

Supporting families settling on the Mexican side of the border.

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In Northern Sonora Mexico, only 4 miles from the US border, Esmerelda sweeps the front step of her one room house. The siding has a fresh coat of paint, and native plants grow by the door. While her home lacks plumbing, she recently acquired electricity to power some lights and a small fridge. Her current home is a far cry from the shack built out of found materials (pallets, scrap metal, etc.) that she was raised in and left only 5 years ago. At the mercy of the desert's extreme temperatures and endless dust, she slept in the one-room hut with her parents and youngest siblings. The older siblings had to sleep outside.

Esmerelda's family migrated to San Luis Rio Colorado when she was a baby, in search of better economic opportunity than they could find in their home state of Oaxaca. In Oaxaca they would grow things to barter and trade and they slept in hammocks in the trees. Esmerelda's father had passed through San Luis Rio Colorado (SLRC) as a young man and decided to take his family there in search of work. However, with no formal education, when they arrived the only work available was picking onions in the fields. The unpredictable agricultural wage meant that the oldest children had to drop out of school after 4th grade to join him in the fields. Esmerelda, being the youngest, was one of the few to make it to secondary school.

Border towns in Mexico, like San Luis Rio Colorado (population ~200,000), are often a destination for migrants or a final stop for displaced people who find themselves in a "no way forward, no way back" situation after failing to receive asylum in the US. But San Luis' population is already challenged with ~60% of the population having only an elementary or middle school level education and 40% of the population living in either extreme or moderate poverty with a further 35% of the population listed as socially or economically "vulnerable."

Public schools are already overcrowded, and migrant children face unique challenges when it comes to engaging in education. Common challenges include lack of documentation, limited space in local schools, lack of funding for fees or materials and unreliable transportation. Years out of school during COVID and sporadic attendance has led to a mismatch between physical age and level of education attainment, yet the school system is required to advance the students, regardless of their actual learning level. Poverty and migration also bring invisible barriers such as lack of hope, poor self-image and in many cases, post-traumatic stress responses that interrupt or prevent learning.

Esmerelda's relative prosperity is due in great part to her personal fortitude and perseverance. But she has also had benefits that many migrants in extreme poverty don't have. Her family prioritized her education, thanks to older siblings sacrificing theirs. She is married and her husband is a dedicated family man and is actively engaged with the children when he is not working in the fields. And Esmerelda has had a supportive community in the form of [Misión de Caridad](#), a Mexico Civil Association and US 501(c)3, that has been embedded in the SLRC community for the last 5 years. Esmerelda's family commits to participating in community events, such as health and wellness classes and community building activities, and in return they have access to education programs with hot meals for the children, healthy groceries once a month, access to clean drinking water and access to a women's work program that includes childcare for preschoolers. Esmerelda particularly credits the women's work program for her slow but steady progress out of extreme poverty. In addition to the skills (women are trained to make bags that are sold in the US and Esmerelda also received a small grant to learn to bake cakes and sell them locally), she appreciated the childcare and the community of women in similar situations who can listen to and support each other.

Transactional support in the form of food banks or one-time humanitarian aid distributions are incredibly valuable, especially for families still in the process of migration, but when displaced families settle, the needs change. Long-term partners engaging in holistic, family-wide support, such as Misión de Caridad, have the best chance to help families break the cycle of poverty. Educating the next generation represents the strongest lever in the fight against poverty but without supporting the entire family, education feels more like a luxury than a necessity.

Next year Misión de Caridad (MdC) will be opening a K-8 school to better support the needs of their families. But the waitlist to participate in MdC's community is long, and growing, as displaced people continue to make their way to the border. The purpose-built community center they christened in 2022 is already bursting at the seams and funds to expand in small towns like SLRC are hard fought. But successes like Esmerelda help point to the progress that is possible for displaced families at the border.