

The Quest for Better Life: Uncovering the Migration Experience of Return Migrants in Biblián, Ecuador

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Keywords: return migration, reintegration, Ecuador

Abstract

Migration is an event that stems from different motivations and results to unique experiences for individuals, households, and even communities. The interplay of factors at the individual, household, and community levels shape migration intentions, reasons for return, and activities to take-up upon return. As such, the study of return migration and activity choice of returnees necessitates investigation of the initial process of migration and consequently of the transnational space to be able to understand the complexity of migration and return. We confront this challenge by conducting a census and complementing it with in-depth interviews to uncover events leading to migration and return. The findings show that while migration is driven by economic reasons, return migration is mainly triggered by kinship and health reasons. Additionally, reintegration is sustained by support from family, friends, and the government.

Introduction

Migration is widespread in our contemporary age reaching as much as 232 million international migrants in 2013 [1]. Although migrants leave their home country, returning to their homeland and their family has often been part of their plan. Unlike migration however, there is no global data that would give us a hint on the degree of international return migration. This is because there is no systematic data collection of return migrants at the country level. There are several reasons to explain this: first, return migration is a relatively recent scholarship in migrations studies, and second, there is no agreed-upon definition of this concept even among migration scholars. As such, return migration is difficult to quantify.

While migration and return are observed at the macro level, the migrant or returnee and their family experience the first order effects of its impact. In fact, decisions at the level of the migrant and their family shape this global phenomenon. As such, migration is context specific and the study of return migration necessitates understanding of the initial process of migration and consequently of the transnational space to be able to comprehend the uniqueness of each migration phenomenon, the return process, and outcome.

We utilized a comprehensive migration questionnaire *Mecanismo de Monitoreo del Impacto Migratorio* (MMIM) to comprehend the complexities of migration, return, and subsequent activities of returnees in Biblián, a small canton in the province of Cañar, Ecuador [2]. By doing so, we hope to grasp the realities of return migration and consequently guide us in doing a systematic investigation of the impact of return migration to the returnee and

their family. This allows us to have a grounded understanding and hence more relevant basis for sound policy recommendations in our study.

This paper presents a peculiar migration experience that allows us to understand the interconnectedness of migration, return, and subsequent activities taken-up by return migrants. Our study proceeds by revisiting the historical account of migration in Ecuador to give us a hint on migration patterns in the Andean region, particularly Biblián. We then extensively provide results of the census data and in-depth interviews alongside analyses and discussions.

Methods

The data used in this paper is part of the census conducted in urban Biblián and in the four rural centers of Nazon, Sageo, Turupamba, and Jerusalen. Canton Biblián was selected after running principal components analysis on different levels of migration, poverty, education, social protection, vulnerability, economic, and demographic aspects. The first step of this exercise involved checking migration flows of the different provinces in Ecuador using INEC census data. Azuay and Cañar are the provinces with the highest migration flows in the Austro. From this, a principal components analysis was used to construct indices to rank parishes according to the dimensions mentioned above. The results lead to the selection of Sigsig and Biblián for the provinces of Azuay and Cañar respectively.

This study presents some results of the Biblián census on return migration. Moreover, we also conducted in-depth interviews to provide depth and clarity with respect to the information we have obtained through the census.

This paper is part of a series of studies aimed at advancing the literature on return migration and development highlighting the case of Biblián. In this paper, our approach is mainly descriptive, utilizing descriptive statistics and complementing it with narratives from in-depth interviews. This method allows us to have a solid understanding of migration peculiarities in the area, which would subsequently guide us in a more systematic evaluation of return migration and development.

Results and discussions

Overview of International Migration

Biblián is home to the pioneer migrants in the Austro region where the first wave of international migration is believed to have originated [3][4][5]. Migration during this time was characterized by clandestine movement to the United States (US), primarily of young male Ecuadorians from highland provinces of Azuay and Cañar. Four decades after the first wave, the census data revealed that international migration from Cañar, particularly in Biblián, is still dominated by male and the US remains to be the favorite destination (Table 1).

Table 1: Destination Country of International Migrants in Biblián

Country	Frequency	Percent
Argentina	5	0,54
Canada	9	0,98
Chile	2	0,22
Colombia	3	0,33

EEUU	861	93,79
España	30	3,27
Inglaterra	1	0,11
Italia	2	0,22
Mexico	2	0,22
Venezuela	3	0,33
Total	918	100

Source: IOB-UCuenca VLIR-IUC Project Biblián

The US-bound migration initiative of an individual often results to snowball-effect migration because Biblián residents are embedded in a tight network of familial and societal relations. This is corroborated in an ethnographic study where migration to the US is described as a “feverish epidemic”[6]. It was clear during the interview that migrants in the US often support a relative who is contemplating on migration.

“I married in 1984. I became a couple and as we were just making home, as at that time there was much migration beyond my land, or people started to go, then I also had the choice, as my dad was too, so my dad left, my uncles were there, then my uncles offered help, then I started up...” (A, 53 years old, interviewed 1 July 2016)

Biblián residents who decide to leave reported a number of motivations but the strongest is economic (Table 2). The unfavorable economic disposition of their family due to dearth of work and income opportunities makes migration an alternative strategy. According to an anthropological study in Cuenca, the idea of going to the US is connected to the notion of “modernity and money” [7]. However, since most of these migrants have finished either primary or secondary education, they typically obtain low-skilled jobs, particularly related to kitchen work (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Occupation in the US

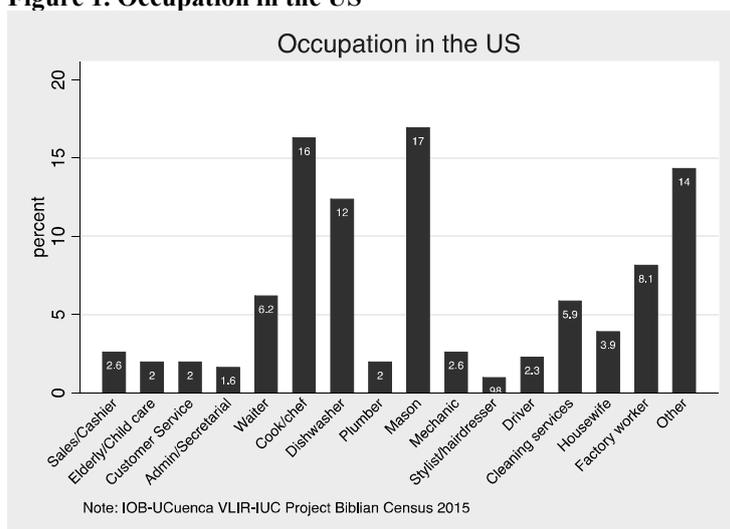


Table 2. Profile of Return Migrants in Biblián

Variables	Mean/Share	N
Returnees from the US		
Age	45.8	321
Gender: Male	73.2	235
Civil status		
<i>Married / Living together</i>	76.0	244
<i>Single</i>	11.2	36
<i>Other (Widowed / Divorced / Separated)</i>	12.8	41
Highest education**		
<i>None</i>	11.2	36
<i>Primary</i>	49.8	160
<i>Secondary</i>	31.2	100
<i>Higher education</i>	7.2	23
Reasons for migration		
<i>Get job</i>	54.8	176
<i>Earn more money</i>	28.3	91
<i>Study/learn new skill</i>	3.7	12
<i>Join family members</i>	7.8	25
<i>Other: freedom, no particular reason</i>	4.0	13
<i>Missing observations</i>	1.6	4
Length of stay abroad***	9.3	320
Reasons for return		
<i>Family</i>	57.3	184
<i>Economic</i>	6.5	21
<i>Unfavorable Conditions (deported, health problems, no job abroad, bad working conditions, adaptation issues)</i>	15.6	50
<i>Other (no motive, will marry, will take care of the house)</i>	14.6	47
<i>Missing observations</i>	5.9	19
Decision to return****		
<i>Own decision</i>	69.8	224
<i>Partner</i>	17.8	57
<i>Family members (Children, parents, relatives)</i>	3.4	11
<i>Other outside factors (e.g. deportation)</i>	3.4	11
Returned with money/savings	60.8	195
Received education: English language	14.6	47
Received trainings abroad	14.3	46
Business ownership	28.7	92

*5 missing observations

**2 missing observations

***1 missing observation

****18 missing observations

Note: This table is a work in progress of the authors based on the *Biblián* census.

Source: IOB-Ucuena VLIR-IUC Project Biblián

Uncovering return migration experiences

The MIMM census recorded 36.7 percent return rate of US-bound migrants from Biblián. As shown in Table 2, majority of these return migrants are male with an average age of 46, and who are married or living with a partner (76%). It is interesting to note that the reason for return was mainly driven by family reasons (57.3%).

In-depth interviews with return migrants confirm the census data and gave us insight on how the family influenced their decision to return.

Now I say first I was getting tired there, I'm outside the family, the children outside, [...] and the second time, I was already suffering, my health was not well, [...] then my children said 'Daddy, come on, why are you there?' [...] all that makes one more encouraged to return ... and my children, nothing else." (S, 73 years old, interviewed 2 July 2016)

Returning also means adjusting to the economic situation in Biblián. Some return migrants have a clear plan in mind while others try different options through the help of their social network.

"When I came here in 2000, I noticed that there was no hotel here in Biblián, and that's what gave me the motivation. [...] I was thinking about the future then. When I started doing this building, people said I was crazy, because this place is so small to make such a large investment... this is a small town. But please think about how this is 10 years ago...much larger, and we will continue to grow, we will be ... more than anything I wanted to leave my family well established, because I want my next generation to no longer suffer what I suffered." (M, 43 years old, interviewed 26 June 2016)

"No, I came back sick. It had nothing clear. I came back and did not know what to do. I worked at the Coca-Cola for a year, then left. Then the idea of greenhouses came out. I just got here in Biblián, and was adjusting well. I had a friend in Quito who was an engineer and knew all the irrigation system...all that is irrigated, food, everything...I set-up a tomato greenhouse, I devoted myself to that greenhouse to work. It was quite big then, I dedicated myself to selling out tomato and deliver to market vendors..." (L, 43 years old, interviewed 24 June 2016).

"People who are helping are the customers, generally the customers. Because they recommend my business...they say 'I'm recommending you to my family, my relatives to avail the work you are performing'. Then my business continues to grow." (G, 58 years old, interviewed 5 July 2016)

The above narratives indicate that setting up a business is one of the options for economic reintegration. This result is also corroborated in a study where returnees who have difficulty finding a job have contemplated on establishing their own business [8]. A study of Pichincha return migrants from Spain indicate that the struggle to obtain a job is not limited to return migrants but in fact affects the wider population due to Ecuador's labor market rigidities [9].

Conclusions

This paper aims to comprehend the complexities of migration, return, and subsequent activities of returnees in Biblián. Using descriptive analysis, our data from census and in-depth interviews show a confluence of individual, kinship and societal factors at play in shaping migration and return migration decisions and their consequences. While migration is motivated by economic reasons, return migration is highly influenced by kinship factors. Once at home, returnees' reintegration, particularly economic, is sustained by their network of family and friends. Though returnees claim the marginal, if not essential, role of the government in reintegration policies, the latter has in fact been instrumental in furthering their economic activities. Specifically, *Plan Retorno* acted as

an enabling policy that allowed some returnees to set-up their business and improve their houses. It has to be noted though that some returnees were not aware of the existence of the credit facility of this program. Hence, this calls for a need to enhance information dissemination of existing return programs to be able to target pertinent beneficiaries.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank VLIR-IUC for the project grant that made implementation of the census in Biblián possible, the University of Cuenca migration team headed by Ms. Andrea Neira for spearheading various activities leading to and during the census, and the local government and residents of Biblián who cooperated in our study. Likewise, we would like to extend our gratitude to IOB by granting us research fund that helped complement the census data with in-depth interviews. Any error in this text is the responsibility of the authors.

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