

Intersections and Barriers:

Economic justice and the futures of work in our hemisphere

*Oscar A. Chacón, Executive Director
Alianza Americas*

Economic inequality, by any measure, is getting worse both in the United States and around the world.

In the U.S., economists estimate that the richest 1% earn about 25% of national income in any given year, and perhaps even more worrisome, own about 40% of the total wealth.¹ A recent Oxfam study noted that the richest 1% globally have as much wealth as the entire rest of the world combined.²

Researchers at Institute for Policy Studies showed that wealth gap is even worse when viewed through the lens of race. African American and Latino middle class households have actually lost net worth over the past generation. The net worth of the median Black and Latino households decreased by 75% and 50%, respectively over the past decade. White middle class households also took a hit in the 2007 recession, but began to rebound soon thereafter, while Black and Latino wealth has stayed on a downward trajectory.³ The inequality trend in the United States extends to our neighbors in the south, especially over the past thirty years. Both Mexico and the United States regularly turn up on the top five OECD lists for income inequality.⁴

Growing inequality is not just a theoretical concern; it has real consequences that undermine healthy communities. Inequality has demonstrated destabilizing and polarizing effects on societies. But it also

¹ Joseph Stiglitz. "Inequality: OF THE 1%, BY THE 1%, FOR THE 1%." *Vanity Fair*, (May, 2011) <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>.

² Oxfam International. "AN ECONOMY FOR THE 1% How privilege and power in the economy drive extreme inequality and how this can be stopped." https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp210-economy-one-percent-tax-havens-180116-en_0.pdf

³ Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, et al. "The Road to Zero Wealth." (Institute for Policy Studies: 2017). http://www.ips-dc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-Road-to-Zero-Wealth_FINAL.pdf

⁴ "Inequality: Income Inequality (OECD; 2017). <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>

undermines health, educational achievement, worker protections, and social integration measures for all members of society, not just those at the bottom of the scale.⁵ Inequality, particularly in the economic arena, also has the effect of creating a reinforcing environment for political forces driven by xenophobia and racism, which often blame foreign nationals as a leading factor causing economic inequality. By doing so, these political forces manipulate legitimate fears and use them to advance a hate-driven agenda.

In thinking about how to address economic inequality, it is tempting to focus entirely on the question of wages. One of the most active economic justice struggles in recent years, the “fight for 15,” is rooted in the premise that raising wages will provide a pathway to reduced inequality.⁶ There is some good logic to this. There is no doubt that the general downward trend in purchasing power for low-wage jobs over the past 30 years⁷ has placed a great burden on working families. Paying a fair wage to workers for their labor makes sense and is clearly one important step toward addressing inequality. But raising the wage floor will not solve economic inequality on its own. To get to the heart of the problem, we need to dig deeper, examining the other structural barriers to equality, and the policy choices that reinforce those barriers.

What we find are intersecting factors that combine to form a fully functioning ecology of inequality.

This intersectionality makes it very hard to find quick fix or silver bullet solutions. It may even make

inequality hard to see at all. Studies have consistently found that all respondents (independent of race)

⁵ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. “The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger” (New York: Bloomsbury Press. 2009) and Tuomas Malinen. “The Economic Consequences of Income Inequality.” *Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tuomas-malinen/the-economic-consequences_b_8827634.html

⁶ William Finnegan. “Dignity.” *The New Yorker*. September 15, 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/15/dignity-4>

⁷ Per Economic Policy Institute: “Wages of middle-wage workers were totally flat or in decline over the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, except for the late 1990s. The wages of low-wage workers fared even worse, falling 5 percent from 1979 to 2013. In contrast, the hourly wages of high-wage workers rose 41 percent. <http://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/>

tended to underestimate the degree of inequality in the United States.⁸ White interviewees were particularly certain that inequality between African Americans and whites had decreased in recent years, when the truth is exactly opposite. Unless we tease apart the “food chain” of inequality— understand fully who is at the top, and how they have used specific policies to remain there— we will continue to focus more on symptoms, as opposed to root causes.

Some of these factors include racism, xenophobia, and gender discrimination, including the structural patterns of discrimination that overlap with our perceptions of whose work is “valuable.” Another deeply embedded problem is the way that policy-makers (and to a great extent, just about everyone else) have embraced a market framing for social and economic policies. The pre-conceived notion that the “market” will provide a solution to all problems is evident in the way we talk about problems and solutions and even the way we think of ourselves.

Belief in the underlying structure of market-based solutions pervades even those who think of themselves as progressives. Students regularly speak of themselves as “consumers” of education. Sky-high costs of health care are explained away by “lack of market competition.” Low wages and miserable or non-existent benefits, and lax environmental regulations are justified by the need to be “competitive.” There is little to no acknowledgement of the policy choices that have created incentives for, say, underpaying workers and not protecting the planet. These choices, notable in taxation policies, funding for education, insurance schemes that limit access to adequate health care, infrastructure investments, and others, have a profound effect on inequality, along with wages and labor conditions.

⁸ Nicholas Fitz. “Economic Inequality: It’s Far Worse than You Think.” *Scientific American* (31 March, 2015) <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/economic-inequality-it-s-far-worse-than-you-think/>

Management of human mobility is another key policy arena that intersects with inequality. Too often this issue is either ignored or relegated to a false competition between immigrants and native-born workers. The notion that foreign nationals come into a given nation to steal jobs from native born workers, and that in the process they make wages and salaries cheaper for everyone, are all common beliefs. It does not matter that foreign workers have nothing to do with policy setting processes related to minimum wages, or labor protection policies in general. Nor does it matter that many studies demonstrate that aside from short-term negative impacts, often concentrated in specific areas of the labor market, foreign workers do not have a lasting impact on bringing down wages.⁹ Needless to say, getting migration policy right, from the now dominant logic of foreign nationals as a threat to their places of residence, to a frame that explicitly seeks to create opportunities for reducing inequalities among native born and foreign born individuals within given nations, as well as between nations, should be a top priority for action.

Section 1. Market-based Race to the Bottom: When Market Value overtakes Values

Our current economic and political system is structured to race to the bottom in terms of environmental protections, worker protections, and limits to avarice. Because generations of people have essentially come to see market-based approaches to policymaking as inherently “good”—leading to growth and well-being—breaking through the barriers that drive inequality will require a major re-tooling. There is no quick fix. We are dealing with the consequences of decades of entrenchment of a hegemonic neoliberal ideology, whose central tenets of deregulation, forcing open national markets to trade and

⁹ The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford. “The Labour Market Effects of Immigration .” (February 2017). <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/the-labour-market-effects-of-immigration/>

capital, and demanding that governments shrink themselves via austerity or privatization, have gradually been embedded in societies around the world.¹⁰

We see this in the United States in under-funded public school systems, crumbling urban infrastructure, including water, sewer and storm management systems, a disappearing social safety net, hollowing out of public oversight agencies, and a host of other places that may not reach the public eye until a crisis occurs. The horrifying lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan, and the most recent post-hurricane flooding in Houston are two good examples of how systematic under-investment in infrastructure, combined with lax regulation, can spell disaster for communities.

The problem is, once the crisis hits, it is very late to intervene. We need to get out in front of these problems by taking a hard look at what has gone wrong in the past, and how we can make different choices based on values, and not exclusively the market. This requires a careful historic analysis, and pushing beyond national boundaries to tease out connections between communities in the US and in the rest of our hemisphere. To that end, it is worth taking a closer look at some of the impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and its cousins, including the Dominican Republic-Central America Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA).

1.1 Bringing a Transnational Lens to Inequality: Case study- NAFTA

During the debate about NAFTA in the early 1990's, proponents argued that the trade agreement would slow migration, beef up tri-national environmental protections and create new opportunities for all. Yet 25 years later, the promises of regional integration still ring hollow for most Mexicans, and for many

¹⁰ [Stephen Metcalf](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/aug/18/neoliberalism-the-idea-that-changed-the-world). "Neoliberalism: the idea that changed the world" *The Guardian*. (August 18, 2017)
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/aug/18/neoliberalism-the-idea-that-changed-the-world>

Americans. Although increased trade has brought economic growth in some sectors, growth has not translated into increased economic opportunities for many of the region's poor people. A World Bank briefing paper ¹¹ reported that trade liberalization can drive growth (at least in the initial years), but it also tends to concentrate wealth, and may have the unintended effect of deepening entrenched patterns of poverty over the longer term.

Prior to 1992, many small farmers in Mexico lived on small plots of land known as "ejidos" that had been deeded to them in the land reform of the 1920s and 1930s. In preparation for NAFTA, Mexico changed its constitution to allow these plots to be sold or seized by creditors. After a short grace period, NAFTA opened the door for exports of US corn on the Mexican market, which lowered prices. Agricultural "dumping" (the practice of selling below the cost of production to eliminate competition) has hurt farmers in Mexico (corn) and the US (tomatoes). Although this practice is prohibited under NAFTA, the prohibition has rarely been enforced¹².

Between 1997 and the early 2000s, more than 2 million Mexican farmers were forced off their land. Many of them went to already overcrowded and heavily polluted cities and manufacturing zones of Mexico, worsening existing environmental and health conditions. Others had no alternative but to seek work in the United States, despite increasingly harsh border restrictions. The lure of higher wages and strong demand for agricultural workers, service employees, meat and poultry processors, and other manual labor jobs in the United States pulled workers into an ever-more integrated hemispheric labor market.

¹¹The World Bank. "Does More International Trade Openness Increase World Poverty?" (part 2 of a 4 part series) *PREM Economic Policy Group and Development Economics Group (April 2000)* <http://icepoverty.pbworks.com/f/AssessingGlobalizationP2.pdf>

¹² Ben Lilliston. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy Blog (August 21, 2017) <https://www.iatp.org/blog/201708/what-are-benchmarks-new-nafta>

Yet the textbook path toward of “upward harmonization” of wages has not materialized. Wages in Mexico have remained largely stagnant since 1994. Mexican wages, when adjusted for inflation, rose only 2.3% between 1994 and 2012. For poor families, gains in income were wiped out by increases in costs for basic goods, driven in part by imports. Purchasing power for low wage work in Mexico has fallen by nearly 75% since its high in the 1970s. These same trends hold in Central America, where the first 14 years of a regional trade agreement brought a surge in the low-wage *maquilas*, or assembly plants, but few improvements for workers. According to the World bank, sixty-six percent of the Honduran population lived in poverty in 2016, a figure virtually unchanged from pre-DR CAFTA days. The trade agreement provided incentives for creating *maquilas*, first in Mexico, then in Central America specifically to take advantage of lower wages. The 130,000 (mostly women) who work in the *maquila* industry in Honduras, earn \$150 to \$200 per month. Workplaces abuse, including sexual harassment and physical abuse, wage theft, dangerous conditions, and reprisals against labor organizers have been extensively documented.¹³

Despite comparable stagnation of wages for many U.S. workers, wage disparities between the United States and Mexico/Central America remain stark, with workers in Mexico and Central America earning a third or less than the wage of a comparable job in the United States. These realities exist at the same time that working class people in the United States have experienced a constant erosion of their quality of life. Millions lack access to health care, send their children to sub-standard schools, and struggle to make a living wage. The ills of unchecked economic globalization have a strikingly similar appearance across the hemisphere.

¹³ AFL-CIO. “Trade, Violence and Migration: the broken promises to Honduran Workers. (March, 2017) <https://aflcio.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/Honduras.PDF>

The Trump Administration has announced that NAFTA will be re-negotiated in the coming months. In principle, it is not a bad idea to question whether trade agreements have realized their promised benefits. But the real question isn't which nation got the better deal, it is who within each nation reaped benefits of export-oriented, growth/maximum profit-at-all-cost trade agreements. Learning the lessons of NAFTA would suggest that any re-negotiation should include at a minimum the following.

- Environmental and labor regulations that push up rather than drive down standards;
- Transparency in negotiations, with clear channels for participation and comment, not backroom deals.
- Scaling back the disproportionate influence of corporations and getting rid of “investor-state dispute settlement” mechanisms that operate outside the rules of national legal systems.
- Protections for local food systems and small producers that ensure that farmers are paid fairly, and that protect both farmers and consumers.
- Serious attention to labor migration, including protections for workers and access to justice across borders.

Section 2: Structural Inequalities: Race, Gender, and Other Biases: Whose Work Deserves Good Pay?

One consequence of blind faith in the market is that it can make it hard to see structural biases that drive inequality. For example, a recent study showed that most people believe that economic inequality across races is on the decline. White people were most prone to this belief, but it is persistent across races. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Racial disparities in wealth and income have increased over the past decade.¹⁴ Gender gaps in pay and professional advancement remain prevalent. Why do we take it for granted that some jobs are “worth” more than others? Does it have something to do with

¹⁴ Mike Cummings. “Americans vastly overestimate progress toward racial economic equality.” *Yale News* (September 18, 2017) <https://news.yale.edu/2017/09/18/americans-vastly-overestimate-progress-toward-racial-economic-equality>

who is working in those jobs? For example, teachers working in K-12 education, a field where women comprise 75% of the workforce, are compensated at a lower level relative to comparable professions, including accountants and computer programmers. Over the past 30 years, teacher pay as compared to similar professions has dropped 18.5% among women and 9.3% among men.¹⁵

Women also make up about 63% of one of the lowest paid sectors—retail. Twenty-six percent of low-wage retail workers live in poverty, or near poverty. And the average age of the retail worker is getting older. These are no longer temporary jobs for new workers. Even within the retail sector, inequalities are evident. African Americans and Latinos are over-represented in the lowest paying cashier jobs, and under-represented in management. Black workers for example comprised 11 percent of the retail labor force in 2015, but just 6% of supervisors.¹⁶

Agricultural work is another sector in which racial and economic inequality intersect with migration policy and low wages. Some estimates put the percent of undocumented agricultural workers at 70%. The official US government number is 46%,¹⁷ which is still a large number of people given the total of about 2 million US farm and agricultural workers. The vast majority of these individuals are Mexican, followed by Central Americans.

As we head to the mall or on-line vendors for that new sweater or to the grocery store for produce, we might ask ourselves what is the true cost of that cheap product, produced by a *maquila* worker in Honduras, picked by a Mexican immigrant in the US earning minimum wage or less, or a Mexican tomato picker earning even less than that, and sold to us by people whose wages keep them in poverty.

¹⁵ Discussed in Economic Policy Institute blog http://www.epi.org/publication/books_teacher_pay/, citing “How Does Teacher Pay Compare? Methodological Challenges and Answers, a 2004 book by Sylvia Allegretto, Sean P. Corcoran, and Lawrence Mishel.

¹⁶ Catherine Ruetschlin. “Retail’s Hidden Potential.” DEMOS Report. 2015. http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/RetailsHiddenPotential_Demos.pdf

¹⁷ United States Department of Labor. National Agricultural Workers Survey. <https://www.doleta.gov/naws/>

By questioning how work is valued, we can expose these biases and start to make changes.

Section 3. The Role of Human Mobility: Getting Migration Policy Right

Since earliest recorded history, human beings have moved to gain opportunities and improve their livelihoods. Indeed, the free flow of goods, capital and labor across borders forms the basis of liberal trade theory. The noble goal of building just societies, in which a majority of people are able to satisfy their economic, social, cultural and political aspirations, should not be construed as an antidote to human mobility. Human migration, despite being obstructed and repressed in the last few decades, has played a positive role in migrants' countries of arrival and countries of origin. Therefore, rethinking the value and the role of human mobility in the migratory circuit that links the Caribbean, Central America, and North America must be a key element of this new paradigm for regional community wellbeing in our hemisphere.

Unfortunately, there are ways of reducing the positive impacts of migration, such as keeping migrants in irregular status so that they are vulnerable to labor exploitation, demonizing migrants to undermine class-based solidarity among workers, emphasizing enforcement and punishment (detention, deportation, and incarceration) over regularization based on earned equity, and limiting long-term investments by keeping migrants in a perpetual temporary state. Current US immigration policy embodies many of these flaws.

Immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean region comprise the largest segment of the foreign-born population residing in the United States (U.S.) and about three quarters of the unauthorized immigrant population. Although the current political context has brought attack after attack on

migrants, both rhetorically and in the daily assaults on dignity, the problems in US migration policy that link it to inequality are old and deep.

The backdrop against which all policy is currently discussed is the threat narrative. The dominant public narrative conceives of and portrays immigrants as criminals, an economic, social, cultural, and political threat. This pervasive framing underpinned the passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) and has prevented meaningful policy deliberation about reversing it. The idea that immigrants are a dangerous liability, rather than a precious asset, precludes movement toward a coherent, rational, just, visionary and humane immigration policy.

3.1 Intersection of Migration and Inequality (and some possible alternatives)

There are **three major structural problems** with the current immigration system:

- **The preference system:** The system of annual and per-country quotas and preferences that governs how relatives of US citizens and lawful permanent residents (LPRs) immigrate, which when first enacted seemed to present a balanced and equitable solution has become outdated, misguided, and denigrates the family reunification values it purports to promote. Immigration policy in the United States has favored family reunification since the 1960s. Prior to 1976, the Western Hemisphere countries had a regional cap which allowed more legal immigration from the Americas than was permitted from other regions. Political compromises made in the 1960s and 1970s subjected migration from Mexico and Central America to the same per-country annual limits as every other country, ignoring historical regional ties. As a result, there are inhumanely long backlogs for legal family reunification for Mexicans and Central Americans,

sometimes stretching more than a decade. Consequently, many immigrants who consider family unity a priority confront a profound dilemma: follow the law and wait years until the family can be reunited or find a way to be together, even if it means breaking the law. No immigration policy should create such a quandary.

- **Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA):** the highly exclusionary, restrictive, and punitive policy framework established by IIRIRA treats immigration as a liability rather than as an asset that offers mutual opportunity. Virtually all laws responsible for the deterioration in the rights of foreign-born nationals residing in the U.S.—as well as the increasing pattern of incarceration and unprecedented number of deportations—find their legal basis in IIRIRA. Just, rational, visionary, and realistic immigration reform cannot be achieved without dismantling this punitive policy foundation.
- **Treatment of Immigration Policy as a Purely Domestic Issue:** The United States persists in regarding immigration as a matter for domestic regulation, with no regard for the realities of global and regional integration. Even as trade treaties like NAFTA acknowledge the interconnected nature of markets in a globalized economy, migration—the mobility of human beings across borders—has been subject to a rigid notion of domestic sovereignty. Human migration is driven by intertwined factors that include armed conflicts, environmental degradation, economic supply and demand, family ties and cultural integration. Acknowledging complex economic, social and cultural drivers of migration would allow discussion about regional, hemispheric, and global policy approaches that emphasize shared responsibilities for embracing new economic and social development strategies capable of gradually attenuating the tendency for people in high volume sending countries to migrate. As people are able to live

in dignity and safety in their countries of origin, the urgent pressure to migrate will lessen. It is also important to remember that human mobility can flow both ways. It is highly probable that increasing numbers of Mexican, Central Americans and other Latin American nationals who worked in the US over several decades, will decide to return to their countries of origin during their retirement years. New policies to ensure portability of benefits for these populations should be adopted as soon as possible, to enable these workers to live in health and dignity in their golden years. A policy approach that recognizes the root causes of migration, as well the complex characteristics of human mobility in Caribbean/Central America/North America corridor will lead the U.S. and its allies around the world to a truly humane way of managing human migration flows in the future.

Section 4: Pillars of Public Policy to Reach this Better Future for Work and Society:

The political route to a more equitable future for work and workers will require a transformative logic that weaves together local, national and international policies in different arenas. This transformative approach must be rooted in a transnational understanding of the world we live in. It is simply not the case that we can solve the problems in the United States as if in a vacuum. We must see ourselves as connected to a broader region, and understand the role we play in that region.

The following are key areas for action.

4.1 Tax Reform for a Just, equitable, and rigorous generation of public resources.

Historically, most developed countries have funded public investments with taxation strategies based, at least in theory, on the fundamental principle that those with wealth can bear a heavier tributary load.

In many countries in Latin America, and increasingly in the United States, tax policies are either overtly regressive (e.g. poor people pay at equal rates as rich) or opaque, complex, and full of loopholes that allow opulent individuals and corporations to evade paying taxes. In the end, those who earn less and accumulate less wealth end up paying the highest proportion of their earnings in taxes, even though they may be contributing less in total. This system is both unfair and inefficient in terms of generating needed resources.

In order to make changes, we will need to push back against the worn-out arguments that there is “no money” to do the kinds of things that we need to build a more equitable society. A recent Institute for Policy Studies report on wealth inequality has a succinct proposal: “Change our nation’s tax code to stop subsidizing the already-wealthy and start investing in opportunities for low-wealth families to build wealth.”¹⁸ The report goes on to name some specific changes that could bring in more revenue, while curtailing the flow of wealth to the very top, including expanding the estate tax, and creating a net-worth tax on multi-million-dollar fortunes. Other studies recommend expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit and building in incentives for retirement savings. These ideas should be a starting point for a serious conversation on tax reform that pushes aside the false notion that lowering taxes on the wealthy will provide benefits for all.

A well-conceived tax policy could also reinforce and stimulate sustainable development at the same time that it penalizes predatory practices that damage the common good. Constructing healthy and reasonably prosperous communities implies a big financial investment. Given the top tier wealth levels that have been generated even in nominally poor countries, there is no doubt that the potential for generating the necessary resources to build better societies is there. Collective action should be directed

¹⁸ Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, et al. “The Road to Zero Wealth.” (Institute for Policy Studies: 2017). http://www.ips-dc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-Road-to-Zero-Wealth_FINAL.pdf

at making sure that that the United States and all countries collect the necessary resources for supporting well-being and sustainable progress for the majority.

4.2 Public Education as a Driver of Prosperity. Making education work for the majority of people is a key pillar for reducing inequality, with positive spillover effects on many other areas of well-being such as health, wealth creation, and gender equity.¹⁹ Inequality doubles the burden for schools. Technological changes and globalization have ratcheted up and shifted the skills needed in the workforce, even as schools in lower income areas and countries are struggling for resources.²⁰

Along our integrated labor corridor in the United States, Mexico, and Central America, public education has not adapted to the changing needs of families nor to the evolving labor market. In many areas, due to migration, or simply the financial necessity of parents working multiple jobs, there is a mismatch between the educational day and the work day, leaving parents and children with gaps and challenges for keeping kids engaged and safe. Education innovations must also consider the transnational labor markets into which the next generation of students will emerge, and ensure that they are getting the full set of skills they will need. Migration patterns in this region, as well as the increasingly interdependent and globalized nature of the world in general argue strongly, for example, for education that is at the very least bilingual (English and Spanish), if not multilingual, including indigenous languages.

State investments are needed to support innovations such as curricula that bridge across traditional subject matters, as well as supporting cultural development and preventive mental health, and assessment linked to continuous improvement. States must also invest in fair compensation for

¹⁹ The Borgen Project. "How Education Prevents Poverty." (June, 2014) <https://borgenproject.org/education-prevents-poverty/>

²⁰ GREG J. DUNCAN AND RICHARD J. MURNANE. *The Atlantic* (Feb 11, 2014) <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/how-public-schools-can-fight-back-against-inequality/283669/>

teachers and administrators, the best possible school infrastructure, universal access, and clear accountability mechanisms.

4.3 Health. As this chapter goes to press, it is not clear what the future of the US Affordable Care Act (ACA) will be. Despite the program's many flaws, the current proposals to replace it seem destined to deepen, rather than alleviate inequality. But it is important to remember that ACA has also fallen short in serving many working families, as well as families at least nominally regarded as middle class. Poor and working people must choose between basic necessities, often foregoing high-priced medicine and non-emergency procedures. The over-reliance on opioid pain killers is just one manifestation of the underlying inequality of care. If we are serious about taking a transformative approach towards well-being, we must come to grips with the fact that access to health care is indeed a basic human right, and not a commercial market subject to an ordinary business logic. In addition, undocumented immigrants are deliberately excluded from any of the income-based subsidies in ACA, putting affordable health care out of reach for more than 10 million people. From a common sense, public health perspective, this is simply irrational.

In addition to ensuring basic and preventative health care, public investment in medical treatment should ensure that innovations and the highest standards of care are accessible to all. Current rules regarding intellectual property rights that apply to medicines should be challenged, and scientific research should be promoted to address basic health across communities. Rooting health research in peoples' well-being, rather than profits, will require integration with other key public policy arenas, such as education, infrastructure, sustainable development, and good governance.

4.4 Infrastructure for citizens' well-being. The choices we make about how to use public investment and subsidy for infrastructure are as important in the US as they are across the hemisphere. Will we continue to prioritize investments in infrastructure that facilitates corporate profit, or can we challenge this model with a values-based approach that focuses public investments on public goods? If we lead with values, water systems that keep lead out of the bodies of children, or provide them safe places to learn and live become a top priority. Other areas at urgent need of public investment include wastewater management, public recreational areas, public libraries, Internet access, and access to reliable public transportation in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas.

Climate change will bring deficits in infrastructure investments to the fore as we have never seen before. How much money will go into hardening coastlines for industry convenience, vs. creating resilient communities? The initial responses to the recent hurricanes in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and across the Caribbean do not point in a hopeful direction. Central America and portions of Mexico will be one of the regions dramatically affected by climate change in the coming decades. The impacts will be felt in the form of an increase in dramatic weather events, such as hurricanes, but also in climate volatility that can take a long-term toll on the ability to enjoy a decent quality of life in a particular place. The reality of climate change and its impacts will only become more visible over time, but governments have yet to incorporate this reality into economic and infrastructure planning, nor into their approach to human mobility.

The stark reality is that many communities may be displaced or find that their way of life has become untenable under changed climatic conditions. The recent devastation in Puerto Rico, and the subsequent displacement of hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans to the mainland United States, should be a cautionary tale. Governments should recognize and prepare for the inevitable human

mobility from climate change, bringing communities into the planning process. A priority should be placed on investments that increase resilience to climate change, such as maintaining and managing forests and natural coastal protections such as mangroves. However, development strategies should also recognize that in the coming years there will certainly be many more people in this region on the move. Investments in infrastructure, health care, and education should take into consideration both climate and migration expectations.

4.4 (Re-)Building Workers' Power

History has shown that effective, independent workers' collective organizations are key to obtaining higher wages and protecting workers' rights.²¹ If workers are not organized to advocate for their rights and defend them when it is necessary, the power asymmetries between workers and global enterprises will only grow. Organized labor can play a key role in assessing and changing the laws that regulate the labor market, as well as providing rigorous oversight of the implementation of those laws. Organizing must extend beyond the traditional manufacturing and public sector workers to a much more diverse set of workers, including historically exploitative sectors such as domestic work, child care, elder care, and agricultural work. Beyond much-needed work to ensure living wages, organized labor could focus on other key issues that will improve well-being for low and moderate-wage workers, including:

- Providing earned sick leave and ensuring that family leave is implemented;
- Access to affordable, and high-quality child care;
- Making work schedules more predictable, ensuring workers get the number of hours they need;

²¹ Josh Bivens, et al. Economic Policy Institute Report: "How Today's Unions Help Working People, Giving Workers the Power to Improve Their Jobs and Unrig the Economy." (August 24, 2017) <http://www.epi.org/publication/how-todays-unions-help-working-people-giving-workers-the-power-to-improve-their-jobs-and-unrig-the-economy/>

- Updating and enforcing labor standards, including safety standards, and cracking down on harmful practices such as wage theft;
- Ensuring that immigrant workers, including undocumented workers and temporary workers, are represented and protected.

In addition, labor unions could play a key role in guaranteeing worker rights and protections across borders. This will require creativity and investing in more diverse, inclusive union structures that can adapt quickly to changes in the workforce and in the economy.

Re-thinking Citizen security. During the last decades many communities have experienced a systematic deterioration of public security and peace. In Central America, pervasive insecurity, due to organized crime and gang activity, as well as state-sponsored repression, have caused hundreds of thousands of people to flee the region. In the United States, violence in cities makes the news every night. Deaths of African Americans, Latinos and other people of color at the hands of police undermine trust in law enforcement. One urgent challenge is to critically examine the prevailing logic of public security as a move toward ever more heavy-handed police and military presence. More specifically, we need to reconstruct and/or fortify the level of trust between the citizens and law enforcement agencies (municipal, state, and federal). A new model of public security must be based on that trust, as well as the highest standards of transparency and accountability.

Systems that actually work-- Good practices of democratic governance.

Sadly, many people seem to have lost hope that democracy has the capacity to correct the big challenges facing our societies. We face a dire combination of massive voter apathy in many countries,

including the United States, along with a surge in popularity of political demagogues who mobilize a small but vociferous base. It is obvious that the task of renovating and strengthening democracy is urgent and cannot be postponed if we care about reducing inequality. Good democratic practices start long before and continue long after casting a vote at the ballot box. Building and putting in place new mechanisms for exercising transnational citizenship continues to be a priority, one that requires urgent and continuous innovation and creativity.

Three principles must guide this effort: transparency, accountability, and direct civic participation.

Transparency and Accountability. The need for governmental transparency has been promoted by international institutions and governments since the beginning of the 1990's as an indispensable practice of good governance. However, even in instances when good laws obligate governments to be transparent in the services they provide to the citizens, very often it turns out that the transparency mandate gets subsumed to corporate interests, or avoided entirely in the name of public security. For this reason, in addition to demanding full transparency policies and systems, it is also crucial to develop the capacity to monitor the governmental sector, especially when it comes to the administration of public finances, including budget priorities. It is also very important to demand transparency in the private sector. Finally, citizens must be organized so that this demand is not ignored. This organizing capacity includes being able to use legal systems to hold governments and private sector actors accountable to their commitments.

Direct civic-democratic participation. The construction of democracy is a continuous task that demands organized citizen engagement. Regrettably, democracy is often reduced to infrequent electoral exercises. There is a big gap between the shallow call to "get out the vote" and systems that allow

ordinary citizens to influence the big political decisions that affect everyone. The great challenge is getting more people interested and engaged in the daily work of building democracy. For migrant populations who organize transnationally, building direct civic-democratic participation is even more complicated because the current participation mechanisms do not take into account that transnational reality. Creating new and better mechanisms for citizens' democratic participation demands new tools and modalities, including the creative use of virtual spaces. This is a challenge that requires creativity and innovation in multiple spaces.

Final thoughts: Migrants as a Core-Constituency for Reducing Inequality

In the end, the viability of any effort to move efforts to reduce inequality from concept to reality will depend on the level of organization and pressure that can be brought to bear on governments and powerful private-sector actors. Strengthening organizing capacity and the ability to influence public policy becomes an urgent priority. Organized migrant communities living in the United States can and must become part of a multi-sectoral alliance to reduce inequality. Organized migrants represent an untapped constituency that already brings a transnational understanding and ties in both countries of origin and destination. Harmonizing our efforts to dream big and build power to implement those dreams is the path toward the better future for communities across the hemisphere.

Much has been made of the growth of the Latino population in the United States, both in terms of its labor force participation, consumerism, and potential for political influence. Less visible are the efforts that Latino and Caribbean immigrants and their organizations are undertaking in order to influence their countries of origin. Among other things, immigrants are pumping a lot of money into local economies in Latin America, both through remittances and collective donations. They are also emerging as more

visible advocates for broad social and political changes in the United States, as well as in countries of origin, calling for reforms in areas beyond immigration policy. Immigrant communities in the US, and particularly those from Mexico, Central America and the rest of Latin America are ready to become stronger partners in the struggle to make their adopted nation, as well as their countries of origin, more democratic, more prosperous, and more equitable places for all.