



INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA (TNCA) (1990–2024): GUATEMALA, HONDURAS, AND EL SALVADOR

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Abstract: International migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America, comprising Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, has been one of the most complex, persistent, and multidimensional social phenomena in the Latin American region in recent decades. This article aims to analyze international migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative-quantitative approach, based on a systematic literature review and analysis of reports from international organizations, including the IOM, ECLAC, and the World Bank, as well as the use of secondary data from national and international sources. The primary destination for migration from this region is the United States of America, where 117.300 immigrants were residing as of 1970, a figure that exceeded 6 million people by 2024. In turn, migration from this region stems from a combination of historical structural factors, such as poverty, inequality, violence, and social exclusion, the intensity of which varies significantly across national contexts. Furthermore, family remittances represent a fundamental component of national economies, accounting for approximately 19,0%, 26,3%, and 24,3% of GDP, respectively, by country in 2024. It is concluded that migration is a structural and sustained phenomenon over time, with profound implications for the region's demographic, economic, and social dynamics.

Keywords: International migration; Northern Triangle of Central America; family remittances. United States of America.

MIGRACIÓN INTERNACIONAL EN EL TRIÁNGULO NORTE DE CENTROAMÉRICA -TNCA- (1990–2024): GUATEMALA, HONDURAS Y EL SALVADOR

Resumen: La migración internacional proveniente del Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica, integrado por Guatemala, Honduras y El Salvador, constituye uno de los fenómenos sociales más complejos, persistentes y multidimensionales de la región latinoamericana en las últimas décadas. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la migración internacional del Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica. Metodológicamente, el estudio se sustenta en un enfoque cualitativo-cuantitativo, basado en una revisión bibliográfica sistemática y documental de informes de organismos internacionales, entre ellos la OIM, la CEPAL y el Banco Mundial, así como en el uso de datos secundarios provenientes de fuentes nacionales e internacionales. La migración de esta región tiene como principal destino de atracción a los Estados Unidos de América, donde para el año 1970 se encontraban 117.300 inmigrantes residiendo en dicho país, cifra que supera en 2024 los 6 millones de personas. A su vez, la migración de esta población responde a una combinación de factores estructurales históricos, como la pobreza, la desigualdad, la violencia y la exclusión social, cuya intensidad varía de manera significativa en cada contexto nacional. Por otro lado, las remesas familiares monetarias representan un componente fundamental de las economías nacionales, alcanzando en 2024 aproximadamente el 19,0 %, 26,3 % y 24,3 % del PIB, respectivamente por país. Se concluye que la migración se configura como un fenómeno estructural y sostenido en el tiempo, con profundas implicaciones en las dinámicas demográficas, económicas y sociales de la región.

Palabras claves: Migración internacional; triángulo norte de centroamérica; remesas familiares. Estados Unidos de América.

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1 Introduction

The phenomenon of international migration is one of the most significant and complex social processes in today's global world. In the case of Central America, and particularly in the countries that make up the so-called Northern Triangle, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, migration abroad, predominantly to the United States, represents a structural reality that runs through the contemporary history of these societies, shaping their economies, cultural dynamics, and political structures (Castles, 2009).

The Central American region has been the scene of mass displacement since at least the second half of the 20th century, as a result of civil wars, recurring economic crises, natural disasters, and, more recently, the spread of structural violence linked to organized crime and the *maras* (Gammage, 2007; Sampo, 2009; Rodgers, 2016). This migratory pattern is neither recent nor episodic; rather, it stems from deep-rooted historical factors that have accumulated, transformed, and reproduced over time, constituting what various authors refer to as a migratory culture or an established migration dynamic (Massey et al., 1993).

According to Massey (2002), migration processes in each country take on their own distinct characteristics determined by their historical trajectories, social structures, and specific migration networks; therefore, analyzing them both individually and comparatively is essential to understanding the phenomenon as a whole. This highlights the magnitude of the phenomenon, with millions of Central Americans residing abroad and remittances that in some cases exceed 20% of the national Gross Domestic Product (World Bank, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the objective of this article is to analyze the phenomenon of international migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America. To this end, a pluralistic theoretical approach is adopted that combines contributions from neoclassical theory, the new economics of labor migration, network theory, and the world-systems approach, recognizing that no single theoretical perspective can fully account for the complexity of the migration phenomenon in its entirety (Arango, 2003).

In methodological terms, this study adopts a qualitative-quantitative, documentary approach based on a systematic review of academic literature, reports from international organizations, and statistical databases. This type of approach is well-suited for constructing broad interpretive frameworks and synthesizing accumulated knowledge on a long-standing phenomenon, allowing for the identification of patterns, trends, and debates present in the literature.



Apart from this introduction, the article is structured as follows: first, the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis is developed, addressing the main concepts and theories regarding international migration; second, the methodological strategy adopted is described in greater detail; next, the results and discussion are presented around four central dimensions: the history of migration in the Northern Triangle, the structural causes of the phenomenon, the characteristics and trends of migratory flows, the impact of remittances, and the similarities and differences among the three countries; finally, the conclusions or considerations derived from the analysis are presented.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 International Migration

International migration can be defined, in its broadest sense, as the movement of people across international borders for the purpose of establishing a new residence, whether temporarily or permanently. This seemingly simple definition, however, masks a deeply heterogeneous reality involving diverse motivations, different trajectories, and varying legal statuses (IOM, 2019).

From a demographic perspective, Zlotnik (1987) defines international migration as the movement of people between countries that involves a change in habitual residence, distinguishing it from other types of human mobility such as tourism, short-term travel, or daily cross-border mobility. For his part, Castles (2010) proposes a broader conceptualization that incorporates the political, economic, and social dimensions of the phenomenon, noting that international migration is not simply a geographic movement but a transformation of social relations that affects both countries of origin and countries of destination.

A fundamental conceptual distinction in the study of international migration is the one that separates voluntary migration from forced migration. Voluntary migration, according to Massey et al. (1993), is migration motivated primarily by the search for better economic or living conditions, in which the migrant possesses a certain degree of agency and decision-making capacity regarding their movement. In contrast, forced migration refers to movements driven by coercive factors that nullify or severely limit an individual's ability to choose, such as political persecution, armed conflict, widespread violence, human rights violations, or natural disasters (UNHCR, 2016).

This distinction, while analytically useful, has been questioned by authors such as Zetter (2007), who points out that in practice both forms of migration overlap and that many people find themselves in intermediate situations where economic motivations and factors of compulsion combine in complex ways. In this context, this ambiguity is particularly evident, as violence, poverty, and a lack of opportunities simultaneously act as push factors, making it difficult to



classify migrants into discrete categories (Cantor, 2015).

The distinction between regular and irregular migration constitutes another highly relevant conceptual dimension for the analysis of the migration phenomenon. Regular or documented migration is migration that takes place in accordance with the immigration laws and regulations of both the country of origin and the country of destination, through officially recognized channels and procedures (IOM, 2019). In contrast, irregular migration, also known as undocumented or unauthorized migration, occurs outside established legal frameworks, whether through clandestine entry into the destination country, overstaying a tourist visa, or working without the proper permits (De Genova, 2002).

Bustamante (2002) has pointed out that irregular migration is not an inherent attribute of migrants, but rather a socially constructed condition resulting from the restrictive immigration policies of destination countries, which, by closing off regular entry channels, push migrants toward clandestine routes and mechanisms that exponentially increase the risks to which they are exposed. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the situation of migrants who, in the absence of accessible legal pathways for migration, often resort to human trafficking networks or undertake extremely dangerous journeys.

2.2 Major Theories of Migration

The neoclassical theory of migration, developed in its fundamental formulations by Lewis (1954), Sjaastad (1962), and subsequently by Todaro (1969) and Harris (1970), conceives of international migration as a rational process of individual decision-making aimed at maximizing economic well-being. From this perspective, individuals migrate when they calculate that the expected benefits in the destination country, measured primarily in terms of wages and employment-exceed the costs of relocation, including both the direct economic costs and the psychological and social costs associated with leaving their place of origin.

At the macro level, neoclassical theory explains migration as the result of differences in labor supply and demand between countries or regions, predicting that migration flows will move from areas with low wages and an abundant labor supply to those with high wages and a relative shortage of workers (Massey et al., 1993). Although this theory has been criticized for its excessive emphasis on individual economic rationality and for ignoring the structural and relational factors that shape migration (Arango, 2003), it remains relevant as an analytical starting point, especially when seeking to explain migration flows between countries with large differences in their levels of economic development.

The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), studied by Stark (1985) and further developed by Stark (1989, 1991), represented a significant advance over the neoclassical paradigm



by shifting the unit of analysis from the isolated individual to the household or family. From this perspective, the decision to migrate is not made individually but collectively by the family unit, as a strategy to diversify sources of income, minimize the economic risks associated with market failures in insurance, credit, and labor markets in countries of origin, and maximize total household income through remittances sent by migrants (Stark, 1985).

This theory introduces the concept of relative deprivation, arguing that the decision to migrate is influenced not only by the absolute level of household income but also by its relative position in the income distribution of its community: the households most likely to migrate are not necessarily the poorest in absolute terms, but rather those that perceive a greater gap between their economic situation and that of their wealthier neighbors (Stark, 1989). This perspective has proven to have considerable explanatory power, as migration has become a strategy for social reproduction adopted by broad sectors of the population as a mechanism to compensate for the precarious nature of local labor markets and the inadequacy of social protection systems (Canales, 2008).

The theory of migration networks, proposed by MacDonald and MacDonald (1964) and systematically developed by Massey et al. (1993) in their influential comparative study on international migration, constitutes one of the most fruitful analytical frameworks for understanding the dynamics and perpetuation of contemporary migration flows. Migration networks are defined as sets of interpersonal relationships that connect current migrants, potential migrants, and non-migrants in places of origin and destination through ties of kinship, friendship, and community of origin (Massey et al., 1993).

These networks reduce the costs and risks associated with migration by providing information on the labor market at the destination, initial housing, financial support, and guidance for new migrants, which means that each act of migration increases the likelihood of further migration by expanding and strengthening the network (Massey et al., 1998). A central contribution of this perspective is the concept of cumulative causation, as proposed by Massey (1990) and Myrdal (1957), which explains how migration, once initiated, tends to self-perpetuate and expand regardless of the conditions that gave rise to it, creating migratory structures and cultures that are difficult to reverse through short-term policies. Network theory helps explain the concentration of migrants in certain countries, as well as the continuation of migration flows despite increasing immigration restrictions (Portes and Bach, 1985).

World-systems theory, developed by Wallerstein (1974, 1979) and subsequently applied to migration studies by Portes (1981) and later by Sassen (1988), provides a structural and macro-sociological perspective that situates international migration within the broader context of the uneven development of global capitalism. From this perspective, migration is not the result of



individual decisions or imbalances between national labor markets; rather, it is a consequence of the expansion of capitalism into peripheral societies and the resulting disruption of their traditional economic and social structures (Massey et al., 1993).

The expansion of capitalism into the peripheral regions of the world system disrupts traditional ways of life, displaces agricultural workers, creates new consumer expectations that local markets cannot meet, and generates flows of migrants heading toward the centers of the global capitalist system (Sassen, 1988). Sassen (1988) points out that the links between countries of origin and destination are not only economic but also political, military, and cultural, and that the presence of transnational corporations, military interventions, and the cultural influence of core countries on the peripheries create the channels through which migrants flow (Robinson, 2003).

3 Methodological Procedures

This article adopts a qualitative methodological design with a documentary approach, aimed at reviewing, systematizing, and critically interpreting the evidence accumulated in the literature and in institutional reports on international migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America. According to Hernández (2014), qualitative documentary studies are appropriate when the objective is to understand complex phenomena in their context and depth, constructing interpretations that integrate multiple theoretical and empirical perspectives. This approach is particularly relevant for the analysis of migration, given that it is a phenomenon with a long and multifaceted historical trajectory that cannot be reduced to simple statistical correlations but rather requires an interpretive analysis that articulates historical, structural, cultural, and political dimensions (Arango, 2003).

With regard to information sources, the study draws on three main types of sources. First, academic literature on international migration, including articles published in high-impact, indexed scholarly journals such as; *Migration Studies*, *International Migration Review*, *Latin American Research Review*, and *Latin American Politics and Society*, among others; as well as books and book chapters by recognized authors in the field. Priority was given to works produced by researchers from the countries in the region themselves - Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador - or by scholars with extensive experience in the study of Central American migration.

Second, we consulted reports and databases from international organizations with an active presence in the region and that produce a wide range of statistical and analytical information on migration, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Third, public policy documents,



national development plans, and statistics produced by the governments of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, as well as by their respective national statistical institutes, household surveys, and central bank remittance records, were reviewed.

The process of collecting and analyzing the information was carried out in three phases. In the first phase, a systematic literature review was conducted in academic databases, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and CLACSO, using search terms in Spanish and English related to Central American international migration, the causes of migration, migration flows, remittances, and development. This search was limited primarily to publications from the last thirty years, although earlier seminal works were included when necessary to provide theoretical and historical context for the analysis.

Next, we proceeded to conduct an analytical reading and systematization of the selected documents, identifying the main arguments, empirical evidence, methodologies, and debates present in each one. Finally, a comparative analysis and interpretive synthesis of the collected information were conducted, organizing the findings around the thematic dimensions established in the study's objectives. This analytical process was guided by criteria of theoretical relevance, empirical soundness, and representativeness of the various perspectives present in the literature.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 A Brief History of International Migration in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador

The history of international migration in Central America's Northern Triangle cannot be understood without reference to the political and economic context that shaped the region during the second half of the 20th century. In Guatemala, the origins of long-distance international migration date back to the 1960s and 1970s, when an internal armed conflict that would last thirty-six years began to displace indigenous and rural communities, particularly in the Western Altiplano and Quiché regions (Jonas, 2000; Moran, 2008).

According to Jonas (2000), counter-insurgency military operations, especially those that took place between 1978 and 1983, resulted in massacres of civilians, the destruction of villages, and forced displacements that compelled tens of thousands of Guatemalans to seek refuge in Mexico and the United States. This first exodus, which was primarily political and forced, laid the groundwork for the establishment of transnational migration networks that would later facilitate more economically driven migration (Moran, 2008).

In El Salvador, the armed conflict had an even more devastating impact on migration flows. The Salvadoran civil war, which lasted from 1979 to 1992, was the primary catalyst for mass migration to the United States (Villalta, 2004; Pombo, 2021). Menjívar (2000), in his study of Salvadoran communities in Los Angeles, notes that during the 1980s, more than one million



Salvadorans left the country, representing approximately 20% of the total population, in what constituted one of the largest exoduses in Central American history in relative terms.

Unlike Guatemalan migration, which was predominantly indigenous and rural, Salvadoran migration during this period included large segments of the urban and middle classes who fled widespread political violence (Popkin, 1999; Landolt, 1999). The signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992 did not reverse migration flows; on the contrary, the postwar period brought with it new forms of social violence, gangs, organized crime, and a deep economic crisis that kept the incentives to emigrate alive (Gammage, 2007; Martínez, 2023).

Honduras, for its part, exhibited a different migration pattern in its early stages, although its recent trends have converged with those of its neighbors. Unlike Guatemala and El Salvador, Honduras did not experience a large-scale internal armed conflict during the 1980s, although it was deeply affected by the civil wars in its neighboring countries, as it was used as a base of operations for Nicaraguan and Salvadoran counterrevolutionary groups supported by the United States (Schulz, 1994; Flores, 2017).

Honduran migration to the United States was initially less widespread than that from Guatemala or El Salvador, but it accelerated dramatically beginning in 1998, when Hurricane Mitch devastated much of the country, destroying infrastructure, crops, and entire communities. According to CEPAL (1999), Hurricane Mitch caused damage equivalent to 70% of Honduras's GDP and left more than one million people homeless, triggering a mass exodus that structurally transformed Honduran migration flows (Barahona, 2005; Flores, 2017; Santos, 2025; Zolano, 2026).

In the 1990s and 2000s, migration in the three countries underwent a significant transformation: from being primarily political and forced, it gradually took on an increasingly economic and labor-related character, although it did not entirely lose its coercive elements, given the persistence of violence, exclusion, and inequality (Poblet, 2022). Massey (1999) notes that the consolidation of migration networks is evident, transforming migration into a normalized cultural practice in which households from different economic strata participated.

In Guatemala, Moran (2008), Gutiérrez (2010), and Selee (2022) demonstrated how entire communities in the Western Altiplano organized themselves around migration as the central pillar of their economy and social reproduction. In El Salvador, the establishment of migrant communities in cities such as Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and New York created dense transnational networks that facilitated the successive migration of new generations (Lungo, 1999). In Honduras, the Bajo Aguán region and the southern departments of the country became hotspots for emigration linked both to the collapse of the agro-export model and to violence and unemployment (Castellanos, 2004; Sandoval, 2016; Santos, 2025; Zolano, 2025).



Beginning in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and with increasing intensity from the middle of that decade onward, gang-related violence became one of the most significant drivers of emigration across all three countries, particularly in El Salvador and Honduras, which recorded some of the highest homicide rates in the world during periods of relative peace (Cruz, 2011; Sandoval, 2016; Flores, 2017).

In this regard, Wolf (2017) points out that the spread of gangs in the Central American context cannot be understood in isolation from the history of migration itself: The maras were largely a product of Salvadoran migration to Los Angeles during the 1980s, and their subsequent mass deportation from the United States to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in the 1990s transplanted these organizations into territories lacking the institutional capacity to contain them. This dynamic created a vicious cycle in which migration generated conditions that in turn fueled further migration, illustrating the complexity of the causal relationships at play (Parducci, 2007; Zilberg, 2011; Sandoval, 2016).

4.2 Main Causes of International Migration in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador

International migration requires a multidimensional perspective that goes beyond monocausal approaches and recognizes the complex interplay of structural, institutional, relational, and subjective factors. From the perspective of push and pull factors, classically formulated by Lee (1966), migration results from a combination of negative factors in the place of origin, which push people to leave, and positive factors in the destination, which attract them there. In the case of the Northern Triangle, push factors have historically been more decisive than pull factors, given that poverty, violence, inequality, exclusion, and impunity act as powerful forces that make it difficult for large segments of the population to remain in their communities of origin (UNHCR, 2016; Flores, 2017; Santos, 2025).

Poverty and structural economic inequality are the most persistent and deeply rooted factors driving migration in the three countries. According to World Bank data (2022), Guatemala has one of the highest inequality indices in Latin America, with a Gini coefficient that has historically ranged between 0.48 and 0.55, and multidimensional poverty rates that particularly affect rural and indigenous populations.

In Honduras, Castellanos (2004) and Sandoval (2016) show how the crisis in the agricultural sector and the country's relative deindustrialization during the 1990s created a surplus of labor that domestic labor markets could not absorb, creating strong incentives for emigration (Flores, 2017; Lopez-Recinos, 2020–2021). In El Salvador, Gammage (2007) argues that the signing of the Free Trade Agreement between the United States, Central America, and the Dominican Republic (DR-CAFTA) in 2005 did not resolve structural employment problems and,



in some sectors, contributed to intensifying the competition faced by local producers, thereby maintaining migratory pressures.

Violence in its many forms, such as gang violence, domestic violence, gender-based violence, extortion, and drug trafficking, is the second major push factor identified in migration from Central America's Northern Triangle. Honduras has the most critical levels, followed by Guatemala. The most common type of violence is street violence, experienced by 39% and 42% of citizens, respectively (Table 1). Unlike poverty, violence has a more immediate and urgent impact, making many migrants de facto in need of international protection, even though they are not always recognized as such under current legal categories (Cantor, 2015).

Table 1 - Types of violence experienced by citizens in the Northern Triangle of Central America, 2024 (%).

Type/Country	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Latinoamérica
Violence in the Streets	42	39	17	42
Verbal violence	15	23	26	32
Domestic Violence Against Women	30	29	22	30
Domestic Violence Against Children	22	22	22	23
Bullying/Harassment	19	22	21	23
Organized crime	18	21	6	21
Maras – Gangs	24	25	8	20
Drug trafficking violence and drug trafficking groups	8	12	4	19

Source: Authors (2026).

In 2015, El Salvador had a homicide rate of 103 per 100.000 inhabitants, making it one of the most violent countries in the world (InSight Crime, 2016). Honduras has consistently maintained high homicide rates, reaching 86.5 homicides per 100.000 inhabitants in 2011 (UNODC, 2013). Guatemala, although with somewhat lower rates, also exhibits levels of violence that directly impact migration flows, especially in areas controlled by drug trafficking or gangs (González, 2011). Cruz et al. (2016) have pointed out that systemic impunity, which in some of these countries exceeds 95% for homicides, reinforces the perception that the state cannot guarantee public safety, thereby increasing the likelihood that migration will be adopted as a survival strategy.

Institutional weaknesses and corruption are of great significance, although they are often underestimated in analyses focused on poverty or violence (Morales, 2017). Acemoglu (2012) highlights that the persistence of extractive institutions, those that concentrate political and



economic power in the hands of small elites, perpetuates underdevelopment and inequality, creating structural conditions that drive emigration. In the three countries of the Northern Triangle, the weakness of the rule of law, corruption in the judicial and police systems, the capture of the state by corporate and criminal interests, and the limited capacity to provide public services, including education, health care, and infrastructure, act as factors that reduce incentives to remain and hinder productive investment that could generate employment and local development (UNDP, 2013).

The persistence of insecurity and illicit economies, together with their structural constraints, continues to characterize the Northern Triangle of Central America (Torres, 2011). In 2024, Honduras and Guatemala recorded the highest levels of concern about crime and the strongest perceptions of increasing criminal activity and drug use. In Honduras, 54% of the population reported being concerned about becoming a victim of crime, while 79% believed that drug addiction had increased, and 32% stated that a friend or family member had used drugs during the previous twelve months. In Guatemala, 71% of the population perceived an increase in both crime and drug addiction. By contrast, El Salvador exhibited considerably lower values across most indicators, highlighting important differences in the security dynamics among the countries of the Northern Triangle (Table 2).

Table 2 - Experiences of victimization, perceptions of crime, and other factors among the population in the Northern Triangle of Central America, 2024 (%).

Aspect/Country	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Latinoamérica
Victim of a crime (you or a relative) in the past twelve months (select “yes” only here)	27	30	12	33
Concern about being the victim of a crime (here, only “All or almost all the time” plus “Sometimes”)	44	54	35	62
Evolution of crime (here, only "has increased")	71	72	7	75
Evolution of drug addiction (here, only "has increased")	71	79	9	77
Any friends or relatives who have used drugs in the past twelve months (select “yes” only here)	16	32	11	34
Perceptions of the fight against drug trafficking and organized crime (here, it is simply stated that “the battle against drug trafficking and organized crime is being lost”)	40	37	6	45

Source: Authors (2026).

Natural disasters and climate vulnerability are significant factors whose importance has been growing as drivers of Central American migration. The Central American Dry Corridor region, which encompasses large areas of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, has experienced



recurrent droughts and extreme weather events in recent decades that have decimated small farmers' crops, driving entire families to emigrate (Welch, 2019; Santos, 2025).

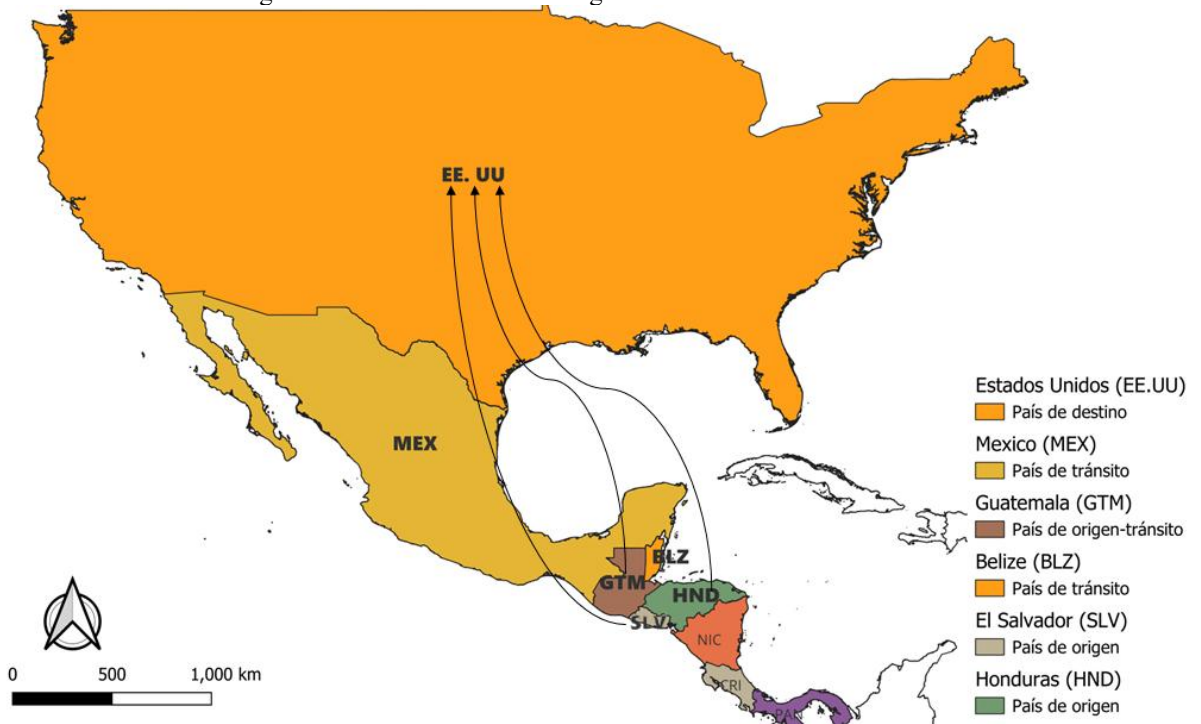
According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2019), agricultural losses caused by drought in the Dry Corridor have left millions of people food insecure, with indigenous and rural communities in Guatemala, which rely heavily on subsistence agriculture, being particularly affected. Rigaud et al. (2018) project that, unless drastic measures are taken to mitigate and adapt to climate change, Central America could generate between 1.4 and 2.1 million internal and international climate migrants by 2050, adding another dimension to the region's already complex migration flows.

In this regard, the existence and consolidation of transnational migration networks act as a facilitating factor that, while not a primary cause of migration, significantly reduces the costs and risks of displacement and increases the likelihood of new migrations from households already linked to previous migrants. Massey (2002) consistently argues that, once a migration network is established, the likelihood that a new household member will migrate increases substantially with each additional contact at the destination. In the context of the Northern Triangle, Central American communities in the United States, especially in California, Texas, New York, Maryland, Virginia, and Florida, have served as centers of attraction that facilitate the labor market and social integration of new migrants, thereby perpetuating and expanding migration flows beyond what objective economic conditions alone would predict (Portes, 2006).

4.3 Characteristics and Trends in Migration Flows

Migration flows from Central America's Northern Triangle exhibit a set of structural characteristics that distinguish them from other international migration flows, although they also share common features with Latin American migration in general. A key characteristic is the predominance of the United States as a destination (Fonseca, 2012–2016; Salazar, 2024).

Figure 1 - Main destination of migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America.

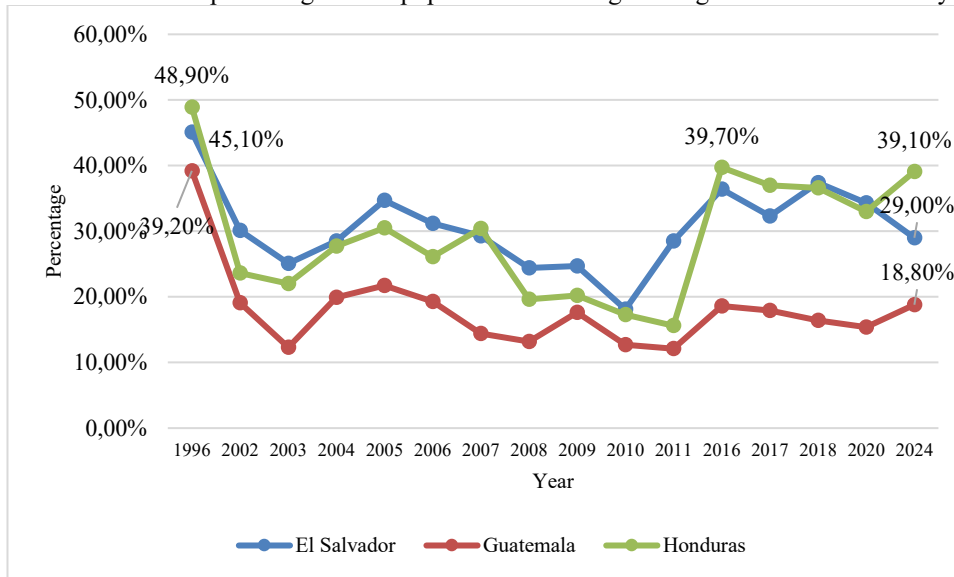


Source: Authors (2026).

Unlike other regions of the world with a greater diversity of migration destinations, migrants from the Northern Triangle overwhelmingly head to the United States, with a small fraction heading to Spain, Canada, Mexico, or other Central American countries. According to OIM data (2020), approximately 90% of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran migrants have the United States as their primary destination or a transit point. This geographical concentration of destinations reflects both relative geographical proximity and the existence of dense, well-established migration networks, as well as the demonstration effect generated by remittances received from established migrants (Fonseca, 2016).

The geographic dimension of migration can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the main routes taken by migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America. In the case of Honduras, a country of origin for significant migratory flows, irregular land migration primarily takes place through Guatemala and then Mexico. For El Salvador, due to its smaller land area, the routes first pass through Honduras, then Guatemala, and finally Mexico. Guatemalan migrants, on the other hand, head directly to Mexico. In all cases, Mexican territory serves as a key transit point, but it is also one of the most dangerous, due to extortion, violence, high temperatures, and other risks migrants face during their journey in search of the so-called “American Dream” (Payes, 2025).

Figure 2 – Evolution of the percentage of the population intending to emigrate to another country (1996–2024).



Source: Authors (2026).

One striking aspect is the persistence of a high intention to emigrate among the population of the countries in Central America's Northern Triangle between 1996 and 2024. Although all three countries show a decline compared to mid-1990s levels, the proportion of people wishing to emigrate remained significant, especially in Honduras and El Salvador, where the figures stood at 39,1% and 29,0%, respectively, in 2024, compared to 18,8% in Guatemala. These results suggest that, beyond a strictly voluntary decision, the intention to migrate is closely linked to structural and cyclical factors that limit life opportunities in countries of origin, shaping mobility processes that are increasingly conditioned by circumstances (Figure 2).

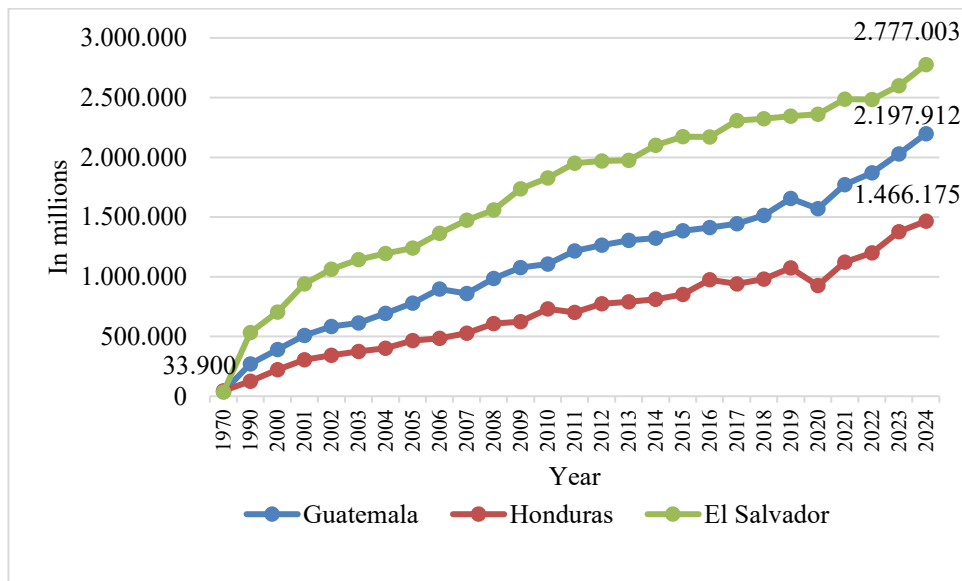
A key characteristic is the age and gender composition of migration flows, which has undergone significant changes over time. Historically, migration from the Northern Triangle was predominantly male and adult, with young men of working age as the main participants. However, since the 1990s, there has been a gradual feminization of migration flows, with a notable increase in the proportion of female migrants, which, in some flows, has exceeded 40% of the total (Ehrenreich, 2003; Cono, 2023).

Hondagneu (2001) has analyzed the specific motivations and factors driving female migration from Central America, noting that many women migrate to escape situations of domestic violence, to reunite with spouses who have already migrated, or to earn income that allows them to support their children back home. In recent years, a disturbing phenomenon has emerged: the dramatic increase in the migration of unaccompanied minors and entire families with children in groups known as "Las Caravanas," especially from El Salvador and Honduras, in what some

analysts have called a humanitarian crisis involving migrant children (UNICEF, 2018; Núñez, 2022; Juárez, 2024).

Consequently, migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTC) to the United States has been a constant phenomenon, although it has intensified since the 1990s due to various social, economic, and, in general, structural factors in the countries of origin. As shown in Figure 3, the number of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador residing in the United States rose from just 117.300 in 1970 to 928.676 in 1990, with even more rapid growth in the subsequent decades, reaching approximately 6.441.090 in 2024 (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Trend of emigrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTC) in the United States (1970–2024).



Source: Authors (2026).

Irregular migration or undocumented status constitutes a third structural characteristic of migration flows from the Northern Triangle, which has profound implications both for migrants' living conditions and for the political debate surrounding migration management. Given the lack of accessible legal channels for labor migration of low-skilled workers between Central America and the United States, the vast majority of migrants from the Northern Triangle who head to that destination do so irregularly, via clandestine routes through Mexico that entail extreme risks of violence, extortion, kidnapping, and death at the hands of criminal groups (Vogt, 2013; Fonseca, 2016; Santos, 2025).

Vogt (2013) documents the experiences of Central American migrants in transit through Mexico, describing an environment of systematic violence in which migrants are frequently victimized by criminal gangs, sometimes with the complicity or acquiescence of corrupt authorities. According to estimates by the Human Rights Center at the National Autonomous



University of Mexico (CDHFBC, 2010), every year tens of thousands of Central American migrants are victims of kidnappings, robberies, rapes, or other forms of violence while transiting through Mexico, constituting what human rights organizations have termed a humanitarian crisis in transit (Espitia, 2024).

As for trends in the volume of migration flows, these are characterized by cycles of expansion and contraction linked both to conditions in the countries of origin and to the migration policies of the destination country. Massey et al. (2002) point out how border control policies in the United States, which were intensified beginning in 1994 with Operation Guardian, far from reducing irregular migration, contributed to an increase in the permanent settlement of migrants in the destination country by raising the costs and risks of return (Abuelafia, 2018).

Complementing this, Zong (2018) of the Migration Policy Institute reports that the Central American population in the United States increased from approximately 1.5 million in 1990 to more than 3.4 million in 2015, with particularly pronounced increases in the Salvadoran and Honduran populations. The composition of these flows has also changed: although labor-related economic migration remains predominant, the proportion of asylum seekers and people displaced by violence has increased significantly, posing major challenges both for international protection systems and for the academic conceptualization of the phenomenon (UNHCR, 2020).

Circular migration, understood as the pattern whereby migrants undertake multiple journeys between their country of origin and their destination country while maintaining active ties in both places, has been another important characteristic of migration flows, although its relative importance has declined as border enforcement measures along the southern border of the United States have intensified. According to Durand (2003), circular migration was historically the norm in the case of Mexican migration and, to a lesser extent, Central American migration, allowing migrants to maintain their community and family ties in their countries of origin. However, the tightening of immigration controls has increasingly encouraged permanent settlement in the destination country, fragmenting transnational communities and making it more difficult for those who wish to return to their countries of origin to do so.

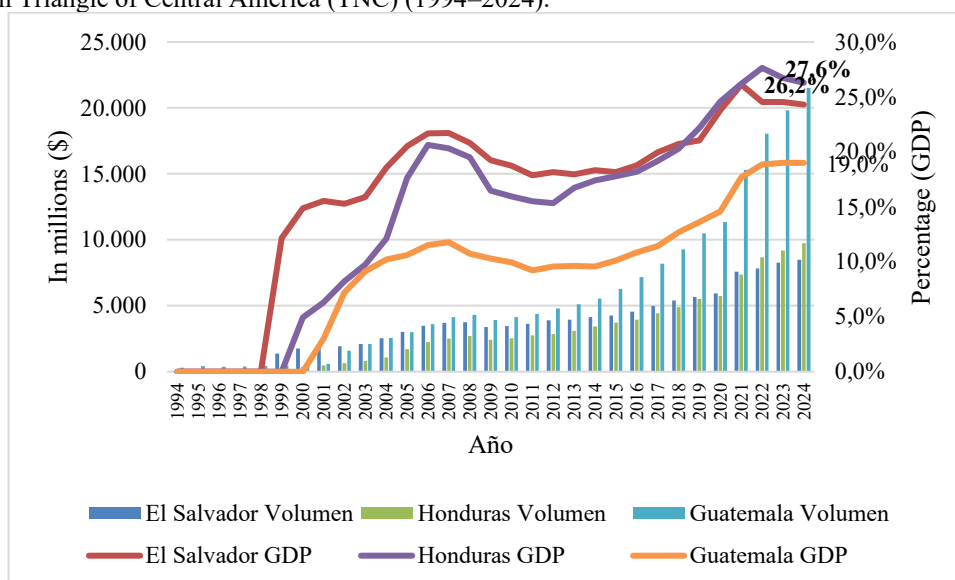
4.4 Remittances and Their Economic and Social Importance

International remittances, defined as monetary transfers sent by migrants to their countries of origin, represent one of the most significant economic phenomena arising from international migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America, with profound implications at both the macroeconomic level and the household level among recipient families. The growth of remittance flows to the region has been remarkable over the past decades (Figure 4).

According to World Bank data (2025), remittances to the countries of the Northern Triangle

of Central America experienced significant growth from 1999 to 2024. In 1999, El Salvador received just 1.374 million dollars, Honduras 320 million, and Guatemala 466 million; by 2024, these figures had risen to 8.480, 9.743, and 21.510 million dollars, respectively. In cumulative terms, remittance flows increased by approximately 517% in El Salvador, 2.945% in Honduras, and 4.516% in Guatemala between 1999 and 2024, highlighting the growing importance of these funds for the recipient economies and families. These figures place the three countries of the Northern Triangle among the largest recipients of remittances in relative terms and as a share of GDP, both regionally and, to a large extent, globally, underscoring the magnitude of the phenomenon and its centrality to the economic reproduction of these societies (IDB, 2022; Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Volume of international family remittances and their relationship to gross domestic product (GDP) in the Northern Triangle of Central America (TNC) (1994–2024).



Source: Authors (2026).

In absolute terms, the countries of Central America’s Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) received a record \$39.732 million in family remittances in 2024, representing a 6,9% increase over 2023 and cementing these flows as a fundamental component of the economy and consumption for millions of households in the region. However, there are significant differences among the countries. In Honduras, remittances accounted for 26,3% of gross domestic product (GDP), although they represented approximately 24,6% of the total amount received by the Northern Triangle.

In El Salvador, where remittances accounted for 24,3% of GDP, they represented 21,3% of the regional total. Guatemala, meanwhile, had a lower share of remittances in its GDP (19,0%), but accounted for 54,1% of the total value of remittances received in the region. This suggests that,



although the Guatemalan economy is relatively less dependent on these resources, remittances remain highly significant in absolute terms and reflect a relatively more diversified economic structure compared to Honduras and El Salvador (Figure 4).

Even so, one trend worth noting is the close relationship between the growth in the number of migrants from Central America's Northern Triangle to the United States and the sustained increase in remittances received by these countries. In fact, remittance flows rose from around \$2 million in 1999 to more than \$39 million in 2024, reflecting a steady growth trajectory. These transfers come mainly from the United States, which in some cases accounts for more than 90% of the total received. This dynamic highlights the increasingly important role of migration networks and the close economic and social ties that migrants maintain with their countries of origin, cementing remittances as one of the main mechanisms connecting those living abroad with their families in Central America.

At the level of recipient households, remittances contribute significantly to improving consumption levels, reducing poverty, and increasing access to health care, education, and housing. Adams (2005), in a comparative study covering 71 developing countries, found that a one-percentage-point increase in the share of remittances in a country's GDP is associated with a 2,1% reduction in the proportion of people living in poverty.

In the case of El Salvador, Acosta et al. (2008) note that households receiving remittances exhibit better well-being indicators across multiple dimensions compared to similar households that do not receive remittances. In Guatemala, ECLAC (2007) found that remittances represent the main source of income for approximately one million households, with a particularly high incidence in the Western Altiplano and Eastern regions of the country. However, various authors have pointed out that the positive impact of remittances on the well-being of recipient households should not obscure the profound asymmetries in the distribution of these benefits: households without members abroad, often the poorest and most vulnerable, are excluded from this flow of resources, which can exacerbate intra-community inequalities (Canales, 2008).

From this perspective, the debate over the potential of remittances as a driver of national development has given rise to divergent viewpoints. On the one hand, Orozco (2004) and Guarnizo (2003) demonstrate that remittances can contribute to local development when they are channeled toward productive investment, the financing of microenterprises, and the improvement of community infrastructure, especially through organizations of migrants abroad, known as migrant clubs, federations, or Hometown Associations (HTAs), which allocate part of their resources to finance public works in their communities of origin.

On the other hand, Taylor (1999) and Durand (1992) have highlighted the transformative potential of remittances, since most of these funds are allocated to current consumption, food,



clothing, and consumer goods, rather than to productive investment, and their multiplier effect on local economies is limited given these countries' high propensity to import. Sandoval (2015) adds a critical dimension by pointing out that dependence on remittances can generate perverse long-term effects, including the appreciation of the real exchange rate, which reduces export competitiveness, a disincentive for local work among recipient households, known as the “laziness effect” and the perpetuation of structural dependence on the economies of the Global North (Santos, 2025; Zolano, 2026).

Beyond their economic impact, remittances also have highly significant social and cultural dimensions that have been explored from the perspective of transnationalism and transnational communities. Levitt (1998, 2001) introduced the concept of “social remittances” to refer to the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that migrants transfer from host societies to their communities of origin, often in ways that transform cultural practices, values, and gender relations.

In this context, Popkin (1999) noted that social remittances sent by Salvadorans in Los Angeles to their communities of origin have contributed to changes in perceptions of gender roles, community organization, and educational aspirations, although they have also generated intergenerational and identity-related tensions (Landolt, 1999). Transnational families, those that maintain ties and responsibilities across international borders, with members living in different countries, constitute one of the most significant forms of social organization resulting from migration in the Northern Triangle, with profound implications for child well-being, child-rearing, and the emotional development of the children of migrants who remain in their countries of origin (Hochschild, 2000; Dreby, 2010; Landolt, 1999).

4.5 Similarities and Differences in International Migration Among Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador

They share a set of structural similarities in their migration dynamics, while also exhibiting significant differences in their social, economic, and other contexts. Understanding these common features and the specific characteristics of each case is essential for developing more precise and effective analytical frameworks (Portes, 2006; Castles, 2010).

Thus, the shared historical origins of their migration processes, rooted in armed conflict, structural poverty, and external interventions that shaped the region's history during the 20th century. All three countries have been equally affected by exclusionary agricultural modernization processes, by economic policies of structural adjustment that weakened the states and expanded informal employment, and by the spread of organized crime and gangs that transformed the landscape of everyday violence (Torres, 2011; Flores, 2012; Flores, 2017; Santos, 2025).

The primary destination for migration in all three countries is the United States, particularly



the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Houston, Miami, New York, and Chicago. This geographical concentration of migration reflects the importance of established migration networks, which are denser and more consolidated toward this destination than toward any other (Massey et al., 1993). These are economies highly dependent on remittances, which in all cases account for more than 15% of national GDP and constitute the main source of foreign exchange, surpassing traditional exports and tourism (World Bank, 2023).

This dependency constitutes what some authors have termed a “remittance trap,” in which the cycle of migration is perpetuated because remittances fail to overcome the structural conditions that give rise to it (Glytsos, 2002). Given this situation, they face the common challenge of forced return through mass deportations from the United States and Mexico, which each year send back tens of thousands of people who have spent much of their lives abroad and who encounter serious difficulties reintegrating into societies they left years ago (Golash, 2015; Zolano, 2026).

However, there are significant differences in their migration patterns that stem from their specific historical, demographic, cultural, and economic characteristics. A first significant difference lies in the ethnic and cultural composition of migration flows. Guatemala has the highest proportion of indigenous people; approximately 43% of its total population belongs to one of the 22 indigenous peoples, and this ethnic diversity is reflected in its migration flows: Guatemalan migrants to the United States face additional barriers to integration because they do not speak Spanish as their native language (Velásquez, 2010; Selee 2022). In contrast, Salvadoran and Honduran migration is predominantly mestizo and Spanish-speaking, which makes linguistic integration into Latino communities in the United States relatively easier (Menjívar, 2000).

Another key point concerns the relative intensity of violence as a factor driving migration. El Salvador has historically been the country where gang violence has had the most devastating impact on migration flows, with homicide rates that, in certain years, ranked it as the most violent country in the world outside of a formal war zone. The penetration of gangs into virtually every municipality in the country, their control over daily life in entire neighborhoods and communities, and the threats of forced recruitment of young people have made gang violence the main trigger of forced migration from El Salvador over the past decade (Cruz, 2011; Pombo, 2016; Sandoval, 2016).

Honduras faces the same problem, but with regional variations; violence is particularly acute in San Pedro Sula, which at times has been considered the most violent city in the world and on the country’s northern coast, compounded by territorial disputes among drug trafficking groups in certain regions (Mejía, 2020; Lopez-Recinos, 2021). Guatemala, although also affected by gang violence and drug trafficking, exhibits a different geographic distribution of violence, with some regions of the Altiplano and the south of the country relatively less exposed to gang violence,



though not to that of organized crime (InSight Crime, 2016).

On the other hand, the degree of institutional consolidation and the experience gained in the areas of migration policy and services for migrants. El Salvador developed, particularly beginning in the first decade of the 21st century, a set of relatively more sophisticated policies and institutions to support its diaspora, including the General Directorate for Assistance to the Overseas Community (DGACE) and mechanisms for engaging with associations of Salvadorans abroad (Perazca, 2008; IOM, 2023).

Guatemala, with its greater ethnic and regional diversity, has faced greater challenges in designing support policies that address the heterogeneity of its migrant population, although significant progress has been made, such as the creation of the National Council for Migrant Assistance in Guatemala (CONAMIGUA) in 2007 (Moran, 2008; Flores, 2020). Honduras, which has the shortest institutional history in this field among the three countries, has made more limited progress in developing a comprehensive migration policy, although there have been efforts in recent years to strengthen institutions providing assistance to returning migrants (Castellanos, 2004; IOM, 2024).

Finally, another point to consider is internal and international migration. In Guatemala, internal mobility, especially from rural and indigenous communities in the Altiplano to the capital city and the agro-export coastal regions, has historically been very intense and, in some cases, precedes or complements international migration (Moran, 2008). In El Salvador, given the country's higher level of urbanization and smaller land area, the dynamics of internal migration are relatively less pronounced, and international migration occurs more directly from the municipalities of origin. Honduras, with its stark contrasts between the industrialized northern coastal strip and the more impoverished rural interior, exhibits patterns of internal migration toward San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa that in many cases serve as stepping stones to international migration (Barahona, 2005).

5 Final Considerations

The objective of this article was to analyze international migration originating in the Northern Triangle of Central America (TNCA), comprising Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, a region characterized by its close geographical, border, and economic ties. These countries are distinguished by their primary roles as sources, transit points, and destinations for return migration, and to a lesser extent as destinations for outbound migration. In this regard, human mobility in the region is driven by historical factors of a social, economic, and political nature, which have contributed to this phenomenon gaining increasing significance over the past three decades.



It is clear that international migration in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador is a structural and historical phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a sum of individual decisions or explained solely in terms of wage differentials between countries of origin and destination. Thus, Central American migration is the result of decades of social exclusion, armed conflict, institutional weakness, and unequal capitalist development, which have shaped structures of expulsion deeply rooted in the social fabric of these countries. A thorough understanding of this phenomenon therefore requires a historical and structural perspective that goes beyond short-term or purely economic approaches.

The three countries share common characteristics that allow them to be considered a regional analytical unit, as well as national particularities and regional and ethnic variations that require differentiated approaches. Among these specific characteristics are the ethnic and linguistic composition of Guatemalan migration, the intensity of gang-related violence in El Salvador, the characteristics of the neoliberal model in the Honduran context, and the varying levels of institutional development regarding migration policies. However, these differences converge on a common element: the predominant orientation of migration flows toward the United States of America, which is both the main destination country and the main source of family remittances received by the three nations.

The role of remittances as a key component of national and household income in the three countries, while also highlighting the limitations of their potential as a driver of development. Although remittances help improve the living conditions of recipient households in the short term, their transformative effect on the productive structures and systemic conditions that drive migration is limited. This finding has important policy implications: strategies focused exclusively on maximizing remittance flows or channeling remittances toward productive investment are insufficient if they are not accompanied by deeper structural transformations in labor markets, income distribution, and the provision of public goods.

At the same time, migration flows highlight the growing complexity of categorizing Central American migrants, who often fall into a gray area between voluntary economic migration and forced displacement. This complexity has direct implications for international protection systems, which must be reviewed and updated to provide an adequate response to people fleeing widespread violence, extortion, and persecution by non-state actors.

This highlights the need to incorporate perspectives on gender, ethnicity, and childhood into the study of Central American migration, moving beyond approaches that treat migrants as a homogeneous, male group. The growing feminization of migration flows, the migration of unaccompanied minors, the distinct experiences of indigenous migrant women, and the impacts on children in transnational families are dimensions that require greater research attention and



specific policy responses.

Finally, this article emphasizes the need to address the structural causes of migration through policies aimed at sustainable development, reducing inequality, institutional strengthening, and peacebuilding in the three countries. Migration is not, in and of itself, either a problem or a solution, but rather a symptom of structural conditions that are not being adequately addressed by governments and the international community. Future research should delve deeper into the impacts of climate change on migration flows in the region, the dynamics of reintegration for returning migrants, the effects of migration on new generations growing up in transnational contexts, and the development of regional institutional frameworks for migration management that respect migrants' rights and address the structural causes of the phenomenon.

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