

# THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION: CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND IN SELECTED COUNTRIES OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

WORKING PAPER



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SELECTED COUNTRIES OF  
LATIN AMERICA AND THE  
CARIBBEAN**

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**The Impact of International Migration: Children left behind in selected countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.**

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## **Executive summary**

The aim of this paper is to arrive at a better understanding of the impact of migration on children and families left behind in selected countries and is based on a review of recent researches and documents in five countries (Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Jamaica and Haiti) selected for being representative of the entire region and for being affected by high and increasing levels of migration.

Migration from Latin American and Caribbean countries has been growing steadily since the 1970s. This was initially taken as a purely economic phenomenon, and little thought was given to the families left behind by migrants. Available evidence indicates that migration can lead to improved chances of survival and poverty alleviation, provided policy and programme environments foster these benefits, but it can also bring exploitation and disruption. Also, the economic benefits of remittances are concentrated among the relatively well-off, consistently with the finding that migrants have generally higher levels than the average population of the county of origin. In all cases reviewed, the short-term economic effects of remittances at the family level appear to be positive, with at least one study however showing that the poverty reducing effect of remittances is much lower when estimates are adjusted for the reduction of income associated with the absence of migrants from their household.

The emotional impact of migrations on children has been given scant attention in analyses and discussions on migration. The paper reviews existing documentation on erosion of family structures and relationships, psychological distress, adoption of risky behaviour and increased vulnerability to violence, abuse and exploitation. This points to the importance of migration's impacts on children's welfare and the need to take it into account in the design of public policies in both countries of origin and receiving countries. There are however important gaps in knowledge and availability of data which creates difficulties in presenting comparable and reliable data on migration; more work needs to be done to understand the impact of migration on children and guide public policies to compensate for the negative impacts of migration.

In a human rights based understanding of the role of states as duty-bearers, these must adjust their human development policies to the reality of migration and improve the links between economic development strategies (often seeking to maximize remittances) and social development to offset the negative impact of migration. UNICEF has a clear mandate to foster policies that promote children's well-being especially the most vulnerable left behind by migrant parents. It can also take advantage of its unique country presence in both developed and developing countries to address specific issues relating to children's rights and migration that require involvement of the source and the recipient countries of migration.

## Resumen ejecutivo

El propósito de este documento es llegar a comprender mejor el impacto de la migración sobre los niños, las niñas y las familias dejados atrás en los países seleccionados, y se fundamenta en la revisión de investigaciones y documentos recientes en cinco países de la región (México, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Jamaica y Haití) que fueron escogidos por su representatividad y por presentar niveles altos y crecientes de migración.

La migración en los países de América Latina y el Caribe ha crecido gradualmente desde la década de 1970. Al principio esto se trató como un fenómeno puramente económico, y no se pensó en las familias que los emigrantes dejaban atrás. Las pruebas que están disponibles indican que la migración puede llevar a mejores oportunidades de sobrevivencia y alivio de la pobreza, siempre y cuando el ambiente en que se desarrollen las políticas y los programas fomenten estos beneficios, aunque también puede ocasionar explotación y desintegración. Además, los beneficios económicos de las remesas están concentrados entre los que están relativamente acomodados, lo cual es consistente con el hallazgo de que los emigrantes normalmente tienen niveles más altos que la población promedio del país de origen. En todos los casos que analizamos, los efectos económicos a corto plazo de las remesas familiares parecen ser positivos; sin embargo, al menos un estudio muestra que el efecto de la reducción de la pobreza como consecuencia de las remesas es mucho más bajo cuando se ajustan las estimaciones para la reducción del ingreso debido a la ausencia de los emigrantes de su hogar.

En los análisis y debates sobre la migración, la atención que se le ha dado al impacto emocional de las migraciones en los niños y las niñas ha sido mínima. Esta publicación/documento revisa la documentación existente sobre el desgaste de las estructuras y relaciones familiares, la angustia psicológica, la adopción de un comportamiento arriesgado y un aumento en la vulnerabilidad a la violencia, el abuso y la explotación. Lo anterior señala la importancia de los impactos de la migración en el bienestar de los niños y las niñas, y la necesidad de tomarlos en cuenta en el diseño de políticas públicas, tanto en los países de origen (emisores), como en los países de destino (receptores). Sin embargo, existen brechas importantes en el conocimiento y la disponibilidad de información que crean dificultades para presentar información comparable y confiable sobre la migración; y es necesario trabajar más para comprender el impacto de la migración sobre los niños y las niñas y guiar las políticas públicas, a fin de compensar los impactos negativos de la migración.

Desde la perspectiva de la comprensión de los derechos humanos sobre el papel de los estados como titulares de deberes, estos deben ajustar sus políticas de desarrollo humano a la realidad de la migración y mejorar las relaciones entre las estrategias de desarrollo económico (que a menudo procuran maximizar las remesas) y el desarrollo social con miras a compensar el impacto negativo de la migración. UNICEF tiene un mandato claro de impulsar políticas que promuevan el bienestar de los niños y las niñas, especialmente los más vulnerables que son dejados atrás por sus padres emigrantes. También puede aprovechar su presencia única en el país tanto en los países desarrollados como en vías de desarrollo para tratar temas específicos relacionados con los derechos de los niños y las niñas y la migración, los cuales requieren de la participación de los países de origen y de destino de la migración.



## Résumé analytique

L'objectif visé à travers ce document est d'arriver à une meilleure compréhension de l'impact de la migration sur les enfants et les familles oubliés dans les pays sélectionnés et se base sur l'analyse des documents et recherches récents dans cinq pays (Mexique, Nicaragua, Equateur, Jamaïque et Haïti) qui ont été choisis comme étant représentatifs de toute la région et aussi pour être les pays les plus affectés par des niveaux élevés et en croissance continue des migrations.

La migration en Amérique Latine et dans les pays des Caraïbes a connu une croissance continue depuis les années 1970. Au départ cela était considéré comme un phénomène purement économique et peu de considération était donné aux familles délaissées par les migrants. Des preuves actuellement disponibles indiquent que la migration peut contribuer à augmenter les chances de survie et alléger la pauvreté à condition que les politiques publiques et le contexte programmatique favorisent ces opportunités, mais elle peut également mener à l'exploitation et à la rupture. Les retombées économiques des transferts sont concentrées entre les mains des moins défavorisés, avec l'évidence que les migrants ont généralement des niveaux de vie plus élevés que la moyenne de la population du pays d'origine. De tous les cas analysés, les effets économiques à court terme des transferts au niveau familial semblent positifs. Cependant, une étude montre que l'effet atténuant des transferts sur la pauvreté est moindre quand les estimations sont ajustées à la réduction du revenu liée à l'absence des migrants de leurs foyers.

Les analyses et discussions sur la migration ont accordées peu d'attention sur son impact émotionnel sur les enfants. La document analyse la documentation existante sur l'érosion des structures et relations familiales, de la détresse psychologique, de l'adoption des comportements à risque et de la vulnérabilité croissante à la violence, à l'abus et à l'exploitation. Cela démontre l'importance de l'impact des migrations sur le bien-être des enfants et du besoin d'en tenir compte dans l'élaboration des politiques publiques dans les pays d'origine et de destination. Il y a cependant des écarts importants dans la connaissance et la disponibilité des données, ce qui crée des difficultés dans la présentation des données fiables et comparables sur la migration ; plus de recherches seront nécessaires pour comprendre l'impact de la migration sur les enfants et guider les politiques publiques pour compenser ses impacts négatifs.

Dans une compréhension basée sur les droits humains quant au rôle des Etats en tant que détenteurs d'obligations, ils doivent aligner leurs politiques de développement humain à la réalité de la migration et améliorer les liens entre les stratégies de développement économique (souvent orientées vers la maximisation des transferts) et du développement social pour atténuer l'impact négatif de la migration. L'UNICEF a un mandat clair de soutenir les politiques visant la promotion du bien-être de l'enfant et plus spécialement les plus vulnérables délaissés par les parents migrants. Il peut également profiter de son avantage d'être présent dans les pays développés et en voie de développement pour parler des sujets spécifiques relatifs aux droits de l'enfant et à la migration, qui requiert l'implication des pays d'origine et de destination de la migration



## Research hypothesis

Migration from Latin American and Caribbean countries has been growing steadily since the 1970s and is involving significant portions of the population. This was initially taken as a purely economic phenomenon, a copying mechanisms especially for low-income individuals to find better jobs and economic opportunities, or for highly educated individuals to meet their professional ambitions in more developed countries. Concerns were expressed mainly with regard to brain-drain, illegal and difficult to trace migrating patterns, interference in the labour market of receiving countries (for example on wage level of low-skill labour), integration and discrimination/intolerance issues.

Little thought was given to the families left behind by migrants, especially the children raised in their home country by other members of the extended family, often without any type of parental guidance, simply considered to be better off as a result of remittances allowing them to improve access to social services including health and education.

The aim of this paper is to arrive at a better understanding of the impact of migration on children and families left behind in selected countries, rather than a typical policy analysis: how does parents' migration impact on children's development and well-being? Is there a role for the state to care for migrant's family members left behind? What is the role of UNICEF to protect the rights of children left behind by migrating parents?

This document is based on a review of recent researches and documents on international migration in five countries (Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Jamaica and Haiti) selected for being representative of the entire region (Central America, south America and the Caribbean) and for being affected by high and increasing levels of migration relative to the size of the population. Part of the research was produced in the framework of the United Nation High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development which took place in September 2006. Most of the documents analyzed are national studies and, in a few cases, comparative studies, particularly those dealing with economic aspects. In addition, the paper took into account empirical evidence from UNICEF's field experiences, consistently pointing to a high emotional impact of migration on children and a reconfiguration of family relations.



# THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION:

## WHAT HAPPENS TO CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND IN SELECTED COUNTRIES OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

### **1. Context**

Migration in Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Jamaica and Haiti is either intra/regional (e.g. Nicaraguans going to Costa Rica and Haitians going to Dominican Republic), or extra/region, particularly to the USA, Spain and the United Kingdom.

#### **1.1. Numbers of Migrants and Destinations:**

International migration is a growing phenomenon throughout the region, in particular in the northern tier of Latin America and the Caribbean and in the five countries under analysis as a consequence of deteriorating economies and employment opportunities. Most of the countries under review produce migration to the United States, Canada and Europe, though each one has unique variants. In the case of Mexico, international migration takes the form of immigration (predominantly by Central Americans), emigration (primarily to the USA) and trans-migration (primarily Central Americans passing through Mexico to cross the northern border into the United States). In Ecuador emigration has traditionally been to the US but more recently also to Spain and Italy; Nicaraguans migrate both to Costa Rica and to the USA. In Haiti, emigration is directed towards the USA as well as the Dominican Republic, with the later involving lower income households. Jamaica has a long history of emigration to the United Kingdom, shifting during the past 20 years to the USA.

The following table shows the numbers of emigrants in relation to total populations. In the five countries emigration is higher than the overall regional average for Latin America; for Jamaica it is also higher than the average for the entire Caribbean region.

**Latin America and the Caribbean: number and % of immigrants and emigrants on total population, by country of residence and of birth, circa 2000. Note: Haiti should be included in the Caribbean rather than Latin America region.**

Country	Total population (000')	Immigrants (000')	%	Emigrants (000')	%
<b>Latin America</b>	<b>511681</b>	<b>5148</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>19549</b>	<b>3.9</b>
Haiti	8357	26	0.3	534	6.4
Mexico	98881	519	0.5	9277	9.4
Nicaragua	4957	20	0.4	477	9.6
Ecuador	12299	104	0.8	585	4.8
<b>Caribbean</b>	<b>11782</b>	<b>853</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>1832</b>	<b>15.5</b>
Jamaica	2580	13	0.5	680	26.4

Source: ECLAC, CELADE, 2006.

While in the past Latin America and the Caribbean region were net receptor of migration, including from European countries that had an important impact on the ethnic composition and cultural identity of the region, most recent decades have been characterized by important flows of out-migration to other, better-off regions. The number of Latin American and Caribbean migrants increased in the last decade alone from 21 million in 2000, to nearly 25 million in 2005 (CONAPO, 2005). Latin American and Caribbean emigrants represent 13% of all world international migrants. Immigrants arriving to the region represent only 1.1% of total emigrants, settling mainly in Argentina, Costa Rica and Venezuela. (ECLAC-CELADE, 2006).

The largest group of migrants from the region are Mexican, reflecting the large size of the overall Mexican population relative to other countries in the region and the geographical proximity to the USA, with whom it shares a long, porous border, and a total of 9.3 million Mexicans living in the United States (CONAPO 2005).

While in absolute numbers the majority of migrants reside in the United States, it is important to signal that around 3 million migrants born in Latin America now reside outside the region in countries other than the USA (CONAPO, 2005). For example, in Ecuador, migration has increased to Spain and Italy. Nicaraguans migrate in greater numbers to Costa Rica (45%) though there is also a large number of migrants to the United States (39%). (ECLAC/CELADE 2006).

The most vulnerable migrants are those that cross borders without formal documents, which hinders contacts with the families left behind. This is true across the board. Haitians migrating illegally to the Dominican Republic are estimated at 500,000 to 800,000 and now represent 6% to 10% of the total population in the Dominican Republic (GARR, 2006). For 2005, of the 488,000 Mexicans that crossed the US border, approximately 250,000 did so without documents (Santibañez-Romellon, 2006). Jamaicans and Ecuadorians are more likely to travel with papers since they are travelling via air, and maintain legal status at least until their tourist visas expire.

However there is an important gap in the availability of data which creates difficulties in presenting comparable and reliable data on the numbers and characteristics of migrants. CELADE (ECLAC/CELADE, 2006) flags the lack of statistical information on trends and patterns of migration. It is therefore often impossible to identify who are the migrants, understand population movements and have a clear-cut picture of the families left behind.

## **1.2. Why do people migrate?**

All the countries surveyed have experienced large scale migration since the 1970s. However in recent years, the dimension, scope and characteristics of households that contribute to migration have changed considerably. There barely exists now a municipality in Mexico that has not experienced migration, in fact, out of a total of 2428 municipalities, only 93 showed no impact relating to migration to US. (Verduzco Igartua, 2005). An astounding 34% of Nicaraguan homes report having at least one family member living outside the country (though not all send remittances back home).

There are four key factors associated with migration:

- 1) Lack of adequate employment opportunities in the countries of origin and low-wages
- 2) Family reunification and ties to the country of destination
- 3) Seeking educational opportunities and improved services (health care, access to material goods and services)
- 4) Increased demand in destination countries for unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled workers (nurses, teachers, social workers) coupled with higher wages than in the country of origin.

In a review of the literature, it is clear that the primary motivation is economic: migration is a decision taken by the household to sacrifice the temporary loss of income and the negative impacts of family separation with an eye towards future economic gains. Migration is often considered a domestic survival strategy, in which one family member emigrates in order to guarantee the support for the whole family. It is important to note that most migrants were employed prior to migrating, underlining the attraction of higher paying wages and improved opportunities as an attraction. We should highlight that although migration may appear to be an individual choice, in the countries under review it rather stems from an explicit or implicit contract among family members, when families develop strategies to obtain financial and emotional resources necessary to face the difficulties involved in the process of migration (Cortes, 2006). They may jointly decide which family members should migrate; on which family member to invest in education to prepare the individual for the challenges involved; how to jointly finance the journey and settlement, often by selling family assets or incurring in debt.

### 1.3. Gender

There has been a steady increase in the proportion of female migrants, internationally and in the five countries under review. It is estimated that 48.6% of all international migration are female, though there are important differences depending on the point of origin. In Nicaragua, the number of women migrating doubled during the 1990s. In Mexico, the traditional emigrant to the United States used to be a single male between the ages of 15 and 24, with women representing less than 25% of the total; in recent years the percent of women migrating has increased to 45% of the total migrant population (CCA México, 2006). In the case of Jamaica, the percentage of women emigrating has been high for a longer period of time.

#### **Proportion of female among the stock of international migrants by major area, 1970 and 2000**

<b>Major Area</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>2000</b>
<b>World</b>	<b>47.2</b>	<b>48.6</b>
Developed Countries	49.0	51.0
Developing Countries	45.7	44.6
<b>Latin America and the Caribbean</b>	<b>46.8</b>	<b>50.2</b>

Source: United Nations, 2004

### 1.4. Education level of migrants:

Migrants have generally higher levels than the average population of the county of origin, though this varies depending on the type of migration. ECLAC's data flag the increasing numbers of professional emigrants between the 1970s and the 1990s, from 300,000 to more than 1 million. Recent studies in Mexico have pointed to a trend of higher levels of education among migrants during the past decade, and it is estimated that in the USA there are 700,000 Mexicans with university degrees; among all the migrants surveyed aged 15-24, the average number of years of schooling was 7.8, implying the completion of basic education. Similarly, Nicaraguan migrants have higher education levels than the general population: only 6.6% of migrants have no education level, versus 22.5% of the general population. (IOM, 2001).

However migrants often have a lower level of education than the general population in the country of destination. For example, the education level of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica is lower than the Costa Rica national average. The same is true for Haitians migrating to the Dominican Republic. It is also interesting to notice that most educated migrants prefer extra-regional migration, while the others go to neighbouring countries. An extreme case is that of Jamaica in 2000, when there were nearly four times more Jamaicans with tertiary education in the USA than at home.

Long-term or permanent emigration of skilled individuals can involve a loss of large amounts of public funds directly and indirectly invested in them (brain-drain). Such is the case of Jamaica, where teachers, nurses and social workers migrate en masse once they graduate. This



undermines the country's long term economic outlook, but also its capacity to protect and help children develop and mitigate their vulnerability due to parents' migration.

## 2. Overall trends in remittances

In all countries analyzed remittances play a crucial role as they are a major source of income for the economy as a whole; a stabilizing factor in the balance of payments and also an important escape valve for unemployment and under-employment. Data show that remittances have been growing during the last decade, both in volume in relation to the overall size of the economy, and in terms of the percentage of families who rely on remittances from relatives abroad.

Estimates of remittances, however, are not always consistent nor necessarily complete, especially as they do not reflect all the informal channels used by families to send cash to their family members left behind.

In **Mexico** total remittances are estimated at US\$20 billion (2005), equivalent of all foreign exchange received from tourism, more than double what is received from agricultural exports and 2/3 of oil exports revenues (CCA México, 2006). At least 1.5 million Mexican households in over 600 municipalities receive remittances, and it is estimated that 1 out of every 10 households in rural Mexico depends on funds sent from family members.

In **Jamaica**, remittances contribute 17% of the GNI. The 2005 Jamaican Survey of Living Conditions reveals that a bit more than half of Jamaican households (53.8%) receive remittances from overseas, a 7.6 percent increase from 2004 within a relatively stable period since 2001.

In Haiti, remittances (\$650 million in 2002) are believed to be equivalent to 24% of GNP (GARR, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. While the number of **Haitians** in the US and in the DR is estimated to be roughly the same, the remittances from the USA are about ten times higher and, as in the case of Jamaica, they disproportionately benefit the rich (this is consistent with the fact that the best educated Haitians migrate to the USA rather than to the DR).

In **Ecuador** remittances represent one third of exports, exceeding revenues from the sale of bananas (the second national export after petroleum), and are equivalent to ten times total foreign assistance (IDB-MIF, 2003). About 32% of Equatorial families are estimated to receive remittances from relatives abroad.

In **Nicaragua** remittances represent about 19.8 of GDP (2002), which is higher than total exports. In a country highly dependent on ODA, the volume of remittances is also higher than ODA and represents 150% of the external debt payments (Renzi, 2005). According to different sources, between 19% and 30% of the population receive remittances from family members. Trends show a growth in both migration and remittances: they were estimated at US\$60 million in 1989, while latest estimates for 2003 indicate up to US\$825 million. (Baumeister, 2006).

Remittances from Costa Rica are more difficult to estimate (projected between US\$100 million and US\$250 million per year), since they do not always follow formal channels, many migrants have illegal status or follow seasonal patterns. As in the case of Haiti, Nicaraguan remittances from the USA are higher, more frequent and easier to track since they are associated with higher income levels/education, more formal and permanent migration, and formal channels for sending them. Migrant population to Costa Rica is clearly more vulnerable than that to the USA, and the same applies to families left behind. 68% of Nicaraguans in the USA send remittances home; only 49% of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica do so (and 44% of Nicaraguans in other countries). (INEC, 2001)

### **3. Remittance expenditure by households**

All evidence available on social expenditure at the household level does not break it down among family members, nor does it highlight its specific use for children – except for some information on the funds destined to education, presumably benefiting the youngest members of the family. In all cases, the short-term economic effect of remittances at the family level appears to be significant and positive, and we can appreciate its importance when we compare it with the average income of the general population.

Sending remittances is related to the proximity of family relations: in **Nicaragua** 72% of migrant spouses send remittances home; 60.8% of sons/daughters; 61.5% of sons in law/daughter in law; 29.5% of grandchildren; 24% of other relatives who had lived in the same household. All those who send remittances are related to the head of the receiving household, and frequency/amount decrease over time, as family relations become more distant. (D'Angelo, 2002)

A recent study by UNICEF shows that Mexican households receiving remittances have cost-patterns similar to those that do not receive them, using them for basic needs (62%), health care (15%), to pay off debts (10%), housing improvements (4%), savings (4%) and others costs (5%) [INM 2006]. However, this does not mean that absolute amounts are not higher, hence increasing the likelihood of the family to meet its basic needs. This is reflected in the fact that households receiving remittances show better nutrition, clothing, education, health care and housing than non-receiving households (García, 2005).

The preliminary results of a survey supported by UNICEF in 2006 in nine Mexican communities with a long tradition of migration and interviews with key informants from government, civil society and community leaders confirm much of the anecdotal evidence on both the positive and negative impacts of migration at the household level: households receiving remittances live in better economic circumstances than households that do not receive remittances in the same communities, resulting in some cases in increased income gaps between households.

However, there are no clear immediate effects in the health of Mexican families receiving remittances, although Lopez (2005) found that remittances reduced child mortality in every region; Duryea et al (2005) suggested that remittances have a positive impact on infants surviving beyond their first month of life. This evidence is scattered and mainly anecdotal, but it is reasonable to infer that remittances affect mortality indirectly as household invest in

improvements in their living conditions (e.g. better housing) and improve their access to medical care.

In Ecuador, the majority of those who receive remittance spend them for necessary costs including utilities, rent, transport, clothes, medicine and nutrition. On the other hand, 17% are used for luxury goods, 22 % for investments, 4% to buy property, 2% to education, 8% saving and 8 % for business. (Acosta, 2006).

In Nicaragua, the average annual amount of remittances received per household was US\$1,200 in 2001 (ECLAC household survey). When we compare this with an average GNP per capita of US\$850, the impact on the household economy is clearly dramatic. The 2001 ENCOVI survey (INEC, 2001) shows that these funds are mainly used for food (43% urban and 39% rural), health expenditure (16% and 17%), clothing (10% and 12%). This is confirmed by the ECLAC survey, which shows that 75% of the remittances are used to guarantee the family's survival (food, clothing), with an increase in recent years for education and health expenditures.

In Jamaica the proportion of people receiving remittances within each quintile varies greatly, but the rich receive remittances in greater numbers than the poor, and remittances seem in general to disproportionately benefit the wealthiest. Over last 5 years, the share of household members receiving remittances among the wealthiest quintile has increased from 51 percent in 2001 to 61.1 percent in 2005 percent, while it has actually decreased from 37.7 percent to 35.9 percent within the poorest quintile. In terms of amounts, the wealthiest quintile garners 30.2 % of the total remittances while only 10.8% goes to the poorest quintile. (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2005) Remittances seem therefore to contribute to the reinforcement of disparities In Nicaragua, on the other hand, there appears to be a positive correlation between remittances and lower poverty at the household level, although the cause and effect chain is not clear (migrants have higher education levels than the average population, from which we can safely deduce that the Nicaraguans who migrate are not the poorest of the poor).

A recent comparative study of the World Bank, which includes, among others, Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico and Nicaragua, shows high heterogeneity in poverty reduction and inequalities resulting from migration. For example in **Ecuador, Haiti and Nicaragua** the poorest three quintiles of the population receive only 16% of total remittances, although the number of households receiving remittances is very high. In **Mexico** 61% of the households receiving remittances fall in the first quintile and only 4 percent of them are in the top quintile. (Fajnzyblber and Lopez, 2007).

The study shows that the poverty reducing effect of remittances is much lower when estimates are adjusted for the reduction of income associated with the absence of migrants from their household. In particular, taking this adjustment into account shows that remittances do not reduce poverty headcounts in **Mexico** and **Nicaragua** – although it reduces poverty gaps in **Ecuador** and **Haiti**. In the case of **Nicaragua**, the study even finds that remittances are linked to small increases in extreme poverty. Hence, for very poor households the income lost because of the absence of migrant family members is less than compensated by the remittances sent home (Fajnzyblber and Lopez, 2007). Hence, in addition to the emotional impact of migration on children and loss of parental guidance, there appears to be also a possible negative economic consequence that contradicts the commonly-held belief, also documented by other studies, and at

least the economic well being of children would improve when their parents migrate. However, this study is based on projections and extrapolations, and its results cannot be conclusively compared with data from other studies.

#### **4. Migration and changes in family relations and gender roles**

When a family member migrates, relations are redefined and there are changes in roles and responsibilities. These changes affect the daily life of children particularly when the mother is the migrant. The different effects of female and male migration reflect existing gender roles and relations within the community independently of migration. This means that migration of a man or a woman has different implications on the children left behind, because different were the roles that fathers and mothers played in their life and society expected from them.

When the man emigrates, he generally leaves behind a household whose reproduction is guaranteed through the mother, spouse or sister. When the woman migrates, she is profoundly insecure because she leaves behind her family and the traditional reproductive role is expecting from her. Many times, upon returning, she has to assume the burden of a materially and morally divided family, especially with regard to children who have distanced themselves.

It is interesting to observe (study by the Red Nicaraguense de la Sociedad Civil para las Migraciones) that women normally leave their children in the care of other women (grandmothers, older girl children); few leave them with their husband and only 12% take the children with them. This reflects the traditional structure of the Nicaraguan extended family, rigid division of responsibilities by gender and society's different expectations from women than from men.

While 31% of **Nicaraguan** households are headed by a woman, this figure goes up to 46% for households with some migrant members, especially in urban areas (46% urban and 30% rural). It is interesting to notice that women who send remittances are more specific than men in determining their use for the family left behind. Women seem also more concerned about making productive use of the remittances inside the household and paying for debts; while men are more concerned about recreation and other expenses (FIDEG, 2005). Also, several studies indicate that, for the most part, remittances by female migrants are invested in non-productive activities such as family maintenance and other activities such as housing construction/improvement. This is in part explained by the loss of the woman's contribution to family maintenance through her original un-paid work while she was in the home, and as a consequence, there is greater dependence on the money that she sends for maintenance.

There are some positive effects of female migration, as it increases earning opportunities for women, autonomy and economic independence. However, this is at the expense of higher risk of exploitation, discrimination and abuse. Female migrants tend in general to fill the lowest paid jobs, also due to employers' expectations that they are more likely to withdraw from the labour force to attend their reproductive responsibilities. For example Nicaraguan women in Costa Rica are mainly employed in low-skilled personal and domestic services (while men work in

construction and agriculture). Only 0.8 of them have some technical/professional qualification, example from Ecuadorian maids in Spain.

An interesting survey (Barahona and Portocarrero, 2001) of 301 households of migrant women shows a change in the family safety net and support system. While in 1992 households received help mostly from family members living in Nicaragua (55.8%), in 1998 this went down to 42.1% and became almost zero in 1999, with a corresponding increase in the help received from family members living abroad. This suggests that local, traditional solidarity mechanisms associated with the extended family structure and cohesive communities are being replaced by the more distant and volatile support provided by family members abroad, thus weakening existing coping mechanisms less associated with monetary exchanges.

It is important to consider that, especially in the poorest communities, in addition to cash, migrants send other gifts to their children at home, including clothing, thus creating new consumption patterns (with new, modern objects, tools, clothing, appliances etc. not traditionally present in the communities) in the families and communities whose effects have not been studied but might have profound implications. This could also change family relations: frequently the existence of a provider abroad producing greater consumption of material goods induces a provider-consumer relationship. Especially in the case of mothers that have left their children and their nuclear family behind, this is reinforced by the attempts to make material compensation for their absence. A good example is that of the “barrel children” of Jamaica, whose parents provide them with significant material resources in the form of cash remittances and barrels of clothing and toys. As observed by a Nicaraguan mayor, the children begin to look on parents as economic means for survival, and want them to go back and work abroad.

## **5. Evidence on emotional impact**

The emotional impact of migrations on children has been given scant attention in analyses and discussions on the costs and benefits of migration for families. Of the countries considered in this paper, Jamaica, Mexico and Nicaragua have started to gather data evidencing short and longer terms impacts of migrations on the psychological and social wellbeing of children and women. Family disintegration, challenges in parenting, adoption of risky behaviour by children and adolescents left without parental guidance, and increased vulnerability to violence; abuse and exploitation are some of the manifestations observed as a result of migration.

### **5.1. Family disintegration and challenges in parenting**

While migration observed in the upper-classes of Jamaica, Mexico and Nicaragua tend to occur with the whole family unit emigrating together, poorer families tend to migrate serially, one family member at a time. Resulting separations erode family structures and relationships. In Mexico, a recent study singled out migration as an important factor in family disintegration, while repeated references were made on the excessive burden for single mothers left in the community of origin to provide care for children and other dependent members of the family. Studies in Nicaragua and Mexico found that children resented the absence of fathers; mothers reported increased parenting problems with their children. According to the Red Nicaraguense de la Sociedad Civil para las Migraciones, the longer the separation between migrating parents and

children, the more children lose parents' reference in the management of the household, their authority, and their role as provider of love and material care. Parents are gradually replaced by other family members, especially grandmothers and aunts in the case of female migration (as noted above, very few mothers migrate with their children).

Recent studies have flagged the emergence of "transnational families", a new form of relations between migrants and their family at home, which is increasingly replacing face-to-face contact and expanding the geographical and cultural universe of the children left-behind through the use of modern means of communication (e-mail, internet hone etc.). This is an interesting and potentially beneficial by-product of migration if properly handled.

## **5.2. Psychological distress**

The effect of migration on children and women remaining in the originating countries revolves around the issues of attachment, separation and loss. In Mexico, 70% of the women interviewed stated that they had suffered periods of depression and 30% considered some of their health problems as related to the stress of having absent partners or family members. A survey undertaken in Nicaragua on "what has migration meant for my family" in municipalities from which large numbers of migrants originate, revealed that most children express feelings of sadness, while understanding the reasons that motivated their family member to migrate, and recognizing that their level of material well-being has increased. Several children indicated as a major problem the separation between their parents, due to one of them migrating. They hence experience a double separation – mother-father and parent-child.

In Jamaica, the immediate psychosocial effects on children affected by migration range from feelings of abandonment, "parentification"- as children are given the responsibility to rearing themselves as well as sometimes their fathers and siblings, and destabilization. As period of separation between parent and child can vary between three and ten years in the case of Jamaica, children left by their parents sometimes spend their entire lives struggling with feelings of rejection, abandonment and loss as observed by researchers in social work. For a child left at an early age, memory of the parents will soon fade. For the child left at a later stage, fear, anger, resentment and feeling of rejection are the most common forms of emotions, which can not be compensated by remittances or gifts such as those sent in corrugated cardboard barrels by Jamaican emigrant parents to their "barrel" children left behind.

## **5.3. Risky behaviour**

More acute forms of psychological distress, such as the adoption of risky behaviour, have been observed as a result of migration among adolescents left behind. Jamaican researchers' interest in the impact of migrations actually branched out from their initial focus on the impact of violence on children. As early as 1993, Dr Claudette Crawford Brown, from the University of the West Indies (UWI) came to the conclusion that the absence of mothers was a key determinant to the involvement of children with violence: in a survey she found that 80% of children in conflict with the law had their mothers absent, while this was the case for only 30% of other children, and migration was the second most important reason explaining the absence of mothers. In Mexico, problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse were found to be greater for

adolescents with migrant fathers. Reduced attention to school and tasks in the home was also stated as a result of migration.

In Haiti, it has been noted that changes of living patterns and circumstances during the migration period may expose the migrant partner to HIV and other infections. HIV infected men or women may then expose the other family members when returning home. There are indeed numerous cases of single parent/motherhood, due to death of one of the partners (frequently due to AIDS), or the case of split couples or early pregnancies. These mono-parental families are in most cases female-led and among the most vulnerable.

#### **5.4. Vulnerability to abuse**

Crawford Brown's 1993 survey revealed that migration significantly increases risks for children to be abused or exploited. Migration of mothers was a much more significant factor than that of fathers for being physically and sexually abused. Data gathered among a larger sample in 2005 confirmed this analysis. In addition, new patterns have emerged such as links between migration and drug trafficking involving mothers, crime, and increased numbers of adult and children returnees often without legal means of subsistence.

At the macro level, it can also be observed that, as teachers, nurses and social workers migrate en masse once they graduate- 40% of Jamaican doctors have migrated- the resulting brain drain can also have a significant effect on individual families, through the heavy toll it creates on the country's capacity to protect and help children develop.

In conclusion, countries have yet to systematically document the short and long term impacts of migration on the psychological and social wellbeing of children and women remaining in the originating countries. This information would be critical to develop most appropriate preparedness and mitigating programmes, both at the family level (individual vulnerability) and at the community and national level (with social programmes meant to protect children suffering from the brain-drain resulting from migration).

## **6. The role of the state and safety net/social service programmes**

Migration has a clear impact on the overall context of the countries of origin, both on the economic and social capital, and affects the wellbeing of whole communities left behind. In a human rights based understanding of the role of states as duty-bearers (assigning them responsibility for the fulfilment of all children's rights, which are not the sole responsibility of individuals or families), these must adjust their human development policies to the reality of migration and improve the links between economic development strategies (often seeking to maximize remittances) and social development to offset the negative impact of migration. It is clear that remittances should build on, but not replace government investment in domestic programmes for social protection and poverty reduction.

Similarly to states' recognized role in trade policies with regard to export and import of goods to benefit its people, states should also have explicit policies with regards to population movements and their effects on the most vulnerable citizens, especially children. States have hence an

obligation to mitigate, reduce vulnerabilities and make sure those left behind can still enjoy their rights to protection, survival, development, participation – social programmes should include benefits for single parent households as a result of migration and non-traditional caregivers such as grandmothers or other relatives. Women who stay behind as heads of households have special needs, as do the increasing numbers of women who migrate. Hence, gender sensitive migration policies are imperative. Children are also affected differently by an absent mother as compared to an absent father; policies to promote children's best interests should consider the effect of migration on different types of households.

Incidentally, comparable obligations apply also to migrant-receiving states, which should provide policies and services for the full assimilation and enjoyment of rights of those children who follow their migrating parents. In general, both receiving and originating states have an obligation to create conditions for legal migration – as opposed to un-documented illegal border-crossing which always increases vulnerability and family disruption. This includes, in originating countries, the full functioning of an effective civil registry and personal identification system (still very deficient in the countries under review, with many children not being registered at birth and adults never receiving any form of legal ID), and the provision of information on how to pursue legal migration channels. In receiving countries, a more in-depth debate should be encouraged to acknowledge the contribution of migration to their economies, the importance of favouring legal migration accompanied by adequate levels of social security, and the importance of family reunification for children's well-being, regardless of their place of birth. In an increasingly globalized planet, state's moral obligation to meet the human rights of the population crosses national borders. This is in line with the content and spirit of the *United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families* which stresses that migrants are not just individual labour inputs for the functioning of the market; they should be treated as social beings, members of family groups, whose rights should be protected, including against exploitation and trafficking.

Recognizing that children affected by migration are particularly vulnerable and should receive special protection, migration policies should be accompanied by additional and targeted investments in health, education and social protection. On the other hand, children and households can gain significant economic resources from remittances. When remittances that migrants send home are harnessed for development, this should be done in a way that improves the well-being of the children and communities at home.

However, there is a common agreement among experts in this field that more work needs to be done to understand the impact of migration on children and families left behind as well as the importance of creating public policies to help compensate for the negative impacts of migration. On the other hand, information on existing safety net/social service programmes created to provide support to households with absent migrants is extremely limited, simply because these programmes are very limited. As a rule, no social safety net programmes exist which target households with absent migrants in the countries covered by this paper. The family members left behind from migration are therefore left to fend for themselves and there are very few cases to be taken as models.

This is not surprising in a country such as Haiti where the State offers no safety nets whatsoever, except for those provided by a few international aid organisations which target communities



made vulnerable by migration, representing a complete substitution for state efforts. However, the same appears to be true also for relatively better off countries that are otherwise able to provide social benefits to their citizens. For example, the Programme of Advancement through Health and Education (PATH) in Jamaica - a conditional cash transfer programme considered as a good practice worldwide - focuses on the poor with level of income as measured by level of consumption. However migration of one or more of the household members is not an eligibility criterion. Neither is it in other social assistance programmes such as the Secondary School Fee Assistance or the National Health Fund.

On the other hand, there are some limited but interesting indirect benefits to family members left behind in Nicaragua: some programmes designed for the general population find that they are especially useful for this population group, such as the “school counsellor” programme initiated by the Ministry of Education as part of the “Education for Life” strategy. The programme reports the detection of detrimental effects of migration on the development of children, and finds them more vulnerable than others to “psycho-social” risk (children referred to the counsellor frequently indicate they live with a grandparent, aunt or other family member after their parent’s migration, most often the mother). They experience a de-structured family, without a source of authority, guidance and love, indispensable for their emotional stability. They report that the relatives who take care of them have other families or priorities to concentrate on, while grandparents often do not have the energy to play the parent’s role.

In surveys conducted in Mexican migrant communities, respondents repeatedly mentioned that there was insufficient support and guidance available on measures that could be taken to address parenting problems, depression and mental health issues resulting from migration. Instead, private, family-based safety nets figure as the most important source of support for mothers and children. Community-based development programmes with a focus on women, children and adolescents have been promoted in Zacatecas, Michoacan, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Oaxaca, and others as part of the social development programme. However, specific actions aimed at migrants are not included in these efforts.

One initiative worth considering is the Mexican “3x1 Iniciativa Ciudadana” which encourages collective remittances utilized for basic infrastructure (e.g. water, electricity, streets, hospital, schools, computer centres). This programme combines the donations of migrant groups in the USA with the Federal and local government. More recently, some communities have started a “4x1” initiative, with local actors becoming the fourth partner in the process.

## **7. Role for UNICEF**

There is fast growing understanding of the critical nexus between migration and poverty; but yet insufficient data to inform a coordinated policy approach. This paper has addressed some of the complexities of the interplay between migration and poverty and the impact on children left behind. In many areas, migration can lead to improved chances of survival and an alleviation of poverty, but it can also bring exploitation and disruption, with potential cost for the migrant, society and governments.

The debate weighs in favour of migration being an effective tool in the fight against poverty in less developed countries, but only where policy and programme environments can foster these

benefits. Amid the uncertainty of outcome, some sensible policy directions have emerged that are relevant for UNICEF as a monitoring agency on children's rights with a mandate to help states design appropriate policies:

- More research and comparable global data are needed on how children are affected by migration, so that children can be more visible in migration debates and in the setting of migration policies. UNICEF programming should seek to *improve the quality of data on this subject with appropriate policy-oriented research, which must* be extended across countries and regions of origin and destination. The approach should be inter-disciplinary, bringing together the perspectives and findings of national and international expert agencies in development, migration, humanitarian assistance, labour, health, culture, education and child protection issues.
- Children must matter in migration policies and debates. In line with the agency's mandate, UNICEF involvement in the development of public policies should include encouraging and monitoring that states' initiatives and migration debates reflect the effect of migration on children as a core consideration: policies should protect children's rights by enhancing access to the potential benefits created by migration, while also protecting against inherent vulnerabilities (for example, *specific and targeted programmes/safety nets* should support families whose parents have migrated to provide children with the care and attention required). UNICEF programming should hence include monitoring and advocacy to ensure the rights of children left behind are met and social safety nets/social policies put in place. Where vulnerability assessments are carried out, vulnerability criteria should include households with family members having migrated.
- UNICEF has a role to advocate for policies that maximize the development benefits of migration, minimize its negative impacts for children and promote children's well-being. Evidence-based policies should seek to promote a child's right to health, education, and to be raised in a protective family environment, and should protect children affected by migration from falling into high-risk behaviors and from suffering as a result of neglect, limited parental care, social exclusion or exploitation. Migration should be included as a contributor to vulnerability and inclusion in social protection programme, for example for mental health, substance-abuse prevention, recreation and after-school programmes, special services/support to single-parents and other caregivers.
- *Migration policies should be part of the national development plan for poverty reduction – PRSPs-*, as well as the UN Development Assistance Framework –UNDAF- with special emphasis on decentralized work with municipalities from which most migrants originate. As part of UNICEF country-programming and involvement in the definition of national development plans, migration should be integrated *into the broader economic and social development framework*. The effects of migration and the social dynamics behind it should be explicitly taken into account in all strategies for the achievement of each one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Within the social agenda of the MDGs, this can help strengthen gender equality, education and health; a focus on migrant health could help combat the spread of HIV/AIDS, which has frequently followed migration routes in the countries analyzed and is hampering development prospects.

- UNICEF can take advantage of its unique country presence in both developed and developing countries to address specific issues relating to children's rights and migration that require involvement of the source and the recipient countries of migration: issues such as assimilation of emigrating children, mixed-family and impact of separation/divorce on children's custody and best interest. UNICEF must forge partnership on both sides (source and recipient) between community-based organizations/non-governmental organizations to exchange experiences and expertise on issues that need to be addressed within the cultural/social context of the migrating communities. It can also envision partnerships with remittances companies and their philanthropic arms to include a social dimension and awareness in the monetary transfers. There is a special role to play for all UNICEF National Committees in migration recipient countries – especially the US - in lobbying efforts around the issue of migration and the protection of *migrants, both male and female, from abuse and exploitation*. Policy makers are aware that the profits garnered by smugglers and traffickers are finding their way in the wrong pockets. The money could be fuelling better policies, particularly in regard to empowering women, human rights and alleviation of poverty and deprivation that makes people vulnerable to the wiles of smugglers and traffickers.
- UNICEF should assist in awareness programmes aiming at mitigating the negative impact of migration by making sure perspective migrants are fully informed and aware of coping strategies. This should target high-migration communities, and parents as well as children within and outside the formal education system. Awareness campaigns to communities should include information on the negative implications of undocumented migration and provide information on services available for caregivers responsible for children whose parents have migrated. On the other hand, exposure to a wider world and close contact with family members abroad widens the cultural horizon of children left behind in the country of origin. This can become a powerful resource to be used by the education system within a strategy to foster inter-cultural bridges, tolerance, openness, understanding of other realities and generally enriching one's point of reference - being careful not to lose social and national identities.

## 8. Conclusions

Evidence from the five (5) countries analyzed is very diverse in accuracy, level of detail and specific findings. However, it all points to economic necessity as the primary drive for migration, and to an improvement in the short-term economic status/income of the family members left behind. To maximize these benefits, the effects of migration on children must be a core consideration in migration debates. Children are affected by migration when they are left behind by one or both migrating parents, migrating alone, or living in a context affected by high migration. Policies should protect children's rights by enhancing access to the potential benefits created by migration, while also protecting against inherent vulnerabilities.

The effects of remittances on long-term economic growth and development still need to be further researched, including from a gender perspective. On the one hand, to the extent that remittances can finance education, health, local infrastructure and increase investment, they

might propel growth. Remittances are likely to be used more effectively in countries with good investment environment, sound financial and legal systems, and effective and accountable institutions. On the other hand, the effects of migration on traditional community-based solidarity mechanisms and weakened family relations can, in the long term, produce unexpected negative outcomes that should be analyzed.

More research and comparable global data is needed on how children are affected by migration. More accurate data are needed in order to formulate policy recommendations in the areas of (a) numbers, gender and age of children left behind as well as their living conditions; (b) expenditures patterns of households previous to the reception of remittances to assess change in expenditure; (c) gender of migrants (father, mother or both); duration of migration; information on caretakers; (d) expectations of migrants and remaining adults on children's development, schooling, health etc.; (e) children's opinions and expectations on their own future.

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