

Borderline Livelihoods

A Case Study from Southern Chiapas/ Mexico

Summary

Context and Research Objectives

General context for the study is the analysis of the livelihood strategies in the borderland of southern Chiapas, Mexico. Basically, the study region is regarded as unexplored, excepting the following contextual aspects: in the last decade an increasing number of people from Chiapas followed the example of many countrymen from more northern regions of Mexico and started to migrate to the United States in order to find work and sustain their families at home. Nowadays, Chiapas belongs to the group of Mexican federal states with the highest migration rate. Not only migration from Chiapas itself increased but also migration from Central- and South America. Hence, the southern border gained relevance, as it is a natural corridor between Central America and Mexico respective the United States. As a result of the rising migrant flow, Mexico intensified its border controls at the southern border. Besides the existence of transmigration, additional pressure on livelihoods of people living in southern Chiapas is stemming from opening up Mexican markets for U.S. goods in the year 1994 as a consequence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and from natural disasters like the hurricanes Mitch in 1998 and Stan in 2005.

Drawing on the assumption that migration and the border context are relevant for the analysis of the livelihoods in southern Chiapas, the following research questions were formulated:

Which are the most frequent livelihood strategies?

What are the consequences of migration for households, community, and region?

What are the impacts on livelihoods stemming from the proximity of the border?

Concepts and Methodology

Basically, the study is based on the sustainable livelihood approach as published by the British Department for International Development (DfID). This perspective was complemented with migration theories focussing on networks and concepts in the field of gender addressed to participation and decision-making within the household and the community.

The lack of available information about the livelihoods in the study area resulted in an explorative character of the research. Fieldwork has been carried out in southern Chiapas from January to May 2007. In cooperation with CESMECA and the local governmental institute for human development (IDH), two communities in the borderland to Guatemala (Frontera Comalapa) were selected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted mainly with different households; furthermore with local authorities, teachers, and health personnel as key informants; and with representatives of the local government and institutions, and researchers as experts. Participatory observation was another tool applied.

Conclusions

In the two selected communities, Huixnaya, (419 inhabitants) and Nueva Morelia (905 inhabitants), the significance of migration as mobile livelihood strategy increased considerably while traditional agriculture became less important. Around one quarter of all households show mobile livelihood strategies (migrant households) and approximately half of all households are linked to migration by receiving remittances (migrant- and remittance households). Despite the general loss of significance of agriculture, subsistence cultivation of maize and beans still is a widespread phenomenon. Only households with the male head currently in migration did not cultivate to meet subsistence needs. Of particular importance for households still showing exclusively agricultural livelihood strategies are agricultural subsidies as prices for agricultural products declined considerably. In both communities it is the group of migrant households that possesses significantly less land than other households and none of the analyzed migrant households is qualified for agricultural subsidies.

In the study area, migration is predominantly a male phenomenon. Migration tends to be repetitive in terms of periodic stays of one to several years in the United States. The amount of earnings remitted varies greatly from a few dollars to hundreds of US dollars per month. Households where the household head is in migration receive around double the amount compared to households having a member but not the household head in migration. Remittances mainly are used for non-productive purposes, such as house construction or food and clothing. Migrants indicated that migration would not be possible without assistance of friends or family members. Most important for migrants is financial support followed by assistance in job searching and accommodation. In this regard, it's important to point out that repetitive acts of migration may create additional social capital that promotes and sustains more movement. Migrants from Chiapas tend to occupy other regions in the

United States than traditional Mexican migration. Interviewed migrants stayed predominantly in Florida and in the city of Phoenix.

Migrants' families generally remain in the community of origin. The five interviewed wives of migrants indicated that male migration does not lead to an empowerment in terms of shifting duties within the household or the community.

The evaluation of the relevance of the nearby border showed that Guatemala nowadays is of minor significance for the livelihoods in Huixtlay and Nueva Morelia and completely insignificant regarding current migration processes. The attractiveness of Guatemala mainly lies in inexpensive shopping possibilities and medication. Moreover, Guatemalans are perceived as cheap labour force on plantations. The sphere of influence of Guatemalan and Central American transmigrants is limited to urban areas (Frontera Comalapa).