

**Salvadoran returnee migrants: An analysis of El Salvador's Government actions  
for their effective reintegration to society**

By

**VASQUEZ SOSA, Alejandra Carolina**

**CAPSTONE PROJECT**

Submitted to

KDI School of Public Policy and Management

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For the Degree of

**MASTER OF DEVELOPMENT POLICY**

**2023**

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Committee in charge:

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## **Abstract**

### **Salvadoran returnee migrants: An analysis of El Salvador's Government actions for their effective reintegration into society**

This research investigated the effects and importance of migration dynamics in El Salvador, emphasizing returning migrants. It also studies the importance and significance of labor mobility programs and their advantages to migrant workers going into the United States of America borders. The central part of this research was focused on returning migrants that have been going to the United States since the early 2000s with the establishment of a labor mobility program in El Salvador in recent years. This labor migration flow has increased along with the demand for Salvadoran workers to supply a workforce shortage in this northern country. However, this higher demand will represent a higher influx of returnees who need local job offers to attend to. According to the results, the labor mobility program is paramount for Salvadoran workers seeking opportunities outside their home country due to the lack of local job opportunities. Together the Salvadoran Government and key stakeholders, with support from other organizations, can provide sustainable solutions for the reintegration of these returnee labor migrants.

Keywords: labor mobility, migration, returnee migrants

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## **List of acronyms and abbreviations**

ACISAM	Training and Research Association for Mental Health
CASATUR.	Salvadoran Tourism Board
CASALCO	Salvadoran Chamber of the Construction Industry
CIMITRA	Integration Center for Migrant Workers
DGPMLE	Department of Management of Labor Mobility Programs Abroad
DIGESTYC	Dirección General de Estadísticas y Censos (Statistics and Census Department)
GMIES	Independent Monitoring Group of El Salvador
ILO	International Labor Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
INSAFORP	Salvadoran Institute of Vocational Training
INSAMI	Salvadoran Migrant Institute
LMP	Labor Mobility Program
MINSAL	Ministry of Health
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USCRI	U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
WFP	World Food Program

## **Introduction**

Migration is a complex topic. The ongoing migration crisis in different parts of the globe has turned humanitarian aid organizations and the Government's attention to the importance of addressing this issue at different levels. Migration is the movement of persons away from their usual residence, either across an international border or within a State (IOM, 2019). The existence of 272 million international migrants worldwide highlights 52 percent of international migrants being male and 48 percent being women, indicating a change in the migration dynamics, where women become providers and give way to the feminization of migration (IOM, 2020). Although migration is multicausal, one of the primary pull factors is work, being 169 million international migrant workers worldwide (ILO, 2019). Getting to know all these changes in migration and human mobility, understanding these migratory flows and the effects they can have, especially in the countries of origin, upon their return, will help us to give ourselves guidelines for establishing programs or policies in response to this phenomenon. Such labor migration flows if under a labor mobility program, must return to their respective countries of origin at the end of their contracts, generating an oversupply of workers for local labor markets. Therefore, this research paper aims to identify and analyze the labor migration dynamics focusing on El Salvador and the new challenge labor migrant returnees pose for the Salvadoran society, as well as suggesting future directions to ameliorate the impact on the country's social and economic environments.

El Salvador is exceptionally vulnerable to migration due to economic reasons, acts of violence, or crimes committed against the population (Ministry of Justice and Public Security of the

Government of El Salvador, 2018). According to the United Nations Migration Agency – the International Organization for Migration (2016), the Salvadoran community in the United States is the second largest minority, with 1,352,357 people. Moreover, the focus of employment on commerce and services; high rates of underemployment and urban informality, and low educational levels affect the population of productive ages, with the most significant impact in the main cities of El Salvador; affecting their intention to migrate to the United States (ILO, 2021), this is a critical matter of concern because, in 2020, 1,599,058 Salvadorans abandoned the country. The destination country with the highest reception of Salvadorans was the United States, with 88.2 percent. In the same year, 9,701 adults of productive ages returned to El Salvador, where they must thrive for reintegration and incorporation into the labor market (ILO, 2020).

Although more needs to be written on this topic, as it is an ongoing matter, there is a growing interest from the Salvadoran Government and United Nations Agencies (IOM, 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador, 2018). This research contributes to our understanding of these returnees' dynamics, proposes possible solutions for their sustainable return and reintegration into Salvadoran society, and promotes the design and implementation of migration-oriented policies in the future. The following research questions guide this study: How do returnees impact Salvadoran society? Second, what actions have been considered to reduce this impact? Last, what can El Salvador's Government do to effectively reintegrate the present and future returnees into the productive sector?

This paper analyzes El Salvador's citizens' socioeconomic context as a reason for migrating to the United States of America and the importance of the Labor Mobility Program (LMP) for regular

and safe migration. The background of this study is followed by the current actions taken by the Salvadoran Government to subdue the social and economic impacts on the society once Salvadoran migrants that have been part of a Labor Mobility Program return. It finalizes with recommendations for the effective reintegration of these returnees in El Salvador.

### **El Salvador Country Profile**

El Salvador is a twenty-one thousand square kilometers Latin-American country, with a total population of 6.5 million, where 3 million 959 thousand 652 inhabitants (60.2 percent) reside in the urban area and 2 million 622 thousand 208 (39.8 percent) in the rural area. Additionally, the population in the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador is 1 million 693 thousand 186 inhabitants, equivalent to 25.7 percent of the total (DIGESTYC, 2017). In El Salvador, as in most countries, migration had historically developed from the influx of people moving within the country, or that looked to migrate internationally. This mobility was furthermore encouraged due to a high population density that grew from 68 inhabitants per square kilometer in 1930 to 309 inhabitants per square kilometer in 2002 (DIGESTYC, 2002), the depletion of the agricultural frontier, and the concentration of wealth in a small percentage of the population.

Moreover, the multidimensional poverty official measurement has recently been implemented by DIGESTYC; by 2017, it reflects 33.3 percent of Salvadoran households under this condition. Regarding economic dependence, the study indicates that the economically inactive population, established between children under 15 years old and those aged 65 years and over, concerning the active population, the age group 15 to 64 years old, was 52.5 percent. Therefore 34 out of 100 people are inactive (DIGESTYC, 2017).

Due to this high dependency rate and poverty, the migration phenomenon has been a worrisome issue for the Salvadoran Government as many more people decide to migrate, not just for security reasons but economically. The importance of the remittances sent from the immigrant Salvadorans to their dependents represents the second item of foreign exchange after exports.

Migration is key to the Salvadoran economy. Remittances are specifically more critical than coffee exports and exports of manufacturers, which have traditionally been the most relevant since the 1960s. The impact of remittance flows has changed the national economic structure, as they serve as an anchor for the financial stability that the country pursues. This variable has allowed a sustained growth of net international reserves and the closing of the trade gap and has contributed enormously to the monetary integration (dollarization) carried out at the beginning of 2001 (Rivera, 2005).

## Literature Review

The allure of the opportunity of security, better job opportunities, and general well-being of family members and oneself are vital factors that push people further to migrate to a foreign land. To continue talking about migration, it is necessary to clearly define the critical terminologies referred to in this research paper. It is imperative to clarify what we mean when we talk about "labor migration," "returnees," "return," "reintegration," and "Labor Mobility Programs." To define labor migration, we first must clarify the meaning of the word migration. The United Nations – International Organization for Migration (2011) defines migration as the movement of people across an international border or State.

Even with this definition, in recent discussions on the topic, international organizations, researchers, and policymakers have turned their attention to the complexity of the word (Arango, 2000; Lindley, 2014; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Betts (2013) describes migration as the mass of people fleeing across borders into neighboring states due to the unavailability of means for survival at home. For this paper, labor migration is the movement of persons from their place of origin to another, or within their own country of residence, for employment. The definition of returnees used in this paper will be based on UNHCR (n.d.), where a returnee is an individual who has voluntarily left the receiving country and returned to their country of origin. In the context of international migrant workers, return, according to the 2018 ILO guidelines on migration statistics, is defined "as all current residents of the country who were previously international migrant workers in another country or countries... The minimum duration of labor attachment abroad for a person to be considered as a return international migrant worker [is] relatively short, such as six months" (ILO, 2018b). There is no universally agreed definition

of reintegration. Nevertheless, the IOM describes it as a process that enables individuals to re-establish the economic, social, and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood, dignity, and inclusion in civic life (IOM, 2011).

To understand a Labor Mobility Program (LMP) for El Salvador, we must first refer to what a Bilateral Labor Migration Agreement involves. These agreements are concluded between two States, are legally binding, and are concerned with inter-State cooperation on labor migration (IOM, 2019). The ILO issued a recommendation concerning Migration for Employment which was adopted contextually to the ILO Convention (No. 97) in its annex "Model Agreement on Temporary and Permanent Migration for Employment, including Migration of Refugees and Displaced Persons" (IOM, 2019). In other cases, trade agreements or other regional cooperation platforms will also provide provisions for labor mobility. Therefore, a Labor Mobility Program is an initiative that allows qualified Salvadoran workers to work for temporary periods in crucial U.S. industries suffering labor shortages (United States Embassy, 2023).

Having discussed the key terminologies, let us now turn to the current migration situation, focusing on El Salvador as part of the Northern Triangle in Central America and its strong link with the temporary labor migration programs in the United States of America. In this section, I will map out the history of labor mobility regarding Salvadorans to the United States of America. In response to the commitments acquired in the international conventions with the International Labor Organization, 2002 El Salvador began efforts to place temporary workers abroad. From 2002 to 2015, 1,070 workers were placed through Labor Mobility Programs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

In 2019, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MTPS) signed an Agreement with the United States Government, which gives way to the Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Temporary

Workers Program through the H-2A and H-2B Visas. From this Agreement, in September 2020, the first Salvadorans went to Mississippi, United States. Later, in December of the same year, a second group was sent to the same place, and in July 2021, the third contingent was sent toward Indianapolis.

Following up on this initiative, in January 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRREE) and the MTPS signed a cooperation agreement to strengthen the Labor Mobility Program, which establishes the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote business management, pre-travel training, monitoring and follow-up of Salvadoran workers during their stay abroad, as well as their return, within the Framework of the Labor Mobility Program, as well as carrying out the coordination and due efforts for the reintegration of returnees (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

In June 2021, the MRREE received the indication to conduct the Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Temporary Workers Project with the United States, giving way to the creation of the Directorate of Diaspora and Development, under which the Department of Management of Labor Mobility Programs Abroad (DGPMLE). This Department is in charge of executing the Labor Mobility Program (LMP) for an orderly, safe, and regular migration, which seeks to exponentially expand opportunities for orderly, safe, and regular labor mobility to countries whose labor market requires the inclusion of labor of foreign workers and that have established programs and regulations that facilitate mobility, from a decent work approach, ethical recruitment and respect for the labor rights of Salvadorans abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Even though El Salvador Government has acted towards an orderly and regular migration pathway, the country is still highly vulnerable to migration due to economic reasons, acts of violence, or crimes committed against the population (Ministry of Justice and Public Security of the

Government of El Salvador, 2018). According to the United Nations Migration Agency – the International Organization for Migration (2016), the Salvadoran community in the United States is the second largest minority, with 1,352,357 people. Moreover, the focus of employment on commerce and services; high rates of underemployment and urban informality, and low educational levels affect the population of productive ages, with the most significant impact in the main cities of El Salvador; affecting their intention to migrate to the United States (ILO, 2021). Similar to the migration dynamics from Guatemala, with 1,368,431 people abandoning the country, where 89.6 percent migrated to the United States of America, and Honduras, with 985,077 people leaving the country towards the same destination country 78.5 percent total (ILO, 2021).

This is a critical matter of concern because, in 2020, 1,599,058 Salvadorans abandoned the country, the United States of America, the destination country with the highest reception of Salvadorans, with 88.2 percent. In the same year, 9,701 adults of productive ages returned to El Salvador, where they must strive for reintegration and inclusion into the labor market (ILO, 2020). Although more needs to be written on this topic, as it is an ongoing matter, there is a growing interest from the Salvadoran Government and United Nations Agencies (IOM, 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador, 2018). These reports have shed light on the importance of Labor Mobility programs, especially for countries such as El Salvador, and the new challenge migrant labor returnees pose for Salvadoran society. However, these reports must offer a sustainable solution for acting upon the matter.

In addressing the issue of reintegration of these returnee migrants in El Salvador, the country's Government has considered several approaches, such as the certification of skills for those who take speed courses on specific trades ("Se Consolida Alianza Intersectorial en Beneficio de Personas Migrantes Retornadas," n.d.). Riester (2011) explains, through Burkina Faso's experience

with their returnees and reintegration efforts, that if the Government in question fails to identify and differentiate those returnees according to necessity and capabilities, their experience of reintegration and the efforts of implementation of a particular development goal may fail. Therefore, in times of crisis, local authorities and governments must work together to implement sustainable policies on reintegration.

The purpose of this research paper, since El Salvador does not possess the necessary policies on how to proceed in the case of mass migrant returns, is to focus on future directions to ameliorate the impact in the country's social and economic environments, which are imperative by the proposal of possible solutions for the sustainable return and reintegration of labor returnees.

The international migration phenomenon in El Salvador has been characterized by including all socioeconomic sectors (political-administrative) of the country, both urban and rural areas, in every Department. The 70s was the beginning of the armed conflict that peaked in 1980, which became the leading cause for the massive migration of Salvadorans who fled mainly from conflict zones during this decade (Rivera, 2005). Therefore, the immigration idea to seek safer places to live and develop emerged in the 80s, mainly caused in a forced way by the outbreak of war rather than planned by economic situations. Another characteristic of this international migration is the recurrent preference of the urban population to flee to countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States of America, which, at that time, seemed to be led by the fear of the possibility of facing dangers during the conflict, not as much by the reality lived by those in the rural areas who decided to immediately flee to neighboring countries such as Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua (Rivera, 2005). Those from rural areas that decided to flee to farther countries, such as the United States, did so illegally, which in consequence, started a new occurrence, seeking refuge in higher

income countries where they could obtain jobs quickly, although at a lower wage but enough to sustain the family that had been left behind.

El Salvador is highly vulnerable to migration due to economic reasons, acts of violence, or crimes committed against the population (Ministry of Justice and Public Security of the Government of El Salvador, 2018). According to the United Nations migration agency – the International Organization for Migration (2016), the Salvadoran community in the United States is the second largest minority, with 1,352,357 people. Furthermore, only 432,329 Salvadoran-borns have obtained U.S. citizenship, 204,000 are under the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) of the U.S., and 725,000 Salvadorans are unauthorized migrants (Pew Research Center, 2018), the phenomenon of emigration interests' 22.2 percent of the total households in the country, 205,380 urban households and 132,200 rural households as of 2002. These households receive remittances, so this population could, at some point, decide to move to where their relatives reside, giving continuity to international migration because of better economic opportunities.

Thus, Salvadoran migration is long-standing, multifaceted, and multicausal. According to an IOM survey to characterize migratory flows, most migrants indicated their motivations for migrating were lack of work and opportunities, economic needs, and violence/insecurity (IOM, 2018). Therefore, the approach to the causes of migration is linked to establishing the conditions and opportunities that associate labor market policies with regular migration (ILO, 2021), so the participation of stakeholders is imperative. Key actors involved in the labor dynamics to support the design and promotion of public policies aimed at ethical, fair, and equitable labor recruitment; based on international labor standards established by the ILO.

The dynamic of migration for work reasons is one of the distinctive features of a highly globalized world. It has been part of the human experience since the dawn of history, and it is recognized that

if it is well managed, it generates prosperity, innovation, and sustainable development. The Labor pathways that many countries implement consist of programs that allow migrants to move from one country to another for work reasons, under previously agreed conditions, that facilitate access to job opportunities in third countries and that allow labor migrants to lead a productive life under conditions that respect their human rights. They also help employers and communities take advantage of the skills, training, and professional and work experiences of migrant workers.

Labor migration equally presents challenges and opportunities, and if well managed and regulated, it translates into economic growth and development for countries of origin and countries of destination, as well as for migrant workers and their families. On this note, remittances have also become the primary source of external financing in developing countries, with \$529 billion U.S. dollars shipped to low- and middle-income countries in 2018, being the equivalent of more than three times the amount received for official development aid (World Bank, 2019).

According to the United States Embassy in El Salvador, in 2020, through its H-2 visa program, the U.S. government made available 66,000 visas for non-agricultural workers and one unlimited number of visas for agricultural workers. During the fiscal year 2021, the same number of visas were available, also considering an increase of 22,000 H-2B visas, of which 6,000 were destined exclusively for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as part of strategies to prevent irregular migration.

In response to the constant migratory flows, countries such as the United States of America, whose labor markets have high levels of labor shortages, have established these systems, regulations, and programs to facilitate the entry of migrant workers, enforcing parameters that allow covering the labor sectors that they have not been able to cover with their national workers and without whose operation their economies would suffer severe effects.

The ongoing migration crisis in different parts of the globe has turned humanitarian aid organizations and the Government's attention to the importance of addressing this issue at different levels. Understanding that migration is the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State (IOM, 2019), the existence of 272 million international migrants worldwide especially highlights 52 percent of international migrants being male and 48 percent being women, indicating a change in the migration dynamics, where women become providers and give way to the feminization of migration (IOM, 2020). Although migration is multicausal, one of the primary pull factors is work, being 169 million international migrant workers worldwide. However, two-thirds of these international migrant workers are concentrated in high-income countries (See Fig.1). These numbers have constantly increased. If under a labor mobility program, they must return to their respective countries of origin at the end of their contracts, generating an oversupply of workers for local labor markets (ILO, 2019).

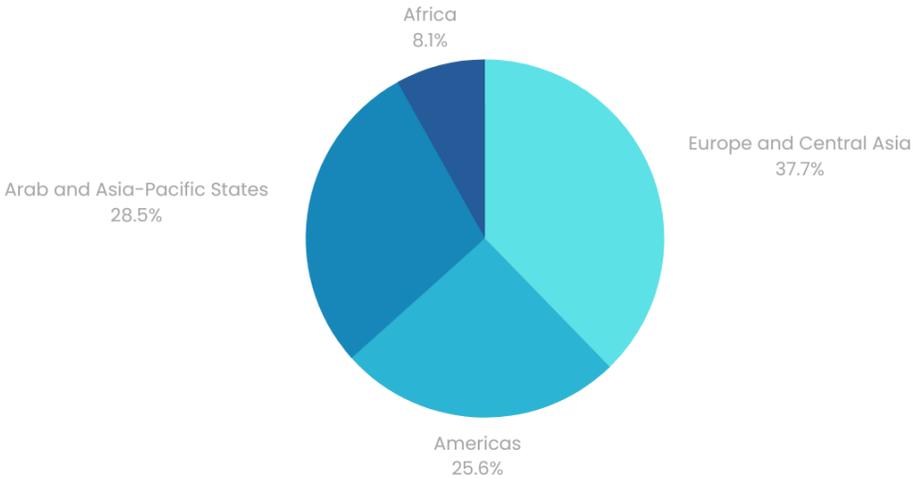


Fig. 1 Own elaboration based on information from the International Labor Organization (ILO)  
High-income countries continue to absorb most migrant workers.

The search for employment at the international level is mainly reflected in the percentage of the young population among international migrant workers. Having increased from 8.3 percent in 2017 to 10 percent in 2019. This increase is probably related to high youth unemployment rates in developing countries. Most migrant workers (86.5 percent) are made up of young adults between 25 and 64 years of age (ILO, 2021).

Consequently, this number of international migrant workers will have to return to their countries of origin through voluntary or compulsory returns; therefore, there are a series of structural and circumstantial challenges that can hinder the socioeconomic reintegration of these returnees. Some challenges are inherent to the migration or displacement experiences. In contrast, others are related to a prolonged stay outside their countries of origin that often results in returnees needing help finding employment opportunities, mainly due to losing contact with previous support networks in their country (ILO, 2019).

The narrative on returns and reintegration also mentions other factors related to countries' capacity to facilitate reintegration. Suppose a country produces large populations of migrants. In that case, it will be unable to support its effective reintegration processes, mainly due to a lack of institutional capacity and human and financial resources. Additionally, migrant workers may not have access to up-to-date information on employment services and the current situation in the local labor market upon their return which may lead them to work in low-skilled informal employment or poorly regulated labor sectors (ILO, 2021).

Nonetheless, this situation presents opportunities for countries of origin to improve such processes; return and reintegration policies are necessary to respond to the needs of the returnee migrant workers. As a result of lessons learned from the high demand for labor migration from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the need for policies that address reintegration

is imperative. It is estimated that 20.2 million migrants are originating from ASEAN countries, and due to the predominance of a temporary migration cycle, many ASEAN migrant workers will eventually return to their country of origin when their contract ends (ILO, 2019). This situation calls for gender-responsive and comprehensive services focused on the diverse needs of these returnee migrants. Parts of the migration cycle, for example, the pre-departure stage leading to working conditions in receiving countries, have always garnered attention from stakeholders.

In contrast, the return and reintegration of migrant workers have been left aside. Given the migration dynamic of returns in the ASEAN region, the Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers was created (ASEAN, 2007). This Declaration contains commitments by countries of origin where the development of policies and procedures to facilitate the migration process of workers must be in place. Such policies include those regarding repatriation and reintegration to the countries of origin. Additionally, this Declaration states commitments acquired by ASEAN corresponding to the development of reintegration programs for returnee migrant workers.

In the case of Salvadoran international migration, particularly the process of returnee migrants to the country, is partially recognized by current national legislation. However, it is incorporated into the institutional Framework with a relatively broad but unconnected offer of specific policies and programs (Rivas, 2019). In this regard, the Labor Mobility Program implemented by the Salvadoran Government offers an opportunity for the unoccupied workforce to obtain a job abroad. However, this same population that travels outside the country's borders will return once their contracts are completed, representing the need to reintegrate these labor returnees.

## **Methodology**

The current study adopts a qualitative methodology and chooses as its target population Salvadoran migrant workers, specifically those who are enrolled in a labor migration program. What can El Salvador's Government do to reintegrate current and upcoming returnees into the productive sector properly? is the topic this descriptive study seeks to address. The document's purpose is to understand better the present Labor Migration Program and the steps the Government is taking to lessen the impact of returnees on Salvadoran society.

Understanding labor migration processes to raise awareness and educate the Salvadoran public is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, it will draw attention to the Program's achievements, shortcomings, and underlying causes. An inclusive approach must be developed to provide solutions that respond to the current situation, create more local employment prospects, and direct us toward safe and orderly migration.

This study draws on discussions with an expert who works in the field of human mobility, as well as conversations with migrant workers upon their return during impact evaluation sessions at the end of the labor migration process through the labor migration program, to gain a thorough understanding of the dynamics of labor migration and the significance of an inclusive approach for the reintegration of returnee migrant workers. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions because of the qualitative nature of this work. Two respondents replied to a total of five questions, while one of them answered an average of ten. The overall number of inquiries fluctuates because of the responses from two respondents regarding their experiences with the Labor Migration Program application process and expectations for their return. The final interview centered on the steps made by the Salvadoran administration to meet the expectations of returnees.

The exploratory interview questions focus mostly on the labor migration program and any possibilities or problems, if any, that may exist. The interviews included predictive questions to determine what the migrant workers can expect from such initiatives upon their return. The interviewees were chosen for the interview based on their understanding of the topic and some of them being beneficiaries of the Labor Migration Program. The following individuals were interviewed: two labor migration program beneficiaries who completed their contracts and returned to El Salvador; Luis Gerardo Ramírez, Vice Minister assistant for Salvadorans abroad of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador, has experience working in the ongoing Salvadoran returnee program. To move beyond the current system and gain a deeper understanding of what is needed for an inclusive labor migration policy that considers returnees as a workforce and potential employment generator in El Salvador, it has been crucial to rely on their ideas, experiences, and knowledge. These appreciations have also shown how Salvadorans might enhance their abilities to access better job opportunities.

The development of this study relies upon a significant analysis of the collection of current reports, materials, existing legislation, agreements, and other documents. These documents provide a context and a greater grasp of the subject when conducting interviews, doing observations, and working on this document.

## **Analysis**

Pathways for labor migration are relevant elements in national and regional migration governance structures for orderly and regular migration. The IOM study on mechanisms for labor migration in Mesoamerica (IOM, 2021) confirms that the area's most used labor migration mechanisms have the United States of America and Canada as their destination countries. Of 25 labor migration mechanisms identified, 14 were subscribed bilaterally; 56 percent of the total mechanisms identified were classified as temporary work schemes; 45 percent of the mechanisms are oriented to the primary sector, where low-skilled migrant labor is required, and agriculture and construction activities stand out (IOM, 2021).

### **The Labor Migration Program (LMP)**

El Salvador's Government has made efforts to protect their migrant workers abroad and respond to the need for reintegration for those who have returned and those who will return to the country. In 2019, the Labor Migration Program was created to promote the inclusion of Salvadorans in the international labor market through regular, orderly, and safe migration through temporary employment abroad. In February 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRREE) and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MTPS) signed a cooperation agreement to strengthen the Labor Migration Program. These became the first steps towards labor mobility and a higher demand for Salvadoran workers to fulfill jobs not covered by the local workforce.

The Program is executed in four stages: promotion/Outreach/Business Management; Call for applications, Selection, and Recruitment; Monitoring and Accompaniment on Return; Reintegration and Impact Assessment. As part of this last stage, group meetings are held, in which the experiences and impact of returnee migrant workers are evaluated. This information and all the

data the beneficiaries share are collected and used for decision-making to improve the executed processes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Through the labor mobility program, the Government has been developing a series of coordinated activities that permitted the identification of the need to systematize and organize a series of information and processes within the Program that may affect the last actions of the migration cycle, which is the return and reintegration of Salvadoran migrant workers. The workers who are part of the LMP and whose contracts have ended must return to El Salvador. Therefore, labor reintegration is vaguely promoted by the responsible institution. Some initiatives seek to promote entrepreneurship programs, exchange of technical knowledge in the country based on the knowledge acquired in the LMP, or guidance to reapply to the Program, notwithstanding such efforts have not yet concretized, possibly due to the lack of specific policies aimed at the return and reintegration of the migrant worker population.

The Government makes efforts to obtain information from returnee migrants and know their immediate needs; the temporary workers attending these gatherings make up a sample of 977 individuals, representing 34 percent of the total number of migrants benefiting from temporary work in the United States (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Although this may not seem like a large number, it is significant to identify demographics, such as gender (64 percent of participants are men and 36 percent are women), age group (mostly in productive ages between 24 and 35 years), and understand the motivations for participating in such programs, and the expectations they have upon their return (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Additionally, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the 2023 report on the Impact evaluation on the experiences of migrant workers, indicate that approximately 56 percent of the returnee migrant workers are already working either in the formal or informal sector, while 7 percent are starting an informal or

formal business after their return. It is also noticeable that almost 96 percent of these migrant workers had a one to two months unemployed upon their return, while the rest of the participants took more than two months to resume paid activities. Currently, The PML does not have a specific action plan or policy framework that backs up institutionalizing a returnee program specific for migrant workers. However, the idea of establishing a training center for potential migrant workers already registered into the PML is there and waiting for approval from the international community, civil society, and the Government itself (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

The International Labour Organization highlights the importance of migrant return and reintegration programs and initiatives through global standards and conventions such as Recommendation No. 86 (Migration for Employment), the ILO Convention No. 97, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. These instruments emphasize the need for policies that address return and reintegration comprehensively.

### **Regulatory Framework for returnee migrants**

El Salvador's international migration phenomenon, particularly the process of return, is a topic that is only partially recognized by the country's current legal Framework, despite being integrated into the institutional Framework and having a relatively broad but disjointed range of specific policies and programs (Rivas, 2019). Articles from the General Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador are the foundation for this Framework. The Constitution establishes that the human person is the beginning and the end of the State's activity and that it is structured to achieve justice, legal security, and the common good (Art. 1); it also recognizes that everyone has the freedom to enter, remain in, and leave the Republic's territory, apart from restrictions imposed by law (Art. 5). However,

secondary legislation and the current institutional Framework are what govern and, in theory, guarantee adherence to certain rights on the mobility of people, including the return of Salvadorans who, because of emigrating irregularly or residing without the consent of the destination country, were detained, and deported to El Salvador (Rivas, 2019).

- **Special Law for the Protection and Development of Salvadoran Migrants and their Family<sup>1</sup>.**

El Salvador has specialized legislation on migration as of 2011, intending to develop the guiding constitutional principles that guarantee the rights of the migrants and their families through the design, formulation, evaluation, and monitoring of comprehensive public protection and development policies through inter-institutional and inter-sectoral coordination of the State and civil society in the processes of national development, the only document available that explicitly mentions returnees and their families. It also includes the creation of the National Council for the Protection and Development of Salvadoran Migrants and Their Family (CONMIGRANTES for its acronym in Spanish), as mentioned by the interviewee Luis Gerardo Ramírez from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is an inter-institutional body that began operations in 2012 (Presidency of the Republic of El Salvador, 2019). The law reveals several protection gaps, such as those related to returnees and the migration of girls, boys, and adolescents, among other populations (Rivas, 2019). This document does not address returnee migrant workers specifically or their needs for reintegration.

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<sup>1</sup> Ley Especial para la Protección y Desarrollo de la Persona Migrante Salvadoreña y su Familia. (2011). The original document can be found at the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA). [https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/2011\\_decreto655\\_elsvd.pdf](https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/2011_decreto655_elsvd.pdf)

- **The National Policy for the Protection and Development of Salvadoran Migrants and their Family<sup>2</sup>.**

The National Policy for the Protection and Development of Salvadoran Migrants and Their Family comes into the picture as one of the agreements from the Special Law for the Protection and Development of Salvadoran Migrants and their Family of 2011. This Policy was made public in July 2017. It comprised the "Comprehensive care of the returned Salvadoran person" and "Insertion of the returned Salvadoran person," two of the National Policy's strategic axes. The first involves the following activities: implementing a comprehensive care model, implementing an integrated institutional care protocol for the returnee population, setting up a temporary comprehensive care center for families and individuals who have returned, the establishment of systematic and organized measures in families and communities to ensure the protection of returned children and adolescents, and the construction and extension of programs for comprehensive care on return and inclusion of families (Rivas, 2019). The second strategic axis, which is concerned with the integration of returnees, establishes a definition of mechanisms that facilitate what the Policy refers to as "insertion" to the educational system, establishment of skills certification mechanisms to promote job placement, establishment of a fund to facilitate business integration and enterprising, creation of productive and employment opportunities, authorization of technical advice on credit institutions, and implementation of the Policy (Rivas, 2019). This Policy is an important instrument; it outlines more specific steps to support the reception and reintegration of Salvadoran returnees. However, it recognizes that migration is multicausal and the existence of work migrants; it does not specify actions oriented to this migration flow.

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- **Special Law on Migration and Immigration<sup>3</sup>**

The Special Law on Migration and Immigration (LEME, for its acronym Spanish), approved on April 2019, aims to ensure the protection and defense of the human rights of Salvadoran migrants and the modernization of processes involved in migration matters. It adopts principles like human dignity, human mobility, the best interests of children and adolescents, due diligence, equality, family unity and reunification, integration, and nonrefoulement of persons. This law upholds the human rights of migrants.

As stated in the interview with Luis Gerardo Ramírez of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, El Salvador is responsible for adequately responding to the migrant population. El Salvador continues to do so under a broad multisectoral and inter-institutional collaboration scheme. The nation sees migrants as a binding force for progress and the achievement of national development.

Unquestionably, these documents are a step in the right direction and offer guidance for migrants who have returned to El Salvador. However, even though numerous institutions have teamed up to support reintegration processes, as noticed and stated by the interviewees, more must be done for returnees. Now that the issue has gained awareness, it is crucial to keep working to provide a more complete and effective reintegration of Salvadoran migrants into society.

### **Providing Returnee Migrants with Education, Training, and Employment in response to the issue.**

Although the Labor Migration Program offers an opportunity for Salvadorans to count on greater economic resources in the short and medium term, each stage of the migration cycle represents a challenge. Following the opinions expressed by the interviewees who were part of the PML, they

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<sup>3</sup> Ley Especial de Migración y Extranjería. (2019). The document can be retrieved at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wKIO08hmKnArMpuLkRJCMDp5djkJV7sR/view>

consider that said Program is an initiative that allows regular migration and thus avoids migration risks through non-conventional means. Additionally, it represents a chance to aim for a higher standard of living. However, there are also the expectations of migrant workers upon their return, especially those who have completed contracts within the Labor Migration Program; as indicated by the interviewees, it is expected that the State can open the way so that as returnees, have access to job offers in the country of origin, as well as keep doors open for jobs outside the country. An interesting fact is that it is also expected to have skills certification that allows applying the experiences acquired during their work performance abroad and access to other forms of education. We can see from the results of a mapping carried out within the Framework of the project "Vulnerability of returned migrants against COVID-19: Challenges and responses from the local in the North of Central America" the Dr. Guillermo Manuel Ungo Foundation (FUNDAUNGO) elaborates the following table of reintegration services for returned migrants and institutions in charge of offering them: (Rivas, 2019).

<b>Service</b>	<b>Institution that offers the service</b>
Certification of competencies	INSAFORP, CASALCO, CASATUR, Swisscontact
Training for work	INSAFORP, USCRI, WFP, INSAMI, Aid in Action, CIMITRA
Entrepreneurship	UNHCR, IOM, MRREE, INSAMI, Aid in Action
Job intermediation	MTPS, INSAMI, Aid in Action, Junior Achievement
Psychosocial care	MINSAL, Women City, ACISAM, INSAMI
Health	MINSAL, INSAMI
Information Hubs	MRREE, Zacatecoluca City Hall, Trifinio association, Cayaguanca Association.
Legal assistance	GMIES

El Salvador has undoubtedly made considerable progress in return and reintegration, mainly due to the persistence of civil society organizations and inter-institutional coordination. Due to legal or security concerns, the majority still concentrates on forced returnee migrants, leaving PML returnee migrants unaddressed within these frameworks. The International Community's and other

nations' achievements in this area are significant because they serve as a springboard for a more inclusive perspective on reintegration. The country still needs to work on inclusion, especially when education plans or certification requirements call for you to be a forced returned immigrant.

- **Welcome Home Program<sup>4</sup>**

The 2019 Special Law on Migration and Immigration establishes in its Art. 322 that the General Directorate of Migration and Immigration will oversee the reception and immediate care of returned Salvadorans in coordination with public institutions and private or international organizations, offering information on reintegration programs. The Migrant Care Management (GAMI) is the agency in charge of articulating with the different institutions the reception process of the Salvadoran population returned to the country, which is called the "Welcome Home Program" and focuses on the reception process for voluntary and forced returned Salvadorans, not under a Labor Migration Program. This Care center offers services such as medical and psychological care for returnee migrants under this Framework, national and international telephone calls, and basic hygiene implements, among other needs presented by the returnee Salvadorans.

- **El Salvador is your Home Program.**

Returnee migrants have always been in the public eye. This migration flow used to be seen from the security approach and removed from a human rights approach, contributing even more to the construction of stigma against migrants who return to El Salvador. With the presence of different

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<sup>4</sup> Ley Especial de Migración y Extranjería. (2019). The document can be retrieved at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wKIO08hmKnArMpuLkRJCMDp5djkJV7sR/view>

civil society organizations, the international community, and others, the country searches for an alternative that opens doors to returnee migrants.

El Salvador is your home program that aims to improve psychosocial support for returnees and give them access to educational, employment, and entrepreneurial possibilities. Programs for delivering initial capital for business management are among these initiatives. With a gender focus and special consideration for those in vulnerable situations, the Program's main objective is to facilitate a thorough return process that fosters the population's socioeconomic autonomy and empowerment; it encourages the integration of various public, private, and civil society actors into the process of integrated insertion under their competencies, and implements a system of care and information that is articulated to lower the rate of re-victimization of the returned population. Most programs are focused on enhancing local capabilities to offer services, such as professional training, psychosocial treatment, and educational and labor reintegration, to the returning population and those at risk of irregular migration.

El Salvador's Government has taken actions to improve the legal frameworks and the programs available to give answers to returning migrants; although these initiatives aim to respond to a necessity of a certain population group, they have already opened a path to the scope and other opportunities for the Labor mobility program and each of the stages of the Labor migration process.

## **Conclusion**

This document's primary goal was to assess the State of the Labor Migration Program of El Salvador to the United States and the steps taken to help returning migrant workers reintegrate once their contracts have expired. Returnee migrants face different situations, including stigma, if the receiving community has faced safety issues, even if the migrant has traveled regularly and returned voluntarily.

The LMP has created high expectations in the Salvadoran population to improve living, working, and salary conditions. It represents a great opportunity to regularly migrate and avoid the risks of irregular migration, when a person enters or resides in a nation of which they are not a citizen, breaking that nation's immigration rules (IOM, 2011). Other advantages sought by migrant workers in the Labor Migration Program are the benefits of learning new skills, acquiring a new language, and having their labor and human rights respected. Later in the process, these opportunities represent the need of the returnee migrant workers to have those skills recognized and search for equal or better working conditions once returned. A challenge that the Program has yet to solve due to a lack of a specific legal framework that comprises these populations.

Although there are currently programs in El Salvador to encourage the engagement of the returnee population, they have some drawbacks, such as a focus on vulnerable groups like children, women, forced returns, or potential migrants or migrants at risk. It is crucial to look for sustainable initiatives that can use the resources already available within the organizations in charge of the Labor Migration Program because the resources allocated to addressing the returnee population are constrained to those provided by inter-institutional coordination. A further opportunity for identifying potential entrepreneurs and the potential for employment generation from the migrant

workers themselves is presented by the exercise for impact evaluation that the Program undertakes upon the return of migrant employees.

### **Recommendations**

El Salvador will continue facing challenges if no action is considered, especially in terms of incorporating mechanisms as part of labor migration policies to respond to migrant returnees flows in a way that addresses the changing needs of the regular migration pathways and ensures the protection of the migrant worker population including their reintegration and labor reincorporation in the local markets.

The central and local governments must act quickly to set priorities and take the lead on the return stage. The lessons learned while conducting this research identify the need for a comprehensive policy for the Salvadoran returning migrant worker population. Although some steps have been taken and legal instruments, such as the Special Law on Migration and Immigration and the CONMIGRANTES, that address different migration flows have been created, their government plans should encompass specific, sustainable, and attainable goals. A participatory construction is recommended between migrants, the Government, and key actors that implement initiatives for orderly, safe, and regular mobility to protect returnees at the end of their working time abroad.

As seen in this document, women have gained ground in the labor field abroad, so the promotion of inclusion and participation of women in reintegration processes for returning migrant workers must be guaranteed equal opportunities. Therefore, reintegration policies at the end of labor migration must include gender and non-discriminatory aspects.

It is recommended to establish and strengthen monitoring processes after return, which allow continuity to obtain inputs for the improvement of regular, orderly, and safe migration mechanisms so that, based on this feedback, comprehensive policies are developed and adjusted to the reality of returnee migrants. Additionally, it is advised that the Government approach international cooperation for assistance in monitoring, especially financial and technical support.

To guarantee access to formal sources of employment and in respect of labor rights, it is recommended that government institutions and other key actors promote advisory and support processes in the exercise of labor reintegration for returned migrants; in such a way that the gap of inexperience about the local labor market is minimized.

As seen in this research, migrant workers contribute to the growth of economies through remittances. Upon their return, they bring income that can be invested in local businesses, generating jobs under similar conditions in the reception community and obtaining a decent income. Therefore, establish policies that make it possible to offer incentives to returned workers so that they decide to invest, settle themselves and generate personal income as well as for the return community.

It is recommended that people interested in applying for orderly, safe, and regular migration mechanisms, such as LMPs, be able to participate in capacity development processes that allow future certification of skills and abilities, as well as financial management, among others. Therefore, the Government must take action for a sustainable reintegration once their contract abroad ends, allowing for better attention upon return appropriate to the needs of the migrant.

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## **Appendix: Interview Questions**

### **Interview with Luis Gerardo Ramírez, who works at the Vice Ministry for Salvadorans abroad of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of El Salvador.**

1. Tell us briefly about your experience at the Vice Ministry for Salvadorans abroad and your role in the return's dynamics. I am currently an assistant in the office of the vice minister of Salvadorans abroad. I have worked for about three and a half years in the returns program, a program that began with us in the previous government administration, and we have been working on it from its beginnings to the way we know it today.
2. What is the name of the Program you refer to regarding returns? The Program I refer to and have been working on is "El Salvador is your home," a program of assistance and comprehensive care for returnees. The "Welcome Home" program is another program that began in 1999 under the responsibility of an NGO, Catholic Relief Services, and in 2004 it passed to another NGO. Then in 2007, the Government assumed the responsibility of dealing with the issue of returned emigrants, which was seen from the security perspective.
3. Is there a reason why these programs were created? I believe that these initiatives are born from the stigma that has been built around returned migrants. Mainly, seeing it from the security approach and removed from the human rights approach has contributed to and allowed the construction of stigma against migrants who return to our country. So, the numbers indicate that many people have committed crimes and have criminal records, from the most minimal to the most serious, of which there is no doubt. However, we also have a large part of our population that are migrant workers, and the current Government itself describes it. It is an accurate description, they are migrants with the desire to improve themselves, with the desire to get ahead, to raise their families, and that the main reason for which these people leave is for something that drives them to go abroad. This point of view of security should not be left aside, but it is important to give the Program all the necessary meaning.
4. What are the program's objectives "El Salvador is your home"? Initially, in 2007, the objective was the security approach. To register all these people, to have control, and mainly because it was believed all of them had committed crimes. In 2009, with the start of the FMLN government, it was treated differently, even though there was a wave of events, mainly economic, because of the recession that occurred in 2008 that led to an incredible wave of migration six years later. So, first, security was the main objective to maintain control; later, other initiatives were taken, with a human rights approach, to make it more comprehensive and provide returnees with specialized, comprehensive, and immediate care.
5. When is it decided when a person can participate in the return program? This is where the two programs I have mentioned converge. Our process with returnees begins with the foreign

service, with the consular representations in the United States. When receiving the notification of the people who will return, they verify that they are Salvadoran citizens, and a profile is drawn up and identifies the reasons for returning, even though some needs of these people are raised upon arrival in the country. There has yet to be an institutionalized form; it has been done with specific cases, security cases, cases requiring specialized attention, and health. This is how cases are dealt with, the consulate receives them, and once it is received, adjustments are made to provide the necessary attention to the person; they are special cases identified by the consulates.

6. Is there any inter-institutional coordination for the attention of return cases? Much progress has been made in this regard, mainly in terms of inter-institutional participation and coordination, which is extremely important. It is one of the most important things to highlight within this Program, mainly because all the participating institutions have made the services offered available to this Program. We are talking about the General Directorate of Migration and Aliens, which leads the Program, then the Foreign Ministry, which has two offices there, one for human rights and one for reinsertion "El Salvador is your home," is the National Civil Police, which supports the task of security, registration, and control always in terms of security. Ministry of Health, which aids all persons who require it or when cases are identified from the consulate. There is a presence of the Institute for Children and Adolescents, the Attorney General of the Republic, and the National Registry for Natural Persons, which was incorporated one or two years ago to identify these returnees. However, they do a job informative at the moment, the idea is that the identification of people, that is, that people can obtain their identity document because many do not bring it, it is a necessity both for them and for the State to guarantee the right to the identity. The Ministry of Justice, not only through the General Directorate of Migration but there is also a part that oversees the protection of victims of violence, including trafficking. Other actors include NGOs, civil society, and international organizations such as IOM and UNHCR. Everyone wanted to participate in these programs at the time, mainly out of necessity. As of 2014, when there was a humanitarian crisis, and it was classified as such, from then on, international organizations and NGOs began to provide support to returnees.
7. What would be the benefits that returned migrants obtain by being part of these return programs? What would be the conditions to opt for the benefits of the Program? Mainly, it would be a benefit at the state level, firstly because it makes the figure of returned migrants visible, not only as one more figure but as a person who must be given the care they need and who must be provided with the tools so that they can reintegrate into the economic and reproductive life of our country. The idea is to avoid a recurrence. As part of the program requirements, I could say that there are none; practically, the only requirement is to have been a returned migrant, even if it was a voluntary or involuntary return. At one point in the Program, it was contemplated to design some special situations for people who have lived abroad for a large part of their lives, even documented with their legal status, but who desire to invest in El Salvador, not only return but also invest. The idea is to provide this support so that they do not have to think about returning to the United States when they return. For us,

the Program serves for inter-institutional coordination so that when the information is captured, it is redirected to the competent institution. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has led this Program since 2015.

8. Have the objectives been met, or has something been left behind? There are always issues that can be improved, even if they are super good; even if you work in the best way, there will always be situations that can be improved. In this sense, it is mainly the fact of putting institutions to work specifically for programs that address the migration issue of reintegration and not only reintegration but migration prevention. Prevention is one of the axes that I consider important and necessary to address more fully regarding migration and these programs. We are treating the disease but do not have a cure or how to prevent it. This is one of the areas that this Program needs to improve. As prevention works and a comprehensive spectrum is addressed, taking into account systematic issues from the economic, social, stigma, everything that has to do with the decision of people to migrate. However, each case is different, but with the experience of listening to people, we realize that there is a similarity and that although each scenario is different, they are covered by all these same problems social, security, economic.
9. What policies or legislation have been implemented to comply with these return migratory flows? In 2016, the reform of the immigration law took place, calling it the Special Law on Migration and Immigration, whose purpose is to guarantee an effective immigration process and order and regulate the entry and exit of nationals and foreigners from Salvadoran territory. The COMIGRANTES law is super important. This is a governing body in migration policies, not only in returns but in the entire migration process, going, transit, and return; the entire migration process is the governing body. Several institutions have recently joined; I do not remember the number, but if I am correct, there are 22 or 15 out there. Nevertheless, the idea of this governing body is to guarantee that the State puts all its institutionalism into operation to work. Moreover, with the State, I mean in the broadest sense because there are government institutions and NGOs representing civil society, academia, and international organizations.
10. Any closing remarks you would like to add regarding reintegration? Many institutions have joined efforts to assist during reintegration processes. We hope that with the support received from all the actors involved, we can achieve something beyond what has already been done. I repeat, important advances have been made, above all, the issue's visibility, which is of great importance. However, work must continue to guarantee a more effective and comprehensive reintegration into society.

#### **Interview with Josseline Mendoza, a beneficiary of the Labor Migration Program.**

1. How do you assess the initiative of the labor migration program? What do you think is needed? Why is it important? This initiative is a good process; it helps us avoid the risks of migrating irregularly, it is a legal pathway and an opportunity to aspire to something different, and it benefits many people. I find no disadvantages in the process.

2. What are the most important things when looking for a good job in the destination country? The salary is more important than the working hours. There are benefits because it allows you to rest according to the schedule and apply to other activities, for example, learning the language.
3. Should you receive some prior training before leaving for the country of destination? I would like to know more about the work system and the company and laws that protect my rights. Also, the language is important.
4. Based on your experience in the Program, how should you and your work abroad be monitored while you are there? It is important that those in charge of the Program can always maintain contact with us by call or message. Review of the contract under which one is and its compliance.
5. What was your expectation upon returning to the country? What do you expect to be followed up on? I want to receive job offers and have more job opportunities here in the country.
6. I look forward to applying the experience gained during my stay abroad.

**Interview with Carlos Ortiz, who was a beneficiary of the Labor Migration Program.**

1. How do you assess the initiative of the labor migration program? What do you think is needed? Why is it important? This Program is very beneficial because it helps me grow economically, allowing me to invest in my house and providing a better place for my wife and son.
2. What are the most important things when looking for a good job in the destination country? The security of the country of destination is important to know about the labor sector in which I work. It is an important opportunity to improve professionally, personally, and financially.
3. Should you receive some prior training before leaving for the country of destination? I would like to know more about the language of the country where I am going to work and the laws of the country of destination.
4. Based on your experience in the Program, how should you and your work abroad be monitored while you are there? I consider it important that they verify if my rights are being respected, as well as having control over people outside the country, that they know our life plan, if we already have a home, food plan, among others, as measures to take into account later. Verify that there is no exploitation in the work we do.

5. What was your expectation upon returning to the country? What do you expect to be followed up on? I hope that the authorities in charge of the Program can assign me to another job opportunity, either here in the country or abroad. Have feedback on the work done to know my skills. Have opportunities and access to education.