

Migration and Resource Access: View from a Quechua Barrio

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Abstract

A study of migration patterns among residents of an urban Bolivian neighbourhood sheds light on how households access resources, and the impact of ethnic identity markers on their ability to do so. The study shows how, in an ethnically divided society, households of rural, indigenous Andean background use migration as part of a complex range of strategies to access resources through space and across social and ethnic divides. The study demonstrates the limitations that these migrant households face, and their implications for social and economic development in Bolivia.

Keywords: households, resources, ethnic divides.

Introduction

In the late 1990s, I conducted an exploratory study of migration patterns and economic development among indigenous Quechua-speaking migrants from rural areas. The focus was on residents of Upper Barrio Japón, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Sucre, Bolivia. This study identified the places of origin of Upper Barrio Japón residents, their use of external ethnic markers (language, dress), and their past and current economic activities in different geographic spaces. The findings illustrated that rural-urban migration is part of a complex range of household strategies to access resources, often over considerable distances. Of particular interest, the study suggested how ethnic identity markers facilitate or block access to different resources and relationships in rural and urban spaces, defining individuals' and households' spheres of action – with specific economic development consequences.

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Sucre is a city of about 220,000 people in the Andean valleys of southern Bolivia. As the city grows – 41% of the Chuquisaca department's population was urbanised in 2001, compared with less than a third in 1992 (INE 2003) – neighbourhoods modernise and new ones emerge further out on the periphery. Rural-urban migration in Bolivia has not historically focused on a single primate city, in the common Latin American pattern identified by Portes and Johns (1989). Rather, migration is directed to a range of centres, rural and urban. A 1997 study of the Bolivian southern highlands estimated that 18 percent of the population had out-migrated since 1983; nearly 45 percent of these to the city of Sucre (Barron and Goudsmit 1998). Others went to urban Santa Cruz (8 percent), rural Santa Cruz (7 percent), Argentina (10 percent) and elsewhere (*ibid*).

In the Sucre neighbourhood of Upper Barrio Japón, the majority of residents I surveyed in late 1996 were originally from the countryside.² Specifically, many were from rural Quechua-speaking villages in Chuquisaca or Potosí department (66%). Residents describe these villages by name and by their location relative to provincial towns: 'near Yamparaez', 'past Tarabuco', 'near Padilla'. Few Upper Barrio Japón residents, however, came from these provincial towns (only 14%). Meanwhile, eighteen percent of surveyed residents had been born in Sucre.³ While most (80%) of Upper Barrio Japón residents were migrants from rural areas, they were not recent migrants; none had been resident in Sucre for less than two years.

² This survey, which provides field data for this paper, comprised a 20% sample of Upper Barrio Japón households (n=25). The method used was a house-to-house visit of every fifth house by the author and a local research assistant with a request to participate in the survey. As there was no bias in the selection of households, the data are presented as representative of Upper Barrio Japón residents in late 1996. Data were collected via open-ended oral interviews conducted in Spanish or Quechua with one or more household members (those available at the time of the visits). Data refer to male and female heads of the 25 households surveyed, a total of 46 people.

³ Only one person had been born in the city of Potosí, and none came from elsewhere.

These data show that the move from rural village to city is often being accomplished in one generation, without an intermediary move to a rural town. A 'step' or 'stage' migration pattern, from countryside to provincial town to urban area, is not generally in effect here. Rather, a common pattern for Upper Barrio Japón residents was migration from their village or town of origin to a long-distance economic hub, later followed by a return to their home region to settle in its capital city, Sucre – sometimes with ongoing links to the economic hub. Well over a third of men (43%) and nearly a third of women (30%) in Upper Barrio Japón specifically mentioned having spent time, currently or previously, in key economic hub: most popularly, the Bolivian lowland city of Sta. Cruz, as well as its surrounding plantation agriculture areas, the city of Cochabamba, and Argentina.

People were travelling to these hub regions, sometimes as seasonal or short-term migrants, and sometimes for periods of several years, as individuals or as entire households, to work in a range of areas including construction labour and retail vending. Seasonal and short term migration is an important, longstanding strategy in the Andes and is often associated with Murra's (1972) model of 'vertical archipelagos' (see also Van Buren 1996). For these households, migration to economic hubs appears to be providing income to establish and maintain themselves in the capital of their home region – which has fewer economic opportunities. This same pattern of migration to economic hubs also emerges in the next generation of Upper Barrio Japón residents. Of surveyed households' adult children (n=26), eleven had migrated to Sta. Cruz, Argentina, or elsewhere.

Data from Upper Barrio Japón encourage us to see migration as part of wider household strategies for tapping economic opportunity over distance, in both rural and urban areas. As authors such as Ellis (1998) and Waddington (2003) also observe, migration can be a key livelihoods-diversification strategy for households. Some Upper Barrio Japón households, for instance, continued to be involved in agricultural activity in their villages of origin, while using their Sucre residence to access education for their children,

as well as business and employment opportunities. Through migration, people can capture far-flung resources (income, personal contacts, information, training). This is also accomplished via other household strategies documented in Upper Barrio Japón, including long-distance commerce and transport activity.

One point that emerged clearly was that households' ability to access resources across space is influenced by ethnic identity markers. In highland Bolivia, rural background is strongly associated with indigenous Andean identity. In urban areas such as Sucre, the many gradations and shifts in indigenous identity markers – such as the use of specific kinds of dress and Quechua and/or Spanish languages – reflect the advantages of accessing both indigenous and non-indigenous relationships and moving, insofar as possible, in both spheres. Upper Barrio Japón households thus frequently cross ethnic as well as geographic boundaries. As an example, Sra. Clara⁴ has lived all her life in the city, and her children are urban professionals using Western dress and speaking mainly Spanish, yet she chooses to use the knee-length, flared pollera and braids indicative of indigenous Quechua ethnicity.⁵ Meanwhile, Sra. Sara was born in the countryside and still lives there the majority of the time, but is anxious for her daughters to have an urban education in Sucre; one daughter has chosen to adopt Western dress.

In the modern Bolivian nation-state, dominant governing institutions are still largely Spanish and Western (rather than indigenous Andean), despite challenges by indigenous movements (see e.g. Ticona Alejo 2000, Van Cott 2003, Yashar 1998). Thus, in the centre of Sucre, where most school and university studies take place and where banks and government offices are located, Western dress and Spanish language enable smoother communication and help avoid discrimination. The use of Quechua identity markers, on the

⁴ This and other names are pseudonyms.

⁵ Clothing use generally reflects choice rather than necessity, as there is not a great cost difference (though Western dress tends to be somewhat cheaper than indigenous dress). Men generally show fewer ethnic markers in their dress than women.

other hand, gives access to a range of other important resources and social networks in the outlying areas of Sucre, in certain urban spaces such as the Campesino ('Peasants') Market, and in the countryside. The use of visible ethnic indicators express certain affiliations, and influence how people are identified and treated in Bolivia's ethnically divided society. As a result, people may use different indicators at different times; for instance, Zoomers (1999) has made the point that farmers who wear ponchos and speak Quechua in the countryside may use Western attire and Spanish language in the cities.

Urban families of rural background such as those in Upper Barrio Japón work on the borderland between indigenous and Western cultures, and are often adept at moving between them to tap a range of resources: from rural land and social support, to urban schools, marketplaces, and employment in economic hub regions. Nevertheless, the legacy of colonialism and associated racism in Bolivia still limits the resources that these households can access. This study demonstrated that Upper Barrio Japón residents from rural backgrounds were working in sharply limited economic spheres (see also Eversole 2002). Their businesses were largely limited to small-scale commerce in the Campesino Market or the local neighbourhood. As casual employees, they worked almost exclusively in construction and driving; the main categories of urban work open to male migrants from the countryside. Only two Upper Barrio Japón women out of twenty-four were formally employed; only four men out of twenty-two had full time salaried employment. Neither of these women, and only two of the men, were among the 80% of residents originally from the countryside.

Meanwhile, migrants' children, like their parents, were for the most part not entering skilled urban trades or professions: they also tended to work in construction, driving, or small-scale commerce. The one exception was teaching; three adult children of Upper Barrio Japón residents were employed as teachers. Most migrants' children receive an urban education and do not appear to be returning to the countryside; yet at the same time, their niches in the urban

milieu tend to be very limited. Entrepreneurship (individual or social) is circumscribed, as there are few opportunities for creative connections that cross indigenous and non-indigenous spheres. This has serious implications for social equity and for the potential to create prosperous urban Quechua lifestyles.

Amartya Sen (1981) has written of the importance of 'entitlements' – the relationships people use to access the resources they need. In a neighbourhood like Upper Barrio Japón, few relationships connect people to the areas of Bolivian society where the greatest economic and political resources are concentrated. Over time, some individuals and households shift their networks of relationships (e.g. from rural indigenous to urban Western spheres), and so are able to access different sets of resources. Yet achieving prosperity is still likely to mean abandoning or concealing indigenous identity. Equally, retaining one's indigenous identity may mean tolerating poverty.

The alternate development scenario is to create options for an urban, indigenous Andean prosperity. This is certainly possible, but achieving the needed resources requires bridging the social divides that are still so marked in Bolivian society. The rhetoric of multiculturalism, the growing attention to the country's indigenous majority in issues of politics and governance (e.g. with the 1994 Popular Participation law) and the increasing number of Bolivian political representatives who identify as indigenous Andeans all indicate an encouraging trend; yet these are only the beginnings of a solution. Ultimately, the everyday relationships in Bolivian society are at issue: here is where stereotypes and discrimination must be overcome in order to bridge the longstanding divisions between Western and indigenous Andean cultures. As rural indigenous people move to the cities, retain links with the countryside, and travel to far-off economic hubs, they create many bridging connections. It remains to be seen to what extent they will be able to use these connections to access resources and contribute to economic and social transformation in their home regions.

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