



# Labor Borders: Recruitment of Central American Migrants in “Exodus” through Southern Mexico and Indigenous Mexican “Braceros” in the Californian Fields

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Accepted: 11 March 2024  
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## Abstract

The article proposes the concept of “labor border” to explore the evolution of migration policies in the Central America-Mexico-USA region by investigating the dimension of work, through two case studies: (1) the US H-2A program for the temporary recruitment of foreign agricultural workers from Mexico; and subsequently (2) the Mexican regularization programs with temporary labor opportunity, implemented by the Mexican government in the context of the so-called “Central American exodus”: Social Emergency Program (*Programa de Emergencia Social*) and Sowing Life (*Sembrando Vida*). The objective of the research is to analyze how the political use of a labor border contributes to the social construction of a hierarchy of immigrant workers, as well as to the progressive closure of borders, and the outsourcing of control operations by the USA to the south of Mexico and other Central American countries. The research took place between March 2016 and December 2021, with a combination of mainly qualitative methodologies.

**Keywords** Labor borders · Central American exodus · Externalization of borders

## Introduction

The Central America-Mexico-USA migration corridor is an exemplary context of the increase in restrictive migration policies, which have worsened internationally during the 2000s. This is a strategic case study, due to its emblematic historical process, the political weight it has globally, and the size of the migrant flows involved in the regional territory.

In the USA, this phenomenon has intensified since the attack on the World Trade Center Towers in 2001. Consequently, the regional migratory system of

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Central America-Mexico-USA has seen changes in the management of flows aimed at strengthening both Mexico's northern and southern borders, physically and militarily. In this context, the Mexican territory, from being a country defined as a "vertical border" (Torre-Cantalapiedra and Yee-Quintero 2018), has come to fulfill the function of a "buffer country" (Varela Huerta 2019).

This has materialized through increased military operations and the building of a wall in various locations along the Mexico-US border. Also, a political dispute has developed between the two countries regarding the regularization of Mexico as a "safe third country,"<sup>1</sup> meaning that it could become the destination for migrants from various areas potentially seeking asylum in the USA. The attempted closure and progressive militarization of the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala is also framed in this perspective of discouraging asylum applications in the country of destination, through a gradual process of externalization of its southern border towards the south of Mexico and the countries of Central America.

According to several authors (Anguiano 2010; Villafuerte Solís 2017), the beginning of the process of externalization of the southern border goes back to the border surveillance and migratory containment measures that the USA has put in place since the 1980s and 1990s. The new doctrine of National Security spread in Mexico from the 2000s, through the implementation of legal devices such as: the Plan Sur (2001), the National Security Law (2005), the agreement that recognized the National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM) as a national security body (2005), the Mérida Initiative (2008), the National Public Security Program (2014-2018), the Southern Border Program (2014).

The most recent attempt to militarize the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala is part of this process. In fact, on June 7, 2019, the governments of Mexico and the USA presented a joint declaration, which, among the main topics of agreement, provided for the deployment of the National Guard (*Guardia Nacional*, GN), composed mostly of military personnel in Mexican territory (Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho 2020). Following President Donald Trump's threats to impose 25% tariffs on Mexican imports if irregular migration was not contained, the Mexican government committed to deploying 21,000 members of the GN to control the northern and southern borders.

This long process of border closure has been definitively consolidated with the public health measures and the restrictions that the Mexican government has

<sup>1</sup> According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the safe-third-country measure is applicable "in cases where a person may have or may find protection in a third country, both in relation to a specific individual case or under a bilateral or multilateral agreement between states on the transfer of asylum seekers." However, the safe third country must at least meet the requirements derived from adhering to fundamental instruments of human rights and provisions of the Convention on the Status of Refugees of the United Nations (Naciones Unidas 1951) and the Protocol on the Status of Refugees (Naciones Unidas 1967). These fundamental rights have to do with non-deportation and/or non-return, the guarantee of the possibility of remaining in the state, freedom of movement, and the right to work, dignity, housing, and education, among others (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados 2018).

established for non-essential land transit, in line with international measures to contain the spread of the virus COVID-19.

Within the academic debate, several authors have critically documented the evolution of Mexican border management towards a logic of containment and repression (Arriola Vega and Coraza de los Santos 2019; Nájera Aguirre 2016), and the particularly strategic role it plays in the US geopolitical system (Villafuerte Solís 2017). One important aspect that has been highlighted is the tightening of migration policies at the regional level and the growing militarization of Mexican borders, in complete subordination to pressure from the US government.

Paris Pombo (2020) has analyzed deeply the restrictive and punitive characteristics of Mexican migration policy within the framework of a dependency relationship with the US Security Strategy. The author has illustrated how the externalization of migration controls are focused on discouraging asylum applications in the USA through three main instruments: (1) international support to secure the borders, migration policies and institutions of neighboring countries; (2) the multiplication of local, national and international humanitarian organizations in the border regions; and (3) the return of asylum seekers to the so-called “transit” countries through the negotiation of agreements that classify them as a “safe third country,” “country of first asylum” or through other types of international agreements.

Despite that, the regional migration system is going through a process of forced displacement of thousands of people from Mexico and northern Central America, as well as from the Caribbean countries, South America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Although the transit of migrants is a historic fact in this region, since the 1980s there had not been a phenomenon of this magnitude, in which thousands of people have tried to enter the USA in such large numbers through Mexican territory.

The origin of this so-called “Central American exodus”, at the end of 2018, is related to a context of violence and widespread poverty where respect for life and human rights are not guaranteed. Along with the structural reasons for fleeing, the opportunity to proceed collectively has generated a new dynamic of massive entry and transit in the Mexican territory. In fact, this has provided migrants with special protection against the action of institutional security forces, as well as formal and informal intermediaries, including those related to organized crime (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2018, 2019; Fernández Casanueva 2017; Rojas Wiesner and Ángeles Cruz 2019).

In this text, I intend to analyze the evolution of Mexican border management by investigating the dimension of work, little explored until now. I will observe it as a determining factor in the process of progressive closure of borders and the outsourcing of control operations by the USA to the south of Mexico and other Central American countries. I will focus on the interaction between labor policies and migration policies, as well as the different ways in which this relationship can be expressed in the current governance of migration at the regional level.

In apparent countertrend with respect to the restrictive practices, mentioned above, the opportunity to open external borders to temporary labor migration has been maintained in several countries of the world, particularly in the US-Mexico-Central America regional system (Castillo 2000; Palerm 2014; Sánchez Gómez and Lara Flores 2015). Historically, active recruitment policies have played a decisive

role in mobilizing migration chains and shaping the structure of labor systems. The selective opening of borders to the mobility of low-cost workers has been the most effective method of expanding the supply of labor and offering more choice to firms, as well as of reducing wages and power of negotiation of national workers (Rea 2010).

In this sense, Mezzadra and Neilson (2014) have proposed the concept of “labor frontier” as a government instrument aimed specifically at a “differential inclusion” of migrants in the receiving labor system, thanks to the temporary recruitment programs based on social, political, and geographic filters. According to other researchers, government institutions use this type of device for immigration containment, thanks to the simultaneous management of repressive operations and specific mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). In this analysis, the dynamic connection between stasis and mobility is managed in a way that stops, fragments, and deters the collective movement of migrants.

In this text, in dialogue with these last contributions, I will analyze different government initiatives on the labor system, implemented on both Mexico’s northern and southern borders. I will demonstrate how, in any case, their implementation is functional to the control and the stopping of immigration flows in entry and transit. I will start by considering the US H-2A program for the recruitment of temporary agricultural workers from Mexico. Subsequently, I will consider the interaction between two Mexican programs, called the Social Emergency Program (*Programa de Emergencia Social*, PES) and Sowing Life (*Sembrando Vida*, SV), focused on the incorporation of migrants from various countries in southern Mexico. I will then contribute to the debate by exploring the political and economic use of labor frontiers, with their concrete consequences on the mobility and employment conditions of migrants in the two countries. Particularly, I will use this concept to analyze how the process of outsourcing border controls from the USA to the south of the neighboring country was consolidated.

In the first part of this text, I will describe the ties that connect the San Quintin Valley with other rural territories in Mexico and the USA. I will analyze the agri-food corporate strategies for mobilizing labor and the action of intermediary agencies, especially in the case of transnational recruitment of temporary migrant workers. I will also observe the political instrumentalization of the labor frontier by the agri-food companies, in response to the workers’ community interests and class struggle.

In the second part of the text, I will analyze the dynamic interaction between migration policy and labor policy announced and then implemented by the Mexican government during the Central American exodus, which started in 2018. I will observe how the announcement and application of job placement programs for people waiting to regularize their immigration status, in the Suchiate border and the city of Tapachula, in the State of Chiapas, has effectively aimed at dissolving the Central American exodus in Mexican territory.

Finally, I will observe how the political use of the labor border contributes to the social construction of a hierarchy of migrant workers, stratified according to their documented or undocumented status. I will show how it can contribute to the process of externalization of border controls by the USA, through the narrative of

migrants' employment in the south of Mexico. The labor border then, currently constitutes a militarized migration barrier and a low-cost foreign labor creation device, hidden behind an apparently humanitarian narrative, strongly mediated by the governments of both countries.

## Methodology

In the following sections I will report the results of the research carried out in the two Mexican borders, during two main stages. The methodology has been based on a combination of different techniques, quantitative and mainly qualitative, which included: the collection of secondary data published by administrative and statistical sources; documentation produced by private foundations, research institutes, associations and unions; journalistic sources; direct observation and participation in the activities of local organizations or migrant workers and international networks of human rights defenders; in-depth interviews (95 in total) with farmers, workers, representatives of local institutions, unions and social organizations, members of the United Nations migration agencies ( IOM, UNHCR) and international civil society organizations. During the first semester of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the investigation was based mainly on digital sources from the press and reports of civil society organizations.

In particular I refer to some principles of participatory research. In general, participatory methodologies allow for the understanding of the point of view of the social actors observed, interpreting their action thanks to a dialogic relationship, sharing motivations, experiences and feelings (Bourdieu 2003). These include a variety of approaches, based on different research assumptions, which vary depending on the degree of internality to the social process analyzed (Paris Pombo 2012).

Regarding the overall migrant population involved in the caravans and recruitment programs, I was able to use only participant observation techniques, which imply external participation in the process and a widespread relationship with the community considered the object of study.

In both phases of research, however, I worked directly with social organizations of migrant workers and human rights defenders. By participating daily in their research and intervention activities, I was able to follow some of the methodological assumptions that characterize the Latin American approach to Collaborative Research (*Investigación colaborativa*). The latter has its roots in the tradition of Liberation Pedagogy (*Pedagogía de la liberación*) (Freire 2004) and Participatory Action Research (*Investigación Acción Participativa*, IAP) (Fals Borda 1968). The Latin American school of Collaborative Research is based on the idea of explicitly positioned knowledge, which is oriented towards principles of social justice, equity and human rights. It is based on the researcher's internality in the social process studied, that is reached through a political and social compromise with the organization involved, and the goal is to collectively transform reality (Hale 2006; Paris Pombo 2012).

The first stage corresponds to the field work carried out, between March 2016 and March 2018, in two strawberry production territories, in Mexico and the USA:

the San Quintin Valley, in Baja California (Mexico), and the rural area of Oxnard, in California (USA). These rural areas are characterized by the presence of the same North American agri-food companies and the migration of native day laborers from southern and central Mexico.

Interviews with indigenous Mexican farmworkers, in Oxnard, were carried out as part of a survey on working conditions and particularly overtime, conducted by the Mixteco Indigenous Community Organizing Project (MICOP). This is a social organization frequented and animated by immigrants, especially Mixtec and Zapotec, many of whom work as day laborers harvesting strawberries and red fruits in the area. The survey was implemented to promote a farmworker bill of rights to the California state legislature, along with other organizations such as Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), Women Peasant Leaders (*Líderes Campesinas*) and the United Farm Workers (UFW). Among the different demands included in the bill of rights presented, is that of a law that extends the obligation of additional pay beyond 8 hours to the agricultural sector. Despite the lobbying of large-scale retail trade and farmers have long prevented the adoption of the bill, the promulgation of it resulted from the intensive protests of agricultural workers, social organizations, and the workers' union.

The research, in the San Quintin Valley, was developed thanks to the collaboration with the Independent National Democratic Union of Agricultural Day Laborers (*Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas*, SINDJA), an autonomous trade union founded in 2015, and two older social organizations: the House of Indigenous Women (*La Casa de la Mujer Indígena*, CAMI), and the Alliance of Organizations for Social Justice (*Alianza de Organizaciones por la Justicia Social*, hereinafter "Alliance of Organizations").

On March 17, 2015, the agricultural workers of San Quintin decided to strike and block the main road that crosses Baja California, to demand better living and working conditions (Jaloma 2016). The list of demands by the mobilized workers included notably the following: an increase in the average daily wage; observance of 8-hour working days as provided by the Federal Labor Law, with extra pay for overtime; one day's rest in seven; proper enrollment in the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) for all workers; stopping sexual harassment of female workers; and the establishment of dialogue with employers and the state government. This is in addition to demands for better living conditions in the valley, namely broader public health services and the extension of basic utilities, like running water, electricity, the drainage system, and paved roads, to all neighborhoods (interviews and documents of the union; Aragón 2015). Regrettably, in the following years, living and working conditions did not improve. Therefore, the Alliance of Organizations and the SINDJA, which were part of the farmworker's movement of 2015, organized a caravan during the month of March in 2016 and 2017, on the anniversary of the uprising. They also proposed an international action to boycott the berries marketed by the North American corporation Driscoll's, world leader in the sector. The objective of such initiatives was to relaunch the claims still ignored.

In this context, the fieldwork included participant observation activities, while accompanying the marches in Tijuana, during March of 2016, and the caravan in 2017, from the San Quintin Valley to Mexico City. On both occasions I collected

audiovisual documents in agreement with the social organizations involved, who in turn used the images and recordings to spread the demands that were at the basis of the mobilization.

The second phase was carried out while accompanying the caravans of Central American migrants in different places of Mexico, between October 2018 and December 2021, on their way from the Suchiate river and along the coastal route of the State of Chiapas, subsequently in Mexico City and Tijuana.

In this case, the research was mostly based on direct participation in the work of the Mexican and international network of civil society organizations, united as the Collective for the Observation and Monitoring of Human Rights in the Mexican Southeast (*Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano*, hereinafter “Monitoring Collective”)<sup>2</sup>.

The monitoring was developed through various brigades, made up of members of the organizations, that simultaneously covered different points of the route through the Mexican states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. In addition, some monitoring focal points were based in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The main objectives of the monitoring activities were to observe, document and condemn migrants’ human rights violations in their transit through Mexico. The aim was also to activate immediate institutional responses on site, by channeling information in real time to government and non-government representatives, when critical situations or urgent needs.

The evidence recorded in the field referred to the following aspects: presence and response of security forces and state authorities; presence and organization of humanitarian assistance, such as water, food, and health care; presence and activities of organizations that provide humanitarian and legal accompaniment; characteristics of migrant group, in terms of number, social profiles, psychological and health conditions; and violations of human rights committed by state actors. The documentation was mainly based on public and internal communications, field records, and audiovisual testimonies produced on the route by the monitoring brigades. Daily meetings were held, in which the evidence produced by the different monitoring brigades was summarized and analyzed, to publish update reports, take decisions regarding the complaints, plan the activities and strategies to be undertaken in the short and medium term.

In the next section, I will present part of the monitoring results that have been finally ordered in the report of the Monitoring Collective, which I helped write

<sup>2</sup> The following is a list of the member organizations of the Monitoring Collective during the writing and publication of the 2018–2019 Exodus Report: American Friends Service Committee, Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean; Bety Cariño A.C.; Human Rights Center; Digna Ochoa A.C. Human Rights Center; Human Rights Center Fray Matías de Córdova A.C. ; Human Rights Center Tepeyac del Istmo de Tehuantepec A.C. ; Center for the Rights of Victims of Violence Minerva Bello A.C. ; Formation and Training A.C. ; Initiatives for Human Development A.C. ; Doctors of the World, Spain and France; Jesuit Network with Migrants, Central America and North America; Jesuit Refugee Service; A Helping Hand in the Fight against AIDS A.C. ; Voces Mesoamericanas: Acción con Pueblos Migrantes A.C.

(Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano 2019a).

## The H-2A Temporary Recruitment Program at the Mexican Northern Border: Close and Select

The San Quintin Valley is in the border state of Baja California and is one of the main agricultural enclaves in the agrifood-exporting region of northwestern Mexico. This rural territory specializes in the production of vegetables, especially tomatoes, and more recently of berries for export to the nearby US market. These products are highly capital and labor intensive. Therefore, starting in the 1980s and 1990s, parallel to the expansion of agricultural exploitation in the area, there were flows of migrants hooked directly into the communities of the south and center of the country, or from other northern rural states where they were already employed as day laborers. Migrants arrived in the San Quintin Valley to work as seasonal workers and, in many cases, with the goal of crossing the border to seek employment in the rich North American lands (Velasco Ortiz et al. 2014).

The productive structure of the strawberry sector in the San Quintin Valley is basically characterized by the presence of many small farmers, as well as large Mexican and foreign agricultural companies. The transnational corporations, active in the sector, are producers and marketers of US origin, Driscoll's and Andrew and Williamson Fresh Produce (A&W), which stand out for being the most significant strawberry companies in the Valley. In fact, in addition to cultivating directly on their own and rented land, they acquire additional amounts of product by contracting small and large local farmers, with different kinds of agreements.

The San Quintin Valley acts as a bridge-territory between the rural areas of Mexico and the USA that is used by both workers and employers as a border area for labor training, specifically in the harvest of berries. There are two main flows in the Valley: (1) the seasonal workers who arrive from the south and center of Mexico to compensate for the shortage of labor during the productive peaks; and (2) the day laborers already established in the Valley, who are recruited to go to work with the temporary H-2A visa in different areas of the USA, especially in California.

Regarding the first type of mobility, it is the large Mexican farmers of the Valley who engage day laborers from other national territories, recruited by foremen, promising well-paid employment and free accommodation in the temporary workers' camps.

There are still migrants heading to the USA attempting to cross the border without papers, but since the 2000s the northern border of Mexico has become much more closed and dangerous. In fact, the price of undocumented passage is higher, as well as the risk of being robbed by armed gangs or apprehended by migration agents. Thus, pickers currently leaving the Valley to work in the USA are trying to take advantage of the H-2A temporary farmworker program.

This is the newer version of the old *Bracero* program but run privately by US employers. In fact, the *Bracero* program was derived from an agreement between the governments of the USA and Mexico. Instead, the H-2 visa is an initiative



unilaterally adopted by the US government, which has assigned the management of the procedure to the farmers. These, in turn, resort to various types of intermediaries.

The H-2A program was instituted in 1986 with the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)<sup>3</sup>, to address labor shortages in American agriculture (Palerm 2014; Trigueros Lagarreta 2015). In time, this program has become institutionalized as an instrument of constantly recruiting additional labor to the local workforce, but without granting immigrants, in return, the option of obtaining permanent residence (Izcarra Palacios 2015).

Different types of labor intermediaries act formally to mobilize day laborers from the San Quintin Valley through the H-2A visa. They select and recruit the workforce considered suitable, facilitating the workers, through a network of managers, in complying with the bureaucratic process to obtain a visa at the Tijuana consulate. From there they will be taken directly to the camps of the employing companies. The workers pay in advance the costs of the entire procedure, which will be reimbursed, together with the costs of transportation to the border, once they have completed a large part of the work contract.

Interested workers are required to have certain specific characteristics: age between eighteen and thirty-eight years, certification of good health, submission of a letter of employment or recommendation signed or stamped by a previous employer, and pay stubs to prove they have solid experience with recognized local companies. The recruiters of the transnational corporations, since managing their own workforce through the production peaks of different areas, they will have thoroughly checked all the personal data, productivity, behavior and even the political orientation of the day laborers selected to work in their own Californian ranches.

The political and attitudinal filter applies both to workers recruited from southern and central Mexico to be employed in the fields of the Valley, as well as for the H-2A visa. These selection criteria extend to the entire community of origin since companies adopt substitution strategies by recruiting day laborers from different origins to avoid protest movements. In fact, they negatively label the specific cultural and geographical characterization of workers considered to be more unruly, especially those who were protagonists of the uprising and the creation of the independent trade union in 2015.

According to several local producers and managers interviewed in Oxnard and Ventura, California, the H-2A visa is insufficient to respond to the demand for seasonal workers. In particular, the testimonies highlighted some difficulties encountered in using the program. They complain about the high travel and maintenance costs of the workers, especially housing. In addition, the complexity and slowness of the bureaucratic procedure does not go well with the speed and fluidity of agricultural operations. That is why undocumented immigrants are still hired by farmers

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<sup>3</sup> The IRCA allowed the legalization of around three million undocumented foreigners, including those who resided in the USA since 1982, and those who had worked in US agriculture for at least 90 days in the previous year (1985), under the program called Special Agriculture Workers (SAW). It also divided the temporary H-2 visa for the importation of unskilled labor, into H-2A for agricultural workers and H-2B for non-agricultural workers.

with false social security codes and worse working conditions (worker interviews). Finally, the increasingly drastic closure of the border between the USA and Mexico continues to feed the reserve of undocumented labor and produces a significant presence of the latter in agricultural activities.

Only the transnational companies manage, with some efficiency, the circulation of labor, even with the H-2A program. The mobilization of workforce based on productivity criteria allows for higher levels of recovery of the money invested for their hiring and daily maintenance. With the support of this recruitment program, as part of the governmental migration policy, the transnational agri-food company directs the circulation of its employees, to manage the availability of workers according to the different productive peaks of the corporate territories.

The selection of workers based on their behavior is reinforced by the frequent spatial separation of their accommodation, with respect to the local population, and by the program itself, since the granted residence permit is exclusively linked to the employing company. This last operating rule guarantees a strong control of the entry to the country and departure of the day laborers as soon as the work is finished. It also limits their labor benefits and behavior since they are constantly threatened by the risk of being expelled (Ackerman et al. 2014; Peutz and De Genova 2010). If the company decides to fire the worker, or does not want to continue the employment relationship, the latter must leave the country immediately and cover the return expenses. In addition, he, or she, will have a negative record and will not be able to access this opportunity in the following years.

In Sayad's words, the agricultural workers recruited with the H-2A program represent that seductive illusion of the "temporary that lasts": a "continuous rotation," which, according to the author, reassures both the communities of origin and the countries of destination (Sayad 2002, 388).

## **The Announcement of Employment Programs in the South of Mexico: Outsourcing the Border**

On January 17, 2019, a large group of the so-called "exodus" of people from Central America began to arrive in the border area between Tecún Umán, Guatemala, and Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico. The group of migrants included families with children, old people, and unaccompanied adolescents. Unlike the first Central American exodus that had displaced in 2018, this new group faced a very different response by the states of origin and transit, especially Mexico. The migrants found themselves with an apparently accessible Guatemala-Mexico border, without the deployment of anti-riot police agents or repressive actions by the Mexican authorities.

In 2019, the response of Mexican institutions to the new migratory pressure combined repressive measures with the implementation of regularization initiatives. This occurred within the framework of the US demand for the official recognition of Mexico as a "safe third country" and in the change of the Mexican federal government. In fact, as of January 2019, the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a member of the social-democratic and populist National Regeneration Movement party (*Movimiento Renovadora Nacional-Morena*), was installed to replace Enrique

Peña Nieto of the right-wing and neoliberal Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI), who was president between 2012 and 2018.

The emphasis on human rights that the López Obrador's Mexican government has spread since the beginning of the mandate, was initially reflected in the implementation of apparently inclusive measures: the Program for the Issuing of Visiting Cards for Humanitarian Reasons (*Programa Emergente de Emisión Tarjetas de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias*, hereinafter Emerging Program of TVRH), implemented in 2019; the incorporation of migrants into the agricultural labors of the Sowing Life program (*Sembrando Vida*, SV), starting in June 2019. In the following text, I will describe the gap between the institutional narrative and the effective implementation of these labor insertion programs, to analyze the impact of the political discourse and the "announcement" effect on the advance of the Central American exodus to the north.

As soon as the Mexican federal government announced, on January 18, the implementation of the Emerging Program of TVRH, most migrants decided to train at the International Bridge, between Guatemala and Mexico, to enroll in the Migration's National Institute registry (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM). During the following days, the displaced population increased dramatically, arriving progressively, and dispersed at this border point, reaching 12,574 applicants (*Instituto Nacional de Migración 2019*).

Thousands of people who obtained their cards at different times, and those who did not benefit from the procedure, continued their way to the interior of the country, divided into various groups staggered over time. Despite the announcements of the new government regarding the possibility of generating jobs for the migrants involved in the Program, in fact, programs or policies at the federal level in this area never materialized.

In the first days of February, a tent with the "Emergent Occupation Program" badge appeared in the customs facilities, offering migrants the possibility of entertaining themselves during the day, passing the time with social maintenance tasks in public facilities. In addition, just in front of the Suchiate border area exit, the National Employment Service (*Servicio Nacional de Empleo*, SNE) set up an information and registration table for people with the TVRH interested in working. The Monitoring Collective was able to find out that the only job offer at that time was presented by some intermediaries from the Grupo Molina agri-food company. These were recruiting men alone, or with a partner, to harvest grapes and tomatoes in the States of Sonora and Sinaloa, promising a salary of 208 pesos per day, transfer to the north, medical assistance, lodging and three daily paid meals. Despite the presence of some SNE employees, collaborating in the registration and transfer of day labor candidates, several people expressed distrust in the veracity of the offer and the transfer. The information regarding the salary conditions reported by the SNE representative and the labor intermediaries of the company did not coincide. There did not seem to be a real institutional control mechanism for the security of the transfer, as well as the regularity of the employment conditions (*Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano 2019a*).

There were also sudden changes in the TVRH application procedure, fundamentally aimed at progressively reducing the number of cards issued. In fact, with

the establishment of different daily quotas for the reception of applications and the delivery of permits, it was possible to establish a “time limit” (Rigo 2007), in support of the physical and spatial border. The Mexican government, by administering the interconnection between stasis and mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), has favored a flow dynamic of smaller and more heterogeneous groups, more easily made invisible and forcefully dispersed by repressive forces.

Along with the growing mobilization of the National Guard, police and military forces, the new federal government started, in June 2019, the implementation of the federal program Sowing Life in the border area of southern Mexico. The program aimed to reduce migration to the USA and generate employment for people who agree to remain in Mexican territory pending their migration regularization. In addition, the president López Obrador announced the investment of US\$ 30 million to replicate the program in El Salvador and thus start the Comprehensive Development Plan for Central America (*Programa de Desarrollo Integral para Centro América*) (Secretaría de Bienestar 2019; Torres 2019).

In the words of the new president of Mexico, the main objectives of this economic development initiative consisted of rescuing the countryside through reforestation and the promotion of food self-sufficiency, as well as generating jobs to stop migration (Presidente de México 2019). But, beyond the announced objectives, the effective application of the program in Mexican territory has generated several problems of a social, political, economic, and environmental nature. Many communities of native peoples, organizations of agricultural producers, associations of civil society and academic research groups highlighted them (Centro de Estudios para el Cambio en el Campo Mexicano 2021; Ethos Laboratorio de Políticas Públicas 2020).

One of the most important inconsistencies that arise between the institutional narrative and the effective application of the program is related to the presumed process of labor incorporation of migrants. A different reality emerges from the annual government reports (Gobierno de México 2021) and according to interviews with local coordinators in Tapachula of SV and the Program for the Welfare of People in Social or Natural Emergency in Attention to the Migrant Population on the Southern Border (*Programa de Emergencia Social*, PES).

In fact, migrants who voluntarily initiate an immigration process with Mexican authorities, INM and Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (*Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados*, COMAR), can request benefits in exchange for their incorporation into “activities of reciprocity to the community that welcomes them” (Secretaría de Gobernación 2021). There is no payroll or direct employment in SV, rather, migrants who agree to regularize their immigration *status* in the four states of the southeast (Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco, Veracruz) can join the PES. Therefore, they receive humanitarian benefits up to obtaining their migratory documents, participating in professional training processes in nurseries, farms and workshops. Above all they contribute to the cleaning and maintenance activities of urban and public green spaces.

In these cases, migrants have the possibility of working for a maximum of three months, earning 2.380 Mexican *pesos* a fortnight, corresponding to 170 *pesos* a day for five hours of work, from Monday to Friday or Saturday. That is, the minimum necessary to feed themselves and, in some cases, rent a flat, while waiting to receive

a humanitarian visa from the INM or the communication of some progress in the application for refugee *status* by COMAR.

The Secretary of Welfare declared that it had provided 34,435 migrants benefits within the scope of the PES, between September 2020 to June 2021, of which 30,117 in Chiapas (Gobierno de México 2021). After the COVID-19 pandemic exploded, the plan of extending the SV program through the incorporation of migrants in agricultural work was closed.

Buoyed up by this narrative of success in the implementation of the SV program, on January 17, 2020, president López Obrador responded to the arrival of another massive group of Central American migrants, informing of the availability of 4,000 jobs for those who decided to remain in the southern region. He also declared, with great media coverage, that the INM would not grant more humanitarian visas.

As reported by the Monitoring Collective (Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano 2019b), between 18 to 24 January 2020, the arrival of migrants at the Suchiate border bridge was dominated by tension, repression, and chaos, after days of uncertainty and family separation. This was the result of the containment attempts by the National Guard and the military to deal with the intention of the migrants to obtain a transit authorization in any case. While waiting to enter the buses prepared for deportation or transfer to the Mexican immigration detention centers, people received information from External Relations Secretariat personnel (*Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*, SRE) about the possibility to access the SV program in their countries of origin.

Subsequently, repressive actions by the Mexican authorities have increased to deal with several caravans made up of people from Central America, Africa and the Caribbean, between June 2020 and December 2021. Direct physical attacks and psychological violence, deportations to the country of origin have multiplied.

The imposing presence of the military, operating in conjunction with immigration agencies, has made Mexico go from being a transit country for migrants to being a retaining wall, a country of forced waiting and deportation. Between the end of August and the beginning of September 2021, thousands of Haitians tried to break through the Tapachula fence, where they had been stuck for weeks and months. Here they lived in endless waiting to get an appointment or for a solution to their immigration regularization procedure at the COMAR and the INM. While waiting in the city, they experienced lack of information and systemic racism, constant risk of deportation due to frequent raids by immigration authorities. They also had difficulty finding work, withdrawing money, paying high rents even in overcrowded conditions.

The dissolution of these Haitian caravans was extremely shocking due to the harshness of the repression, the use of persecution strategies and military technology. The most blatant violation, of both national and international law, and the criminalization of human rights observers and journalists occurred. The latter have witnessed the use of drones and violent attacks by the GN with long weapons, children forcibly separated from their parents, capillary hunts for migrants on farms and in private homes. In addition, they documented massive deportation and detention of refugees and people in possession of humanitarian visas, as well as forced abandoning of migrants in remote and wild border areas.

The city of Tapachula, the main gateway to the coastal route from the border with Guatemala to the north of the country, has recently become a prison city. As the possibility of moving forward in large groups and regularization pathways are restricted, migratory flows move from the coast to more internal and insecure routes.

Finally, the Mexican government has succeeded in weakening the massive transit of the Central American exodus, thanks to the announcement of a new labor border between Mexico and Guatemala. Publicly promising a change in migration policy, in respect of human rights and integrated by programs of labor insertion, that have never materialized, has favored a flow dynamic in smaller, dispersed and heterogeneous groups in terms of legal residence *status*.

At the same time, the strategy of deterrence and forced dispersal of large groups of migrants has been maintained, trying to render invisible a crisis of forced displacement of colossal proportions. In any case, the main interest of the migrants is still to proceed collectively to the north of Mexico and the border with the USA.

## Conclusions

In this article I have put forward the concept of “labor frontier” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2014) as an analytical tool useful for exploring the current border management in the US-Mexico-Central America region, by examining two case studies. The first, the H-2A program for transnational and temporal recruitment of agricultural workers in the context of US agribusiness corporations and intermediary agencies expansion across the northern Mexican border, in the rural San Quintin Valley and Oxnard. Subsequently, the temporary regularization programs with employment opportunities for migrants in transit through the states of the Mexican southeast, during the recent Central American exodus and the progressive externalization of the US border towards southern Mexico.

I began by observing how the San Quintin Valley constitutes a bridge-territory. Here dynamics of mobility and trade union of Mexican indigenous day laborers interact, as well as agribusiness strategies of mobilization of labor over different areas of Mexico and the USA, through informal recruiters and official agencies. For labor mobility across the northern Mexican border, companies are facilitated by the temporary recruitment migration policy of the US government. Since with the tightening of border controls, both day laborers who work in the Valley and North American agricultural companies try to use the temporary H-2A visa. In this case, it is predominantly the transnational agribusiness corporations of US origin and the intermediary agencies that work for them to get the most out of the program.

The labor circulation is filtered by the selective dynamics of the recruitment systems, particularly because of the 2015 strike. In this case, the labor frontier is created by the control and management of social characteristics, geographical origin, productivity, behavior and even the political orientation of the seasonal workers

selected. This clearly responds to the needs of agribusiness to have cheap, flexible, and non-confrontational labor available throughout the seasonal cycle of the various productive territories involved in the corporate network.

Regarding the southern Mexican border, between October 2018 and December 2021, Mexican institutions have proposed a labor frontier based on the modulation of spatial and temporal dimensions of the mobility of migrants (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). They achieved it through the establishment of different temporalities for the delivery of humanitarian permits and by conditioning access to employment rights and basic services with residency in the southeast. Both the deferred delivery of the TVRH in the Suchiate border and the alleged temporary incorporation of migrants in the social work of PES and SV program in the Tapachula area, have served to implement the outsourcing process of border controls from the USA to southern Mexico.

In this case, the political use of the labor frontier has been based on the inconsistency between discourse and practice. The media narrative spread the idea of an institutional intention of addressing the structural causes of migration, with investment in labor development in southern Mexico and Central America. On the contrary, the implementation of migratory programs responds to dependent international relations with the US, and of a militarized territorial order.

The temporary recruitment programs applied in both Mexican border areas are connected and complementary to each other. The construction of many labor frontiers along the Mexican territory, from the north to the southern states and beyond to Central American countries, is functional to a selective closure, which produces a fragmentation of the migrant population based on different legal *statuses* and access to the employment system. These filters produce flexible and low-cost labor depending on the different degrees of precariousness; at the same time, they support the process of militarization and tightening of border controls. Both borders were constructed to justify the apparent closure: the first much more focused on filtering workers, the second on subcontracting border control. Thus, the process of outsourcing border controls from the USA to the south of Mexico and the neighboring countries was consolidated.

In any case, it has also been observed how migrants continue to seek various strategies and transit routes through Mexican territory. They will not stop, regardless of “orderly, safe and regular migration” approach that involves containment measures, detention, deportation and temporary employment programs. They will continue to migrate until policies satisfy their concrete need to lead a dignified life in their countries of origin.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Salerno within the CRUI-CARE Agreement. No funds, grants, or other support was received for the work. The author has been a consultant, during 2019, to the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova, as part of the Network of Human Rights organizations of the Mexican Southeast, to draft the “Report on the Central American Exodus” cited in the article. She has been an unpaid and supportive volunteer of the following organizations: Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova in Tapachula, Chiapas, as part of the Network of Human Rights organizations of the Mexican Southeast (2018-2019); the Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project in Oxnard, California, USA (2016); and the Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas in San Quintín, Baja California, Mexico.

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