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Migrant Organization and Hometown Impacts in Rural Mexico

JONATHAN FOX AND XOCHITL BADA

The interaction between migration, development and rural democratization is not well understood. Exit is usually understood as an alternative to voice, but the Mexican experience with cross-border social and civic action led by hometown associations suggests that exit can also be followed by voice. This article explores migrant impacts on hometown civic life, focusing on voice and bargaining over community development investments of collective remittances that are matched by government social funds. The most significant democratizing impacts include expatriate pressures on local governments for accountability and greater voice for outlying villages in municipal decision-making.

Keywords: migrant civil society, Mexico, hometown associations, remittances, community development

CONTENDING RURAL FUTURES: EXIT OR VOICE?

Political economists counterpose exit and voice as conceptual shorthand for different actors' possible responses to diverse challenges.¹ In this context, migration is often understood as an exit option and therefore an alternative to voice. Migrants vote with their feet, in the commonsense phrase. If this exit-voice dichotomy holds, then the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who leave their villages each year are indirectly weakening rural civil society's capacity for collective action and political representation. This article suggests that while exit might well substitute for voice in the short term, exit can also be followed by voice.

This proposition emerges from analysis of the cross-border social processes in which migrants come together in transnational communities, which in turn constitute the social foundations of an emerging 'migrant civil society'. Mexican migrants have demonstrated a growing capacity to form their own representative organizations. For more than a decade, hundreds of US-based Mexican migrant hometown associations have raised funds and campaigned for community development and public accountability in their villages of origin. Widespread practices

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¹ See Hirschman's classic works (1970, 1981). He applied the notion to individuals, firms and peoples, in both economic and political arenas.

of long-distance community membership are generating notions of bi-national citizenship.² A bi-national framework for understanding Mexico's emerging migrant civil society allows analysts to take into account the feedback effects of migrant organization on power relations within home communities.

These cross-border and multilevel forms of active membership represent one dimension of the broader process of the formation of transnational civil society. So far, the study of transnational civil society has been dominated by discussions of transnational advocacy campaigns, often involving more openly politicized public interest groups and/or militant social movements. Such campaigns are often described as transnational social movements, though in practice they usually involve networks or coalitions whose actual density would fall short of most definitions of social movement.³ Yet for the most broad-based social and political organizations that are engaged in cross-border networking or mobilization, very few of the participants actually cross borders (in any sense). In many sectors and issue areas, the transnational engagement and liaison is often limited to a small handful of leaders or professional staff, who serve as the intermediaries between the global and the local. Yet some specifically agrarian transnational movements are quite different, involving broad and deep direct contact between the rank and file across borders, as in the case of the Campesino to Campesino agroecology movement (e.g. Holt-Giménez 2006). In this context, when considering the range of possible forms of expression of agrarian transnational movements, the formerly rural migrants who reach out across borders to engage with their hometowns and villages also 'count' as part of transnational civil society – even if their terms of engagement are often confined to less overtly politicized civic and community development agendas. While these territorially-based migrant civic organizations are only occasionally openly confrontational in their stance towards the state, and only a few of these mass-based migrant organizations pursue transformative goals, those migrants who are organized to promote community development and democratization in their communities of origin may well have more transnational density and cohesion than many cross-border campaigns that are less deeply grounded in their respective societies.⁴

To assess some of the ways in which migrant collective action can encourage rural democratization, this article focuses on the patterns and impacts of organized migrant participation in the federal government's 'Three-for-One' community development matching fund programme.⁵ As context, the study

² See the related conceptual discussion in Fox (2005a).

³ For example, the campaigns against the North American Free Trade Agreement, involving labour, agrarian, human rights, environmental and civic groups, arguably constitute a 'paradigm case' for assessing the degree to which globalization from below is catching up with globalization from above. In almost all sectors, the transnational dimension of the networks and campaigns proved to be thin and/or transitory (Brooks and Fox 2002). For related perspectives based on studies of other campaigns, see Laxer and Halperin (2003).

⁴ One of the exceptions in the Mexico–US context, in the sense of a bi-national mass organization that does pursue transformative goals, is the Bi-national Front of Indigenous Organizations (FIOB). See Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2004).

⁵ On the dynamics of rural democratization more generally in Latin America, see Fox (1990).

begins with a brief overview of rural out-migration trends, followed by a discussion of the relationship between the concepts of exit, voice and loyalty.

Accelerating Migration

Migration to Mexico's cities and to the US has long been a pathway to escape the limits of smallholder agriculture, often as part of diversified family survival strategies. While migration to the US was historically concentrated in Mexico's centre-west region, in the 1980s and 1990s out-migration spread throughout the nation's countryside, as well as into large cities and across a broader mix of social classes. Yet while the urban share of Mexican migration to the US is growing, migrants continue to be disproportionately rural, often coming from outlying villages in their municipalities of origin. For rural Mexico, consider the implications of the fact that the million Mexican farm-workers who gained US permanent residency under the 1986 immigration reform were equivalent to *one sixth* of the adult men in rural Mexico at that time (Martin 2005, 6). In increasing numbers of villages, from the northern border to the Mayan southeast, young men and women increasingly *expect* to migrate, rather than envisioning their future in rural Mexico.

While this cross-border migration process represents the current phase of a century-long structural process, its pace was accelerated by conscious policy choices. At a 1991 Harvard forum, Mexico's then-undersecretary of Agriculture, Luis Téllez, predicted dramatic changes in the place of agriculture in Mexican society. He estimated that, within the following decade, the share of Mexico's economically active population in agriculture would drop from 26 per cent to 16 per cent – thanks to the Salinas presidency's three main rural policy reforms – the North American Free Trade Agreement, the withdrawal of government-subsidized production supports for family farming and a Constitutional reform that encouraged individual titling of agrarian reform lands.⁶

According to Mexico's 2000 census, 25 per cent of the population continued to live in localities with less than 2,500 inhabitants. This suggests that Téllez's prediction was off the mark, especially when one considers that this official threshold for defining rural is exceedingly low. Yet if one looks at the share of the population that is 'economically active' in agriculture, then Téllez's prediction was on target. According to the most recent National Employment Survey, agricultural employment fell from 24 per cent in 1991 to under 15 per cent at the end of 2005 (INEGI n.d.). A similar survey found a loss of 1.3 million agricultural jobs between 1993 and 2002 (Polaski 2003, 20). These data indicate a growing gap between the population that lives *in* the countryside and the population that

⁶ For an analysis of that political turning point, which immediately preceded the Zapatista uprising, see Fox (1994). Note that the constitutional reform did not lead to widespread individual land privatization and sale. Most land reform communities followed the law insofar as they agreed to confirm both their collective and family land boundaries, and longstanding trends toward commodification and rental of these lands accelerated, but very few *ejidos* took the final step of complete privatization – a decision which the law left in community hands (e.g. Cornelius and Myhre 1998).

lives *from* the countryside. The growth in the share of the rural population that does not live off of agriculture has major implications for the future of public life in the countryside.

By the year 2000, only six years after the implementation of NAFTA, national census data indicated an increase in international migration rates, with 96.2 percent of the country's municipalities reporting international labour 'expulsion'. Increased migration combined with falling birth rates led to widespread depopulation in so-called 'sending' regions: between 2000 and 2005, 33 per cent of Mexican municipalities reported negative growth. For instance, in the state of Michoacán, between 1990 and 2000, 93.8 per cent of the state's municipalities reported population decreases, with some municipalities losing more than 9 per cent of their population in that decade. The state's population fell 0.1 per cent annually between 2000 and 2005, compared to an annual average population increase of 1.2 per cent reported between 1995 and 2000, thus becoming the first state in the country that registered a population decrease since the end of the Mexican Revolution (INEGI 2006; CONAPO cited in Ramos 2007; SEDES0 2004).

As a result of the accelerated pace of out-migration, family remittances back to Mexico skyrocketed over the last decade, from a total of just under US\$3.7 billion in 1995 to more than US\$23 billion in 2006, increasing five times in just one decade and currently representing 2.7 per cent of Mexico's GDP and 66 per cent of oil exports. Most of these resources are spent on basic consumption (86 per cent) and a modest percentage is invested in commercial operations or community improvement (0.6 per cent) (Banco de México 2007). Investments with collective remittances amount to an average of US\$14 million per year, representing far less than 1 per cent of migrant remittances.

Mexico's remittances are disproportionately concentrated in few states. In 2006, 65.5 per cent of total reported family remittances went to nine states, including Mexico City and the traditional 'sending' states in central Mexico (Michoacán, Guanajuato and Jalisco). The rest of remittance income was spread among 23 states. There is still no consensus regarding the exact amount of family remittances in Mexico. Some remittance experts believe that the official figures are underestimated because they don't include cash transfers, US pensions received by returned migrants, gifts, and in kind transfers from migrants to their families. Others strongly question the Central Bank calculations and believe that remittances have been grossly exaggerated and manipulated as a political tool, to enable political leaders to depict migrants as heroes in the national public discourse (Lozano Ascencio 2003; Lozano Ascencio and Olivera Lozano 2005; Leyva Reus 2005).

*Exit and Voice: Dichotomous or Interactive?*⁷

Overall, in 2000, 14 per cent of Mexican-born workers were in the US (Martin 2005, 10). The cumulative result of this exodus of working-age adults must

⁷ This section draws on portions of chapter 10 in Fox (2007).

affect the prospects for future social and political change in the countryside, but the patterns of this impact remain unclear. It is no coincidence that analysts in Mexico often refer to this issue as the 'migration problem', even though – for the migrants themselves – access to the US labour market represents a 'solution'.

It is worth recalling that during the post-NAFTA decade, Mexico experienced no protest movement of the rural poor that was both sustained and of national scope.⁸ The most notable apparent exception to this generalization, the well-known Zapatista movement, generated widespread sympathy nationwide, but remained a regionally-bounded social actor. The broad-based but brief 'Countryside Won't Take Any More' 2003 march on Mexico City was the decade's only peasant protest of national significance that focused on making family farming economically sustainable. Though the mobilization was much larger than even sympathetic observers expected, it ended up having virtually no impact on national agricultural trade and investment policies, which continued to be extremely biased in favour of better-off producers.⁹ In January 2008, the final implementation of NAFTA's agricultural measures also provoked a national peasant protest march, though it appeared to be a classic case of 'too little, too late'.

Mexican and US political elites presented NAFTA to the US public as a job creation strategy that would reduce migration, but estimated annual rates of out-migration grew sharply during the 1990s (Passell and Suro 2005). In this context, it is useful to rethink Mexico's 1994 national elections. The public policies that are now widely associated with the increase in out-migration, notably the withdrawal of support prices, input subsidies and trade protection for basic grains, date primarily from the Salinas presidency (1988–1994). In this sense, the 1994 elections, had they been fully democratic for rural voters, might have served as a referendum on this package of public policies.

Thanks to the citizens' movement for independent election monitoring in 1994, led by the Civic Alliance, their reports show that at least half of the polling places in the countryside lacked guaranteed ballot secrecy (Fox 2007). The Civic Alliance also found vote-buying pressures in 35 per cent of rural polling places. As Hirschman noted, the secret ballot is a key mechanism for 'making voice

⁸ The well-known Barzón movement for debt relief reached national scope, but represented primarily small-to-medium-sized commercial producers. Only a minority of Mexican farmers were sufficiently well-off to have received bank credit in the first place.

⁹ On the class bias of the Mexican government's agricultural spending, see the little-known but nominally public analysis by the World Bank (2004). Most analysts would agree that the very modest agricultural policy concessions that the 2001 peasant protest had appeared to win were quickly subsumed by old-fashioned corporatist-style payments to organizations. Once the protesters returned home, the combination of technocratic diversions and the persistent intervention of traditional corporatist peasant groups overwhelmed the national representatives of participating independent organizations. The newly-governing PAN discovered the political convenience of providing funds directly to PRI-style peasant organizations (e.g. Fox and Haight forthcoming). For background on the '*El campo no aguanta más*' movement, see, among others, Schwentesius et al. (2004), a thematic issue of *El Cotidiano* (No. 124, March–April, 2004) and the extended 2003 debate between leading rural analysts Luis Hernández Navarro and Armando Bartra in the pages of the left-wing daily *La Jornada*.

retaliation-proof (1981, 241). To put this in Hirschman's terms, given the lack of political voice for most of the rural poor, many turned to exit. While this was certainly not the only migratory push factor, out-migration rates did rise substantially over the rest of the decade, perhaps suggesting some relationship between lack of voice and the exit option – at least at that political turning point.¹⁰

The clearest expression of rural political voice during this period came from Mexico's indigenous peoples, whose numerous and politically diverse local and regional social organizations flowered from the 1970s through the 1990s (Fox 1996, 2007). In the wake of the 500 year anniversary of the European conquest and bolstered by the Zapatista movement, they began to come together nationally for the first time during the 1990s. Yet during the same decade, cross-border migration processes began to extend for the first time to almost all of Mexico's indigenous regions (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004). Looking back over the past decade and a half, Mexico's indigenous peoples have been exercising *both* voice *and* exit more than ever before.

While conventional discourse in Mexico refers to migrants as 'abandoning' their communities, a growing body of research on migrant collective action based on shared communities of origin suggests that many migrants bring their sense of community with them, and recreate it with their *paisanos* in the US. This sense of shared collective civic identity is broadened when hometown associations form home *state* federations in Chicago or Los Angeles, constructing a sense of regional belonging that the migrants may not have shared before they left.

At the same time as one recognizes the emergence and consolidation of transnational communities, to be discussed below, one must also recognize that many who migrate *do* abandon their communities. Some do not return. In spite of the widespread attention to the growing volume of migrant remittances, substantial minorities do not send resources to support their families. Plus, when an organizer migrates, their organization clearly suffers a loss – especially if the leadership has invested in their training, as in the case of coffee coop certifiers of organic production (e.g. Mutersbaugh 2008).

These patterns suggest that while exit may sometimes weaken voice, and at other times they may reinforce each other, perhaps exit can also reflect the *prior weakness* of voice. Many observers point to regions of long-term out-migration and see a very thin civil society, yet the cause and effect relationship is not so clear-cut. Many migrants leave regions where rural civil society was *already* thin. In addition, even in regions that had experienced autonomous collective action, few campaigns had produced lasting change, and even fewer could offer viable

¹⁰ More recently, Goodman and Hiskey's (2008) large-scale statistical analysis of voter turnout rates and survey data finds that, at the municipal level, higher rates of out-migration are associated with lower voter turnout levels at national elections. At the same time, high rates of migration are associated with higher levels of reported civic engagement at the local level, which may be related to bi-national partnerships with organized migrants.

Table 1. Rural and indigenous municipalities: migration and poverty rates

<i>Migration intensity</i>	<i>High and very high marginality levels (%)</i>	<i>Intermediate and low marginality levels (%)</i>	<i>Very low marginality levels (%)</i>
Very high	3.3	4.7	0
High	7.1	8.4	0.2
Medium	8.1	7.5	0.9
Low	11.9	7.5	1.4
Very low	27.8	6.0	0.4
No data	4.4	0.1	0
Total	62.6	34.3	3.1

Source: Carral Dávila (2006, 99–100), based on 2000 data from the National Population Council.

future options for young people. But if we extend the temporal and geographic frame for considering the interaction between exit and voice and take the bi-national arena into account, new ways of considering the relationship between exit and voice emerge, as well as the role of loyalty as a mediating factor.

This review of rural out-migration trends and the conceptual dilemmas posed by the relationship between exit and voice sets the stage for a discussion of Mexican migrant civil society and the impact of collective community development remittances on village governance. But first, a brief discussion of the relationship between out-migration and poverty rates is in order.

Out-Migration and Rural Poverty Rates

The available data on rural municipalities suggest that there is no direct correlation between poverty levels and out-migration rates. Of Mexico’s 2,443 municipalities, 82 per cent are considered rural. One-quarter of Mexico’s municipalities are also considered indigenous (a category defined by language use). Government census data indicate that 62.6 per cent of these rural and indigenous municipalities are in extreme poverty, with ‘high’ or ‘very high’ levels of marginality – an indicator that refers primarily to access to basic services (water, sanitation, education, housing, etc.). These rural, low-income municipalities account for 20 per cent of the national population (CONAPO 2000).

The government demographic agency considers 20 per cent of Mexico’s rural municipalities to register high or very high levels of out-migration. If one reviews Mexico’s rural municipalities in terms of the varying degrees of what government discourse refers to as ‘migration intensity’ and ‘marginality’, one can get a sense that the relationship between poverty and out-migration is not as direct as widely assumed, as indicated by the data in Table 1.

These data suggest three distinct patterns among rural municipalities, indicated by the typeface in Table 1.

1. Just over 10 per cent of rural municipalities experience both high poverty and high migration rates. Here the impacts of both government anti-poverty programmes and remittances have been very limited.¹¹
2. Approximately 20 per cent of rural municipalities combine high poverty and a medium degree of 'migration intensity', and they are likely to increase their out-migration rates in the future, in the absence of substantially increased investment in family farming.
3. Another 13 per cent of rural municipalities combine high levels of out-migration and 'intermediate' poverty levels. Here the potential impacts of government anti-poverty programmes and remittances appear to be more significant.

This approach to understanding the interaction between poverty and migration rates is complicated by the fact that rural municipalities are not the 'most local' governmental jurisdiction. They refer to local districts rather than to specific villages, and therefore usually include both an 'urban centre' and numerous outlying villages and hamlets (also known as 'localities'), which tend to experience higher levels of both poverty and out-migration than the town centre. Official municipal data therefore average the poverty and migration trends in these different kinds of communities. Most official out-migration data are not sufficiently disaggregated to the level of 'locality' to allow more precise analysis of their relationship to poverty levels.

From the point of view of understanding the dynamics of rural democratization, it is crucial to recognize that in much of rural Mexico, outlying villages are politically subordinated to municipal centres, both formally and informally. Many rural municipalities are in the midst of a long-term 'regime transition', largely invisible to outsiders, in which outlying communities campaign for the right to resources and self-governance vis-à-vis the town centres (Fox 2007). This is the context within which organized migrant hometown associations, together with their communities of origin in outlying villages, pressure municipal and state authorities to gain standing, voice and representation.

MIGRANT CIVIL SOCIETY AND HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS¹²

As many as hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrants work together with their *paisanos* to promote 'philanthropy from below', funding hundreds of community development initiatives in their hometowns. Tens of thousands signed up to exercise their newly-won right to cast absentee ballots in Mexico's 2006 presidential election. Many more are engaged with their US communities – as

¹¹ The federal government's flagship welfare programme, the *Oportunidades* conditional cash transfer programme, appears to reach a much larger share of the poorest rural population than receives migrant remittances (e.g. Muñoz 2004).

¹² The following text draws on Fox (2005b). Note that 'migrant civil society' emerges from but is distinct from transnational communities, since they may or may not be engaged with the public sphere.

organized workers, parents, members of religious congregations and naturalized voters. In addition, some Mexican migrants are working to become full members of *both* US and Mexican societies at the same time, constructing practices of 'civic bi-nationality'.

What are some of the implications of putting together three words: 'migrant civil society?' Simply put, migrant civil society refers to *migrant-led membership organizations and public institutions*. Specifically, this includes four very tangible arenas of collective action. Each arena is constituted by actors, while each set of actors also constitutes an arena. These arenas include autonomous public spaces (such as large-scale cultural or political gatherings), migrant-led NGOs, the migrant-led mass media, as well as migrant-led membership organizations.¹³

Membership organizations composed primarily of migrants can range from hometown associations (HTAs) to worker organizations and religious congregations. Because of the focus here on cross-border impacts on home communities, this discussion will be limited to the HTAs. Hometown Associations are migrant membership organizations formed by people from the same community of origin. Though many began as very informal groups, by the turn of the century hundreds had become formal organizations. HTAs function as social support networks, as well as transmitters of culture and values to the US-born generation. Often in response to Mexican government encouragement, many of these translocal clubs later joined with others from their home states to form federations. These scaled-up forms of representation increased migrant leverage with their home state governments. They become involved in social development projects on behalf of their communities of origin, as well as in the defence of migrant rights in their region of settlement.

The Mexican consulates have registered well over 600 such clubs (Rivera-Salgado et al. 2005). The federal Ministry of Social Development is also developing a database of Mexican HTAs in the United States and Canada and so far they have found 815 clubs. However, this figure has not yet been disaggregated geographically (SEDESOL 2006). Mexican HTAs are heavily concentrated in California and Illinois, with 86.5 per cent of them concentrated in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles and Chicago. They are also expanding their presence in New York City (Cordero-Guzmán and Quiroz-Becerra 2005; Smith 2006). While they are concentrated in large US cities, most have rural roots in Mexico.¹⁴ Each has a core membership of perhaps an average of two dozen families, some with hundreds more. Many HTA members are relatively well-established in the US, and many of their leaders have relative economic stability and are either legal residents or US citizens (which allows them to travel back and forth frequently).

¹³ For detailed discussion of these arenas of migrant civil society, see Bada et al. (2006) and Fox (2007).

¹⁴ One of the few federations of HTAs that is located primarily in rural areas of the US is Alianza LUDA (Latinos Unidos de América), which includes 16 mainly farmworker-based clubs in the small rural communities of California's Salinas Valley.

It is difficult to measure with any precision how many migrants participate, especially given the wide variation in the size and activities of each HTA and federation. In addition, the official consular registries include some clubs that exist only on paper, while some active associations choose not to register. An unusually large-scale survey of relatively recent Mexican migrants found that 14 per cent of respondents belonged to some kind of hometown association (Suro 2005). However, a much smaller national survey found that only 6 per cent of foreign-born Mexicans interviewed reported membership in an ethnic immigrant civic or social organization (Waldinger 2007).¹⁵

Today's Mexican HTAs have a long history, with the first Zacatecan club in California dating back to 1962 (Moctezuma 2005). But their numbers and membership boomed in the past 15 years, as the result of several converging factors. Within the US, the massive regularization of undocumented workers that followed the 1986 immigration reform facilitated both economic improvement and increased cross-border freedom of movement for millions of migrants. On the Mexican side, the government deployed the convening power of its extensive consular apparatus, bringing together people from the same communities of origin and offering community development matching funds to encourage collective social remittances, through the Three-for-One matching fund programme. Though this policy began as a response to pressures from organized Zacatecan migrants, it also served as a powerful inducement for other migrants to come together in formal organizations for the first time. Indeed, many transnational social and civic relationships unfold outside of the clubs and federations (Fitzgerald 2000). In addition, the Mexican state changed the tone of its relationship with the diaspora by formally permitting dual nationality for the first time.¹⁶ While most clubs emerged autonomously, from below, many of the state-level federations were formed through engagement with the Mexican state (Goldring 2002; González Gutiérrez 1997).¹⁷

¹⁵ Whether these numbers are considered high or low depends on one's comparative frame of reference.

¹⁶ Note that a full discussion of the potential for migrant home country political impacts in the electoral arena is beyond the scope of this study. Briefly, beginning in the late 1980s, migrant civic leaders began campaigning for the right to absentee ballots, eventually winning a partial victory that allowed migrants who had brought their voting cards with them to navigate a bureaucratically complex process to vote by mail in 2006. Less than 1 per cent of the estimated eligible migrant electorate actually participated, and it did not appear to make a difference even in a very close national outcome. While many Mexican migrants are certainly politicized, that energy has yet to be fully expressed through cross-border partisan electoral processes. It is therefore safe to say that so far, Mexican migrants' greatest cross-border civic and political impact has been at the community level. On migrant voting rights campaigns, dilemmas and results, see the archives of the bi-national civic journal *MX Sin Fronteras* (<http://www.mxsinfronteras.com>).

¹⁷ For more on Mexican HTAs, see also, among others, Bada (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2008), Escala Rabadán and Zabin (2002), Fitzgerald (2000, 2004), Lanly and Valenzuela (2004), Moctezuma (2003a, 2003b), Orozco et al. (2004), Rivera-Salgado and Escala Rabadán (2004), Smith (2003), Smith R (2003, 2006), Smith and Bakker (2008) and Williams (2004).

COLLECTIVE REMITTANCES AND HOME COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Over time, the academic and policy discussion of the impact of migration on sending communities has shifted from an earlier focus on the loss of human capital, to a debate over whether family remittances contribute to more than relatives' subsistence, and whether remittances can become a lever for job creation (Goldring 2004). In terms of the dichotomy often posed between the use of remittances for consumption vs investment, documented experiences with sustainable job-creating enterprises beyond a very small scale are very limited, at least so far.¹⁸ There are many powerful reasons why the results of job-creating investment of remittances have been limited, including unequal distribution of land, supply and demand mismatches, lack of technical capacity, a less-than-hospitable policy environment, the greater attraction of public vs private goods (in the case of collective remittances) and very limited investment opportunities in many sending communities. In addition, the wages usually offered by migrant micro-investors are rarely better than the prevailing rural wage, which limits the incentives to stay home instead of leaving in search of higher wages in the United States.

In the state of Michoacán, several job-creating projects using collective and individual remittances have been implemented, with mixed results. Many are struggling to survive despite repeated financial contributions from the government to prevent bankruptcy, while others have failed after a few years of operation (Bada 2008). This state was the pioneer in implementing agricultural projects with collective remittances, using a cooperative model that requires participation from at least 10 migrant investors. However, peasant production cooperatives in Mexico have had an uneven track record, and the state of Michoacán is no exception, with limited results after years of state government efforts since the economic restructuring of the late 1980s (Gledhill 1995, 212).

So far, migrants' main impact on the productive structures of rural communities is through the withdrawal of their labour, rather than through productive investment that creates sustainable employment. Yet they often do influence political and civic life. Do they encourage local democratization? Do they affect women's opportunities for participation and representation?¹⁹ Many participants and observers expect that HTAs do have democratizing impacts, though the evidence is not yet clear. Returned migrants clearly play key roles in hometown public life as individuals. According to a survey carried out by the Michoacán state government migrant support agency, 37 per cent of the 113 mayors who governed in the state during 2002–2004 were former migrants (Bada 2004c).

¹⁸ See García Zamora (2005a, 2005b, 2006). For a heterodox critique of the conventional discussion of remittances and development, see the *Declaración de Cuernavaca* from the Migration and Development Network, at <http://www.migracionydesarrollo.org>. For an English translation, see *Enlaces News*, No. 10, August 2005 at <http://www.enlacesamerica.org>.

¹⁹ For bi-national analyses of Mexican migrant organizing and gender, see Goldring (2004), Stephen (2007) and Maldonado and Artia Rodríguez (2004).

But the fact that some migrants return to fill local leadership roles does not answer the question about the civic and political impacts of HTAs. More generally, to what degree do the hometown associations reproduce the political culture that dominated Mexico in the twentieth century? Optimists often suggest that organized civil society generates democratic values and practices, and this is sometimes the case. But civil society also carries the weight of history, and is cross-cut by hierarchies and inequality between genders, classes and ethnic groups, as well as the legacy of less-than-democratic political ideologies. After all, many of the federations, as well as some of the HTAs, came together in response to Mexican government initiatives. If one interprets this relationship through the lens of state–society relations in Mexico, then this government strategy represents both a response to real demands from below, while also serving as an institutional channel to regulate relationships with migrant civil society. In principle, in contrast to similar government efforts *in Mexico*, migrants in the US are less vulnerable to clientelistic manipulation, but some recent reports indicate that old habits die hard.²⁰

While in some cases the persistence of home community political cultures across borders sustains persistent clientelism, in other cases a strong sense of local community membership grounds long-distance social cohesion. Indeed, many indigenous communities have strong, explicit criteria for determining local citizenship, based on high expectations of unpaid community service and informal taxation (Fox 2006a). As these communities become more involved in migration, some have created flexible approaches to allow for long-distance membership, permitting migrants called back for service to spend less time than usual, or to pay others to cover their dues (Kearney and Besserer 2004). In one Oaxacan case, returned migrants doing community leadership service formed a *de facto* coalition with locally excluded women to dislodge entrenched local bosses (Maldonado and Artía Rodríguez 2004).

Nevertheless, high levels of migration directly undermine indigenous community traditions that rely heavily on a large fraction of the adult male population providing service at any one time. While communities cannot prevent out-migration, some have found ways of discouraging exit by making return more difficult. For example, village elders may decide not to be flexible about long-distance membership, insisting that if villagers do not return to provide their service, they risk losing their local citizenship status. This carries both tangible and symbolic weight, land rights can be lost, and migrants who do not return when called can lose their right to be buried in the village cemetery. This adds up to what is known as ‘civic death’ (Mutersbaugh 2002).

The broad question of home community civic-political impact needs to be unpacked in at least two ways. First, to what degree do the HTAs themselves generate democratic values and practices? So far, research that compares the

²⁰ For example, Fitzgerald’s (2004) study of the cross-border/home community politics within a migrant-led California trade union local suggests that ‘old politics’ can persist across borders and triangulate homewards to involve communities of origin.

internal practices of different state federations finds a wide range of practices, from more to less democratic (Rivera-Salgado and Esacala Rabadán 2004). The second question would focus on their impacts in home communities. These questions are distinct because, in principle, hometown clubs could be highly representative of their US-based constituencies, but not necessarily of the non-migrant population.

Why might one expect migrant clubs to encourage democratization in home communities? Those that send collective remittances for community investments are taxing themselves for the benefit of others. Historically, those who pay taxes are accustomed to demanding some form of representation, which recalls the metaphor of exit, voice and loyalty. In this view, collective remittances are possible thanks to migrants' exit, they exist because of their loyalty, and they then tend to encourage the exercise of voice.

Such civic practices suggest the hypothesis that HTAs tend to hold local governments accountable.²¹ However, even if most clubs are internally democratic, and even if they hold local governments accountable (to the HTA 'donors'), this does not necessarily generate democratization within the home community. Accountability refers to a power relationship, checks and balances, in this case between a specific constituency and the local government – but not necessarily vis-à-vis the majority of the community (whether defined in local *or* in translocal terms). Do the non-migrants play any role in determining how to invest collective remittances? How are choices weighed between infrastructure projects that the migrants use on their annual visits home vs those that may have a greater impact on the daily lives of non-migrants (e.g. rodeo rings vs water systems)? It should be no surprise that relationships between migrants and mayors are not always easy, especially now that local elections are more democratic in many regions of Mexico.

THE THREE-FOR-ONE MIGRANT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Mexico's Three-for-One community development matching fund programme is a rare example of a development programme that emerged in direct response to civil society pressures – in this case from migrant civil society, beginning with a state-level programme in Zacatecas. This programme allows organized migrants to propose community development project ideas, mainly for small towns and villages, to be funded by collective remittances. Federal, state and municipal governments then vet the proposals. If approved, each level of government contributes matching funds. In principle, local committees oversee project implementation. The programme therefore opens a window on the balance of power and negotiation between these different governmental and civil society actors.

²¹ See especially Burgess (2005, 2006) and Williams (2004).

It turns out to be difficult to assess the influence of migrants in the selection of Three-for-One projects. In the beginning, the Three-for-One programme's operating rules stated that any organized citizen group was eligible to submit a project, but that situation changed in 2004, when HTA federation lobbying limited access to organized migrant groups. As a result, the new system has generated some tension within rural communities that lack connections to organized migrant groups in the United States, since it excludes locally organized citizen initiatives from access to this potential source of project funding. As noted above, many low income rural communities do not experience high rates of out-migration – though they may have access to other, larger-scale anti-poverty programmes, such as regular municipal funds, or the federal Micro-Regions Programme.

Research on the relationships between HTAs and stay-at-home community members in the decision-making process remains incipient. However, in an official evaluation's 2004 survey of HTA members from six states, 62 per cent of the club members interviewed declared that project selection was decided by unanimous consensus and 38 per cent reported that project selection decisions were made by majority vote, indicating a degree of democratization within HTA structures (Servicios Profesionales para el Desarrollo Económico 2005).

Striking a balance between the participation of local government officials, project beneficiaries and migrant groups in selecting Three-for-One projects has proven to be quite challenging. For instance, municipal staff complained that local governments were obliged to choose projects that were not a priority and they expressed frustration at having to report to the migrants regarding project advances and spending. On the other hand, the beneficiaries' main complaint was that they could only submit projects with the approval of organized migrant groups (Servicios Profesionales para el Desarrollo Económico 2005). More generally, research and media reports on the role of HTAs tend to underestimate the active participation of stay-at-home community members in many community development projects. Indeed, Bada's (2008) fieldwork in Zacatecas and Michoacán revealed that more than half of the projects visited in both states involved funds contributed by both the stay-at home community and the organized migrants.

More recently, a study of 13 communities in three Zacatecas municipalities receiving Three-for-One funds found that their HTAs in the US have been offering their support to projects led by stay-at-home community members in order to get the approval for Three-for-One project funding. This strategy was devised to comply with the requirement that projects must be exclusively submitted by organized migrants (García de Alba Tinajero et al. 2006, 224). This pattern of collaboration between migrants and stay-at-home community members also emerges in a national survey, which found that 59 per cent of villagers contributed some money to Three-for-One projects (Secretaría de la Función Pública 2006). Some HTAs respond that they finance these projects indirectly, since some local family contributions are made possible by remittances.

In Bada's research on dozens of projects financed through Three-for-One in the state of Michoacán, both mayors and community members reported that they contributed extensively to the infrastructure projects, either through local fund-raising efforts or with unpaid community labour (known as *faenas*, or *tequio*, in indigenous communities). Recognizing the participation of both the 'sending' and 'receiving' ends of the transnational community is an important step to sustain participation without provoking intra-community conflicts, especially in communities that have seen their social fabric weakened by the massive departure of so many working adults.

According to Social Development Ministry officials, the programme's requirement that organized migrant federations select the projects complicates efforts to maximize the funds' anti-poverty impacts. As the data in Table 1 indicate, many of the lowest-income municipalities do not produce large numbers of international migrants; others produce mainly domestic migrants, who send fewer remittances and are not subjects of the programme.²² The federal representative for the matching fund programme in Morelia reinforced this concern about the difficulty for channelling resources to the most impoverished municipalities:

One of the problems that we face in channelling resources to these 35 [poorest] municipalities is that, for instance, these communities don't have potable water but migrants say that they want to fix the village square or they want to fix the church. They have problems of sewage but the migrants want to build a rodeo ring. We try to encourage them to fund projects that focus on immediate and basic needs but we can't obligate them. . . . We let the [state-level] validation committee choose the projects with the highest merits to support with public funds.²³

Yet local authorities also share responsibility for many 'community development' investment decisions that have little to do with poverty reduction. Mayors tend to be more interested in financing more easily visible public infrastructure projects. In contrast, sewage and drinking water projects in outlying areas are not easily visible. Moreover, the requirement that both migrant committees and local authorities must agree on project proposals may also encourage a 'lowest common denominator' approach.

Nevertheless, in spite of these obstacles, a substantial fraction of the Three-for-One projects do address basic infrastructure needs. Table 2 shows the sectoral distribution of projects, according to an official external evaluation. The data clearly show a strong preference for public goods such as roads, drinking

²² Some mayors of low-income municipalities also report that even when they find groups of expatriates in the US, they 'don't want to participate because they are afraid to give out their personal information. They believe that if they send a letter committing to donate funds, the Mexican government will report them to the Immigration office in the United States and they will be deported' (Bada interview, Morelia, Michoacán, July, 2004). All interview translations were done by the authors.

²³ Bada interview with Social Development Ministry official in Morelia, May 2005.

Table 2. Categories of Three-for-One community development investments, 2002–2005

<i>Type of project</i>	<i>Average share of 2002–2005 projects (%)</i>
Food marketing	0.32
Drinking water	7.12
Drainage	4.95
Support for primary production	1.02
Social welfare and community services	15.66
Rural roads	8.8
Feeder roads	10.68
Health centre	2.2
Regional development planning	1.31
Irrigation works	0.96
Electrification	7.55
Production and productivity support	1.88
Sports infrastructure	3.39
Educational infrastructure	4.32
Livestock infrastructure	0.34
Paving	14.60
Historic and cultural sites	1.58
Urbanization	14.11
Protection of federal areas and watersheds	0.15
Housing	0.20

Source: Servicios Profesionales para el Desarrollo Económico (2005, pp. 38–40).

water, welfare services, paving and electrification, with only a small fraction invested in productive projects.

The power relationship between the organized migrants and the municipal authorities is also influenced by the parallel project committees, which are citizen groups organized around approved infrastructure projects funded through the Three-for-One programme. These committees are often elected in a community assembly or are chosen by HTA leaders to represent them during their dealings with the three levels of government. Their main function is to supervise the construction process. In the year 2006, a national government survey found that 87 per cent of 91 Three-for-One projects had a formally constituted parallel committee (Secretaría de la Función Pública 2006). Nevertheless, most of these committees are weak, due in part to poor training and low literacy levels. Currently, in the state of Michoacán, not more than 10 per cent of these committees are working properly and very few have effective bargaining power with municipal authorities and HTA leaders.²⁴ They are also hindered by the lack of

²⁴ Personal communication with a staff member from the Migrant Affairs State Office, 8 January 2006.

Table 3. Percentage of migrant community development projects outside the municipal centre

State	2002–2005 (%)
Guanajuato	82
Guerrero	84
Hidalgo	66
Jalisco	48
Michoacán	73
Oaxaca	58
Veracruz	65
Zacatecas	65

Source: Burgess (2006, p. 113).

a clearly defined division of labour with US-based HTAs. In addition, HTAs still have limited accountability mechanisms vis-à-vis their own constituents. Nevertheless, the existence of these new trans-locally based oversight structures represents first steps towards representing the voices of previously underrepresented communities in municipal governments – especially given the broader context of the subordination of villages to municipal authorities based in the town centres.

Indeed, when one examines whether Three-for-One community development projects are located in the municipal centres vs the outlying communities, the pattern clearly favours the smaller villages. This is consistent with the widely held view that out-migration rates for the outlying communities are higher than for town centres. As indicated in Table 3, the emphasis on outlying communities holds for all of the principal states involved in the Three-for-One programme – with the notable exception of the state of Jalisco, where field reports indicate that the mayors are often more influential than the migrant organizations in making project decisions.²⁵

This pattern of favouring the lower-income outlying communities in the programme as a whole is consistent with Bada's field interviews in the state of Michoacán, where HTA capacity to mobilize and lobby increases the voice and standing of the outlying communities vis-à-vis the municipal authorities. The most important tool that HTAs have to improve the allocation of funds for underserved communities turned out to be their capacity to negotiate directly

²⁵ Note also that the programme resources remain highly concentrated geographically, with 72 per cent of the 2006 funding focused on the four states considered historic 'sending states' in the central-western region. Zacatecas leads with 27.39 per cent, followed by Jalisco (26.96 per cent), Michoacán (10.24 per cent) and Guanajuato (8.03 per cent) (Sagarnaga Villegas et al. 2006, p. 32). Not coincidentally, these four states together account for 52 per cent of the more than 600 officially registered HTAs, as of 2003, the most recent year for which data are available (Bada et al. 2006, p. 7).

with the *state* government, and to a lesser degree with the federal Social Development Ministry, and thereby pressure unresponsive municipal authorities.²⁶ HTAs have been effective in informing the state government about the needs of their communities and the unfulfilled promises that many municipalities have long made on issues regarding deficient elementary schools, water, electricity, roads, etc. In response, the state government has tried to raise awareness among the municipal presidents on the pressing conditions that many communities are facing outside the municipal centres. However, the success of the HTAs sometimes ends here due to their lack of capacity in project supervision and a poor understanding of their role as public accountability actors. This was evident in the results of a survey applied to Three-for-One beneficiaries and conducted by the Public Management Ministry, which revealed that only 43 per cent understood their rights to have access to information regarding projects financed with federal funds and only 4 per cent had ever submitted a formal complaint to the appropriate authorities (Secretaría de la Función Pública 2006).

One of the main sources of HTA influence on behalf of their communities of origin is their institutionally recognized voice in the Three-for-One committee for project evaluation and approval. However, their effectiveness as new power brokers is limited by problems of 'excessive representation' after long absences as community members and the imposed silence associated with those absences. When the opportunity to recover their voice becomes available, some absent members want to have direct representation at every decision-making opportunity. For instance, in 2005, Michoacano HTAs were allowed to have a seat on the Three-for-One committee for project evaluation and approval and they chose a representative from Chicago. Soon, complaints from representatives from Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Texas, Alaska and many other places with vast HTA representation from Michoacán also wanted to have a seat on this committee. As a result, in 2007, the committee in Michoacán had 12 people representing all HTA associations and federations in the United States, but they only had one vote.²⁷ Reaching a consensus is a challenge when not all representatives can afford the trip to the committee meetings in Morelia (those are not usually paid by the government) and they live several thousand miles apart from each other in the United States. So far, they have been able to offer a unified vote in the first meeting of the committee, but the long-term success of this model has yet to be seen. Despite their increased presence and participation in the evaluation committee of the Three-for-One programme, they have not always been successful in convincing municipal authorities to carry out all the Three-for-One projects that are needed in remote communities and rejection rates remain high. Between 2002 and 2004, 192 Three-for-One projects were rejected in the state. Of those, 140 (73 per cent) were located outside the town centre (Bada 2008). In

²⁶ This dynamic could be understood as an example of a much broader process, the 'boomerang effect' in transnational civil society campaigning (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

²⁷ Bada interview with Social Development Ministry official in Morelia at the First Latin American Migrant Community Summit, Morelia, Michoacán, 10–13 May 2007.

the long term, however, the most significant impact of the Three-for-One Programme's increased leverage for outlying villages may unfold in other local civic arenas – if they manage to exercise greater voice in the rest of the municipal decision-making process. In other words, the civic *spillover* effects may turn out to be the most significant.

THE PERSISTENT DISCONNECT BETWEEN MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT²⁸

In light of the clear overlap between the challenges of migration and rural development, one might expect high levels of dialogue and convergence between the analysts and social actors involved. After all, the growth in migrant worker remittances, combined with the spread of organized hometown associations, has provoked widespread optimism about prospects for investing in cross-border community development. Yet analyses of Mexican migration and development continue to engage at most sporadically, for reasons that are not well understood. Each agenda tends to treat the other as a residual category, while fully integrated approaches have yet to be developed. One factor may be that specifying the nature of the linkages between migration and development turns out to be easier said than done. For example, does sustainable/fair trade coffee production and marketing provide an alternative to migration, does it serve as a source of funding for marketing, or do remittances end up subsidizing coffee production because demand at fair trade prices is insufficient? Available research finds little evidence that fair trade/organic coffee slows migration.²⁹

So far, the huge volumes of economic remittances have attracted most of the public and policy attention. The framing of migration and development issues through the lens of remittances draws attention to questions of how financial institutions can capture the funds. While 'banking the unbanked' is certainly very important to those both sending and receiving remittances, the connection to broader development remains uncertain. For migrants and their families, the most tangible impact of the widespread public discussion has been the significant recent reduction in transaction costs, driven largely by increased private sector competition. The remittance focus also draws attention to collective remittance investments, primarily for social infrastructure rather than economic development (as indicated in Table 2).

The potential of remittances to generate economic development alternatives has been discussed for more than a decade, but in Mexico there is still little tangible evidence of sustainable jobs beyond a few micro-level cases. The challenge of finding and managing economically viable projects is compounded by the structure of the decision-making process. When migrants pool their hard-earned money for hometown projects, they place a premium on those

²⁸ This section draws on Fox (2006b, 2007).

²⁹ For one of the few studies to directly address the relationship between migration and fair trade/organic coffee initiatives, see Lewis and Runsten (2005).

investments that provide benefits to the community *as a whole*. Most job-creating investments, in contrast, directly affect only a small subset of the community. In addition, their benefits may be perceived as at risk of being captured by local elites or well-connected kinfolk – in a context in which ‘long-distance accountability’ is difficult. This dilemma suggests the importance of identifying those productive investments that can also have ‘public goods’ effects, such as improved coffee-processing infrastructure in those communities where most people depend on coffee and already have years of experience working together in a marketing coop whose leadership is publicly accountable. Yet this category of potential investment projects has yet to be linked to migrant collective action.

Efforts to bring migrant organizations into the broader development policy debate are still incipient, as their Mexican policy agenda continues to be dominated by the traditionally bounded ‘migration policy’ framework, limited to the Three-for-One programme, the Institute for Mexicans Abroad and Mexico’s approach to US immigration and border policies. Besides, locally based-NGOs are not always aware of the existence of HTAs and therefore there is no communication or common agenda to develop shared sustainable rural development goals. Even at the level of local and trans-local policy agendas, few cross-border membership organizations support grassroots development agendas *both* in communities of origin *and* in communities of settlement. Mexico’s Association of Social Sector Credit Unions has worked with migrant organizations to launch a network of rural micro-banks, which could provide working capital for local economic development. The Bi-national Front of Indigenous Organizations (FIOB) is another exception, as it builds a participatory grassroots microcredit network back home, to make a locally accountable institutional base that could eventually receive and invest remittances (Domínguez Santos 2004).

In an effort to craft a new way of framing the relationship between migration and development, Mexican rural development strategist Armando Bartra (2003) bridges the migration, development and rights agendas with his call for respect for ‘the right to not [have to] migrate’. After all, the Mexican Constitution’s Article 123 still speaks of citizens’ right to ‘dignified and socially useful work’. The ‘right to not migrate’ can be a useful bridging concept for promoting reflection and discussion between diverse and sometimes disparate actors who see the process differently. This principle recognizes that while migration is an option, it is a choice made within a context imposed by public policies that enable some development strategies over others. Yet the apparently limited impact of the ‘right to not migrate’ concept suggests that translating an evocative frame into practical strategies for grassroots organizations turns out to be a serious challenge.

What might explain this persistent disconnect between migration and development? Migration is increasingly recognized as spreading throughout Mexico, remittances are widely seen as a development resource, and those practitioners and analysts working on migration increasingly acknowledge the need to take into account dynamics in communities of origin. Perhaps the roots go deeper

and one needs to look at the basic frameworks used to define strategies for change. Most of Mexico's rural development practitioners and analysts implicitly treat migration as an external process happening 'outside' the grassroots development process, a de facto residual category – whereas for *campesino* families, migration is *inside* the box, a central component of a diversified survival strategy. For most practitioners and analysts who are working on migration, in contrast, the development dimension of the relationship between receiving and sending community is understood in terms of 'philanthropy from below', an approach that tends to prioritize high profile, 'something for everyone' projects over policy advocacy for job creation and sustainable development.

One indicator of the challenge of engaging the migration and development agendas involves the uneven landscapes of the relevant community-based organizations. Mexican migrants, for example, have generated a broad and diverse array of membership organizations, but they vary widely in their density and distribution. To contribute more directly to grassroots development strategies on the ground, a next stage of mapping is necessary. At the level of a state or a region, it would be very useful to take a map of those communities whose migrants have generated hometown associations and lay it over a map of those communities of origin that have also generated the social, civic and economic development organizations that could serve as counterparts with the organized migrants. Some 'sending' communities in the state of Oaxaca have very limited economic development prospects, but others have significant, scaled-up community-based enterprises, such as organic coffee and timber cooperatives. Imagining alternatives with those organized migrants who come from hometowns with community-based economic development track records could go a long way toward addressing the issues that make productive investments of remittances difficult. Those issues include the need for viable investment prospects, for entrepreneurial experience and reliable technical support, for public accountability to the communities of origin, and for positive social spillover effects beyond the local interested parties. Yet this social-geographical convergence between territorially-based migrant organizations and grassroots-led community economic development initiatives remains incipient.

CONCLUSIONS

The emergence of Mexican migrant civil society suggests that exit can be followed by voice. For many Mexican migrants, autonomous collective action begins as they look homeward. For those who were active before they left, civic life back home may be undermined, at least in the short term – though some later provide community service, directly or indirectly. Reflecting on those Mexicans active in migrant civil society who had track records of collective action before leaving suggests that many find new pathways for expressing their commitments, following Hirschman's (1984) principle of the 'transformation and mutation of social energy'. This idea refers to the ways in which activists often draw on their formative experiences with collective action, even after

major changes in their political context and social terrain, and draw on these legacies to inform their new initiatives in different arenas.

The preceding analysis of the project decision-making dynamics within the Three-for-One community development investment programme indicates that migrant organizations have some capacity to bolster the representation of their often-subordinated home communities within municipal, state and federal politics. Yet this programme represents a tiny fraction of Mexico's overall social investment spending. More importantly, this programme has not managed to leverage substantial, sustainable productive investments. Without economically viable, broad-based, socially credible job alternatives, out-migration will continue to deepen in those communities not yet considered to have reached 'high migration intensity'. As a result, the migrant hometown associations that are tithing themselves to invest back home in public goods may face the dilemma of building basketball courts and baseball stadiums with very few players, except for the 3–4 weeks each year when expatriates return to visit.³⁰ The Three-for-One programme's investment in roads may facilitate migrants' return home over Christmas, but they also lead the next generation north.

In conclusion, Mexican experiences with organized migrant involvement in hometown community development initiatives show that voice sometimes can follow exit. Yet voice that is limited to addressing the symptoms rather than the causes of exclusion is unlikely to lead to sustainable community development.

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³⁰ The latter scenario was depicted in the 2003 documentary *The Sixth Section* (see <http://www.sixthsection.com>)

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