WORLD EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME RESEARCH

Working Paper

Rural Employment Policy Research Programme

MEXICO: COMMERCIALISATION AND THE GROWTH OF A MIGRATORY LABOUR MARKET

by

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This paper forms part of a number of case studies planned by the Rural Policies Branch of the World Employment Programme on "Labour Markets, Poverty and Rural Development," being coordinated by Samir Radwan.

The main theme of these studies is the investigation of rural labour situations, especially as they affect the rural labour force in Third World countries. This follows from past research which has focussed on explanations of impoverishment at the macro level (entitlement to assets and land tenure systems) and secondly on macro policy options (agrarian reform). The present project aimed at examining both the explanation of impoverishment and the viability of policy options at a different level: the labour markets. The starting point was the observation that the development of the type experienced by most non-socialist developing countries had produced different types of pressures on rural labour. In many cases growth was not accompanied with the creation of productive and remunerative employment. In many others agriculture had reached a stage of involution where little additional labour can be absorbed in agriculture. In land-scarce countries the landless and near landless labourers constitute the bulk of the rural poor, enter the labour market for employment and are almost totally dependent on wage employment for their livelihood. In land abundant, bimodal structures (Latin America) "marginalised peasants" find no alternative but to enter into sharecropping and labour hiring relationships under restrictive conditions. Moreover, in the dual structures (for example of Africa and Latin America) the leading sector is usually the small modern part of agriculture, while the traditional smallholder sector suffers from stagnation. In such a situation smallholders find themselves obliged to hire out their labour at least during the peak season. The impact of these migratory systems on the traditional sector of agriculture can be far reaching.

Some of the issues being investigated under these case studies are:

(a) Characteristics of the labour process and modes of employment; types of wage; extent and process of integration of the peasantry into the wage system; and socio-economic characteristics of wage labourers.

(b) Wage determination in poor agrarian economies; interlinkages between various factor markets and their effects on labour reward.

(c) Inter-relationships between various articulations of labour relations and rural poverty.
Case studies have been organised in India, Egypt, Kenya, Mexico, Peru and Turkey.

In this paper the authors survey some aspects of the rural labour market in Mexico. The paper first examines the pattern of agricultural change in Mexico and analyses its implications for demand for labour. The bulk of the paper is devoted to an exploration of a relatively new feature of the rural labour scene viz the development of a temporary migratory labour system. The system has developed rapidly over the past two decades. Currently nearly a quarter of the agricultural wage labour are seasonal migrants. Practically all of them originate from other rural areas and a high proportion are petty farmers themselves. Given the small and shrinking average size of their plots and relatively low productivity, the minifundistas are forced to supplement their meager incomes by hiring-out their labour for part of the year. The movement of labour is from the South to commercial farms in the North as well as to the plantation economy of the South.

The paper examines the underlying reasons behind and the organisation and characteristics of the seasonal migratory labour system. It brings out the hardships of travel, the often back-breaking nature of the work and the relatively low earnings for workers. Given the growing importance of temporary migratory labour not only in other Latin American countries but also elsewhere in the Third World, this paper makes a useful contribution to a better understanding of the dominant features of rural labour markets in developing countries.

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Introduction

The development of a rural labour market has tended historically to accompany the growth of commodity transactions and the parallel integration of other factor markets.

The pattern of development in the Mexican economy that has occurred in recent times offers an interesting instance of the danger of adopting rigid models of dynamic change in explaining a situation of considerable diversity. This is not to deny that the dominant trend in the Mexican economy has been the expansion of exchange relations and the commercialisation of agricultural production. However, the means by which this has been achieved and the pace of its expansion have been very specific and this is no more clearly the case than in the agricultural sector. Thus, to talk in terms of apparently exclusive categories of development runs the risk of distorting the reality. De Janvry's use of the notion of the "farmer road to capitalism", as opposed to the "Prussian way", as a means for categorising the Mexican experience points to the dangers of such an approach.¹ For it will be apparent throughout this paper that while differentiation of the peasantry is clearly far advanced, this has not led, as in the 'farmer road' typology, to the necessary proletarianisation of the majority of small holders lacking in land and capital endowments. Moreover, within Mexican agriculture it will be seen that elements from this model continue to co-exist with a pattern of transition that would more neatly fit into the 'Prussian' type, where large estates are converted into capitalist enterprises.

The conditions under which a rural labour market has evolved in the Mexican context illustrates very clearly the fact that the growth of capitalist enterprise has neither led to the emergence of mass proletarianisation in the smallholder sector nor to the dominance of particular production units in the rural areas. Rather, this growth has been based on the consolidation of regional disparities, as well as
sectoral ones, that have led to the linking up of enterprises favourably endowed with capital and land with those whose assets are effectively of labour through the increase of labour flows within the economy. In particular, this has meant the emergence of a substantial migratory labour market whose principal function is to transmit labour across regions and production units. While it would not be strictly apt to term this a dualistic structure, it is clear that the linkage itself does not necessarily lead to the suppression of one productive structure by the other. Indeed, a major characteristic of the Mexican rural labour market is the creation and subsequent utilisation of a pool of underemployed labour whose periodic sale of labour power does not preclude their continuing basic retention within the framework of petty commodity and subsistence oriented production.

The growth of a migratory, and predominantly seasonal, labour market in the agricultural sector is a relatively recent phenomenon and has been contingent on a series of major shifts in the framework of production on larger farms mainly located in the north and north west of the country. Importantly, this has not occurred at the expense of localised labour market transactions but has, instead, acted as a complement to this web of intra-regional labour markets. The fact that this has been the case and has not engendered severe shortages of labour for these local markets testifies to the existence of considerable labour surpluses, relative to land and capital assets, in most regions. While initially this condition was reflected in the outflow of labour towards the urban sector, in more recent years the importance of rural-rural migration has become the more striking feature. This derives from the set of pressures and shifts within the respective agrarian production systems that have occasioned both the demand for, and the supply of, seasonal migrant labour. This paper aims to examine the historical foundations of this linkage while also looking at the contemporary basis on which labour and capital combine with each other. This will mean that much of the focus will be directed towards the conditions under which seasonal labour inputs have become a crucial component of the production process especially in the most dynamic agricultural regions. At the same time, close attention will be paid to examining the factors that account for this release of labour from the more backward regions.
1. The Structure of the Mexican Economy

Urbanisation, Industrial Production and Government Policy since 1960

If the growth of a seasonal migratory labour market can be traced to development within the rural economy over the last two decades, it is important to realise that out-migration from rural areas is hardly a new phenomenon. Historically, however, this has been linked to the growth of urban areas and has been characterised in large measure by the role of permanent migration. This pattern of labour transfer has thus served as a vent for rural surplus labour, though its importance decreased over time. While the average growth rate of labour absorption in all sectors was in the order of 4.1 per cent per annum in the 1950s, by 1970 the rate of growth had fallen to less than 1.5 per cent. Much of this decline, as we shall see, can be attributed to constraints present in the agricultural sector, as well as the declining urban capacity for labour absorption.

Looking at the last fifty years the importance of the urban sector is reflected in the fact that in 1930 roughly a third of the population could be classified as urban, while recent estimates place the proportion at over two-thirds. Migration from rural areas accounted for much of this growth, especially in the 1940s. Thereafter, high rates of natural increase in the population of urban centres proved a more significant factor. However, it is clear that in this process of urban growth one constant feature has been the progressive concentration of population with nearly a third of the total population being contained within the seven largest cities by 1980. Mexico City and its surrounding suburbs alone account for 22 per cent of the population and growth rates in urban areas continue to exceed, by a substantial margin, those prevailing in the rural hinterland. At the same time, rural migrants to the large urban conurbations remain a major factor sustaining these differential demographic trends. In Mexico City particularly migrants from rural areas still play an important role in this process with at least two-fifths of total migratory growth being concentrated on the city.
Accompanying this increased urbanisation pattern has been, as one might expect, an appreciation in the scale and function of the industrial and service sectors of the economy. By 1980 agriculture's share of GDP had fallen to under 10 per cent. Furthermore, growth rates in industry and manufacturing were over three times those registered by agriculture. If this rate of increment remains relatively slack when compared with the previous decade, when growth rates in industry exceeded 9.1 per cent per annum, it is still important to recognise that the consolidation of the urban industrial sector had had a very pronounced impact not only on the structure of production, but also on the demand for, and utilisation of, labour. This has been reflected in the fact that by 1979 over 26 per cent of the labour force was occupied in the industrial sector and a further 37 per cent in the services sector. Between 1960 and 1979 alone the proportion of the labour force in agriculture fell from 55 per cent to less than 37 per cent. These trends were made more pronounced by the manner in which oil revenues have been utilised. As output of oil increased by nearly six times between 1958 and 1979, the revenue feed-back into the economy was substantial. The direct impact has been most striking in the oil-producing region of Tabasco itself, where high rates of in-migration have accompanied galloping local inflation and a glutting of the labour market. At a macro-level, oil revenues have mostly been channelled into the urban sector, resulting in a substantial construction boom in the first place. However, given the inability of the state to reform the fiscal structure, oil revenues increasingly came to be used as the means for driving up the public sector deficit. The resulting financial crisis of the Mexican state - a crisis that came to a head in the summer of 1982 - accordingly has had widespread implications for both the urban and agricultural sectors, a factor that will be brought out more specifically at a later stage in the paper.

The expansion of the urban economy and of the industrial sector - the most marked feature of the last decades in Mexican history - has thus been facilitated both by the set of priorities pursued by the state, as also by the manner in which oil revenues were subsequently utilised. However, despite high growth rates in the industrial and service sectors the expanded rural-urban migration of the 1960s led to problems of labour
Table 1


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population:</td>
<td>25.8m</td>
<td>34.9m</td>
<td>50.4m</td>
<td>69.8m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Population:</td>
<td>11m</td>
<td>17.7m</td>
<td>28.3m</td>
<td>43.9m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Population as % of Total:</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of Population Growth:</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of Urban Population Growth:</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

absorption. As a result, a rapidly growing urban labour pool — outside of the organised urban labour market — came into existence in most large towns. Unable to secure for themselves a sustained increase in real wage, this 'informal' labour sector lacked the capacity to achieve income stabilisation, let alone sustained employment. Partly as a response to the political pressures engendered by these developments, government administered pricing policy acted to subsidise the cost of basic provisioning in urban areas. The correlate of this was to move the terms of trade against the agricultural sector, depressing farm-gate prices and encouraging, through the use of price ratios, a shift out of basic food crop production. In particular, this meant a declining area devoted to traditional subsistence crops, such as maize and beans.

One result of this set of priorities was that by the end of the 1960s major production bottlenecks, particularly for food crops, had emerged in the agricultural sector. At the same time, a slower rate of growth in industry led to an overall diminished derived labour requirement. Indicative of the pressure exerted through inadequate grain production was the fact that while in 1925 a cropped area of some 6 million hectares could produce around 9 million tons of maize, wheat and barley for a population of around 16 million, by the late 1970s, some 15 million cropped hectares could only manage an output of 19 million tons. In the meantime, the population had more than quadrupled.

The most immediate consequence of this inability to raise food production ceilings was the growing reliance on imports of grains (see table 2) largely from the United States. This placed an additional burden on the balance of payments. For while in 1965 Mexico had a positive trade balance with the USA, by 1980 this had been transformed into an enormous deficit. It was in response to these pressures that, somewhat tardily, the state embarked upon a programme designed to raise production levels in the non-irrigated regions. Initially, concentration was on the expansion of the commercialised farming regions in the north of the country. Much of this investment took the form of irrigation inputs, as well as the proliferation of higher yielding seed inputs. That these succeeded in raising output cannot be doubted, but their
effect was both regionally specific and largely at the expense of the poorer farmers. Moreover, the most notable gains were made in wheat production, but the impact on poorer quality food crops was probably negative, as farmers switched out of their cultivation. As the greatest proportion of farm land still remains effectively rain-fed, the crucial issue was how to raise output and marketed surplus within the less commercialised, small farms located in the more backward regions. This led by degrees to an attempt to reverse earlier strategies towards the agricultural sector that had been associated with the 'stabilising development' strategy of the 1960s and the concentration on large scale irrigation programmes that emerged in the following decade. The culmination of this project of concentrating more on the rainfed regions has been the creation, in 1980, of the Sistema Alimenticio Mexicano (hereafter, SAM). Designed to ease rural unrest through an enhanced programme of developmental aid to the agricultural sector the SAM aimed to re-adjust prices, principally by pushing up the guaranteed price for maize, and at the same time increase the proportion of output purchased by public sector agencies, such as CONASUPO. In this latter regard, the history of public sector intervention has not been a particularly successful one and in the mid-1970s public sector purchases were less than 3.5 per cent of total marketed maize. The short period of operation of the SAM has not materially altered the situation. Moreover, while the larger commercial, wheat farms of the North have responded to price stimuli, the same response amongst maize and beans producers has been far weaker. The result, in the short term, despite a massive redirection of credit to the rainfed regions, has been an enhanced marketed surplus for wheat but achieved at substantial cost. It seems likely that policy based on augmenting producer prices while also directly subsidising urban consumer prices would initially have the most impact on the public sector deficit. Indeed, the financial crisis of the Mexican state has now placed continuance of the programme in a prejudicial light. At the same time, there are reasons for supposing that strategies which do not combine redistributive with manipulative policies - in other words, land redistribution with terms of trade adjustment, are unlikely to overcome the major bottlenecks in the rural
### Table 2

Mexican Grain Consumption and Imports, 1960-1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Human</th>
<th>Livestock</th>
<th>of A</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of Total Consumption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

USA-Mexican agricultural trade balance ($ X 10^6$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>-191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>-388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>805</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

economy. Furthermore, as we shall see, shifting guaranteed prices in favour of maize rather than wheat cannot deal with the very pronounced trend towards livestock farming; a trend that is evident in many contemporary Latin American economies.

State policy towards the agricultural sector has thus been characterised in the last three decades by a shifting set of priorities. Initially, in the post-war period growth was achieved by a combination of the extension of the cultivated area coupled to rising yields for the major crops. This was particularly the case for wheat and commercial non-food grain crops such as cotton and sugar cane. Much of this production growth can be attributed to the expansion of irrigation in the northern regions and was allied to massive investment in the irrigation infrastructure. One further consequence was that those areas touched by the 'green revolution' became progressively more differentiated from the backward, rainfed areas in which small-scale farms predominated. At the same time, this acceleration of commercial agricultural production allowed for the wider project of industrial growth and protection to be worked out. This was achieved not only through the absence of food imports, but also by means of major transfers, through the price system, out of agriculture into the urban, industrial sector. In addition, this was associated with a growing pattern of migration from rural areas to the highly concentrated urban growth poles. With relatively low rates of industrial labour absorption, these latter areas became the habitations of a large 'informal' sector labour force, whose potentially explosive political chemistry has acted as a major factor in ensuring institutional subsidisation of basic consumer costs. By the 1970s, however, deceleration of agricultural growth rates and sharply declining food grain output reversed these conditions. Oil revenues were used to support more interventionist policies by the public sector, though their efficacy in bridging the divide between the commercialised and partially-market integrated small scale farms has been limited. The consequence is that the absence of adequate land and capital endowments leads increasingly to a temporary transfer of labour from the backward regions to the commercialised ones. In this sense, shifts in government
Table 3

Mexico: Relative Importance of Principal Crops, 1970-79
in Terms of Cultivated Area and Value

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cultivated Area</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maize (Corn)</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fodder Crops</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oilseeds</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar cane</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

policy and the declining rate of industrial growth have aided a process of labour re-allocation. This has been consolidated by the pattern of labour demand that has accompanied the spread of different crop mixes and the growing use of machinery.

2. **Agricultural Production and the Demand for Labour**

By far the most important features of agricultural production in Mexico in recent decades have been the impact of new seeds, the extension of the cultivated area and the application of supporting inputs, such as fertilizers and pesticides. In the early 1960s these allowed gross agricultural output to grow by around 4.5 per cent per annum with crop production increasing at an even higher rate.\(^{14}\) The result was that while between 1900–1958 Mexican crop production increased some two-and-a-half times, in the five year period, 1959–1964, output more than doubled.\(^ {15}\) While, as has already been mentioned, this trend did not continue into the 1970s, one lasting consequence was the shift away from food crops into more commercial crops and into the production of fodder. In 1960, wheat, beans and maize accounted for 76 per cent of the total cropped area, ten years later this had fallen back to less than 68 per cent and at the end of the 1970s the proportion was in the order of 51 per cent. The shift out of food crops had a decided regional bias. Thus, while in the rainfed, petty-producing central tracts nearly two-thirds of all farms grew maize, in the richer northwest less than 30 per cent of units cultivated maize at all.

Linked to this process of regional cropping and income differentiation was the shift not only towards higher-value, more lucrative cash crops but also the parallel enlargement of the area devoted to pasture and fodder cropping. Again this has been most marked in the northern and northern Pacific zones, as well as in Gulf region, around Tabasco and Veracruz.\(^ {16}\) Here, it seems that the major livestock concentration is by small and middle sized farms, whereas wheat and cotton cultivation is very much an attribute of the larger enterprises. If the area under pasture is added up with that devoted to fodder and oilseeds it would appear that possibly as much as 86 per cent of area utilised in agriculture is accounted for by stock-raising. This
### Table 4

**Area Given Over to Stock Raising, 1940-1979 (in 000 hectares)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pasture Land (1)</th>
<th>Fodder Crops (2)</th>
<th>Oilseeds (3)</th>
<th>Area for Stock Raising (4)</th>
<th>Area devoted to Stock Raising &amp; Arable Cultivation (5)</th>
<th>(4) as % of (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>56,172</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>56,333</td>
<td>62,072</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>67,378</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>67,740</td>
<td>75,978</td>
<td>89.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>79,093</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>76,692</td>
<td>91,245</td>
<td>87.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>74,526</td>
<td>1,228</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>76,315</td>
<td>89,501</td>
<td>85.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>74,473</td>
<td>2,124</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>77,523</td>
<td>89,630</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>75,509</td>
<td>1,920</td>
<td>1,243</td>
<td>78,672</td>
<td>91,451</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Mexico: Indicators of Mechanisation and Improved Inputs Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improved Seed</th>
<th>Fertilizers</th>
<th>Pesticides</th>
<th>Tractors</th>
<th>Oxen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private</strong></td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ejidal</strong></td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Northern Region**:

| **Private** | 49.1 | 50.4 | 37.6 | 65.9 | 40.1 |
| **Ejidal**  | 44.4 | 41.4 | 35.9 | 63   | 47   |

**Northern Pacific**:

| **Private** | 5.4  | 30.9 | 5.9  | 12.2 | 70.9 |
| **Ejidal**  | 12.7 | 36.8 | 8.8  | 24.5 | 78.5 |

**Central**:

| **Private** | 4.4  | 24.4 | 20.7 | 11.4 | 39.3 |
| **Ejidal**  | 5.8  | 12.3 | 12   | 14.1 | 30.9 |

**Gulf**:

| **Private** | 3.9  | 8.7  | 4.8  | 10.5 | 70.9 |
| **Ejidal**  | 3.8  | 5.7  | 5.7  | 7.8  | 50.7 |

**Pacific South**:

**Regional Breakdown**

**Northern**: Coahuila, Chihuahua, Durango, Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas

**Pacific North**: Baja California Norte and Sud, Nayarit, Sinaloa, Sonora

**Central**: Aguascalientes, Distrito Federal, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Mexico, Michoacan, Morelos, Puebla, Queretaro, Tlaxcala

**Gulf**: Campeche, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatan

**Pacific South**: Chiapas, Colima, Guerrero, Oaxaca

**Source**: CEPAL, Vol. 2, Cuadro II—pp. 43 ff.
in itself is clearly one major reason for the inability to raise food production ceilings at a rate commensurate with domestic demand. At the same time, it is clear that labour absorption in pasture farming remains far lower than in arable cultivation.

The major shifts in the agrarian sector that had thus occurred in the 1960s, whilst achieving yield increases of over 7 per cent per annum through the 1960s for wheat, and between 2/2.8 per cent for corn and beans, served additionally to exaggerate regional differentiation, one correlate of which was the change in labour requirements within Mexican agriculture. This resulted not only from the impact of mechanisation in the commercialised areas, but also due to the movement away from traditional, basic subsistence crops with their higher labour absorbing properties.

Any understanding of this process necessarily requires some knowledge of the regional character of the Mexican economy. For a start, it should be pointed out that urban, industrial production and labour demand has been concentrated on the major conurbations, particularly Mexico City, the great proportion of which are located in the central part of the country. With the growing prosperity of the northern regions - coupled to their proximity to the United States - the expansion of 'offshore' assembling for North American enterprises has somewhat diversified the locational aspect of industry. However, the labour demand set up by these offshore units is very specific, being almost entirely for female labour, and the quantity of labour inputs is not high. Even for the major industrial and manufacturing sectors the labour demand is mostly for semi-skilled and skilled labour. This suggests that entry into these occupations is rarely an option for rural migrants to the towns. Thus, while substitutability may exist between seasonal construction workers and the type of labour required by agricultural enterprises, there is evidence of some degree of segmentation in the respective labour markets. This results, given the generally capital-intensive nature of the industrial technology, in rural migrants being pushed into the 'informal' labour market.
By contrast, the rural labour market does not display the same type of segmentation. In part this is changing under the impetus of mechanisation, so that an important component of the overall labour input on the larger northern commercial farms is comprised of skilled workers, such as tractor drivers. However, this is by no means a widespread phenomenon, a fact that is important in explaining the scale and function of seasonal migratory movements. By 1970, it has been estimated that the number who fall into this latter category exceeds 24 per cent of the total agricultural wage labour force, their function being to harvest a range of commercial crops outside of the regions in which their own ejidal plots are located. For if a proportion of this labour force is comprised of landless labour, the bulk are petty farmers themselves supplementing their meagre on-farm incomes by hiring-out their labour. This very labour force constitutes in itself a series of links between various agro-ecological zones within the economy.

One very significant migratory channel bridges the predominantly food crop producing regions of the south and centre to the prosperous, irrigated districts of the north. For it is in the latter region that traditionally the largest proportion of government and private credit has been directed. Appropriating, even as late as 1978, nearly half the total credit directed towards the rural sector, investment in the northern region has allowed for a sustained pattern of growth in agricultural output and in commercial cropping in particular. A somewhat similar orientation can be found in the lowlands along the Gulf Coast. In these dynamic regions cotton, wheat, sugar cane, coffee and market fruit farming, as well as livestock raising, predominates. The shift away from maize/corn and bean cultivation has been pronounced.

By and large it can also be asserted that commercialisation has markedly enhanced regional prosperity, though in a severely differential way. GDP per economically active person in the agricultural sector in the northern regions is as much as three times higher than that in the majority of southern and central districts, while data on income distribution suggests a strong short-term trickle-down effect accompanying a longer term trend towards stratification.
### Table 6

**Economically Active Labour Force in Agriculture by Socio-Economic Group and Sub-Sector, Mexico, 1970**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Large Private Farms</th>
<th>Small Private Farms</th>
<th>Ejidos</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large Scale Employers</td>
<td>19,900</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>19,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaried Employees</td>
<td>28,333</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2,858</td>
<td>31,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Wage Earners</td>
<td>255,949</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>255,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small-scale Employers</td>
<td>395,241</td>
<td>467,024</td>
<td>1,307,607</td>
<td>2,169,872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day-Labourers</td>
<td>1,341,344</td>
<td>179,239</td>
<td>747,537</td>
<td>2,268,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Workers</td>
<td>194,196</td>
<td>229,466</td>
<td>642,475</td>
<td>1,066,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,234,963</td>
<td>875,729</td>
<td>2,700,477</td>
<td>5,811,169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Van Ginneken, op. cit.*
But if commercialisation has involved a shift in cropping, leading to both higher productivity and an increase in regional income disparities, both processes are fundamentally linked to conditions pertaining in the market for land and in the size distribution of operated holdings. Here, the problem of land holding is made more complex by the existence of ejidos, the creation of successive waves of land reform that date back to the period following the Porfiriato. Strengthened in particular during Cardenas' presidency ejidal land comprised nearly half the total cultivated area by 1950. While the ejido is constituted as communal property with private usufruct rights, the majority of cultivators are minifundistas. Their lands moreover tend to be concentrated in rainfed areas. Access to credit, given the institutional framework of the ejido, has been extremely restricted so that, unsurprisingly, overall productivity - in physical terms - when compared with the private sector, has been low. Even if calculated in terms of social productivity - a calculation that suggests the minifundista ejido to be the most productive unit - the fact remains that over one in five of the total ejido holdings are less than 1 hectare and more than 50 per cent are under 4 hectares.

The fragmentary data available on income distribution suggest that low land and capital endowments in the minifundio sector results in correspondingly diminished incomes. Using a basic cut-off level of 1,621 pesos as a proxy for the poverty line, Bergsman has estimated that of those families falling below this point at least one-third were ejidatarios.

Part of the reason behind the predominance of low income levels for petty producers in the more traditional agricultural regions is the fact that entry into the labour market is only a partial means by which income levels can be augmented. With the potentially economically active population growing by over 44 per cent in the decade, 1970-1980, one consequence has been a worsening in the degree of underemployment in agriculture. Van Ginneken estimates that broadly 4 out of 5 million remunerated economically active persons in agriculture are productively employed for less than 150 days a year, a rate of underemployment that is
### Table 7

**Mexico: Distribution of Land Holdings, 1923-1970**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number (000)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Area (000 hectares)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Average Size (hectares)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before Reform - 1923</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private Farms</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 hectares</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1,230</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - 100</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8,660</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 - 1000</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19,100</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>130,115</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>10,009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>622</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>159,102</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post-Reform - 1970</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private Farms</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 hectares</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>881</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - 100</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8,436</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 - 1000</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18,986</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>41,840</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4,184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ejidalarios</strong></td>
<td>1,986</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>60,724</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2,896</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>130,867</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 8

**Type of Farm**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mechanised, Commercial</th>
<th>Commercial, non-mechanised</th>
<th>Subsistence non-market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of Farms (000)</td>
<td>200.1</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td>1,479.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ejidos</td>
<td>120.3</td>
<td>676.2</td>
<td>1,062.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>463.8</td>
<td>412.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Incomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pesos/farm</th>
<th>Pesos/farm</th>
<th>Pesos/farm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of Farms (000)</td>
<td>200.1</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td>1,479.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ejidos</td>
<td>120.3</td>
<td>676.2</td>
<td>1,062.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>463.8</td>
<td>412.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

more pronounced amongst small-holders. This situation was already visible in the 1960s when the annual growth in the potential supply of labour exceeded the demand for remunerated labour (2.6 per cent as against 2.3 per cent per annum), but with slackening growth rates in both the primary and secondary sectors since 1975, the degree of underemployment can only be assumed to have worsened.

An indication of the magnitude of the problem is given in the fact that as early as 1969 possibly as much as 45 per cent of the labour force could be classified as underemployed, of which over 60 per cent were in the primary sector. This very high proportion of underemployed labour is a reflection of a number of factors: low productivity, sharp demographic rates of increase and an inadequate command over resources and credit within the numerically preponderant ejidal sector. The majority of minifundistas, lacking access to irrigation, new seeds and secure marketing networks, and cultivating over half the current disposable cropland are consequently forced into the labour market. In the 1960s this frequently took the form of migration to the cities, while more recently it took increasingly the form of migrant labour. Regions characterised by the existence of large farms and where differentiation amongst the peasantry is more pronounced draw consciously upon this pool of labour to satisfy the seasonal harvesting requirements. In all, possibly as many as one-and-a-half million labourers look to this migrant demand for temporary employment.

For the overwhelming majority "push" factors lie behind the need to migrate. Even if migration does not necessarily result in sufficient work or a reliable and attractive wage, it does at least offer the prospect of a chance to earn. From the other end of the spectrum, those who employ migrant labour are attracted by the low-wage, non-organised nature of the labour force at their disposal, while, in addition, the reproduction costs of labour are borne to a major extent by labour itself. This is not merely the consequence of low wages, but of the dual function that a significant proportion of the labour force performs, straddling the spheres of wage labour and periodic petty commodity production on their own plots.
Alongside the growth of a seasonal migrant labour market, it is clear that the pattern of land distribution, with its sharp inequalities, gives a very definite structure to the supply of labour across farm sizes. In the commercially developed regions comprising the states of Sonora, Sinaloa, Nayarit and Baja California distribution of land in both the *ejidal* and private sector is pronouncedly skewed. In the private sector agricultural capitalists and commercial peasant enterprises account for over 85 per cent of the cultivated area, while in the *ejidal* sector there is a marked tendency towards the emergence of a class of prosperous peasant farmers. The poorer *minifundistas*, alone comprising about 38 per cent of the *ejidatarios* and over 31 per cent of the *campesinos* in the private sector, act as a labour pool for the more prosperous cultivators and farmers of the region. This situation is even more pronounced in the less dynamic beans and maize producing tracts of the centre and south. \(^{28}\) Here, the great majority of holdings are unable to afford their proprietors sufficient even for subsistence. In the central region, for instance, over 60 per cent of all cultivators fell into this category and the proportion is even higher in the southern Pacific tracts of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Colima and Guerrero (see table 9). Yet, this does not imply that agriculture has acquired the quality of universal misery. Rather — as in the north — differentiation, both within the *ejidal* and private sectors, is advanced and leads as a result through an increasingly skewed pattern of land ownership and command over resources to the development of two, often distinct, elements within the rural labour market.

In the first instance, this structure of land control leads to a growing proportion of outright wage labourers in the total agricultural labour force. By 1970, of the 20 per cent of the total economically active labour force that was classified as day labourers, over four-fifths were working in agriculture. \(^{29}\) Parallel to this, the number of small cultivators whose sown area is inadequate to absorb their and their family's disposable labour time has increased substantially. On the other side of the coin, there is a more pronounced need on the part of cultivators and agricultural capitalists with adequate size holdings to hire-in labour on a seasonal, harvest basis.
# Table 9

Agricultural Sector: Holdings by Class and by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Producer</th>
<th>Total No. Producers</th>
<th>Total No. Producers</th>
<th>Northern Region</th>
<th>Pacific North</th>
<th>Central Region</th>
<th>Gulf Region</th>
<th>Pacific South</th>
<th>Total No. Producers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ejido Sector</td>
<td>1,763,933</td>
<td>793,137</td>
<td>479,897</td>
<td>164,777</td>
<td>1,140,391</td>
<td>331,184</td>
<td>460,821</td>
<td>2,557,070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Sector</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Campesinas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Below Subsistence</th>
<th>52.3%</th>
<th>63.1%</th>
<th>55.7</th>
<th>14.3</th>
<th>61</th>
<th>44.7</th>
<th>63.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subsistence</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginally surplus</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surplus</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Transitional Producers**

| 12.2 | 10.3% | 10.6 | 31.3 | 9.2 | 15.3 | 9.8 |

**Agricultural Capitalists**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total No. Producers</th>
<th>Total No. Producers</th>
<th>Northern Region</th>
<th>Pacific North</th>
<th>Central Region</th>
<th>Gulf Region</th>
<th>Pacific South</th>
<th>Total No. Producers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Northern Region:** Coahuila; Chihuahua; Durango; Nuevo León; San Luis Potosí; Tamaulipas; Zacatecas

**Pacific North:** Baja California North and South; Nayarit; Sinaloa; Sonora

**Central Region:** Aguascalientes; Federal District; Guanajuato; Hidalgo; Jalisco; Mexico; Michoacan; Morelos; Puebla; Querétaro; Tlaxcala

**Gulf Region:** Campeche; Quintana Roo; Tabasco; Veracruz; Yucatán

**Pacific South:** Chiapas; Colima; Guerrero; Oaxaca


**Classification:**

- **Campesinos:** Below subsistence - less than 4 hectares. Subsistence - 4/8 hectares. Marginally Surplus - 8/12 hectares. Surplus - 12 hectares.

- **Transitional Producers:** Those who hire-in labour to a significant degree.

- **Agricultural Capitalists:** Those who cultivate almost entirely with hired labour.
Hiring-in of labour takes a wide variety of forms and extends to a genuinely broad range of producers, even to those with holdings of 2 hectares in some areas. Hiring of labour on small plots can principally be explained by the fact that at the lower end of the agricultural scale, the cultivation process tends to be very labour intensive. In the rather backward Mixteca Baja region, for example, it is interesting to note that in a corn and beans cultivation cycle current average deployment of household labour is in the order of 172 man-days per annum on their own land. This amounts to roughly 66 per cent of the total household labour input on and off the farm. However, over two-thirds of the farms normally hired day labourers and their labour input amounted, on average, to a further 68 man-days. As the average holding is less than 3 hectares, it is clear that size of plot is not necessarily an accurate index to the extent of hiring-in.

Elsewhere, in some of the intermediate agricultural zones, labour demand may in fact be somewhat less pronounced than in backward tracts. A recent study of prosperous ejidal peasant enterprises in Las Huastecas (San Luis Potosi) reveals that with holdings averaging over 7 hectares and a production geared to on-farm consumption and low levels of monetised inputs, households in the sample average 275 man-days with only a further 52 man-days accounted for by hired labour.

It is, by contrast, in the predominantly irrigated areas where monetised inputs attain a significantly high level that demand for hired labour gains the most prominence. In the Bajio area (Guanajato) where capitalist farmers predominate, there is a strong positive correlation between farm size, purchased inputs, commercial cropping and hired labour utilisation.

The demand for labour that thus comes into existence across all agricultural regions tends to be satisfied, for the most part, through local networks of recruitment and labour provision. But beside this local rural labour market—a market that often displays a wide range of contractual forms, including sharecropping—there exists a parallel,
yet regionally specific, labour market which draws upon migratory labour and whose requirements are highly seasonal. Whereas in many of the intermediate regions hired-in labour is predominantly local and not necessarily entirely concentrated in the harvest season, the opposite is true for much of the commercial crop production in the dynamic regions, as well as the coffee and cotton plantations in Chiapas and Oaxaca. Such areas act as poles of attraction for migrant labour, some of whom then, in the northern regions at least, attempt to cross into the USA. Elsewhere in the south this migratory labour force is complemented and in some cases competes with similar workers from neighbouring Guatemala and El Salvador.

The demand for labour that is generated by commercialised agriculture differs not only in terms of its deployment of labour across the agricultural year but derives more fundamentally from the labour-absorbing capacities of individual crops (see table 10). Those, such as cotton and sugar cane which tend to be characterised by high overall labour input requirement, tend also to be those that demand a far more uneven spread of that labour across the agricultural year. In the case of cotton, for instance, between 40/50 per cent of labour input is concentrated in the harvest period. These patterns of labour utilisation are meshed in with the structure of landholding and production. Thus, in the predominantly wheat, cotton, fodder crop and fruit producing tracts of the north the dominance of larger enterprises has led to higher levels of capital investment in agriculture. As a result, mechanisation is most evident in these areas and this serves as a means for depressing labour absorption, while reorganising to some extent the demand for categories of labour. Semi-skilled work (e.g. tractor drivers, irrigation workers) has tended to displace the previous reliance on unskilled labour and the greater mechanisation of cultivation has set up a requirement for a diminished, yet more permanent labour force, particularly in wheat growing areas (e.g. Sonora).

Where mechanisation has been less advanced, as with cotton, coffee, cane and fruit cropping, the demand for labour, with its strong seasonal component, exceeds local supply. This requirement is filled by migrant
Table 10

Total Unskilled Man-Days, 1975/79 (millions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop</th>
<th>Cultivated Area-Hectares</th>
<th>Mechanised*</th>
<th>Partially Mechanised*</th>
<th>Non-Mechanised*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>320,841</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee</td>
<td>386,113</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>n.a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>42,245</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar Cane</td>
<td>505,828</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>n.a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorghum</td>
<td>1,334,158</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfalfa</td>
<td>206,643</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>288,769</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>1,255,537</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>79.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maize/Corn</td>
<td>6,741,412</td>
<td>163.1</td>
<td>242.6</td>
<td>343.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>745,818</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomatoes</td>
<td>62,122</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soya</td>
<td>285,600</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesame</td>
<td>234,589</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Input of unskilled mandays (millions).

Source: Calculated from CHAC statistics; Anuario Estadistico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 1980. Mexico City, 1982, Cuadro 4.2.1.
labour. In Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas, for instance, the importance of coffee in the local economies derives not only from its high commodity value vis-à-vis other crops but also with regard to this seasonal migratory labour force that is required to complete the picking. In the northern regions, cotton is the major crop attracting this form of labour.

3. The Structure of the Migrant Labour Market

The emergence of a major migrant rural labour market thus derives from a continuing pressure on the base of the land holding structure. In particular this has important implications for the small-holding ejidatarios who look to the labour market to supplement low on-farm generated incomes. In this regard, the growth of commercial farming both in the north and in the older plantation areas in the south of the country acts as a means for preserving, if on an increasingly tenuous basis, the minifundio sector as a labour pool.

Despite the growing size of this migrant labour force, the literature on the subject remains very limited. What follows will thus be an attempt to describe the framework in which this flow of labour occurs. A number of key areas in which seasonal migrants are a crucial input to the production process have been selected. These include the northern cotton plantations of Baja California and Sonora, their counterparts in the southern states of Chiapas and Tapachula, as also the highland coffee plantations in Chiapas and Xicon Tepec de Juarez (Puebla).

Recruitment of this seasonal migrant labour force occurs only partly spontaneously. Reliance on word of mouth is complemented by the use of advertisements in local papers, radio announcements and distribution of posters, handbills and the like. In addition, employers or their agents use the local authorities to aid the dissemination of this publicity.

In the cotton growing tracts of Sonora, Tapachula and Chiapas the whole process is set in motion by some five or six experienced workers signed up specifically for this purpose. Two months prior to the harvest
these recruiters disseminate by radio and handbill news of the impending cotton harvest in the Yaqui Valley. The announcements mention that "cotton pickers are needed to harvest 40,000 hectares", while also adding that fares and medical care would be provided. This news is passed through some twelve states outside the northern region. In all the recruiters aim to reach nearly 500 key ejidos, principally in Jalisco, Michoacan, Durango and Guanajato.

Since 1958 formal control over the process of recruitment has lain in the hands of the "Comision Mixta para el Control de Pizcactores de Algodon" — a body established by local government and managed by the cotton producers. Its aim is to coordinate the recruitment of migrant labour, thereby depressing the costs born by individual farmers. For a payment of 15 pesos per ton of cotton, the farmers can use the Commission's services, as well as being entitled to a federal subsidy of 50 per cent towards the peon's fare. By this means cotton farmers in the prosperous Yaqui Valley recruit their seasonal labour force of some 35/40,000 workers mainly from the poorer southern and central regions. Much the same can be said for the additional 10,000 peons involved in the picking of the cotton crop in the coastal zone of Hermosillo. Attracted by the possibility of work the migrant labour force habitually travels significant distances in response to the Commission's announcements. In the past — up to 1965 — to supplement this source of labour the farmers and Commission also drew upon the thousands of peons waiting at or near the US border for their entry visas. Making a condition of exit the possession of a 'carta', the Commission extracted in return labour from these peons wishing to leave the country. In one plantation this corvée-like labour involved picking over 2,000 kgs of cotton per peon — work that would, at the least, occupy some 40 days in the fields.

However, if more recent methods of labour procurement have drawn on a mixture of 'partial' cultivators and outright wage labourers, one striking characteristic of the labour market in the cotton areas is that of over-supply. In a very real sense, this appears to be a strategy evolved by the Commission. In the Yaqui Valley, for instance, while a
labour force of around 9,000 peons is required, recruitment in 1980/81 exceeded 40,000. By glutting the labour market, farmers can depress wages and ensure a more favourable contractual transaction.

4. The Recruitment and Transportation of Migrant Peon Labour

Migrant labour tends to be recruited by a number of different methods. On the one hand, there is the dissemination of knowledge by word of mouth or through local dialect-speaking workers - one of whom acts as an agent for the Commission or farmers. Sometimes, as in the case of the strawberry industry in Zamora, peons are collected by the estate owners from local railway stations or town squares. Alternatively, in areas far distant from the prospective place of work the more formalised channels of labour procurement that have been described above are resorted to. For all processes the availability of labour is in part a function of the local harvests and prices, as years of plenty tend to lead to a declining availability of migrant labour.

At harvest time the peons tend to move initially by rail, then being collected from the local railheads by trucks belonging to their future employers. This is the case not only on the cotton farms but also for the hundred thousand peons that are involved in harvesting vegetables in Sinaloa, as also the migrant workers on the coffee estates in areas like Xicontepec de Juarez, Puebla and in Tapachula where seasonal labour demand exceeds 20,000 peons. In the highlands of Chiapas, the labour force used for harvesting the 150,000 hectares devoted to coffee is predominantly Indian. While a large number are locally recruited from the small indigenous communities that surround the main town in the region - San Cristobal de las Casas - additional supplies of labour come from Guatemala in the harvest season. The coffee producers themselves rarely recruit directly but instead rely on local enganchadores (recruiters) or use the Agricultural Labourers' Union for this purpose.

The recruiters work on a commission basis. On the one hand, the caporal, someone who normally lives in one of the communities, announces in local dialect the going wage rate, assembles up to 50 peons and then
having taken them to town, 'sells' them to an enganchador. The rate at which this exchange occurs fluctuates quite widely but may be as high as 15 pesos per head and would also include the cost of the peons' bus fares to San Cristobal.

Once the Indian labour has 'changed hands', the enganchador is responsible for registering them with the local union (10 pesos per head), paying the municipal tax of 2 pesos and arranging for the transport to the coffee estates. The peons are normally given an advance of 20 pesos and a further 70 pesos for their travel expenses. The system thus works to the benefit not only of the coffee producers - many of whom are relatively recent German immigrants - but also provides income for the recruiters and the local union. The latter acts merely as a legal device, sanctioning the recruitment of Indian labour and receiving in return a fixed sum per recruited peon. In addition, the union periodically exacts sums of money from the enganchadores.

The whole process of labour recruitment in the coffee region of Chiapas is thus highly organised. The costs of recruitment are mostly born by the coffee producers. Each peon recruited effectively incurs a cost of 413 pesos to the grower, out of which 10 pesos goes to the caporal, a further 10 pesos to the union and 70 pesos to the enganchador. The latter having deducted a number of costs normally manages to net a profit per peon of 50 pesos. As at least 30,000 Indian migrant workers are recruited through San Cristobal for the Chiapas coffee region, the sums involved are considerable with the most prosperous enganchadores earning up to 1 million pesos a year. In addition, non-official recruiters with lower overhead costs account for nearly a third of the total labour supplied and their margins are, if anything, greater. The latter are frequently used by the growers to complement the labour provided by the official recruitment channels. At the same time, this ensures that the union and registered enganchadores are unable to entrench their positions so firmly that they could potentially control the labour market.

The use of official recruiters and middlemen is, thus, quite widespread. They range from small time agents working in their villages who then get hired as foremen, to the rather more defined practices of
sub-contracting that exist in Chiapas, as elsewhere. The Sonora
landowners, for example, commonly hire peons and offer them a rate of
1,500 pesos per hectare. These selected few then recruit other workers
from the surplus labour regions of the Centre and South, forming a group,
which they pay at the rate of 1,200 pesos per hectare. The difference is
their profit.

Somewhat different from these "mobile middlemen" are the fixed,
institutionalised patterns of labour recruitment, such as the "Joint
Commission for the Control of Cotton Pickers in Sonora" and the channels
of labour recruitment for the sugar mills. But overall public or
government organised recruitment channels are by no means as pervasive as
those created and sustained by private bodies. Here, normally, the local
associations of producers or individual farmers organise the collection
of peon labour from local centres in which the workforce congregates.
This also tends to be the case when the crop has been purchased prior to
picking by a merchant or outside contractor.

One can thus see that the pattern of labour supply, despite being
varied, in the seasonal peak periods tends, for the major crops, to
possess a number of common, dominant features. While recruitment for
coffee picking is often directed towards local subsistence cultivators
and migrant Indian labour from Guatemala, for cotton and grape picking in
the north the majority of the labour force is extra-local. In all
instances, the majority of workers are themselves "partial cultivators"
whose plots are unable to provide an adequate income and subsistence.

Having left their homes these migrants settle for the season in a
number of villages and towns proximate to their workplace. In the Yaqui
Valley, where nearly 20 per cent of the irrigated area is sown with
cotton, the numbers involved in recent years have been in the order of
40/45,000 peons per annum. Once having arrived they are distributed
across 7/8 local villages, spending the nights there and being picked up
each morning for work by truck. In all, the harvest season lasts a month
and a half (45 days) and in this time their homes are mainly the dirt
tracks - or street dividers - of the local villages. In each village, in
the heat of summer — some 8,000 persons spread themselves out along these dividers by night. Hardly surprisingly, the social problems — let alone those of hygiene — are often acute and this is compounded by the fact that due to the oversupply of labour the arrival and subsequent departure of the trucks early in the morning invariably leaves behind a large number of unemployed peons. When, as in the 1980/81 season, mechanised reapers begin to be used, the problem is only made worse.

A very similar set of conditions exists in the commercial cotton and grape producing areas along the coast of Hermosillo in the north of the country. Here, the township of Miguel Aleman — known to the peons as "Calle 12" — now houses around 12,000 migrant workers. They are clustered into the township — itself surrounded by a barbed wire fence (Fig. 1) — where between 1,000/2,000 peons are guarded by two policemen. The township acts as an intermediate stage through which this migrant labour force passes on its way to the worksite. Room rents are exhorbitantly high — 10 pesos a night for sleeping in the corridor and 60 pesos for a room — while facilities are almost non-existent. Crime is rampant and local recruiters and the police effectively prey upon the migrant workers. In short, the very process of seeking work has itself become an ordeal.

5. **Characteristics of the Migrant Labour Force and Labour Process**

The type of labour required for seasonal work varies according to crop. Grape picking, for instance, is normally done by women and children, while for cutting down other fruits — such as guavas and bananas — adult male labour is employed. The packing is, however, done by children for the most part. For the major seasonal crops — coffee and cotton — the labour force is mixed and varied according to region. For the Hermosillo coast cotton farms of those classified as "single males" in 1979 the majority were over 30 years of age, though in general the migrant workforce tends to be younger.
"CALLE 12"
Coast of Hermosillo, Sonora District

Figure 1
An additional factor is the regional preferences that exist. In the northern areas peons from the south - from Oaxaca - are often preferred to those from Sinaloa as they are less tall and have a reputation for being docile. Much the same qualities are attributed by the Chiapas coffee farmers to the Guatemala peons who compete with the local labour for work.

Work conditions are often harsh and in some cases sufficiently burdensome to demand a predominantly young labour force. In the wealthy oil-producing region of Poza Rica in Veracruz, for instance, picking of oranges requires the peon to transport, in the 4/5 months he is employed there, at least 120 tons of oranges. Every day the peon makes several trips between the orchard and the truck that will cart the produce away, carrying on his back between 90/125 kgs of oranges. To dump the fruit into the lorry itself requires mounting a 4 1/2 metre ladder - a work process sufficiently strenuous to ensure that only those peons under 32/35 years are hired. Once they get beyond that age, they are replaced by younger workers eager to secure the daily wage of 300 pesos.

Apart from often back-breaking labour, migrant workers tend also to face more modern problems associated with the use of insecticides and sprays. This is particularly the case with vegetable picking. Yet, the most striking feature of the labour processes in which migrant workers are implicated remains the intensity of work and the severely fluctuating and often depressed levels of real wages.

An indication of the intensity of labour inputs in the seasonal peak periods can be seen in the case of the Sonora (Yaqui Valley) cotton pickers. Here, work in the fields often continues at night in the early hours before dawn. The peons themselves often prefer to work by moonlight as this spares them some of the severe heat by day. The work itself is tiring as they separate the cotton balls from the plant and then place the picked cotton in the plastic bags which they strap to their waist. To pick each ball requires that the peon stoop close to the ground so that their hands almost touch their feet. Most workers try to cram as much of their picking into the early hours as possible, for by 10.30/11 a.m. the heat is so intense that work has to stop.
The main contestation between the farmers and the migrant workers is over the quality of cotton. As the wage is determined by weight the picker naturally takes little care in ensuring that he selects only the purer balls of cotton. If he were selective his daily income would barely exceed 100 pesos a day - not enough for basic subsistence. As a consequence the growers are continuously exhorting the labour to pick only the purer, white balls of cotton. More systematically, for every bag that the picker brings in to be weighed, between 4/6 kgs are deducted arbitrarily on account of impurities. In all, for every 100 kgs that is picked 10 per cent will be unremunerated, leaving, on average, a daily income of around 145/160 pesos. Once the picker has had his bag weighed and been paid he may, if he wishes, quit immediately and seek work elsewhere as the terms of employment are kept strictly temporary. In addition, rights to negotiate the wage, or to protest about arbitrary deductions, are completely denied to the local peons.

6. Migrant Labour and Mexican Agriculture: Some Conclusions

The emergence of pronounced regional income and employment differentiation within the Mexican economy is not in itself a new phenomenon. What, however, is novel is the manner in which this process has been occurring over the last couple of decades. Additionally, the growth of northern commercial agriculture has served to accentuate this regional variation. Whereas in the past, the concentration of plantations specialising in crops, such as sugar cane and coffee, was a feature of regions in the south of the country, this labour market has now been complemented by that existing in the prosperous northern states where massive irrigation and other infrastructural investment has succeeded in restructuring the framework of agricultural production. With this shift into intensive wheat, cotton and fruit farming, the nature of the labour demand generated by these commercial enterprises has been significantly modified. In particular, this has led to the expansion in the number and function of seasonal migrant labour inputs.

The enhanced importance of the seasonal labour market has thus derived from the specific cropping-cum-labour requirements of commercialised agriculture. At the same time, it has been facilitated by
the ability to mobilise — often over long distances — a sufficient temporary labour force with which to fill these seasonal requirements. This has involved looking beyond the confines of the local region and has led to a greater flow of labour within the economy.

A great proportion of the migrant, seasonal labour force that moves out of the more backward, rainfed agricultural regions is composed of minifundistas. These 'partial cultivators' complement the flow of landless labour to the commercial regions. That they do so is largely attributable to the high levels of under-employment on-farm in their own regions. With the labour force in agriculture expanding at a rate in excess of 3.4 per cent per annum the capacity for full-time on-farm retention is continuously weakened within the small-holding section of the agricultural population. It is as an attempt to ease these conditions of under-employment that seasonal harvest work becomes a necessary adjunct to on-farm income generation for many small-scale peasants. This process is, moreover, particularly marked in the ejidal sector where low land and capital endowments have historically been coupled to limited access to credit and inputs subsidisation. With declining labour absorption in the urban and industrial sectors the options for unskilled migrant labour have become increasingly narrower. This may partly explain the growing importance in the last decade of migration towards the southern states — particularly California — of the USA. Here, however, it seems that the composition of the labour force that emigrates is more strongly characterised by its component of landless labour than by the presence of minifundista labour. A recent survey pointed to the fact that while over 35 per cent of emigrants were landless, only some 13 per cent could be classified as ejidatarios and other small-scale farmers. Part explanation for this may lie in the fact that the greater proportion of emigrants aspire to work in North America largely on a non-seasonal basis, although, initially, seasonal work may be the reason for their movement. In recent years, the number of Mexican migrant workers that have crossed the border annually fluctuates between 500,000/1.2 million and estimates of the total number of Mexican workers in North American vary between 6/11 million. The scale of cross-border migration is, interestingly, closely associated
with seasonal conditions in Mexican agriculture, just as much as with labour demand across the border. In lean years when the internal labour demand falls, the external migration movement increases and this is a pattern similarly reflected in conditions within Mexican agriculture. Good years invariably lead to a diminished internal migration and force *enganchadores* and labour hiring farms to raise wage rates as an attempt to attract more labour. It is partly as a response to this internal, agriculturally-given labour supply cycle that in all years recruitment of labour is based on the premise of attracting more migrants than can actually be accommodated. This depresses the wage rate and ensures that no major supply bottlenecks are engendered.

Both the external migratory labour market and that within northern Mexican agriculture draw to a large extent upon petty producer labour from the central and southern zones of the country. In particular, migrants appear mostly to originate from the states of Michoacan, Jalisco, Zacatecas, Guanajuato and Nuevo Leon. In the southern plantation economies and the fruit growing zones, labour is brought in not only from surrounding districts but also from neighbouring states. In the cotton, banana and sugar cane farms of Chiapas, for example, Guatemalan migrant labour is a crucial input. The largely Indian workforce, recruited from highland areas, themselves lack access to sufficient land while the non-intensive cropping mix of corn, potatoes and wheat is often insufficient for on-farm consumption requirements. At the same time, and similar to the US/Mexican wage ratio, wage rates in Mexico are between 36/50 per cent higher than in Guatemala, while the higher cost of basic provisions is offset, to some extent, by the fact that the owners subsidise the migrant labour force's food requirements. Additionally, in recent years severe political discontent and internal disruption of Guatemalan agriculture in the border zones has led to a growing exodus of labour, both seasonally migrant and permanent.

The importance of the 'wage-pull' effect in both the southern plantation labour market as also with regard to migration towards North America is only partially mirrored in the internal migratory framework. Data on wages are rarely of sufficient quality to support any firm
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>General Minimum Wage (daily)</th>
<th>Minimum Wage for Field Workers (daily)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964/65</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966/67</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968/69</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970/71</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972/73</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974/75</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>64.7/79.6</td>
<td>56.5/69.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>106.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>136.6</td>
<td>134.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 12

**Real Rural Wages Trend, Mexico, 1970-1979**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rate of annual increment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970/71</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971/72</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972/73</td>
<td>-9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973/74</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974/75</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975/76</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976/77</td>
<td>-2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977/78</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978/79</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: ibid.*
conclusions. However, official statistics on recent real wage trends within the rural sector point to the fact that between 1970 and 1979 rural real wages rose on average by some 12 per cent. However, this figure relates not only to wages within agriculture but to other forms of wage work in rural areas. If one complements this by looking at the purchasing power of the minimum daily rural wage in terms of basic food crop entitlement, it would appear that for maize, wheat and rice, the real wage has increased though not substantially. For chili and beans there has been a relative fall.

The problem with using data based on minimum wages is that in many cases the minimum wage is purely fictional and this is clearly the case in much of this seasonal migrant labour market. With frequent over-recruitment and market glutting, wage rates tend to be depressed for unskilled categories of workers. In addition, workloads tend to be very high and the overall conditions of labour frequently leave much to be desired, a fact clearly emerging from the previous section. However, for selected categories of workers, such as those already mentioned who pick oranges in the Veracruz region, wages can be considerably higher than the minimum. In this case, payment of some 300 pesos a day for back-breaking work nevertheless gives a money wage that is more than double the minimum rate. Apart from the high levels of labour productivity induced by the effective presence of a piece-rate system of payment (or, more exactly, an output rate) this type of harvest labour is normally condensed into a short period of time and some of the ostensible money rate advantages maybe offset by high, local provisioning costs.

In concluding this paper, it would appear that one of the most striking recent developments in Mexican agriculture has been the substantial expansion in the demand for seasonal, migrant labour. This market for labour is qualitatively different from the more traditional, localised labour market transactions that have characterised Mexican agriculture. Drawing most specifically on the under-employed labour available within the small-producing sector as a complement to the use of landless labour, commercial farming has thus engendered the growth of
migrant labour flows. These flows are made feasible by the continuing pressures, both in terms of income and labour absorption capacity, within the minifundio farms and in particular within the ejidal sector. Disequilibrium at the level of the petty producing household impels an expulsion on a seasonal basis of a proportion of the disposable labour force. This squeeze on small-holdings (as also on the landless) has been tightened over the last decade. While consumer prices have exhibited a sharp upward trend — more than doubling between 1970 and 1980 — average rural prices of subsistence crops have risen very marginally (1972:100, 1979:108) and those of some commercial crops have actually declined over the same period. In a context of continuing high demographic rates of growth and a skewed pattern of land and income distribution these factors have accelerated the expansion of a migrant labour force. As such, this process — which in some areas particularly in the northern states and in parts of the south — has become the most significant feature of the rural labour market, appears to be the result of the regional and commercial demarcations within Mexican agriculture that have been developing for the last two decades.38 The result is that the expansion of capitalist relations in agriculture has proceeded on the basis of the preservation of the petty-producing sector rather than its outright supersession.
FOOTNOTES


3 Ian Scott, Urban and Spatial Development in Mexico (Baltimore, 1982), pp. 123 ff.


5 L. Unikel and E. Victoria, Medicion de algunos aspectos del desarrollo socioeconómico de las entidades federativas de Mexico, 1940/60, Demografía y Economía, 1970, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 292/316.

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14 Ibid, pp. 104/5.

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18 A. Cardenas Ortega, Problems of Regional Development in Mexico (Rotterdam, 1974); W. van Ginneken, Socio-Economic Groups and Income Distribution in Mexico (London, 1980).
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22 Eckstein, et. al. op. cit.
23 Ivan Restrepo, S. Eckstein, La Agricultura Colectiva en Mexico (Mexico City, 1975); J.W. Barchfield, Land Tenure and Social Productivity in Mexico (University of Wisconsin, 1979).
28 CEPAL, Vol. 1, pp. 87 ff.

35 The following section is based on field-work done by the author in these regions between 1981-1982.


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