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Hidden in Plain Sight: Indigenous Migrants, Their Movements, and Their Challenges

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On every continent you can find groups of people who have maintained their traditional cultures, often in a particular geographic place, for centuries. These "indigenous peoples" are the descendants of the communities that existed before other groups settled in or colonized that region.

"Indigenous peoples" refers to common experiences of many distinct groups. When used at the international level, this term encapsulates many different communities, as diverse as the internationally recognized countries of the world.

In its 2009 study, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues reported there were more than 370 million indigenous people in some 90 countries worldwide. Indigenous communities, such as the various Native American peoples of the United States, are usually treated as a minority in one or many countries.

Thirty years ago, a report to the United Nations on discrimination against indigenous populations did not cover immigration. Today, however, the internal and international migration of indigenous peoples is an unavoidable topic for any academic, government, or advocacy group interested in indigenous peoples' issues.

Among the most famous indigenous migrant groups are the Maya from Guatemala and El Salvador who fled their countries during the civil wars in Central America and have since settled in North America; the Otavalos of Ecuador who migrate to Colombia, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil to seek better economic opportunities; and the Maori of New Zealand who move from rural-agricultural and fishing communities to Auckland and Australia to seek employment and better services.

Within the migration studies field, indigenous people have often not been considered separately from others born in the same country (e.g., Zapotecs from Mexico are simply "Mexicans" in the United States despite language and cultural differences). In most cases, those communities were accounted for within peasants' internal migration to cities, and city governments did not recognize their cultural differences until the indigenous peoples movement became visible on the international stage.

This article looks at how indigenous people are defined, the characteristics of indigenous people who migrate, and the three types of indigenous-people flows: internal, international, and transborder movements that split long-standing communities. It then examines how indigenous migrants maintain ties with their home communities and their experiences with integration. The piece ends with new avenues for study and emerging trends in indigenous-peoples migration.

Defining Indigenous Peoples

In the countries where they live, indigenous peoples have been categorized in many different ways, such as peasants, autochthonous groups, or tribal communities. Governments have limited membership in indigenous groups by instituting blood quantum measures (which determine the "purity" of someone's indigenous ancestry), requiring indigenous people to live on reservations, or only conferring rights to those individuals and groups still residing in ancestral territories.

At the international level, no definition of these groups has been agreed upon. The non-

binding UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which the General Assembly adopted in 2007 and is supported by 143 countries, does not contain a definition.

This lack of a definition prevented some countries from voting for the UN declaration, and remains a hot-button issue between governments and advocates. On one hand, governments, mostly in Africa and Asia, argue that a lack of a definition could translate into a de facto protection of all minorities and grant new rights to a few peasants attached to their lands.

On the other hand, advocates and indigenous groups caution against adopting a closed definition that could prevent some groups from benefiting from the protection of their rights as indigenous peoples.

Former UN Special Rapporteur José Martínez Cobo provided a working definition in 1986 that the United Nations and its agencies commonly use to deal with issues involving indigenous peoples. The working definition reads:

> Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and precolonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories. They form at present nondominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.

However, this definition emphasizes attachment to specific lands. This is problematic because of widespread forced relocation and the loss of ancestral territories. Still, the Martínez Cobo working definition identifies some pressing issues that face indigenous communities.

Indigenous peoples and other advocates of their rights have used the right to self-determination in lieu of a definition for who is to be considered indigenous. In the case of indigenous migrants, the right to self-determination — especially the principle of self-identification — allows individuals and groups that have left, been displaced, or migrated from their ancestral lands to maintain a link to their indigeneity.

Here we use the working definition of indigenous peoples although it does not fully recognize indigenous migrants.

Characteristics of Indigenous Migrants

It is difficult to make generalizations about indigenous migrants as they come from so many places and have varying levels of recognition in their home countries. While most indigenous migrants continue to be men, a growing number of women have either started migrating on their own or to join their husbands, brothers, and parents.

Education levels differ by generation. Among indigenous migrants from Mexico, the older generation has little formal education, while those in their 20s today are likely to have seven to eight years of school.

For the most part, indigenous migrants do not belong to the poorest communities in their countries of origin, as many of them hold some type of land. Migrants travel to supplement incomes and give better opportunities to their children, who tend to stay behind with extended family. In the case of persecuted groups, entire families find temporary shelter and employment in the informal communities in places of destination.

Increasingly, indigenous groups migrate to seek better economic opportunities, although persecution and statelessness are still a reality for many groups, such as the Rohingya in Burma. A new factor affecting the movement of indigenous groups out of their traditional lands is environmental degradation, in part due to climate change.

Internal Migration

Rural-to-urban migration, which often leads to international migration, is a common feature of indigenous migrants. These movements normally follow two paths:

displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands and economic migration to more developed regions within the country of origin. While most of the examples here reference economic migration, the extreme situations in which some of these groups live cannot be considered normal, and therefore their migration cannot be considered solely voluntary.

In the Americas, indigenous migration to cities slowly began in the 1950s as mainly men left home in search of work. Many were employed in dangerous sectors. Mixtec men helped build Mexico City's subway system during the 1960s, and Mohawk laborers helped build skyscrapers in US cities in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

By the late 1990s, indigenous women in the Americas and Asia had started to join the flow, often finding employment as domestic workers. Sociologist Bosu Mullick documented such flows of Oraon, Kharia, and Munda women to New Delhi, India, as J.R. Bowen did for indigenous women in Indonesia. Population and demographic researchers Austreberta Nazar-Beutelspacher, Benito Salvatierra-Izaba, and Emma Zapata-Martelo have argued that women seeking better health-care options travel to urban centers and usually establish the first connections between indigenous groups and governmental institutions.

Another form of internal migration, which also sometimes leads to international migration, is the trafficking of indigenous women and children. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, criminal organizations in most countries with indigenous populations target indigenous women and girls due to their perceived vulnerability. Indigenous children from Africa, Asia, and the Americas have been trafficked for adoption in developed countries.

No official data exist on the number of indigenous people trafficked or displaced, as most countries currently do not disaggregate their data to account for such populations. However, the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT) and the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples have started to collect some data from country reports to the United Nations but have not publicly released the numbers.

International Migration

Once indigenous peoples have moved within their country of origin, many start migrating abroad. Their paths include taking part in temporary worker programs, entering a country illegally, or claiming asylum/being granted refugee status. The academic literature has yet to document the most recent trends in indigenous peoples' international migration, but information can be found in news reports, official statements from indigenous peoples, as well as information provided by nongovernment organizations (NGOs) working with these communities.

The first documented international migration of indigenous peoples is that of some P'urepecha males from the Mexican state of Michoacan who participated in the US Bracero program in the 1960s; this program brought hundreds of thousands of Mexicans to the United States to work temporarily in agriculture. As political scientists Jonathan Fox, Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, and others have found, Hñañus, Mixtecs, and Zapotecs migrated before the end of the Bracero program and have continued to migrate without documents to the United States.

Maya-speaking Mexicans from the state of Yucatan traveled a different path. As sociologist Wayne Cornelius found, they first moved to the cities of Merida, Yucatan, and Cancun in the state of Quintana Roo before heading to the United States in the 1980s, settling in California and working in the construction and service industries.

In Latin America, Otavalos and Quechuas of Ecuador and Peru have migrated in the Andean region, between Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador, to seek better economic opportunities. They have also settled in Italy and Spain, travelling as tourists but working without documents since the early 1990s. They can be found playing traditional music in subway terminals and train stations.

According to anthropologist Maliina Abelsen, indigenous groups from Greenland, after settling in cities in that Danish territory, later migrated to cities in Denmark over the last two decades.

Other cases are those of the Tuareg, who inhabit the Sahara desert in North Africa and have migrated within Africa but are also now settling in France, according to participants at a UN forum in 2009. In France, they have joined the informal economy by peddling contraband in tourist destinations; they have also found jobs as cleaning crews and other positions in the service industry.

In the case of persecuted indigenous peoples, some groups have sought refuge from forced relocation, political campaigns, and efforts to destroy their cultures and populations. Well-documented cases include the Maya from Guatemala who fled during the 1950s civil war in that country and settled in the southern part of Mexico and in California and Florida.

In Asia, the Montagnard, with help from the International Organization for Migration, left Vietnam in the late 1980s and were granted refugee status in the United States. Thousands of Hmong from Laos who helped the United States during the Vietnam War also came to the United States as refugees in the 1970s and 1980s; another wave were resettled in the last decade from Thailand after the Laotian government refused to accept them.

Other groups in Asia, like the Rohingya in Burma and Bangladesh, have not received similar help, comparatively speaking. Reasons include the reluctance of international organizations and NGOs, which do not want to create more problems for groups that are already vulnerable and do not wish to be further disrupted by being resettled in foreign countries. It is important to remember that many communities still do not consider themselves and therefore do not self-identity as indigenous, such as ethnic and religious minorities in China, Russia, and the Middle East.

Africa has numerous examples of indigenous people fleeing to neighboring countries. Members of the Twa/Batwa community escaped civil unrest in Burundi in 2006 and 2007 by moving to Rwanda. Although Rwanda did not offer official protection, the displaced Twa/Batwa were allowed to remain. Another example are the Somali Bantus who have found temporary refuge in Kenya due to conflict in the horn of Africa.

Transborder Indigenous Migration

Many indigenous peoples settled during the precolonization period in territories that later did not fall within the borders of a single country. Examples of such communities include the Guayami of Panama and Costa Rica, the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, and the Semang/Mani of Malaysia and Thailand. Their situations are a result of *Uti Possidentis* (Latin for "as you possess"), a principal in international law that maintains the boundaries traced by colonial powers after a colonized state becomes independent.

Such divisions make it difficult for indigenous people to follow seasonal or harvest cycles, attend religious or ceremonial rites, or benefit from their resources found in a foreign state but within ancestral lands.

In North America, some groups are protected by treaties to allow transborder indigenous migration. These treaties vary widely, and some date from the colonial period, signed between native communities and colonial powers.

The United States and Canada have a treaty that protects Haudenosaunee communities, as have Mexico and the United States to allow free passage of Kickapoo peoples. However, most groups in North America and elsewhere do not have such protection, leaving them vulnerable to discrimination and limiting their right to self-determination over their territories. The Maya peoples of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Belize, and the Tohono O'odham living in the United States and Mexico face harsh policies impeding their free movement; these policies disrupt their traditional way of living.

Historically, the Sami were also considered transborder indigenous peoples because they inhabit territories that extend across Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. However, their traditional migrations have been discouraged since 1826 when the Norway-Finland-Russia border was closed. In 1940, they were stopped from migrating when the Sweden-Norway border was closed due to Germany's occupation of Norway.

While Sami individuals today can move between Sweden, Norway, and Finland due to freedom of movement within the European Union, their status as indigenous in a country other than their own is not recognized by the host country. This means that even with

European integration, indigenous peoples still draw their rights as citizens of countries and not as members of indigenous groups.

Increased border security has caused problems for many transborder indigenous peoples across the world, but especially where state borders are under pressure from criminal organizations. Drug traffickers, people smugglers, and arms dealers have used indigenous lands as a way to avoid traditional security measures, and governments fear that terrorists may use indigenous lands. In November 2009, the US Department of Homeland Security and Tohono O'odham leaders signed an agreement to issue travel cards to US citizens who are also members of this group. This was one of the many recommendations that the 9/11 Commission made for securing US borders.

Maintaining Ties

Like many migrants, indigenous peoples maintain strong ties to their home communities once they move abroad. These linkages serve many purposes, including the production of cultural resources to strengthen indigenous cultures, membership, and maintenance of customs.

Fox and Rivera Salgado *et al* and Cornelius *et al* have documented these changes and emphasized the importance of indigenous migrants in funding local holidays and cultural events that give permanence to indigenous cultures in places of origin. These researchers have also emphasized the transnational behavior of such immigrant communities.

Indigenous international migrants pose challenges for the home communities as well. For example, many communities in North America have changed the way members participate in indigenous institutions so that migrants can maintain their rights within that community. The *tequio* or *cargo* system, which requires adult members to hold leadership posts in Mixtec and Zapotec communities in Mexico, allows members to pay for a relative to perform their traditional roles.

Integration and Development Back Home

The studies from the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego argue that indigenous individuals who first moved to urban centers within Mexico have been more successful integrating into life in the United States than indigenous migrants who went directly to the United States. They call this pattern "schools of migration" as the moves serve to train mostly rural individuals with agricultural skills for jobs in the construction and service industries. In some cases, individuals also had the opportunity to learn English and even Spanish, which helped them better adapt to their places of destination in the United States and urban Mexico.

Indigenous migrants face similar issues as those of other migrants. For instance, indigenous children may be barred from enrolling in public schools because they are not citizens or legal migrants. Women may be denied health services and other benefits, also due to their unauthorized status.

But the situation of indigenous migrants is compounded by the fact that nonindigenous migrants and nonindigenous hosts discriminate against them. As Fox and Rivera-Salgado have found in North America, indigenous migrants face discrimination as they compete for jobs, services, and benefits with nonindigenous migrants and native-born minorities from a disadvantaged position.

New Avenues of Study

As it is evident in this work, the immigration of indigenous peoples remains understudied. Some groups, like those migrating from Mexico and settling in the United States, have recently received heightened attention while other communities have been overlooked. Because of the lack of accurate information, it is possible for governments to deny that immigration of indigenous peoples is taking place and limit services to only those communities recognized by the destination country.

Since empirical data is minimal, disaggregated information should be collected to understand the impact of indigenous migration on women, children, and other vulnerable demographics. Calls for this data have been a constant recommendation of United Nations bodies, and some agencies have started to collect information.

In the United States, the 2010 Census includes indigenous migrants from Latin America and Canada in its official tabulation. This will be the fourth time that indigenous migrants from North America will be counted. Knowing the numbers of foreign indigenous migrants in the country will help governments at the state and federal levels address specific issues of these communities.

More research is also needed on the experiences of indigenous migrants in developing countries. Some data already exist on the migration of indigenous peoples to countries in their region and who enter the labor force at a disadvantaged position.

Looking Ahead

Indigenous communities are working to strengthen transnational links and networks and are fostering internal relocation to regions perceived as "training grounds" for international movements. Indeed, some groups see internal migration as positive in the mix of experiences that they deal with.

As a result, more indigenous individuals will become international migrants in the future. This means governments in the destination countries (and in some home countries, depending on the rights indigenous people have) will need to provide them with services.

The Institute of Mexicans Abroad, an initiative of the Mexican government, has recently begun providing services to indigenous migrants. These programs were drafted in response to the increasing number of indigenous Mexican migrants, incarcerated in the United States, who did not have access to defense attorneys capable of communicating with them in their indigenous languages.

Some US states, such as Oregon, have considered servicing indigenous migrant communities by providing bilingual education to indigenous Mexican migrants in their native languages and English.

Both origin and destination countries should fine-tune and replicate such initiatives. It is particularly important to consider indigenous peoples and their leaders when creating and implementing new programs to ensure their full participation and appropriate involvement.

Furthermore, it is important that such programs are carefully documented and shared between governments, advocate groups, and indigenous peoples to benefit disenfranchised groups everywhere.

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