

**ANTHROPOLOGY**

# Indigenous Communities, Migrant Organizations, and the Ephemeral Nature of Translocality

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This article reports on the current state of collective migrant organizing for two Indigenous communities in Oaxaca, Mexico. Strained relations between migrant organizations and village authorities combine with small active memberships to limit the level and type of fund-raising in support of village development and governance. These findings highlight the difficulties that communities face to maintain effective translocal institutions over time, particularly as first-generation migrants “retire” and a lack of new arrivals hinders organizational renewal.

Este artículo informa sobre la situación actual de la organización colectiva de migrantes en relación a dos comunidades Indígenas de Oaxaca, México. Las relaciones tensas entre las organizaciones de migrantes y las autoridades comunales, combinado con pocos miembros activos, limita la capacidad de generar fondos de apoyo para el desarrollo y gobernanza de las comunidades. Estos datos enfatizan las dificultades que afrontan las comunidades para mantener instituciones translocales que sean efectivas a través del tiempo, especialmente cuando las primeras generaciones de migrantes “se jubilan” y la falta de nuevos obstaculiza la renovación organizacional.

## Introduction

Migration is a critical driver of change in the global countryside, a dynamic process that shapes rural development trajectories through a reconfiguration of capitals, resources, ideas, and linkages (Woods 2007; Kay 2008; Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). In Oaxaca, southern Mexico, several decades of internal and, more recently, international migration have had a profound impact on the state's Indigenous communities (Van Wey, Tucker, and McConnell 2005; Cohen and Sirkeci 2011). In particular, migration has drawn people away from Oaxacan villages, reducing the resources available for village development, including the collective resident labor that underpins customary forms of civic and communal governance (Mutersbaugh 2002; Kearney and Besserer 2004; Robson and Berkes 2011; Klooster 2013). As resident populations contract, there has been concern about the “vitality of [these] communities to staff offices and deliver basic services, maintain and improve infrastructure, maintain law and order, and preserve communal ceremonial and religious life and identities” (Kearney and Besserer 2004, 453). Although Oaxacan wage labor migration has fallen dramatically in recent years (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012; Cohen 2016), village populations have not rebounded (Bada and Feldmann 2016; INEGI census data, 2000–2015) and recent reports show that local governance structures remain under pressure, especially in communities with small resident populations (Hernández-Díaz 2013; Robson et al. 2018).

One hope for affected communities lies in the establishment (or strengthening) of translocal institutions and connections (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Fox and Bada 2008), through which “community” is recreated in faraway places (Grieshop 2006; Stiffler 2007) and migrants, through their activities, ideas, and investments, function as “agents of development” (Glick Schiller and Faist 2010) in the home village.<sup>1</sup> This is achieved

<sup>1</sup> The term “translocal” rather than “transborder” or “transnational” is used throughout this article to reflect the mix of international and internal migration dynamics that have influenced (and continue to influence) many sending communities in Oaxaca. It follows Stephen's (2007, 65) definition: “movement of place-specific culture, institutions, people, knowledge, and resources within several local sites and across borders—national and otherwise.” In this way, it refers to ties and relations that extend beyond the village community (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013).

through tangible means—sending monies and (sometimes) labor to meet village governance obligations or finance community projects and infrastructure improvements—and symbolically, as community norms become embedded across an expanded social field (Stephen 2007).

Although scholars have long debated the impact of migration in rural Mexico (Binford 2003; Cohen, Jones, and Conway 2005; De Haas 2010), much of that work has focused on economic and social change forged through household-level remittances (Rubenstein 1992; Taylor 1999; McKenzie and Rapoport 2007). These remittances, while significant in aggregate terms, can be small at the level of individual households, appear to be declining over time, and have limited village-level impact when used solely to meet basic family needs (Delgado Wise and Rodríguez Ramírez 2014). This reality has helped to shift focus from the individual to the “collective” migrant (Moctezuma 2000)—the active migrants who self-organize to affect change in communities of origin (Orozco and Rouse 2007; Fitzgerald 2008) and, in some cases, facilitate the transfer of political power from home village to migrant community (Smith 2006; Schütze 2014).<sup>2</sup>

While the establishment of hometown associations and other types of migrant organization is well documented (Hirabayashi 1993; Orozco 2003), the impacts that these organizations have on their communities of origin have often been assumed rather than empirically demonstrated (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). Researchers are now beginning to address this knowledge gap by analyzing the membership profiles, activities, and influence of such collectives. In the Mexican context, much of this work has focused on the ability of migrants to influence the accountability of public investment (and officials) in communities of origin, often through the federal government’s 3 × 1 Program (Fox and Bada 2008; Burgess 2016; Garcia Zamora 2005). Other studies have investigated how migrants shape village politics and intercommunity conflicts (Gutiérrez Nájera 2009; Duquette-Rury 2016) or assessed the quality of linkages that connect migrants to one another and to those back home (Waldinger, Popkin, and Magana 2008).

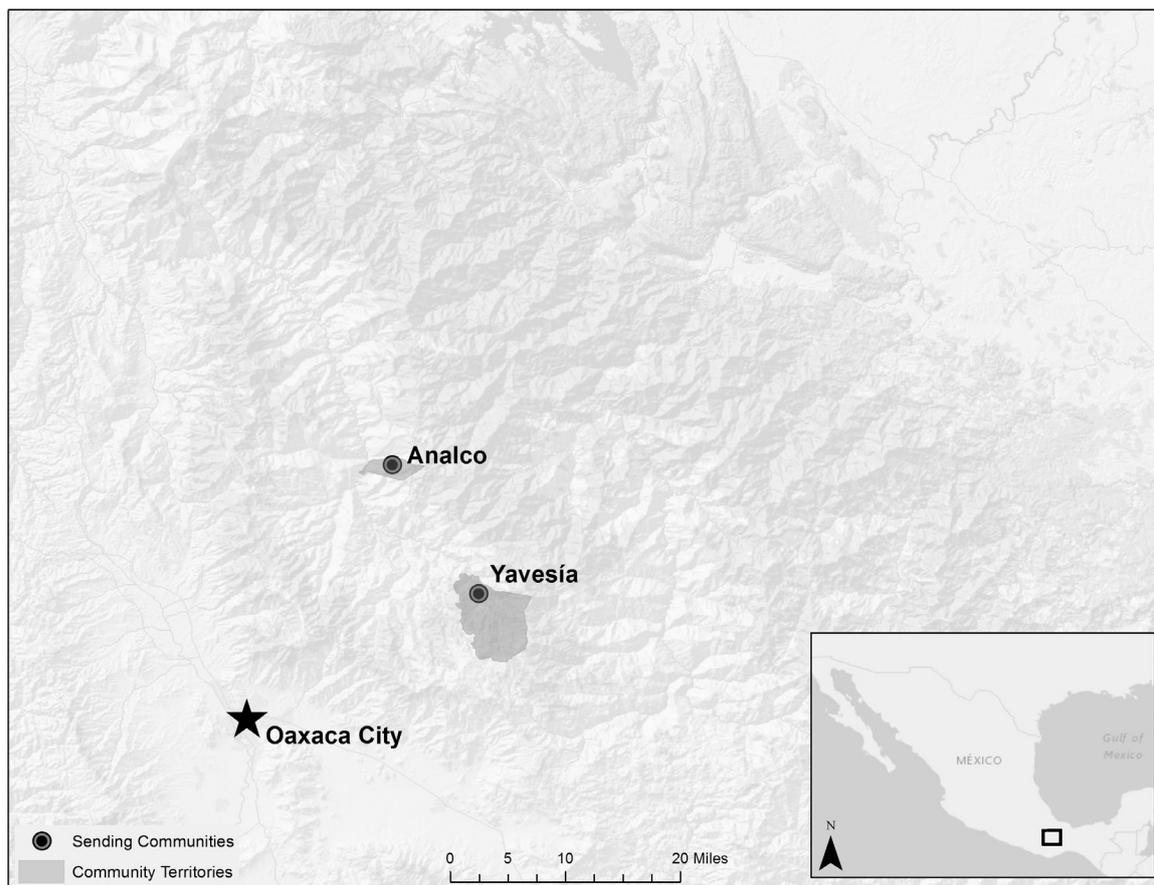
However, while studies exploring the efficacy and longevity of migrant organizations are not new (see Delgado Wise and Rodríguez Ramírez 2001; Perry et al. 2009), they are few in number. Certainly, more work is needed to better understand if and how organizations play a significant role in shaping community life, determined by the number of migrants willing and able to meet village requests for support over time. As Stephen’s (2007) work shows, the nature of migrant-village ties may change as migrants’ own family or work situations alter. As long-term absenteeism becomes commonplace, and Mexican migrants see limited possibilities for village return (see Jones 2009, 2014; Mines, Nichols, and Runsten 2010; Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012), any material commitment to the home village may waver. In addition, while some communities codify migrant obligations in local village statutes (Mutersbaugh 2002; Perry et al. 2009; Klooster 2013)—specifying what nonresidents must do in order to maintain community membership and attendant rights—adaptations of this kind are not universal (Robson and Wiest 2014), with many migrants morally (but not legally) obliged to meet the demands of village authorities.

This article assesses the state of migrant organizing for two Indigenous communities in Oaxaca’s northern highlands, including the current and projected role of active migrants to meet village development needs and mitigate communal labor shortages. Drawing on individual and group interviews with migrants living in Mexican and US destination centers, the article explores five key themes: membership numbers and status, migrant-village relations, collective investment preferences, migrant perspectives on traditional governance, and migrants’ ideas for institutional change at the community level. It reports on lulls in many organizations’ memberships and activities and considers the future implications of such trends. It discusses whether the limited efficacy of present arrangements can be overcome, or whether migrant organizing in these two cases better represents a temporary boost to village development, with support slowly eroded by changes in attitude and the aging-out of organizational leadership. While these two cases provide too small a sample to allow findings to be generalized more broadly, they serve to highlight a current reality in the region, and one that affected communities must manage as they continue to adapt to the changes associated with, or exacerbated by, migration and the migratory experience.

## Study Region and Methods

I conducted multisited ethnographic research (2014–2016) with the Zapotec community of Santa María Yavesía and the Zapotec community of San Juan Evangelista Analco, both located in the Sierra Norte (northern highlands) of Oaxaca (**Figure 1**). These communities, like most others in the region, are governed under a semiautonomous system known as *usos y costumbres* (uses and customs) that idealizes

<sup>2</sup> Orozco and Rouse (2007) found that the monies donated by hometown associations (HTAs) equaled or surpassed more than 50 percent of municipal public works budgets in towns with fewer than three thousand people, and up to 700 percent in towns with fewer than one thousand people.



**Figure 1:** Location of study communities in Oaxaca, Mexico.

the assembly of community members, who meet to debate and decide issues of local importance, and periodically elect community members to serve civic and communal governance positions (*cargos*). Cargo holders are empowered to represent the community in interactions with other communities, the state, the nation, and civil society. It is through providing this service when called upon by their peers, in addition to participating in collective work days (*tequio*), that members earn the rights to participate and speak in the assembly and hold usufruct rights to collectively held land.

The villages in this region have a long history of out-migration, encapsulating a mix of internal and international flows and dynamics. The most recent (published) census data indicate that Oaxaca had “elevated out-migration” for internal migration flows (to other parts of Mexico) and was ranked tenth (out of thirty-two Mexican states) for US-bound migration, with a grading of “high” (CONAPO 2010). However, Oaxaca is in no way uniform in its migration patterns. Some regions, like the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, have a history of receiving, rather than expelling immigrants (Gómez Roussel 2013). Other regions, such as the Mixteca or the Central Valleys, are known for sending temporary (mostly male) agricultural workers to northern Mexico and the United States (Stephen 2007; Zabin et al. 1993). Within the Sierra Norte itself, populated by Zapotec, Chinantec, and Mixe peoples, migration has been more varied, with a longer history of Zapotec migration to urban centers in Mexico and the United States and with more recent international migration involving Mixes and Chinantecos (Ramos Pioquinto 1992).

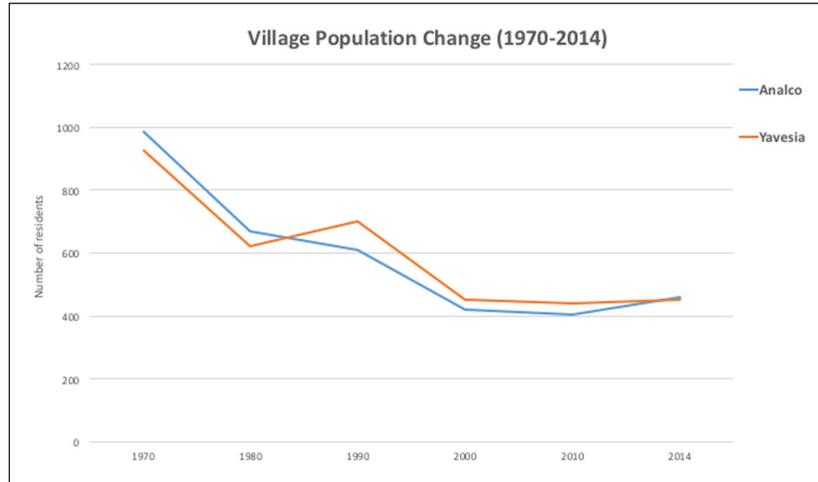
As Zapotec communities, Analco and Yavesía reflect some of this diversity. For both, initial experiences with labor migration to areas of plantation agriculture in Oaxaca (1930s–1940s), were followed by temporary migration to the US under the Bracero Program (1940s–1960s), and intense periods of wage labor migration to Oaxaca City and Mexico City (1960s–1980s) and the US (late 1970s to mid-2000s).<sup>3</sup> Yavesía has additional experience (since the mid-1990s) with seasonal, documented wage labor migration to the US. As of 2010,

<sup>3</sup> Migration streams from the Sierra Norte region ground to a halt in the late 2000s, with census data showing a leveling off of resident populations post-2010. This is attributed, at least in part, to the US economic recession in 2008 and 2009 and the securing of the US-Mexico border during the Obama administration. More recently, increasing deportations from the US to Mexico have affirmed fears that the US is not a viable destination for many would-be migrants (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015), heightened by the rhetoric and actions of the current US administration. Nevertheless, while movement north has been curtailed, this could potentially change if the Mexican economy enters a period of economic recession and decline as projected.

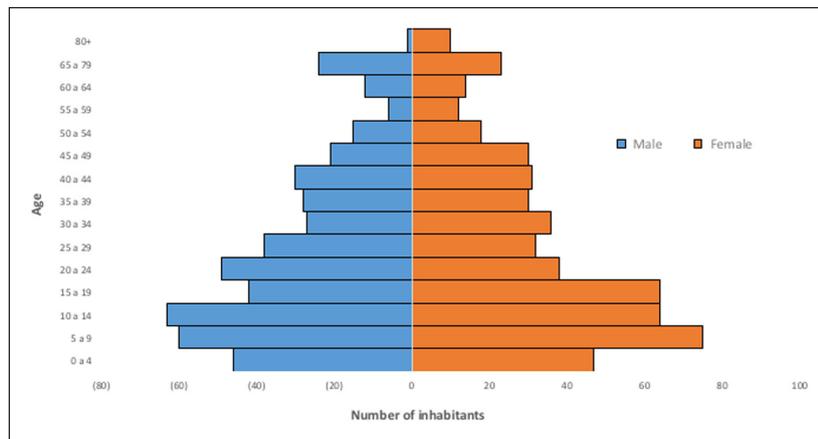
both communities were considered to exhibit “medium-level” migration intensities for US-bound migration, with internal (within Mexico) migration intensities “elevated” in the case of Analco and “balanced” in the case of Yavesía (CONAPO 2014).

These respective histories have driven significant change in the two communities’ resident populations (**Figure 2**) and age and sex structures (**Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6**) and reduced markedly the pools of adult resident labor available to meet collective work demands (specifically, cargos) in the home village (**Table 1**).

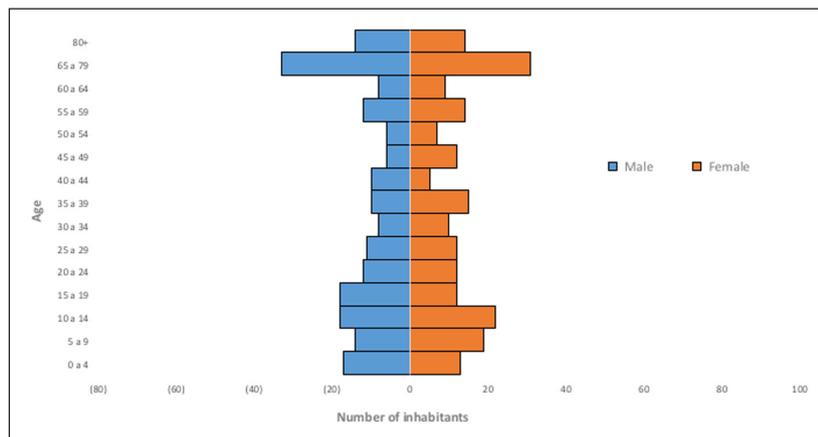
The research was focused on asking migrants in Mexican and US destination centers about the nature and scope of collective organizing in support of their home village. Interviews were guided by the following lines



**Figure 2:** Resident population change in Analco and Yavesía (1970–2014).



**Figure 3:** Age-sex structure of village population of Analco in 1970.



**Figure 4:** Age-sex structure of village population of Analco in 2010.

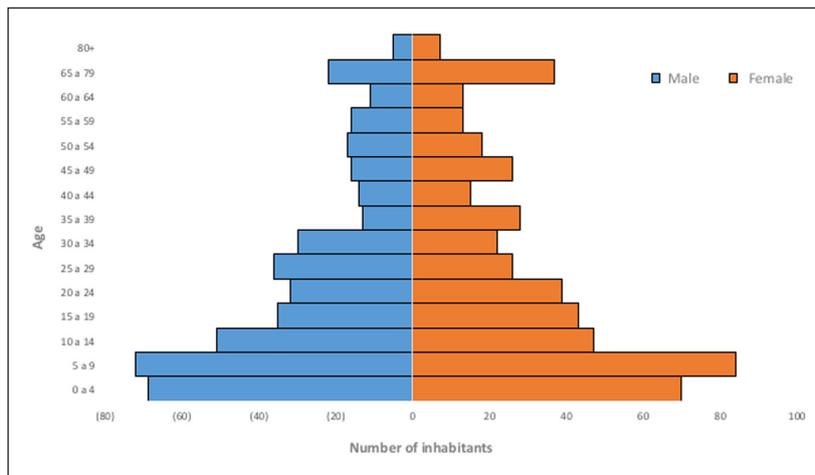


Figure 5: Age-sex structure of village population of Yavesía in 1970.

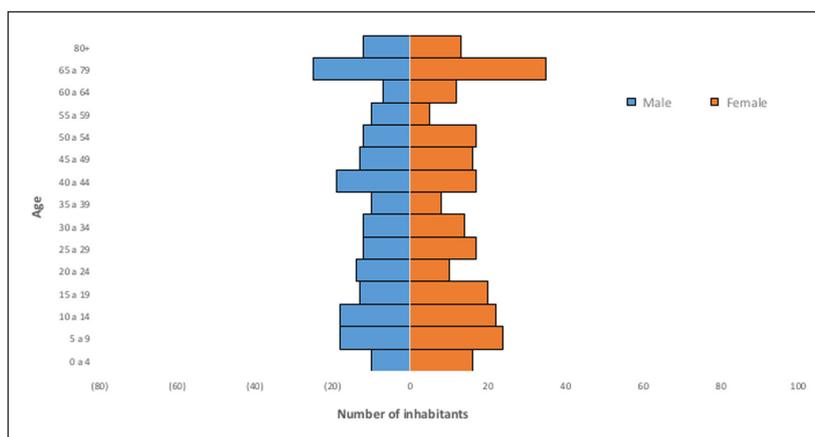


Figure 6: Age-sex structure of village population of Yavesía in 2010.

Table 1: Number of village cargos, active resident citizens, and current citizen: cargo ratio.

Community	No. of village cargos* (2015)	Number of active resident citizens (2015)	Citizen: cargo ratio (2015)	Citizen: cargo ratio (late 1970s)
Analco	79	81 <sup>†</sup>	1.02	4.25
Yavesía	78	92	1.17	(data not available)

\* The number of cargos is based on lists maintained by village authorities. It should be noted that this covers cargos both within the municipal and communal authorities, which include the most responsible and time-demanding positions, and cargos associated with various *comisiones* (school committees, health board, irrigation committee, festivity committees, etc.) that, while also unpaid, are not as demanding in terms of time and energy.

<sup>†</sup>This figure is based on lists maintained by village authorities and refers to the number of adult resident men under the retirement age of sixty-five.

of inquiry: life within the translocal community; relations with village authorities; level of awareness of village issues; community governance obligations; perspectives on governance and collective work arrangements; village services and infrastructure, and future scenarios. Prior fieldwork in both communities established the trust necessary to secure letters of introduction from municipal and communal authorities, by which migrant organizations and their memberships were contacted in Oaxaca City, Mexico City, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas (in the case of Analco), and Oaxaca City, Mexico City, Los Angeles, and Chicago (in the case of Yavesía). The contact details of other migrants were provided by family members living in the community of origin. Both strategies were important for making contact with undocumented migrants in the US in particular.

In total, fifty-two migrants from Yavesía and forty-two migrants from Analco participated in the research. Some participated in individual interviews, others in group interviews and discussions, and some participated in both (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Interviews with migrants from Santa María Yavesía and San Juan Evangelista Analco.

	Number of individual interviews	Number of group interviews
Migrants from Yavesía		
Oaxaca City	2	–
Mexico City	2	1 (5 participants)
Los Angeles	3	2 (26 participants)
Chicago	2	1 (18 participants)
Migrants from Analco		
Oaxaca City	4	–
Mexico City	2	–
Los Angeles	6	1 (38 participants)
Las Vegas	–	1 (2 participants)

These interviews were conducted in Mexican destination centers during September, October, and November 2014, and in the US in February, March, and April 2015, with additional interviews and verification meetings with migrants in Los Angeles in August 2015 and again in August 2016. Time constraints and difficulty in locating migrants and establishing rapport precluded a larger sample. In particular, the research was constrained by difficulties in identifying and interviewing inactive migrants, such that the sample is biased toward the perspectives of semiactive and active migrants. Despite this, the research produced sufficient data to study and analyze the institutions and general patterns of engagement shown by a translocal community.

Of the twenty-one individual interviews, four were with women and seventeen with men. Interviewees ranged from nineteen to sixty-one years of age, with most in their forties and fifties. Group interview participants exhibited a more even gender split but a similar age range. Nearly all interviewees were first-generation migrants born in the home village, who left as children or young adults to pursue wage labor or educational opportunities in Mexican and US cities. A number residing in the US had spent time in Mexico City before heading north. Most participants were long-term absentees, having spent at least fifteen years, and in some cases as many as fifty-five years, living outside the home village. This included the majority of US-based migrants, around three-quarters of whom were undocumented. While returns home were more feasible for undocumented US-based migrants in the 1980s and 1990s, the costs associated with border crossings have made return trips very difficult since the early 2000s. There has been some return migration to Oaxaca resulting from deportations, economic downturns in destination centers, or “retirement.”

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed where possible. Data were coded through a process that allowed themes to be read across interviews, for associations to be identified between such themes, and for insights to be refined based on those relationships. For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, direct quotes used in this manuscript are not credited to identifiable individuals.

## **Migrant Organizations, Migrant-Village Relations, and Migrant Perspectives**

### ***Membership numbers and status***

For any community that receives contributions from nonresident members to finance or support village development initiatives and local governance structures, the organizations established by first-generation migrants in Mexican and US destinations play a central role. In both study communities, these organizations provide migrants with cultural familiarity and cohesion in their new places of residence and facilitate collective support for the home village through financial and cultural investments. They are structured along the same lines as municipal and communal authorities in the community of origin: run by unpaid cargo-holders, filled on a rotational basis, who report to periodic member assemblies where decisions are taken collectively. A major goal of the research was to establish current levels of participation among the members of these organizations, both in terms of numbers and levels of involvement (**Table 3**) (**Figures 7** and **8**).

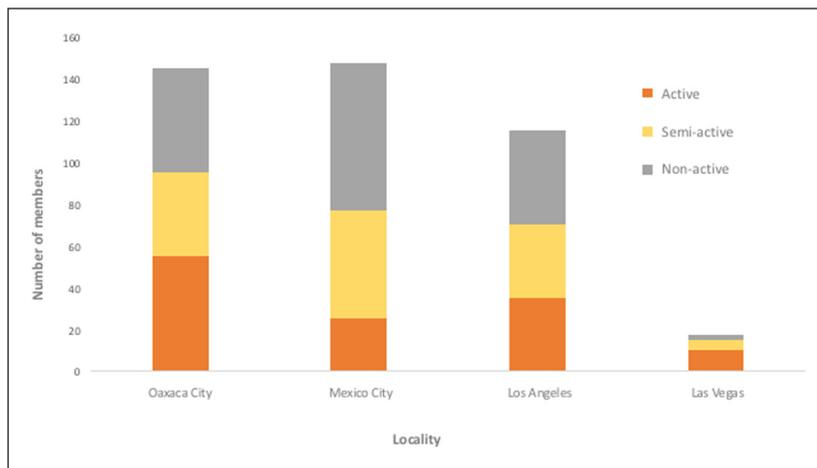
**Table 3:** Migrant organizations' membership numbers\* and status (2015).

Migrant organization (by location)	Year established	# of fully active members	# of semiactive members	# of inactive members
<b>Analco</b>				
Oaxaca City	Late 1970s	50–55	30–40	No data
Mexico City	1976	25–30	50–55	70
Los Angeles	Late 1980s	35 <sup>†</sup>	35	45
Las Vegas	1997	10	5	2
<b>Yavesía</b>				
Oaxaca City	1990	20	30	10
Mexico City	Mid-1980s	25	20–30	90–110
Los Angeles	2000	19	20–25	35–40
Chicago	2012	18	0 <sup>‡</sup>	32

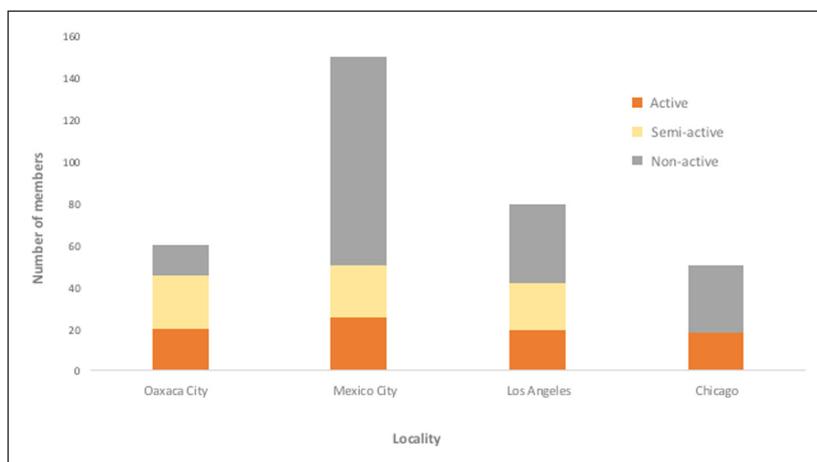
\* Membership numbers are given as exact numbers in cases where regularly updated lists have been maintained by the organization, or as a range when this is not the case.

<sup>†</sup> In August 2016, this figure rose to 59, following restructuring of the organization.

<sup>‡</sup> Because this organization was only established in 2012, it is still too soon for semiactive members to be identifiable.



**Figure 7:** Membership numbers for migrant organizations of Analco (2015).



**Figure 8:** Membership numbers for migrant organizations of Yavesía (2015).

In most locations where organizations have been established, between one-sixth and one-third of first-generation migrants maintain an “active” status, defined by local migrant leaders as those who pay their monthly or annual membership fee, fulfil cargos within the migrant organization when elected to do so, fund-raise to support investments and festivities in the community of origin, and regularly attend (and vote in) member assemblies. The proportion of active members was generally higher for Analco’s than for Yavesía’s organizations, and (for both study communities) higher among Oaxaca City-based organizations than those in Mexico City or the US. For six of the eight organizations studied, the number of active migrants currently stand at around twenty individuals. In several instances, this number has remained fairly consistent since the organization was established, although, as a proportion of migrants residing in that place, there has been a steady decline.<sup>4</sup>

A number among this group reported that a strong sense of moral duty and obligation underpinned their involvement. As one migrant leader noted, “it’s easy not to be involved but if I did that I wouldn’t feel good ... I’d feel as if I was lacking as someone from my village ... for me, I just want to help my people, my village.” For some, the moral argument combined with a strong desire to be buried in the home village, or to simply “keep the door open” to any return home in the future.

While a more economic rationale for participating was evident across the diverse member profiles of these organizations, it was most apparent among the migrants best termed “semiactive.” These are the individuals who more often than not pay their annual or monthly fees, sometimes but not always contribute money for specific community-level investments, attend some but not all meetings and assemblies, and often decline requests to carry out cargos within the migrant organization. A broad category, it includes both those willing to contribute to most things, most of the time, and those who “do the bare minimum” to protect rights and interests. Most semiactive migrants cited a lack of funds, family needs, and logistical challenges for not doing more, with the latter reason given by many migrants living in the conurbations of Mexico City and Los Angeles. As one migrant explained, “things were better before ... everyone had more to give ... now there isn’t as much work, household expenses are really high and it’s difficult to contribute funds.”

Some active migrants were sympathetic to such claims, noting how the lack of economic opportunities for some made it difficult for the collective to demand that all contribute equally. Others, however, were less impressed, arguing that the membership fee was “the monthly equivalent of foregoing a coffee or two in Starbucks,” and lamenting how compatriots would “cry for five or ten dollars, one hour’s salary, while our people [in the home village] give up four or five hours of their time every Sunday for *tequio*.”

The decision to be active or semiactive was influenced by the fact that, in neither community (or until very recently, in the case of Analco), have migrants been legally required to meet customary obligations to maintain community membership. As one noted, “when you leave there are no laws to say you have to keep helping out the home village ... that is up to you as an individual.” While any return to (live in) the village will likely be met by fines and immediate cargo service for any who have failed to maintain active status in absentia, their status as a community member will not have been rescinded. Migrants know this when deciding how much time and money to invest in migrant organizing. As a case in point, one interviewee recalled the time, upon completing multiple terms as president of his local organization, when his brother asked him, “Why do you do it? Let that shit be ... pay your fees and leave it at that!” The message was crystal clear: Why do more than is necessary?

A significant number of first-generation migrants have decided to have very little or nothing to do with their local organization. In six of the eight organizations analyzed, inactive migrants outnumbered their semiactive counterparts. Across this same sample, inactive migrants constituted at least 35 percent and up to 70 percent of the estimated total number of first-generation migrants living in that locality. As one Analqueño in Los Angeles noted, “there are a lot of inactive people here ... the moment that they get settled they no longer have any interest in the village or its problems ... it’s just the way they think, and it’s always going to be like that.” Migrant leaders noted a higher proportion of inactive migrants today than in the 1980s and 1990s, when most organizations were in their infancy and many first-generation migrants were men who had “spent time in the community serving cargos, had material interests in the community, intended to go back, and the idea of cooperating was not a barrier ... they knew what it was to serve their community.” As another explained, “there came a time when migrants would arrive who didn’t want to get involved ... they arrived with a different attitude.” Ever since, the job of getting migrants on board and fully involved “has become a constant problem for us.”

<sup>4</sup> Active Yavesians in Los Angeles jokingly called themselves *los mismos*, given that it was the same individuals who would do all the work.

The fact that many migrants contribute so little was a source of great frustration to some and a reason to cooperate less than “if everyone was pulling in the same direction.” As one migrant explained, his compatriots would often adopt the attitude, “well I’m not going to do anything while so-and-so doesn’t do his cargos or cooperate, yet still has his rights and his name on the list [in the community of origin].” In Los Angeles, tensions around members not pulling their weight prompted Analco’s organization to restructure at the end of 2015, to “start afresh” with a committed group of fully active members bound by a clear set of membership obligations. Their list of registered members fell from 115 in April 2015 (35 active, 35 semiactive, and 45 inactive members) to 59 active members in July 2016.<sup>5</sup> This left 56 first-generation migrants off the list, who were now viewed as inactive (with attendant rights put on hold) by both the migrant organization and village authorities in Oaxaca.

### ***Migrant-village relations***

The previous section questions whether migrants can mobilize sufficiently to meet community demands and needs. This is shaped by a number of different factors, but one of the most important is the kind of relationship forged over time between migrant organization and village authorities in the community of origin.

For both study communities, migrants complained of infrequent and limited communications, with many frustrated that municipal or communal authorities would only contact them when financial support was needed. As one noted, “there is almost no communication ... only when they have a project that needs money and send a request asking for help.” As another explained, “at all other times, it’s like we don’t exist ... they don’t ask how our health is, how the family is, work ... during the course of the year they don’t speak to us ... nothing, they forget about us.” The sense of neglect was particularly notable among migrants in the US, since the majority are undocumented and not in a position to make return visits to Mexico. As one migrant in Los Angeles explained, many compatriots “no longer know their village, they don’t know how things have changed,” and are reliant on those with papers to visit Oaxaca and return with news—the key individuals who span the “here” and “there” of trans-local indigenous communities (see Waldinger 2008). This contrasts with migrants in Oaxaca City and, to a lesser degree, Mexico City, who can more easily visit the home village, and whose organizations can (if they wish to do so) send delegations to attend important community assemblies and meetings.

Migrants spoke about a lack of transparency regarding monies sent to fund projects and activities in the village, which had led to “mistrust in how they [the authorities] use the money [we send].” It is a problem exacerbated by the turnover of village authorities (every eighteen months), which makes effective follow-up more difficult. One migrant organization in Oaxaca City recently decided to purchase all project materials themselves rather than send procurement funds to the village. For Yavesians in Los Angeles, anger over the (mis)use of migrant funds had led some members to stop cooperating. As one explained, “before there were more [active] members ... some twenty-five or thirty ... but the problem is that we would collect money from everybody, send it, but no one was ever sure what it was spent on.” Of those that remain, “no one wants to give anything now, or at least not much.”

When asked if problems of poor communication and limited transparency were relatively new, most migrants responded that they were long-standing issues. They explained that while the situation could improve under a specific village administration, most such improvements were temporary, reverting to type with the next set of incumbents. Over time, frustrations have grown. Because so many are long-term absentees, few migrants hold “*voz y voto*” (voice and vote) in the community’s general assembly and so “[are] not listened to ... our opinions carry no weight.” Similarly, the cargos they perform as part of their migrant organizations, while acknowledged by the village authorities, do not meet communal service quotas back home. This lack of recognition, and the feeling of being left out of the loop, has led some to feel like “second-class citizens” within their own community.

For the situation to improve, migrant leaders argued, the home village needed to properly acknowledge “the moral support that people here [migrants] provide.” As one noted, “[they] withhold support for, and commitment to, the migrant organizations outside the village.” A number felt it was vital for representatives of the municipal and communal authorities to travel to where migrants are, “to speak with us ... [to understand the] reasons for any lack of commitment ... there are few of us and while we do what we can, they [the authorities] need to do their part.” This was particularly important for US-based migrants, given that so few are documented and able to visit Oaxaca. Unfortunately, visa requirements and financial

<sup>5</sup> In the two assemblies that followed this restructuring (July 2016 and August 2016), attendance was in the low forties, suggesting that not all 59 members will maintain a fully active status over time.

constraints have, to date, restricted the number of in-person visits to the US by municipal or communal authorities. Although “virtual” online meetings could be organized, such encounters have yet to take place in either of the two study communities.

Until communication is improved and relations strengthened, migrants made clear that a sense of despondency among their number would likely persist. In Mexico City, for example, migrants from Analco continued to feel “pressured despite all we have done so far,” and this had pushed their organization to a “point of no return” in its relationship with village authorities. While reasonably strong in number, the organization was considering breaking ties altogether. Rather than disband, the organization would look to shift focus, from raising monies in support of the community of origin, to organizing solely to meet the needs of its members in the country’s capital.

### ***Collective investment preferences***

I would love to be in my village but it’s not possible ... no one chooses this life, circumstances change ... I don’t have papers, I don’t have the money to go and come back, so I have to get involved from here.

Although there is a lot of love for the pueblo, some things aren’t possible ... we would like to do more but we can’t because there are so few of us.

Migrants provide financial support for a range of different projects and activities in the community of origin. In both communities, “la fiesta” (the annual village festivities) is a well-funded part of the social and cultural calendar, with a significant part of the budget covered by migrant fund-raising. In some instances, migrants provide general funds, but more typically they finance some of the specific events and activities—such as El Castillo (an elaborate firework display), musical concerts, or prize money for the basketball tournament—that form part of the festivities. Migrants also attend en masse, arriving in their bus loads from Mexico City and even driving down from the US, to swell the village’s population for a couple of weeks each year.

Other migrant investments have focused on public infrastructure improvements taking place within the urban zone, from new sewage and drainage systems (Analco), and a village irrigation project (Yavesía), to church remodeling (Analco), basketball courts (Yavesía, Analco), and school renovations and equipment (Yavesía, Analco). Migrants have, on occasion, funded natural resource-related projects, including ecotourism infrastructure (Yavesía) and a now defunct water-bottling plant (Yavesía). In general, though, these types of investment are less common.

For most migrant organizations, a commitment to fund village festivities looks set to continue despite growing criticism over the amounts being spent. Most of those interviewed still value the annual village fiesta and other cultural events for what they contribute to community cohesion and identity. They inspire the most visible forms of cultural reproduction practiced in Mexican and US destination centers, based on organizing around fiestas, dance, music, and food, and reflect the “rootedness” that connect migrants back to their home village. In just one instance, Yavesía’s migrant organization in Chicago, have migrants taken the view that “[our] money could be better spent elsewhere” and opted not to provide collective support for such events.

Continued migrant support for community infrastructure projects is less certain. As migrant organizations struggle to maintain (let alone increase) the size of their active memberships, limited funds are being prioritized for a few, specific uses (such as investment in school equipment and infrastructure). Even when funds are readily available, many migrants are reluctant to support certain “development” initiatives because of accounting and transparency problems associated with previous investments, and the failure of earlier migrant-funded projects. As one migrant in Los Angeles stated, “We only support the fiesta now ... we are less willing to provide funding for other things.” Finally, recent efforts by the federal government to improve transparency in how municipal funds are allocated have made village development budgets publically accessible online. As a result, migrants are much more aware of the amounts their communities receive from the state, which can raise suspicions when certain funding requests (i.e., for public infrastructure works) are made.

It should be noted that neither Analco or Yavesía have looked to leverage migrant, municipal, state, and federal funds through Mexico’s 3 × 1 program. This is broadly reflective of the Sierra Norte region as a whole, whose communities have not accessed this program to nearly the same degree as communities in other regions in Oaxaca such as the Mixteca.

### ***Migrant perspectives on traditional governance***

We left when we were young ... but none of us imagined that we would stay away for so long and end up being responsible for supporting our village from afar.

Many migrants, first through the decision to leave their home village, and then through a decision to limit their contributions, have isolated themselves (to varying degrees) from traditional customs and structures. As one migrant pointed out, "There are many who conform [to community expectations] but many who do not ... The truth is that each of us thinks differently." Among those who contribute in some way, a sizeable number are not interested in meeting village governance obligations: "There is a group that is happy to send their *cooperaciones* [monthly or annual monetary membership fee] but they don't want to do cargos ... they are not interested in that."

I used individual and group interviews to delve further into migrants' perspectives on community governance arrangements, and in particular the degree to which migrants value the communalist ideology (Mutersbaugh 2002; Martínez Luna 2013) that underpins them. Frank exchanges among migrants in Los Angeles and Las Vegas showed that obligatory communal service was a factor behind the decision to leave the village or remain absent. As one migrant explained, "Why do you think we are here? [It is to avoid cargos] that many leave ... of course it is a reason why people migrate." It similarly influences the thoughts of those going back to visit, knowing that a series of cargos may await them. As one interviewee explained, many adopt a strategy of "I'm not going for long because I don't want [the authorities] to grab me to do cargos," limiting their stay to "two or three weeks, maximum."

Some of the most active migrants were highly critical of such views, arguing it was the work of "an egotistical mentality ... [because] to function as a community, to respect what *usos y costumbres* provides, at its core [is] the idea of contributing to the greater good." And this meant "getting involved ... [and] finding the best way to do that." As one migrant in Los Angeles explained, "The objective of performing cargos is to bring people together, and generate benefits for all." Yet these discussions showed that, for many, collective work is more a burden than an "opportunity" to provide for the common good. As one migrant in Las Vegas noted, "We no longer see it as a service to our community ... [in contrast] to the original idea behind *usos y costumbres*, it's no longer for *gusto* [pleasure or pride], it's for obligation."

For some, it was a generational issue, noting how older migrants had "a lot more *sentido común* ... [and] a respect for [community] rights and obligations." As another explained, the migrants who established organizations in the 1970s and 1980s did so because they shared the same sense of moral commitment and duty to their community. Countering this, a number of the younger migrants questioned how well *usos y costumbres* matched contemporary realities, which saw community members living different lives across a range of socioeconomic and cultural contexts. As one migrant asked, "Can you have development with *usos y costumbres*? [Because] you have to invest so much in cargos that you don't have the resources available to [properly] look after your children and to cover their needs."

In essence, the migratory experience, the act of leaving one's village, provided community members with opportunities to reflect on community structures and to cultivate new perspectives and ideas. As migrants in Las Vegas noted, spending time away from the village can reinforce beliefs that "there are too many cargos, too many people in service ... [that] it doesn't make any sense what they [the community] are doing," adding that the coercive nature of *usos y costumbres* had led "youngsters [born in the village] to no longer want to say they are from there ... they don't want a part of what that represents."

Migrants in both Mexico and the US spoke of the need to streamline the system, to get "beyond tradition and allow for new ways [of doing things] to emerge." One idea, expressed by migrants in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, would be to figure out which cargos are most useful and which are largely redundant and remove these from service. As one explained, "There are cargos that take up lots of time but don't produce anything ... but they are obligations that really affect the cargo holder and his (or her) family ... One year serving as a community policeman is a real burden for those who live there, both physically and economically." Few, however, had confidence that the system could be revamped, noting how "it's a good idea but really difficult that they [the community] will accept it because I know them, they are really stubborn ... One can't change the culture so easily!"

This questioning of *usos y costumbres* as the pillar of community governance would appear to be a prime example of how migration, or better still the dynamics of migration, can create (or widen existent) divisions between resident and nonresident members, and among migrants themselves. Many residents, along with some of the most active migrants, agree that nonresidents have had "it too easy for too long," and it is

“right that [the authorities] become stricter ... [that they] create new rules for one simple reason, so that the *pueblo* can survive.” But this view is not shared by a majority of migrants, especially the younger ones, who are openly resistant to instituting legal obligations, arguing that it is unfair to “change the rules” after migrants have been contributing (in other ways) for so many years.

### ***Migrants’ ideas and proposals moving forward***

Migrants had different ideas about strategies to adopt in response to current problems, which fell into three main categories: strategies to improve migrant-village relations, strategies to help migrants comply with governance obligations, and strategies to better represent migrant interests (Table 4).

Most agreed that a critical first step was to build stronger, more positive relationships with village authorities, to be achieved through regular face-to-face meetings, periodic visits by community representatives, virtual (online) assemblies, extending the term of office for incumbents (of migrant organizations and village authorities) to improve planning and follow-up, and creating a staffed position in the community of origin to handle migrant issues, investments, and communications.

A second set of ideas was tied to the demands of communal governance. For some, it was essential to define what constitutes an “active” migrant, so that those not willing to cooperate fully would step down, and this would help the community of origin determine who could be counted on for support. They felt that the community had been remiss in not setting clear parameters from the moment that migration took hold, which encouraged migrants to freeloader on the collective efforts of others. Properly enforced rules were seen as essential to rectifying the situation. For others, it was unrealistic to ask migrants to meet customary governance obligations, and “a change in ideology was needed in order to progress.” One suggestion was to allow migrants to choose which civic or communal obligations to meet, and thus which set of village rights they would hold. As one migrant leader argued, “Migrants need to be committed and so it has to be voluntary, it’s not going to work if it’s an obligation [through coercion].” Another idea involved adopting a collectivist approach to funding village cargos, with the cost absorbed equitably among active migrants. This could take two forms: organizations in different localities would agree to fund a set number of village cargos (under each administration), or migrants would share the cost of financing a surrogate every time one of its active members was called to serve. Such approaches had begun to be adopted by Analco migrants in Oaxaca City and Mexico City, but not yet by those in the US.

**Table 4:** Future strategies proposed by migrants.

<b>Broad aim or purpose</b>	<b>Implemented or proposed strategy/initiative</b>
Improve migrant-community relations	<p>Establish a <i>mesa permanente</i> or longer terms in office for migrant incumbents, in order to construct better relations with village authorities and strengthen institutional arrangements.</p> <p>Create a new and permanent position (cargo) to deal exclusively with community-migrant relations and activities.</p> <p>For each municipal president (and other high-level cargo holders if possible) to visit migrant organizations (especially those in the US) ahead of starting their term.</p> <p>Regular virtual assemblies to allow for face-to-face meetings between migrant and village authorities.</p> <p>An annual “virtual” assembly that brings together community members, both residents and nonresidents, to establish communication across a dispersed membership and allow migrants to feel more involved in community affairs.</p>
To enable migrant support of village governance arrangements	<p>For the organizations to clearly define what being “active” means, to clean up member lists accordingly, and “remove those not willing to provide a full range of support.”</p> <p>To differentiate among migrants in accordance with those who have “citizen obligations” and those who have “commoner obligations,” and thus better connect migrant contributions to village rights.</p> <p>Migrant organizations to each fund a set number of cargos (i.e., three financed by Los Angeles, three by Chicago, three by Oaxaca, two by Mexico City), in accordance with the economic situation of each group.</p> <p>Each migrant group to collectively pay a surrogate each time one of its members is called to serve a cargo in the home village; to split the bill among all active members.</p>
To better represent migrant needs and interests	<p>For the organization to draft its own legal document to represent migrant interests and dictate the terms of migrant-community relations.</p> <p>Develop alliances between migrant organizations to provide for a more unified voice among migrants in different localities and improve economies of scale.</p>

The third and final set of strategies concerned what migrant organizations could do to better represent their members, but also to scale-up support for the community of origin. Some migrants felt strongly that their organizations needed to restructure in order to both better articulate and better protect migrant interests vis-à-vis community demands. As one migrant complained, “The authority wants [all of] us to pay our fees every year, but [some of us] don’t have property [in the community], or land ... we are paying the same [*cooperaciones*] but we don’t receive the same level of benefits.” In Mexico City, migrants from Analco had registered as a “Civil Society Association,” adopting a structure that stood in opposition to the traditional *mesa directiva* model established to serve *usos y costumbres*. This same group had also drafted an agreement “to protect migrant interests with regard to land rights in Analco,” prompted by a recent decision in the village to update lists of compliant *comuneros* (“common property rights-holders”). In developing this legal framework, migrants in Mexico City had worked closely with compatriots in Oaxaca City—a development that had alerted migrants in the US as to the potential of greater interorganization collaboration—creating a more unified “migrant voice” for future negotiations with village authorities.

## Discussion

The existence of migrant organizations is not evidence, in and of itself, of positive (productive) and robust relations between migrants and their communities of origin. Through documenting migrant organizations in both the US and Mexico, and using the voices of organization members themselves, this research has highlighted limited participation in migrant organizing, with a majority of first-generation migrants involved intermittently or not at all in current arrangements. Explanatory factors can be complex but, in general terms, distance from the village, long-term absenteeism, and strained relations and infrequent communications appear to combine to inhibit stronger translocal arrangements from emerging or being maintained. As a consequence of this, migrants report limited investments in community development and infrastructure projects, with their support currently restricted to a narrow range of activities. These findings suggest that the traditions of migrant organizing are reaching a critical juncture as translocal communities mature (after Smith 2006), changing migration dynamics limit the prospects for organizational renewal (Stephen 2007), and migrants question their role as agents of development “back home” (after Moctezuma 2000; Glick Schiller and Faist 2010).

While migration weakens traditional arrangements by drawing labor away from civic and communal governance (Mutersbaugh 2002; Robson and Berkes 2011; Hernández Díaz 2013), it has been posited that migrant organizing could help affected villages persist or flourish despite depopulation (Cohen 2004; Klooster 2013). This study offers some important caveats in response, showing that many first-generation migrants resist (equitably) sharing collective work obligations with village residents. Tension between residents, who disproportionately meet the burden of village governance, and migrants who want to limit their contributions, provides further evidence of incongruence between individual and collective rationalities in Oaxacan commons regimes (Stephen 2007; Gutierrez Najera 2009; Robson et al. 2018). While migration cannot be considered the only disrupting force at play, the research presented here suggests that the migratory experience remains significant.

As nonresidents, migrants have a unique vantage point from which to perceive the key governance issues of transparency and accountability, direct participation in decision-making, and power sharing—all widely studied in a Oaxacan context (Chance and Taylor 1985; Garibay 2007; Gijssbers 1996) but, until recently, rarely from the perspective of migration and changing community demographics (Curiel 2015; Worthen 2012). Across Indigenous Oaxaca, the practice of “collective work” is engrained in community culture (Martínez Luna 2013; Mutersbaugh 2002), and based firmly on the principles of reciprocity. However, for a system of governance where *all* members are expected to reciprocate, such arrangements can be hard to maintain when a sizeable proportion of members no longer reside in the home village. While villagers, understandably, demand that the collective sacrifices of absentees match their own, many migrants want to contribute based on the principles of solidarity, giving what they can, when they can.

The resulting impasse provides an opportunity for community members, resident and nonresident, to both question the authoritarian ideology upon which customary governance has been based, and discuss alternatives. In this way, Analco and Yavesía have arrived at a key moment in their recent histories, forced to reevaluate and potentially reconfigure governance structures to better reflect a community sphere that has shifted, irrevocably, beyond the traditional, bounded territorial arena. On the one hand, communities could coerce migrants into meeting communal obligations, in an attempt to reduce the burden on those left behind. But this would likely alienate nonresidents and further reduce the support they provide to multiple areas of village life. Alternatively, they could offer flexibility and choice in terms of how migrants contribute

and how these contributions are recognized—creating a multitiered system of rights holders, each with their attendant sets of obligations. Yet institutional change of this kind, especially in conjunction with the monetization of cargos or the replacing of *tequios* with paid labor (see Perry et al. 2009; Klooster 2013; Robson and Sosa Perez 2019; Robson 2019), would be transformative, bringing about long-lasting structural change over a relatively short period (Vertovec 2004).

The other major finding that deserves attention is that, for both internal and US-bound migration streams, long-term absenteeism has become the norm (see Jones 2014; Jardón Hernández 2016) and is reshaping the nature of migrant-village ties. This change, coupled with the fact that net national migration has essentially dropped to zero (Cohen 2016), requires scholarly focus to consider not only moments of intense connection across borders (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011) but to understand how transborder communities re-create themselves or repopulate over time. While cultural reproduction in Mexican and US destination centers continues, and migrants participate in forms of ethnic tourism back to their communities of origin, many of the migrants with deepest connections to their communities are reaching retirement age and looking to take a step back from active service. In all such cases, it is not clear who can replace them, as migrant organizations struggle to replenish via new arrivals, and the children of many first-generation migrants show limited interest in long-standing goals and activities (Robson, Klooster, and Hernández-Díaz 2019).

While communities may exert limited control over migration flows and dynamics, they can shape how migrants and their organizations are viewed, perceived, and treated by broad community memberships. Excluded from participating in community governance decisions, migrants form a second-class citizenry. This creates fertile ground for an “us against them” attitude to take hold, and for the kinds of conflict to arise that have been considered an inherent aspect of translocalism (Waldinger, Popkin, and Magana 2008). Yet this study suggests that such tensions could be addressed, and potentially remedied, through simply improving the channels of communication. The use of virtual meetings, including an annual translocal community assembly, would likely enhance the frequency and quality of dialogue. Over time, this might build a mutual understanding of respective interests and needs. New members might be encouraged to join their local migrant organization, and past members might consider a return. Similarly, there is potential to enhance links between migrant organizations, help migrants pool their ideas and resources, and streamline community development and governance investments. When presented with the results of this study in August 2016, Yavesians and Analqueños living in Los Angeles were struck by the number of active migrants spread out across Mexican and US destination centers, and they appreciated how better coordination across sites could enable their small migrant organizations to make more of a difference.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that a sample of two communities is too small to be representative of the situation in the Sierra Norte or in rural Oaxaca more broadly. Similar research is needed in many more communities in order to construct a typology of experiences with migrant organizing and investments over time, and to understand how the connections between migrant groups and village authorities are influenced by variation in resident population size, municipal status, or how village statutes are implemented and enforced, among other factors. Comparative assessments could produce a refined specification of the different variables and mechanisms at play, while detailed intraorganizational analyses would help us to understand how organizations in different domestic and international locations function. Research is also needed to identify the evolving (and likely divergent) views of those living in their communities of origin, with regards to traditional governance, terms of membership, and shifting power relations within the community sphere. This would help to properly contextualize the role that migration and the migratory experience might be playing in disrupting structures of communal service and identity (Robson et al. 2018), particularly in conjunction with broader changes (in village culture, economy, politics, and environment) affecting remote and rural communities (Van de Ploeg 2008; Berdegué, Rosada, and Bebbington 2014; Davidson-Hunt et al. 2016).

## Conclusion

This article assessed the capacity of migrant organizations from two Indigenous communities in Oaxaca, Mexico, to support home villages weakened by depopulation. It found that migrant organizing can be temporary and generational, framed by long-term absenteeism, aging-out of active members, strained relations between migrants and village authorities, and barriers to organizational renewal. Most migrants are denying or limiting support to their home village, with their propensity to contribute shaped by their sense of (moral) obligation, personal and family situation in place of residence, material ties to the home village, and the nature of their (collective) relations with village authorities. Where the tie between migrant organization and village authorities is strained, migrants can be less disposed to meet community requests

for support. The limited time that migrants spend in the home village—with cyclical migration or regular return visits practiced by only a small minority—becomes an additional contributory factor.

The research findings make an important contribution to debates around the potential of migrant organizations to support rural development and traditional systems of governance in Indigenous Mexico. The findings highlight the importance of tracking lulls in the activities and membership numbers of migrant organizations, especially during periods that follow intense moments of connection. While the study highlights the limited efficacy of present arrangements, further work is needed to track how communities are adapting in response to the ideological and practical challenges that migration has helped to pose.

### Author Information

James Robson's scholarship focuses on environmental governance, commons, rural development, and ethnographic inquiry. Over the past decade, he has researched the impact of rural out-migration on Indigenous communities in Mexico. Current research in Latin America and Canada looks at innovative practices and institutions for the building of sustainable rural communities, especially involving youth. He holds a PhD in Natural Resources and Environmental Management (University of Manitoba), an MA in Environment, Development, and Policy (University of Sussex), and a B.Sc. in Geography (Honours) (University of Liverpool).

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