

The Absent and Those Left Behind

Researching Missing Honduran Migrants and Their Families



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Abstract

Every day Hondurans leave their country to migrate to the U.S. undocumented, risking their lives on the journey. Some reach the U.S., many are deported after being picked up by either the Mexican or the U.S. authorities. This thesis focuses on a little acknowledged third group, those who go missing on the trip, and their families, who are left worrying and wondering what has happened. It looks at the cases of four missing migrants in the area of El Progreso, in north-western Honduras, considering what is at the root of their decision to migrate, what is suspected to have happened to them, how the situation is affecting their families and what the latter do to find them. It also examines the support they receive. These relatives are affiliated with a self-help committee founded with the aim of finding out what has happened. In the process of doing so, the committee has not only been able to locate some of those missing and put the topic on the public and political agenda in Honduras, its most active members have gained a previously unknown confidence in their ability to take the outcome of their lives into their own hands.

Acknowledgement

This research was made possible thanks to the support of many people and I would like to use the opportunity to thank a few in particular:

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In El Progreso, the families of Ada, Lando, Rosita and Tachito; the members of COFAMIPRO, especially Nelly and Edita; Ricardo; and the staff of ERIC did what they could to support me, and Nelly's family who took me in with great hospitality.

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In Miami and San Salvador, Marta and her relatives have become my second family over the past few years, making me part of transnational Salvadoran life.

In San Salvador, Lissette Campos and Beatriz Arias of the Human Trafficking Unit of Save the Children and the ladies of COFAMIDE introduced me to the topic of missing migrants and provided me with valuable input.

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Finally, what would I be without my amazing network of relatives and friends, who always find a way to be there for me regardless of where I am.

Thank you!

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to the families of Ada, Lando, Rosita, Tachito, and all the other missing migrants. The relatives I worked with generously opened their homes to me to share some of the most emotional and difficult issues in their lives. Their struggle to find out what has happened is a brave one, but also one they cannot win on their own. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to explore their stories and efforts, as my way to contribute a tiny bit to putting their fate on the agenda and let them know they are not alone and will not be forgotten.

Despite all the tragedy surrounding my research topic, I want to stress that there were many bright moments and much laughter during my fieldwork, especially when it came to exploring the cultural differences between the Hondurans and I. All too quickly only poverty, violence, inequality and injustice are being emphasised when it comes to countries like Honduras. However, one should not forget that the people who live there are as hospitable, helpful and kind as one could wish for. While the negative issues mentioned certainly impact on their lives, they find many more reasons to celebrate or simply enjoy life and I have far more happy than sad memories about this beautiful country and its even more beautiful people.

Andrea, Alejandro, Adriana and Lorien, I hope that if you choose to live abroad one day, it is not because you feel like having no other option, but because you want to.

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1. Introduction

'It felt like my head had been ripped off, I never thought something like this would happen to my family.' Toya took her glasses off to wipe away a tear, determined not to get emotional. She was telling me about the time in 2004 when her husband Lando had gone missing while trying to reach the U.S. as an undocumented migrant and her families' search efforts remained unsuccessful. It was late April 2010 and we sat in the patio of her house in the outskirts of El Progreso, Honduras. She added: 'Only when I joined COFAMIPRO¹ I realised I was not on my own and that together we could do something.'²

Her sentiments echoed those of members of COFAMIDE³, a self-help committee of affected relatives in El Salvador, who had been my first encounter with families of missing migrants in spring 2009 when working as an intern with Save the Children. I had been studying the consequences of undocumented migration before, but never realised how many Central Americans went missing on their journey to the U.S. and how their relatives suffered. Deeply impacted by their stories and realising how little material existed in this field, I decided to make their fate the topic of this research, conducting four months of fieldwork with a pioneer in the field, COFAMIPRO in Honduras. Toya is a member of the committee and one of the main protagonists of this thesis.

1.1 Aim and Relevance

It is estimated that every year hundreds of undocumented Central American migrants go missing or are killed while heading north. (Amnesty International 2010:18). Behind every case is an affected family in a limbo between hope and desperation, left to figure out what to do to determine their relative's fate. So far, the issue has been largely ignored by the public, academia, and the authorities. There is minimal coverage in the

¹ Comité de Familiares de Migrantes en El Progreso (Committee of Families of Migrants in El Progreso)

² Interview with Toya, April 29, 2010

³ Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Desaparecidos y Fallecidos (Committee of Families of Missing and Deceased Migrants)

media and academic publications, and no co-ordinated effort to count or even register cases of missing and dead undocumented migrants on a national level in Central America, Mexico or the U.S., or in a joint international effort (Reineke 2009). Given the lack of attention, there are few theoretical concepts specifically aimed at explaining the impact it has on families when a migrant goes missing, their reactions and possible efforts to find out what has happened, notable exceptions being recent works of Bollinger (2009) and Reineke (2009).

The aim of this research is to approach the fate of missing migrants and their families in a holistic way, dealing not only with the one who leaves or with the reaction of those left behind but to show how both are constantly connected, even once the migrant is physically absent. This includes considering the reasons why these migrants leave, what dangers they confront on their way and how their departure affects the families, especially once they have realised that the relative has gone missing. Furthermore, it aims to shed light on how the families act to determine the whereabouts of their missing relatives, the support they receive and the outcomes these actions have. It also briefly deals with issues arising when a migrant reappears or their fate becomes known.

1.2 Problem Statement and Theoretical Approach

The central research question was:

What efforts are undertaken by the families of missing Honduran migrants to find out about their relatives' fate and what support do they get in their endeavour?

Throughout the fieldwork, it became clear that the efforts of the families can not be explained without dealing with the migrant's motivation, so while this thesis still deals with search and support, this has become one aspect within the broader context. Therefore, the initial plan to approach the central question also was being restructured into three general lines: The decision to leave, including the impact this has on the remaining family; the reactions and coping process of the relatives once it becomes clear the migrant is missing; and communal action taken by the families through COFAMIPRO and the support they receive.

To explain the decision making process, it draws on a formula developed by Puerta (Sladkova 2007:200), 'decision to emigrate = expulsion + attraction > costs + risks'. The decision to migrate is taken when the expulsion factors at home and the attraction of the destination are perceived as stronger than the potential costs and risks connected to it. In this context, the family plays an important role in the motivation to leave, since the hope to meet their unfulfilled economic through the sending of remittances is at the root of most migrants' decision (Narayan et al. 2009). At the same time, leaving behind one's family and the consequences of this separation for both sides is one of the costs attached to migration (Falicov 2003).

When a migrant never reaches his destination and has gone missing, relatives experience what Boss (1999) terms *ambiguous loss*, which terms the kind of incomplete loss felt when a person is absent but it is not clear what has happened. Amnesty International (1981) suggests that families react in three stages, where a first phase of initial inaction is followed by obsessive search before some relatives eventually move on to engage in collective action. However, my research suggests that in the Honduran context this has to be enhanced for another phase of prolonged inaction following the obsessive search. Poor families like those portrayed here see themselves unable to confront the situation in a proactive way, given the small degree of control they perceive to have over their lives (Narayan et al. 2009; Gissi 1995). Many are only able to take the initiative after joining other affected relatives in organisations like COFAMIPRO.

The last perspective deals with this stage, when relatives organise to take action. It investigates the support network available to those families both on the level of civil society and from the authorities, finding that even though the search-efforts might not be as successful as hoped for, the activities have the positive effect that the relatives find their voice, raise their self-esteem and make them more aware of their rights. It also deals with the consequences of a reappearance or determination of a migrant's fate, which can release relatives from the uncertainty but often raises other concerns within the family.

1.3 Research Population

To approach my research population, I decided to focus on a limited number of active members of COFAMIPRO. The four missing migrants whose families I eventually worked with are Ada, Lando, Rosita and Tachito. I will briefly introduce them here as their extensive stories will be told throughout this thesis.

Ada's case is one of COFAMIPRO's oldest, thanks to the relentless activism of her mother Emeteria. Ada joined a colleague to go to the U.S. when she was only 17, leaving in 1989. Her family has not heard of her since. She left two young children behind. It can be assumed that her reasons to leave were both economically and personally driven. Due to several incidents, Emeteria is convinced her daughter is alive and knows she is searching for her, but Ada has still not been in touch.

Lando, a father of two in his early forties, left in 2004 to work in the U.S. to finance his daughters' university studies. He was last seen on his way to cross the Mexico-U.S. border. His wife Toya has given up hope of finding him. Still, she remains active in COFAMIPRO, grateful for the emotional psychological support she receives there.

Rosita was in her early twenties when she left in 1995 with her younger brother. They were separated at a raid by immigration authorities in Mexico. Her brother eventually made it to the U.S., but did not know what had happened to her. Years later, on one of the search trips staged by COFAMIPRO, it turned out Rosita was alive in Mexico and had tried to get in touch with her family without success. She died in 2004, but her mother Edita emphasises the peace it gives her to know her daughter is buried close to her.

Tachito left the day after his high-school graduation in 2008, informing his family about his plans the very last minute. He ended up working in Mexico and initially kept in touch regularly. Then suddenly the calls stopped until May 2010, when Tachito called on his mother's birthday. However, at the point of writing this remained his only call and it was impossible to reach him. The family, while being relieved that he is alive, is still worrying.

I also include the stories of two young undocumented migrants, Ricardo and Marta, to illustrate aspects about the journey to and life in the U.S. as an undocumented migrant.

Ricardo's family were my neighbours during my fieldwork. When I met him, he had just been deported from Mexico on an attempt to return to the U.S., from where he had also been deported after serving a prison sentence. He had been living there for nearly half his life. Now he was relaxing for a few days before trying again. Since then I have been informed that he has made it into the U.S.

Marta is a young mother of two whose family I lived with in 2004 and 2005 while working as a volunteer in El Salvador. In 2006, she made it on her first attempt into the U.S. and settled in Miami. Visiting her on my way to and from Honduras, I got an inside view on her life as an undocumented migrant. As I also visited her family in El Salvador, I got to observe what it means to be a transnational Central American family.

Other information came from people working with the families, either as volunteers or staff of NGOs. Here my principal informant was Nelly, the General Secretary of COFAMIPRO. Due to her position, she is the principal link between the relatives and the organisations supporting the committee and has extensive knowledge both about the cases and general issues regarding undocumented Honduran migrants on a more abstract level. Furthermore I participated in a meeting with the Foreign Ministry and conducted an interview with one of its representatives responsible for dealing with the cases of missing and deceased migrants.

1.4 Setting and Methods

The research was conducted from the start of February to the end of May 2010 in El Progreso in north-western Honduras. Located on an intersection of mountainside and coastal plains, the area's economy is dominated by *maquila* manufacturing businesses, producing mainly apparel for export, and by large plantations of African palm, banana and sugarcane. After hurricane Mitch devastated the region in 1998, there was a steep rise in undocumented migration to the U.S. The location was chosen because it is where COFAMIPRO is based. To talk to NGOs and authorities I also made several trips to Honduras' capital Tegucigalpa.

To approach the topic I used qualitative methods, mainly open and semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility towards the person interviewed while the interviewer still keeps an overview over issues addressed. (Denscombe 2003:166). Mikkelsen (2005:172) points out the importance of choosing a sample group which is as differentiated as possible in order to make individuals form part of an explanatory

process. This was established through the different circumstances surrounding each family. All informants knew they were participating in a research project. I also relied significantly on participant observation and informal conversations to gain additional information when spending time with the families, observing the daily work of COFAMIPRO or participating in activities, events and meetings. Furthermore I drew from documentation about missing migrants' cases as well as other relevant documentation obtained from the organisations I worked with.

1.5 Structure

The thesis is structured in a theoretical chapter, a section on the Honduran context, three empirical chapters and the conclusion. The theoretical framework includes migration, its impact on the families left behind and the consequences for the latter when a migrant goes missing. Next, the background of Honduran migration in general and specifically for the El Progreso region are sketched out, as is the impact the coup of 2009 had on my fieldwork. Moving on to the empirical findings, the reasons why the migrants portrayed made the decision to leave are being introduced. This is followed by a closer look at the impact it has on the families once they become aware a migrant has gone missing and their subsequent actions to determine what happened. Finally, the search efforts the families undertake through COFAMIPRO and the help they receive are examined as well as the consequences of the reappearance of a missing migrant. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings, answers the research question and poses question that opened up in the course of this research.

2. Torn Between Here and There: Concepts and Debates Surrounding Migration and the Family

The theoretical framework in which this research is based draws from different areas. It looks at the nature of migration and the motivation of people to take this step. Special emphasis is placed upon the aspect of the promise of improving the economic standing of the migrant's family through the reception of remittances. Furthermore, it discusses the specific characteristics of Central American undocumented migration to the U.S., including major factors causing it, such as the civil wars of the 1980s and natural catastrophes in the following decade as well as the attraction factors the U.S. offers to them as the main destination of choice.

Migration not only impacts upon the one who leaves but also those left behind, which will be discussed especially with regard to the consequences of long term separation. When this separation is caused by the missing of a migrant, the consequences for the family are traumatic. The handling of the situation will be examined through Boss' (1999) concept of ambiguous loss and Amnesty International's (1981) three stages of response, as well as the impact such shocks have on the perceived ability to control one's own life, as shown by Narayan, Pritchett and Kapoor (2009) and the subsequent need for the families to be able to draw on outside support.

2.1 Migration as a Phenomenon

Human migration has existed throughout the history of mankind, either as internal migration, 'human movement within the borders of a country', or international migration, 'human movement across international borders, resulting in a change of country of residence' (UNDP 2009:15). As a phenomenon, it concerns almost every country in the world, either because its population migrates; it is being transited by migrants or receiving them; or a combination of all three (UNESCO 2005:5). Although internal migration is by far the most prevailing (UNDP 2009:1), only international migration will be considered further in this thesis, since the problem of missing migrants is connected

to the latter. Even more specifically, it is closely tied to undocumented migration, meaning that the person has no official permission to enter and or work in the country of destination, a condition an estimated fifty million people worldwide currently find themselves in (UNDP 2009:2).

When a person is making the decision to emigrate to another country, a formula developed by Puerta (Sladkova 2007:200) applies:

$$\text{Decision to emigrate} = \text{expulsion} + \text{attraction} > \text{costs} + \text{risks}$$

According to this equation, the reasons to leave and the incentives the destination has to offer need to outweigh the costs and risks which the journey and stay there potentially bring. For citizens of developing countries, this weighing of factors often comes out in favour of migration to other countries. Mostly a combination of expulsion factors plays a role, but the dire economic situation they and their families encounter themselves in is often the most powerful. On top of this wish for economic and often also educational betterment further reasons might exist such as difficult political circumstances or persecution in the country of origin; armed conflict; ethnic tensions; or the violation of human rights.

Narayan, Pritchett and Kapoor (2009) extensively show the importance of the family in moving out of poverty. A migrated relative is in many poor areas 'a key factor distinguishing those on the higher steps of the ladder of life' (Narayan et al. 2009:287). Their study finds that people are often willing to go great lengths for the economic and educational improvement of their families, both first steps to make it out of poverty. This includes sacrificing oneself by migrating and leaving behind the familiar environment (Narayan et al. 2009:284). However, this reliance on each other also means that major blows to the family's make-up, such as the death or disappearance of a close relative, can cause a decline into poverty, especially if he or she played a major role in bread-winning (Narayan et al. 2009:166). They also can have a significant negative impact on the self-confidence of the remaining members and how they imagine their future, since they lose the belief in having control over decisions in their every day life (Narayan et al. 2009:168).

The destination country might attract by offering better wages and job opportunities and a higher standard of living, as will be shown in Chapter 3.1 on the causes for the high rate of Honduran migration and later in Chapter 4.2, or simply the absence of the above mentioned expulsion factors (UNESCO 1995:18).

On the cost side, one of the most important factors is certainly to leave behind one's family and friends and the known environment, in order to start new in a different place and the subsequent separation, aspects will be discussed in detail further on. Risks depend greatly on the form the migration takes, and can reach from giving up one's livelihood, no matter how precarious, to start new with the risk of failure and losing everything to risking one's life on the journey to get to the country of destination, as discussed in Chapter 4.4. This is the case for Central American undocumented migrants on their way to the U.S. as much as for Africans trying to reach Europe by sea. As already shown the consequences of discovering a migrant is dead or missing might be devastating and push the remaining family even further into poverty.

While migration, especially for labour purposes has traditionally been male-dominated, in recent years there has been an increasing trend towards female migration, posing new challenges in terms of gender identities and family constellations. (Schmalzbauer 2004:1320) Traditional notions of the man earning the money and the woman taking care of children and home change when the woman turns into the main income earner, being absent from the family by doing so. As it will be discussed further on, many families struggle to adjust to these new realities.

2.2 Central American Migration

The fact that Puerta's formula⁴ often comes out in favour of migration also applies for Central America's leading emigration countries El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua⁵. Migration from this region to the U.S. has a history dating back a long time, but it took on a whole new level during the 1980s, when leftist insurgencies fought bloody civil wars with the military in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

⁴ Decision to emigrate = expulsion + attraction > costs + risks

⁵ El Salvador leads Central America's net migration rates with -9.13; followed by Guatemala with -2.17; Honduras with -1.27; and Nicaragua with -1.09. (CIA World Fact Book Country Comparison: Net Migration Rate) <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2112rank.html?countryName=Honduras&countryCode=ho®ionCode=ca&rank=127#ho> (accessed 26.7.2010)

Millions of civilians, suffering from extreme poverty and under brutal violence from both sides decided to head north. (Reynolds 2000:470) Peace was eventually reached throughout the region in the 1990s, but in the following years, a series of natural disasters kept migration levels high. A few lucky ones had their status in the U.S. legalized under the TPS, the Temporary Protected Status.⁶ It was granted to a restricted number of citizens from Honduras and Nicaragua in December 1998 in the aftermath of hurricane Mitch, and from El Salvador in March 2001 following a devastating earthquake. (Wasem and Karma 2008:5) Even though the TPS was issued for a restricted period of between six and eighteen months, it has been continuously renewed for all three countries ever since and is currently valid until January and March 2012 respectively.⁷ However, only those already present in the U.S. by the time the disasters hit were eligible.

Ever since, most of the numerous others who saw no possibility other than migration have done so without the necessary permit, entering the U.S. as undocumented migrants. What it means to live this kind of life will be further illustrated in chapter 4.3. In 2008, Central Americans accounted for eleven percent of the unauthorized immigrant population in the U.S., equal in size with undocumented Asians and only outnumbered by Mexicans, who make up almost sixty percent. (Passel and Cohn 2009: i)

Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla (1991:75) point out that for Central Americans, past approaches using a mutually exclusive terminology citing only either one reason or another as being behind the decision to migrate do not adequately address the phenomenon. The old classification of political or economic migration also does not hold up anymore, since even though most Central American governments are not openly repressive anymore, their economic policies make leaving the country appear the most feasible decision for disadvantaged parts of the population. At the same time, rich families not suffering any economic hardship often choose to send their offspring abroad to study, given the failure of the state to provide high-quality education.

⁶ The TPS statute was enacted by Congress in 1990 and can be granted to citizens of states where 'there is ongoing armed conflict posing serious threat to personal safety; a foreign state requests TPS because it temporarily cannot handle the return of nationals due to environmental disaster; or there are extraordinary and temporary conditions in a foreign state that prevent aliens from returning, provided that granting TPS is consistent with U.S. national interests.' (Wasem and Karma 2008:3)

⁷ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services www.uscis.gov (accessed 19.7.2010)
Questions and Answers: 18-Month Extension of Temporary Protected Status for El Salvador;
18-Month Extension of Temporary Protected Status for Honduras Update;
18-Month Extension of Temporary Protected Status for Nicaragua Update

In any case, an initially temporary stay might become prolonged by the unchanged situation in the country of departure or other circumstances. Specific circumstances in Honduras regarding expulsion factors will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The network of relatives and friends many can count on in the U.S. even before arrival provides a powerful and comforting attraction factor to try to reach *El Norte*, as the U.S. are commonly called. (Sladkova 2007:191) Even as deportations of Central Americans have been increasing (Orozco 2009:8) the chance of remaining undetected once in the country remains relatively high. (Payan 2006:56) The combination of these factors helps explain why so many Latinos try to enter the U.S. undocumented despite all risks, and why even the most restrictive immigration policies and the dangers of the journey fail to deter them. (Hamilton et al. 1991:77) The hazards and risks they confront on their journey will be discussed in chapter 4.

2.3 Families Left Behind

As already shown, the wish to support one's family, 'the most important institution in people's lives' (Narayan et al. 2009:282), often stands behind the decision to migrate. Usually this is done by sending remittances (Narayan et al. 2009:284). Family unity and the entailing willingness to sacrifice oneself for the well being of close relatives play an extremely important role in the ability to move out of poverty (Narayan et al. 2009:285). Falicov (2003:286) traces the responsibility most migrants feel towards their relatives through their upbringing in countries that favour collectivistic narratives about the family, including an internalized obligation to help the extended kin throughout life, regardless of the quality of relationship to them. Boss defines the family as an 'intimate group of people whom we can count on over time for comfort, care, nurturance, support, sustenance, and emotional closeness.' This might well include someone not biologically related. At a time where people are increasingly scattered over different places, she notices that it is the family existing in someone's mind which is important, not only the members physically present. (Boss 1999:3)

This is especially true for the increasing number of households separated by migration. These *transnational* families maintain ties between two or more countries. (Schmalzbauer 2004:1317) The subsequent separation often turns migration into a mixed blessing, deeply impacting both those having left and those staying behind (Narayan et al. 2009:286). The severity with which it is experienced is determined by a variety of factors, including the perceived degree of voluntary choice involved in the

decision, the social support given to those left behind, age, gender and if there is a possibility to visit one another. (Falicov 2003:281) Schmalzbauer (2004:1317) argues that transnational Central American families often 'depend on a cross-border division of labor in which productive labor occurs in the host country and reproductive labor in the home country.' In this traditional role allocation men migrate to earn money and provide economically for those left behind, while women stay, bear children and take care of the family. She uses the term *motherwork*, coined by Hill Collins (Schmalzbauer 2004:1320), which describes 'the productive and reproductive labor that poor women do to ensure the survival of their children and community'. At the same time Schmalzbauer (2004:1320) recognizes that changing labour demands towards paid domestic work have started a shift in migration from men to women, a development challenging these notions..

In single-parent households or when both migrate, children are often left behind with other care-givers, as migrants often shy away from the additional risks and costs of taking their children with them. This situation is often hard to deal with for both sides, especially if a prolonged separation results in an estrangement (Falicov 2003:296). Nazario (2007) describes the mixed feelings of children in this situation with emotions ranging from gratefulness for the possibilities and material gains through their parents' remittances to one of abandonment and open rejection of them, often in favour of the new caregiver, like a grandparent or the other parent. On the other side stand sad and disappointed parents who find their struggles underappreciated. Modern means of communication help to maintain ties, but they also can make everyone more aware of the absence in one another's lives.

In the worst case, existing dissent is exacerbated to an extent that family ties break. (Schmalzbauer 2004:1320) Some migrants might be unable to provide a sufficient amount of remittances or find their struggle underappreciated. (Falicov 2003:296) They go through a sense of loss, grief and mourning characteristic to the migration experience, a process which has been compared to the death of loved ones, despite the imaginary possibility of an eventual reunion. (Falicov 2003:282) Most remain torn between the opportunities and gains they have in the new place while missing those left behind. (Falicov 2003:283) While this ambiguity is felt by the migrant, something similar can be expected for those left behind. Gratitude for a better economic standing through remittances is countered by a sense of loss, preoccupation and all other sorts of mixed feelings towards the one who has left.

2.4 Families of Missing Migrants

For all those problems to occur, the migrant has to make it to the U.S. first. When someone has made the decision to migrate undocumented and risk the journey, family members wait anxiously for life-signs from the traveller. For some, the only news to arrive come from other relatives stating that the migrant did not arrive at the destination or a *coyote*,⁸ a smuggler, telling that the person was for some reason left behind or got separated from his group during the journey. Chapter 4.4 takes a close look at the dangers this journey poses. He or she has gone missing and for many relatives this means embarking on a process of searching which can continue for years to come. (Reineke 2009:11) What it means for the families portrayed in this research is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify the terminology. Even though the terms *disappeared* and *missing* are often used interchangeably, there is an important difference in the Latin American context. *Disappearance* is associated with the missing of persons after being apprehended by government agents or people acting in some form of collusion with the government (Amnesty International 1981:78), practices that took place on a massive scale in a number of Latin American countries during the late 1960s and 1970s. (Amnesty International 1981:1) In the case of *missing* persons, such official involvement is not given. However, both types share that the families are left behind uncertain what has happened with their relative and if he or she is still alive. The impact is devastating, nothing remains the same. (Trully 1995:1598) Amnesty International (1981:109-113) describes not to know the fate of a loved one as a form of mental torture. With regard to the families of disappeared persons, it is suggested that usually there are three stages of response. Initial inaction is caused by fear and the feeling of guilt and indirect responsibility. This is followed by a phase of obsessive search, led by a terrible sense of urgency since it is believed the person is still alive. The obsession can get to a point where someone neglects the rest of the family, which subsequently disintegrates. Some families or individuals eventually move on to a third stage of collective action, once they come to realise that their individual effort can not solve the case.

⁸ *Coyote* is a common casual term in parts of Central America referring to people who smuggle undocumented migrants for a fee. Those who can afford it pay a *coyote* to guide them from their place of origin all the way into the U.S. Others try to make it through Mexico on their own and only contract a smuggler to get them across its northern border. There is no set fee for the services of a *coyote*, but migrants can expect to pay a couple of thousands of U.S. Dollar, the higher the further the journey.

Even though these stages are described in connection to disappearances, Bollinger (2009:187-191), who researched into families of missing Mexican migrants, observed the same phases in them. In this context, Reineke (2009:13) notices that the process of searching contains both an external and an internal component. While the family starts a frantic external search for information, every individual also embarks on the internal search for a way to make sense of the situation.

Boss (1999) uses a concept termed ambiguous loss, an incomplete or uncertain form of loss, to describe the effect it has on families when a relative goes missing. According to her, someone can be experienced to be missing by others in two ways. In the first case, a person is physically present but psychologically absent, such as patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease. In the second case, a person is physically absent but psychologically kept present by the family when they have no clear information as to what has happened. (Boss 1999:9) Only the latter case applies here. What weighs heaviest in cases of ambiguous losses is the uncertainty. A mother of a Nicaraguan who disappeared during the civil war brings it to the point: 'We must always be ready for 'yes' and 'no'. Yes, he is alive. No he is not.' (Trully 1995:1606) Affected relatives describe the situation as an emotional rollercoaster ride, where hope and hopelessness alternate as every reported trace is countered by frustration when it leads nowhere. (Boss 1999:24) For missing migrants, a huge variety of possibilities exist as to what has happened, ranging from death or abduction to a voluntary ceasing of contact. (Reineke 2009:2) The resulting confusion can lead some families to refuse to accept the death of the person, even when the body is finally found. (Reineke 2009:15)

However, more often no remains are found. For most people it is difficult to accept the loss of a person unless they see the body, (Boss 1999:26) since this also means no funeral and no place to grieve, no anniversary to observe. (Trully 1995:1606) In cases like the mentioned Nicaraguans who were disappeared forcefully during the civil war, the mothers at least have someone to blame it on, generally the government or the military. (Trully 1995:1604) For families of missing migrants, the culprit is not clearly identifiable, yet the yearning for placing the blame on someone remains.

Considering the loss that is felt in the family when a migrant goes missing, it is important to mention that this often is not only experienced emotionally but also economically. (Reineke 2009:18) It is mostly those with the best wage-earning perspectives who migrate, with the others depending on them. Some families see no other option than sending someone else, risking an even greater tragedy when losing

this person too. (Reineke 2009:19) As already mentioned this can lead to a descent into poverty or exacerbate the situation. (Narayan et al. 2009:166)

Some families engage in an intense search for the missing in line with the already discussed internalized obligation to help kin (Falicov 2003:286). Extending this argument, the felt responsibility to do everything possible to search for the relative, hopefully encounter him alive or at least bury the remains, stems from the same narratives. Many realise only by doing so how many others there are in the same situation when eventually joining self-help groups such as COFAMIPRO or COFAMIDE. Organising helps against the feeling of being left alone but also harbours the danger of further frustration when it leads to no palpable successes (Trully 1995:1607). Those who search actively often find themselves under criticism by their own families and surrounding for not being able to move on and worry about those present rather than those missing (Trully 1995:1606)

In this context Trully (1995:1602) points out that it is often the women who are most active. She suggests that they view their search as a logical extension of their responsibilities towards their families, which fits with Hill Collin's (Schmalzbauer 2004:1320) notion of motherwork, where women take on the responsibility for the well being of those important to them. Many state that they feel unable to move on before knowing what has happened. (Trully 1995:1607) To keep searching means to retain a least bit of hope that one day the person will either reappear or be found. (Trully 1995:1599) Bollinger (2009:105) describes in her study of families of missing Mexican migrants the intense hope that makes them survive the tragedy they are experiencing. In some cases this feeling is nurtured by deeply rooted religiosity as described by Bollinger (2009:126) for families of missing Mexican migrants and Trully (1995:1603) for mothers of disappeared Nicaraguans.

Religion offers consolation but can also contribute to a feeling of being in 'the hands of God', which translates into the conviction that one's fate is outside their own influence, since only God can change it (Gissi 1995:11). Gissi (1995:12) notes that in Latin American popular religion, saints and the Virgin Mary are the ones to turn to for fulfilling wishes that the individual feels unable to obtain themselves, something that has also been observed by Bollinger (2009:126) among families of missing migrants in Mexico.

While some relatives go to their limits to find out what happened, there are also many who do nothing. Especially poor people seem to be struck by a certain kind of inability to handle the situation in a proactive way. Gissi (1995:10) traces the apathy within certain lower strata of Latin American societies to a form of chronic resignation, caused by constant frustrations experienced in daily life. Gradually the individual lowers their level of expectation to adapt to what they perceive as an unchangeable reality and through this their level of frustration. (Gissi 1995:9) This fits with the observation of Narayan, Pritchett and Kapoor (2009:168) that there is a relationship between health shocks, which the missing of a relative can be counted into in a psychological sense, and the degree to which control over everyday life is perceived.

Gissi (1995:12) explains the reluctance to even start an attempt to change certain situations or conditions in that 'the objective difficulties of success and the objectively high probability of failure have a negative impact on the achievement motivation in the lower strata of [Latin American] society'. This lack of motivation hinders the development of a more favourable position towards the ability to handle a problem successfully. (Gissi 1995:12) Nevertheless, he also stresses that resignation is not an unavoidable side effect of poverty and also exists in various degrees (Gissi 1995:13). This observation is in line with the different ways of reacting among poor families as described by Bollinger (2009), with some being very active and inventive and others completely apathetic.

Searching for a missing relative not only takes a psychological toll; it also confronts families with a great amount of bureaucratic obstacles. (Reineke 2009:16) As mentioned, up to date there has been no systematic effort to even report those migrants suspected to be missing or found dead on the U.S.-Mexico border (Reineke 2009:7), nor in Mexico (Amnesty International 2010:18). Subsequently, some of the families Bollinger (2009) interviewed described the extreme frustration and disappointment when seeking help from Mexican government agencies, finding minimal cooperation and help. In these cases, NGOs offered a last beacon of hope. (Bollinger 2009:184) Given the lack of literature, it can only be assumed that the same is true for Central Americans and is certainly true for members of COFAMIPRO, as it will be shown in Chapter 6.

This lack of interest by the authorities is especially disappointing since the way families experience support by their surrounding or the lack thereof is crucial to their ability to cope. (Walsh 1996:3) Drawing on practical and financial assistance and a functioning network of kin and friends helps to handle the situation. This is hindered by

the obstacle that most people and institutions are not accustomed to provide support for a loss that is not certified, as it is the case with missing migrants (Boss 1999:30). Joining self-help organisations like COFAMIPRO and COFAMIDE can help counter this feeling of not being understood by one's surrounding. To do so however, the family itself needs to be willing and able to reach out (Walsh 1996:8) and in this context be lucky enough to live in radius of action of such an organisation, given how few there are in Central America.⁹

Reading about the different cases described by Bollinger (2009) and Reineke (2009), one becomes aware that some families seem to cope better than others. Walsh (1996:1) explains this through the concept of family resilience. A person that shows resilience has 'the ability to withstand and rebound from crisis and adversity.' She is convinced that this is not only the case for individuals, but can also be applied to the family as a whole, as 'interactional processes over time that strengthen both individual and family hardiness.' These processes involve the way a family organizes daily life, how it communicates and solves problems, its belief systems and use of communal resources. (Walsh 1996:1) If self-esteem and self-efficacy prevail, members are more likely to cope as if they feel helpless. (Walsh 1996:3) This likely depends on the particular history and the surrounding in which each family is embedded. (Falicov 2003:281) Chapter 6 will highlight these aspects further.

Given the prolonged psychological stress and change of conditions over the course of time, it is most important that families can draw on a variety of coping strategies to choose what fits the current situation best. (Walsh 1996:4) This is helped if a general climate of warmth, affection and emotional support prevails in the family. (Walsh 1996:3)

Returning to the three stages of response some families or at least members of it, finally reach a stage where they can move on. They have come to accept that the loss is caused by an external force and not their fault, which does not resolve it but enables many to make meaning out of the tragedy. (Boss 1999:127) Many resort to helping others in the same situation or working towards sparing others the experience, as it will be shown in Chapter 6. (Reineke 2009:22).

⁹ It seems that the handful of committees in Honduras (more in Chapter 6.2) and the one in El Salvador are the only of their kind in Central America but since there is so little literature and media coverage this is hard to determine.

3. A Country of Missing Opportunities: Migration in the Honduran Context

Many factors that prompt the migrants portrayed in this research to leave can be applied in the general Central American context, such as the importance of poverty as an expulsion factor, the attraction offered by the comparatively higher standard of living in the U.S. and the reliance on an existing network of relatives and friends. This chapter discusses indicators specific to Honduras and the El Progreso area which cause in the high level of undocumented migration and hence the constant rise in cases of missing migrants. The last section examines the impact the coup of June 2009 had on my research. Most civil society activities had come to a halt and were still had to return to normal when I arrived, which influenced my ability to observe the full spectrum of work of these organisations and the authorities, since the new government had been inaugurated less than a month before I arrived.

3.1 Honduran Migration

Unlike its neighbours, Honduras was spared the armed conflicts of its neighbours in the 1980s, but the country's population still suffered from the economic consequences for the region. As will be discussed later in detail for El Progreso, the consequences of hurricane Mitch in 1998 caused undocumented migration to rise further, as it aggravated already existing economic difficulties, given Honduras' strong reliance on a narrow range of mainly agricultural export products (Barahona et al. 2009:13)

As anywhere in Central America, wages are low and regular employment is scarce in Honduras, which is why many people have to turn to the informal economy to eek out a living, even though this is hardly a viable alternative. (Schmalzbauer 2004:1319) Honduras leads the Central American region in terms of inequality, which is generally high already (UNDP 2009).¹⁰ How much of the population struggles with

¹⁰ Honduras' Gini Index is with 55.3 (UNDP 2009:196) the highest in Central America, with 0 representing absolute equality and 100 absolute inequality (UNDP 2009:198).

poverty is evident in the latest Human Poverty Index (HPI).¹¹ According to it, over fifty percent of Honduras' population is living under the national poverty line and almost a fifth from less than US\$1.25 a day, in what is defined as extreme poverty (UNDP 2009:177).

Like all over Central America, many try to make it to the U.S. to find employment and send remittances to their families.¹² More than half the population has at least one relative abroad, mainly in *El Norte*, who provide a network of support once there. Currently about a third of all households receive remittances, in 2008 on average over two thousand US Dollar.¹³ (Orozco 2008). In the same year, remittances accounted for 20 percent of Honduras' Gross Domestic Product, more than foreign direct investment and official development assistance combined (Migration Policy Institute 2010). This shows how immensely important its migrants are for Honduras. However, due to the current economic crisis, in 2009 the inflow of remittances has declined for the first time in more than a decade. Deportations have been also been stepped up. In the first half of 2010, over 10,500 Hondurans were deported from the U.S. and a further 11,600 from Mexico.¹⁴ Relying on remittances has become a valuable but risky bet. (Orozco 2009:9)

There is little agreement on the numbers of Hondurans leaving annually for the U.S., ranging from 80 thousand (Sladkova 2007:187) to 185 thousand (Zavala 2007:8). Consensus exists that only about a quarter of them actually make it there. The majority who leave are young, single and male (Zavala 2007:10), despite the already mentioned trend towards female migration (Schmalzbauer 2004:1320). Research indicates that Hondurans are aware of the potential difficulties undocumented migration brings (Sladkova 2007). Still, the numbers indicate that a substantial number is not being deterred by this.

¹¹ The HPI measures the deprivation from three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living (UNDP 2009:210)

¹² The minimum wage in Honduras is less than three US Dollar per day; in the U.S. almost six US Dollar per hour. Even if an undocumented migrant earns below minimum in the U.S: he is still earning a multiple of the average in Honduras.

<http://www.ilo.org/travaildatabase/servlet/minimumwages?pageClass=org.ilo.legislation.work.web.CategorySearchPage> (accessed August 16, 2010)

¹³ In 2008, Honduras' average GDP per capita was just under two thousand US Dollar and given the high level of inequality the majority of the population earns considerably less.

<http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Honduras>

¹⁴ Llegan a más de 22,000 los deportados en 2010, La Presa Honduras, June 20, 2010

<http://www.laprensa.hn/Pa%C3%ADs/Ediciones/2010/06/21/Noticias/Llegan-a-mas-de-22-000-los-deportados-en-2010> (accessed June 21, 2010)

3.2 El Progreso and the Impact of Mitch

As already mentioned, my research was conducted in El Progreso, an area with a high level of undocumented migration. Locals routinely divide time in 'before and after Mitch', the hurricane which hit in October 1998 with disastrous consequences. (ECLAC 1999) Until then, the economy in the area depended almost exclusively on extensive banana plantations owned by the United Fruit Company. It provided employment to most people in the *campos*, the rural outskirts.¹⁵ After Mitch everything changed. The livelihoods of nearly three quarters of the population were affected. Most banana plantations were destroyed (ECLAC 1999:78) and United Fruit partially retreated or reoriented its production toward more resistant and less labour intensive African palm (Barahona et al. 2009:22). Suddenly, people were left coping with the destruction and out of work with little prospect of finding something new.

The subsequent collective trauma has still not been overcome completely. Men especially have struggled to find stable work ever since. Young people have resorted to working in the *maquila* manufacturing outlets. They are the main source of employment now, despite long hours, low wages and unhealthy, insecure working conditions. Women are being preferred for best manual skills, but rarely earn enough to support a family on their wage alone. (ERIC 2009:23) Since they do not receive the necessary education and training, most are unable to maintain the employment beyond their thirties. (Wolseth 2008:316) This lack of opportunities has resulted in a steep increase in mainly undocumented migration (ERIC 2009:13).

Wolseth (2008:315) detected a 'general sense of hopelessness about the future' among most of El Progreso's youth. Many of them see undocumented migration to the U.S. as the only means to get out of this situation, even though not all really leave. (Wolseth 2008:328) This exodus is reflected in the noticeable lack of young men in the *campos* and the high number of households receiving remittances. Some, like my host-family, even depend almost exclusively on them, which will be discussed in the next chapter.¹⁶

¹⁵ Information obtained through informal conversations with locals while living in one of the *campos*.

¹⁶ Information obtained through informal conversations with locals while living in one of the *campos*.

3.3 Impact of the Coup of 2009

The situation in Honduras further deteriorated in June 2009, when a military coup ousted President Manuel Zelaya and installed the president of the senate, Roberto Micheletti. The country was deeply divided over this move, foreign opinion largely opposed. There were violent clashes between both sides and when the tensions were at their worst, a general curfew was imposed. The crisis was eventually superficially resolved when Porfirio Lobo was elected new president in a much contended general election in November 2009, and most of the violence ended.

During crisis, those not actively involved retreated to the private sphere and civil society activities largely grinded to a halt as many foreign donors froze their aid. Upon my arrival in February 2010, things were on the road to recovery, but especially in the beginning of the research period it felt like civil society was only slowly able to shake off the nightmare of the recent months. However, the repercussions were still felt upon my arrival in February 2010. In Tegucigalpa, Honduras' capital, the new government made many promises to take the fate of missing migrants more serious than its predecessors, but had yet to prove this was more than empty words. So even though it was incredibly interesting to stay in the country in times like these, my research was sometimes hampered by the long-term consequences of the coup since I could not witness the full spectrum of activities.

4. The Wish to Improve: Taking the Decision to Leave

This section connects the empirical findings on the motivation of my case study migrants to leave with the theoretical framework. Drawing from Puerta's (Sladkova 2007:200) formula 'decision to emigrate = expulsion + attraction > costs + risks', expulsion and attraction factors causing the decision to migrate as well as the costs and risks attached to it are being discussed. It becomes clear that on the expulsion side, poverty, the lack of economic opportunity in Honduras and subsequent inability to live the life the migrant envisioned for himself and his family are the strongest factor, with additional factors like personal or family problems also playing a role. At the same time the U.S. promised higher wages and the possibility to send remittances home. As it will be shown, in the El Progreso area to receive remittances or not is a prominent factor in determining the well being of a household, so the incentive was strong to provide the own family with these. Despite these positive effects, the examples of Marta and Ricardo also point out the costs of undocumented migration, especially in terms of family separation and the limitations in daily life in the U.S. The final section examines the risks, which are at the highest during the journey crossing Mexico on the way to the U.S.

4.1 Expulsion Factors

In line with already mentioned observations regarding poverty as a principal expulsion factor in a general context (Narayan et. al 2009:284) and as the main factor in Honduras (Schmalzbauer 2004:1319), the wish for economic improvement is the overarching expulsion factor hovering over all cases portrayed here is poverty, albeit to varying degrees and in some cases combined with other reasons like family problems. Probably none of my case study migrants or their relatives would cite a violation of their human rights as an expulsion factor in the decision to migrate. A different perspective offers article 23(3) of the UN (1948) Declaration of Universal Human Rights, stating 'the right

to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection’.

As already mentioned, the work available did not offer a sufficient number of adequately paid jobs, especially after Mitch. Honduras, unlike its neighbours, was spared the violence of civil war during the 1980s but its economy has a long history of weakness. Despite current efforts to diversify, the country has a tradition of relying on the export of a very limited range of products, mainly apparel, bananas and coffee. Natural disasters and fluctuations in commodity prices were always bound to have a heavy impact on the economic stability.¹⁷ This explains why Mitch could have had such a devastating impact on the economic performance of the whole country.

Lando provides an example for the impact Mitch had on individuals. A former banana plantation worker, he kept working occasionally in the African palm plantations, but the pay was very low. His case shows that the meaning of a ‘dignified existence’ is very subjective. The family did not suffer from a lack of the very basic means of survival, such as shelter and food, but had not enough to pay their daughters the university studies Lando and his wife Toya envisioned.¹⁸ As many parents all over the world, they were convinced of the value of making a sacrifice to enable their children an education that can provide a path out of poverty (Narayan et al. 2009:284). Once he had decided to migrate, relatives in the U.S. provided the funding and he left in March 2004.¹⁹

A dignified life is not necessarily secured solely through the achievement of a certain level of economic security but also involves feeling comfortable in one’s surrounding. In Ada’s case, her relation with her family was tense. Ada’s father was an alcoholic who treated them badly, and her mother Emeteria struggled to get the family through, sending Ada to relatives to help in their household.²⁰ Even though Emeteria did not state it explicitly, other members of COFAMIPRO indicated that it seems the daughter blamed her mother for being violated and becoming pregnant with only thirteen years while being there..²¹ It would come as no surprise if all this emotional

¹⁷The World Fact Book Honduras

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ho.html> (accessed July 26, 2010)

¹⁸ Interview with Toya, April 29, 2010

¹⁹ Interview with Toya, March 19, 2010

²⁰ Interview with Emeteria, February 23, 2010

²¹ Information provided in informal conversations with members of COFAMIPRO

baggage made leaving the family for a life in the U.S. very appealing. Her two children grew up with Emeteria.

Rosita also left a household of dire poverty. Her mother Edita has provides basic medical aid to friends and neighbours to bring the family through. As the oldest daughter, Rosita felt the responsibility to help her mother to pay for food. Her dream was to build a house for herself on a corner of her mothers plot, something modest, not one of the so-called 'remittance palaces'²² as common in Honduras.²³ Her image of a dignified life seems to be a very modest, low scale one mainly oriented toward fulfilling the basic needs of her family.

Tachito's comes from a farmers family growing vegetables and fruit, which does not allow great jumps but according to the parents they never thought of migration and find it unnecessary that their children do either.²⁴ They are an example for the notion that 'families stand out as the most important institution in people's lives.' (Narayan et al. 2009:282) All members stress the existing unity and spending time with them, one comes to the same impression. Given the absence of what they perceive as reasons to migrate, such as a lack of food or other basic necessities, none of his closest relatives really seems to understand why Tachito took the decision to leave. Only one of his brothers suspected that there were unpaid debts the young man might have wanted to get away from but was ashamed to admit to.²⁵ However, since he had not discussed his decision with anyone, this remains speculative. Wolseth (2008:331) suggest that for young men in the El Progreso area, 'the United States stands in for any type of utopia where their immediate problems no longer exist.' This might have been the case for Tachito, who despite ending up working in Mexico always insisted he would make it to the U.S. eventually.

Other families of missing migrants I visited during my research, especially in the municipality of El Negrito in the mountainous countryside close to El Progreso, live in extreme poverty. Looking at the different standard of living of households which do and which do not receive remittances echoes the observations made in the study by

²² In many, especially rural areas with a high emigration ratio, some houses stick out from the local architectural style and supersede the average size of homes. These houses are built with remittance money and reflect the newly acquired tastes of those sending them. They are way of showing the community of origin that one has made it successfully in the U.S. and are often intended as a retirement home once the migrant returns, to be used by the remaining family in the meantime.

²³ Interview with Edita, March 23, 2010

²⁴ Interview with Tachito's parents, March 4, 2010

²⁵ Informal conversation with several family members during a visit, May 19, 2010

Narayan, Pritchett and Kapoor (2009:287) which determined ‘the migration of a family member as a key factor distinguishing those on the higher steps of the ladder of life’. In El Negrito, this is a difference on a low level, but makes all the difference between suffering from hunger or not.²⁶

4.2 Attraction Factors

In terms of attraction factors, the perceived easy availability of work and the subsequent possibility to send remittances were certainly the most influential in the decision to leave for the missing migrants, with the chance to escape personal problem only being a welcome side-effect. In all cases the decision to leave was a deeply personal one, but often influenced by someone in the closer surrounding planning to leave and suggesting taking the journey together. In Tachito’s case, his cousins apparently convinced her boyfriend, a *coyote*, to take him for free which might have made the thought of leaving all that easier.²⁷

As mentioned, about a third of all households in Honduras receive remittances (Orozco 2008). The missing migrants all had seen what a difference it makes to receive or not to receive money from abroad in Honduras. Here as in many developing countries receiving remittances means stepping up the social and economical ladder (Narayan et al. 2009:287). When it is payday in the U.S. long lines form at the banks and money transfer agencies of El Progreso. People wait patiently, often for hours. The new American-style shopping mall in the outskirts, normally half empty, fills with shoppers. In the *campos*, people pay their tab at the *pulpería*, the local store. Those who do not receive remittances are reminded at every step on what they miss out.

The impact it has on a family when it receives remittances or not can be shown when comparing the household of Nelly, COFAMIPRO’s executive secretary, and of Edita, Rosita’s mother and deputy secretary of the committee. Nelly and her husband live in one of the *campos* in the outskirts of El Progreso. They have four grown children, two older sons and two younger daughters. Both sons migrated undocumented in 2006 and have been living in the same area of Florida since. The oldest left a wife and three little children behind. Even though they cannot always send much, they pool their resources and unfailingly provide for the life of their parents and youngest sister who still lives at home. The older one also sends money to his wife. The remittances are not

²⁶ Visit to a various members of COFAMIPRO in El Negrito, March 2, 2010

²⁷ Informal conversation with various family members during a visit, March 24, 2010

enough to lift the family completely out of poverty, but they do not have to suffer from hunger, live in a well-kept house and can afford medical aid when necessary. When an earthquake damaged Nelly's house in 2009, the remittances paid the reparation.²⁸

Edita lives in a very modest house in one of the poorest areas of El Progreso. Four of her sons and one of her daughters live in the U.S. undocumented. Apart from one, those who left hardly ever send money, not to their mother or the children and spouses some have in Honduras. This leaves Edita to figure out how to feed not only her self but also the ever-changing number of granddaughters who do not get along with their caretakers and seek refuge in her house, some of them pregnant. For mother's day, the siblings sent fifty US\$ between all of them, but had the transaction fee included in this amount, which meant less than US\$ 40 were paid out to Edita. When one of her sons called, he told her: 'You know mami, this is money to set aside for tough times.'²⁹

Comparing these two households confirms the already discussed notion that remittances can be extremely effective to move families out of poverty (Narayan et al. 2009: 287) and the positive impact they have on easing the daily life of poor households. At the same time it illustrates that not all migrants feel compelled to send them, despite the original intention of most to do so, often driving the remaining family into even more dire poverty (Narayan et al. 2009: 166).

In terms of the already mentioned attraction factor of an existing network of relatives and friends in the U.S., apart from Ada all portrayed migrants had someone to go to. Lando knew he could count on the support of his wife Toya's siblings, who also provided most of the money needed for the journey. Rosita had relatives there, Tachito his oldest brother. Ricardo' aunt was a U.S. resident, but had not been informed of his coming. When he was caught as an unaccompanied minor by the U.S. authorities, she nevertheless signed an agreement to take on the responsibility for him, in line with Falicov's (2003:286) notion about the internalized feeling of responsibility most migrants have when it comes to their kin. In Marta's case, it was a family member in the sense of Boss' (1999:4) concept of the family as a psychological entity, which might well include someone not biologically related. Her son's godmother, who was already living in Miami, offered to provide her with accommodation and a first job if she would join her.

²⁸ I lived with Nelly's family during my whole fieldwork

²⁹ Information gained in various informal conversations during visits at Edita's house and while doing participant observation with COFAMIPRO where she was present.

Given this support, it comes as little surprise that most of those willing to migrate worry more about actually getting into the U.S. than finding a job once there. Even as the current economic crisis is being felt by many migrants in the U.S., the situation in the countries of origin is often worse. Marta sometimes struggles not to fall behind on the remittances, but she is determined to stay put, given that her family depends on her and the cost of leaving would be returning forever or to dare the whole journey again.³⁰

Some stick to their original plan of achieving certain goals and returning quickly. Tello, a relative of Nelly returned to Honduras after spending a couple of years in the U.S. together with his oldest son. They lived frugal and worked hard. While away, Tello sent his wife the money to build a large house and open a fruit and vegetable business. His son saved up enough to finance his own university studies in Honduras.³¹ They are a good example for a sustainable use of remittances, allowing a long term step up the economic ladder. (Narayan et al. 2009:285)

Marta is ambiguous about returning. She is aware that she has grown used to the more liberal lifestyle a young unmarried woman enjoys in the U.S. compared to her native El Salvador, even though she rarely ventures out of the Latino community. Still, she insists that she will be going back once her younger brother has finished university and does not depend on her anymore.³²

Others have grown so accustomed to the American way of life that they shy no risk to maintain it. Ricardo, my young Honduran neighbour freshly repatriated from Mexico, admitted that he was trying to make it back to the U.S. because he had grown accustomed to the amenities life there offers even him as an undocumented migrant compared to Honduras. Ricardo explained:

In the U.S., I feel free and save. Not like here, where people are being shot on the street and everyone is corrupt. Sure, I am not as free as someone with his papers in order, but still.³³

³⁰ Informal conversation with Marta, Miami, February 6, 2010

³¹ Informal conversation with Tello and his family, March 3, 2010

³² Informal conversation while visiting Marta in Miami, June 1, 2010

³³ Interview with Ricardo, March 29, 2010

His judgement of the situation in his native country echoes the sentiments of the young people from El Progreso in Wolseth's (2008) study, for whom the U.S. is a synonym from escaping the hopelessness and violence of their hometown.

4.3 Costs

Despite the mentioned factors in favour of migrating, this decision comes at a cost. The most prominent is leaving behind one's family. The lack of a legal permit to stay and work in the U.S. limits the migrant's freedom and entails the inability to visit the family back home and return to the U.S. whenever they want without doing the whole journey again, the dangers of which will be discussed further on. Life as an undocumented person in the U.S. does not necessarily mean to live in constant hiding, but the threat of being apprehended and deported hovers over all of them, especially if a migrant returns despite having been deported before. Ricardo, who has such an order and a criminal record on top. Asked how he was imagining his life in the U.S. given these circumstances, Ricardo said:

I have to avoid stupid things, so no driving, drinking or getting in fights, just working and staying home. I know I have to behave so they do not get me, but the most difficult thing is to get into the U.S. Once there, it is up to me.³⁴

Marta, who has no such order yet, still tells the same.

At the moment, the U.S. authorities do not even know I am here. Look at me. I don't drive, I pay my bills, and I don't do stupid things like getting in fights with my neighbours. I blend in as much as I can and try not to give anyone a reason to pay attention to me. Would they still find and deport me, okay, I know I have no legal permission to be in this country, but I would rather choose myself the point in time to return.³⁵

Those statements show the limitations the migrants have to face and the constant awareness of being at the mercy of others. At an earlier visit, Marta had told me

³⁴Interview with Ricardo, March 29, 2010

³⁵Interview with Marta, Miami, June 5, 2010

horrified that her former neighbour threatened to call the migration authorities during a minor dispute about the use of the communal washing machine.³⁶ At the same time, they also show the awareness of these migrants that as long as one behaves, chance are good to remain undetected.

As mentioned, shifts in labour demands within the U.S towards paid domestic work have resulted in an increase female migration. (Schmalzbauer 2004:1320) Often these women are single mothers, like Ada and Marta, having to leave their children in the care of relatives or other care-takers. While most are heart-broken to leave their children behind, some are more ambiguous. Given the trauma and family drama attached to the fathers of Ada's children, it seems likely that this was the reason she never got in touch with her offspring after leaving. However, even if these women have an interest in remaining in close connection to their children, their undocumented status complicates matters. Marta has not been back to see her family ever since she left in 2006, nor have they been able to come to visit. She explains:

You have no idea what I would give for any permit allowing me to go home and see my kids every once in a while. Even if that meant I only had a limited time to stay in the U.S. There are so many like me. Even those who have a TPS³⁷ are not allowed to leave, only residents or citizens. I think that is what wears the hardest on us, knowing we would be able to afford a flight home, but if we go, it means going back for ever. And what are we going to live off then?³⁸

Her family uses Skype frequently, but Marta says seeing and talking to them without being physically close does not make it easier for her and especially her son, who is eight now and was old enough when she left to remember her. Her five year old daughter only knows her as a video image. Still she has never considered sending for her children to join her. It is not only the immense costs and risks of having someone smuggle two children to the U.S. She would uproot them and feels there is little she has to offer them.

³⁶ Informal conversation with Marta, February 5, 2010

³⁷ Temporary Protected Status

³⁸ Interview with Marta, Miami, June 5, 2010

Marta states:

At home, my family takes care that my son does not get on the wrong track. Here, with me working all day and no relatives around, he might end up in a gang. One friend brought her boys here, and after a few months her oldest complained why she had made him leave all his friends just to live in the same poverty, only that back home everyone was poor and here only some, making it even worse. No way that I do this to my children and myself.³⁹

There is also the economic aspect. Once in the U.S., there might be more money to be made than back home, but getting undocumented from any place in Central America to any place in the U.S. is not cheap. The sheer distance means that the journey might at best take weeks, at worst months or years. Those who can afford it, pay a *coyote*, a smuggler who usually relies on an established network to get the migrant through Mexico and into the U.S., hopefully without the authorities noticing. Marta paid US\$ 7,000 in 2006, which seems to be more or less the average for being transferred from one's hometown in Central America's main emigration countries⁴⁰ to the place of choice in the U.S., but of course there is no fixed price given the illegal nature of the business. Marta's *coyote* demanded half the sum to be paid in advance, as a non-refundable starting fee. The other half was due once she had made it into the U.S. where she was only given a chance to shower and change into clean clothes once the money had arrived. In Marta's case, her father had taken up a bank loan to finance it. A Salvadoran taxi driver said in this context:

In our country, when you try to get a loan for building a house or to open a business, no bank will give you one. You indicate you need the money to pay a *coyote* and they will give it to you. They know chances to get their money back are better through that than through anything done the legally correct way within this country.⁴¹

³⁹ Interview with Marta, Miami, June 5, 2010

⁴⁰ The countries in Central America with the highest net emigration rate are El Salvador with -9.13; Guatemala with -2.17; Honduras with -1.27; and Nicaragua with -1.09. (CIA 2010b)

⁴¹ Informal conversation during a taxi ride, San Salvador, March 12, 2010

Even though this is an opinion formed by a good portion of prejudice and little factual knowledge, the same opinion was voiced by Hondurans during the research. It echoes the general sentiment that the export of labour has become one of the most lucrative means of income-generation for most Central American countries. In other cases, migrants receive financial aid from relatives already in the U.S. or mortgage property. Some also hand over the rights for land they possess.

4.4 Risks

Paying for a *coyote* does not eliminate the risk of not actually reaching the U.S. but being apprehended by either Mexican or U.S. authorities. In this case, a lot of money is lost and some migrants feel forced to try again, this time without *coyote*, just to be able to pay the debts. Those who can not afford to spend that much on a *coyote* still need money for food, transportation, accommodation, bribes to authorities and phone calls home, just to name a few cost factors.

Most of the migrants are little prepared when starting out on their journey. (Amnesty International 2010; Nazario 2007) They have no clear idea of the immense distance they have to overcome when crossing Mexico. Few expect it to get cold in parts of the trip, especially in some mountainous areas of Mexico where the freight train passes, and the U.S. desert that can get just as freezing cold at night as it gets sweltering hot during the day. (Gorney 2008) Some think it will be easy to work along the way, just to find that there are many others competing for the same type of casual jobs. (Nazario 2007:140) They can hardly be blamed for their ignorance. Even if someone would make the effort to really research the trip, there is no standard procedure or routine and there are simply too many unforeseeable factors. Most migrants have their belongings stolen completely or partially at some point, something that renders preparation useless. (Nazario 2007)

People like Rosita's mother Edita, who have been dealing semi-professionally with missing migrants and hence undocumented migration for years, say that due to the increased media attention in recent years people are much more aware of possible dangers than ten or twenty years ago, when the risks also objectively seem to have been lower⁴². This concurs with Sladkova's (2007) findings about the awareness of her

⁴² Informal conversation with Edita, March 23, 2010

Honduran research population regarding the potential difficulties awaiting undocumented migrants.

Some residents of El Progreso, mainly male, tell how they spent a few years in the U.S. in the 1980s and early 1990s, when no one was contracting a *coyote* before the Mexico-U.S. border, and how it even was possible in some areas of the little secured U.S.-Mexico border to just cross alone by foot. Their memories might have become somewhat rosy in the course of time. Still, none of them recalls being faced with any of the organized crime and violence migrants have come to fear nowadays, apart from the apparently timeless existence of corrupt authorities.⁴³

For most migrants the dangers begin when entering Mexico, usually by crossing the Suchiate River that divides Guatemala from Mexico in the area close to Tapachula. On the Mexican side of the river, corrupt officials wait to be bribed and thugs to prey on them. Most try to avoid checkpoints by using paths off the main routes, exposing themselves even more to assault, violence and – especially the women – rape. The next big problem is posed by riding the freight train traversing Mexico, the mean of transportation of choice for those unable to pay a smuggler all the way from their country of origin. The basic problem is obvious; it is not meant to transport humans and does not offer much to hold on to when sitting on the roof of one of the wagons. One of the greatest dangers is to fall asleep and lose grip, falling off the train when it is moving and being caught between the wheels, which can lead to the loss of limbs or life. (Gorney 2008) There are raids by Mexican authorities on top of the trains and some migrants fall off in attempts to flee. Armed gangs assault the travellers and do not shy away from killing someone or pushing him off the moving train when they do not get what they ask for (Nazario 2007:83)

Dangers also await when getting off the train in search of food, sleep or because it is not the same train going all the way but the migrants have to board several to get from the south to the north of Mexico. Women and children, especially when travelling unaccompanied, run a high risk of falling victim to sexual violence, rape, human trafficking and forced prostitution. (Amnesty International 2010:15) Rosita was separated from her brother in a raid by the Mexican migration authorities and ended up being sold to a bar owner. She was lucky enough not to be violated and managed to

⁴³ Informal conversation during a house party, March 3, 2010

flee before further harm could be done to her, thanks to the help of a Mexican man who later became her partner and with whom she stayed in Mexico.⁴⁴

On these stops, migrants are particularly vulnerable and at the mercy of the local population for shelter, food or at least the mercy to not tell the authorities about them. In this context Nazario (2007) describes the different sentiments of the Mexican population towards them from open hostility in Chiapas in the south (Nazario 2007:62) to helpfulness and mercy in Oaxaca and Veracruz (Nazario 2007:103) and migrant-shelters on the northern border (Nazario 2007:141)

Amnesty International (2010) and Mexico's Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos⁴⁵ (2009) report a wave of reports about the abduction of migrants since 2007. These are often product of a co-operation between corrupt officials and criminal gangs. They extort the phone-numbers of relatives in the U.S. or left behind and demand a ransom under the threat of killing the captive when the money is not being provided. Eye witness accounts about executions in case of non-fulfilment leave little doubt the perpetrators are serious about it. On behalf of the Mexican authorities there is no co-ordinated effort to keep track of those having fallen victim to the dangers mentioned. Amnesty International suggests that this lack of reliable information is partially the reason for the lack of public interest in the fate of these migrants. (Amnesty International 2010:18)

Once the migrants have overcome all obstacles in Mexico and are not among the majority picked up by the authorities to be deported or repatriated (Amnesty International 2010:22), they face the last and arguably most difficult hurdle, passing the highly secured border into the U.S. The securitization of this border dates back to 1986 when the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, regularizing undocumented immigrants already in the country while simultaneously stepping up border security and penalizing the employment of undocumented workers. This has been described as a turning point towards an increased law enforcement approach on the U.S. border (Payan 2006:56).

Migrants attempting to enter the U.S. without documentation are being pushed into ever more remote and hostile areas in order to avoid the increased security measures around more densely populated regions. This has made them more dependent on contracting smugglers, so called *coyotes*, who know the terrain and ways

⁴⁴ Interview with Edita, March 23, 2010

⁴⁵ National Commission for Human Rights

to avoid detection. (Guerette 2007:15) Lando was last seen with a group of other migrants and a *coyote* on his way to cross the border. The *coyote* later was unable to provide any satisfying explanation as to what happened to Lando and after a while simply did not answer to repeated calls from the missing's family anymore.⁴⁶

Since the 1980s there had been such a significant increase in migrant fatalities that in 1998 both the Mexican and the U.S. government recognized it as a problem on their common border and responded with the creation of the Border Safety Initiative, intended to save lives without abolishing the security measures. (Guerette 2007:33) Despite reports about partial successes, it seems rather ineffective, given the continuous rise in deaths. The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME), which examines the remains of those recovered along the Arizona-Sonora part of the U.S.-Mexico Border (Reineke 2009:2) reports that between 1960 and 1988, the annual average of remains recovered and believed to be migrants was 19. Since 2001, this has increased to numbers between seventy-five and more than two hundred per year only in this section of the border. (Reineke 2008:5) Over half of those reported missing to the PCOME are Mexican, and almost a third Central American. (Reineke 2009:8)

The problem with these numbers is that so far there has been no coordinated effort along the U.S.-Mexico border to count the recovered remains of those believed to be migrants. In order to get a complete overview over the dimension of the problem, not only this issue needs to be solved, but, as Reineke (2009:2) argues, the cases of missing migrants also have to be counted and included, since many remains are never found, let alone identified (Reineke 2009:5). Many of them do not even make it to the U.S.-Mexico Border but their trace is lost somewhere in the southern Mexican borderlands. As mentioned, in this region there are even less efforts to systematically deal with the problem, something that is reflected in the almost total lack of literature on the subject. What easily gets out of sight when talking about missing migrants is that to every case there is a heavily affected family.

⁴⁶ Interview with Toya, April 29, 2010

5. Struggling with the Uncertainty: Realising a Migrant is Missing

After having dealt with the reasons behind the migrant's decision to leave, this chapter deals with the consequences it has for a family when he goes missing. In all cases it is a more or less sudden break up of contact that makes the relatives suspicious that something has happened. Their reaction comes in four stages, initial inaction, frantic search, prolonged inaction and communal action. While the first stage of inaction is caused by the shock, the second stems from being convinced not to be able to contribute anything meaningful to encountering the migrant. This inability to do something proactive is explained by a feeling among poor people not to be in control of their own lives, especially after experiencing shocks to it. (Narayan et al.2009:168) Most families only manage to leave this stage when encountering a way of taken communal action with others in the same position, like when joining COFAMIPRO.

5.1 Loosing Contact

Despite the time difference in their departure and hence the possibly quite different expectations concerning the journey awaiting them, all migrants portrayed here share that they took the decision to migrate voluntarily and, except in Tachito's case, their families were informed of the departure. They were prepared not to be constantly informed about the whereabouts of their loved one for a couple of days or weeks since it was likely that the travellers would not always have the possibility to communicate with them. This did not mean they would not worry, but not in the same way like later, once they suspected the migrant had gone missing.⁴⁷ Tachito initially kept in touch, calling home regularly. Lando also called from Mexico. Rosita and Ada, started their trip in a time where the nowadays ubiquitous modern means of communication such as telephones were scarce in their country of origin. Both of their mothers stated that at the time of their daughters' departure no one in their closer vicinity had access to one.

⁴⁷ Interview with Edita, March 23, 2010

Lando's wife Toya remembers that even in 2004, the year of his departure, only one of her neighbours owned a cell-phone and that she had to go to El Progreso's branch of Hondutel, the national phone company, to make calls, especially abroad.⁴⁸

Given these difficulties to maintain regular contact, many families state that they only realised after a while that something was wrong. In the case of Rosita it was when her younger brother had finally made it to Houston. Word reached their mother Edita that he was on his own and had no idea what had happened to his sister after they had been separated when fleeing a raid by migration authorities in Mexico.⁴⁹

Toya knew her husband was planning on crossing the border to the U.S. A few days later, a lady from El Progreso who had been waiting in the same group as Lando for an opportunity to cross, finally opted for turning herself in to be repatriated rather than to continue the journey. She told Toya she had seen him in the back of a pickup bound for the border. This is why she assumes he must have died in the desert. She says that she has given up any hope of encountering him either dead or alive. Six years after his disappearance she rules out that he is in a detention centre or hospital, unable to contact her. She never believed in abduction, because no one called to ask for money. As for him having met another woman and therefore not keeping in touch, she simply cannot imagine it. Toya explains:

Not because of me. We had a good marriage, but you never know. But he loved his daughters so much he never would consciously make them suffer like that. He just would not do something so horrible to them, he left to give them a better life. They were his everything.⁵⁰

After Tachito had left, he kept in touch more or less regularly. His youngest sister recalls him teasing her on the phone:

One time he called and said 'How is the prettiest girl of the village doing?' I asked 'Who is this?' 'It's me, your brother, now that I left you don't know me anymore or what?' That day he told us that he was going to move to

⁴⁸ Interview with Toya, March 19, 2010

⁴⁹ Interview with Edita, March 23, 2010

⁵⁰ Interview with Toya, April 29, 2010

Cancun, because there he could live better. After this time, his calls just stopped and we did not know why. It was terrible.

For the families, a nightmare becomes reality once they realise a relative has gone missing. They see themselves confronted with a myriad of possibilities as to what might have happened, which can be so overwhelming that it is hard to figure out where to start searching for the missing.

5.2 Coping with the Situation

Families of missing migrants are facing many difficulties when dealing with the situation, but the most taxing in terms of the psychological impact is the uncertainty of not knowing what has happened. Returning to Boss' (1999) concept of ambiguous loss, families encounter themselves in a state where the person is physically absent but psychologically kept present since there is no certainty whether he or she is alive or dead. Edita recalls how in the time she knew nothing about her daughter, she caught herself sometimes to set food aside for her, so Rosita would have something to eat if she would suddenly stand in the door. After the trauma she experienced with her eldest daughter, she continued this habit every time one of her other children made the trip to the U.S. until she would have notice from them.⁵¹

Given that the migrants are going missing days, weeks or months after they have left their families, the rupture is different and less noted by the surrounding than in the case of forced disappearances. In the latter case, there is a sudden trauma for relatives and friends when someone gets abducted by force, maybe even in public or from his own home. Missing migrants just vanish quietly. Toya recalls how for months after Lando went missing she dreaded encountering acquaintances of the family on the street whom she had not seen for a long time and who would unfailingly ask for her husband, assuming he was in the U.S. now. It took her years not to well up when someone talked about her husband. She recalls:

'A year ago I could not have talked to you about him like I do now, I would just have cried. But there came a point where I told myself enough is

⁵¹ Interview with Edita, March 23, 2010

enough, I have to find a way to deal with what happened and decided that this was best achieved by no longer avoiding to talk about it.⁵²

Despite this obvious step towards moving on, there is still no talk between her and the daughters about what might have happened to Lando or how each of them with the situation. When I met the daughters, they were very friendly and willing to be photographed with their father's picture, but were anything but forthcoming about the way they had experienced their father's fate. Toya attributes the reluctance of her daughters to confront themselves with their emotions to the fact that they had a very strong bond to their father and it simply hurts them too much.⁵³

I experienced this reluctance not only from Lando's daughters but also on behalf of Ada's and Rosita's families. In all cases it is the mother searching, the reasons for which will be discussed in chapter 6, and the other family members made it clear by their attitude towards me that even though they treated me friendly and with respect, they were not interested in co-operating in my research. In Ada's and Rosita's case this probably can be attributed to the fact that they went missing such a long time and, as it will be discussed in Chapter 6.6, both cases have been more or less resolved. As for Ada, the already described frictions within the family might also play a role in not wanting to stir up the past. Only Tachito's relatives, the ones most recently affected, all not just answered my questions but came forward with additional information. His youngest sister told me that she feels that rather than driving them apart, what has happened has made them more united as a family.⁵⁴ This concurs with the observation that 'family love and unity provide the moral and psychological support that enables people to survive hard times.' (Narayan et al. 2009:282)

In the cases of the families portrayed here, the three stages of response described by Amnesty International (1981) with regard to relatives of disappeared persons need to be extended. After the initial inaction and frantic search described by Amnesty International, a second phase of inaction needs to be inserted before coming to the final stage of communal action. In all families, there was initial inaction caused by the shock of realising something has happened, even as this awareness came gradually when more and more time passed without news of the migrant. As for the second phase

⁵² Interview with Toya, March 19, 2010

⁵³ Interview with Toya, March 19, 2010

⁵⁴ Informal conversation with Tachito's sister, April 28, 2010

of frantic searching, only the family of Lando seems to have really made an individual search effort extending further than calling the *coyote* to find out what happened. His wife Toya's relatives in the U.S. went to search on known entry points for migrants in the U.S. and even hired a lawyer to find out whether he was detained somewhere. However, after a few months of fruitless efforts, they stopped.

Tachito's family tried to get in touch with the *coyote* who had brought him to Mexico but the efforts remained futile too. Edita and Emeteria state that since their daughters had not paid a *coyote*, there was no one to get in touch with.

Now all families fell into another stage of inaction, which in some cases lasted years and seem to have evolved from intensely grieving initially to complete resignation. Lando's wife Toya described how she fell into a deep depression after the initial search efforts had failed, unable to even get up on some days:

It felt like my head had been ripped off. I never thought something like this would happen to my family. I did not want to see anybody, neglected my friendships, even my family. I was just overwhelmed with sadness.⁵⁵

Edita and Emeteria both recall how they cried a lot in the time following the realisation that their daughters had gone missing.⁵⁶ The same reports Tachito's family for his father, even though he apparently never admitted to it and tried to hide his feelings. This ties in with Wolseth's (2008:317) observation that in Latin America, grief is gendered, with women grieving more visible to the point of becoming ill from their grief, while men's responses are 'maybe more stoic and less visceral'.

Fortunately none of those portrayed here was so affected that they were experiencing a further decline into poverty, a not unlike possibility in such events (Narayan et al. 2009:166) The economic loss as described by Reineke (2009: 19) was only really felt in the case of Lando's family. However, the blow was softened initially by the assets he had left in order to overcome the first months after his departure as he expected to take some time before finding work and being able to send money home. His daughters could not fulfil his dream of going to university, but have both found work and are able to support themselves and their mother.⁵⁷ In the other cases, the families

⁵⁵ Interview with Toya, April 29, 2010

⁵⁶ Interviews with Emeteria, February 23, 2010 and Edita, March 23, 2010

⁵⁷ Informal conversation with Toya's daughters, March 21, 2010

might have looked forward to receiving remittances but it was not like their standard of living further deteriorated.

When they were asked why they did not do more, all relatives stated the same: having no idea what to do or who to ask for help. Being poor, they are unable to afford travelling to Mexico to search by themselves and did not see any other option promising enough to be worth trying. Gissi (1995:12) explains the reluctance to even try to do something even if it is not very promising in that 'the objective difficulties of success and the objectively high probability of failure have a negative impact on the achievement motivation in the lower strata of [Latin American] society'. This lack of motivation hinders the development of a more favourable position towards the ability to handle a problem successfully in a proactive way. (Gissi 1995:12)

Surely four families are not enough to make general statements about relatives of missing migrants in Honduras, but the observation that there is little individual action was further confirmed by a variety of voluntaries and professionals working with families like these throughout the research.⁵⁸ This corresponds with Gissi's (1995:10) notion about the apathy in certain lower strata of Latin American societies, caused by constant frustration experienced in daily life. Do these families experience a shock like the missing of a relative, they feel unable to react in a proactive way since they do not feel in control over their lives. (Narayan et al. 2009:168) Gissi's (1995:9) notes: 'When aggression or compensation fails as a reaction to frustration and its causes are being perceived as basically unchanged, the subject submits himself to his fate. This situation can be seen as chronic frustration.'

Many retreat to their faith as the ultimate source of strength and hope left to them. Similarly to Bollinger's (2009:15) observation about the hope Mexican families drew from their religious faith, all relatives of the missing migrants portrayed here stated that they resorted to praying for comfort, but also to ask for help in encountering the missing. Toya even described how what happened to her husband made her rediscover her faith, which had not played a decisive role in her life for many years.⁵⁹ Edita recalls quarrelling with God why he was doing this to her family, pleading to him to make sure Rosita was alive and citing her gratitude to him for giving her daughter back to her as

⁵⁸ Interview with Manuel Suarez (SJM), May 25; Edith Zavala (FONAMIH) March 10, César Sanchez (Red COMIFAH), May 11, 2010

⁵⁹ Interview with Toya, March 19, 2010

one of the reasons why she continues to work for COFAMIPRO.⁶⁰ Her statement is very much in line with Gissi's (1995:11) notion that many Latin American poor see their life 'in the hands of God' depending on his mercy. Hence it does not come as a surprise that they see themselves unable to proactively change their situation, unless God shows them a way like when they learn about organisations like COFAMIPRO.

Coming back to the already discussed four stages of response, initial inaction, frantic search, a prolonged second phase of inaction and eventually communal action, the families portrayed here emerged from the second phase of inaction only when they learn about COFAMIPRO and decide to join, the impact of which will be discussed in the next chapter

⁶⁰ Informal conversation with Edita, April 17, 2010

6. Reaching Out and Becoming Strong: Search and Support

This final chapter examines what happens once the relatives join COFAMIPRO and connect with others to engage in collective action. It looks at the committee's work and the support it receives from other civil society organisations and from the Honduran authorities. Joining the committee fulfils many purposes. It helps against the feeling of being left alone with the problem, but it also shows a way out of the already discussed apathy and towards taking action, not only to promote the case of the own relative but to put missing migrants in general in the spotlight. While engaging in activities, they become educated about their own and migrants rights and find a voice many of them never believed to have had. However, it also needs to be stressed that this is only the case for active members. The last part briefly deals with the consequences it has for a family if the missing migrant does reappear.

6.1 COFAMIPRO

COFAMIPRO is the pioneer organisation of families of missing migrants not only in Honduras but in the whole of Central America. It emerged in 1999 out of an initiative of Radio Progreso, a local catholic radio station in El Progreso, which will be further introduced in the next section. As already mentioned the year before the committee's foundation hurricane Mitch had hit the country with devastating consequences. Due to the destruction of homes and infrastructure, many people lost touch with their relatives. The radio made an attempt to reconnect families within the country through a weekly show. COFAMIPRO was born when it became clear how significant the number of families was who did not know about their relatives on the way to the U.S. and it is its declared aim, and main appeal in the eyes of most relatives, to solve as many cases as possible through communal action by its members.

Over the time, COFAMIPRO evolved from a handful of affected relatives to currently representing over 350 pendant cases of missing migrants.⁶¹ It reaches its target group by word of mouth and through the still existing weekly radio show on Radio Progreso. The committee is non-partisan and welcomes people of any denomination, but its roots are clearly located within the socially and politically active Catholic scene of El Progreso, dominated by Radio Progreso and ERIC, a lay social work outlet of the Jesuits. The leadership of the committee mirrors these roots, even though there are evangelical Christians among the members.

The close bonds with the Catholic Church have both positive and negative effects. They limit the reach among members of evangelical churches which are especially popular in poor neighbourhoods, which is where much of COFAMIPRO's target group is situated. At the same time, the Catholic Church is among the most active actors in providing help to migrants in Central America, Mexico and the U.S., especially through the Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes (SJM)⁶² and the Scalabrini order. This means that COFAMIPRO is well connected to in terms of lobbying for the rights of migrants and when trying to find out what happened to the missing.

It is worth mentioning that most of the active members of COFAMIPRO also form part of other organisations of civil society. They are active in their churches, their children's schools, or the local water council of their *campo*. This already existing level of activity might explain why they are the ones who have overcome the previously described resignation (Gissi 1995) concerning the fate of their missing relatives and now pull others along in their activism for the committee.

The committee started to stage search trips, where they took photos of the missing, to make their fate known and hoping for clues from the local population. The first trip in 2000 went to Tecun Uman, a Guatemalan town on the border with Mexico heavily frequented by undocumented migrants, where they encountered two missing. On the following in 2002 to Tapachula, on the Mexican side of the border with Guatemala, they found a further six and learned about five who had just been deported back to Honduras.

⁶¹ Interview with Nelly, February 8, 2010

⁶² Jesuit Migrant Service

Trips in 2004 and 2006 along known migrant routes in the Mexican states of Chiapas and Veracruz and in 2008 to Mexico City generated press attention and brought the issue to the attention of Mexican politicians and the Honduran consul.⁶³ Despite having resolved only a few cases, these trips are certainly COFAMIPRO's most effective way of generating attention, and have majorly contributed to put the issue on the political and public agenda in Honduras. However, it has not always been easy to put these trips together. Reineke (2009:16) mentions the bureaucratic obstacles the family have to face, and in this case it has proved very difficult not only to secure funding but especially to obtain the necessary travel permits. Mexico has imposed very strict rules for issuing visas to Central Americans, which is why so many migrants enter undocumented in the first place. For the members of the committee the same rules apply, and it took a lot of effort and support from other organisations to get them waived for some members to participate in the trips.

The committee has also started to feed its cases into a database for missing migrants of the SJM⁶⁴, which can be accessed by everyone and where all cases eventually are meant to be put into, a process that still is not completed.⁶⁵ However, the representative of the SJM in El Progreso mentioned that in his opinion, not too much emphasis should be put on this database when dealing with the relatives. He sees the database more as a tool for professionals, like social workers or journalists, since the use of the internet is not very widespread amongst those otherwise most likely to encounter the missing, fellow migrants on the move.⁶⁶ The biggest problem next to not really reaching the target group is that there are also other similar databases maintained by international organisations, like Save the Children Sweden.⁶⁷ For a database of this kind to operate effectively it would have to be a single centralised one for all cases of missing Latin Americans, regardless if migrant or not, which can be fed by a variety of organisations, both governmental and non-governmental and accessed by anyone.

While the actual search efforts are met by many difficulties, the real achievement of COFAMIPRO lies in the psychological and emotional support offered to the relatives.

⁶³ Interview with Nelly, February 8, 2010

Buscan centroamericanos en Lechería a familiares migrantes, El Universal, 16 October 2008
<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/547698.html> (accessed 25 June 2010)

⁶⁴ *Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes* (Jesuit Refugee Service) <http://www.sejemi.org/site/perdidas.php>

⁶⁵ Interview with Nelly, February 8, 2010

⁶⁶ Interview with Manuel Suarez, May 25, 2010

⁶⁷ www.latinoamericanosdesaparecidos.org

Boss' (1999:30) notes how most people and institutions are not accustomed to provide support for a loss that is not certified, and the committee fills that void.

Toya noted how much the involvement with COFAMIPRO has helped her to overcome the deep depression she suffered for months after her husband went missing. As mentioned in the introduction, she states that only by joining the committee she realised that there were many more in the same situation.⁶⁸ Walsh (1996) stresses the importance of warmth, affection and emotional support by the family in the coping process. Even though organisations like COFAMIPRO cannot substitute this, they can help where family members, shaken by the events, are unable to support each other adequately, especially since most have no previous experience in how to deal with such a situation. In the committee's monthly assemblies and other activities it is noticeable how much expression of emotion and affection takes place. This is further helped by the fact that the majority of members are women, who, as Wolseth (2008) notes, are in Latin American societies much more able to openly express emotion than men. Looking at the active members of COFAMIPRO a similar picture emerges as described by Trully for the mothers of disappeared Nicaraguans, namely that it is mostly the mothers who search. The same is true for COFAMIDE in El Salvador and the other committees existing in Honduras. Hill Collins' (Schmalzbauer 2004:1320) of *motherwork*, the feeling of responsibility by women for the well being of their loved ones, and Trully's notion that the search is a logical extension of that fit into the picture.

When this internal sense of responsibility is bundled in a community of likewise affected women and paired with the experience of success, like COFAMIPRO had it on the first search trip when encountering two missing migrants, it can lead the members to experience a feeling of self-confidence they never had dreamt of before. Emeteria, Edita and Nelly have mentioned over and over how much the involvement with COFAMIPRO lifted their self-esteem and empowered them as women.⁶⁹

While the search for the relatives resembles a lottery, with very slim chances to actually find the person, the involvement provides all members with the sense of influence on the road their life takes which is important to reverse the effects of the shock experienced when a relative has gone missing (Narayan et al. 2009:168). It gives them the experience that they have a voice worth using and are not alone in this difficult situation. When this experience is being taken over for all aspects of life, it can help

⁶⁸ Interview with Toya, March 19, 2010

⁶⁹ For example during a meeting with representatives of COFAMIDE, April 24, 2010

them to find a way out of poverty on the long run, realising that it is worth making an effort even if the obstacles seem high and overcome the general feeling of not being in control of one's life. This development fits with Gissi's (1995) notion that resignation is not an unavoidable side effect of poverty and therefore can be overcome. After overcoming her depression, Toya started to bake sweet bread and cakes on the weekend to sell in her community as a way to make money but also because it is something she enjoys and is good in. However, it has to be kept in mind that all relatives of missing migrants portrayed here are fairly active in COFAMIPRO, or at least attending the monthly assemblies, they take full advantage of these aspects.

Despite all the positive aspects, there are also tensions within the committee. While Toya is full of praise for the emotional help, she also laments that the committee has lost its drive.⁷⁰ In terms of one-on-one support, it currently seems like very little is done, which certainly has can be attributed to the already mentioned impact of the 2009 military coup on civil society activities. Furthermore, I got the impression that COFAMIPRO is slowly outgrowing the purpose for which it was founded, being a voluntary self-help group of affected families. The leadership is torn between being representatives of this ever growing group while at the same time having reached a point where they are perceived as some of the main actors in the field of supporting undocumented migrants by organisations like FONAMIH, Caritas and Save the children, which can count on professional staff and a budget. This issue is not easy to resolve and clearly stretches the capacities of COFAMIPRO in terms of the amount of work to be done, given it after all is a committee of voluntaries.

The dissonances are further exacerbated by a comparatively new second group present within COFAMIPRO which is competing with the relatives for both a say in the committee and public attention, to the disadvantage of the latter. It consists of returned migrants who have been mutilated on their journey through Mexico, mostly when travelling on the freight trains. COFAMIPRO assists a group of them in their efforts to obtain prostheses, given that they are equally outside of public and political attention and fight a similar fight for recognition as the relatives of missing migrants. The stories of this group are equally touching as the accounts of the relatives, with the advantage that former are physically present and the missing are not.

⁷⁰ Interview with Toya, April 29, 2010

However, it would be wrong to blame the problems COFAMIPRO faces on its leadership. Instead of engaging actively, many families have come to perceive the committee as a service provider rather than a self-help initiative. In the words of Nelly:

They come to us and hand in the documents about their missing relatives, often incomplete. In many cases, years have passed since the contact to the migrant has broken off and the information about his or her last whereabouts is rather vague, like 'in Chiapas' or 'he had passed the border to the U.S. in a desert area'. Then they call two weeks later and say 'have you found my son?' like we only have to make one phone call to an almighty contact in Mexico and the person appears. We tell them from the beginning this is not how we work. We are a committee of family members, not an international NGO with a staff paid to search for people. We can put the case in the data base, we can call our contacts in Mexico and the U.S. and if people are interested they can participate in the search trips. However, in the latter case we only can take people who understand that these trips are not so one just looks for his own relative. It is about taking care of all cases, about solidarity. That is when most people lose interest, they are not interested in a common effort but simply want someone else solve their problems.⁷¹

A worker of Caritas San Pedro Sula agrees: 'The problem of people's passivity is not just among those searching for a relative. This is how things are in this country, most people expect someone else to take care of their problems without having to return anything for it.'⁷² These comments bring back Gissi's (1995) notions of passivity and apathy introduced earlier. The effects of encounters with shocks like the missing of a relative can have such a drastic negative impact on confidence in oneself (Narayan et al. 2009:168) that it takes more to reverse this than COFAMIPRO can offer. While experiencing the solidarity with other affected families makes some relatives overcome the threshold to act, others have reached a level of passivity which can apparently not even be overcome by the good example of others in the same situation. Still,

⁷¹ Informal conversation with Nelly and a worker of Caritas Honduras, April 16, 2010

⁷² Informal conversation with Nelly and a worker of Caritas Honduras, April 16, 2010

committees like COFAMIPRO do provide the most direct and effective support to affected relatives and are the important link between them and other actors in civil society.

6.2 Civil Society

In terms of the supporters of COFAMIPRO, its initial founder, the catholic radio station Radio Progreso, still is among the most important. It aims to be the voice which is with the people, *la voz que está con vos*, independently from the government. As already mentioned they still facilitate the committee a weekly one-hour slot.⁷³ The show, *Abriendo Fronteras* (Opening Borders) is moderated by Nelly, Edita and a changing set of guests. There is a topic and question of the week and news regarding migration. Listeners can call in to send greetings to their families, voice their opinion, ask questions or make known that they search for a relative. As already mentioned this is one of the most effective ways for COFAMIPRO to make its work known and communicate with its target group.

Narayan, Pritchett and Kapoor (2009:327) note that for poor people's groups to be successful, they need outside help to overcome constraints posed by a lack of resources, knowledge and skills. Even though members of COFAMIPRO lament a lack of funding, the committee is lucky enough to be able to count on a network of supporters. The main financial and logistic support comes from ERIC⁷⁴, a social work outlet of the Jesuits. It provides the committee with an office and lets them use its facilities for meetings and activities. The local representative of the SJM is also located within ERIC, allowing for constant co-operation with the committee.

On a national level, the committee forms part of Red COMIFAH⁷⁵. This network of committees was founded to group the efforts of committees all over the country which have sprung up modelled after COFAMIPRO. Together they organise activities such as the search trips.⁷⁶ FONAMIH⁷⁷, the National Forum for Migration, unites most national actors working in the field of migration in Honduras, including COFAMIPRO, Red

⁷³ The broadcast of COFAMIPRO can be received every Sunday from 12.30 to 13.30 local time via live stream over the internet at www.radioprogreso.hn

⁷⁴ Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación de la Compañía de Jesús (Team for reflection, investigation and communication of the company of Jesus)

⁷⁵ Red de Comités de Migrantes y Familiares en Honduras (Network of Committees of Migrants and Families en Honduras)

⁷⁶ Meeting between members of COFAMIPRO, COFAMIDE and staff of Red COMIFAH, April 25, 2010

⁷⁷ Foro Nacional de Migraciones en Honduras

COMIFAH and the before mentioned Scalabrini order. Its members regularly participate in activities and trainings offered in order to act as multipliers in areas like political impact and awareness rising on topics like migrants' rights, human trafficking and HIV/Aids.⁷⁸ The forum provides the connection to both the government and international organisations and has contributed greatly to the topic of missing migrants being recognized by the government.⁷⁹ There are also efforts being made to connect COFAMIPRO and the other Honduran committees with others like COFAMIDE in El Salvador, to join efforts on a regional Central American level.⁸⁰ Together these different actors have managed to provide committees like COFAMIPRO with a fairly strong support network, logistically, financially and in terms of knowledge. However, as the political crisis last year has shown, no matter how much well intentioned effort there is on behalf of civil society, it depends strongly on a stable political atmosphere to thrive.

6.3 The Authorities

Despite all efforts from organisations like COFAMIPRO, most families quite rightly recognize the need for more involvement of the authorities, even though most are highly sceptical that this will actually happen⁸¹. Obviously those whose cases have not been resolved wish for a more effective way of searching, but do not blame the organisations for this lack of effective action but rather the authorities, which to a certain degree certainly has a point.

Those active in Honduras' civil society regularly complain about a lack of political will and accountability when it comes to supporting their work and COFAMIPRO is no exception.⁸² Those who have been active in the committee for longer always tell the story of how they handed over case documentation to the Chancellery of Consulate Affairs, the government outlet responsible for tracing cases of missing migrants and the repatriation of Hondurans who die abroad, just to never hear about it again. An interview with one of the Chancellery's representatives unfortunately underlined this impression,

⁷⁸ Migrants on the move are considered to be at high risk of contracting HIV/Aids. Therefore efforts are made throughout Honduras to raise awareness about this issue among organisations working with this segment of the population, to use them as multipliers to fight the spread of the disease.

La Epidemia de VIH / SIDE y las poblaciones móviles <http://fonamih.org/Estructura/VIH-%20SIDA/LA%20EPIDEMIA%20DE%20VIHSIDA%20MIGRANTES.pdf> (accessed August 16, 2010)

⁷⁹ Interview with Edith Zavala, March 10, 2010

⁸⁰ Meeting between members of COFAMIPRO, COFAMIDE and staff of Red COMIFAH, April 25, 2010

⁸¹ Informal conversation with members of COFAMIPRO during the monthly assembly, April 25, 2010

⁸² Representatives of COFAMIPRO, Interviews with Sister Valdete Wilemann (Scalabrini Sisters) May 10; César Sanchez (Red COMIFAH) May 11; Manuel Suarez (SJM) May 25, 2010

since there was hardly any specific information provided and the impression came up that there was little in dept knowledge on cases or proceedings. My mentioning of the case documentation that had been handed in years ago only provoked defensive comments about failures of earlier administrations.⁸³ For reasons of fairness it has to be said that the current government had just taken office during my research period and the staff was still in the process of making sense of what had been left by its predecessors, which apparently was a lot of unstructured information.

After years of turning a blind eye on the fate of missing migrants and those in transit in general, in 2008 it looked like the Honduran state was finally making a serious step towards recognizing the problems that occur as a side effect of undocumented migration. The government of then President José Manuel Zelaya Rosales approved a law assigning 15 million Lempira, about 800 thousand US\$, annually to the newly created FOSHOMI⁸⁴, a fund dedicated to finance all sort of initiatives to help Honduran migrants in vulnerable conditions. Of this money, ten percent are assigned to go towards the search for the missing. However, the distribution of this money proved difficult from the start and has been suspended ever since the start of the political crisis that hit the country in the second half of 2009.⁸⁵ It remains to be seen how this official commitment develops, since in a meeting regarding FOSHOMI I was able to attend, the authorities promised to pay out parts of it to finance the search trip planned to take place later this year.⁸⁶ It was also announced to train staff in Honduran consulates throughout Mexico and the U.S. on aspects regarding the needs of undocumented migrants and their families, something neglected by previous governments, as both officials and representatives of civil society organisations readily agree on.

These initiatives by the new government have to be welcomed but it is also justified that most of those active in providing aid to migrants are reluctant to become overly enthusiastic before the promises are actually being put into practice, given the experiences with previous governments.

However, it has also be noted that while the Honduran government certainly has a responsibility to provide for the security of its people, there are limits to it. Given the sheer number of missing migrants, it does not realistically have the human and financial

⁸³ Interview with a member of staff of the Chancellery, Tegucigalpa, May 11, 2010

⁸⁴ Fondo de Solidaridad con el Hondureño Migrante en Condiciones de Vulnerabilidad (Solidarity Fund for Honduran Migrants in Vulnerable Conditions)

⁸⁵ Interview with Edith Zavala, Executive Secretary of FONAMIH, May 5, 2010

⁸⁶ Meeting of the Executive Council for FOSHOMI, Tegucigalpa, May 7, 2010

resources to be the main actor when it comes to finding them. Furthermore, the question comes up how far the state can be made responsible for the security of its citizens when they choose to do something they know brings a lot of potential dangers. Surely structural inequality and failed economic policies by the Honduran state are at the root for taking these decisions but in the end at least those migrants in the centre of this research have taken their decision voluntarily. What can be expected is to make an effort on the political and diplomatic level to pressure for the respect of the migrant's rights by both the Mexican and U.S. government and to play an active role in the creation of international tools like a DNA database to identify missing migrants. (Amnesty International 2010:19)

6.4 Dealing with a Reappearance

After all the considerations regarding the missing and the search for them, what is left is to look at what happens when a migrant actually does reappear. The first assumption is that the family must be happy to be released from days, months, or years of uncertainty. Sometimes this is the case. However, it would be too easy to assume that in every case where there is word about the fate of a migrant, the time of pondering and doubt is over.

Knowing is a relative term, as Tachito's case shows. After months of not getting in touch, the family received a call of him on his mother's birthday. Everyone was so excited to talk to him, they did not ask what had happened. He just said that he was fine and in Chiapas, they should not worry. He insisted that he would still make it to the U.S. eventually, even though his parents pleaded him to come home. His father Anastacio remembers:

I said 'Son, come home, we do not need the extra money. We need you here, not there.' But he insisted, 'Papa I have promised I would go there and send you money, I will keep this promise.' And I was so happy to hear his voice, that he was not dead, that he was fine, I did not ask questions. Everyone wanted to talk to him, and he said he was calling on a phone card with limited time. Now, I think I should have insisted more, ask him for a number where to be reached.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Interview with Anastacio, May 19, 2010

For a few days after the call, everyone was immensely relieved. Anastacio gave testimony at the monthly assembly of COFAMIPRO, and everyone cheered and congratulated him. For days, then weeks after this call, the family waited to hear from the lost son again, but Tachito did call. They tried to reach the number from which he called, but since it had been with a phone-card there was no answer. They remain feeling torn between the relief of knowing he is alive, being worried because they do not know under which circumstances he lives, and angry because he does not call again. His mother says she has no hard feelings for him, after all he is her son, but her other children say that she sometimes calls him a *bayunco*, a mildly insulting term for someone who is a mix of stupid, badly behaved, thoughtless and irresponsible.⁸⁸ Fact is that they know little more than before, apart from the unarguably very important fact that he is alive. His case shows the many shades of grey between not knowing anything and having certain knowledge about the fate of a person.

The same is true for the case of Ada. After years of relentless activism on behalf of her mother Emeteria, an acquaintance came to the family's home and showed a video, insisting that Ada was on it. There was a lady looking remarkably like her, sending greetings to Honduras into the camera. However, somehow no way could be figured out to get in touch with her. Later, the daughters of a neighbour, who were visiting from the states told Emeteria they had learned about her search for Ada on TV. In a fast-food restaurant in Los Angeles they encountered someone they believe is Ada. Since they had all grown up together, Emeteria judges this as credible. They confronted the woman, telling her that her mother was searching for her and she should get in touch, even though the lady denied being Ada, but without convincing the others.⁸⁹

Ever since these occasions, everyone in Emeteria's surrounding is convinced that Ada is alive and simply does not want to get in touch. At times, Emeteria agrees. Sometimes, she presents her daughter still as missing. Both is true. Even though Ada is very likely to be alive, to her mother she is missing in the sense that she cannot make peace with what her daughter did until she knows why. It seems as by continuously presenting Ada as missing to the world, Emeteria retains her last and only possibility to force her daughter into getting in touch.

⁸⁸ Informal conversation with several family members during a visit, May 19, 2010

⁸⁹ Interview with Emeteria, March 18, 2010

Some families eventually do experience the happy reunion all hope for. In 2002, Rosita's partner recognized her on one of the photos a group of Honduran women showed on Mexican television to draw attention to their search for missing relatives. They managed to get in touch with COFAMIPRO, for an emotional reunion between mother and daughter and several visits of Rosita and her partner to Honduras. In 2004, word reached Edita that her daughter had fallen gravely ill. The mother managed through the contacts of COFAMIPRO to bring her daughter home to take care of her. Shortly after, Rosita died of an unidentified illness. However, Edita states that even though she was devastated by her daughter's death so shortly after finally finding her, it gives her great calm to know she is buried close to her home in Honduras.⁹⁰ This is in line with Boss' (1999) theory that it is not so much the being alive and well of a person that gives the relatives peace, but even more the certainty of what is going on, a clear situation, even if this means having to face that the person is gone forever.

⁹⁰ Statement during a meeting with representatives of COFAMIDE, April 24, 2010

Conclusion

I had come to El Progreso to research the search of families of missing migrants, as reflected in my research question: 'What efforts are undertaken by the families of missing Honduran migrants to find out about their relatives' fate and what support do they get in their endeavour?' Once in Honduras I soon realised that there was little individual search conducted and that anything that was done went through COFAMIPRO. It became clear that it was necessary to broaden my research, settling on three general lines: the decision of a migrant to leave and how it impacts his family, the reactions and coping process of the family once it becomes clear he is missing, and communal action taken by the relatives and the support they receive.

My research shows that it is not enough to just look at either the migrant or his family, but that both sides are tightly linked. This applies for the whole chain of events, from the decision to migrate over the realisation the migrant is missing, the coping process and possible communal activity until a re-encounter or the acceptance that it is time to move on. So far, research has dealt with missing migrants mainly as a side product of general reports on the dangers undocumented migrants face in Mexico (Amnesty International 2010, Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos 2009), those missing on the U.S.-Mexican border (Reineke 2009) or focused on Mexican families (Bollinger 2009) This thesis combines research on both missing migrants and especially their families in a Central American context.

Looking at Puertas' (Sladkova 2007) formula according to which the decision to migrate is taken when expulsion and attraction factors outweigh perceived costs and risks, my findings concur with the notion of the importance of the almost symbiotic unit most migrants and their families form (Narayan et al. 2009). The majority leaves to support their families in a bid to step out of poverty, despite the cost of family separation. This symbiosis is often but not necessarily a positive one but always deeply influences anyone taking part in or opting to leave it. In the case of missing undocumented migrants and their families, this bond continues to exist even when the former has gone missing.

In this case, the families confront a situation too complicated for most of them to handle individually. They experience an uncertified, ambiguous loss (Boss 1999). While not to all migrants have met a horrible fate, the suffering of the family is always there until it becomes clear what has happened and even then, the outcome is not always purely positive. I found their reaction similar to the three stages of response described for families of the disappeared (Amnesty International 1981), only that in this case, there are four stages: initial inaction; frantic search; prolonged inaction; and finally communal action.

At first I was surprised by their apparent lack of individual initiative, but during these four months it became clear that most relatives simply did not know what to do and that their inaction stood in no connection to the previous relationship to the missing. In Honduras, many offered me the explanation that 'Hondurans are like that, they do not take the initiative' and I was glad to find a more academic explanation in Gissi's (1995) theory concerning the apathy in lower strata of Latin American societies, which is caused by chronic frustration when it comes to agency over their own lives.

Often relatives only start to thrive when encountering others in the same situation and find a way to engage in collective action. The success of these actions should not be measured in numbers of encountered migrants. These are very small. It is the experience to be able to achieve something through the own initiative that counts, just as it does in other forms of communal activities, something that can eventually bring those engaged on a path out of poverty. (Narayan et al. 2009) However, as mentioned, it also became clear that despite the positive effects, the relatives are still overwhelmed with the actual search, something that affirms the need for more activity especially on behalf of the government to push for international initiatives to tackle this issue.

Looking at four families in a relatively narrow geographic area, all associated to the same committee makes my findings in a way quite specific. However, I am convinced that the findings on a more general level are applicable for most missing Central American migrants and their families. The situation in the other main emigration countries of Central America is similar to Honduras, and once they cross into Mexico, the undocumented migrants all make the same journey. Many of the findings regarding the relatives left behind concur with Bollinger's (2009) observations about Mexican families, which adds weight to the assumption they might also apply in a more general Central American context. Furthermore, researching missing migrants and their families

means drawing conclusions from human stories, each as individual as the person telling it, so any generalisation will always do someone injustice.

Given so little research has been conducted concerning missing migrants and their families, many aspects are still left to be explored. All the families portrayed here were affiliated with one of the very few committees of affected relatives that exist in Central America. It would be interesting to see how families cope completely left to themselves, despite the problem of locating them. This leads to how the support had to evolve to reach out to more families, given the immense impact it apparently has on them to join others likewise afflicted. In a more practical sense, a concerted effort to register and identify the cases of dead and missing migrants throughout their whole route from Central America into the U.S. would greatly help to reduce the number of relatives left worrying and make it possible to get seriously promising search efforts under the way.

Most importantly, it has to be kept in mind that the problem of missing migrants is not limited to Central Americans or Mexicans. Africans in deplorable conditions are being washed to the shores of Spain after trying to cross the Mediterranean in decrepit boats in a desperate attempt to make it to what they consider their promised land. Their journey is no easier one than of the Central Americans trying to reach the U.S.⁹¹ The list could be infinitely extended, to incidences anywhere in the world where there are people determined to risk their lives to make it to a country that does not officially welcome them. To every case there is a family. So even though my research only looks at a town in Honduras, it is the larger context that matters, the reasons that make people feel the need to risk their lives and leave behind their loved ones to make it to a place that gives them no warm welcome but only offers a life in the shadows. When there is talk about the respect of migrant's rights, the rights of their families should also be taken into account, especially since all most of them ask for is to know what happened.

⁹¹Davies, Nick: Melilla: Europe's dirty secret, *The Guardian*, April 17, 2010
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/apr/17/melilla-migrants-eu-spain-morocco>
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