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In light of the global economic downturn, the need for increasing social, economic and political security for immigrants in the United States is more pressing than ever. Migrant Hometown Associations (HTAs) offer a promising opportunity for fostering the security of immigrant communities by increasing their political and economic capacity at the grassroots level in both the United States and Mexico.

These organizations have the potential to be powerful agents for both development in immigrant communities of origin and integration in destination countries. Most research to date has focused on efforts by HTAs to utilize remittances for hometown development projects. However, HTAs can also provide important means for integrating immigrants in their communities of destination through the services they provide. While researchers have argued for the benefits of focusing HTA efforts on development and integration, little is known about the most effective strategies for orienting HTA capacities towards these goals.

A recent paper by the Migration Policy Institute examining HTA activities in the U.S. recommended further study of how HTAs function as facilitators of development and integration. Research generating more information on HTA programs would allow for a better understanding of the diverse ways HTAs operate, creating the opportunity for increased cooperation and consolidation of association goals and projects. They identified many benefits to increasing HTA visibility and the creation of coalitions between associations. More formal networks of HTAs have a greater capacity to attract funding and resources from larger institutions and agencies. Additionally, the combined resources of networked HTAs are more effective in achieving development and integration goals.

It is important to approach development and integration as synergistic endeavors. HTAs can serve as important destinations for accessing community resources and services that increase the economic, political and cultural capacity of immigrants. Integration programs such as legal and health services, language and technical training, and leadership development not only increase the standard of living for immigrants in destination countries, but also better enable immigrant associations to promote sustainable development in their sending communities. HTAs also provide essential assistance for immigrants applying for citizenship. In the event of comprehensive immigration reform a strong network of HTAs with established naturalization services would be crucial for ensuring that the maximum number of eligible immigrants receive citizenship. Finally, networks of HTAs that are well-connected with their counterpart organizations in Mexico could offer services to connect families with relatives as they shift locations.

In light of the considerable benefits to increasing formal HTA associations and networks, The Oregon Immigrants Rights Coalition (CAUSA) and Whitman Direct Action (WDA) are collaborating to initiate an effort to unite Oaxacan HTAs in the Pacific Northwest around an agenda of increasing cooperative efforts to address common goals. CAUSA and WDA are committed to facilitating the generation of a formalized cooperative HTA network, in which the

specific program goals and policy agendas for the network would be determined by the HTAs themselves.

To lay the groundwork for the formation of a cooperative network, WDA will first initiate a comprehensive field study of the current state of Oaxacan HTA networks and programs in the Pacific Northwest region. The goal of this study is to solicit input from HTAs and affiliated organizations about the most needed and effective strategies for promoting economic, political, and cultural development and integration initiatives. After dialog with HTAs and similar organizations, WDA will produce a policy paper that incorporates suggestions from numerous parties to offer a template for collaborative action. This research would precipitate the formation of the bilateral partnerships with Oaxacan HTAs, as well as recommend a model for increasing the capacity of HTAs to meet their goals through more formalized collaboration.

This research will serve as a springboard for organizing a conference in partnership with the Oaxacan HTAs and allied organizations to develop a bilateral agreement that creates a formal coalition among the HTAs. The event would also serve as an important opportunity for inviting relevant community organizations and U.S. and Mexican government officials to discuss the potential for increased collaboration with HTA networks.

CAUSA and WDA envision the initial process of research and collaboration occurring from March 2009 through the summer of 2010. This project has 5 stages:

- WDA will begin by working with CAUSA to identify potential partners in the project. During this first phase of contact, we will seek to establish initial working relationships and set mutual goals for the research process.
- In June 2009 WDA will begin an in depth discussion with Oaxacan HTAs of the Pacific Northwest about their experiences and suggestions relating to increasing HTA development and integration capacity.
- WDA will follow this phase with a research trip to Oaxaca in January 2010 to gather information on the impacts of Oaxacan HTA projects in sending communities of Mexico. The trip will allow Oaxacan communities in Mexico to incorporate their suggestions into the goals of the bilateral agreement.
- After completing discussion and research in the U.S. and Mexico, WDA will write a comprehensive report detailing current Oaxacan HTA activities and outlining a suggested action plan for moving forward with the creation of a formal cooperative network.
- The report will act as a starting point for developing an agenda for a conference to establish the collaborative network in the summer of 2010.

The conference offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of uniting HTAs, community organizations, government officials, and academic institutions around a common goal of strengthening human rights and social justice. WDA and CAUSA see in this project the potential for the creation of a powerful agent of change and empowerment in Oaxacan communities in the U.S. and Mexico that should grow in strength after this initial stage. Furthermore, the project can serve as a model other HTAs and partner organizations can use to further their own work around the country.