

# Where Do We Go From Here? How Do Communities Develop Intellectual Capital and Sustainability?

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**A** key discussion in the United States in the new millennium centers on community. Urban areas have not had a good model for community. Rural areas are losing population and the sense of community they have always had. In fact, the only community that many rural areas have anymore is the local school district. As the student count shrinks and conversations about consolidation begin, many communities vigorously resist that effort because intuitively they understand the need for community.

For the purposes of this article, the definition of community will be the one used by Carl Taylor and Daniel Taylor-Ide in the book *Just and Lasting Change: When Communities Own Their Futures*. They write: "Community, as we use the term, is any group that has something in common and the potential for acting together" (p. 19).

Taylor and Taylor-Ide have been involved with community development for many years around the world. "*The key to building better lives,*" they state, "is not technical breakthroughs but *changing behavior at the community level ... in ways that fit local circumstances ...* Playing an essential role in these processes are the formation and maintenance of a genuine three-way partnership among people in the community, experts from the outside, and government officials" (pp. 17-18).

Community development is becoming more imperative because of the relationship between the intellectual capital in the community and its economic well-being.

## What is intellectual capital?

Thomas Stewart, in his book *Intellectual Capital: The New Wealth of Organizations*, defines it as the "intangible assets – the talents of its people, the efficacy of its management systems, the character of its relationships to its customers ..." It is the ability to take existing information and turn it into useful knowledge and tools.

Intellectual capital has become the economic currency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the 1900s the economic currency was industry-based. In the 1800s it was agriculture-based. One of the issues for many communities is the loss of jobs related to industry and agriculture. Wealth creation is now linked to intellectual capital.

## What is the relationship between economic well-being and the development of capital?

Right now in the world and in the United States there is a direct correlation between the level of educational attainment in a community or country and its economic wealth. In the book *As the Future Catches You*, Juan Enriquez gives the following statistic: In 1980 the differential between the

richest and poorest country in the world was 5:1 as measured by gross national product (GNP). In 2001 the differential between the richest and the poorest country in the world was 390:1 as measured by GNP. GNP is directly linked to the level of educational attainment. So growth is not incremental; it is exponential.

For the future well-being of communities, it becomes necessary to begin the serious and deliberate development of intellectual capital. This is easier said than done.

## How do communities develop intellectual capital? How do you translate between the poor and the policymakers/powerbrokers?

Systems tend to operate out of default and are amoral. Systems are only as moral as the people who are in them. One of the big issues is how different economic groups translate the issues. For a group to work together, there must be a shared understanding and vocabulary. What is a huge issue to an individual in poverty often doesn't translate as an issue in wealth. The policymakers/powerbrokers tend to be at the wealth level, while the bureaucrats are at the middle-class level. In the book *Seeing Systems*, Barry Oshry talks about the difficulty the three levels have in communicating with each other.





What the endowment does is ensure that for 25 years the ensuing process is followed, data are collected, and three groups are always involved: people in the community, outside experts, and government officials.

The process I recommend takes a minimum of 20 years and follows these steps:

### Step One:

A community group gets together. The members of the group identify what their ideal community would be like 20 years hence. They identify six or seven issues (using the sustainability index as a guide) that would most enhance their community.

### Step Two:

The group identifies the key markers for each issue that would indicate progress toward that ideal.

### Step Three:

The group identifies the current status of those indicators by gathering “real” community data.

### Step Four:

The group works backward and identifies what the marker would look like 18 years from the goal, 16 years from the goal, etc. Measurements for the markers are established.

### Step Five:

The group goes to the larger community (including government officials) and asks all agencies, foundations, charities, churches, businesses, etc. which, if any, of the markers they are currently working on or would be willing to help address. The larger community agrees to gather data and report those data once a year.

### Step Six:

The individuals overseeing the endowment gather the data, put them into a report, and once a year gather all the larger community for a break-

fast and report the data. The leadership persons make suggested recommendations for external expert assistance. The larger community commits for another year to the larger goals and collection of data.

### Step Six is repeated every year.

It will take 10 to 12 years before much progress at all is seen. Then the progress will become noticeable. Within 20 years the progress will be dramatic.

### Why use this process?

In the history of community development, one of four approaches tends to be used: blueprint, explosion, additive, or biological (Taylor and Taylor-Ide). The biological approach is one of tensegrity. “Tensegrity is the biological form of building,” say the authors. “It works by balancing systems in flexible homeostasis rather than by building in a mechanical way that attaches its components rigidly” (p. 58). According to Taylor and Taylor-Ide, tensegrity has these characteristics:

- ◆ It allows forms to move and reshape.
- ◆ It uses self-assembly in locally specific patterns.
- ◆ The whole is different from the member parts.
- ◆ It has information feedback.
- ◆ It has an efficient distribution and redistribution system.
- ◆ It brings accountability; when one part is irresponsible, the whole system is out of balance.

### What can you do to get individuals from poverty involved in community issues?

1. Understand the nature of systems. What appeals to the decision-makers and powerbrokers doesn't have the same appeal in poverty and vice versa.
2. Work on real issues – issues that impact day-to-day life.

3. Approach the poor as problem-solvers, not victims.
4. Teach the adult voice.
5. Teach question making.
6. Teach “backward” planning (“begin with the end in mind”).
7. Start the process by building relationships of mutual respect, using videos, food, and entertainment; identify the powerbrokers in the poor community (corner grocers, hairdressers, barbers, ministers, etc.) and bring them into the process.
8. Pay them for their time (e.g., with inexpensive gift cards).
9. Let them bring their children.
10. Identify common tasks so that conversation can occur.
11. Provide constructive outlets for frustration and criticism.
12. Use mental models to help identify, with a minimum of emotion, the areas of needed change.
13. *Gather real data.*

### Why would a community consider such an endowed process?

Quoting Taylor and Taylor-Ide, “For rich and poor alike, the expansion of trade, changes in the earth's environment, and the unraveling of social systems make the future uncertain. Even wealthy societies are increasingly unable to care for their growing numbers of poor, alienated youth, forgotten elderly, marginalized mothers, hostile homeless, and exploited minorities ... To achieve a more just and lasting future, we must continually update our definition of development. We can advance more confidently and effectively into that unknown territory by drawing lessons from past successes – and from past failures – and by tailoring solutions for each community to its specific hopes, capabilities, and resources” (p. 30).

In short, community development – based on intellectual capital – is not a choice. Our sustainability, even survival, depends on it.

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**Editor's note: Ruby K. Payne** presents *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, a two-day workshop, on her U.S. National Tour each year and has also produced accompanying materials. Both are available on her website, [www.ahaprocess.com](http://www.ahaprocess.com). Also opt-in to **aha!**'s e-mail newsletter for the latest poverty and income statistics [free] and other updates.

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