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## Vigilance and control at the U.S.-Mexico border region. The new routes of the International Migration Flows

María Eugenia Anguiano Téllez y Alma Paola Trejo Peña

*El Colegio de la Frontera Norte*

### *Resumen*

A partir de 1993, el gobierno de Estados Unidos desplegó un variado conjunto de estrategias y acciones de control y vigilancia en su frontera con México que han provocado cambios en las rutas de los flujos de migrantes que pretenden internarse a aquel país por la frontera norte mexicana, empujándolos hacia zonas más inhóspitas y peligrosas, entre ellas la desértica frontera de Sonora-Arizona. El objetivo de este trabajo es identificar los cambios en las rutas del flujo migratorio internacional de trabajadores no documentados en sus desplazamientos por México y dar cuenta de los efectos ocasionados en las localidades adoptadas como nuevas zonas de tránsito, estancia temporal o cruce de la frontera en el estado de Sonora, destacando a la par situaciones y procesos asociados a las extremas condiciones de vulnerabilidad que enfrentan los migrantes bajo estas nuevas circunstancias.

*Palabras clave:* migración internacional, migración mexicana hacia Estados Unidos, control fronterizo, flujos migratorios, rutas migratorias, región Sonora-Arizona.

### *Abstract*

*Vigilance and Control at the U.S-Mexico Border Region. The New Routes of the International Migration Flows*

Since 1993, the U.S. Government stretched out several strategies to increase the control and vigilance in the U.S. Mexican border region. These actions modified the routes of the Mexican migratory labor flows, pushing them towards more hostile and dangerous crossing border areas, among them the Sonora-Arizona Desert. The purpose of this paper is identify the changes in those routes and point out the effects caused on the new transit localities, calling attention to the vulnerability faced by the migrants under these new circumstances.

*Key words:* international migration, Mexican migration to U. S, border control, migratory flows, migratory routes, Arizona-Sonora region.

Ever since the United States decided to reinforce control and vigilance in its frontier with Mexico, non-governmental organizations, the media and researchers have warned, documented and analyzed the results from that strategy; results which are mainly observed in the reorientation of the migratory flow through more dangerous routes, a considerable increment of the difficulties and risks faced by the migrants and thousands of deaths since 1993.

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Conversely, the consequences of the reorientation of the flows of international migrants towards new border populations used as transitory spaces or as temporary abiding have been scarcely examined

In a similar way, in the literature on international migration are studied the causes and consequences, the costs and benefits of the migratory flows and the conformation of social networks in the places of origin as well as in the destination ones, but there has been few research on this very aspects in the places where the international migrants transit. These deficiencies in the knowledge of the migratory phenomenon motivated our interest in researching; we focus on the Mexican border State of Sonora (in the northwest part of the country) due to the transcendence that some of its populations have acquired as places of intense transit of international migrants, in particular the little towns of Altar and Sásabe.

Hence, this work tries to give an account of the effects caused by the reorientation of the international migratory flow in towns adopted as new transit zones, temporary abiding and border crossing, being distinguishable both the situations and processes associated to the conditions of extreme vulnerability that the migrants and local dwellers face.

This text is divided into three sections. In the first we specify the consequences that produced the actions and strategies of vigilance and control on the United States' south border in the reorientation of the usual routes the international migrants took. In the second, we detail the fast strengthening of the new Hermosillo-Altar-Sásabe route by means of which migrants cross Sonora. We conclude analyzing the effects the routes' reorientation generated for both migrants and dwellers of the transit towns, being noteworthy the increment of their vulnerability and the violation of their human rights.

**Border control and changes in the routes of the international migratory flow**

Since 1993, United States' government implemented a set of strategies and actions of control and vigilance in its border with Mexico. In only twelve years there was a dramatic increment in the number of Border Patrol agents. This detachment, constituted by 450 elements in the year of its creation, 1924, and whose number slowly grew in its first seventy years of existence, was massively increased during the last decade, changing from slightly less than four thousand

agents in 1993 to more than eleven thousand in the year 2006 (Nevins, 2002: Appendix F). Additionally, on July 13<sup>th</sup> 2006, the U.S. Representatives' Chamber approved the unfolding of six thousand soldiers of the National Guard on the border with Mexico, as well as an increment of a thousand agents of the Border Patrol and the construction of detention centers for four thousand undocumented immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, in the 1990's decade there were unusual dispositions and extraordinary methods of control and vigilance in this border (Waller, 2006), among them the construction of 86.5 miles of walls along the 1951 miles that mark the border with Mexico and that were edified in the specific zones of the areas that are commonly used by the migrants to suddenly cross the border, they were also build with high intensity lightning, telescopes with infrared sights and thermal and movement detectors, as well as non-piloted airplanes with sophisticated computer and video systems that can move across inhospitable regions in order to locate people and transmit precise information and images on the location of the trespassers to ground vehicles (U.S. News and World Report, 2005 and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2006). By the end of September 2006, in the U.S. Senate the broadening of these barriers would be voted by means of the construction of a wall of seven hundred miles and one thousand and eight hundred vigilance towers equipped with cameras, sensors and trackers with capacity to detect movement in a perimeter of seven kilometers.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, there were special operations in the border of the States of Texas, California and Arizona, unfolded in border towns that usually concentrated large numbers of illegal entrances, such as El Paso, San Diego and Nogales. In table 1 we refer the special operations applied as from 1993, the geographical spaces where they were performed and the dates they started, stressing that besides being in operation for more than a decade, the operations have progressively and strategically been to places clearly identified as spaces of intense and recurrent unauthorized immigrants' entrance.

<sup>1</sup> «Aprueban en Estados Unidos mil 900 mdd para control fronterizo», in *El Financiero online*, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006. <http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/ElFinanciero/Portal/cfpages/print.cfm?docId=6935>.

<sup>2</sup> Maribel Hastings, «Muro en frontera puede ser votado el fin de semana», *La Opinion Digital*, September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006. <http://www.laopinion.com/print.html?rkey=00000000000000557290>. Rosario Green, «Endurecimiento migratorio», in *El Universal Online*, September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006, [http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/editoriales/vi\\_35558.html](http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/editoriales/vi_35558.html).

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TABLE 1  
CONTROL AND VIGILANCE OPERATIONS IN THE U.S. BORDER WITH MEXICO,  
1993-2004

Operation's name	Geographical space	Operation's start date
Hold-the-Line	El Paso, Texas	September 1993
Gatekeeper	San Diego, California	October 1994
Safeguard	Nogales - Arizona	1995
Rio Grande	Rio Grande, Texas	1997
Arizona Border Control Initiative	Arizona border	2004

Source: Own elaboration with information from Cornelius 2004 and U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2006.

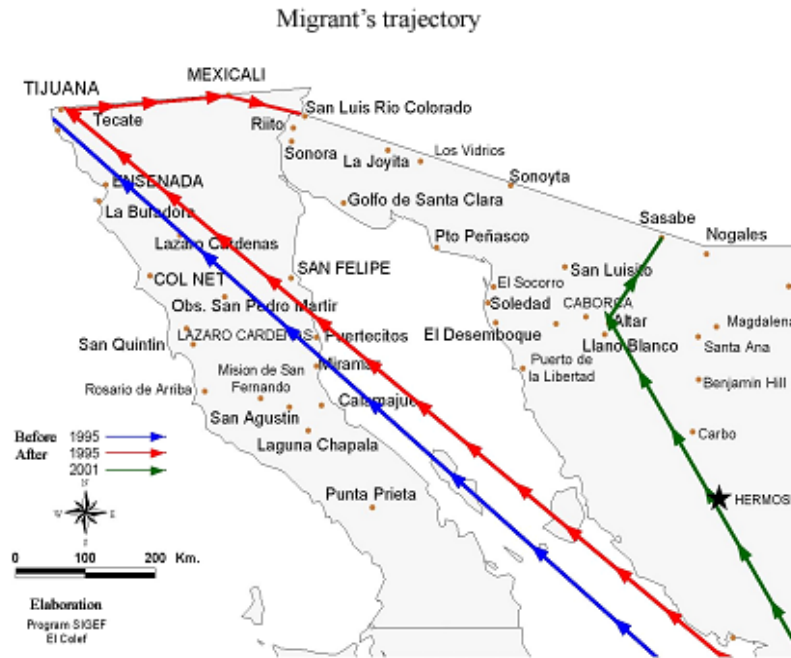
As a result of all of these actions, the emigrants' flow was displaced towards less visible zones, usually unoccupied, in the borders of California, Texas and Arizona, this provoked their movement to more dangerous and wild spaces of the border geography, specially towards the desert region of Sonora-Arizona, causing an estimated number of three thousand deaths (Smith, undated; Andreas, 2000; Cornelius 2001; Alonso, 2005)

As it has been documented by Manuel Ángel Castillo and Jorge Castillo Santibañez (2004) with data from the Survey on Migration in the Northern Border of Mexico, Map 1 allows us to discover the changes in trajectories of the flows of the Mexican undocumented emigrants that tried to gain access to the United States through Northwest Mexico in recent years.

The map illustrates how before 1995 the city of Tijuana was one of the main localities that concentrated a large part of this flow. As from 1995, there is a gradual displacement of the flow of emigrants who arrived to Tijuana moving towards Tecate's mountainous zone and towards Mexicali's desert region, in the same State, and that was extended to San Luis Rio Colorado in the border between Baja California, Sonora and Arizona. Since the year 2001, emigrant displacements were notoriously relocated to Sonora, taking the city of Hermosillo as land and air arrival point in order to continue to the Arizonan border passing through the Sonora's towns of Altar and Sásabe, strategic sites as we will detail further on this paper.

Taking as information source the aforementioned survey, we reconstructed the routes of the migratory displacements in 1993 and 2003, this is, in the year the operations of border control started and ten years later. The maps show the transformations that these displacements from three regions of the country experienced.

MAP 1



Maps 2a and 2b show the routes followed by the emigrants from the called traditional region of international emigration, integrated by the States of Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacan and Zacatecas —historical and central nucleus of that region— and by the neighboring States of Aguascalientes, Colima, Durango, Nayarit and San Luis Potosí. Maps 3a and 3b show the routes of the emigrant flow from Mexico City and the States of Oaxaca, Mexico and Puebla, States new to take part in the international migratory flow. Maps 4a and 4b show the routes of the emigrants from the States of Veracruz, Guerrero, Chiapas, Hidalgo, Morelos, Querétaro, Tlaxcala and Campeche, that make up the region called Emergent, it is so because its significant contributions to the international migratory flow started ten years ago.

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In 1993, the flow of migrants from the traditional region mainly used the route from Tijuana to California, less frequently the route from Matamoros to Texas and the least used were the routes of Nogales and Juarez, even if the latter represented a scale of certain magnitude in the movement towards California. In the year 2003, migrants from that region continued using the Tijuana and Matamoros routes, but increased their displacements through Juarez and definitely reduced them to the Sonora route, the wildest, most arid and dangerous of the four routes.<sup>3</sup> Migrants from this region have experience, knowledge and social networks associated with their long and broad migratory tradition, which surely allow them to ponder the risk and success probability of their displacements in a better way, these are the probable reasons why the Sonora route was progressively discarded as an option.

In 1993, Tijuana was notoriously the most used route by the international emigrants from the capital of the country, the State of Mexico, the State of Oaxaca and the State of Puebla who traveled towards California. Ciudad Juarez route was also used a calling point towards California and less frequently towards Texas. The displacements were noticeably fewer along the Nogales and Matamoros routes. Ten years later, in 2003 the flow from this region of new migration changed radically its route, moving through Matamoros to Texas, and possibly to some other destinations located in the west of the United States.

Migrants from the emergent region started to move mainly along the Matamoros route, a decision probably associated to a perception of this route as the geographically closest from their states towards Texas. Ten years later, migrants from the emergent region, besides incrementing their proportional participation in the international migratory flow, had diversified their displacement routes and destinations in the United States, moving through Sonora towards Arizona and California, however, they did not stop using the Matamoros route in order to reach Texas.

Differently from the migrants from the traditional and recent migration regions, the ones from the emergent region have scarce international migratory experience, limited knowledge of the routes and incipient social networks or of short reach to support their displacements into the United States. Probably, this is the reason why they chose the most perilous route, but also because it is this route along which smugglers ('*polleros*' and '*coyotes*') and terrestrial and air transport have reoriented the displacements, as we will see further.

<sup>3</sup> In 1993, the main town for border crossing in Sonora was Nogales, by the year 2003 the towns of Sonoita, Altar, Sásabe and Agua Prieta had been added to the Sonora route.

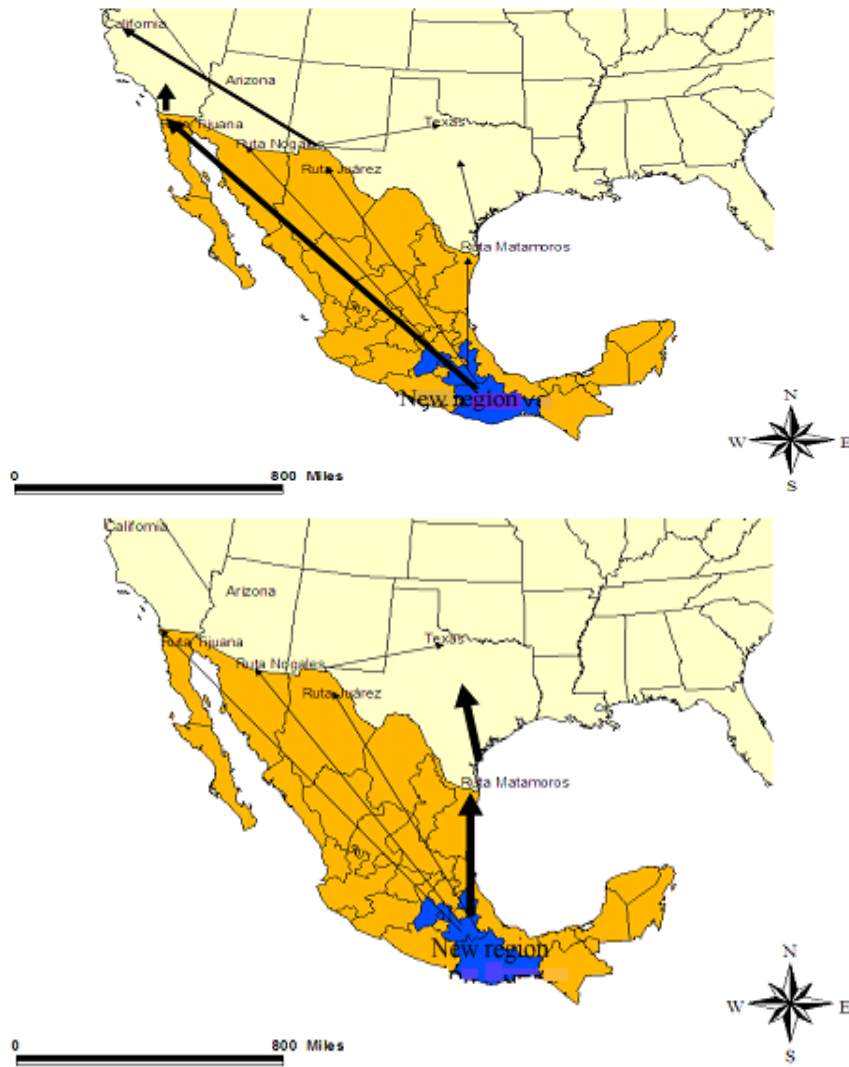
MAPS 2A AND 2B  
DISPLACEMENT ROUTES ORIGINATED IN THE TRADITIONAL REGION,  
EMIF, MIGRATORY FLOW FROM THE SOUTH, 1993 AND 2003.





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MAPS 3A AND 3B  
DISPLACEMENT ROUTES FROM THE NEW REGION, EMIF,  
MIGRATORY FLOW FROM THE SOUTH, 1993 AND 2003.



MAPS 4A AND 4B  
DISPLACEMENT ROUTES FROM THE EMERGENT REGION, EMIF,  
MIGRATORY FLOW FROM THE SOUTH, 1993 AND 2003.



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A second set of maps allows us to detail the route changes that the migrants deported by the United States' authorities experienced. The maps allow reconstructing the journeys made by the migrants who were captured and sent back by the Border Patrol, considering as the routes' starting point the migrants' hometowns, tracing their itineraries in the border region where they tried to illegally enter into the United States and setting as a final point the destination state in this country.

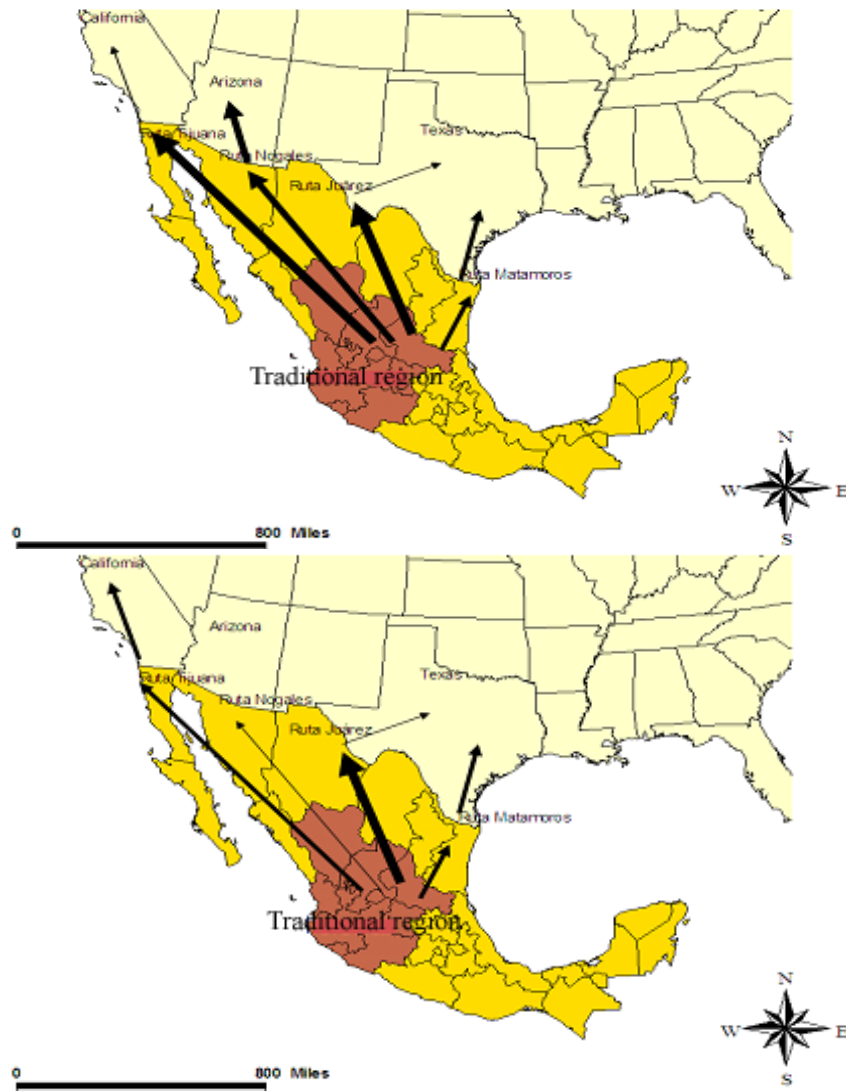
Maps 5a and 5b refer the displacement routes declared by the deported migrants originated in the traditional migration region. In the year 1993, these migrants used the four routes, with a preference for the Juarez and Tijuana ones, to go to California, Arizona and Texas. In 2003, their access routes and destinations noticeably changed, significantly reducing Tijuana and Nogales' participation, whereas Juarez and Matamoros preserved their proportions. Even if the operations carried out in San Diego did not seem to have discouraged the flow towards California, the disappearance of the flow with Arizona as a destination is notorious. This information confirms that migrants from the traditional region, with the most experience, knowledge and social networks, progressively discarded the arid Sonora route.

Maps 6a and 6b show the routes used by the deported migrants whose displacements were originated in the recent migration region. In the year 1993, this flow had Tijuana as the preponderant route of unauthorized access and its destinations were preferably located in California and Texas. In the year 2003, a notorious increment in the flow which traveled along the Sonora route towards Arizona.

In this second moment in time, even if the Tijuana route did not changed volume, it seems to be imperceptible the flow of deported migrants from this region who had California as a destination, which shows that even if Tijuana was a crossing zone, the final destination was not necessarily California.

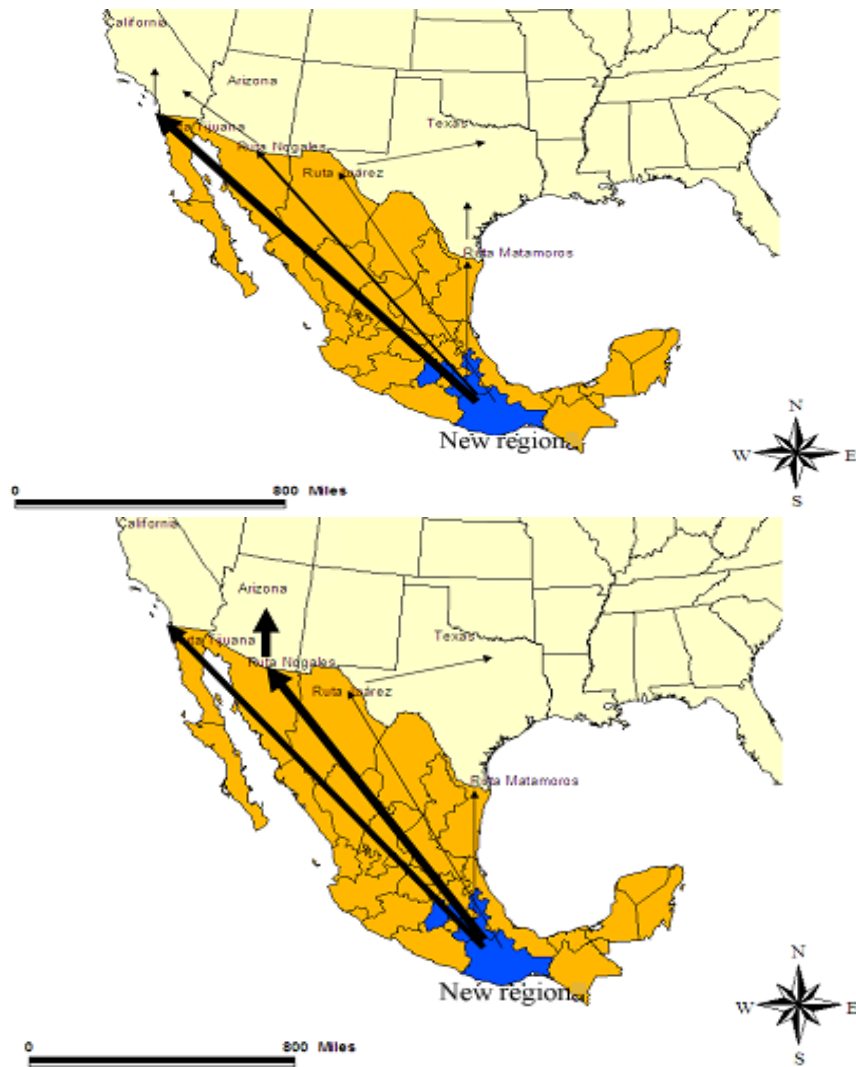
Possibly, the U.S. border operations were successful in discouraging the flow that from this region of new migration was directed to California and Texas, making the number of displacements across Sonora to Arizona and other destinations increase. Likewise, it is possible that those who traveled in the year 2003 from the said region were migrants with no previous experience, thus using the most frequented route by then.

MAPS 5A AND 5B  
DISPLACEMENT ROUTES FROM THE TRADITIONAL REGION, EMIF,  
MIGRATORY FLOWS DEPORTED BY THE BORDER PATROL, 1993 AND 2003

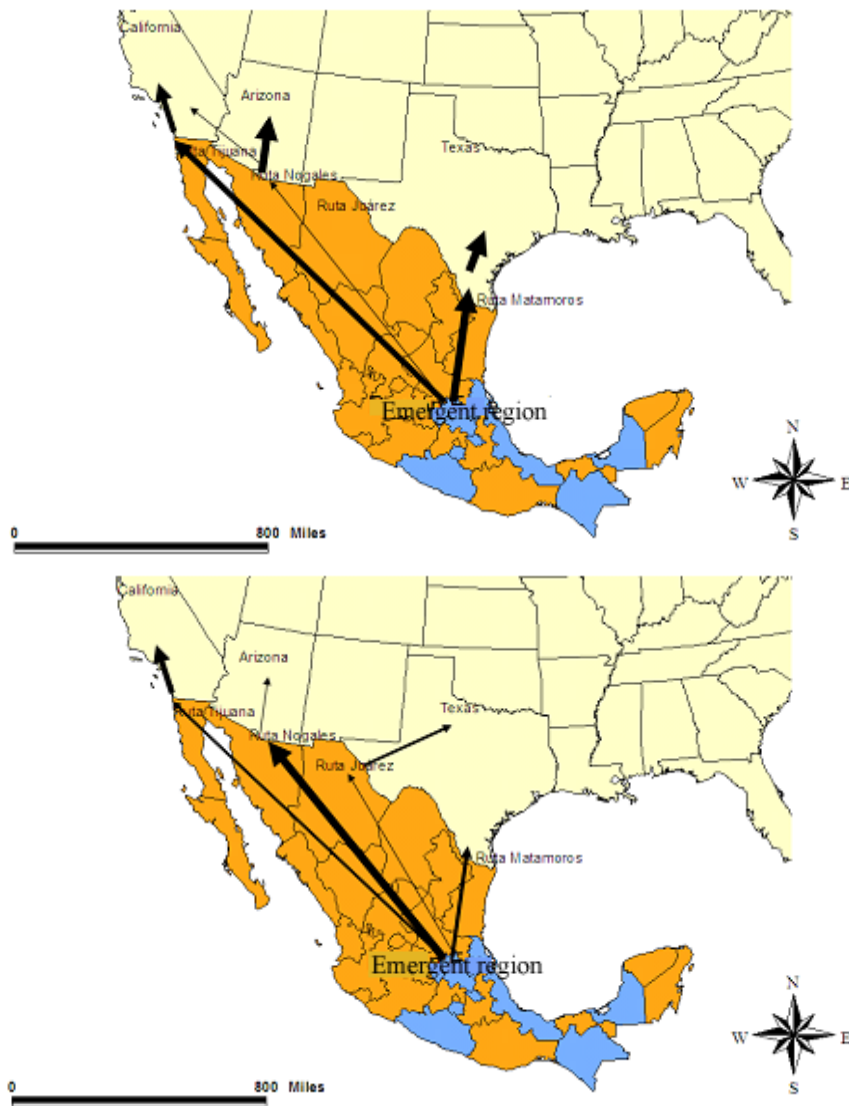


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MAPS 6A AND 6B  
DISPLACEMENT ROUTES FROM THE NEW REGION, EMIF,  
MIGRATORY FLOWS DEPORTED BY THE BORDER PATROL, 1993 AND 2003



MAPS 7A AND 7B  
DISPLACEMENT ROUTES FROM THE EMERGENT REGION, EMIF,  
MIGRATORY FLOWS DEPORTED BY THE BORDER PATROL, 1993 AND 2003



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In Maps 7a and 7b were registered the routes of the journeys made by the deported migrants who lived in the States of the emergent region of international migration. In 1993, the Matamoros and Tijuana routes were the ones that these migrants most frequently used, being the former the predominant, and their destinations seem to be located, in the same proportion, in California, Arizona and Texas. In the year 2003 the flow from this region which moved through Tijuana and Matamoros, at the time that the displacements along Sonora were notoriously increased and the Juarez route was opened for them.

Displacements' routes illustrated in the maps suggest that the abiders of the new and recent regions of participation in the international migratory flow were the ones who traveled along the State of Sonora in their attempt to reach the United States. It is possible that the limited information and experience they have and their scarce contacts and social networks (from personal and relatives to informal crossing agents, such as the called 'polleros' and 'coyotes') make them believe it is feasible to enter into the United States by using routes so isolated and inadequate as the Sonora and Arizona deserts, in spite of the terrible risks of this route, frequently little known and very underestimated.

### **The strengthening of the Hermosillo-Altar-Sásabe route**

In the 1980's decade, the city of Tijuana was one of the border urban centers with the highest concentration of migrants who tried to enter the United States undocumented (Bustamante, 1987: 21). In different and well-known areas of the city neighboring the international border zone, among them El Cañón de Zapata and El Bordo, everyday numerous groups of people could be observed waiting to suddenly cross the border towards the United States.

As from 1993, displaced from the usual places of unauthorized crossing, especially in the border States of Baja California, Chihuahua and Tamaulipas, irregular emigrants progressively moved to the State of Sonora in order to reach the Arizonan border. Even if during the history of Mexican emigration to the United States, towns from the State of Sonora have been used by the international emigrants in their displacements to the north and when they come back to Mexico, in recent years the extraordinary fact lies in the growing magnitude these transit flows have reached, particularly the ones of the undocumented emigrants.

In the last quinquennium of the Twentieth century, the towns of Altar and Sásabe started to be recurrently mentioned, by authorities and the media in Mexico and in the United States, as two of the localities of Sonora through which there has been a massive increment in the undocumented international emigrants' number in transit towards the United States.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the airport in Hermosillo started to witness an intense flow of travelers from the rest of the country who use this building as a connection point in their displacements to the Sonora and Arizona frontier.

As from 1999, the field operations of the EMIF in Sonora also started to identify that growing and continuous flow which moved across the Sonoita, Agua Prieta and Altar, apart from the usual in and out flows circulating through Nogales. In fact, EMIF is an adequate source of information for the ends of this work for it allows giving an account of the evolution that spatial and temporary movement of the emigrants, who enter and leave voluntarily and forcefully the United States, has experienced from March 1993 and, in the case of our concern, analyzing the reorientation of those routes' displacements.<sup>5</sup>

The systematic register of the flows' displacements performed by the EMIF for longer than ten years, particularly of those migrants deported by the Border Patrol, allows estimating their changes in time and space, this evolution is illustrated in graph 1. In the graph we clearly observe how the Nogales region, that in the survey's first stage (from March 1993 to March 1994),<sup>6</sup> was in the last place with just 8 percent, as from the fourth stage it started to increase its participation in the flow of emigrants sent back by the border patrol, taking the first place from the fifth stage, and taking more than 40 percent of the flow in the sixth stage and the two successive stages. Conversely, the Tijuana region, which by the first stage concentrated a larger proportion with a fourth part of the total flow, in the third stage it experienced a sharp fall in its participation, and in the last stage it barely reached 8.1 percent, changing within only ten years its place in relation with the Nogales region.

<sup>4</sup> National Institute of Migration and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Notes and special reportages can be consulted in *La Jornada*, *El Universal*, *El Imparcial*, *The Arizona Republic*, *The New Republic*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, as well as other presented by Noticieros Televisa, Hechos TV Azteca, Telemundo, Univisión and the BBC.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to mention that quarterly the sample framework of the EMIF is evaluated and adjusted, considering and paying attention to the yearly seasonal mobility that characterizes the emigrants' displacements and their spatial variations continuously reported by surveyors and field reporters. In this respect, the quarterly reports of the survey, which detail these procedures, can be consulted.

<sup>6</sup> The second phase started in December 1994 and concluded in the same month of the following year. As from the third phase, the survey started in July in the said year and concluded the same month next year.



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Another indication result from the EMIF on the change of routes can be identified exploring the Mexican border towns through which the emigrants, who were later captured and deported by the Border Patrol, crossed towards the United States; this information is systematized in graph 2.

Totaling the participation of the nearby towns and located in the same state, in spite that in the first two stages Matamoros turned out to be a notoriously preferred locality to cross the border in an undocumented manner through Tamaulipas, the Tijuana-Tecate region was undoubtedly the most used by the indocumented emigrants in order to gain access to the United States. During the first stage, one in five deported emigrants and during the second a larger number of emigrants chose the Tijuana-Tecate route to enter the United States; a proportion progressively reduced, not only in relation to Baja California and the northwest of the country but in the whole of the border.

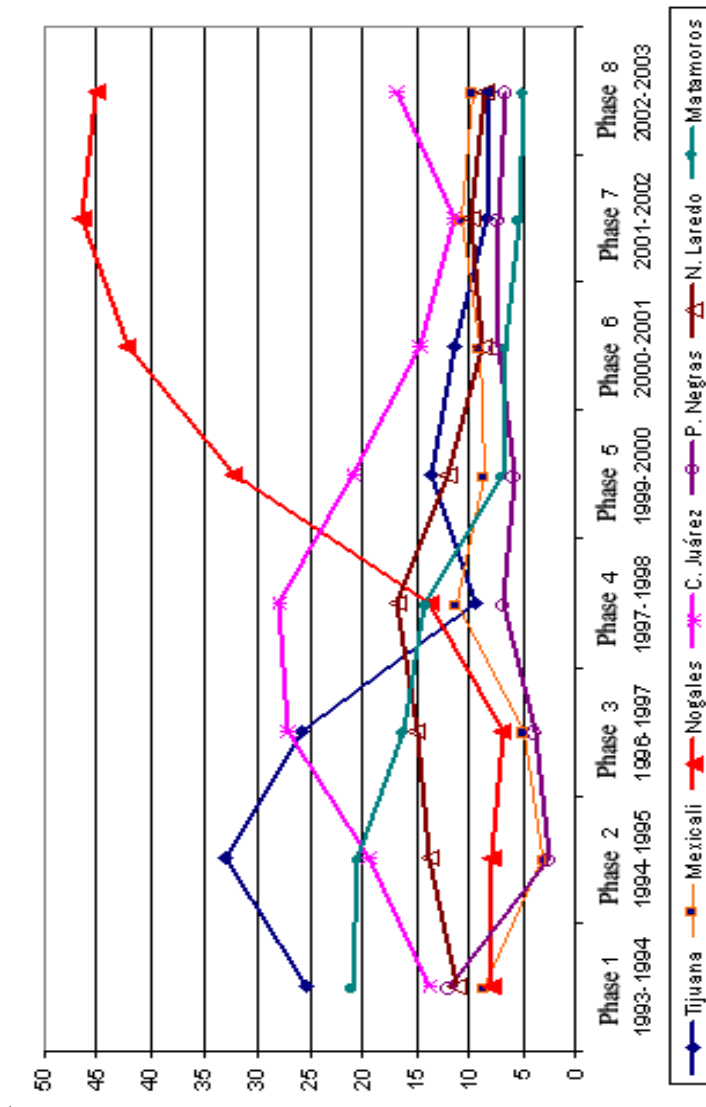
The sent-back emigrants started to move towards Sonora, choosing their towns to cross the border, at first through Nogales, Agua Prieta and Naco, and overwhelmingly through Sásabe in recent years, since, as from the year 2001, this town came into view as a border-crossing locality with a weight of its own, not only in the State of Sonora but in the whole of the general border scenery. In its first appearance, during the seventh stage, 5.6 percent of the sent-back emigrants stated having used Sásabe as crossing zone, and an unusual 23.1 percent in the immediate stage.

In other words, slightly more than one in five emigrants deported in the second half of the year 2002 and almost one in four during the first half of the year 2003 had entered the United States with no authorization through the Sásabe region.

Those emigrants surely had previously transited through Altar, population whose geographical location is strategic due its condition as the closest town and door to the Sásabe region. Additionally, Altar has basic services, necessary for that mobile population before getting into an unpopulated and arid region. Likewise, it is possible that these migrants had arrived to the State of Sonora from Hermosillo, in recent years one of the places of land and air transit most frequented by the migrants and the transporters in order to travel to the Sonora's towns of Altar, Nogales and Agua Prieta, as we detail below, since displacement's mobility along the different routes and regions has also been linked to the transformations in the means of transport, terrestrial at first, currently aerial.

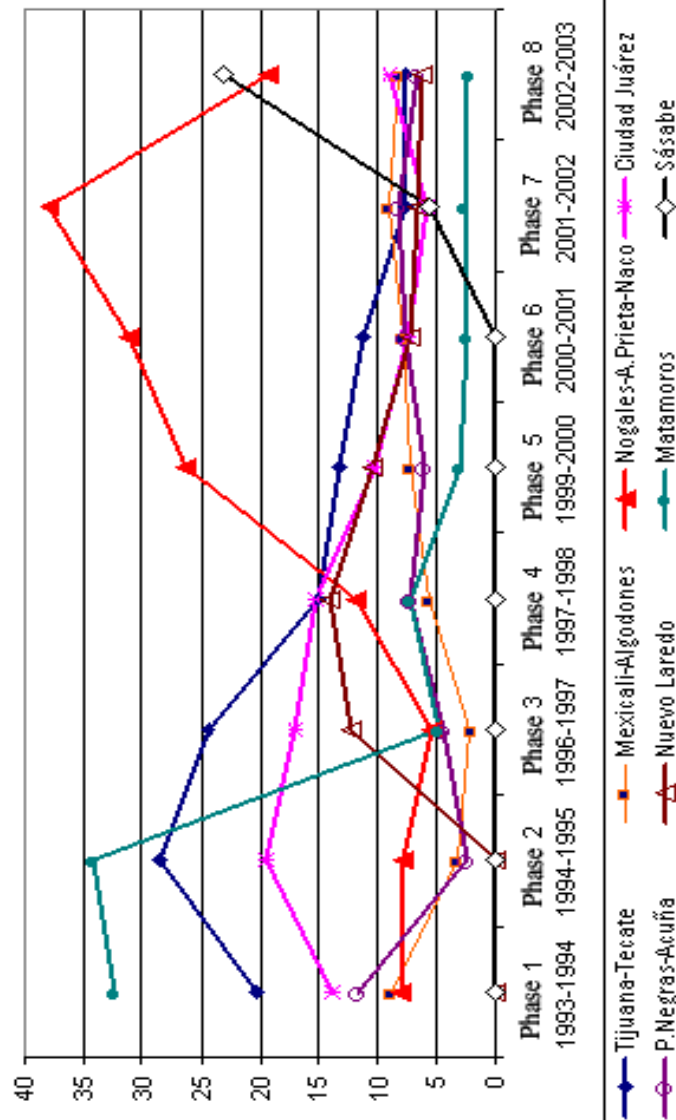
In this respect, it is worth mentioning that as from the mid of the 1990's decade, the trains which moved passengers to the northern border were

GRAPH 1  
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE INTERVIEWED DEPORTED MIGRANTS  
BY PHASE AND REGION, EMIF, 1993-2003



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GRAPH2



progressively cancelled, in Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Matamoros and Reynosa, passenger trains were closed down in 1997 and in Piedras Negras in the year 2000. In the 1990's decade, inter-city busses' companies renewed their units by selling them to small companies and even to individuals, who started enterprises and opened new routes, independent from the already established ones, the large corporations and bus stations. As a result of both processes, new itineraries, courses and routes were covered by incipient transport lines, and small inter-city bus stations were located in the border communities.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, direct inter-city transport services emerged, connecting the emigrants' abiding places and their destinations in the United States, they were called 'illegal buses' since they did not have any visible registration of a transport line nor a formally established station for departures and arrivals.<sup>8</sup>

These buses are part of the long chain that links an international labor market, where recruiting has acquired new and sophisticated organization forms, including long-distance direct transport service from the communities of origin to the places in the north of Mexico where the necessary connections to cross the border and continue to the final destination are made. All included in the same 'package' and supported by an extensive network of transport, lodging, catering, communication and border-crossing services, both from formally established and illegally organized.

But also, there has been an increment in the aerial connections of that international labor market, as it is exemplified by a promotion of the new airline, *Avolar*, and the *Grupo Estrella Blanca* bus line. As from April 2006, these two enterprises promoted «extra economical packages» to travel from Oaxaca, Puebla, Acapulco, Zihuatanejo, Uruapan, León, Morelia and Cuernavaca to Hermosillo or Tijuana. Especially to Altar, Agua Prieta and Nogales as a destination, in a colorful and visible imprint available in air terminals and bus stations, they promoted the *Avolar Package*, whose price included an air ticket to Hermosillo from different cities in the country, taxi from the airport to the bus station and a bus ticket to continue to any of the three Sonora's towns.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Apart from the traditional bus stations in each city, in recent years some others of smaller scale have been set up and even ticket-offices that work as minor stations of their own buses. In Sonora, for instance, Autotransportes Tufesa operates since 1994, traveling from Guadalajara to Phoenix, calling mainly at Sinaloa and Sonora, at its own hubs independent from the main bus stations. In Tijuana, independently from the Central de Autobuses, in the 1990's decade, some other small stations started to operate, they receive new bus lines, among them Transportes Pacífico, Transportes Guasave, Transportes Guamúchil, Transportes Nayarit, Transportes Corona. Cf. Quarterly EMIF reports.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with key informers. Project: Socioeconomic effects of the international migratory flow in Sonora's border localities (*Efectos socioeconómicos del flujo migratorio internacional en localidades fronterizas sonorenses*) Colef/Unison, 2005-2006.

<sup>9</sup> In April 2006, the cost of the Oaxaca-Altar package was 216 American dollars. Information from its 01 800 telephone number.

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Ironically, not only were the smugglers and migratory authorities from both countries in operation in the new routes the international emigrants use in their displacements. Terrestrial and aerial transport services have set itineraries in order to facilitate their journeys; enterprises, similarly to illegal organizations devoted to migrants' smuggling, have reorganized and made their services flexible. In its May-2006 number the magazine *NEO Business Marketing* (Neo La mercadotecnia de los negocios) published an interesting report on the low-cost airlines, where the commercial director of *Avolar* declared that even if they were not only focused to satisfy «the needs of transport of the border traffic and the Mexican population residing in the United States» they were indeed interested in the market's segment.

### **Consequences for residents and migrants in transit**

Historically, border towns in the north of Mexico have been places of transit and temporal stays for international migrants, the places offer services and diverse spaces to take care and lodge this seasonal population (Anguiano, 1992, Spener, 2005). However, in small and isolated communities such as Altar, with 8357 inhabitants in the year 2005, and Sásabe, with barely a thousand inhabitants (police station dependent from the Municipality of Sáric, located in the desert and neighbor to the minuscule Sasabe town in Arizona), the recent displacement of an intense migratory flow has generated a vulnerability environment for migrants and residents, shaped up by police operations, extortions, authorities and providers of services' abuses and an accumulation of social inequities linked to the shortage of public services to meet the demands of that population which moves seasonally.

In recent years, especially from 1999, different sources have estimated the hundred of migrants transit through the towns of Altar and Sásabe. The Program of Voluntary Repatriation calculated between 800 and 1000 daily crossings through this region (SRE, SEGOB-INM, 2005). Other sources, especially journalistic, have estimated that between 1500 and 2500 people transit the region everyday during high season (from February to July) and no less than 600 in low season (from August to January), a figure that is possibly reduced in the last month of the year. Paying attention to the seasonal mobility of the labor migrations, especially the Mexican towards the United States, the migrants' flow modifies its number, daily, weekly, monthly and annually.

In any case, if we consider the largest estimated figure of migrants in transit (2500), Altar's population could be incremented in a third on the days when there is the most transit and in a variable way in other season. Conversely, the number of its local residents has not been significantly increased in the last twenty-five years. According to the information systematized in Table 2, the population of the municipality of Altar scarcely grew 0.7 percent between 1980 and 1990, 1.1 percent between 1990 and 2000 and 2.5 percent between 2000 and 2005.

The large quantity of people in transit becomes more visible in Altar for they concentrate around its church and its central square, where the services are strategically located, local and inter-city transport, telecommunications, and foreign exchange bureaus as well as multiple places which sell meals, clothing, shoes and grocery stores.

According to table 3 registers, between 1994 and 2004 the commercial and service sectors show an expansive growth in the Municipality of Altar, for both the number of establishments and the employed people. Its localization in the city downtown has turned out to be as strategic as undoubtedly associated to the migratory phenomenon.

Migrants in transit remain in Altar during periods that vary between hours and days. During their brief stay besides arranging what is necessary to cross the border and as we detail in table 4, they use the telephonic and telegraphic services, perform monetary transactions in the only bank in town or in the 11 bureaus of exchange publicly identified, they sleep in the 12 hotels formally established or in the 50 guests houses registered as such, they eat their meals from a variety of 45 places or buy them processed from 28 grocery stores, six small supermarkets and two branch offices of the Supertiendas PH (Pesqueira Hermanos) supermarket, where they can also acquire other products they will use during their displacements towards the border.

In half a hundred of business premises formally or informally established, the migrants can buy clothing, shoes, backpacks, and other indispensable accessories to continue the journey to the north. In a similar way, they draw upon transport services especially set up to move them to the Sásabe region (some estimations calculate 70 vans and 10 school-like buses<sup>10</sup>), and whose growing number has caused the opening of 17 mechanical garages and even four shops dedicated to the cleaning of these vehicles.

<sup>10</sup> José Antonio Román, «Altar, Sonora, última escala de quienes buscan cruzar el desierto hacia Estados Unidos», in *La Jornada On Line*, March 17th, 2006, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/03/17/018n1pol.php> and interviews with key informers, project Colef/Unison, 2005.

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Other derivations from the seasonal presence of that mobile population have been the establishing of four plants of water purification in the urban zone and one toll booth located at the entrance point of the unpaved road that leads from Altar to Sásabe, the toll is forty pesos. Likewise, construction industry has experienced a notorious expansion in the last decade (Colef, 2005).

TABLE 2  
ALTAR: MUNICIPAL POPULATION  
AND AVERAGE RATE OF ANNUAL GROWTH, 1980-2005

Total population				Average rate of annual growth		
1980	1990	2000	2005	1980 1990	1990 2000	2000 2005
6 029	6 458	7 253	8 357	0.7	1.17	2.53

Source: Own elaboration from INEGI, Cesus and Population and Tenement Counting.

The almost inexistent entrepreneurs —and occasionally not so inexistent— and several residents from Altar, Caborca and other neighboring towns —and even people from other states of the country as close as Sinaloa or as distant as Veracruz and Chiapas<sup>11</sup>— have found markets *niches* which have allowed them to extend and diversify their economic activities, traditionally agriculture and animal breeding, broadening their options in the services' sector, in formally and informally established entries.

In opposition to the accelerated growth of the services' sector and taking in consideration the demographical size of Altar, it is worth wondering about the infrastructure required to meet the demands of the seasonal population, because, as in any other municipality, it has basic public services in accordance to the number of the habitual residents.

For instance, the municipality has three clinics offering first level basic services in family medical units, depending from the Mexican Institute of Social Security (*Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social*), Institute of Security and Social Services of the Workers of the State (*Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores de Estado*) and in a Rural Clinic.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with key informants

In an interview with a doctor and the manageress of one of these places, both stressed that the Government's Social Security does not have resources, capacity or sufficient infrastructure at municipal level to deal with the frequent problems the seasonal population has, especially severe dehydration, accidents with the vehicles used to reach Altar and go beyond the border, and other series of emergencies and complications associated to the journeys across the desert of a mobile population that is unaware of the necessary provisions to do it as well as the difficulties that such journey implies. Despite the fact that in Altar a mobile Red Cross unit, which assists the migrants with basic medical attention, has been settled and that a non-governmental shelter promoted by the Social Pastoral of the Catholic Church, which offers them temporary shelter and gratuitous meals up to three nights, as well as the basic orientation on their human rights and the risks and dangers of traveling into the desert (Community Center of Attention to the Migrant and the Underprivileged), these resources are insufficient to meet these mobile population's necessities.

Administrative attributions and Municipal government's budget capacities are not enough to provide public services whose demand has been incremented in recent years with the unexpected and accelerated constructions of hotels,<sup>12</sup>

TABLE 3  
MUNICIPALITY OF ALTAR: NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS, EMPLOYED  
PEOPLE AND GROWTH IN INDUSTRY, COMMERCE, SERVICES

Number of establishments	1989	1994	1999	2004	Growth 1994-2004
Industry	0	11	19	42	282 %
Commerce	45	82	121	230	180 %
Services	24	34	89	237	597 %
<i>Employed people</i>					
Industry	0	19	50	124	553 %
Commerce	152	283	798	1518	436 %
Services	65	94	194	958	919 %

Source: 2005-2006 Colef-Unison project.

<sup>12</sup> According to Maren Von der Borch, «Before 1999, there were only two hotels: the San Francisco, which dates from the early twentieth century, and the María Elena, founded in 1984. In 1999 two hotels were constructed, the Plaza and the Yaqui's in the Buenos Aires neighborhood. In 2000, the Apache Inn; in 2003, the Valle del Sol, Las Isabeles and the Lima. The three hotels which were under construction in 2004 are already in operation.



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TABLE 4  
IDENTIFIED ESTABLISHMENTS IN ALTAR WHICH PROVIDE GOODS AND  
SERVICES FOR THE TRANSITORY INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS

Type of establishment	Quantity
Telegraph	1
Telephone booth / Telmex (Company)	20
Long distance service	20
Bank	1
Bureau of change	11
Hotels	12
Guesthouses	50
Restaurants	15
Food stalls	30
Grocery stores	28
Supermarkets	8
Shoes and clothing stores	20
Shoes and clothing stalls	30
Pharmacies	7
Mechanical garages	17
Carwash	4
Service stations	3
Water purifying factories	4

Source: 2005-2006 Colef-Unison project.

guesthouses and other enterprises, and with the diversity of places which offer meals products and services to the migrants in transit and whose functioning needs additional public services, among them: water, sewerage, garbage collection and public security.

In spite of the generation of new income sources and the creation of new jobs that the temporary stay of the international migrants has caused in town, and that are widely acknowledged by its inhabitants, government's response to the migrants and residents' basic needs created by this mobile population flow has been increasingly focused on one of its most somber derivations, people smuggling; consequently, giving priority to actions implemented in the police sphere, thus generating an additional vulnerability environment for the migrants and a new one for the residents, because with the displacement of the international migrants through Altar, and in general across the state of Sonora,

nodes and networks linked to the widespread and highly organized people smuggling trade have also appeared. The Program of Voluntary Repatriation recognized this situation in the following terms

[...] Altar Sásabe region [...] the prevailing situation in the zone, as a function of the high-risk factors' concurrence, is as follows: a) an unusual growth of the undocumented flow; b) establishing of the infrastructure in service of the smugglers of people; c) necessity to increment the presence and resources of federal authorities in preventive/dissuasive functions; d) extreme weather conditions; e) increase in the activities of organized crime, such as drug and people smuggling; f) incursions performed by the organized crime; g) violence performed by Mexicans against Border Patrol agents; h) the appearance, along the United States' south border, of radical anti-immigrant organizations with xenophobic tendencies and particulars' 'vigilantism' (SRE, 2005).

In agreement with this diagnostic that emphasizes «the concurrence of high-risk factors» associated to organized crime, the Mexican Federal and the State of Sonora's governments unfolded the most recent «permanent safeguard» in April 2006, it was called Sonora-Arizona Operation (*Operativo Sonora-Arizona*), setting up «mixed revision filters» in Altar, Nogales, Agua Prieta and Hermosillo, with the participation of the Federal Preventive Police (*Policía Federal Preventiva*), General Office for Justice Procurement of the Republic (*Procuraduría General de la República*), National Institute of Migration, State Preventive Police (*Policía Estatal Preventiva*), and even the Ministry of Communications and Transport and the Federal Office of Environmental Protection (*Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente*).<sup>13</sup> This operation is not only added to the ones previously unfolded in the State in the years 2002, 2003 and 2005, but also becomes a permanent one.

Contrasting with the government's response, Altar abiders appreciate that the migrant's flow has generated new employment and income sources, boosting their depleted economy, traditionally based upon agriculture and animal breeding; for them, migrants are not a problem,

The problems are caused by the people who come and go with them pretending to help them and abusing their necessity, not only the smugglers and the goods and services' providers, but also governmental authorities from all levels and offices.

<sup>13</sup> José Guerra, «Frenan a ilegales en filtro mexicano», in *El Imparcial*, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006, <http://www.elimparcial.com/buscar/traernotnew.asp?NumNota=531270>.

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This an opinion on which unanimously agreed our interviewees.<sup>14</sup>

In order to meet the demand efficiently and in balanced way the effects and consequences caused by the changes in the routes of the undocumented international migrants that has been deviated progressively and growingly towards the State of Sonora, it is absolutely relevant to recognize, ponder and as humanly possible to seize their positive derivations and not only to be focused on the problems that require police attention.

At the time, any diagnostic will have to recognize and consequently pay attention and try to alleviate the extreme vulnerability conditions the migrants are in. From the moment they leave their hometowns are victims of frauds and abuses exercised by 'hook-up's' (*enganchadores*), 'polleros', 'coyotes' and other individuals involved in people smuggling. As though this outrages' chain was not enough, in their lengthy journey to reach their destination, drivers who move them as well as authorities they will meet in the military pickets along the routes will demand for different 'fees' in order to allow them to continue their way to the border.<sup>15</sup>

In the border towns of temporary abiding, while the inclement desert waits for them, they will face other kind of risks: being sold by the smugglers to other Mafias; experience arbitrariness and extortion from municipal police and local authorities; being victims of the '*bajapollos*' or of sophisticated robberies (such as the recent modality of stealing their telephone number in order to extort their relatives), since the organized migrant smuggling trade, «multinational, multimillionaire and of a large scale» (Spener, 2005) has also take the Sonora Route.

Being abandoned by the smugglers in the desert, the aggressions from several authorities in Mexico and in the United States and the attacks of the immigrant-hunters are not unfortunately the final stage of the journey. To reach their final destination, those who achieve it will have to face other perils and yet more outrages.

If they are lucky, in the desert they will be helped by volunteers from the non-governmental organizations of Humane Borders and the Samaritan Patrol, who move across the Arizona desert setting water sheds and emergency lights in strategic points, especially in such points where the largest number of casualties have been registered. Likewise, these organizations will give first aids to the

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with key informers. *Loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

migrants who have the fortune to find them and still being alive, transferring them hospitals and clinics so that they receive emergency medical attention. Early in 2006, Humane Borders' volunteers took the duty to make and spread out maps which warned the migrants on the dangers of traveling into the Sonora and Arizona desert, images that were visibly located in different places where the migrants gather, including the church and the Altar's central square surroundings.

But the migrants are also in risk of finding United States' citizens with different opinions and behavior, similarly organized but, on the contrary, organized to detect and repel their journey, such as the members of the Minute Man Project or the American Border Patrol, groups self-erected as guardians of the United States' border with Mexico.

Both the residents of the small towns of Sásabe and Altar and the migrants who transit through them, undoubtedly require intergovernmental attention and coordination at the different levels of the Federal State and municipal public administration, and in their respective spheres of competence in order to maximize the benefits of the migration and lessen their costs, especially social and human.

## Conclusions

The changes in the routes of the displacements of the Mexican migrants —and other nationalities— that have taken the Sonora route and its arid border, are causing new and different contingencies faced by them when trying to reach the United States. Affected at a lesser extent, the residents of the Sonora's communities through which they transit, especially the town of Altar, have taken advantage of the positive derivations of its geographical location that has turned out to be strategic as connection point in the route, indispensable scale to continue the journey across an unpopulated region and necessary place to rest, stocking provisions and establishing contacts.

In Altar, the spatial dimensions of the town and its residing population size have remained rather constant. Conversely, the offer of goods and public services has been transformed, diversified and incremented due to the presence of a considerable seasonal population who requires communication, transport, lodging, catering and other formal and informal services to support the migratory displacements.

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Altar and Sásabe location in a border region, scarcely populated and arid is strategic not only because of their condition of places and gates towards a lowly patrolled area. It is also strategic as social space of limited concentration of authorities who pay attention to that migratory flow and its necessities.

In places with the territorial and demographical dimensions of Altar and Sásabe, the international migrants' flow is evidently more notorious than in urban areas of larger dimensions, such as the cities of Agua Prieta or Nogales. At the time, public services provided in relation to their residing population are unavoidably insufficient for a mobile population integrated by migrants in transit who remain temporarily and cyclically, however recurrent and growing in the recent years, moving through the State of Sonora towards the United States.

Private enterprisers and at a much lesser extent non-governmental philanthropic organizations have responded to those insufficiencies, included new airlines that have incremented their flights with Hermosillo as a destination and the terrestrial transport services formally or informally established. Adequate attention to the derivations associated to the international migrants' flow in new places, such as Altar and Sásabe, would require the participation and coordination of the governmental authorities at its municipal, state and federal levels, and even in the bilateral negotiations sphere and the international diplomatic relationships which pay integral and adequate attention to that flow in the north and south borders of Mexico, and not police responses, inefficient to attend them.

Even if the residents of Alatar, Sásabe and other small villages along the Mexican border —such as Puerto Palomas (Rodrigo M. Quevedo Station) in Chihuahua<sup>16</sup>— have diversified their economic activities and incremented their incomes due to the displacements the routes of the international migrants have experienced, they have also witnessed police operations appear and multiply, which take place almost every years for the last six years in the State of Sonora, performed with gratuitous violence and abuses by corporations and other authorities.

Migratory policy in the federal sphere requires acknowledging the rising position of Mexico as a migrants' transit country, and not only of its historical condition as migrants' emitter and even receptor. In the state and municipal government spaces, coordination efforts to assist the migrants population and the residents of localities through which they transit with recurrent frequency also require an acknowledgement of its positive derivations that allow assisting and attenuating in a more efficient manner their potential inconveniences.

<sup>16</sup> Miroslava Breach Valducea, «Puerto Palomas: de pueblo agrícola a peligroso emporio de polleros», *La Jornada*, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2004/11/24/037n1est.php>.

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