

Transnationalism:

Most Americans expect new immigrants to trade in their home-country membership card for an American one. But you have only to walk down the street in Boston's Jamaica Plain, South Central Los Angeles, or Siler City in North Carolina, observing the ethnic grocery stores, the travel agencies, money-sending businesses, and the political party headquarters to realize they don't. Many continue to vote, invest, and support families back home at the same time that they start businesses, establish

churches, and join parent-teacher associations in the United States.

A visit to immigrant hometowns in India, the Dominican Republic, or Brazil reveals the flip side of this picture. It's the migrants' homes that have the new roofs, the running water, and the satellite dishes. It's the towns with many emigrants that have paved roads, new schools, and health clinics.

According to a 2006 report by InterAmerican Dialogue (a policy center focusing on the Western

Hemisphere), immigrant remittances to Mexico, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Guatemala alone total \$8 billion annually.¹ Immigrants also send back social remittances—new ideas, behaviors, and values that subtly and not so subtly transform social and political life.

Clearly, what is meant by "community" has changed. Immigrants may live far from family and friends, but they occupy the same social and economic space. They're part of transnational



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Living in Two Worlds

communities. Organizations engaged in immigrant outreach can heighten their effectiveness by bringing an understanding of this larger context to their work. Immigrant poverty and its solutions are inextricably linked to homeland poverty and lack of development. They are two sides of the same coin.

Some community organizations have already caught on. For example, the Bhagat Samaj, a Hindu group from Gujarat state in India, not only supports cultural and

educational activities in Lowell, Massachusetts, but also has helped to build a school in the town many of its followers come from. And the most popular class there is English, which is intended to prepare future migrants to succeed in the United States.

Similarly, the Miraflores Development Committee, which has chapters in both Boston and Miraflores in the Dominican Republic, funded infrastructure and social service projects in the sending community. The committee

asked its nonmigrant members, who were supervising project implementation, to solicit community input, request bids, and submit budget reports. They were tasked with applying standards that they learned while working in Boston and improving the accountability and transparency of the final product. Both groups recognized that by strengthening the community back home, they were also helping people in the United States.

Challenging the Assumptions

The inextricable links between immigrants and their home communities call for revisiting past assumptions. We now know that assimilation is not a linear, irreversible journey. Instead, many immigrants craft dual loyalties that reinforce each other. Consider the recent study showing that immigrant business owners who were most integrated into life in the United States were also the most likely to conduct business across borders.² Another study found that the organizations promoting political participation in immigrants' homelands also promoted civic engagement in the United States.³ Thanks to a growing understanding of transnationalism, more regional organizations are supporting immigrants' efforts to help the folks back home—improving the health, education, and political and economic skills of people in the sending communities so that more of them can build a good life there and fewer feel a need to emigrate.

Synchronizing Policy and Practice

With transnationalism gaining recognition, nonprofits that work with immigrant communities in the United States are beginning to push for policies that mesh with the current realities. Several changes in attitudes and ways of working are needed.

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Rethinking Space

Public policy should reflect the actual social and physical spaces where people live. Since migrants' and nonmigrants' lives don't fit neatly within nation-state boxes, countries need to cooperate on policy.

Redefining Categories and Outcomes

People whose lives cross borders often deal with conflicting sets of ideas about race, gender, and class. Throughout South America and the Caribbean, for instance, race is conceptualized along a continuum of skin-color categories, whereas most U.S. demographic data just use the categories "White," "Black," and "Hispanic."⁴ In another example, success for an Indian or Pakistani family is often defined collectively. In the United States success is generally measured in terms of how much money one individual makes, but immigrants may opt to earn less rather than turn their back on their family and community.

Adjusting Institutional Arrangements

Although most public institutions are not set up to operate across borders, a few new strategies are promising.

- **Extending Sovereignty.** Some nation-states formally or informally allow other governments to act within their territory. For example, Mexico issues a *matricula consular*, an identity card to help Mexican migrants lacking U.S. Social Security cards to get driving licenses or open bank accounts. By 2004, about 100 cities, 900 police departments, 100 financial institutions, and 13 states had accepted the cards as proof of identity.
- **Fostering Partnerships.** Cooperative arrangements have emerged between education and health-care providers in both sending and receiving countries to encourage record sharing, reciprocal credentialing, and joint training programs. In one case, the Mali-France Framework Partnership Document spelled out strategies for co-development between Mali

and France. The document established a program allowing people who migrated to France from Mali to set up bank accounts in France that their relatives back home could draw upon to pay for health care.

- **Education Programs.** Cooperative arrangements between countries' educational institutions are emerging. Some are simple and informal like a Dominican Ministry of Education program that sends teaching materials to New York City's public school curriculum specialists, or the cultural orientation and exchange programs for high school teachers that take place each summer. Some are more complex, like an initiative at Cambridge College in Massachusetts that grants degrees valid in both the United States and Brazil.
- **Hometown Associations.** Home-town associations (located in the United States but focused on the sending community) have been at the forefront of transnational community development. Often they help migrants learn to represent their interests on both sides of the border. The Brazilian Consulate in Boston, for example, established monthly citizens councils where immigrants could air their concerns about the social and economic challenges they face. The councils ultimately helped community members become more organized and better able to negotiate with officials in both Brazil and the United States.

Tapping Religious Organizations

Religion is a powerful force for many migrants. Church groups often have considerable resources, including money, experienced leaders, organized membership, and well-greased communication channels. Such attributes make them powerful potential partners for U.S. community organizers, especially as religious communities are often linked into national and transnational networks. For New England community organizations, church groups are a bridge to new immigrant communities and offer

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partnership potential for building low-cost housing, lowering crime rates, and redeveloping neighborhoods.

Going Forward

Transnational problems need transnational solutions. One option for organizations in New England is to help build healthier, better educated, and economically viable sending communities, thereby alleviating the problems that cause people to migrate to begin with. Another is to encourage reciprocal credentialing so that the higher education and professional degrees that migrants bring to the United States are accepted here—allowing such workers to alleviate nursing, elder care, and teacher shortages and to sidestep downward mobility. A third is to create cheap, convenient, and reliable money-transferring institutions that don't siphon off migrants' hard-earned dollars with high fees. Ideally, such institutions would also bring immigrants and community organizations into the formal mortgage and banking systems of both the United States and home countries.

In short, people who live transnationally are the face of the future. In living their lives across borders, they teach us that homeland and host-country poverty are never far apart.

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Endnotes

¹Peggy Levitt, *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

²Alejandro Portes, Luis Eduardo Guarinizo, and William J. Haller, "Transnational Entrepreneurs: An Alternative Form of Immigrant Economic Adaptation," *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002): 278-298.

³Cristina Escobar, "Dual Citizenship and Political Participation: Migrants in the Interplay of United States and Colombian Politics," *Latino Studies* 2

(2004): 45-69.

⁴The U.S. Census added a mixed-race category in 2000.

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