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A Shared Destiny

By Richard Kiy

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Monday, Sept. 29, 2008 | This week, as our elected officials hammered out the details on our country's \$700 billion bailout for the financial sector, I received an e-mail from an old friend, Isabelle, who was visiting Venice and came across the [U.S. Pavilion](#) of the Venice Architectural [11th Biennale Exhibition](#), which featured controversial imagery of the San Diego-Tijuana border fence by local architect Teddy Cruz.

For Isabelle, who resides on the East Coast and has never experienced the border fence up close, Cruz's imagery [was overpowering](#). Her email said it all: "It is shocking -- really horrible. Not sure what the country would think if they could see it."



For those of us who reside in the San Diego-Tijuana area and whose lives or professional work depend on crossing the border regularly, we know all too well how truly horrible the border has become. With the long delays at our ports of entry and growing public safety concerns, the divide between our two communities keeps growing.

As Robert Frost once penned, "good fences make good neighbors," but is this really so?

In spite of our own country's current budgetary challenges, work continues on the border fence, which according to the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, will cost more than \$49 billion in order to build and maintain a double set of steel fences along just 700 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border over the next 25 years.

This staggering cost is in stark contrast to the United States Agency for International Development's annual budgetary commitment for [development assistance](#) for the entire country of Mexico, which amounts to less than \$14 million, with \$2.5 million for children's health and survival (see page 55).

As the long-term implications of the current administration's bail-out plan, and the cost of our own "border fence to nowhere," begin to sink in, I wonder how much funding will remain to respond to the root causes of human migration along the San Diego-Tijuana border, namely poverty, health disparities, underdevelopment and lack of economic opportunity in Mexico's migrant sending regions, particularly in states such as Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán or Chiapas where the per capita income in some communities is as low as \$500 per year?

Given our government's budgetary constraints, in the years ahead our nation will need to

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seriously reconsider how best to achieve its goals. Will it be far more cost effective to provide seed funding for micro-credit programs in places like rural Oaxaca to keep would be migrants gainfully employed in their communities of origin rather than to plow more money into a border fence at nearly \$8 million a mile?

Instead of the marked 150 percent increase in Border Patrol's manpower to keep aspiring job seekers from coming in, wouldn't it be far more economical to partner with Mexico to support keeping children and youth in school? Interestingly, the cost of providing basic school supplies and uniforms through many Mexican education-serving nonprofits is less than \$350 for a secondary school student. But this out-of-pocket expense is more often than not a deal breaker for many Mexican families living on the economic margins.

It will be paramount for whomever wins the presidency to properly assess the cost-benefit tradeoff of building physical barriers versus expanding our investment in human capital. As it is becoming increasingly clear that the federal government will be unable to effectively solve our border area's issues and challenges alone, the need for an expanded bi-national civil society commitment in the San Diego-Tijuana border region is needed now more than ever before.

Some area residents may prefer to avoid thinking about the border and a growing number have simply stopped crossing altogether out of fear, but the fact remains, increasingly, that our border is becoming blurred.

The rise in drug-related violence and kidnapping in Tijuana now spills on to the streets of San Diego; Tijuana's never-ending sewage spills remain South County's headache and the ongoing public health challenges of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and diabetes in neighborhoods on both sides of the border are constant reminders that cross-border issues and challenges do not respect international boundaries.

Such cross-border issues are stark reminders that those of us who reside in the San Diego-Tijuana region have a shared destiny. We must do all that we can to minimize the ill effects of the physical barriers which increasingly divide our respective communities. Irrespective of our political views, cultural biases or ideologies, we're all in this together.

So much work remains to be done in the San Diego-Tijuana border region, but I remain heartened by the number of committed civic leaders and organizations, such as the San Diego Chamber's Mexico Business Center, the South Bay Economic Development Council and Otay Mesa Chamber of Commerce, that are stepping up to keep bi-national economic ties strong in spite of the challenges now faced on both sides of the border due to our sagging economy.

I also continue to be impressed by the steadfast commitment of so many area residents who, through their charitable giving and volunteerism to border area charities, are tirelessly working to offer proactive solutions to so many of our ongoing trans-boundary challenges by building school libraries, supporting after school programs and scholarships for children and youth and providing housing and expanding healthcare access in some of Tijuana's most economically marginalized communities.

Through these collective actions and acts of kindness and caring, I hope that forthcoming future visitors of Venice's architectural exhibition will come to view our bi-national region a little differently as one which has succeeded in transcending the physical barriers of the border fence to become a more humane and inclusive place to live.

Richard Kiy is president and CEO of National City, Ca. based [International Community Foundation](#) and U.S.-Co Chair of the [U.S.-Mexico Border Philanthropy Partnership](#). You can contact him at: rkiy@icfdn.org. Agree with him? Disagree? Submit a letter to the editor [here](#).

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