

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CIRCULAR MIGRATION PROGRAMS BETWEEN GUATEMALA AND THE UNITED STATES: Analysis of the Impact on Living Conditions, Migration Intentions, Barriers and Opportunities

JULY 2023



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CIRCULAR MIGRATION PROGRAMS BETWEEN GUATEMALA AND THE UNITED STATES: Analysis of the Impact on Living Conditions, Migration Intentions, Barriers and Opportunities

This article introduces **U.S. employers, industry stakeholders and government authorities** to the challenges, bottlenecks and opportunities for hiring Guatemalan workers under the H-2A and H-2B Guest Worker Program.

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INTRODUCTION AND STUDY OBJECTIVES

International migration is an extremely complex reality, of interest to both origin and destination countries. It is a phenomenon that can be seen from different, even contrasting, perspectives, ranging from security and control to its effects on production, employment and development. In this article, we summarize key elements of a study relevant to U.S. employers that addressed a type of migration that has generated growing interest in recent years: circular migration.¹ This refers to the transfer of migrants from a country of origin to one of destination with the aim of working in a certain activity for a limited period of time (usually between three and 10 months).

In the U.S., temporary labor is granted visas under the Department of Labor's H-2A and H-2B guest worker programs. These visa programs are important labor sources for many U.S. employers who depend on workers to fill often physically demanding and seasonal positions that many U.S. citizens are unwilling to perform. While there is growing interest in these visa programs to fill labor gaps, there is also interest in their capacity to improve worker livelihoods, slow irregular migration and contribute towards mutually beneficial international relationships.

This study is focused on Guatemala, a country that has high percentages of irregular migration to the U.S., high poverty rates and low participation in H-2 visa programs. This has generated interest in the capacity to expand labor recruitment from Guatemala as a strategy to improve local livelihoods while slowing irregular migration.

Specifically, the study had two primary objectives:



- *Identify bottlenecks limiting the demand and participation of Guatemalan workers in migrant labor programs.*
- *Assess the capacity of the H-2 visa programs in Guatemala to foster greater rootedness in their communities of origin, improve livelihoods and generate socioeconomic opportunities in Guatemala.*

Study results point to key bottlenecks for Guatemala including: a complex visa application process, higher recruitment costs, visa processing delays, and recruitment strategies that favor long-standing labor networks in Mexico. Conversely, Guatemalan workers have a reputation for being hardworking, trustworthy and highly productive. In addition, results suggest circular migration has the potential to both reduce irregular migration and improve the living conditions of migrants and their families.

¹ This research brief is part of a broader study on migrant labor conducted in Guatemala, the U.S. and Canada. The full report can be found at: www.accioncontraelhambre.org.gt/migracion-circular-2023/

METHODOLOGY

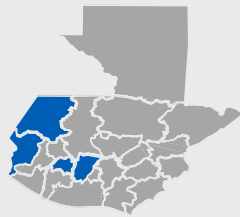


This study used semi-structured interviews and quantitative surveys in Guatemala, the U.S. and Canada.

This approach allowed the research team to compare findings by gathering information from multiple sources and perspectives. Researchers conducted interviews with industry stakeholders and employers of H-2 workers (for example, owners of nurseries, agricultural businesses, and industry organizations) as well as labor recruiters and Guatemalan community leaders and workers. Respondents were identified via public sources (e.g., web sites) and referral.



U.S. survey distribution employed a database, published by the U.S. Department of Labor, consisting of employers and contractors hiring H-2 Labor.² In addition, surveys were distributed by various industry organizations to their members. In Guatemala, 11 communities with a high percentage of circular migrants and 11 communities with low circular migration were selected for survey distribution. Sites were comparable in population, proximity to roads, agriculture and geographical area. Both interviews and surveys were conducted in:



4 DEPARTMENTS
IN GUATEMALA



- Chimaltenango
- Huehuetenango
- San Marcos
- Sololá

Responses for the four study components included:

- (1) Survey of Guatemalan community members (1,367 respondents).
- (2) Interviews with Guatemalan stakeholders, community leaders and migrant workers (60 respondents).
- (3) Interviews with stakeholders and employers located in Canada and the U.S. (25 respondents).
- (4) Survey of employers of migrant workers (166 respondents from the U.S. and Canada).

² Surveys distributed in Canada relied on industry associations and recruitment companies to share surveys, as cited in the full report.



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BACKGROUND: U.S. MIGRANT LABOR PROGRAMS

The H-2 Guest Worker visa programs have their roots in agreements dating back to World Wars I and II, when Mexico and various Caribbean governments sought to fill labor shortages in the U.S. In 1986, the **Immigration Reform and Control Act** established two separate temporary visas:

- (1) the H-2A program, for hiring agricultural workers
- (2) the H-2B program for non-agriculture-related work.

Both visas allow employers to recruit workers for seasonal or intermittent jobs, generally for periods less than one year.

The H-2A program has grown from 75,000 workers in 2010 to 317,000 certified visas in 2022, and accounts for 10 percent of employment on farms. The H-2B program is designated for non-agricultural jobs including hotel, seafood processing, landscaping, restaurant, construction, and forestry. H-2B visas are capped at 66,000 visas per year with periodic congressional expansions raising the number of visas two-to threefold. Applications take up to 120 days and require approval from three government agencies.

In 2022, Guatemalan workers made up approximately one percent of H-2A and five percent of H-2B visas. Due to previous bilateral agreements, long-standing relationships, and a shared border, the majority of H-2 guest workers originate from Mexico (68% of H-2B and 93% of H-2A). Other countries with high participation rates include Jamaica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and South Africa.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

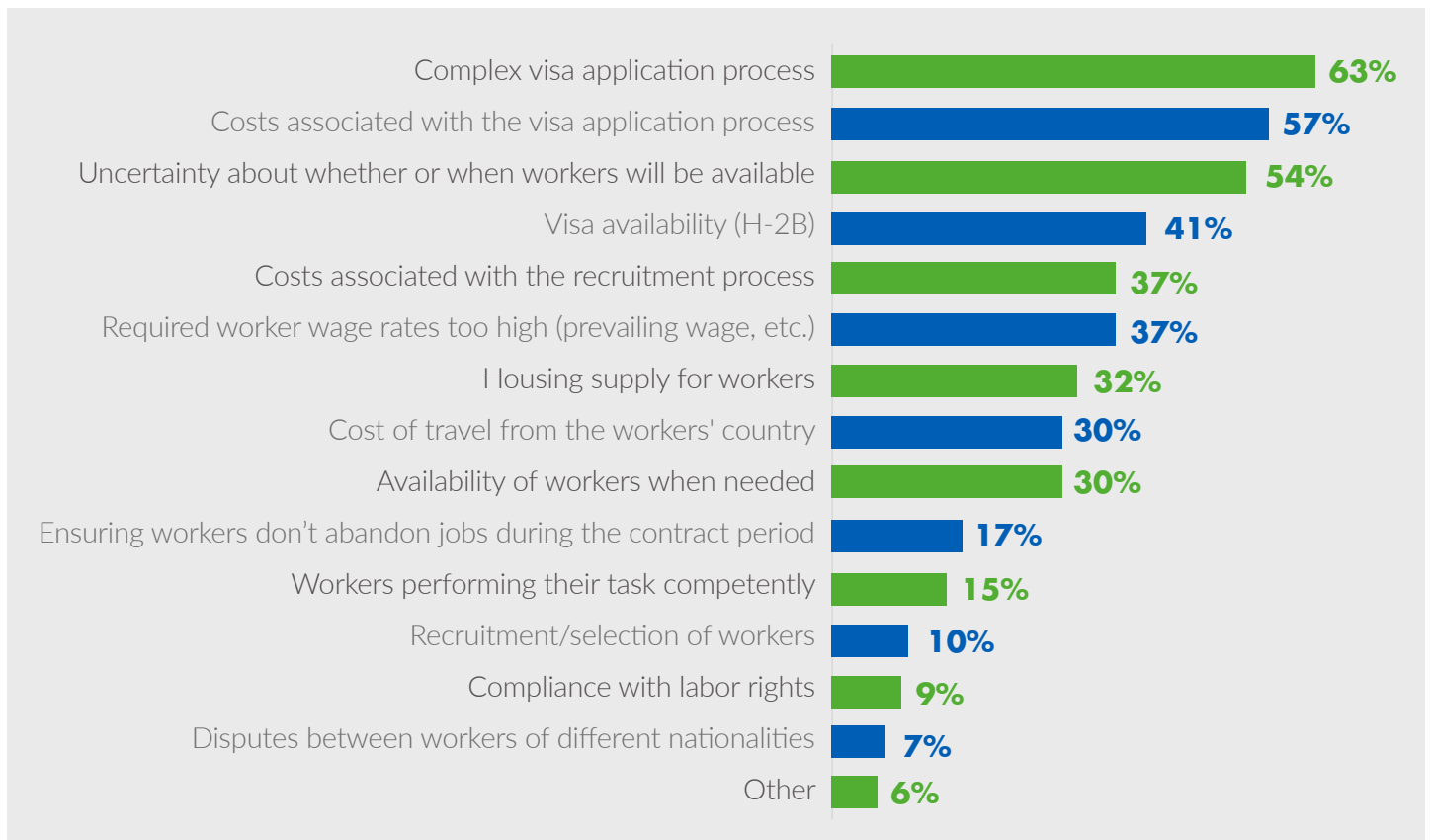
1. Employers face multiple challenges in participating in H-2 visas, including a complicated, lengthy, uncertain and costly application and hiring process

Employers described the H-2 visa programs as a complicated, expensive, uncertain and increasingly burdensome process. Specific challenges described include:

- A complicated process with constantly changing rules and requirements that keep employers uncertain whether they are complying with all the programmatic rules.
- Lengthy visa application process taking between 75 (H-2A) and 150 (H-2B) days.
- High participation costs due to a complicated process requiring employment of outside visa processing and recruitment firms.
- Increasing worker costs associated with requirements for providing housing, travel reimbursements and upward trending prevailing and adverse effect wage rates set by government agencies.
- Fierce competition and increasing uncertainty about if and when workers will arrive on the capped H-2B visas.

Survey results (Figure 1), closely mirror qualitative data, with complex visa application, visa application costs, uncertainty of worker availability and availability of visas (H-2B) being the top responses.

Figure 1: Survey data on challenges faced by U.S. employers





2. Employers use external firms to process visa applications in the U.S. and fragmented informal recruitment strategies to process and select workers in Guatemala

The role of a recruiter includes identifying suitable workers who meet both employer qualifications and embassy requirements (i.e., no criminal record or history of irregular migration), helping workers navigate the application and embassy interview process, and ensuring workers arrive at their worksite on time. Employers use multiple recruitment methods to process visas and identify and recruit workers.

- **Visa application process:** Most employers (86%) hire external firms to process and navigate the complex visa application process in the U.S. Once employers have been granted visas, they use recruiters to identify and process worker applications.
- **Formal recruiters:** Formal recruiting companies, or companies providing open and transparent recruitment services to any employer, are often contracted by the firms hired to process visa applications. Formal recruiters are more common in countries such as Mexico with long-established labor relations and a history of government assistance programs. As a result, many employers in these established labor markets use formal recruiters. In Guatemala, however, informal recruitment strategies for U.S. visas are more common.
- **Informal recruiters:** In Guatemala, most H-2 workers (59%) are recruited using internal company personnel or past employees who perform as informal recruiters (Figure 2). Informal recruiters appear to be more common in emerging labor markets, such as Guatemala, where the absence of formal recruiters forces individual employers to develop their own networks to recruit and process workers. This results in a fragmented process, with dozens of small-firm recruiters working with individual employers, and creates difficulties for new employers without established networks, which is the case in Guatemala.

Figure 2: Methods for identification and hiring of employees



- **Worker selection procedures:** While most employers use formal or informal recruiters to process worker applications and ensure they are eligible, individual workers are more commonly identified through a worker-to-worker model. Employers ask existing workers to recommend family and friends who are willing to participate in the visa program and provide their recruiters with these names to vet and process. New employers either rely on formal recruiters (i.e., government agency recruiter), or, more often, ask workers from neighboring farms to recommend family and friends and use the informal recruiter for that region to process worker applications. Once a trusted worker base is established, the worker-to-worker recruitment model is implemented. Formal or informal recruiters are only asked to identify workers if employers do not have enough worker-recommended names or are unhappy with their workforce and are looking to expand into other countries or regions.

The advantages of the worker-to-worker selection model are that it allows employers to ensure a trustworthy, productive and committed workforce while also rewarding employees in good standing. Part of this model establishes strong inter-worker networks to reduce cases of workers abandoning contract periods or not returning at the conclusion of the work permit period. Individuals who recommend other workers bear some responsibility for recruiting quality workers who complete contracts. For workers, the opportunity to recommend family and friends allow them to share employment opportunities within their social networks.

The disadvantage of this model is it establishes closed recruitment networks where some communities have high participation rates, while others have little to none. The system establishes tight social networks, often within families, and outside individuals, even within participating communities, have difficulty accessing worker permits. This leads to confusion and misinformation about how to access work permit programs or how these programs function. Additionally, resentment from community members unable to access and prosper from employment opportunities is common.



3. Challenges for recruiting Guatemalan workers include employers with strong geographic ties to other countries, higher costs, delays in processing visas and illegal recruitment fees caused by high demand, lack of transparency and worker selection procedures

- **The worker-to-worker selection model leads to strong geographic ties:** The worker-to-worker selection model has established strong geographic ties to specific countries or regions (Mexico being the dominant source). Employers develop relationships, sometimes spanning multiple generations, with workers from communities in these countries. This establishes trust and a reluctance for employers to branch into other countries, such as Guatemala.
- **High costs for employers:** Guatemala requires more costly air or bus travel because it does not share a border with the U.S. In addition, the visa processing firms hired by employers usually charge premium recruitment rates for working in Guatemala due to a perceived greater difficulty in recruiting and processing workers. Finally, visa processing times are longer, which adds costs for employers reimbursing local travel expenses (hotel, food, bus, etc.) between rural villages and the capital city, where workers process visas at embassies.



“Some employers are a little more price sensitive. They just don't have the pricing ability. They're competing against imported food from Mexico and other places, so they just [...] don't have the margins.”

- Migrant Labor Advocate

- **Delays in visa processing times:** Employers described long visa processing times in Guatemala compared with other worker sources, particularly Mexico. This is due to delays, sometimes as long as one year, for Guatemalan passports and longer embassy processing times (two to four weeks versus three to five days in Mexico).



“I need them working up here, not waiting for their visas down there [in Guatemala].”

- U.S. Employer

- **Illegal recruitment fees:** A side effect of the worker-to-worker selection model is illegal fees charged by recruiting workers to access visas. By U.S. law, visa programs have no access fees; however, recruiting workers (those empowered by employers) take advantage of their position, the high visa demand and limited information about how these programs function to charge access fees. Illegal fees to access visas range from \$250 to \$3,850. Employers appear to have limited knowledge of this problem, as most workers understand this is illegal and would result in termination should employers become aware. Similarly, recruited workers understood disclosure could lead to being excluded from participation, possibly impacting their entire family network or community. **It is important to note that illegal recruitment fees increase the overall visa transaction costs and generate a higher potential for workers to withdraw from employer contracts or to overstay their visas.** By comparison, Canadian visa programs, while still facing illegal recruitment fee challenges, appear to control the frequency and more exorbitant rates through use of formal recruitment companies rather than worker-to-worker contacts. Finally, while illegal charges were found in Guatemala, it is very likely occurring in other countries using the worker-to-worker selection model.

- **Recruitment Scams:** Closely related to illegal recruitment fees are scams related to individuals requesting payment for worker visas that do not exist. Scammers claim to represent established recruiters or employers; however, workers have limited capacities to verify such claims. The scams negatively affect the individuals who are deceived and generate mistrust in communities regarding visas. Overall, these scams decrease the value of temporary worker visas as an alternative to irregular migration.

4. Visa application and processing costs are paid by U.S. employers, and workers incur costs associated with the informal recruitment strategies

- **Costs covered by employers:** U.S. employers are responsible for all visa application and travel expenses incurred by workers. Specific expenses include:
 - Visa application fees: (\$190).
 - In-country travel expenses to process visas: (about \$60 - \$260).
 - International travel expenses to jobsite (about \$1,200).
- **Costs paid by workers:** Guatemalan workers incur costs associated with the informal recruitment procedures common to U.S. visas. Specific expenses include:
 - *Intermediary services:* Intermediaries provide visa application services in many of the communities from which Guatemalan workers are recruited. These intermediaries provide workers with many of the services large recruiters would normally cover, including assistance in visa applications, coordinating travel logistics to the capital city where embassies are located and applying for Guatemalan passports (cost varies).
 - *Travel essentials:* Many first-time visa applicants have expenses related to clothing and luggage for trips. Climates can be drastically different depending on where workers are going and the type of work they are performing (cost varies).



5. Worker characteristics sought by employers include a reliable, positive and collegial workforce with agricultural field experience and a willingness to work

Almost without exception, employers hiring Guatemalans describe a workforce that has a positive attitude, gets along well with others and is highly productive (Table 1). As one employer notes, *“They come ready to work.”* Other employers note Guatemalans have lower employment abandonment rates. However, there is some evidence that abandonment rates might be connected to disagreeable work conditions (i.e., work in inclement weather) or employers with unreasonable production expectations. While these conditions were rare, they arose from a combination of workers unprepared for their new work environments and cases of supervisors pushing excessive production rates. Employers look to minimize these challenges, as they invest large sums in recruiting and transporting workers and want to ensure a trustworthy labor force willing and ready to complete contracts.

Table 1: Desired worker characteristics

Preference	Description
<i>Confidence they will remain until the end of the contract</i>	A significant percentage of employers consider this a key characteristic.
<i>Strong commitment to hard work</i>	Employers are looking for labor with a strong commitment to hard work. This often means hiring workers from rural regions with an agricultural tradition where physical strength and endurance are central characteristics.
<i>Positive attitude</i>	Employers are looking for workers with a positive attitude toward physical work and an interest in learning new skills.
<i>Reliability</i>	Because many workers are expected to perform tasks independently, employers look for people who can be trusted to remain productive without constant supervision.
<i>Ability to get along with others</i>	Many workers are accommodated in shared housing offered by employers. Workers' ability to have positive interactions with each other both on and off the job is key, as is maintaining a clean home and avoiding excessive alcohol consumption.
<i>Fieldwork experience</i>	Most employers prefer to train their workers. However, they also look for workers with extensive experience in agriculture, as an indicator of physical strength, endurance and willingness to perform manual labor.



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“Our cost per person coming in is close to \$500 to \$600 per employee. So if I lose 100 people, that has cost me \$50,000 [...] so I have a huge vested interest in finding the best workers, those that are committed to the process and the work.”

- U.S. Employer

“I'm looking for somebody that's willing to learn, that's coachable, that is going to get up in the morning and work hard all day, and do it again the next day and do that for six months straight.”

- U.S. Employer



“Our biggest challenge is figuring out what else would make them happy. The idea is to have the people want to come back to work every year.”

- U.S. Employer

6. There is a strong preference for hiring men, as most positions require physical strength and stamina and separate housing requirements discourage hiring both genders

Most employers have a strong preference for recruiting men, primarily for two reasons:

- Women require additional investments in separate housing (60% of survey respondents), as government regulations stipulate that shared housing is unallowable.
- Most jobs filled by temporary workers require physical strength and stamina, which employers feel women lack (31% of survey respondents).

However, certain industries (for example, strawberry production and seafood processing) had preferences for women due to a perceived greater hand dexterity and productivity compared to men. In these cases, employers hire only women, and no men, due to the need for separate housing.

7. Numerous factors contribute to workers abandoning employment during the visa period, including combinations of insufficient working hours, short visa stays and high illegal visa access fees

Migrant workers abandoning visas is a concern for governments, employers and recruiters. Understanding of factors influencing visa abandonment is limited due to the highly sensitive nature of the issue. Interviews suggest the percentage of visa abandonment is between two and seven percent. In the case of workers abandoning visas, three scenarios were identified:

- Workers who never report to the job (very rare).
- Workers who leave their position during their contract period.
- Workers who complete their employment contracts but fail to return home.

All situations affect employers differently and are likely to have different causes and consequences (Table 2).

Table 2: Causes for worker abandoning work permits

Lower wages than other nearby employment opportunities
The worker considers working hours insufficient or excessive
Worker paying high illegal fees to access visas combined with short-term visas that don't allow workers to pay debts and earn additional income
Short visa periods that limit opportunity to earn income
High family financial needs due to previous financial debts/responsibilities combined with short visa stays
Belief that re-obtaining the visa in the subsequent year is unlikely
Negative relationship with employer due to poor treatment/conditions, disagreement about work expectations, not having the required skills

8. Several emerging strategies to overcome recruitment challenges in Guatemala are being implemented, including free recruitment services by the Guatemalan government, a recruiter registry aimed at reducing the number of fraudulent recruiters, tax incentives to reduce worker travel expenses and expedited passport procedures

- **New recruitment options:** Over the past two years, efforts have been made in Guatemala to address the increase in irregular migration by opening access to legal migration pathways through H-2 visa programs. These efforts include:
 - **Guatemalan government recruitment services:** In the past few years the Guatemalan government, supported by the U.S. government, has formalized an internal recruitment service (Programa de Migración Laboral del Ministerio de Trabajo y Previsión Social de Guatemala - MINTRAB). This service, offered at no cost to employers, has a growing presence, expanding from 15 visas in 2019 to 3,446 in 2022. However, the MINTRAB's previous struggles providing labor in a timely manner continue to cause uncertainty among some employers.
 - **Formal recruiters:** At least one formal recruitment company has recently established a presence in Guatemala. The organization, working with community-based nonprofits, is trying to create an alternative recruitment model outside of the traditional worker-to-worker recruitment system. Their efforts have been moderately successful, and their slow growth is largely due to U.S. employers having established reliable worker networks in other countries, often through the worker-to-worker recruitment model.
- **Recruiter registry:** In 2023, all recruiters operating in Guatemala must register with the Guatemalan government. This is an effort to reduce fraudulent recruitment scams by publishing a list of authorized recruiters for workers and employers to access. These lists, vetted by the Guatemalan government, will help both employers and workers identify and access contact information of reputable recruiters and avoid bad actors. The published list is available at:

<https://www.mintrabajo.gob.gt/index.php/servicios/sistema-de-reclutadores>



- **Overcoming higher travel costs:** Recognizing that travel costs to the U.S. are high, the Guatemalan government has reduced taxes for airline tickets and waived the country's exit tax for visa workers for the next five years. Additionally, a recruiter, with support from the U.S. government and a private foundation, has a pilot project offering \$500 vouchers to offset travel costs.
- **Delays in contracting workers:** Delay issues have improved dramatically over the past year. Workers participating in H-2 visa programs are eligible for expedited passport times of approximately one month. However, not all recruiters seemed to be aware of or have access to these expedited procedures. The U.S. embassy has made efforts to speed up visa processing by reducing the waiting time to three to five days and in some cases waiving consular interviews with workers.

9. H-2 visas have the capacity to significantly improve livelihoods in both the short and long term compared to both nonmigrants and irregular migrants

According to the study's survey data, the top two reasons why Guatemalans migrate are to improve livelihoods (90% of responses) and look for better employment (36% of responses). Their employment in the U.S. generates remittances (between \$770 to \$1,900 per month) that are a key source of income for the workers and their families as well as the communities and country as a whole. There is strong evidence that temporary work visas have a much higher potential to improve the quality of life of families than irregular migration (Table 3). In addition, results suggest H-2 visas have a greater capacity for long-term impacts on families and communities through investment of remittances in land, microenterprises and education.

Table 3: Key differences in remittances between households of circular migrants and irregular migrants

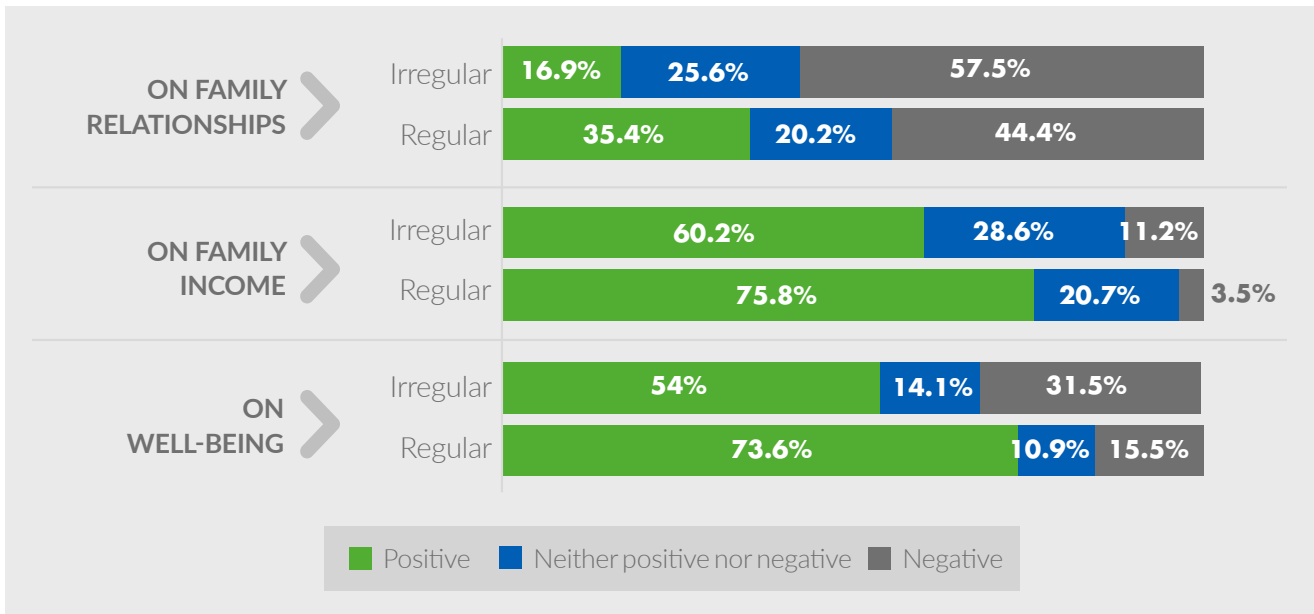
A higher percentage of regular migrants send remittances to their families compared to irregular migrants (96.5% versus 87.5%, respectively).
Households of regular migrants are 26% more likely to have received remittances in the last 5 years than those of irregular migrants.
The average monthly remittances received is higher for regular migrant households.
Remittances received by households of regular migrants are more frequently used to make investments and those investing are more decisive in their financing.
Investments in the purchase of tools or equipment for agriculture are much more frequent in the households of regular migrants.
The use of remittances for investment purposes tends to increase with the number of years remittances were received. This is more pronounced in regular migrant families.

10. Workers voiced a strong preference for migrating with H-2 visas due to lower costs and travel risks and greater earnings potential and family well-being compared to irregular migration

Workers voiced a strong preference for migrating with temporary worker visas over undocumented migration. The primary reasons are that visas:

- Require a much smaller investment, with approximately \$1,000 for visa costs versus \$15,000 to pay a human trafficker (coyote).
- Allow for a quicker, easier and less risky travel process (often air travel) compared to the high-risk illegal route requiring hiring human traffickers and traveling through Mexico and across the U.S. border.
- Generate greater remittances for families (76%), allow workers to maintain family ties by returning each year (35%) and result in a greater sense of well-being among workers (74%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Impact of migration by well-being, family income and family relationships



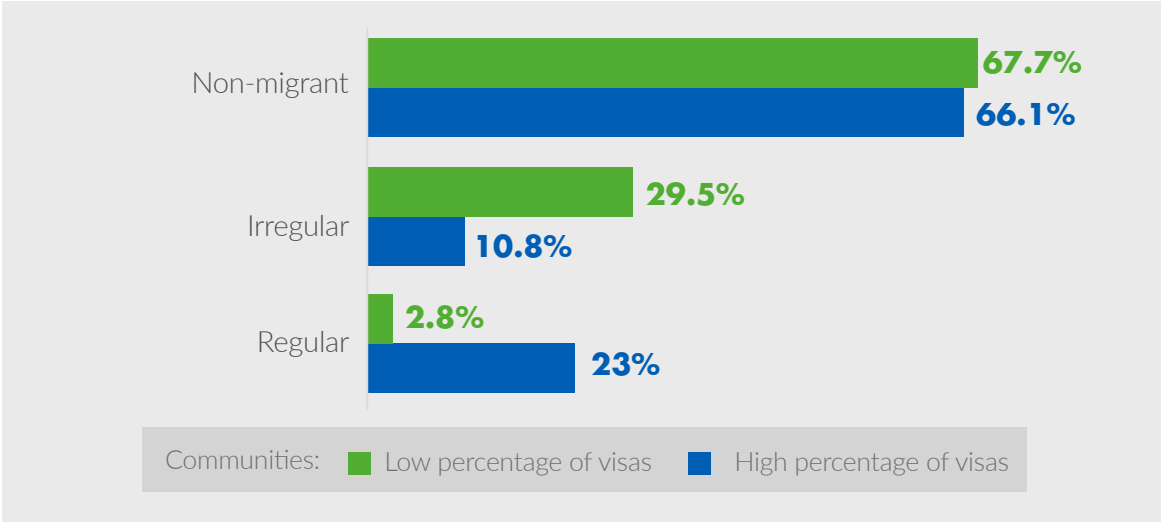
11. The availability of H-2 visas does not increase migratory intentions of nonparticipating community members, but does reduce the total number of irregular migrants

Interview results suggest the availability of visas affects both migratory intentions and the strategies for migration. Specifically:

- The availability of temporary work visas (when they are perceived as real and not as scams), causes people to postpone irregular migration while waiting for a visa (if the visa does not arrive, they will migrate irregularly).
- The presence of temporary work visas contributes to increased local employment as remittances are invested in local projects (more frequently than by irregular migrants), which generates employment and reduces migratory intentions of neighbors.

Statistical data indicates that the availability of visas does not increase migratory intent within communities. The study also found that the number of families with at least one migrant in the U.S. is similar for both communities with high percentages of visas (34%) and low percentages of visas (32%), which was not statistically significant. However, in comparing how the migration is distributed between irregular versus regular migrants, it was observed that communities with a high percentage of visas had drastically lower percentages of family members as irregular migrants (11%) (Figure 4). **Communities with low percentages of visas, by comparison, had 29% migrating irregularly. In short, the availability of visas does not increase the migratory intention, but it does drastically reduce the number of irregular migrants (in percentage terms, it reduces irregular migration by 63%).**

Figure 4: Proportion of families per migratory status in communities with high and low percentage of temporary work visa



RECOMMENDATIONS

While some recommendations may be more within the control or interest of one entity (e.g., government) than another, coordinated action can generate broader and more synergistic impacts than entities working individually.



I. STRENGTHENING THE LABOR RECRUITMENT SYSTEM IN GUATEMALA

- 1. Publish the recruiter registry implemented by the Guatemalan government and include information useful to employers.** Published information may include contact information, certifications and experience with different visa programs. This can help employers select the most appropriate recruiters for their needs and allow workers to verify the legitimacy of recruiters.
- 2. Support external recruiter certifications to ensure quality recruiters.** This may include IRIS certification from the International Organization for Migration and ISO 9001. This recommendation will help contribute to increasing the quality of recruiters and the service offered to employers.
- 3. Train registered recruiters on the procedures of all available visa programs.**
- 4. Develop and validate tools, procedures or protocols to select workers who are more responsive to employers' needs and more likely to return after visas have ended.**
- 5. Support Guatemalan government efforts to counter illegal recruitment fees and scams.**



II. DEVELOPING INCENTIVES TO FACILITATE EMPLOYER RECRUITMENT IN GUATEMALA

- 1. Train first-time workers to anticipate U.S. working and living conditions so they can function more effectively abroad.** This includes interpersonal skill training to work and live with other employees, conflict management, labor rights and access to health services, with the aim of qualifying Guatemalan workers for employers.
- 2. Generate tools and implement actions to reduce recruitment costs in Guatemala.** This may include tax reductions, negotiation of wholesale ticket purchases, decentralization of passport application and delivery, and facilitation of virtual paperwork with embassies.
- 3. Support efforts to reduce passport and visa processing times.** Among possible actions are expediting the obtaining of passports, facilitating virtual procedures, decentralizing locations and / or using secure postal mail.
- 4. Develop linkages between U.S. employers and Guatemalan recruiters and workers:** Implement a stakeholder-funded project to bring U.S. employers and recruiters to Guatemala to encourage future hiring.

This may include:

- (1) Promoting Guatemalan workers with visa processing companies, U.S. recruiters and relevant organizations representing farmers or employers.
- (2) Inviting employers to Guatemala to meet recruiters and visit communities.
- (3) Subsidizing recruitment fees with certified recruiters.
- (4) Subsidizing in-country visa processing travel expenses of first-time workers.
- (5) Offering incentives for the hiring of women.

5. Encourage changes in the structure of visa program. This action includes encouraging policymakers to consider the following suggestions:

- (1) Approve exemptions of H-2B visa caps for Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras).
- (2) Expand H-2B caps by approving returning worker exemptions in Northern Triangle countries.
- (3) Allow expedited application process for employers and workers in good standing.
- (4) Award employers and workers in good standing access to longer visa periods, thus reducing application procedures.



CONCLUSIONS

Circular migration programs have the capacity to drastically improve local livelihoods in Guatemala when compared to earnings of nonimmigrants and even irregular migrants. Furthermore, temporary visas can slow undocumented migration as most migrants prefer traveling with visas. This preference is due to visas allowing workers more opportunities to remain better connected to families and improve their income and well-being when compared to irregular migrants. Additionally, employers who recruited workers from Guatemala described a dependable and productive workforce that possessed many of the characteristics they valued.

However, there are a number of challenges to both increasing Guatemalan participation in these visa programs and expanding their capacity to improve local livelihoods and reduce irregular migration.

- **First**, employers face several challenges in participating in the H-2 visa programs, specifically a difficult, lengthy, uncertain and costly application process.
- **Second**, employers describe delays in processing workers in Guatemala due to slow Guatemalan passport and U.S. embassy procedures.
- **Third**, limited availability of formal recruitment firms in Guatemala discourages both U.S. visa processing firms and employers from recruiting in Guatemala.
- **Fourth**, the worker-to-worker selection process used by many employers can lead to recruiting workers charging illegal access fees.
- **Fifth**, the lack of clarity and understanding on how workers can access visas, combined with the scarcity of visas, creates opportunities for unscrupulous individuals to scam workers by charging for nonexistent positions.

These fees and scams decrease the positive livelihood impacts and increase the potential for workers abandoning visas in destination countries. In the past year, steps have been taken by the Guatemalan and U.S. governments to overcome challenges in the passport and embassy processing times. Additionally, new recruitment registries and services are emerging to help employers better engage with the Guatemalan workforce and reduce challenges related to illegal fees and scams.

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