

San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Gil J. Villagran

November, 2007

NAFTA is to Tijuana as NAZI was to Casablanca

Gil J. Villagran



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/gil_villagran/91/



NAFTA is to Tijuana As NAZI was to Casablanca

By Gil Villagrán, MSW

Lecturer, School of Social Work

San Jose State University

November 2007

gvillagran@casa.sjsu.edu



- As the Third Reich in 1930s Germany created an oppressive regime, causing millions to flee Germany and other occupied nations, desperately seeking escape from war, forced labor and death camps...



- Refugees traveled throughout Europe to France, then by ship to Algeria, then overland to Casablanca
- From there by plane to Lisbon, and then on to freedom in the Americas.



- So today the Refugees of NAFTA travel by bus, car or foot to Tijuana desperately seeking to reach America



NAFTA: North American Free Trade Agreement



- What it is: a tri-lateral free trade agreement (U.S., Mexico, Canada)
- What it says: capital and goods may cross borders without tariffs or constraints (but not workers)
- What it does: changes the dynamics and economics of production and trade



The promise of NAFTA

- Increased jobs in each country
- Increased productivity
- (lower costs = higher profits)
- Increased standard of living for all workers in each nation





Immediate changes along the Mexican border



- The Maquiladora belt: massive factories built along the border
- Jobs for workers flooding the border from the long time impoverished South (of Mexico and Central America)
- Yet no infrastructure for arriving workers (homes, schools, roads, police, healthcare, consumer markets, public utilities)



Changes in the U.S.: the case of General Electric



- GE light bulb factory in Indiana paying
- Union wages (\$ 8-24 per hour)
- Factory moved to Ciudad Juarez (across border from El Paso, Texas)
- Most U.S. workers lost their jobs, some re-assigned to Mexico to supervise / train their replacements
- Wages in Mexico: \$ 6-8 per day
- GE profits rise, buys NBC network



Nothing stays the same, a bad situation can get worse



- Runaway shops keep running in race to the bottom
- Maquiladoras leaving Mexico for lower wages
- In China, Vietnam, Okinawa, Haiti, Africa
- Nike factory in Vietnam: \$.18 / hr.
- I-pod factory in Hong Kong: \$.27 (after housing & meals, 15 hr./day, 6 day/week)
- U.S. protectorate Pacific territories
- Desperate workers from China contracted to slave-like conditions



Maize



- Maize is the staple food of Mexico: eaten in every meal
- Most of Mexico was rural, and maize was grown everywhere, even on rocky soil without irrigation
- If a family had maize, they ate



Corn is grown in most states of the U.S.



- Corn grown with irrigation, fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, machine harvested, and now bio-engineered corn may not be healthy to eat, but it is perfect to the eyes
- Corn is the most highly subsidized agricultural product in the U.S.
- Subsidy: \$ 9 b in 2005, \$ 51 billion in ten years
- NAFTA enables U.S. corn to flood Mexico at lower prices than Mexican-grown corn
- First year of NAFTA, 525% increase in corn exports to Mexico



The consequence of U.S. corn imports to Mexico



- Subsistence farmers cannot sell their corn even in their own village
- Regional mercados are flooded with corn from Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, etc.
- Perfect looking American corn is cheaper than Mexican corn—the poor always buy the least expensive (like wonderbread)



Mexican farmers stop growing corn that they cannot sell



- They grow only for familial subsistence
- They leave their land to seek urban jobs
- Mexican cities grow exponentially-creating
- Infrastructure stress that cannot be ameliorated by inadequate government resources
- Without jobs, workers migrate to Northern Mexico, which is more industrialized, yet unable to provide jobs for all at livable wages



Living along the border



- Maquiladoras and squatter shanty towns
- Working conditions: toxicity inside & runoff into communities
- Wages: \$ 7 per day, \$ 2 bus/day
- Half-day wages for gallon of milk
- Housing: “parachuted” squatter shanty towns
- Roads: either dust or mud
- Health issues: air & water pollution infections endemic
- School slots by lottery, \$100 costs



Facing the American Dream El Sueño Americano Just across the border ...



- Wages differences: from \$ 7/day to \$ 7/hr., \$25/hr. in construction
- Living in an alien land, yet all too similar
- Most Mexicans have family in the U.S.
- Many villages empty of young men who send money to family (often most of their earnings, \$24b in 2006, \$13b from Calif., \$10b from San Diego County)
- Families strategize to send a member to the U.S. to ensure their survival
- Children without fathers, wives without husbands
- Men in the U.S. without their families



Crossing the 2,000 mile border



- Resident visas: almost impossible to obtain (ten year wait, must have \$ or family sponsor)
- Coyotes (smugglers) charge \$2,000 +
- Desert crossing more dangerous
- 80% deported, 10% keep trying, 50% finally go back home, 40% find jobs in Tijuana
- 500 die each year, 4,000 since 1994
- Border fence (\$ 7 billion cost)



Tijuana: city of unfulfilled dreams



- Border crossers are deported every day
- Some deported after spending all their money, being robbed, beaten up
- Nowhere to return to, desperate to try again
- La Casa del Inmigrante (homeless shelter for recently deported males, 180 beds)
- 15-day limit, 3 entries (food, shelter, job referral, clothing, assistance to contact family)



Many deported immigrants realize they have limited options at home



- The poverty of dying villages, growing corn that cannot be sold, family that has moved away
- Efforts to create a life in border cities, working at maquiladoras
- Government developments: building two cities for 500,000 families
- But 200,000 new shanties being built every year in desert plateaus, ravines
- Tijuana is now third largest city in Mexico



La Morita community development



- Churches and NGO collaboration
- Health clinic, daycare, youth club
- Home building project:
- St. Julie's Catholic Church in South San Jose
- San Enrique Church in La Morita (outside Tijuana)
- 25 volunteers build **two homes** in one week
- Seven double garage doors to create two-room homes (cost \$25,000 materials + volunteer labor)
- Two very happy families, 248,000 to go!



The problem is massively bigger than any solution contemplated or funded



- The problem must be seen as bi-national
- Neither the U.S. nor Mexico alone can solve or even seriously affect the issue of the longest and most inequitable border in the world
- Mexico needs economic development to create jobs for all, the U.S. needs commodities (food and goods) without the need to cross an ocean
- Both governments must develop joint strategic solutions if we are to solve the tragic problems presented by post NAFTA consequences
- NASCO proposal: North American Super Corridor where workers can cross borders to meet employment needs, family unification or visits



Implications for Social Work and Human Rights



- Human and community development must be planned by those affected and funded bi-nationally to create real economic and social justice in both nations
- Based on economic reality: Mexico needs jobs with livable wages,
- The U.S. needs workers (ex. 95% of farm workers in the U.S. are undocumented)