



## Redefining National Boundaries: Changing Relations Between Diasporas and Latin American States

*Rodolfo de la Garza and Jerónimo Cortina\**

**Theme:** This article describes the major dimensions of the new relationships that Latin American governments are developing with their émigrés in the United States.

**Summary:** Primarily because of greatly increased immigration from Latin America, Latin American States are developing new relationships that emphasise immigrant concerns such as protecting immigrant rights, providing them assistance with a wide range of problems and supporting community-sponsored cultural activities. Governments are also working with their émigrés to mobilise them into lobbies that will act to advance home-country interests and to increase the sums emigrants remit to their home countries.

### **Analysis: Introduction**

The increase in Latin American migration to the United States over the past four decades, the advent of new communication technologies and the increased ease with which immigrants travel between the US and their communities of origin have established the basis for a new relationship between Latin American countries and their émigrés. Home-country officials, including consular staff in the US, have acted on their knowledge of 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Basch *et al.*, 1994, p. 6) to reach out to their diasporas in the US. Immigrants fuel this relationship by increasing the demands they make of home-country governments.

Major immigrant sending States have responded similarly to this new situation. Mexico, Colombia and El Salvador, for example, have created offices within their respective Foreign Affairs ministries to manage relations with emigrants, and these have been of key importance in increasing the support each State provides its émigrés. Their efforts include helping 'home town associations' (HTAs) establish themselves legally as non-profit organisations so that they can raise funds to support cultural and patriotic celebrations, such as soccer leagues and Mexican Independence Day and projects such as purchasing ambulances and improving local parks in communities of origin. Sending States are also becoming much more actively involved in protecting immigrant rights as defined by the constitution and international human rights conventions. Mexico and Colombia have been especially active regarding the rights of prisoners. Sending States have also initiated efforts to encourage emigrants to invest in economic and community development projects in their communities of origin and to lobby American officials regarding legislation affecting home-country interests.

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\* *Rodolfo de la Garza, Eaton Professor of Administrative Law and Municipal Science, Columbia University, and Tomas Rivera Policy Institute*  
*Jerónimo Cortina, Research Associate, Columbia University*

Several factors have stimulated this new outreach. First, the continuous increase in emigration requires consulates to devote greater resources to providing emigrants with basic and emergency assistance and intervene to protect their rights under US law and international agreements. These expanded contacts have produced increased awareness among officials of how these immigrants could benefit the home country economically and politically. Secondly, there has been an increase in transnational activities initiated by immigrants. This is most evident in the creation of a variety of types of immigrant associations, the best known of which are HTAs (Garza and Hazan, 2003), through which immigrants have mobilised to contribute to collective projects such as purchasing ambulances and improving local water systems that provide collective benefits to communities of origin, and to demand that countries of origin extend dual citizenship and absentee voting rights. The third factor is the interest of home-country governments in benefiting from emigrant resources. Concern about remittances helps explain the willingness of governments to respond to emigrant demands for various types of increased assistance and to support demands for absentee voting rights. The final factor is the interest of home-country governments working through HTAs and other organisations to mobilise emigrants to lobby in support of policies that will benefit them.

HTAs are central to this new relationship. Immigrants established hometown associations as a way of encouraging and stimulating contact with others in the US from the same community (Garza and Hazan, 2003). Once established, these associations engage in transnational economic and political activities that link their membership with their communities of origin. Their activities include collecting funds in the US for community-oriented projects in their countries of origin, exerting influence on home-country politics and in some cases even exporting American values such as democracy and accountability to their local communities (Leiken, 2000). The primary result of these activities has been the creation of institutionalised networks sustained by migration and social contracts between immigrants and their communities of origin (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Portes, 1999; Portes, Guarnizo *et al.*, 1999; Vertovec, 1999; Portes, Guarnizo *et al.*, 2003) in which the state has played a secondary but important role. The second factor influencing the development of this new relationship is the continued growth in the value of remittances. All emigrant sending states, led by Mexico –which receives approximately US\$15 billion annually– and El Salvador –where remittances total approximately 15% of its GDP–, receive substantial sums from their emigrants. These inflows have led to a uniform assumption by the governments of those countries: remittances are the panacea for the development and fiscal problems that have plagued them for centuries. Hence, States see these funds as essential for development projects and most governments have planned and implemented a variety of policy initiatives to stabilise the flow of such funds and maximise the amounts received.

Because they are extensive and well developed, the links that exist between the Salvadoran and Mexican diasporas and their home countries best illustrate the many dimensions of the new relationships that are developing between Latin American States and their emigrants. The remainder of this paper will draw on these cases to illustrate how these new links developed and to provide examples of specific aspects of the new relationships.

### *Mexican and Salvadoran<sup>1</sup> Home Town Associations*

According to the Salvadoran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are around 200 Salvadoran hometown associations in cities such as Houston, Los Angeles and Washington, DC and more than 550 Mexican hometown associations in Los Angeles, New York, San Antonio, Austin, Chicago, Detroit Phoenix and elsewhere in the US. Salvadoran and Mexican hometown associations are usually established to help specific communities of origin rather than states or regions, even though state confederations which include groups from numerous communities evolve from these. Most Salvadoran and Mexican hometown associations have a well-defined structure, involving a board and a few active members, numbering around ten.

There are no 'formal procedures' for establishing HTAs. For instance, there are cases where a hometown association is formed by only five families and others where all the people from the same town who live in the US form the association. Sometimes HTAs form around a disaster, such as hurricane Mitch; around a cause, such as lack of a high school; or at the urging of a prominent member of their home community, such as their pastor, as in the case of the *Club Monte Escobedo* in Zacatecas, Mexico, where the local pastor organised the creation of the first 'committee' in Chicago to gather funds to repair the local church. Eighteen years later the committee was formally established as a hometown association.

Hometown associations often work with a parallel institution in their home community. This organisation, often consisting of relations of US-based members of hometown associations, sends ideas for projects, oversees the disbursement of funds and supervises the implementation of projects. Because of why they were established, hometown associations focus their activities on one town. In the community of origin, residents come together to perform the *faena* (volunteer community work) for the community, with everybody pitching in to pursue a collective goal.

**Project identification and implementation.** Salvadoran hometown associations work on a range of projects that often involve activities carried out in both countries. The decisions on project selection and implementation result from consultation among hometown association board members on the basis of requests from home communities. In some cases, hometown associations report being approached by both private citizens and elected municipal officials and organisations that petition support for specific projects. Hometown associations that do not have a counterpart in the home country ask townspeople in their communities of origin about specific needs to which they might contribute. Because hometown associations are small-scale organisations they choose projects that target the most urgent needs of their home communities. Those close to the hometown associations identify the needs of the town. In 2002 in Zacatecas, one-third of the approved projects (305) were initiated in response to community-based petitions.

Although the selection and implementation of projects vary depending on the hometown association, most pursue a common goal: participating in the economic and social development of their communities of origin. On the Salvadoran side, the majority of projects seem to focus on health and education. In health, the funds are invested in building health clinics and donating medicines and ambulances. In education, funds are invested in libraries, school water systems, school supplies and school repairs. Mexican

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<sup>1</sup> The information from El Salvador comes from a paper commissioned from Manuel Orozco by The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute.

projects vary according to the specific needs of communities of origin. Projects range from repairing the local church to building roads.

Hometown associations also carry out charitable and infrastructure projects. These include constructing laundry facilities, recreational areas and stadiums and undertaking church renovations. In addition to carrying out projects in El Salvador and Mexico, some organisations work in the US to promote cultural and religious identity. Some of these activities include supporting cultural events (dances and Independence Day celebrations), scholarships, religious celebrations, youth motivational talks and sports and recreational activities. Some hometown associations go a step further: for instance, HTAs from several communities in Michoacan established the *Federación de Clubes Michoacanos* in Illinois, which has instituted a youth programme in cooperation with Heartland Alliance to forge future community leaders.<sup>2</sup>

**Fundraising efforts.** Efforts to raise funds translate into various kinds of activities, including raffles, pageants and festivals such as the annual Zacatecan picnic in Chicago, Illinois, which draws more than 5,000 persons. Donations in kind are also common to support these activities. Many hometown associations have a community base of 50 to over 100 people who participate in their fundraising events. Most groups raise less than US\$15,000 a year for projects, but a few raise more. Even when the total is greater, it does not necessarily all go to the home country. Some of the money is used for activities supporting Mexican and Salvadoran culture in the US, such as the *Semana Cultural Michoacana*, organised by the *Federación de Clubes Michoacanos en Illinois*, which was the first Federation of Michoacanean hometown associations in the US (interview with José Luis Gutiérrez, *Federación de Clubes Michoacanos en Illinois*, FEDECEMI).

#### *Institutional Responses*

How have the Salvadoran and Mexican governments responded to the increased activities of their diasporas? Most notably they have emphasised policies intended to encourage immigrants to maintain and deepen their identification with the home country. For instance, in 2000, El Salvador and Mexico approved a limited form of dual citizenship (Jones-Correa, 2002). Governments in the region, such as those of the Dominican Republic and Colombia, have recently modified their electoral laws so that émigrés can vote from abroad. Colombia has gone as far as to provide émigrés with the right to vote from abroad and elect their own representative to the national legislature (Escobar, 2004).

**Diaspora Outreach.** A recent study on Central American transnationalism suggested that 'the Salvadoran government as compared to the other governments in the region has a much more institutionalized response to international labor migration' (Andrade-Eekhoff and Silva-Avalos, 2003). Despite the limited resources available in a country as impoverished as El Salvador, the government has sought to adapt to changing circumstances and promote policies towards its emigrant communities.

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<sup>2</sup> *Enlaces America* (or "Links to the Americas") is the international programme of Heartland Alliance. *Enlaces America* helps transnational communities reaffirm their commitment to building an equitable, sustainable and dignified way of life for peoples in the Americas. In particular, it works with Latino immigrant communities in the US to maximise their leadership and regional policy advocacy potential. Currently, *Enlaces America's* programme work is focused on three areas: building transboundary community leadership, linking development, human rights and migration policy, and expanding multi-sectoral learning and cooperation (<http://www.heartland-alliance.org/> and <http://www.enlacesamerica.org>).

One of the first steps in that direction was the creation of a General Directorate within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to address the Salvadoran community living abroad (DGACE). The directorate, created in January 2000, has been the main official link between the government and Salvadoran émigrés. The Directorate justifies its existence by pointing to the continuing reality of migration and remittances of the Salvadoran community living outside El Salvador. The programme it has developed is divided into three areas: economic ties and integration, community and local development, and cultural and educational initiatives.

This office has been active in forging and maintaining relations with emigrants by working directly with consulates and the embassy, coordinating projects with other government agencies, visiting the communities and their leaders on a regular basis and keeping the community informed through an online publication (*Comunidad en Acción*), which reports on various activities and projects implemented by the diaspora as well as in cooperation with government or private entities.<sup>3</sup> This strategy has focused predominantly on education and community outreach, but has not addressed political matters such as the right to vote abroad and the broader representation of the community.

Although Mexican officials sporadically sought to improve relations with their diaspora beginning in the 1970s, Mexico's official outreach started in the early 1990s with outreach programmes such as *Paisano*, which emphasised protecting immigrants from abuse by Mexican border officials when they returned to Mexico, and the Programme for Mexican Communities Abroad (PCME), created by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim of the PCME was to expand and improve Mexico's relations with its emigrants and with US-born Mexican-Americans as well. The programme was set up through Mexico's embassy and its consulates in the US and focused on education, health, sports, business opportunities, community organisations and support for hometown associations.

According to Mexican Officials the PCME brought into national perspective the notion of an organised Mexican community in the US, and it was not until the programme was established that hometown associations began to view their relations with Mexico from a national perspective rather than in terms of their specific local concerns. This partly explains why they responded positively to the government's initiative regarding establishing Federations which group hometown associations from the same states (interview with Dante Gómez, Mexican Consulate General in Chicago, Illinois).

In 2000 the newly elected Fox administration created the Presidential Office for Mexicans Abroad (*Oficina Presidencial para Mexicanos en el Exterior*), which was merged with the PCME to create the Institute for Mexicans Abroad (IME). The IME is an independent agency within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a governing board of 152 members elected by the Mexican and Mexican-American communities in the US and a ten member advisory board appointed by the IME's Director.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the IME is the executive arm of the National Council for Mexican Communities Abroad, which is headed by Mexico's President and whose members include the Secretaries of the Interior, of Foreign Affairs, of Finance, of Social Development and of Education, among others. The goal of the IME is to elevate the quality of life of the Mexican communities abroad through the provision of services and information regarding education, health, banking services, business opportunities, loans and recreational activities. At the state level, the Zacatecan and

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.comunidades.gob.sv/comunidades/comunidades.nsf/pages/revista>

<sup>4</sup> Rodolfo O. de la Garza, the main author of this paper, serves on the advisory board.

Michoacanean governments also have offices that work with their specific diasporas, such as the General Office for the Michoacanean Migrant and the Zacatecas State Institute of Migration.

**Development Partnerships with Hometown Associations.** The Salvadoran government has worked closely with hometown associations on a range of development projects in rural El Salvador. One important example is the initiative managed by the Social Investment and Local Development Fund (FISDL) of the government of El Salvador.

Hometown associations have also established partnerships with various organisations. These groups include the national government (often in the form of the national development agency, the FISDL), municipalities, churches, other non-profit organisations and businesses. Depending on their political associations, local mayors and the FISDL are among the hometown association's top liaisons for project implementation. Churches are also high on the list. Additionally, some Salvadoran hometown associations are closely connected with other Salvadoran organisations through groups such as *El Rescate* and *Carecen*, or through umbrella hometown association groups such as *Comunidades Unidas Salvadoreñas*. These links have been essential to the hometown associations' lobbying power when dealing with the governments of their countries of origin.

To take advantage of the success of the Salvadoran hometown associations in the design and implementation of projects in El Salvador, the FISDL (in partnership with the DGACE) has developed a programme in which hometown associations compete for matching funds from the national government to complete development projects. The programme, known as *Unidos por la Solidaridad*, is designed to operate with Salvadoran organisations raising funds to support their hometowns. Through this programme hometown associations submit applications describing their projects and the funds required and FISDL reviews them for feasibility and responsiveness to community needs.

FISDL has several requirements for a project to participate in the partnership, including:

- (a) The project must conform to the municipal government's plan on civic participation.
- (b) The hometown association must match at least 10% of the project's costs.
- (c) The municipal government must be solvent.
- (d) Only social infrastructure projects are included.
- (e) Projects must cost at least US\$30,000.

Since 1993 there have been 14 competitions for FISDL matching funds, involving more than forty projects, to which hometown associations have contributed US\$2.1 million. The FISDL runs a programme called *Conoce tu municipio*, which provides information to hometown associations about the state of their hometowns as well as details regarding the projects it has undertaken in individual towns.

As shown in Table 1, of the 45 projects that hometown associations have partnered with the FISDL, 28 are in three of the country's fourteen provinces. Several provinces have only had one project each, and only one has had none. The average cost of a project supported by these partnerships is US\$31,832, but this varies across departments and depending on the type of project undertaken.

Salvadoran hometown associations, on average, give a total of 16% of the cost of projects, including both financial donations and support in kind. The percentage ranges across provinces from a low of 1% in San Salvador to 57% in Usulután. In the department of Cabañas, where hometown associations have established partnerships with the FISDL in three projects, they have contributed US\$99,000 –9% of the total cost– to match the FISDL’s US\$780,000 –69% of the total–. These figures indicate that the Salvadoran government contributes substantially to these projects, and this may encourage further hometown association investment in community-of-origin improvements.

Of the 45 projects, 17 deal with infrastructure, 14 target recreation, six address health, five deal with schools, four are about water and two involve productive activities. The two projects sponsored by Cuscatlan-origin hometown associations (SALA, LA and *Asociación Adentro Cojutepeque*) with the FISDL are typical of these joint ventures. In Cojutepeque they worked to remodel and furnish a recreation area for the town. In Suchitoto, Cuscatlan, SALA worked with the FISDL to repair and install streetlights on an access road to the Port of San Juan.

**Table 1. FISDL-Hometown Association Partnership Projects (US\$)**

Department	Nr of Projects	HTA Donation	FISDL Funds	Total Cost of Projects	Avg. Cost/Project	% HTA Donation	% FISDL Funds
La Unión	11	34,987.72	273,468.48	414,321.27	37,665.57	8.4	66.0
La Paz	10	7,138.78	89,349.51	156,039.11	15,603.91	4.6	57.3
Chalatenango	7	12,515.15	46,676.50	77,957.09	11,136.72	16.1	59.9
Cabañas	3	11,283.60	88,895.22	129,472.74	43,157.58	8.7	68.7
San Miguel	3	7,543.77	38,449.12	51,006.38	17,002.13	14.8	75.4
Cuscatlan	2	2,512.85	21,046.49	29,115.12	14,557.56	8.6	72.3
San Salvador	2	685.32	44,294.50	72,980.69	36,490.34	0.9	60.7
Usulután	2	158,106.43	117,081.53	276,493.34	138,246.67	57.2	42.3
Ahuachapán	1	456.88	2,398.63	4,568.82	4,568.82	10.0	52.5
La Libertad	1	1,658.24	15,372.58	17,030.82	17,030.82	9.7	90.3
Morazan	1	567.90	39,125.06	56,785.28	56,785.28	1.0	68.9
San Vicente	1	4,200.91	3,437.12	7,638.04	7,638.04	55.0	45.0
Santa Ana	1	2,090.01	10,728.72	13,933.40	13,933.40	15.0	77.0
Total/average	45	243,747.56	790,323.45	1,307,342.09	31,832.06	16.2	64.3

Source: FISDL, *Proyectos de 'Unidos por la Solidaridad' con Salvadoreños en el Exterior*.

Other examples of institutional relationships and partnerships involving government participation are those in which the United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has co-financed development projects with hometown associations. IFAD has an extensive rural project network in the Latin American and Caribbean region and has been working on projects based on the relationship between rural development and remittances in El Salvador.

IFAD has been working to determine the role of remittances, especially as untapped capital, from the United States to Latin America. IFAD has been working in cooperation with the World Bank to inform Salvadoran hometown associations about the conditions of rural Salvadoran communities and identifying potential cooperative projects on which it would be possible to pool hometown associations and IFAD resources. For instance, IFAD worked with a Los Angeles hometown association, supported by *El Rescate* and a Virginia-based hometown association, to privately construct a local high school. Besides providing 53% of the funding, IFAD’s main contributions were technical assistance and help in obtaining the Ministry of Education’s support for the project. What IFAD has done, in sum, is to incorporate hometown association initiatives in its Rural Reconstruction and Modernisation Programme, which in turn encourages migrants and migrant associations to invest in income-generating projects in their home countries. By matching migrant funds,

IFAD has provided technical and financial assistance for projects in targeted Salvadoran communities.

The Mexican experience involves fewer federal and international funds. Since the early 1990s cost sharing programmes between migrants, local, state and federal governments – such as the three-for-one programme (3x1), in which each party shares 25% of the cost of a particular project– have been in operation in Mexico in Zacatecas, Guerrero, Jalisco and Guanajuato. The Zacatecan experience in these programmes is the most institutionalised (Goldring, 2002), as evidenced by the close relationship between the state government and the 282 HTAs and more than 16 hometown association federations in the US (see Table 2).

**Table 2. 3x1 Programme in Zacatecas, Mexico**

Year	Projects	Municipalities	Amount (US\$)
1999	93	27	503,253.77
2000	108	28	6,330,249.10
2001	123	22	7,256,539.63
2002	308	43	17,597,250.69
2003*	305	44	13,174,805.87
Total	937	164	44,862,099.05

(\*) Up to April 12, 2003.

Source: Gobierno del Estado de Zacatecas.

In 2002 the state of Michoacan adopted a similar programme as part of the National Agreement for Human and Social Development with the Federal Government. In that year there were 64 projects: 75% for infrastructure, 19% for economic activities and the remainder for cultural or recreational projects. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of these projects and their value in US dollars. In 2003 there were 153 project proposals from January to May. The state's first expenditure on this programme for 2003 involved 23 social infrastructure and two economically-focused projects totalling US\$1,056,572.23.

**Table 3. 3x1 Programme in Michoacan, Mexico (2002)**

Stipends	Projects	Municipalities	People Benefited	Amount (US\$)
1we	12	9	31,342	762,669.81
2	16	11	190,000	1,317,550.46
3	20	8	46,270	959,504.79
4	9	3	1,966	639,789.66
5	7	7	4,412	380,512.60
Total	64	30	273,990	4,060,027.33

Source: *Coordinación General para la Atención al Migrante Michoacano*, Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, 2003.

The federal government and private organisations have also instituted a wide number of programmes. Among the most significant is the 'Invest in Mexico' programme, which involves Nacional Financiera, the Inter-American Development Bank and the State governments of Zacatecas, Puebla and Hidalgo. The programme identifies entrepreneurial projects for migrant participation in order to generate employment and roots for young potential migrants. The initiative helps those interested in generating a business plan with benefit-cost analyses, technical assistance and a complementary credit line for each project. It also offers opportunities to establish drug stores, 'pop and mom' stores, gas stations, coffee shops and *tortillería* franchises in their local communities. For instance, in Jalisco the state government offers loan support and technical assistance to small businesses owned, and sometimes run, by *Jaliscenses* living in the US. This policy has proved to be effective in increasing the level of well-being in the communities of origin. In a similar vein, the private sector has also started targeting immigrants for investment purposes. Just to cite one example, it is now possible for emigrants to use mortgages arranged in the US to buy houses in Mexico, with monthly payments starting at US\$140

dollars for 25 years.

**Conclusions:** This paper has shown that partly because of increased communications associated with globalisation, the relations between Latin American States and their emigrants has fundamentally changed in recent decades. As their numbers have increased, immigrants have raised the amount and changed the nature of the demands they make of their home countries. Among the demands are increased protection against abuse in the US and a voice in their home-country politics. Home-country governments have responded to these demands because their emigrants are too numerous to ignore, and because of the realisation that emigrants have the capability to benefit the nation politically by lobbying for home-country interests and economically through their remittances. Many aspects of this new relationship are channelled through hometown associations established by immigrants and through 'hometown association federations', which home-country governments help create and sustain.

Latin American immigration is virtually certain to continue. That means that these developments will become institutionalised even as they evolve. A consequence of this new relationship is that the historical meanings of State boundaries and nationalism will change. Immigrant demands for increased assistance combined with home-country interest in increasing remittances will increasingly involve home country officials in domestic US affairs. To the extent that immigrants also respond to the efforts of home-country governments to lobby on their behalf, home country involvement in US politics will reach unprecedented levels.

Together, these developments have functionally expanded the boundaries of the State and the context within which nationalism might be developed and sustained.

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