Our Sad Neglect of Mexico

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Body

Whether you believe Mexican immigrants help or hurt the United States, there is one truth you have to accept: Work here pays much, much better. A low-skill Mexican worker earns five to six times as much in this country as back home, assuming he or she could find a comparable job there.

This truth is so obvious it seems a cliche and yet it remains mostly absent from the debate on how to reform U.S. immigration. For all the talk around the country of border enforcement, guest-worker programs, employer sanctions and driver's license restrictions, the ***sad*** fact is that none of these "solutions" addresses the root of the problem: a persistent and large income disparity between the United States and ***Mexico***.

Even the most comprehensive and progressive immigration reform proposal in years, introduced this month by Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), is more concerned with making U.S. immigration policy more humane than dealing with this income disparity. The bill crafts a guest-worker program -- creating new visa categories and quotas and a secure identification system for employers -- but provides only a vague indication that income disparity might be a problem or a responsibility to take on.

Why such reluctance? How can a proposal that purports to reduce the flow of illegal Mexican workers to the United States not take a stab at the root cause? Won't better conditions for immigrant workers here only be an invitation for more illegal migrants from ***Mexico***, as the argument goes, as long as wage disparity remains unaddressed?

To alter income disparity, it is obvious that ***Mexico*** must reduce its development gap and raise incomes. What is just as apparent is that Americans do not feel, at least at the moment, that they have a responsibility or even an interest in reducing that gap through investments of money and expertise. They don't feel the same obligation they once felt, say, after World War II for Europe, or that the European Union took on when it bolstered its poorest members. ***Mexico*** and the United States may share a 2,000-mile border, but their sense of a shared future runs about two inches deep.

There is a strong sense in this country that ***Mexico***'s problems are of its own making, and must be solved by ***Mexico***. That is why former Bush official Richard A. Falkenrath and others say a significant infusion of U.S. aid into ***Mexico*** is a "nonstarter." Indeed, ***Mexico*** desperately needs to collect more taxes and reform its energy sector and labor laws -- healing itself by removing structural constraints that make it more a Third World nation than the economic powerhouse it could become.

The North American Free Trade Agreement, signed more than 10 years ago by Canada, ***Mexico*** and the United States, was supposed to generate more jobs in ***Mexico***, raise salaries and reduce people's incentive to emigrate. That proved to be wishful thinking. In fact, NAFTA has not generated the number of new jobs predicted, nor has it alleviated rural poverty in many areas of ***Mexico***. That would require, according to an upcoming report on NAFTA by the Institute for International Economics, "a sustained period of strong growth and substantial income transfers to poorer states."

There are some in this country, a minority to be sure, who say Washington must get involved more directly. Otherwise, they argue, ***Mexico*** won't be able to reduce disparities for at least another hundred years. Among them is Robert Pastor, a former Carter administration official who has tirelessly argued for a North American Investment Fund. Pastor cites a 2000 World Bank estimate that ***Mexico*** would need $20 billion per year for a decade in essential infrastructure and educational projects to reduce that 100 years to 10.

Pastor is under no illusions that such a fund will be created any time soon. Certainly the Bush administration is not talking about any such ideas within the recently launched Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, the latest ambitiously named project that won't even touch on immigration, although immigration is directly connected to security and prosperity.

The administration and Congress are under little pressure to deepen the U.S. commitment to ***Mexico***, not when the public is increasingly fearful of and resentful toward immigrants, particularly Mexicans. But if anything, such sentiments prolong illegal immigration in the sense that they distract citizens and leaders alike into thinking that if you put up enough barriers, Mexicans will go away.

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