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# America's Immigrant Dream

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## America's Immigrant Dream

Elie Ngandu

I was born and spent the earliest years of my life in The Democratic Republic of Congo, in a typical Congolese middle-class family. My dad was a polytechnic engineer and my mom a business woman; they were and still are deeply preoccupied with my siblings' and my own success in life. They are convinced that succeeding educationally means succeeding in life; therefore, they have always put our education as the first priority. We had a decent life, never missed anything that we truly needed; we, my siblings and I, obviously had everything on our side to succeed in life. Unfortunately, the country did not have what we needed, almost no jobs, infrastructure, technology, and so on—long story short, no opportunity. Led by the hope of finding a better place for their kids' future, my parents decided to move to the U.S., leaving behind them everything they built and acquired in a lifetime, seeking a better tomorrow for their children. I appreciate my parents' willingness to leave the culture they knew, as the U.S. is a land full of opportunities to succeed for whoever is ready to work and work hard for them.

I believe in the American dream. Every year we see a lot of people, mostly from third world countries, coming to the U.S. trying to better their quality of life. Starting life over again, some of these people come in without any kind of documentation, not even a social security number, risking arrest and deportation. Legal or illegal, many come with very little, living in crowded conditions in rough neighborhoods. Yet many of those immigrants demonstrate an amazing ability to take advantage of the opportunities that the U.S. has to offer, taking even better advantage of them than many American-born citizens do. For instance, according to the Migration Policy Institute, in 2014 the median income of households headed by an Asian

immigrant was \$70,000, compared to \$55,000 for native-born households. Households headed by Indian (\$105,000), Taiwanese (\$91,000), Filipino (\$82,000), and Malaysian (\$80,000) immigrants had the highest median income among all Asian immigrant groups (Batalov). And according to Pew Research Center tabulations of the 2013 American Community Survey, foreign-born blacks have a higher median income than U.S.-born blacks. U.S.-born blacks have a median household income of \$33,500, a full \$10,000 less than that of foreign-born black households (Anderson). We can infer a lot from these numbers, and they bring up a lot of questions, as well, one of which might be: How come people who come from outside, with a different culture, different language, different mentality, can achieve this much while a lot of American-born are still struggling and stuck in poverty? It might be a matter of motivation, of feeling inspired by the new possibilities—of coming here with a desperate hunger to succeed. When moving to a new country, one might be more likely to work harder than in one's home country; maybe that's what poor Americans lack, the same internal drive, motivation, and sense of hopeful possibilities.

People of all backgrounds want to succeed in life and to see their children succeed. So if the opportunities in the U.S. are so fructifying to foreigners, one would assume they would be, also, to its citizens. No one wants to remain in poverty and struggle to make ends meet every week. But it is also obvious that not everybody wants it with the same fervor, which we can see by looking at how motivation varies among people, and when motivation varies, the way people work varies, as well. According to the Census Bureau, 40.6 million American were in poverty in 2016 (Semega). That means 40.6 million Americans in 2016 have not found a way to become financially self-sufficient. Who is to be held accountable: the government or those

people? I tend to think both. In the matter of poverty, the government tends to be more focused on the survival of the poor as of today than their survival in the long term. Handouts each month might be a good way to help the needy to get food and other necessities, but helping them to become self-sufficient (for instance, by improving schools in poor communities, offering more job training and job placement services) is a better goal.

However, we can't only blame the system: after all, there are people who have escaped poverty by just working harder. Michael J. Dowling, the president and Chief Executive Officer of Northwell Health, who grew up in poverty, said in an interview for The New York Times, "People like to play victim too much. And obviously circumstances influence you, but they should never hold you back from succeeding." Dowling also reported that his mom used to tell him, "Don't ever let your circumstance interfere with your potential or limit your potential. You have unlimited potential to be successful if you work hard enough and if you work with people in a caring way" (Bryant). Dowling, who grew up in Ireland, is one example of the common American immigrant experience of getting out of poverty and succeeding in life by working hard for it. More people need to get out of their comfort zone—which is not really that comfortable since they are poor—by trying to work harder, taking advantage of free libraries, valuing education.

Now, don't get me wrong. I understand that blaming historically oppressed Americans for not working as hard as immigrants in their own country and comparing Americans to immigrants from third world countries is not fair. There are many American poor who were born into poverty and never experienced living somewhere else to get that different perspective on what American society offers compared to less fortunate nations. Some of them

have been through awful things that have impacted their psychology, such as African Americans who underwent centuries of slavery and segregation, which still shapes their self-image and perception of the country. It has them looking at this country bitterly. Where I work, at Caterpillar Inc., I have heard a Nigerian coworker arguing with an African American about this: The Nigerian accuses African Americans of being lazy and not having any goals even though they are living in a country full of opportunity. Meanwhile, the African American argues that the country is full of racism and inequity and is set (by a history of oppression) in a way to hold back black people from succeeding. They are clearly living two different realities in the same country, and I have certainly become sympathetic to my African American co-worker's perspective.

I also understand that there are many millions of poor people who do work, people whom Katherine Newman, a Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at The University of Massachusetts, calls "the working poor." Newman says, "What fails to register in the national imagination is the fact that the vast majority of poor people do work for a living. They hold the jobs that no one else really wants" (Newman). As the size of the U.S. middle class decreases and more job openings are in minimum-wage and low-wage positions, many Americans find it impossible to afford a decent life; there are tens of millions of people in the U.S. who try desperately to live off low wages, without benefits—it doesn't make any sense in a country where there is so much wealth. We need to acknowledge the working poor and their everyday struggle; we need to find effective ways to help them out of poverty without making them dependent at the same time.

The government needs to create more efficient, beneficial programs and redesign existing welfare programs, so it can be for recovery and a path to get out poverty, not a trap.

"Any attempt to reform welfare must begin with the recognition that the current system has not resolved—rather seems to be perpetuating—poverty", said Dick Armev, an American economist and former congressman. People get on welfare—with hope that they will find a way to get back on track—because they simply can't afford the basic necessities of life by themselves; however, they then find themselves trapped in a circle of dependency that sometimes lasts generation after generation. Armev also states, "Welfare reform must begin with the realization that most programs designed to alleviate 'material poverty' generally lead to an increase in 'behavioral' poverty. While the poor were supposed to be the beneficiaries of the War on Poverty, they instead have become its victims" (Armev). The goal should not be to provide for the needy as long as we can, but instead to get them back on the job with good pay as soon as we can. It is true that in a free market society, government can't directly create more good-paying jobs, but it can design policies that attract investors to create jobs, especially in poor neighborhoods, which the Economic Innovation Group calls "distressed communities." At very least, a combination of innovative policies by government and the development of a mindset guided by optimism and hard work (rather than victimhood) can help many Americans see the country more like immigrants do—as a land of opportunity.

We cannot ignore the fact that despite tough circumstances, some people still find their way out of poverty, which means there are still possibilities and opportunities. Although the government needs to make improved efforts, people also have to work harder. According to estimates by Credit Suisse in its 2016 Global Wealth Databook, the U.S. alone claims 13.6 million adults with a net worth above \$1 million — that's 41% of all the world's millionaires and more than the next eight countries combined (Global Wealth). This says it all: if this many

people can get this much wealth in this country, it's because the U.S. is set in a way that makes it possible. This statistic may cause a lot of American-born citizens to feel a sense of defeat and despair, because they feel hopeless about the chances of success compared to those who live in wealthy neighborhoods, with great schools in their communities. This hopelessness can cause many to be educationally detached and unmotivated. But to immigrants, these statistics enhance the idea of the U.S. being a land of opportunity; thus, they make sure their children excel in school, as they want them to be part of the America they picture.

I hope people will find a way to overcome the awful things that this country has been built on and appreciate the country that it has always claimed to be and that it now is, fortunately, becoming, thereby taking advantage of everything this nation has to give.