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## The Impact of NAFTA on Agricultural Development in Mexico

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### Abstract

Agriculture still plays an important role in the Mexican economy and it has undergone a significant number of changes during the last 15 years, which have important impacts on the life in Mexican towns and villages.

After the Mexican revolution the new constitution of 1917 (article 27) aimed at distributing the large landed properties of the haciendas to the multitude of landless peones, forming the so called Ejidos, where the land belongs to the community, but each peasant works his share under his own responsibility. This agrarian reform and the formation of Ejidos was seen as a constant process. Most land redistributions were carried out in the 30s and 40s, however still in the beginning of the 80s some Ejidos were established. The Mexican agricultural sector was also strongly supported by subsidies and protected by taxes and tariffs almost prohibiting the import of foreign agricultural products.

During the government of president Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) it was officially declared that the land reform was concluded, article 27 was significantly changed, now allowing the privatization and sale of Ejido land. On the 1st January of 1994 when the NAFTA-treaty entered into operation this also meant the reduction of subsidies and opening borders for imports.

In my paper I will analyze the impact of these changes on the structure of agricultural production in Zacatecas, which is one of the Mexican states that still depend heavily on agricultural production. Special attention shall be drawn to the decay of agricultural prices in Mexico since 1994.

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Agriculture still plays an important role in the Mexican economy and society and it has undergone a significant number of changes during the last 20 years, which have important impacts on the life in Mexican towns and villages. Although the agricultural sector accounts only for about 5.7% of Mexico's GNP it still provides about 24% of the national employment (Nadal: 2001), mostly peasant smallholders representing the lowest income groups. Taking into account that the family size in rural areas is above the Mexican national average; we see that much more

than 24% of the Mexican Population depend economically on the agricultural sector. Therefore changes in the framework – such as removing governmental support through subsidies or trade barriers – affect a huge number of people.

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## 1. Historical Background

### 1.1 The Mexican Agriculture before the revolution

The first land reform in Mexico was carried out during the government of Benito Juárez (1858-72)<sup>1</sup> the aim was to distribute the properties of the church to indigenous peasants. However, these intentions were corrupted afterwards by the successors of Juárez, who supported the concentration of landholdings in large Haciendas. Land distribution had been extremely unequal: less than 5% of the population owned more than 90% of the land. Until the Mexican Revolution (1911- 1917) agriculture was dominated by this semi-feudal Hacienda system, which had already been established during the Spanish colonization (1521-1821). Most people in the countryside were so called peones: landless agricultural workers that were bound to the lands of their Hacendados. During the government of Porfirio Diaz (1876- 1910) most of them were living in extreme poverty and the peones build the backbone of the revolutionary armies of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. They were calling for "Tierra y Libertad" (Land and Freedom) (Buchhofer: 1996 and Bonilla/ Viatte: 1997).

### 1.2 The Constitution of 1917

After the revolution the new Constitution tried to satisfy the need for land of the former peones. One aim of the land reform (Article 27) initiated in 1917 was the distribution of large landed property to the peones. Land distribution was carried out basically under two regimes:

- Fraccionamiento (Splitting)
- The creation of Ejidos.

The first meant splitting a Hacienda into an elevated number of private lots, turning peons into smallholders. The second – and under politicians more popular one - was the conversion of an Hacienda into an Ejido: land was distributed to peones for use only, it remained in community ownership. Water and land resources for grazing were used by the community; the Ejidatario used only a small lot exclusively (more than 60% of all Ejidatarios cultivate lots of 5 hectares or less). Ejidatarios did not own their lands they could inherit their lot, but not sell it or use it as a security for credits. They were not allowed to hire agricultural workers, but had to work their

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<sup>1</sup> During the Guerras de Reforma (1858- 1861) Mexico had two Presidents and from 1862- 1867 Mexico City and central Mexico were occupied by French troops, while Juárez and his government were displaced to the northern part of Mexico (Sommerhoff/ Weber: 1999, 99 f).

lands on their own (with support from the own family of course) (Fix-Fierro: 1995). At same time there was set an upper limit for private land holdings: 100 hectares for irrigated land and 300 hectares for land without irrigation (von Krockow: 1974, p. 15).

In the first two years from 1917 to 1919 more than 100 million hectares were distributed and converted into Ejido lands. Also during the government of Lázaro Cárdenas the surface cultivated by Ejidos rose significantly: from 1934 to 1940 more than 20 million hectares were distributed (Buchhofer: 1996). It is important to underline, that land reform – as well as revolution – was seen as an ongoing process, so land reform and land distribution continued through the years, however at a slower pace. Until 1991 Ejidos covered more than 48% of the arable land.

As a result of land reform Mexico increased its production of staple food (maize, wheat) more than six times from 1930 to 1971. Until the beginning of the 60s Mexico was a net importer of staple food and than became self-sufficient (von Krockow: 1974, p. 18f).

### **1.3 Problems in the Agricultural Sector**

Land distribution however, did not happen on equal bases: in order to maintain productivity and output of the agricultural sector poor land was distributed to the Ejidos and good soil remained in the possession of former Hacendados (Sommerhoff/ Weber: 1999, 259).<sup>2</sup> As a consequence agriculture in Mexico was still divided in two: a dynamic and market/ export orientated agriculture, formed by the remaining latifundistas and a subsistence-agriculture, formed by peasant smallholders, mostly Ejidatarios and Fraccionistas (von Krockow: 1974, p 21). In the 80s almost 60% of all farmers owned less than 5 hectares and 50% of all smallholders did not participate in agricultural markets, 25% did participate only sporadically (Fritscher Mundt: 2001). In order to secure the subsistence of small producers of staple food guarantee-prices were introduced, which were paid by the governmental organization CONASUPO that was also in charge of transportation, storage and marketing of agricultural products. The state also provided support for the agricultural sector through a number of other institutions as for example BANRURAL for credits and, ANAGSA for insurance, FERTIMEX for fertilizers and PRONASE for seed. Obviously producers were caught in a system of governmental care and did not have any contact with market forces (Fritscher Mundt: 2001).

However, a lot of smallholders (mostly those located in the southeast) did not have access to the state owned CONASUPO purchase offices, for these peasants guarantee prices meant a ceiling instead of a floor. However, the structure of the Mexican agriculture was stabilized by this system of subsidies, smallholders with access to the governmental agencies did neither have the incentive, nor the capital to modernize their production systems (Buchhofer: 1996). Also BANRURAL could only partly compensate this lack of capital by allowing credits with low interest rates (Fritscher-Mundt: 2001).

They could not employ resources in an efficient way. As a consequence Mexico lost its status of food self-sufficiency, which was reached in the beginning of the 70s and started to import staple food already at the end of that decade (Calva: 2000).

## **2. The Changes in the agricultural policy**

### **2.1 The first wave of trade liberalization**

The debt crisis of 1982, which hit the Mexican economy after the oil price shock led to the implementation of structural adjustment programs, which were not only designed for the industrial sector, but in large parts also for agriculture. The politics of import substitution, which were pursued since the 1940s were abandoned and replaced by an export, orientated policy. In 1986 Mexico joined the GATT (which later became the WTO). Subsidies and governmental programs supporting agricultural development were reduced, and also import taxes and tariffs

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<sup>2</sup> It has to be pointed out, that the laws for the upper limits were never carried out completely.

were cut. As a consequence the development of the agricultural sector was disconnected from the rest of the economy. While the general index of consumer prices in the years of high inflation 1982-87 rose by 5.572%, prices of agricultural products rose only by 3.899% in the same period. This equals a reduction of prices by almost 70% within five years. Also guarantee-prices were constantly reduced, in 1989 they were at a level of 76.7% in the case of maize and 61.0% in the case of beans compared to 1980 (Arteaga Dominguez: 1993). This meant an important loss of relative income for producers during the 1980s.

## 2.2 The „Second Reform“

These structural problems together with the implementation of the NAFTA-treaty in 1994 made president Salinas de Gortari promote a second agricultural reform, with the aim of making the Mexican agriculture competitive on international markets. As the secretary of agriculture of that time Carlos Hank Gonzales put it:

*“Mexico will push large scale national and foreign investment in association with the Ejidatarios in the frame of an open economy that will foster the specialization of the country in products that are internationally competitive” (cited in: Arteaga Dominguez: 1993, translation by the author).*

The new politics tried to introduce market structures in the Ejido-sector, which had been highly protected and subsidized before. Tariffs and trade barriers are to fade out between the NAFTA countries during a 10-year period beginning in 1994.

The 6<sup>th</sup> of January 1992 then marked the end of the continuous process of land reform initiated in 1917 (Fix-Fierro: 1995), as it was said that there was no more land left, which could be redistributed.

Core of this “second reform” however was the change of Article 27, which determines the legislation for Ejidos. Ejidatarios should become owners of the lots they and their ancestors had been working on for generations. Now they can lease their land, sell it or use it as a security for bank-credits. These measures should secure a more efficient allocation of land resources and solve the problem of financing investments (Buchhofer: 1996). Before 1992 credits had been given to Ejidatarios mainly by BANRURAL at low and subsidized interest rates. The aim was to capitalize the countryside and to give the Ejido sector access to credits of commercial banks and submit it to market interest rates.

On the other side this meant a rupture with 70 years of Ejido-traditions and ended more than 1000 years of the indigenous way of land use. Registration and privatization of Ejido-Lands were carried out through a special program called PROCEDE. According to the new agricultural legislation also corporations obtained the right to own land. This actually put an end to the legal restrictions on the size of individual landholdings (Foley: 1995).

Besides these changes in Article 27 the old system of guarantee-prices was replaced by the so called PROCAMPO. CONASUPO and all other governmental agencies were dissolved. PROCAMPO is a direct payment to the farmer, depending on the number of hectares cultivated with certain crops that are eligible for the program. PROCAMPO is thought to compensate producers for the elimination of trade barriers and guarantee prices on support crops, however floor prices for maize and beans are kept. At the same time this new form of subsidizing farmers was designed in a way, that domestic prices now would reflect those of the world market. PROCAMPO payments are fixed for the first ten years and will then reduced to zero over a period of 5 more years (Baffes/ Meerman: 1997 and Bonilla/ Viatte: 1997). However, as PROCAMPO is not related to the output, there is less incentive for efficient production.

Last but not least another aim of the free trade agreement was to reduce migration movements from Mexico to the US. Most migrants stem from rural areas and belong to peasant families, which suffered heavily under the economic crisis of the 80s. Migratory flows had been increasing strongly during the decade before NAFTA. As President Salinas de Gortari said in a popular way:

*“Mexico prefers to export Mexican tomatoes, rather than Mexican tomato pickers.”*  
(Cornelius/ Martin: 1993)

The promoters of this liberalization supposed that privatization; free markets and the free allocation of production factors would enhance investment, productivity and agricultural production. The idea was that even smallholders could form strategic alliances to improve their production systems and compete on national and international markets.

### **2.3 Impact of NAFTA: different scenarios**

Before the new laws were approved and the NAFTA treaty went into effect, the changes were discussed very controversial in the public and the scientific community. Yúnes-Naude (1997) mentions four different scenarios regarding the effects of free trade and the reduction of governmental supports for farmers:

- *The catastrophic view:* NAFTA and especially the elimination of all governmental supports for Mexican agriculture through guaranteed prices will lead to a depression of the production of staple food in general in the country (especially maize) and therefore foster migration movements to the US. (see also: Calva: 1995)
- *The optimistic view (the official):* reducing the weight of the agricultural sector in the national economy is a natural process of development and economic stability, the opening of markets and liberalization of trade barriers will raise productive investment and industrial growth. This process will expand the demand for labor in Mexico and reduce international migration. (see for example: Bonilla/ Viatte: 1994)
- Naturally there are also *intermediate opinions* taking into account a certain period of transition between a closed economy and an open economy: agricultural production will decline, therefore in the short run migration movements will rise (migration hump). In the long run however, the Mexican economy especially through growth in the industrial sector in urban centers as well as in rural areas will adapt to the new situation and migration flows will diminish. (see also: Cornelius/ Martin: 1993)
- The scenarios mentioned above however do not take into account the *heterogeneity* of the Mexican agriculture, as it consists of two opposite groups:
  - a) Large landed properties, which have specialized and modern production systems and dispose of capital assets as tractors, harvesters and irrigation systems. These latifundios are orientated towards national and international markets.
  - b) On the other side we have smallholders, that mainly produce for self-consumption and besides agriculture have diversified income sources (as for example int. labor migration). It has to be pointed out, that many of these Ejidatarios or Fraccionistas did not have access to the guarantee prices offered by CONASUPO, this means that large parts of Mexican farmers have always been excluded from the system of subsidies and governmental support that existed until 1983.

It is obvious, that the impact of open markets will be different for each group. According to Yúnes-Naude (who advocated this position: 1997) the first group will be struck more severely, as they participate in complete markets, while the other group has been excluded from markets (by prohibitive transaction costs for example) and will be excluded also in the future. Therefore changes in prices will basically influence market-orientated producers.

## **3. Agricultural Development during the last Decade**

Looking at the aims of the changes made in the 1992 legislation for agriculture we can identify the following central aspects of the reform:

- a) The shift towards other crops
- b) To improve the competitiveness of Mexican agriculture on the international markets and increase exports in that sector.

- c) To improve the access to credits for peasant smallholders
- d) A reduction of the migration flows between Mexico and the US.

*Regarding a):* We can observe, that for the main staples (and cotton) there has not been a significant change during the last decade. The surface harvested – regarding the main products: maize, beans, wheat, rice and soy – does decrease only slightly during the last decade. The yields do almost stay the same, while the yield per hectare decreases in the case of soy, stays the same for beans and increases slightly for all other products. However we can observe, that the production of staples did not crash as predicted in the scenario. (Source: SIACON, see Appendix 1- 3)

If we have a look at the production per capita, however, we have to state, state, that the production of basic grains per capita was reduced by 27.6% in the lapse from 1982 to 1999.

Young argues that for peasants it is difficult and many times impossible to switch their production towards other products. Land that is arable for beans or maize might not give good results on vegetables or other products that are apt for export (Young: 1995). As the plan to capitalize the countryside failed, peasants did not have the chance to build irrigation systems or purchase other machinery, which are necessary for the production of exportable vegetables like tomatoes. In addition we have to consider, that most Ejidatarios had been growing the same crops (maize, chili and beans) in the highly protected system of subsidies and governmental supports for a lifetime. They were not prepared to switch production to other crops.

*Regarding b):* Agricultural exports have been increasing since the 1980s; especially vegetables have gained importance. However, in Mexico there are about 100.000 producers of vegetables, of which only 20.000 produce for export; more than half of all exports originate from only one state (Sinaloa) and about 90% of the exports originate from Sinaloa and the region of the Bajío (Schwentenius Rindermann/ Gómez Cruz: 1997).

We also have to contrast this increase of exports to the increase of imports in the agricultural sector. Since 1980 Mexico's trade balance in the agricultural sector has only been positive in six years<sup>3</sup> (INEGI), which by the way have been the years of crisis. This indicates that a positive balance in this case is not that much a result of strong export agriculture, but of the lack of financial resources to pay for imports. Since the NAFTA treaty went into effect, there has only been one year with a trade surplus: 1995, which was the year in which the so-called Tequila-Effect was invented, to give the Mexican crisis a name of its own (see Appendix 4).

Growth rates in the agricultural sector have been constantly below the rate of population growth during the last decade (Fritscher Mundt: 2001). After all, food imports rose significantly during the period: from 1,790 million US\$ to 8,601 million US\$, which equals an annual growth of 9.7% annually (Calva: 2000). This means, that Mexico did not improve its balance of payments through the exports of agricultural products.

However, we observe, that the trade volume has increased and that the deficit varies, but only in the last year (2001) shows exceeds the values that were already present 20 years ago.

*Regarding c):* Nadal (2001) and also the World Bank (2001) state that rural credit from commercial banks for Ejidatarios did not improve since 1992. In fact the percentage of farmers that were allowed credits went down from 25% in the period 1984- 1992 to 23% for the period 1992- 2000 (in case of all Ejidatarios from 23% to 20%; World Bank: 2001). Before the reforms BANRURAL gave credits to secure the cultivation of 7 million hectares and now only supports 1 million (Fritscher Mundt: 2001). This means a significant reduction of the number of farmers with access to credits, so we can conclude that the liberalization of land markets did not improve access to credits for peasants. This reduction of access to credits is accompanied by the termination of other governmental supports and therefore worsens the situation of peasants significantly.

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<sup>3</sup> 1982, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1995

*Regarding d):* During the 1990s migration flows were growing at an increased level (see Appendix 5). Obviously land the changes of the agricultural legislation did not slow down migration movements, at least not in the short run. The urban centers in Mexico do not yet attract migrants, people prefer to move to the US, as they can move along social networks (Hamann: 2001) and still earn better wages. Also the distance is almost the same.

#### 4. Conclusion: Success or Failure?

Today's agricultural policy in Mexico and the situation of peasant farmers are the consequence of 20 years of deregulation. The changes after the reform of Article 27 of the Mexican constitution in 1992 may appear not very drastic, however, it is important to remember that the process of liberalization began in 1982. In the first decade farmers have already been confronted with serious changes (as mentioned above the guarantee price for maize and beans were constantly reduced during the 80s), which – besides other effects – lead to a significant increase of migration movements during the 1980s.

While producers had to face world market prices governmental spending on agriculture was reduced from 30,143 million Pesos in 1982 to 8,871 million Pesos in 1999 or 74.62%. In relation to the consumer price index the producer prices for maize, beans and wheat lost 58.23%, 14.73% and 41.95% of their value respectively (Calva: 2000).

The national production of staples has remained almost the same since 1990, prices have gone down about 45% and food imports have risen drastically, this indicates, that farmers did not shift to other products and therefore suffered significant income reductions, on the other hand consumer prices have been affected positively. (Nadal: 2000)

However when evaluating the changes opinions differ. While the World Bank (2001) focuses on markets and efficient allocation, Calva (2000), Nadal (2001) and Fritscher Mundt (2001) focus more on the (social) situation of peasant smallholders.

There can be no doubt, that market efficiency has increased after the reforms, this is why the World Bank considers NAFTA and the changes in the agricultural policy a full success. It welcomes the allocation of property rights to the Ejidos, which solved internal conflicts and improved the functioning of land markets. It is also said, that household welfare has increased, due to the fact that the new legislation opens more options for participation in off-farm labor markets (World Bank: 2001).

On the other side social scientists do consider the changes to be the reason for the “disaster of Mexican agriculture” (Fritscher Mundt: 2001). Their focus is more on the economic situation of the peasant families. The introduction of land markets into the Ejido system threatens the traditional social structures of many small towns. It is also said, that the new legislation opens the door for a reversion of the land reform of 1917, and will foster a new concentration of land holdings, leading to the same social problems that have caused the Mexican Revolution in 1911. The access to off-farm labor markets is also criticized, as it also destroys the traditional peasant society. Additionally we have to mention, that many peasant households had already diversified their income sources long before NAFTA, sending one or two family members to a national urban center (Mexico, DF; Guadalajara, Monterrey, the border region) or to the US.

The introduction of land and credit markets in the agricultural sector obviously increases economic efficiency, but in this case does not improve the living conditions of small scale farmers. Peasant families will face more distortions of their traditional live, and will have to adapt their income strategies. The only program to soften the hardship of structural adjustments for the affected Ejidatarios and their families is the PROCAMPO, which will fade out in 2008.

Mexico will have to face drastic structural changes in its agriculture, these changes will be similar to the developments we could observe in the industrialized countries and therefore can be considered to be natural process of development. However many of the industrialized countries had the means to finance social programs to soften the social impact for the affected

smallholders. Mexican peasants however will have to face the changes on their own, so we can expect heavy social disruptions in the near future.

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- INS: Immigration and Naturalization Service: <http://www.ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/>
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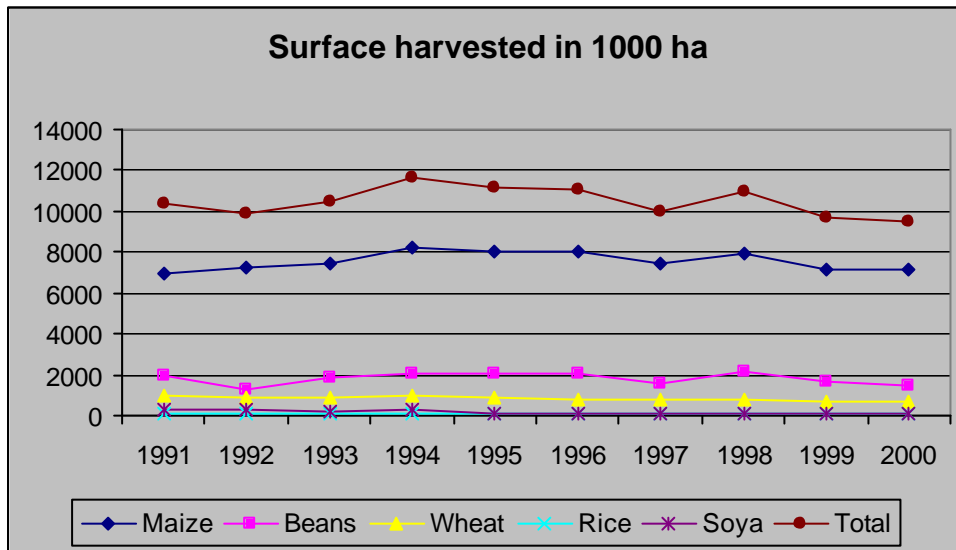


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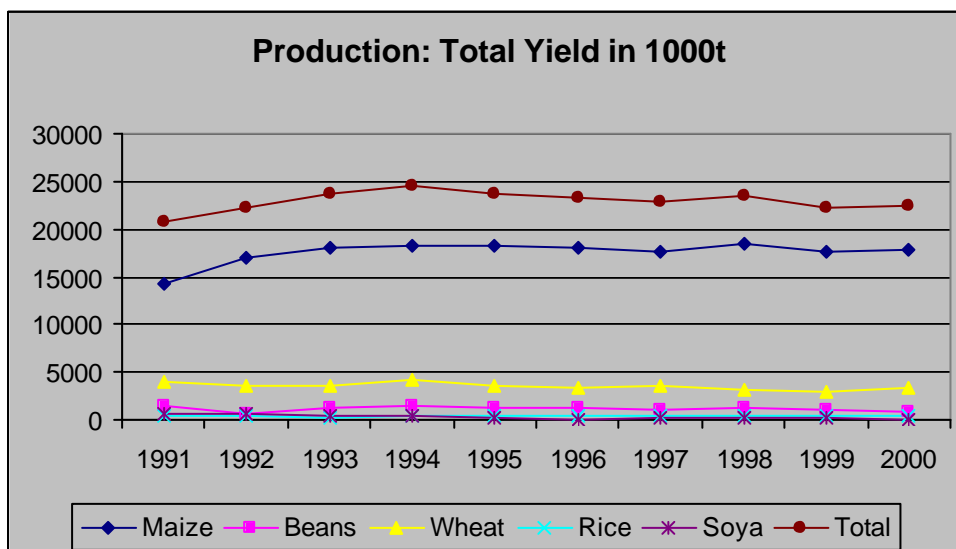
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Appendix 1 :



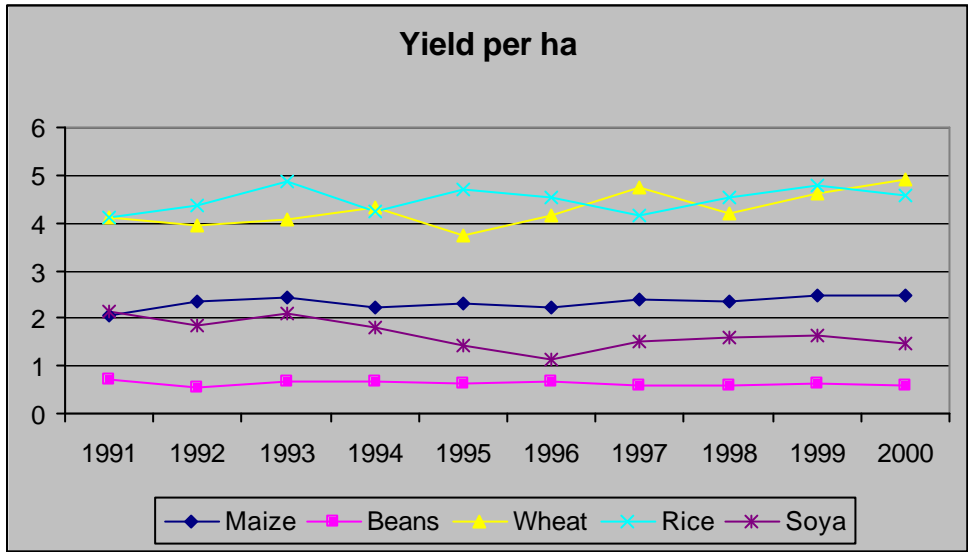
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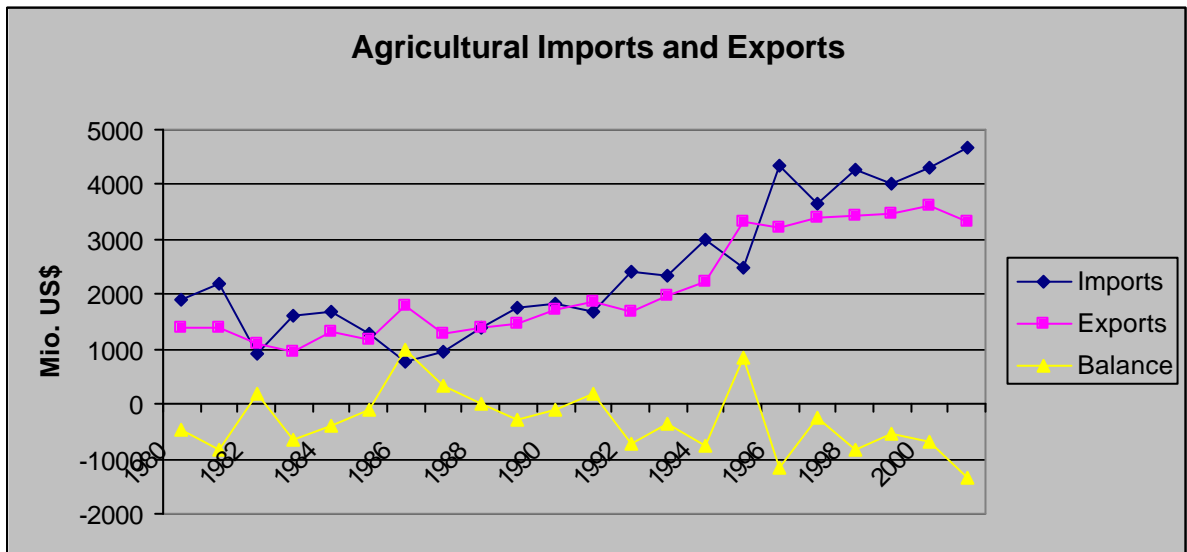
Source: SIACON

Appendix 3:



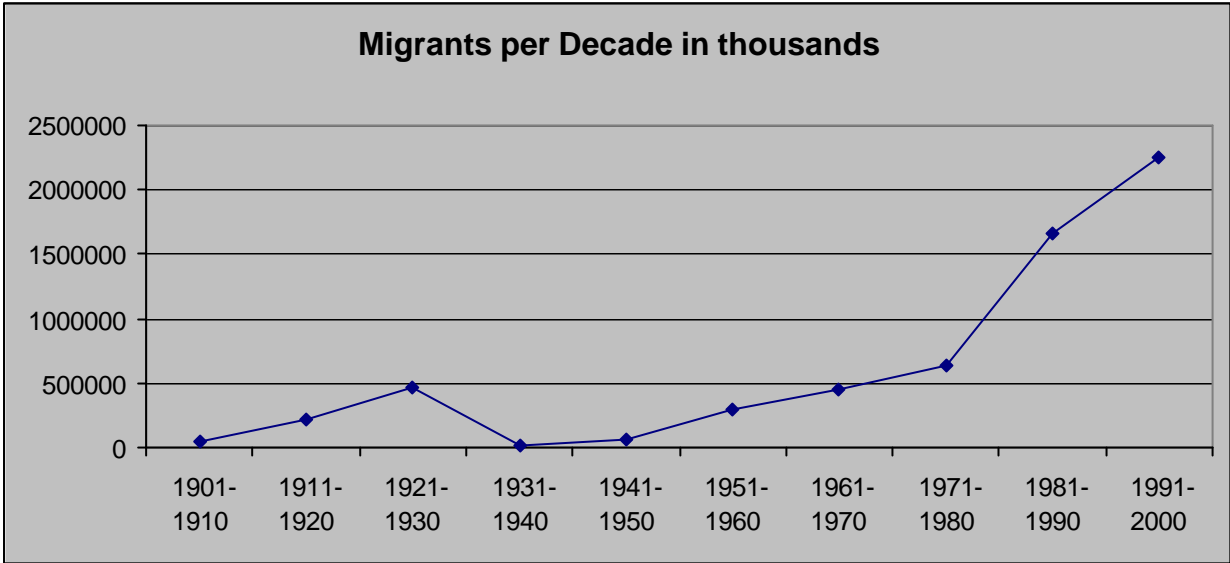
Source: SIACON

Appendix 4:



Source: INEGI

Appendix 5:



Source: INS