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Transnational Problems Need Transnational Solutions

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On May Day, thousands of people thronged the streets of cities around the country in support of comprehensive immigration reform. These marches triggered the passionate debates we have all become accustomed to. Those wanting stricter controls see immigrants as stealing jobs, overusing services, and embracing values that are antithetical to the American way. Immigrant supporters believe that they do jobs the native-born don't want to do, stimulate the economy, and enrich our cultural heritage.

People on both sides of this debate have gotten one very fundamental thing wrong. They act as if we just fix things in the United States, everything will be solved. But you only have to walk down the street in Flushing, Queens, South Central Los Angeles or rural North Carolina or Nebraska to see this is only part of the story. Many residents there stay strongly connected to their homelands at the same time that they become American. They continue to vote, invest, and raise family members back home while they go to work, worship, and attend PTA meetings here. The many grocery stores, travel and money-sending agencies, and political party headquarters that line the streets of these neighborhoods are the proof in the pudding.

A trip back to India or Mexico reveals the other side of the equation. You can tell which houses emigrants live in because they are the ones with a new roof or running water. You can tell which towns emigrants come from because they are the ones with the new road or community center. More and more, immigrants are the sole supporters of their family members back home. They fund the social services and public works projects weak governments can't provide. Immigrants and their relatives are part of the same social and economic space even though they're separated by physical distance. What happens to people in the U.S. can't be separated from what happens to people who stay behind because their fates are inextricably linked.

We can't reform immigration laws here if we don't address the problems in sending countries that force people to migrate to begin with. Immigration is a transnational problem that needs a transnational solution. It requires fixing things in the United States and in the countries where people come from because they are, in essence, two sides of the same coin. That means creating jobs so that people who stay home earn enough to support their children. It means making affordable health care and good schools available to everyone. It means creating courts and police departments that work.

Right now, most policies focus overwhelmingly on conditions in the U.S. But there are examples out there, of people in the U.S. and in immigrants' countries of origin working together that improve socioeconomic status. Some start small -- like the summertime exchanges between teachers in New York City and Santo Domingo or exchanges of health and school records for children who move back and forth between Latin America and the U.S. Some aim higher like the

federal, state, and municipal governments in Mexico that match the dollars emigrants send back to support village projects. These efforts are steps in the right direction because they address migrations' symptoms and causes.

We can reform immigration laws all we want but it won't stop people from coming if the problems causing them to leave to begin with persist. We can still act as if when you cross a border, you trade in one membership card for another. But the fact is that more and more people belong to several communities at once. When so many people's daily lives cross borders, our policy responses must do the same.