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# REMITTING DEMOCRACY? THE ROLE OF MIGRANT REMITTANCES IN PROMOTING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN GUANAJUATO, MEXICO

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**Abstract:** *Remittance-led development in Mexico reveals the potential for state-migrant cooperation to channel remittances towards public works projects in migrant hometown communities. In some cases, such as the one presented in this article, the transfer of ideas and knowhow-i.e., social remittances-incites constructive interaction between migrants, government officials, and hometown citizens. Moreover, under the right conditions, the multiplier effects of migrant remittances (both social and economic) can act as a catalyst for democratic growth. Building on observations from the field, this study argues that the promotion of migrant investments in entrepreneurial projects has the potential to foster the growth of democratic norms in migrant hometowns.*

**Keywords:** *remittance-led development, democracy, migration and social remittances.*

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*One of the things that Mexico had never acknowledged about my father-I insist that you at least entertain this idea-is the possibility that my father and others like him were the great revolutionaries of Mexico. Pocho pioneers. They, not Pancho Villa, not Zapata, were heralds of the modern age in Mexico. They left for the United States and then they came back to Mexico. And they changed it forever.*

-Richard Rodriguez. 2009. "Go North Young Man," pp. 215-216.

## 1. Introduction

As the popular Latino writer Richard Rodriguez notes, Mexican migrants have had a profound impact on their home country (Rodriguez 2009: 215-216). Every year migrants play an instrumental role in underwriting the economic wellbeing of the Mexican countryside by remitting billions of dollars back to their friends and family members. In fact, since 2005 Mexican migrants have sent back more than \$20 billion

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dollars per year, accounting for roughly two percent of the country's GDP (Banco de Mexico). However, migrants also partake in the shaping of social and political norms in their hometown regions. For example, over the last decade migrants have worked closely with their hometown communities and the Mexican state in an effort to promote meaningful development in rural townships across the country. Still, the actual effect of this type of collaboration on social and political norms is not well understood.

In this article I systematically analyze the nature of remittance-led development (RLD) in Mexico through an in-depth case study of El Timbinal, Guanajuato. The town of El Timbinal, which has been working with migrants on development initiatives for more than three decades, provides a particularly fruitful environment to study the effects of RLD on the ground. As I argue below, El Timbinal reveals the role of social and economic remittances in promoting political change, while at the same time illustrating the trials and tribulations of deepening democratic practices within political circles traditionally marked by patron-client relationships. The article is structured in the following manner. I open with a brief literature review, followed by an in-depth analysis of RLD in El Timbinal. Finally, I conclude by discussing several policy implications that emerge from my research in Guanajuato.

## 2. Literature Review

In Mexico, few factors affect local communities more than emigration. Jonathan Fox, borrowing from Albert Hirschman's classic analysis (1970), describes the potential influence of migrants on their communities as a distinct process of *exit* and *voice*. Specifically, Fox (2007; 2008) argues that Mexican citizens faced with entrenched poverty and lack of access to political voice frequently opt to migrate or "exit" due to an inability to influence the conditions that structure their lives. However, as Fox points out, in recent decades Mexican migrants living in the U.S. have begun to exercise their "voice" in their communities of origin in the form of remittances and communal development initiatives. Fox's work implies that unsatisfied citizens have four basic options: remain faithful to the status quo (loyalty), stay and take action in an effort to improve social conditions (voice without exit), permanently withdraw (exit without voice) or withdraw with the intention of improving social conditions through migration (exit with voice). Given this, migration appears to have a potential dual effect on Mexican society, such that it first reduces social pressure on politicians and then fosters the potential for social and political change as migrants begin to remit money and ideas back to hometown communities. This relationship is depicted in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Exit, Voice and Loyalty In Mexican Migrant Communities

	Silence	Voice
Stay	<i>Loyalty</i> - Compliance, Clientelism	<i>Voice</i> Mass Protest, Electoral Opposition
Migrate	<i>Exit without voice</i> - Migration only	<i>Exit with voice</i> -Remittances, Human Capital, Political Capital

Source: Adopted from Jonathan Fox (2007: 297).

Extant research supports Fox's theoretical framework. Early research, for example, found that emigration drained local communities of their most productive citizens and workers, thus having an overall detrimental effect on local development. This body of literature depicts migration as an irrevocable form of exit that traps communities in a vicious cycle of dependency in which migrants and their families waste away precious savings on superfluous consumption (Reichert 1981; Staurt and Kearney 1981; Wiest 1979). Subsequent research, however, found that remittances have multiplier effects within local economies, thus directly and indirectly stimulating employment, investment and income (Adelman, Taylor and Vogel 1988; Adelman and Taylor 1992; Durand, Parrado and Massey 1996; Calderón 2008). This line of research illustrates the potential for a migrant "voice" in communal development. This notion is reinforced by recent findings that demonstrate that migrants have the potential to leverage local politics (Batista and Vicente, 2010; Burgess, 2005; Chauvet and Mercier, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2000; Fox and Bada, 2008; Goldring, 2002; Goodman and Hiskey, 2008; M. P. Smith, 2003; R. Smith, 2006; Rother, 2009; Waddell, 2015).

Specifically, Pérez-Armendáriz and David Crow (2010) find that in Mexico connections with migrants improve one's inclination toward democratic participation. Their findings indicate that individuals living in areas with high levels of migration are more likely to participate in politics beyond the electoral booth such as civil associations and protests. Pfütze (2012), in turn, documents a link between household remittances and political change in the Mexican countryside. His work suggests that migrants, via cash transfers and social networks, play a role in promoting electoral competition and "the improvement of democratic institutions at the local level" (174). Pfütz findings are supported by Chauvet and Mercier's research in the West-African nation of Mali, which demonstrates that migrants frequently trigger "transfers of political norms" and in this manner contribute to higher participation rates in local elections (2011: 29). On a similar note, Batista and Vicente (2010) document evidence in Cape Verde that indicate that return migrants have a positive effect on the demand for political accountability. Like Chauvet and Mercier, they note that this effect is particularly evident among migrants who have lived in countries with relatively more democratic forms of governance (3). Related to this, Rother's work in the Philippines demonstrates that the effect of return migrants on local politics is often dependent on the political environment of the country to which individuals have migrated. This finding leads the author to the conclusion that "it [is] clear that migrants are a worthwhile factor to include in the research on external factors of democratisation, diffusion, democratic consolidation and diffuse support for democracies" (2009: 274).

Given the aforementioned findings, one might expect migrants to have a particularly profound effect on Mexico's social and political norms. To be certain, few nations have experienced such a deep integration of transnational migrant communities with local development initiatives. This is particularly evident in the case of the program 3 x 1 para migrantes, which brings migrants and the Mexican state together to work on development projects across the country. The 3x1 program, which matches migrant contributions dollar-for-dollar, channels migrant remittances towards a variety of development projects, including: bridges, roads, electricity grids, drainage systems, community centers, schools, healthcare centers and occasionally, businesses. A typical

3x1 project begins when a group of migrants in the U.S., typically organized through a Hometown Association (HTA), decides to spearhead a development project in their hometown. If approved, the project receives matching funds from the federal government through reserves made available by SEDESOL.<sup>1</sup> In turn, state and municipal governments match migrant contributions to the project with funds from their respective budgets. In this manner, migrant remittances donated towards development projects are tripled, thus incentivizing migrants and their communities to participate in the program.

Still, while the 3x1 program is an obvious catalyst for local economic development, it is less clear to what degree it engenders the transfer of so called “social remittances” between migrants and hometown regions (Fernández de Castro, et al 2006). Social remittances symbolize the circulation of new identities, innovative ways of thinking and new behaviors that migrants acquire in the U.S. and bring back to their hometown communities (Conway and Cohen 1998; Fox 2008; Levitt 1998, 2011; Smith 2006). Given the degree of influence that migrants wield over local development patterns in rural Mexico, one might expect that migrants affect the nature of local social and political norms. This is particularly true in the case of the program 3x1 para migrantes. Surprisingly, extant research pays little attention to the role of social remittances in communal development directed by the 3 x 1 para migrantes program. With this in mind, as a means of expanding the accounting methods used to analyze the relative success or failure of 3 x 1 projects, in this study I focus on the less quantifiable social remittances channeled between migrants and hometowns within the 3 x 1 framework. To this end, I provide an ethnographic snapshot of RLD in one migrant hometown community: El Timbinal, Guanajuato.

### 3. Social Remittances and Political Change in El Timbinal, Guanajuato

Located in the southern most extreme of Guanajuato, El Timbinal, population 538, is largely dependent on *migradolares* or migrant dollars.<sup>2</sup> However, the town is somewhat unique in that while migrants have privately funded more than a dozen public works projects since the late 1980s, the town’s only use of 3 x 1 funds was registered in 2009

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<sup>1</sup> If a 3x1 project is deemed viable and is in accordance with the rules of operation stipulated by the 3x1 program, the file is submitted for final evaluation to the Committee of Validation and Attention to Migrants (COVAM). Each state has its own COVAM, which consists of twelve representatives: three migrants, three municipal officials, three state officials and three federal officials. Each year, the COVAM votes on which projects to approve for funding. If a project is approved, funds are allocated for the following fiscal year and all parties involved are given a green light to move forward with the project (SEDESOL). It is important to note that a majority vote is necessary for project approval and thus government representatives share a comparative advantage over migrants in determining which projects will ultimately be funded.

<sup>2</sup> This section of my paper is constructed from interviews and observation made during field visits to Guanajuato during the period 2009-2013. I would like to thank the Fulbright foundation for funding the most formidable period of this work during the spring and summer of 2011.

for the reopening of a clothing factory or *maquila*.<sup>1</sup> The maquila was built in the late 1990s through an initiative named *Mi Comunidad*, which was spearheaded by then governor of Guanajuato, Vicente Fox. *Mi Comunidad* sought to channel migrant remittances towards the construction of maquilas throughout the state. El Timbinal's maquila, however, like the rest of the more than twenty maquilas funded by *Mi Comunidad*, closed its doors after just three years of production. The factory shut down in part due to the tumultuous global market that emerged in the wake of 9/11; however, poor management and a general lack of entrepreneurial culture amongst workers also influenced the factory's demise. El Timbinal's maquila remained closed from 2001 to 2009, when Angel Calderón, the president of the town's lone hometown association (HTA), acquired 3 x 1 funds from the state to aid with the training of new factory workers and improved marketing strategies. Interestingly, in this particular case, while the federal and state government both contributed roughly \$40,812 dollars to the project, the municipal government in Yuriria did not contribute to the project. (I revisit the cause of this unique outcome below.) The reopening of the factory was still considered a 3 x 1 project because it was also supported by Western Union, which donated roughly \$17,330 dollars.<sup>2</sup> Currently, the factory is run by *Las Mujeres Emprendedoras del Timbinal*, a group of five women who have been thoroughly trained by MIDE AC, a civil society association that works with migrant hometown communities throughout central Mexico. The factory is currently operating on a contract basis but it is in search of more stable, long-term contracts that will permit it to sustain itself overtime. Taken together, El Timbinal presents a unique opportunity to analyze the role of social remittances in promoting the evolution of political norms in rural Mexico. In the space that follows I provide excerpts from semi-directed interviews conducted in the town of El Timbinal as a means of illustrating the role of social remittances in the small town's development.

Ángel Calderón, or Don Ángel, as locals know him, migrated to the U.S. for the first time in the 1980s. For many years he worked in agriculture fields but he currently oversees three migrant shelters in Napa Valley, which provide housing to migratory workers who are employed in the valley's fertile wine fields. Here I provide a brief account of the nature of Don Ángel's work in order to give the reader an idea of the knowledge sets that Don Ángel has acquired in the U.S. through his work. The following conversation, which I recorded in the summer of 2011 during a site visit to El Timbinal, recounts how he got involved in his current job:

Angel: One day I happened upon a group of 40 peasant workers living under a bridge. And among these 40 peasants were 3 women and one of them asked me to, 'Imagine the nights that we have to spend with these 40 animals, with all the alcohol they consume one doesn't have to have much of an imagination to figure out what goes on here.' And I responded, 'M'ijias, why are you here?' To which she responded, 'Where the hell are we supposed to go?!' So I got them out of there and took them to a Catholic Church and the Father made space for them. From there I went back to the bridge and I told the men that if they stopped drinking I would start looking for a place for them to live. I began to take photos

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<sup>1</sup> In the paragraphs that follow I use both maquila and factory.

<sup>2</sup> Amounts converted with an exchange rate of 12.5 pesos to 1 US dollar.

of their living conditions and with the photos in hand, I would go around to the grape producers. I would tell them, 'Here is your labor force. This isn't Central America and it's not Mexico. This is the United States, this is California, this is Napa Valley and this is *your* labor force.' I went from one producer to the next.

Author: When did all this start?

Angel: In 1998.

Author: So about the time the maquila opened in El Timbinal?

Angel: Yes. Yes and then in 2000 I began working full time with the migrant worker program and at that time it was just one center, we only had twenty tiny bunk beds. Three to each room, we stuffed sixty people in there.

Author: Did you receive government funding for the project?

Angel: No, at first we collected a small rent of \$10 per day from the migrants and the grape producers gave a small donation. Later we acquired funds from different organizations and then, in 2000 we pushed for a small tax of \$10 per acre, which provided us with half a million dollars for the program. By 2003 we had three good centers, nothing opulent but good. I pushed my twelve employees to provide good treatment. I had to let several people go for not treating the workers well. I ran off one of the managers and his family because they used expressions like "pinche Oaxaqueños." When the harvest season was over I let them go... The most important thing in the center is respect. They are all honorable workers, they are the most responsible people in the valley and they are humans. Right now we have a good system and we provide respectable housing for 180 workers.

As the aforementioned passage reveals, like many HTA leaders, Don Ángel is an altruistic individual and his noble actions are evident on both sides of the border. Moreover, it is clear that Don Ángel's work in the U.S. naturally feeds into the "social" nature of the projects that El Timbinal's HTA has supported in Mexico. For example, as manager of the Napa shelter, Don Ángel has come to demand respect and equal treatment for all and as the excerpts below reveal, he has placed similar demands upon those individuals that have come to participate in the maquila in El Timbinal. Most importantly, as Don Ángel expressed to me while walking through his hometown streets, in the U.S. he has seen the ability of his people [Mexicans] to change and adopt to new cultural norms and for that reason, he knows that change can also be brought to the hills of Guanajuato. The question is how to catalyze it.

In El Timbinal locals refer to the last thirty years as the "age of migration," and as they pointed out to me on multiple occasions, during this period change has been a constant. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century El Timbinal was a rural village located at the end of a dusty trail. The town was settled during colonial times and many of its current inhabitants, including Don Ángel and the women that work at the factory, are direct descendants of these original *pobladores*. For generations economic activity in El Timbinal revolved around subsistence farming and ranching and the village did not begin to change until the onset of migration to the U.S., which began in 1942 with the

dawn of the *Bracero* period.<sup>1</sup> The first remittances arrived as migrants began to settle in the U.S. and as Don Ángel explains, they changed everything:

Author: And when did the first migrants head north?

Angel: With the *bracero* program, in the 1940s and 1950s.

Author: What changes has migration provoked in the village?

Angel: Immigration has driven a great deal of drastic changes. The population has gone down. Construction has gone up due to remittances and the economy has changed considerably. Now the people dress well, eat well, they can pay for a taxi, they can travel...in that sense the economy has improved a lot with the remittances. Still, there is no production in the community. No agriculture and no cattle and the only source of work is external and that's what we would like to change with the factory.

Thus, while remittances created new consumers in El Timbinal, they did not generate jobs, which is the goal of the factory. Still, the HTA's communal development plans did not begin with the factory but rather, in the 1980s with the public works projects that Don Ángel and other migrants helped the town fund. These initial migrant projects were not supported by the government but rather, as Don Ángel phrases it, "were 1 x 0":

Author: What were the first projects that migrants funded in the town?

Angel: We invested about \$7,000 [in the church] and it was 1 x 0, there was no government assistance...The second project was to tear down the old kindergarten and build a new one. This project was 1 x 0 as well and we invested about \$14,000...Then we supported the Lepitos [children of a migrant family] so they could study music because they weren't doing anything productive. Their fathers were in the U.S. and their mothers couldn't control them and they boys frequently went out to party. It was dangerous because they could get into fights and Raúl was one of the leaders of a group and other kids in town followed his lead. So we found a retired musician to teach the boys music. Some of them quit being loafers and started playing in a band, others went on with their lives but they became more productive. After that we fought for a better central plaza. I didn't completely agree with the project but we went along with it because the municipal president said, 'Whatever you guys raise for the project I will match' and so we build a new plaza and added an arch to the church...I didn't like the project because it was very expensive and in those years there were still outbreaks of diarrhea every year due to the bad water. So eventually we funded a project to pipe in potable water from a well outside the village. And after that is when we opted to invest in a productive project, and that is when it got complicated, it is very difficult to create a business, a clothing factory, for example, in a place with these characteristics. We knew it would be an ordeal, that it would be a long road and that we would have to change a whole culture.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bracero program, which ran from 1942-1964, was a U.S.-sponsored program that facilitated the contract of Mexican laborers in the U.S.

As the above quote demonstrates, like in Napa Valley, migrants and Don Ángel in particular, have played a fundamental role in the town's development over the last thirty years. Not only have they funded public works projects but they have also played a principal role in the social welfare of locals by helping fund a community center and extracurricular activities for youth. Also, Don Ángel, although not always successful, has pushed for projects with social impact. What is unique about the majority of the projects that preceded the factory is that they materialized without the assistance of the government and in fact, if it had not been for the government's persistence, the club might not have pursued the maquila at all. However, while the government persuaded the HTA to build a maquila through the program Mi Comunidad, as Don Ángel explains, the only monetary support they supplied came in the form of a large loan:

Angel: If we had built the factory at cost, it would have cost us \$50,000 but the government insisted that we take out a government loan to buy the material and so we took out a \$50,000 loan but we paid it back in installments. In two years we paid back \$100,000.

Author: The interest rates were that high?

Angel: Yes but the good part was that of the \$50,000 that we paid in interests, they technically returned \$12,000 because they paid for a technician for twelve months and provide him with a salary of \$1,000 a month. Later they gave us another \$10,000 in order to keep a technician on for a while longer. So in all, they returned \$25,000.

Author: So the government provided you with a good deal of technical assistance?

Angel: Yes but back in April [of 2009] when we began thinking about reopening, I simply asked that they assist me with the bureaucratic paperwork that one has to go through every time one goes into a government office. For God's sake, it can be so frustrating. They treat you bad, they run you off and so I told the governor, help me with the bureaucratic work ...that's all I wanted but someone in government said, 'Wait a minute, how much did you invest originally? Ok, what you need to do is solicit a 3 x 1 project and that way you can receive government assistance to reopen the maquila.' So that's what I did but it was advice from the government. They offered and so I accepted. We sat down and wrote up the project. That's when we remodeled part of the maquila, we bought a pick-up, two more machines and computers.

In addition to 3x 1 funding, the maquila is currently being supported by a non-governmental organization called Migración y Desarrollo (MIDE AC), which is dedicated to assisting migrant clubs with the development of entrepreneurial projects in central Mexico. MIDE AC has been extremely instrumental in the factory's reopening. For example, they were the ones that first brought the project to the attention of Western Union, which allowed the club to access a generous grant of \$17,330 dollars. Most importantly, MIDE AC has provided the factory workers with hundreds of hours of professional training through workshops sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). As MIDE AC's co-founder Anselmo Meza explains, the nature of the organization's work is part of a larger vision aimed at promoting



democratic development norms and “political capital” within Mexico’s nascent democratic society. The following excerpt is from an interview that I conducted with Anselmo in 2011 en route to El Timbinal:

Author: How did MIDE AC begin?

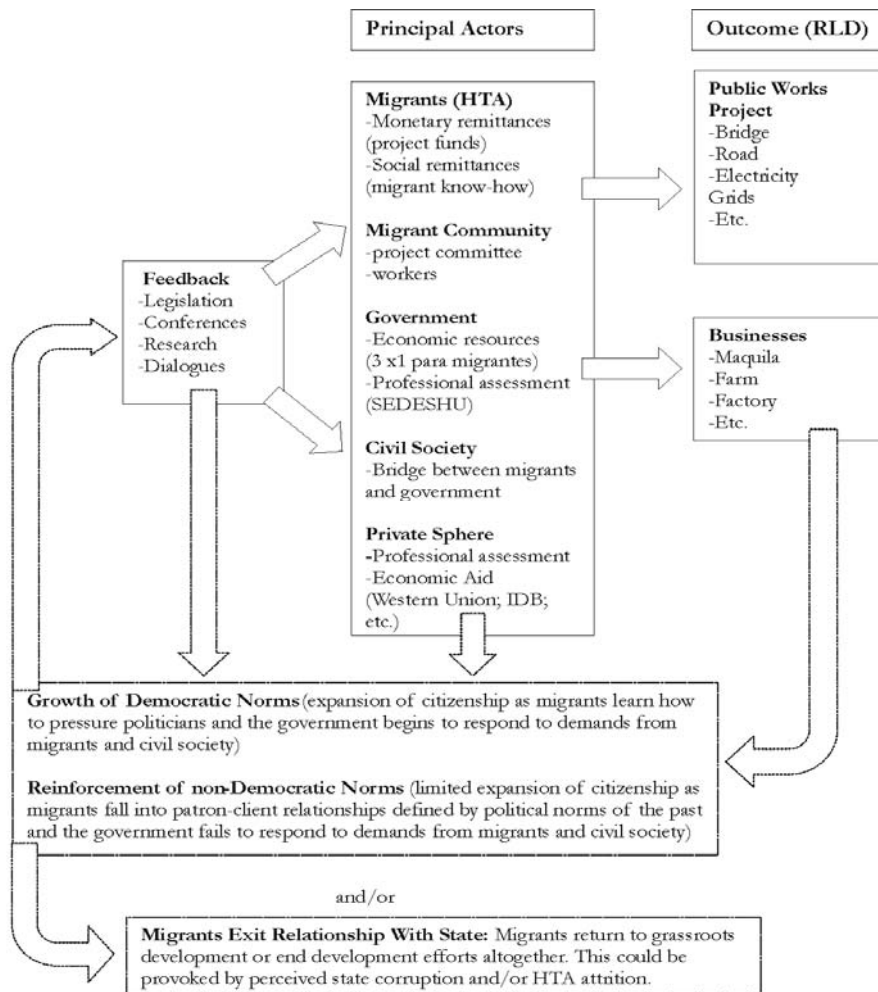
Anselmo: Alejandra [co-founder of MIDE AC] worked in the federal office of SEDESOL in Mexico City and she was working with the program ‘Oportunidades.’ She and I talked frequently about the situation that was taking place in Mexico. Vicente Fox had just won the presidency, PRI was out but it was clear that there was a need for more civic participation. We also talked about how the respective powers—the executive, the legislative and the judicial—were beginning to divide and that given all the changes, there was an opportunity to develop a sort of ‘social lobby’ which didn’t exist in the country. There were lobbyists, like myself, for businesses and political parties. The pharmaceutical business, the auto industry, the insurance companies, they all had lobbyists but there were no lobbyists for the people. And around that time, at the outset of Fox’s presidency congress passed a law that supported sustainable rural development and part of the legislation called for the promotion of investment strategies that channeled migrant remittances towards development and that is when Alejandra and I saw an important opportunity to begin lobbying for the people. And so we began the initial process of founding an association that would be an intermediary between the government and migrant organization. Why? Because just as the government didn’t understand the migrants well, the migrants did not understand the government...And so we decided to promote migrant investments in their hometowns and offer them a contact point and a means through which to contact key legislators that were in one form or another conscious of the role of the participation of everyday citizens in politics.

MIDE AC’s promotion of “political capital” is quite evident amongst the workers of the factory. Through training sessions and meetings, Don Ángel and MIDE AC have clearly changed the lives of the five women that run the factory. During my site visits to Guanajuato I noticed that, unlike most rural women in the Mexican countryside, these five individuals are assertive and proactive. For example, one afternoon, while I was visiting the factory in El Timbinal, I had the opportunity to observe a business strategy meeting held inside the maquila. What was most interesting about the meeting was how the women interacted with Don Ángel, Alejandra and Anselmo. They were highly participatory in the meeting and proposed, in many cases, very viable solutions to the problems currently facing the factory. Most importantly, the confidence that I observed in the women that day is not limited to the confines of the factory. Rather, their newfound confidence as entrepreneurs and business owners carries over into the public sphere. When they have to file official paperwork with the government they immediately solicit meetings with officials in the state capital and in the meetings they look government functionaries in the eye and ask direct questions. As Anselmo pointed out as we were leaving the town one evening after a visit to the factory, “That’s not how things used to work in Mexican politics, especially in rural areas and *never* with women.” It was not that long ago that all political relationships in Mexico were dominated by men and marred by clientelism. This was especially evident in the rural countryside where the hierarchal relationships defined during the semi-feudal colonial

period were reinforced under the seventy-five year political reign of PRI. Given this, the very notion of a female peasant sitting down and negotiating the terms of a business venture with the male governor of a state is nothing short of monumental.

#### 4. Social Remittances and Democratic Inroads in Guanajuato, Mexico

Figure 1. Flow Chart of Democratic Growth Within the 3 x 1 para Migrantes Framework



Source: Author.

Note: ----- = possible causal path; \_\_\_\_\_ = established path

Taken together, El Timbinal presents the opportunity to analyze the evolution of political norms in relation to the 3 x 1 para migrantes program. Figure 1 reveals the feedback loop inherent to the 3 x 1 model. At all junctures, and specifically following the completion of projects, migrants and government officials have the opportunity to provide feedback to each other. For example, in recent years the government of Guanajuato, in conjunction with Mexican HTAs in the U.S., has organized conferences in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston and Dallas. These public forums provide the government and civil society members like Don Ángel, Anselmo and Alejandra the opportunity to discuss the outcomes of projects across the state, and most importantly, they allow for both parties to learn from past experiences. As the case of El Timbinal demonstrates, these feedback loops are also evident in hometown communities. The factory workers, for example, actively pressure the government to concede to their demands and in doing so, they openly question traditional political and social norms. Although subtle, such developments provide snapshots of democratic progress in rural Mexico.

Still, although El Timbinal clearly demonstrates the potential for RLD to underwrite constructive collaboration between migrants, community members and the state, it also reveals the difficult nature of changing political culture in rural Mexico. In the excerpt that follows Don Ángel outlines the troubling nature of Yuriria's local political culture:

Author: Have you and your fellow migrants seen any notable changes within the local government? Do you think, for example, that the government has become any more transparent and/or open to working with citizens on development projects?

Don Ángel: We have received support from the federal and state government but not from the municipal government. With the municipal government it is different, they have a very limited vision and their objectives are very small. Their perspective is very close-minded. However, in our experience with the federal and state government it is very different. At this level the officials are very educated. In their offices you find engineers, architects, contractors, business administrators, ecologists and so on. It is much easier to work with these individuals because they have a different vision of Mexico. In the municipal government, however, things are different. The jobs at this level are handed out based on personal connections and not individual capacity. As a consequence, often they have very little knowledge and they don't understand the first thing about entrepreneurship. Moreover, their administrative period is quite short and as a result projects are often not followed up with.

Author: And regarding the municipal government in Yuriria, have there ever been changes in terms of the ruling party or has the same party always controlled the government?

Don Ángel: Right now it is a big mess. The local government is a disaster. For many years the PRI controlled the government through the traditional *caciques*. Then a young member of PRI emerged and a group of young, professional priistas [PRI party members] took the municipal presidency for a number of years. I worked with a few of them. After that the old priistas, the dinosaurs,

jumped over to PAN and they won under the PAN label and they led us to ruin.<sup>1</sup> The next president was the son of the previous president but the son did not run under PAN but instead ran with the green ecologist party [PVEM]. He recently left the presidency and now the president is his wife, who also ran under the PVEM but the family has been involved with PRI, PAN and PVEM. Their party, as you can see, really doesn't mean much.

Although the case of El Timbinal reveals the potential for RLD to catalyze change in rural Mexico, Don Ángel's account of municipal politics draws into question the depth of Mexico's recent transition towards democracy and clearly illustrates the types of barriers faced by RLD.

## 5. Conclusions

In recent decades the Mexican state has strategically positioned itself to reincorporate their large diaspora community into the political fold. The country's pro-migrant turn has included the development of a number of migrant-centered services, including: international life insurance, distance education programs, microcredit for rural housing initiatives, and migrant-led development programs such as 3x1 para migrantes. More recently, in 2005, the state launched the "Red de Talentos Mexicanos" or the "Mexican Talent Network," which is designed to "facilitate the participation of emigrants in the develop of their home country, thus reducing the effects of brain drain and incentivizing 'brain circulation'" (Red de Talentos Mexicanos). Still, as noted in the introduction to this article, the actual effect of state-migrant collaboration on Mexican society is not well understood.

The findings presented in this article reverberate with the evidence from existing literature that demonstrates the *potential* for migrants to impact social and political norms within migrant hometowns (Batista and Vicente, 2010; Burgess, 2005; Chauvet and Mercier, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2000; Fox and Bada, 2008; Goldring, 2002; Goodman and Hiskey, 2008; M. P. Smith, 2003; R. Smith, 2006; Rother, 2009; Waddell, 2015). Specifically, the case of El Timbinal demonstrates that RLD has the ability to incite social, economic and political shifts within hometown communities. Over the course of the last thirty years, Don Ángel and other migrants from El Timbinal have taken it upon themselves to provide for their small village's basic development needs; such as education facilities, roads, potable water, and most recently, a potential center of employment in the form of a clothing factory. Throughout this process, social and economic remittances have played a distinct role in the development of the community. Still, one of the most difficult parts of measuring social remittances is determining the direction of causality. That is, do migrants actually remit learned behavior? Or do some migrants simply have an altruistic disposition that makes them more prone to lend a hand to those in need. For example, if Don Ángel had never gone to the U.S., would he have still tried to change his hometown for the better? Given Don Ángel's benevolent

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<sup>1</sup> "Dinosaurs" is the term commonly used in Mexico to label PRI party members that continue to hold conservative ideals more closely aligned with the traditional party beliefs defined during the PRI's seventy-year reign in the executive branch.

nature and his deep commitment to his community, it is quite likely that he would have found a way to help even if he had never left. That said, the fruits of his labor would have had much less impact in the community. In this sense, what the case of El Timbinal illustrates is that under the right conditions the 3 x 1 para migrantes program has the potential to channel social and economic remittances towards development projects, and in this manner, spur multiplier effects within society. El Timbinal helps the reader visualize how the multiplier effects of social and economic remittances materialize on the ground. Just as importantly, this case demonstrates that the effects of migrant remittances cannot be measured in an economic vacuum, but rather, must be considered in light of their interaction with the government, local residents and civil society organizations.

Taken together, El Timbinal sheds light on both the potential for, and the limits to, migrant-led development. For instance, it is important to note that since reopening its doors in 2009 the maquila has had trouble securing stable work orders and while the young women who run the business are working hard to create solutions, at this point, it is not entirely clear that the factory will be successful. (As of April 2014 the factory was still in operation.) However, as Don Ángel informed me following a particularly frank and open discussion with the women concerning the factory's economic future, "It is important that we give them enough room to create solutions themselves because that is the only way to create meaningful change in them and the village's society." As this exchange demonstrates, change begins by leveling of the playing field (i.e., creating initiatives like the 3 x 1 program that allow citizens to partake in the redistribution of resources) but actual progress only takes place once the game is underway. Given Mexico's history, the very fact that the citizens of El Timbinal are on the playing field at all is evidence of progress. Still, the degree to which any such progress is paid forward will likely depend on the ability of the state and migrants to collaborate with local government. As the research outlined above indicates, this may very well be the village's largest challenge yet. Despite the justified criticism of the 3x1 program in existing literature (Aparicio and Meseguer 2009, 2011; Zamora 2006), the solution to this barrier will likely come through the expansion of programs like 3x1 para migrantes. Currently, the 3x1 program captures less than one percent of all remittances sent back to Mexico. Capturing a larger percentage of this total would arguably improve the nation's development, but just as importantly, it would provide everyday citizens with more opportunities to engage with—and pressure—the state for meaningful change.

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