

Life on the border

Public health researcher **Dr Cecilia Rosales** is investigating the health of populations on the US-Mexico border in collaboration with a binational team. With the knowledge garnered, they are hoping to promote real and lasting improvements in these populations' standard of living

As Assistant Dean of Phoenix Programs at the University of Arizona Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health, what are your main responsibilities?

I am responsible for expanding our accredited Master of Public Health programme to Phoenix and the wider Maricopa County area, where around 60 per cent of the population of Arizona reside. The State Health Department and the third largest local health department are both based in Phoenix, and there are also a number of non-profit, public health-focused organisations in the region. Despite this, for the most part public health professionals in Arizona are not formally trained and receive on-the-job training in public health. Expanding these operations to Phoenix has afforded this large workforce an opportunity to enrol in our programmes without travelling or moving to Tucson, where the College is based. We are also in the process of developing a totally online programme that will provide further options.

To what extent did your experiences working for the Office of Border Health in Arizona guide your interest in the health and quality of life of border populations?

My experiences there were certainly significant. The position involved serving as a liaison with public health and healthcare industry leaders in binational activities addressing specific challenges experienced by border populations. It enhanced my professional network and,

given the stable workforce in the area, these established relationships have continued over the years into my academic endeavours.

How are the health outcomes experienced by Mexico-US border populations related to socioeconomic conditions?

The border is a rapidly growing geographic region made up predominantly of a younger population of Hispanic origin. In comparison with non-border communities, these communities have high poverty rates and low educational attainment, and these socioeconomic conditions have a great effect on health outcomes.

Can you discuss the ways in which the Hispanic border community has been affected by the expansion of Arizona's Medicaid programme?

The border states that passed Medicaid expansion will benefit the most – 48 per cent of the US uninsured live in a 10-state region, including the four border states. Approximately 70 per cent of US uninsured Hispanic people live in these 10 states. In Arizona, 57 per cent of the state uninsured are Hispanic (651,000 people). As of May 2014, 120,071 people selected a plan from the marketplace; of those, 21,718 are Hispanic.

Why are Mexico-US border populations marginalised from the benefits and services available in each country?

There are many reasons, including low health literacy rates, lack of healthcare providers and mixed immigration status families, which then creates fear of accessing services by those that are undocumented.

US border communities are considered Health Provider Shortage Areas, and for Mexico border populations with high unemployment, people are accessing services through public programmes, which are overwhelmed.

What challenges have you encountered when conducting your research?

The greatest challenge is funding, as social justice research is not often funded. We rely on small grants, which in our case go a long way when combined with student support and the use of funds from generous donors.

By what means do you plan to build on the successes of your research in the future?

We are excited about conducting advocacy work related to farmer worker health. With results and experience gained, we are ready to do the real work of talking to decision makers about the need to change farmworker living and working conditions and advocate for enforcement of better standards. The political climate has shifted and is now more suitable for discussion, dialogue and, hopefully, change.



The bottom of the food chain

The health and living conditions of Mexican workers supplying American food demands are being analysed by researchers from the **University of Arizona** in collaboration with Mexican institutions, with a view to drastically reshape current working practices

THE HEALTH AND welfare of labourers in agribusiness is a topic that has attracted much attention following shocking exposures by reporters and public health researchers of the lives of farm workers in US and Mexican border towns. The accusations against the employers have included denying workers beds and refusing them their promised salary, and in addition, research has revealed extreme malnourishment and poor health in these populations. The workers who are subjected to this treatment typically originate from poor rural areas in the south of Mexico, and migrate to work for growers in the northern areas to support their families.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Such occurrences are not isolated to Mexico. Migrant workers in the US have also complained of maltreatment, particularly the tomato pickers of Florida's vast tomato industry. Many of the workers are unable to access adequate healthcare, hindered by lack of health insurance and fear of deportation, and as such, poor health is rife on both sides of the border. Thankfully, the disclosure of these issues as a consequence of projects underway at institutions including the University of Arizona has induced large retailers to demand their US suppliers adhere to stricter regulations for the treatment of their workers. As a result, treatment of workers north of the border is improving and reports of abuse less common. For tomato workers in Florida, for example,

working conditions went from being the worst to the best in three years, as a consequence of the Fair Food movement. This move by large US businesses and retailers is part of the developing concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Employing CSR in agricultural industries, particularly those employing migrant workers, has an assortment of motivations. Traditionally, the idea was born from ethical and human rights concerns, with pressure to maintain CSR practices exerted by government policies. The majority of international trade agreements of exporting countries incorporate poverty reduction and sustainable development. Unfortunately, the implementation of these practices is historically lacking in many developing countries, including Mexico. More recently, however, with advances in the standard of living, the role of business in reducing poverty in such countries is changing, along with how CSR manifests itself in industry.

RAISING STANDARDS

This change is being fuelled by research at The Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health at the University of Arizona in collaboration with colleagues across the border from Centro de Investigación en Alimentación y Desarrollo (CIAD) and El Colegio de Sonora (COLSON). "The principal focus of the partnership between these academic institutions is cooperation and

collaboration on research questions that can resolve the various challenges affecting border populations," explains Dr Cecilia Rosales, who is collaborating with co-workers Jill de Zapien and Dr Antonio Zapien from the University of Arizona and their Mexico-based counterparts Drs Patricia Aranda and Isabel Ortega, from COLSON and CIAD respectively.

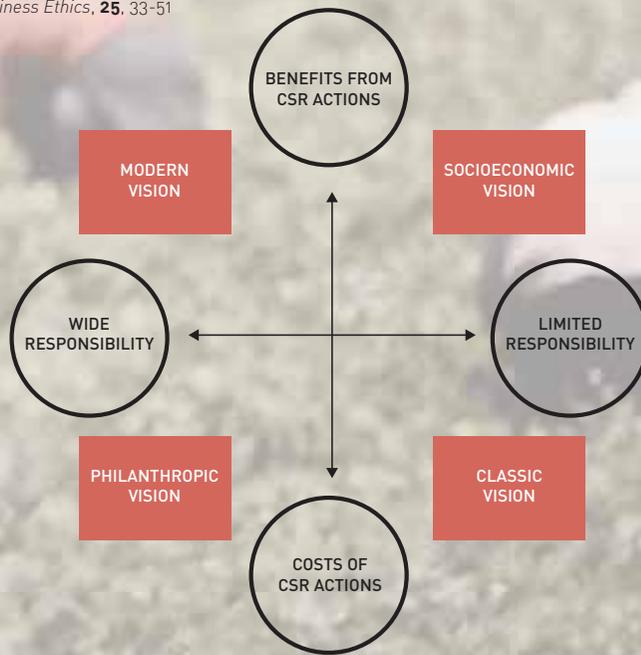
These aims are condensed into three main areas. Firstly, the team hopes to introduce institutionalised, binational agricultural labour standards to ensure the wellbeing of workers on both sides of the border. The researchers are taking action on this point by attending proposed meetings with the Mexican Secretariat of Social Development in early 2015, who are responsible for setting the standards followed by agricultural growers. A further necessity in the success of this aim is to provide the impetus for agribusiness owners to comply with new standards. Several businesses in both countries have already adopted some reforms and may serve as models for those that have not. Such examples should pave the way in convincing businesses that adhering to a new binational agreement would increase productivity and, eventually, profitability.

IMPROVEMENT AND EXPANSION

The team's next goal is to utilise the concept of CSR to institutionalise better working conditions. Attitudes towards CSR from agribusiness owners are often negative and

TWO DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF CSR

Quazi A M and O'Brien, 2000,
Journal of Business Ethics, 25, 33-51



INTELLIGENCE

A BINATIONAL APPROACH TO FRAMING CHALLENGES AND CONSTRUCTING SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVING FARM WORKERS' LIVES

OBJECTIVE

To establish a binational approach between the US and Mexico to comprehensively address the health problems and socioeconomic challenges faced by migrant and seasonal farm workers working in the border regions of both countries.

KEY COLLABORATORS AND PARTNERS

Jill de Zapien; Antonio Zapien, PhD, Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health, University of Arizona, USA • **Maria Isabel Ortega, PhD**, Centro de Investigación en Alimentación y Desarrollo, AC (CIAD), Mexico • **Patricia Aranda, PhD**, El Colegio de Sonora (COLSON), Mexico • Large scale agricultural grower in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico

FUNDING

Programa de Migración y Salud (PIMSA)
 • Mexico Section of the US Mexico Border Health Commission • Large scale agricultural grower in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico

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DR CECILIA ROSALES has worked at the Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health since 2005. She is actively involved in survey research in the areas of migrant

health, farm worker health, and border community health. Rosales focuses her research, teaching and services on reducing the burden of health disparities in the state and along the US Mexico border.



Core research team: L-R bottom row – Jill de Zapien, Dr Antonio Zapien, Dr Patricia Aranda
 L-R top row – Dr Isabel Ortega, Dr Cecilia Rosales

efforts to change this concept are central to the team's work, with the introduction of 'codes of conduct' offering one feasible solution. This idea has been executed in some northern areas of Mexico and consists of guidelines that are mutually agreed upon by workers and employers. The team based this approach on information extracted from surveys performed at a farm in Sonora at the consent of the grower, which allowed the team to identify areas where change was most needed. This study yielded important information about quality of life, revealing that the main stresses were health-related issues such as musculoskeletal ailments, and social problems such as language barriers. Data from this study, and similar ones, have provided the basis for implementation of CSR as a model within various farms in Sonora. The binational team is hopeful that this is a genuine step forward: "The potential for implementing positive change within agribusiness holds promise for improving farm workers' health and development," Rosales enthuses.

The third and final aim is to expand their binational approach to the problem. The researchers aim to unify agencies working with employees on both sides of the border to provide better support. "Since migrant farm worker populations in the US and Mexico have similar demographic profiles and face parallel challenges, there is a benefit to be had in cross-border partnerships," explains Rosales. If such a network were established, it would enable sharing of information, resources and strategies that may greatly assist those most in need. In addition to better communication across borders, private and public sector communications are also critically important.

The researchers found that developing a trusting and meaningful relationship with a private grower in Sonora generated a public insight into the conditions on the farm. This openness is a vital advancement in addressing the issue and in gaining support for the work already being done.

Information published by researchers has revealed common cases of extreme malnourishment and poor health

With hundreds of thousands of agricultural workers employed in the border regions, the success of this project may have vastly significant implications for improving the quality of life for many of society's poorest and hardest working. With the media playing a significant part in bringing the issue to the attention of the public, the next step is to encourage policy change and ensure employers adhere to stricter guidelines. It is hoped that this move, in combination with changes in attitude towards CSR and binational cooperation, will induce positive and permanent change for farm workers in the border region.

