



The diffusion of diaspora engagement policies: A Latin American agenda



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ABSTRACT

This paper provides evidence about the diffusion of diaspora engagement practices and institutions as a result of formal and informal collaboration between Latin American governments. In particular, it examines how Latin American governments have developed similar practices and institutions regarding consular protection and service provision for their populations in the United States and the models they have followed. Notwithstanding the differences in capacities and motivations, the results of this research indicate that there is a convergence of practices and policies of diaspora engagement among Latin American countries driven by ideas of regional solidarity and unity and a clear reference to the Mexican model in the development of budding initiatives and partnerships in this area. The diffusion of policies in this regard has implications in terms of providing a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind diaspora engagement programs and the ways in which existing practices are adapted and transformed in response to the practices of other countries in a similar host country context. So far, most of this regional collaboration is based on information-sharing and participation in joint initiatives oriented towards service provision and protection of migrants' rights, with economic development back home as a relevant but secondary objective. One of the implications of this diffusion of policies with a regional focus is its effect in the socioeconomic mobility, in the group identity and in the political participation of Latinos, the largest minority group in the United States.

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Introduction

On October 1, 2011, the Executive Director of the Institute of Mexicans Abroad, together with the Consul General of Mexico in Chicago, and 11 other Latin American consular representatives, inaugurated the *Latin American Health Weeks* in Chicago. Two weeks of health-related activities (including health fairs, information seminars, referrals to health services and insurance programs, as well as free vaccinations and diagnostic tests) were held in hospitals, clinics, community organizations and consular offices in the states of Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana, which encompass the jurisdiction of the Mexican Consulate in Chicago. These services were provided free of cost to the public and were funded primarily by the Mexican government and its partner institutions in the United States, with the support of 11 other consulates from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Dominican Republic and Uruguay.

This health initiative was originally known as the *Binational Health Week* — and it is still widely known as such nationally — and

it is one of many programs implemented by the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME, in Spanish), an institution established by the Mexican government in 2003 with the objective of developing linkages with the Mexican population abroad as well as protecting and promoting their rights (Délano, 2011). The program began in 2001 as an annual collaboration between Mexico and the state of California but in the past 11 years it has expanded to almost every Mexican consulate that forms part of the network of 50 consulates in the United States, and in many cases the program spans over two weeks or even a month of activities. Moreover, as is clear by the example of the *Latin American Health Weeks* in Chicago, it has also expanded to include other Latin American consulates and it explicitly targets a Latino migrant population from various countries, beyond its original focus on the Mexican communities.

Cooperation between Latin American consulates in the promotion of health fairs is one of the most common examples of the expansion of a program initially targeting the Mexican diaspora, which has gradually involved the Latin American migrant population and led to more formalized collaboration between the governments of these countries. The initiative has expanded significantly since its creation: according to official statistics, in 2011, the organizers reported carrying out 3641 activities in the

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U.S., which directly benefitted 499,184 persons, and an estimated 1 million received messages about health through different media. The events involved “7500 agencies and 12,905 volunteers headed by 150 consulates that work with 178 regional planning committees” (<http://www.semanabinacionaldesalud.org/>, accessed July 19, 2012). This growing visibility and reach can certainly explain why it has been supported by a wide range of actors including U.S. government agencies like the U.S. Department of Health and the Center for Control and Prevention of Disease, community organizations, and universities—particularly the Health Initiative of the Americas at Berkeley University—, and why other Latin American governments are interested in participating.

This example sheds light on a process through which Latin American governments have increasingly developed mechanisms of collaboration explicitly oriented towards sharing information about diaspora engagement programs and institutions; pooling resources to expand existing programs and services in their consulates in the United States; promoting common agendas related to the protection of migrants’ rights and the provision of social services with a focus on the Latin American population as a whole; and, although with different capacities and resources, incorporating some of the existing practices in other countries to their own consulates and institutions in the home country.

In this paper I present evidence of the impact of dialog and information sharing among Latin American governments—particularly through their representations in the United States and their foreign ministries—, which has led to expanded formal and informal collaboration on programs aimed at protecting the rights of their populations in the United States and promoting their well-being through social services. In turn, this has influenced the emulation of some of these programs and the development of dedicated diaspora institutions in the home countries. Three salient features are evident in the diffusion of these policies: first, the influence of the Mexican experience in other countries in the region, which is seen by other Latin American countries not only as a successful model but also as a way to channel their own interests without exposing their countries to diplomatic tensions; second, the importance of an ideological convergence, based on a regional identification as Latin American countries that is expressed in government representatives’ discourses through ideas of solidarity and unity; thirdly, the impact of the host country context (including its immigration policies and the existence of networks of actors that support and promote the social services provided by home countries) and the shared characteristics of the diasporas in the capacity and interest that some of their home countries have in replicating existing models.

The global interest in “best practices” and “models” of diaspora engagement has grown significantly in recent years as the benefits of existing programs have become more apparent, particularly with regards to the successful promotion of economic development back home (Iskander, 2010; Newland, 2010). Increasingly, matching-funds investment programs, knowledge transfer networks, or programs that aim to reduce the costs of remittance transfers have been replicated by other states, or at least there have been attempts to do so. However, as is clear from the example of the Health Weeks, there are other types of diaspora policies that are also proliferating even though they are not as closely tied to the model of diasporas as a resource for development that is actively being promoted by international organizations and think tanks.

These initiatives focus on the provision of services such as health, education, financial literacy or leadership development as well as on the protection of migrants’ rights in the host country. In some cases they directly or indirectly promote a more successful integration of migrants in their country of residence (Délano, 2010). This could seem contradictory with regard to the state of origin’s

expected goals regarding diaspora engagement, given the conventional interpretation that as migrants develop longer-term commitments to the host country they are less likely to maintain an interest in participating economically or politically in the home country. But a broader understanding of diaspora policies and their varied goals (Gamlen, Cummings, Vaaler, & Rossouw, 2013; Ragazzi, 2014), as well as the evidence about the fact that transnational activities and integration in the host country are not contradictory processes (Portes, Escobar and Arana, 2008; Smith, 2005), reveals that some of these engagement strategies can also empower the migrant community and promote its social mobility. In turn, this can lead to more significant contributions to the home country as a result of increased income, skill development and capacity for political lobbying (in both the host and home country), or to an improved image of the country of origin and its nationals vis-à-vis the host country or the international community. Given the fact that the rationale for adopting service-oriented diaspora policies is not as straight-forward as in the case of development-oriented programs or political reforms (such as absentee voting rights or dual nationality), tracing the processes through which states adopt or participate in these programs is revealing in terms of the diversity of goals of diaspora engagement policies and the different factors that influence their design and implementation.

I have proposed elsewhere (Délano, 2011) that there is a need for a multi-level perspective that takes into account the domestic, transnational and international factors that influence states’ decisions to engage their diasporas, and the timing and mode of these policies. At the international level, it has been argued that relations between the sending state and the host state can impact the development of relations with the diaspora (Délano, 2011; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003) but, with the exception of Gamlen et al. (2013) there is still limited research on policy diffusion to other countries or on the impact of regional or global forums and dialog mechanisms in the development of diaspora engagement policies.

As in many other policy areas, in the case of diaspora policies, it is clear that there is a “transnationalization of policy norms and practices and [an] increased mobility of policy techniques and policy ‘makers’” (Peck & Theodore, 2010: 169). From a perspective of critical policy studies, Peck and Theodore (2010: 169) argue that “policy transfer is not reduced to a more-or-less efficient process for transmitting best (or better) practices, but is visualized as a field of adaptive connections, deeply structured by enduring power relations and shifting ideological alignments.” This paper aims to shed light on the processes through which existing diaspora policies are diffused, transferred or adapted by other states. Iskander (2010) refers to the process of policy development in this issue-area as an “interpretive engagement” between the actors involved (in her case, this refers to the interactions between migrants and states; in this paper I focus mainly on interactions between states, mainly through their consulates, embassies and Foreign Ministries). Iskander’s explanation of this process of policymaking as one characterized by ambiguity and developed through formal and informal processes is useful to understand the meaning of various sites in which exchanges about policy take place and it can also be helpful as a tool to examine the ways in which existing policies that are considered models are adopted and transformed by other states. Iskander’s work focuses mostly on the Moroccan and Mexican experiences that in many ways were groundbreaking and are recognized as models in this regard (Iskander, 2010). In the cases that I focus on here, specifically Latin American governments’ interest in and interpretation of Mexico’s programs, there are already models in sight and the evidence of their results is readily available, which means that there is less ambiguity and uncertainty about the goals as compared to the cases

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