

# Urban Meeting Locations of Nicaraguan Migrants in Costa Rica's Metropolitan Area and the Spatial Effects on their Social Support Networks

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HAUKE JAN ROLF

## 1. Introduction

After a brief review of the theoretical framework, key historical and current migration processes of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica are presented. Furthermore, the general urban development of Latin American cities and more specifically of the metropolitan region of Costa Rica's Central Valley are discussed to respond to the spatial distribution or rather concentration of Nicaraguan migrants within this urban area. Subsequently, three exemplary places of the case study are described and compared to illustrate the specific relationship between locations and the local and transnational support networks of Nicaraguan migrants in the urban area. The article finishes with some conclusions about the presented places and the reciprocal impacts between these locations and the local and transnational support networks.

## 2. Theoretical framework of the case study

The migration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica has a long historical tradition and has always been transnational even though the term *transnationalism* had not been used in social sciences until the appearance of the so-called globalization, that is the increasing social, political, and above all economic interconnection and interdependence of the world, induced by technological innovations of new

transport and communication media.<sup>1</sup> Instead of unidirectional movement of people with a gradual process of an inevitably long-term settlement and socio-cultural assimilation, the Nicaraguan migration to the neighbouring country in the south has always been characterised as durable, circular, pendular or rather multidirectional movements. This resulted in bi-national economic, cultural and familiar interrelations, plural socio-cultural identification and, last but not least, political tensions between the two involved nations and societies.<sup>2</sup> These processes correspond with the features of *transmigration* defined by Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Blanc-Szanton:

“We define ‘transnationalism’ as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. [...] Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political – that span borders we call ‘transmigrants’. [...] Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states.”<sup>3</sup>

Particularly over the last twenty years, the migration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica has been highly politicised in Costa Rican immigration policy debates. It is not only due to a rapidly increasing inflow of migrants since the beginning of the 1990s and its transnational character as “[...] the ongoing interconnection or flow of people, ideas, objects, and capital across the borders of nation-states, in contexts in which the state shapes but does not contain such linkages and movements [...]”<sup>4</sup>. But the increase in attention to the Nicaraguan immigration (and related problematisation) is also because of its new directions. While historically the migration from Nicaragua has always been characterised by movements within the frontier region and towards the rural areas, urban immigration dynamics of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica’s metropolitan Central Valley are still a new phenomenon.

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1 Cf. CASTELLS, 1996; BECK, 1997; URRY, 2001; SASSEN, 2002; DÜRRSCHMIDT, 2002.

2 Cf. MORALES GAMBOA/CASTRO VALVERDE, 2006; SANDÓVAL GARCÍA, 2003; JIMÉNEZ MATARRITA, 2009.

3 BASCH et al., 1994, p. 7-8. Cf. also PRIES, 2010; FAIST, 2000; LEVITT et al., 2003; PORTES et al., 1999.

4 GLICK SCHILLER/LEVITT, 2006, p. 5.

Looking at the urban migration movements of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica, it is fruitful to explore the specific structure and functions of the local and transnational networks that they have created within and beyond the metropolitan area. In this context, a focus on migrant networks is useful to explain not only the dynamics of the so-called *chain migration* (that is the effect of following migration processes as a result of pioneering emigration paths) but also to explore the migrants' social resources. On one hand, due to the precarious living conditions of the majority of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica's urban area, they have established reciprocal social support networks that help them cope with the everyday struggle for socioeconomic and spatial resources on a local level. On the other hand, they stretch their social ties to kin, friends and other affiliated actors in their country of origin on a transnational level. In a multidirectional perspective, these transnational ties serve as much to broaden the potentials of the migrants' social resources as to fulfil social obligations towards their descendants and other relatives, close friends and sometimes informal creditors, who stayed behind in Nicaragua.

The approach of social support, for its part, is an activity-oriented focus on social networks that highlights not only the structural relationships and social positioning of the network's members (for example by focusing on the ability to stabilise horizontal and/or vertical socio-economic linkages of social *bonding* and *bridging*) but also the quality of such relationships and the functional contents of social interactions.<sup>5</sup> According to the activity-focus, social resources of networks are not just understood as potentially available social capital of a somehow solidarity bonded and homophilic structured community but as concrete social interactions that generates collective opportunities and orientations. In consequence, this approach is markedly appropriate to explore the specific character of a social relationship (if it is unidirectional or reciprocal, unidimensional or multiplex et cetera) in correlation to the particular constitution of the social ties (if they are primarily family-, community- and/or work-based). By this means, it is possible to focus not only on structural elements of social networks, predicated for example on their size and relational density,<sup>6</sup> but also to highlight the dynamics of social interactions. This approach offers the opportunity to differentiate between potential and actual support, received and perceived help, autonomy and dependence or positive and negative impacts. In addition, the focus of social support provides the possibility to distinguish

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5 Cf. PUTNAM, 2000; RYAN et al., 2008.

6 Cf. HOLLSTEIN, 2006; HOLZER, 2006.

between different kinds of support capacities upon which the social networks depend, such as functional, economic, informative or emotional functions.<sup>7</sup>

However, it could be criticised that the spatial dimension of social support networks has been neglected or even rejected within this concept. In consideration of the diverse character of social networks and their different structural and functional interlinkages with regard to distinctive localities of socio-spatial settings such as an urban area, it seems to be extremely important to focus on the spatial effects of social networks.

When analysing the collected data of ethnographic interviews and observations resulting from a fieldwork period in Costa Rica's metropolitan highlands in 2009-10, one of the main questions the researcher had to deal with was how these social networks are organised and reproduced within the urban space and to what extent migrants' meeting locations influence their social support relationships both locally and transnationally.

The ethnographic fieldwork was launched on two assumptions. First, it had been supposed that such concrete meeting places would serve not only as a precondition for social linkages by providing direct face-to-face contacts for the exchange of information, goods and different types of support, but also as localities of socio-cultural representation within the foreign society to highlight the distinctive collective identity as Nicaraguan migrants. In this perspective, the physical space can only be reflected on as socially generated or rather occupied and is therefore always an expression of the social structure and the socio-political struggle of power relationships. As Pierre Bourdieu says,

“The physical space could only be thought of as an abstraction, [...] as a lived and occupied space that means a social construction and a projection of the social space, a social structure in an objectivated condition [...], the objectivation and naturalisation of past and current social relations.”<sup>8</sup>

The conceptualization of the physical space as a reproduction of past and current social power relationships thus demonstrates the importance of focusing not only the contemporary structure of the urban space, but to adopt an entirely historical perspective of the urban and socio-spatial development in all its sedimentary complexity (equivalent to a biographical exploration of the city and its society, its physical materialisation and social milieu).

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7 Cf. DIEWALD, 1990; NESTMANN, 2001; KEUPP, RÖHRLE, 1987.

8 BOURDIEU, 1991, p. 28 (translation by the author).

The second prior assumption was that these locations cannot be understood as separate places that exist independently from the spatial and social surrounding. Instead of defining these places as internally coherent and static, it is argued that their uniqueness results especially from the dynamic interconnections with other locations and social constellations. Inspired by Doreen Massey, these localities are considered to be interrelated with the socio-spatial environment of the city as a whole. To quote Massey,

“With such a set of connections, and such a history, it becomes clear that to romanticize places as settled, coherent and unchanging is highly dubious. [...] to see places as bounded can lead to their interconnections being ignored, and thus may result in parochialism. To see them [...] as particular sets of interconnections in a wider field might hold open the possibility of both appreciating their local uniqueness and recognizing their wider interlinkages.”<sup>9</sup>

In a relational socio-spatial perspective, as it has been framed by Bourdieu and Massey, such localities can hardly be seen as internally closed. Focusing on the social interactions it is obvious that spatial-related activities are as much directed to local strategies and orientations as to interconnections to the entire urban space and society. According to this theoretical comprehension, the social interrelations are not just contextualised within an intrinsic logic of the very local places themselves. These locations are reciprocally interlinked with the physical and social environment and also with other external socio-spatial constellations on an urban scale, but also on a national and even transnational level. From this perspective, these places not only interrelate to different social networks within an urban setting, in addition they may also function as gateways between local and transnational ties. Moreover, it remains to be seen if these urban places themselves have been transformed on the basis of the diverse interactive processes of local and transnational exchanges into kinds of *transnational localities*.

The illustrated assumptions have led to the comparison of several urban locations where the social interactions of Nicaraguan migrants' networking take place in a different manner. To this end, characteristic localities of activity and settlement of the Nicaraguan migrant population have been investigated, such as two precarious residential districts, diverse inner-city parks, certain restaurants and bars, clubs and dancing halls as well as churches and the offices of migrants' associations and civic organisations. Out of this broad variety of places, three

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9 MASSEY, 1995, p. 66.

particular locations are discussed in this article to identify the interconnections between specific local and transnational networks of social support and distinctive spatial settings. The exemplarily compared locations are (1) a suburban squat named *La Carpio* with a remarkable proportion of Nicaraguan inhabitants, (2) the main baseball stadium of San José, the capital of Costa Rica, and (3) the inner-city park called *La Merced* that is mostly frequented by Nicaraguan migrants.

### 3. Historical and current migration processes of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica<sup>10</sup>

Currently, as well as historically, Nicaraguans are and have been the most important migrant group in Costa Rica with more than 50 % of all foreigners living in the country (see the table below). Approximations vary between six and ten percent of the national population without knowing the precise proportion of temporary, seasonal and particularly irregular migrants. Moreover, updated representative statistics are not available since the last national census in the year of 2000. Supposed approximations resulting from selective case studies mostly act on the assumption that more or less 50 % of the Nicaraguan migrants are in the country illegally.

Populace of Costa Rica and the proportion of inhabitants born outside the nation concerning their country of origin between 1950 and 2000					
National Census					
	1950	1963	1973	1984	2000
Populace	800,875	1,336,274	1,871,780	2,416,809	3,810,179
Foreigners	33,251	35,605	22,264	88,954	296,461
<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>18,954</b>	<b>18,722</b>	<b>11,871</b>	<b>45,918</b>	<b>226,374</b>
Panama	2064	3255	1598	4794	10,270
USA	956	2001	2151	5369	9511
El Salvador	574	769	766	8748	8714
Columbia	610	676	517	1678	5898
Others	10,143	10,182	5361	22,447	35,694

10 The historical review of Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica is based on the work of: MORALES GAMBOA, CASTRO VALVERDE, 2006; ROSERO-BIXBY, 2004; ALVARENGA VENUTOLO, 1997. Cf. also HUH, 2005; PÉREZ, 2006; FUNKHOUSER et al., 2002.

Percentage of inhabitants born outside the nation concerning their country of origin relative to the populace of Costa Rica between 1950 and 2000					
	1950	1963	1973	1984	2000
Born outside the country	4,2	2,7	1,2	3,7	7,8
<b>Nicaragua</b>	-	<b>2,4</b>	<b>1,4</b>	<b>0,6</b>	<b>1,9</b>
Panama	-	0,3	0,2	0,1	0,2
USA	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,2	0,2
El Salvador	-	0,1	0,1	0,0	0,4
Colombia	-	0,1	0,1	0,0	0,1
Others	-	1,3	0,8	0,3	0,9
Percentage of inhabitants born outside the nation concerning their country of origin and relative to all foreigners in Costa Rica between 1950 and 2000					
	1950	1963	1973	1984	2000
<b>Nicaragua</b>	-	<b>57,0</b>	<b>52,6</b>	<b>53,3</b>	<b>51,6</b>
Panama	-	6,2	9,1	7,2	5,4
USA	2,9	5,6	9,7	6,0	3,2
El Salvador	-	1,7	2,2	3,4	9,8
Colombia	-	1,8	1,9	2,3	1,9
Others	-	30,5	28,6	24,1	25,2

*Source: INEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de Costa Rica). From the national census 2000.*

There have always been migratory movements from Nicaragua to Costa Rica for economic, cultural and familial reasons. Traditionally, these dynamics occurred in the border region of the two neighbouring countries and could be explained by the narrow historical and socio-cultural interrelationships within this region and by the minor influences of the historically weak central nation states. Moreover, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the political boundary had changed in bellicose conflicts when the province Guanacaste became part of the Costa Rican territory after the failure of a Nicaraguan military invasion in 1856. Furthermore, the definite borderline had still not been clearly defined until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and still is the cause of bilateral tensions. Even after the declaration of a contractually fixed line of demarcation, systematic border control had not been established for decades until the appearance of the first migration movements for political reasons due to the rise of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. Even today, the frontier is still not con-

trolled like in other immigration countries, but the Costa Rican state spends much more public funds to check the legal entrance to the territory than before.

While traditionally the Nicaraguan immigration to Costa Rica had mainly been directed towards rural areas to work in the seasonal agricultural production of coffee and bananas, the urban migration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica's metropolitan area is still a quite new phenomenon, appearing only within the last twenty years. The main explanation for historical movements from Nicaragua to Costa Rica is the migration for labour reasons, forced by the distinctive economic development of the two states. While Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries of the whole Latin American hemisphere Costa Rica is one of the wealthiest and is also called *Switzerland of Central America* with regard to the numerous mountains and the relative socio-economic prosperity. In distinction to former movements and migratory intentions of Nicaraguans towards Costa Rica, the first significant wave had resulted from the earthquake of 1972 in the Managua region and the rates accelerated each year to reach a preliminary peak in the 1980<sup>th</sup> due to the civil war in Nicaragua (at first against the Somoza regime and afterwards against the Sandinista authority). In the time of civil war the former political emigration of a few intellectuals and opposition members became increasingly a mass phenomenon of the Nicaraguan population that originated mostly from the devastated rural regions. In conjunction with the high rates of Nicaraguan immigration, the demand for a stricter regulation of the immigration policy within the Costa Rican society also increased. In spite of a more restrictive legislation in Costa Rica in the 1990s, the Nicaraguan migration did not decline even though the civil war had ended. In contrast, the established social networks between former refugees and latter newcomers had created a constant chain of migration no longer led by seasonal labour intents but rather by the aim for a permanent life in a wealthier country. With regard to the concept of dual labour markets, the predominately young migrants mainly found work in labour segments of lower income, mostly without any access to insurance or a formalised contract.<sup>11</sup> For example, in 2001 64 % of the workers hired in the coffee production were migrants and a remarkable 94 % did not possess all of the necessary documents to work in this sector.

Finally, the new phenomenon of the Nicaraguan migration to the metropolitan Central Valley is also characterised by an economic integration into the lower segments of the urban dual labour market, although the types of activity differ. Accordingly, the male Nicaraguans work predominantly in the sectors of lower services and construction or are hired as informal vendors and security guards. Female migrants mostly work as housemaids, employees in restaurants and other

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11 Cf. PIORE, 1979.

unqualified services or in the so-called *maquiladora* industry that is mainly characterised by textile processing, and in some cases they work as prostitutes. In distinction to their marginal proportion in the agricultural sector, the female population represents more than 50 % of the urban migrants (see the table below).

Proportional Distribution of Nicaraguan and Costa Rican males and females in selected labour segments in comparison (2000)		
	Nicaraguans	Costa Ricans
Labour segment	Males	
Agricultural unskilled worker	28,8	14,5
Mason/carpenter	8,7	3,7
Unskilled worker in the sector of mining and construction	8,3	2,3
Security guard	5,9	4,6
Formal vendor	3,4	5,6
Agricultural skilled worker	3,2	6,0
Unskilled worker in manufacturing industry	2,7	2,0
Welder/mechanic/metal worker	2,3	1,5
Truck or personal driver	2,0	7,5
House employee/concierge	2,0	1,6
Percentage	67,3	49,3
	Nicaraguans	Costa Ricans
Labour segment	Females	
House maid	48,4	14,9
Service in restaurants	10,3	5,7
Formal vendor	7,1	9,9
Unskilled worker in the textile industry ( <i>maquiladora</i> )	4,2	2,6
Agricultural unskilled worker	3,5	1,8
Skilled worker in the textile and leather production	2,9	4,8
Street vendor	2,3	1,7
Nursing service	2,1	1,9
Cashier	2,0	3,1
Other non qualified services	1,9	0,7
Percentage	84,7	47,1

Source: FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Costa Rica), 2005.

In consideration of the historically restricted migration to the Central Valley – for example, it had been forbidden to the black Caribbean national population to move to the metropolitan area up to the declaration of the Second Republic in 1948 – this new type of urban migration meant a profound change for the Costa Rican society. As the centre of cultural, political and economic activities as well as the core of national self-identification, Costa Rica's urbanised Central Valley has always played a quite important role for the country's development and was treated like an exclusive and precious space of – not only topographically – higher spheres.

#### **4. The urban development of Latin American cities and Costa Rica's metropolitan area**

To explain the specific location, spatial distribution and clustering of Nicaraguan migrants within Costa Rica's metropolitan Central Valley relative to their settlement, economic and socio-cultural activities, it seems to be important to explore the genealogical context of the urbanised space. Therefore, it is quite useful to highlight some benchmarks of the general urban development in Latin America and of Costa Rica's metropolitan highlands specifically. These outlines could serve for a better comprehension of the current aspects of socio-spatial fragmentation within the urban space into which the Nicaraguan migrants have settled.

In the era of globalization, significant processes of urbanisation and migration are seen as two closely meshed phenomena of contemporary social transformation.<sup>12</sup> In Latin America, for its part, the process of urbanisation has begun much earlier than in Africa or Asia, and much faster than previously in North America or Europe. In consequence of a policy of the so-called *import substituted industrialisation*, high levels of internal migration and urban birth rates have accelerated the relative percentage of the urban Latin American populace from 17 to 70 percent just between the years of 1965 and 1987. Nowadays, the proportion of the urban populace in Latin America has reached almost 80 percent. While historically the process was mainly characterised by a tendency of *metropolisation*, meaning a high concentration of the populace in the most important urban agglomerations (mostly the capital), by now the process of urbanisation predominately takes place in metropolitan areas of smaller scales.

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12 Cf. SASSEN, 2002; ROLF, 2006.

The metropolitan area of Costa Rica's central highlands is such a mid-size urban agglomeration that contains the four main cities (San José, Alajuela, Cartago and Heredia) with a populace of almost 3 million inhabitants, corresponding to more or less 50 percent of the national population. Even if the rapid urban growth of the 1960s and 70s has decelerated, the annual growth still represents 2,8 %, representing a duplication within 25 years. (In comparison: in 1990 the annual growth still corresponded to a proportion of 3,7 %)

Referring to the typology developed by Axel Borsdorf, Jürgen Bähr and Michael Janoschka, the urban transformation of Latin American cities is characterised by four steps from the dense colonial city to the fragmented urban agglomeration of current days.<sup>13</sup> The originally Hispanic *colonial city* – in distinction to the Portuguese – was structured in the strict logic of a military camp according to a grid with a central square, the *plaza mayor*, surrounded by the main buildings such as the cathedral, the city hall, other administrative buildings and the residents of the most important families. The farther the inhabitants lived from this central core, the poorer they were.

This centralised structure has been transformed in a second step of urban transformation in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which the authors call the emergence of the *sectoral city*. This corresponds to a partial and linear suburban development that depended on the infrastructural subdivisions with a strict segmentation between places of economic production and residence as well as between the residential districts of the urban rich and the working class.

In a third step, Borsdorf et al. describe the era of the rapid growth and industrialisation of Latin American agglomerations during the 1960s and 70s as a development which they call the *polarised city*. This era of urban expansion is basically characterised by high rates of rural-urban migration, a significant lack of housing and the appearance of activities such as the taking over of peripheral or rural public land and the construction of huge marginal squats by the urban poor while the centres were still predominantly occupied by the richer ones.

The last and current step represented by the *fragmented city* corresponds to a more diverse and sometimes opposite transformation of a so-called *archipelagoisation* on a micro level with downgraded and abandoned inner-city spaces next to the central business districts, peripheral *gated communities* of the upper and middle class next to consolidated or precarious squats, and residential islands within industrial districts. Last but not least, this transformation process was strengthened by the effects of the IMF and World Bank structural

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13 Cf. BORSDDORF et al., 2002.

adjustment programs of the 1980s which had induced the de-formalization of the urban labour markets on one hand and on the other the informalisation of urban development. The privatisation of urban space and infrastructure was on the one hand accompanied by the appearance of *gated community*-projects of different size and on the other by the emergence of an informal and commercialised housing and rental market within the various squats. At the same time, the establishment of a few countable social housing programs during the 1960s and 70s has mostly ended due to the constraints of reduced public investment budgets.



The described panorama of the *fragmented city* also coincides with the current situation of Costa Rica's urbanised Central Valley. In distinction to some other agglomerations, the uncontrolled spatial expansion in the metropolitan highlands is restricted in size due to the surrounding mountains that delimit the Central Valley. Nevertheless, the urban region is characterised by a mainly horizontal urban sprawl corresponding to aspects such as the high frequency of earthquakes and a traditional culture of estate property.

As in other Latin American cities the climax of land takeover ended in the 1980s and the current process is mainly characterised by a densification of the populace within the existing squats in terms of parcelling out the already occupied space. Even if Costa Rica has not experienced such a process of economic decline and de-industrialisation like other Latin American nations and cities during the so-called *lost decade* of the 1980s – a process which Mike Davis has identified as an urban expansion without economic growth<sup>14</sup> - the metropolitan region of the Central Valley is confronted with a tendency to urbanised pauperisation. And remarkable proportion of these urban poor equates to the segment of Nicaraguan migrants.

In consideration of the socio-spatial fragmentation it is finally quite important to ask how the Nicaraguan migrants are spatially distributed and where they settle, work and live within the metropolitan area. According to Davis' opinion, the spatial locations of social inequality do not necessarily correspond with processes of *ghettoization*. On one hand, the so-called *slumlords*, which are local estate agents, do not necessarily fit in with the characteristics of poverty, on the other, many construction workers live within the building yards where they work and most of the house maids live directly in the houses and *gated communities* of their employers. Nevertheless, a spatial concentration of poverty is verifiable, and these are in consequence also the districts where many of the Nicaraguan migrants are located (that is in the South, the North and the North-West of the metropolitan area). The comparison of the average housing conditions of Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans also shows high rates of Nicaraguans in precarious dwellings (see table below).

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14 DAVIS, 2007.

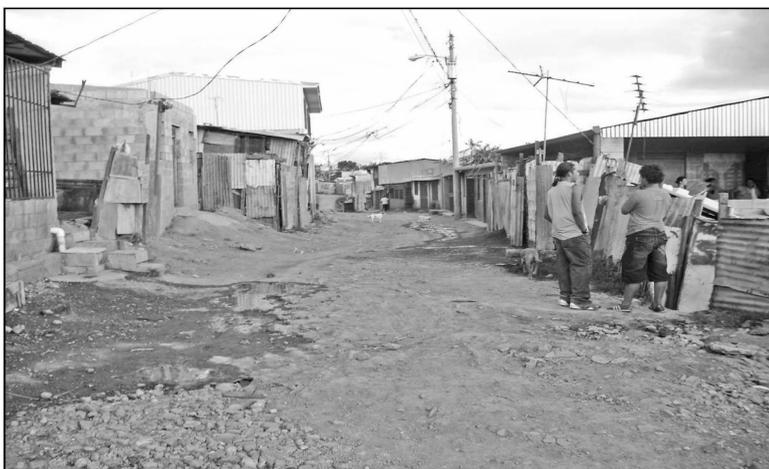
Indicators of the Housing Conditions corresponding to the origin of the head of a household 2000 (in %)		
Characteristics	Costa Rican	Nicaraguan
Type: slum dwelling ( <i>tugurio</i> )	1,2	7,2
Housing in bad condition	9,6	25,3
Without connection to water	10,1	18,2
Without connection to canalisation	6,8	17,0
Sanitarian equipment but without canalisation or sewage work ( <i>tanque séptico</i> )	7,1	28,4
High density	9,5	27,3

Source: INEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de Costa Rica). Data from the national census 2000.

## 5. Presentation of three exemplary urban locations

In the following three exemplary urban locations are presented to show that especially in a fragmented metropolitan area such as the San José region the migrants' socio-spatial orientation and operating range is not just exclusively limited to their places of settlement, but also to different meeting places in public and (semi-)private spaces. Referring to some results of the own research project, these places serve to illustrate the specific relationship between the spatial distribution or rather concentration of Nicaraguan migrants in the urban area and the impacts that spatial effects could have on the formation of their social support networks. To this end, the comparative presentation contains: first a suburban squat with a remarkable proportion of Nicaraguan inhabitants; second, the baseball stadium in San José; and third, an inner-city park which is mainly frequented by Nicaraguan migrants. Even if it is not possible to compare these quite distinctive places by their size, structure and social diversity in all their dimensions, it is still fruitful to compare these locations with respect to their functional role for specific types of social networks.

## 5.1. The suburban squat *La Carpio*



The suburban squat called *La Carpio* with about 20,000 inhabitants is one of the largest in Costa Rica's metropolitan area and has a considerable concentration of the Nicaraguan population with a proportion of almost 50 %. As opposed to other squats, in the case of *La Carpio* the Nicaraguan households did not move into precarious dwellings of an area already occupied by Costa Ricans, but rather were part of the original land takeover in 1993, which was one of the latest.

The social support networks within this area were mainly led by a common strategy of all inhabitants (Nicaraguans as well as Costa Ricans and a few other

migrant groups) to pursue local interests such as the regulation of their property rights, access to basic infrastructure (like paved roads, electricity, fresh water and drainage), access to public housing programs, the establishment of educational and health services, playgrounds and so on.

The social networks are predominately structured by local family- and community-based neighbourhood associations and semi-institutionalised organisations centred on very local activities without any transnational ties that exceed personal contacts to visitors or newcomers from the country of origin. While practical and material help is predominantly based on social support networks resulting from the neighbourhood associations and the resident family members, mostly emotional support is contextualised with transnational ties by the interviewees from *La Carpio*. In contrast, transnational exchanges, for their part, are quite a rare phenomenon in the squat. Apart from some political campaigns of Nicaraguan politicians that visited *La Carpio* during their stay in Costa Rica to engage the migrants' sympathy for their candidature in the native country, political activity in *La Carpio* is mainly represented by debates and conflicts with the city council, the public administration and the state. The economic activities are also locally based, even if some of the stores and stalls sell traditional food from Nicaragua that is demanded from Nicaraguans as much as from Costa Ricans.

In a socio-cultural perspective, an interesting fact about *La Carpio* is that the *Purísima*, one of the most important traditional festivities in Nicaragua, is today celebrated in the squat by almost all inhabitants. Instead of representing an exotic and exclusively Nicaraguan festivity, the *Purísima* has become more and more a symbol for the entire district to show their community-based intercultural identity and function in part as a nostalgic retrospective view by the Nicaraguans. As numerous interviewees from *La Carpio* stressed, they do not really distinguish between Costa Rican and Nicaraguan inhabitants in the squat and highlight the political and infrastructural achievements they have fought for collectively. Moreover, after a long period of shame and stigmatisation due to living in this squat, today they feel proud to call themselves *Carpeños*, which has become a more important feature of self-identification for many interviewees than their Nicaraguan origin. As Martha Lidia A., a 24 year old Nicaraguan resident of *La Carpio*, said:

“Before, hmm (...) before I always felt in a way (...) kind of ashamed to be from La Carpio. And, well (...) additionally to be Nicaraguan, hmm (...) I always told the people that I live in Uruca because (...) because I was afraid of what they might think. (...) If they think that I am a criminal, that I have a bad education, that, hmm (...) that I am not a trustworthy person. (...) But now I feel something like (...) proud in a way, (...) to be *Carpeña*. (...) proud of all

that my parents have achieved, the whole community has reached. [...] We are all proud now, proud to call ourselves *Carpeños*.<sup>15</sup>

## 5.2. San José's baseball stadium



15 Martha Lidia A., 24, resident of *La Carpio*, in Costa Rica since 1998. Interview from 25.11.2009.

Another location that has been studied during the ethnographic fieldwork in Costa Rica is the main baseball stadium of San José. It serves as a meeting place not only for the Nicaraguan population but also to connect them with other groups of migrants from the Caribbean and from Central and South America. While Costa Ricans are mainly interested in soccer, the baseball stadium is frequented mostly by Nicaraguans, but also by Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Columbians and other migrant groups and people (so for example a single retired US-citizen), according to the predominant sport of their home country.

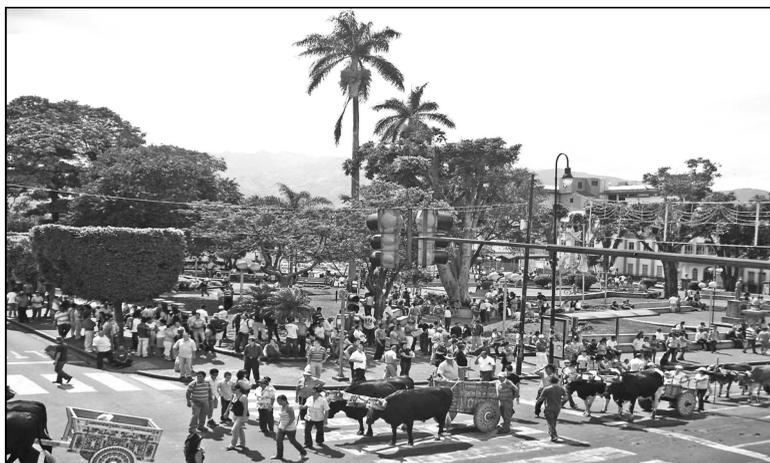
As a somehow protected place that is partly open, partly separated from the outside world, the stadium has a strong family-oriented character, where migrant families can go for a weekend activity without spending much money (for example, in contrast to shopping malls, where they can hardly remain for an entire day-trip without being forced to buy something). Normally they just pay the symbolic entrance fee and bring their own lunch. Due to the shared interest in baseball, the stadium serves as a meeting place not only between migrants and the national population, but also, and predominantly, between different migrant groups that would not interact in such a way in other public areas. Moreover, the visitors come from all parts of the urbanised Central Valley and use the location of the stadium to get in contact with others whom they could not meet elsewhere because of the lack of alternative time and spatial opportunities.

Reactively, the importance of the migrants for the Costa Rican Baseball is not just reflected in the physical and symbolical occupation of the once abandoned and neglected stadium by Costa Ricans, but also in the constellation of the teams. While some teams are composed of players of different nationalities, others signal their predominantly Nicaraguan origins by giving themselves names like the *Tiburones Nicaraguenses*, the Nicaraguan Sharks, or the *Equipo Managua*, the Managua team, to refer to their home country or even city. Moreover, while the baseball stadium is mainly a place that brings together people of different nationalities at the local level, it has also been used (or misused) in a transnational way during the election campaign in Nicaragua when the candidate of a Nicaraguan political party came to Costa Rica and held a speech in the stadium to his ex-compatriots, in full recognition of their importance for their home country as they send remittances, start investments and keep transnational ties alive.

Additionally, Julio César R., the general director of the Costa Rican National Baseball League, a Nicaraguan who moved to Costa Rica more than 20 years ago, also reported about a special event when a famous team from the Nicaraguan capitol Managua has been invited to play against a selection of Nicaraguan migrant players in San José:

“They all (.) all the Nicaraguan migrants have been very thankful that we could have organised this game. (...) Well, our team lost but (.) the stadium was almost overcrowded. (.) And such an ambiance! Almost like in Nicaragua, with all the banners, the equipment, (.) the music. (...) The event has also been noted in the Nicaraguan newspaper.”<sup>16</sup>

### 5.3. The inner-city park *La Merced*



16 Julio César R., 37, the general director of the Costa Rican National Baseball League, in Costa Rica since 1991. Interview from 13.11.2009.

The third place being discussed in greater detail here is the inner-city park *La Merced*, also called the *Nica Park* by Costa Ricans as well as by Nicaraguans themselves. For about 15 years now, the once abandoned park has been occupied physically and symbolically by Nicaraguan migrants and serves as a central location with a variety of support functions for the Nicaraguan communities. Surrounded by a church, a hospital and low-rise buildings, the inner-city park has a rural character that might fit with the predominately rural origin of many Nicaraguan migrants. Moreover, next to the park is an important bus station where many buses arrive from the outskirts like *La Carpio* where most of the Nicaraguan migrants live. The park is frequented during the entire week and especially on the weekends – and even during the rainy season it serves as a central meeting location until the afternoon when the thunder storms usually start.

In a way, the park is a place of cultural reproduction where Nicaraguan festivities are celebrated, traditional Nicaraguan food and utensils are sold by informal vendors and where Nicaraguan music is played by traditional musicians. Moreover, it is also a place of collective socialising and emotional support, a first connection for newcomers as well as the last resort for long-time migrants in precarious situations.

The support functions within the park are quite diverse and range from brief informational support about employment, housing or legalising the immigration status to a profound kind of support concerning the reunion of family members and friends and the creation, maintaining and stabilising of a durable social network between compatriots and - more specific - certain occupational groups like the housemaids that only have public spaces such as these to meet and interact.

Apart from these local support functions, the park is embedded in transnational ties in ways that go far beyond the regular queues in front of the public phones to call the family in Nicaragua and to indulge in the reproduction of a socio-cultural nostalgia. It is because the park environment has profoundly changed over the past 15 years. The entire district around the park, once abandoned by the Costa Rican population, has now become an area of so-called *ethnic businesses*, with numerous remittance banks, typical bars and restaurants, lawyer offices and NGO accommodations for legal support, hotels for newcomers and postal, travel and goods transport agencies to Nicaragua.

At the same time, the park itself has witnessed a dramatic social change. Long-term migrants recount in a nostalgic way that the park used to be a place for socialising, familial meetings and even served as a marriage market, and lament the park's socio-spatial decline into a place which is today characterised by criminality, alcoholism and prostitution. Moreover, the informal vendors within the park have a lot of trouble with the municipal police, which was not

the case in the past. As Danélia C., a 50 year old political activist for the rights of the Nicaraguan migrants, reported:

“Always, always. I am going to the park since I have come to San José (...). This is the place where the Nicaraguan community is gathering, where you can meet your folks. The park is the park. The park has always been the park. [...] But the problem is that the park has changed a lot, you see, you’ve got all this proliferation of, (.) of *prostitution*, of *alcoholism*, of *drugs*, of *criminality* (...). Before, the park has been a much more familial place (.) but (.) with the time it has lost, hmm, (.) a little bit it’s spirit.”<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, newcomers, the informal vendors or the prostitutes, as some of them ascertained in the interviews, still see the importance of the park to meet and link together with their compatriots, to support each other or just to do their business.

While there has been some kind of institutionalisation of the migrant activities in the entire district around the park which originated from the park itself, the park has changed its symbolic relevance for the heterogeneously structured community of Nicaraguan migrants over time.

In this sense, one’s symbolic self-positioning towards the park seems to be not only a possibility of social differentiation towards the Costa Rican society but also among the Nicaraguan migrants themselves to distinguish, for example, between newcomers and long-term migrants, between well established and precarious migrants, and to point out (or conceal) one’s social status within the migrant group *and* the Costa Rican society. Accordingly, Javier M., a 34 year old Nicaraguan musician, noted:

“Yes, there are differences (...) I would say that, hmm, the people who go to the *Parque de la Merced* (...) they, hmm, they are just the men on the street, (.) the people originally from the countryside. [...] I would say that the Nicaraguans who go to the *Plaza de la Cultura* or to the *Parque Central* have a kind of (.) a little bit more like, hmm, (...) they have a higher cultural level. (.) Or they think that they are something better (.) or something like that. They go to Kentucky to eat a chicken and they wouldn’t eat the food from the park, I think.”<sup>18</sup>

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17 Danélia C., 50, Nicaraguan political activist, in Costa Rica since 2002. Interview from 18.10.2009.

18 Javier A., 34, Nicaraguan musician, in Costa Rica since 2005. Interview from 10.12.2009.

## 6. Conclusions

By contrasting and comparing these different locations, the particular connections between different types of social support networks and the specific conditions of concrete meeting places have been identified. In this context, it has been assumed that the collective linkages to a certain place reinforce as much the network's composition as the socialised place is produced and reproduced reactively by the social action and the physical and symbolic occupation of a particular group such as the Nicaraguan migrants.

The previous assumptions and the comparison of the different places in a fragmented urban agglomeration such as Costa Rica's central highlands have led to a differentiation between more locally-oriented places with a high importance for the direct migrant's networking and of more transnationally related locations for the reciprocal exchange between the host and the native country.

While, for example, in the *La Carpio* squat only locally-based entrepreneurial activities could be set up sustainably and other activities, such as the establishment of a remittance bank or a transport agency, have been implemented but have never been successful, the district around the park as a central hub of the socio-spatial activities of locally widespread Nicaraguan migrants has changed into a space of semi-professional transnational activities. Therefore, it is questioned, whether this area is not only a transnational interlinked location with constant and multiple interconnections across national borders that are anchored in the migrant's daily live or if such a park could also be called a significantly *transnationalised place*.

Further investigation could probably focus on the interconnections between specific *transnational localities* on both sides of the border to highlight the interlinkages among different types of networks. Such investigation in the tradition of *multi-sited ethnography*<sup>19</sup> could explore for example the mutual exchange relations of the diverse business persons involved in the fields of remittance banking, transborder travel or goods transportation agencies. The spatial clustering of such activities on both sides of the border could be understood as a geographical mapping of transnational social networks.

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19 MARCUS, 1995.

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