

COMMONS FORUM *Response*

Response to: Demographic Change and Commons Management: A Focus on Migration, by Leticia Durand and Rosalva Landa

Local Commons with Global Implications in a Footloose World

Dan Klooster

Department of Geography, Florida State University, USA

In parts of Northern Mexico, small farms lie abandoned and common property forest owners are dispersed in the USA and Mexican cities. Only a tiny number of community members participate in decisions about logging in their forest commons. In a lightly populated landscape, the exclusion of outsiders who steal timber is increasingly difficult. In one successful common property ejido, however, the professional forester in charge of logging is a returned migrant from the USA, where he gave up a well-paying job. His ejido is now certified as a well-managed forest by an international nongovernmental organization and its wood enters globalized supply chains that end in Home Depot and Ikea stores.

In Central Mexico, a returned migrant lives on his US social security stipend, serves as a community leader, and dreams of establishing a small cooperative to log pines in old fields abandoned 40 years ago, when a guest worker program created work opportunities in the USA. In his community, remittances from absent family members provide a crucial pillar of support for those who stay. At the same time, those who stay continue to use the village commons for firewood, agriculture, and building materials. Meanwhile, many emigrants build houses in the village in hopes of retiring there, and as a hedge against stricter emigration policies in the US.

In Southern Mexico, an indigenous community renowned for sustainable logging activities has trouble retaining members with the skills needed in carpentry workshops, and forest management teams. Young men leave, taking their skills with them. At the same time, many communities in this region experiment with institutions that permit members to work elsewhere without abandoning communal service obligations. To interpret these contradictory examples of rural change, it helps to understand migration and demographic change as symptoms of larger processes of global social and economic change that affect the rural commons. Here is an incomplete, preliminary list of factors that might affect rural demography and Mexico's rural commons:

- US immigration and labour laws that create work opportunities, but often without creating stable rights of residence.
- The economic viability of small-scale agriculture amidst environmentally destructive commercial agriculture and the hypocritical free trade agreements that allow rich countries to subsidize politically important agricultural sectors but force poor countries to open up their markets to foreign competition.

- Communication technologies and financial institutions that permit the relatively easy flow of information and remittances across borders. These connect physically distant members of transnational families to each other.
- Rural access to education, healthcare and other governmental services.
- The physical characteristics of the ecosystems and organisms that generate common property resources.
- The presence and absence of markets for these resources, including ecosystem services.
- The strength of the social capital that ties people in sending areas together.

Under the influence of such conditions, changes to the rural commons will vary greatly from place to place. Rural commons will probably survive in one form or another, despite these transformations. Despite substantial out-migration, rural populations in Mexico and most other Latin American countries continues to grow in absolute numbers, for example. In order to raise children and support the elderly, the majority of Latin Americans who stubbornly stay put make use of the rural commons to stretch the meagre remittances from those who have left. They grow some of their food in the agricultural commons, graze animals in strips of roadside pasture, and use firewood and building materials gathered in the commons. In this way, the rural commons of Latin America continue to play an important role in the social reproduction of labour. Increasingly marginal for the production of commodities, these commons will remain important for the production of labourers, and crucial for the continual transformation of a global economy. Finally, the complex changes to the rural commons will also have implications for the global commons.

Increasing numbers of people will consume more resources and produce more waste, especially if they are displaced to the USA, where lifestyles consume a disproportionate share of the world's resources. Even more troubling, however, are the implications for the conservation of agricultural biodiversity. Through their commons-embedded practices planting crops and managing vegetation, rural people in Latin America maintain traditional crop varieties of global importance. Agricultural abandonment and the destruction of the rural commons that embed these practices will erode crop genetic resources developed over thousands of years of careful selection.

dklooste@garnet.acns.fsu.edu