



THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER JOHN IKERD

The need for radical changes in community development policies

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This is the final installment in a series of Economic Pamphleteer columns advocating radical changes in government policies. Previous columns have made the case for changing policies that affect farming and food production. This column focuses on additional policy changes needed to revitalize communities—both rural and urban. When I began writing this series, it seemed as if the current political turmoil had created an opportunity for changes that would not have been possible earlier. With growing cultural division and social dissent, it appears we are nearing a time

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when radical changes in government policies will no longer be optional but necessary. Anything less may be too little, too late.

I concluded my previous columns with policy proposals to empower people to create more sustainable agri-food systems locally, within their communities. People in like-minded food communities could then form networks to create bio-regional, national, and global sustainable food systems. Over the years, I have become convinced that community-based food networks are the key to creating sustainable food systems. I believe the same is true for economies and societies. Authentic sustainability begins with committed individuals

Why an Economic Pamphleteer? In his historic pamphlet *Common Sense*, written in 1775–1776, Thomas Paine wrote of the necessity of people to form governments to moderate their individual self-interest. In our government today, the pursuit of economic self-interest reigns supreme. Rural America has been recolonized, economically, by corporate industrial agriculture. I hope my “pamphlets” will help awaken Americans to a new revolution—to create a sustainable agri-food economy, revitalize rural communities, and reclaim our democracy. The collected Economic Pamphleteer columns (2010–2017) are available at <https://bit.ly/ikerd-collection>

but grows within and among caring communities. Government policies can not create sustainable communities, but radical changes in community development policies could replace current obstacles with opportunities.

Federal community development programs are currently administered through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Department of the Treasury. Each agency provides funding, primarily through grants, for specific services and purposes such as affordable housing and healthcare, safe drinking water, wastewater treatment, low-cost business loans, assistance for low-income households, and incentives for economic development. The states also provide funds for community development purposes, including economic development and assistance for low-income households.

Each of these government programs involves complex application processes, and commitments to specific quantifiable goals, benchmarks, and deliverables—and once funded, detailed monitoring and reporting on progress and accomplishments. In addition, service- and purpose-specific development initiatives have limited potential unless they are integrated into comprehensive, long-term community development strategies (Amadei, 2020) and are planned and implemented in collaboration with the community members they are to serve (World Bank Group, 2012). Thus, communities must attempt to fit their individually funded projects into overall community development strategies, with no assurance that funding will continue once specific grants and contracts are completed.

Community development practitioners consistently stress the difficulty in solving specific problems, such as hunger, homelessness, and pollution, without addressing related problems and constraints in the cultural, political, and economic environment. They express frustration with current government programs that fail to appreciate this interconnectedness.

For example, a recent issue of this journal featured articles related to community-based circular food systems (C-B CFS) (Hilchey, 2025).

The editorial team for the issue wrote,

The articles and commentaries in this special issue reflect a collective shared insight: circularity is not only a technical fix, but a practice deeply embedded in social relationships, political processes, and cultural norms. The special issue also reveals important tensions and limitations facing global C-B CFS efforts, marked by patchwork funding, policy inconsistency, structural inequalities, and limited recognition in planning frameworks.” (Alonso Martínez et al., 2025, p. 5)

As Food Lifeline in Seattle, Washington, USA, a foodbank affiliate of Feeding America, explains,

Food Justice is a holistic and structural view of our food systems that sees healthy food as a basic human right and addresses the structural barriers that obstruct this right. These structural barriers include poverty, racial inequity, and social injustice. Food Lifeline believes these are the ‘root causes’ of hunger” (Food Lifeline, n.d., para. 1–2). It goes on to say, “We believe that people who have experienced or are currently living with food insecurity are truly experts in what it takes to solve hunger. Yet food assistance programs are often created without the input of those with lived experience. (Food Lifeline, n.d., para. 5)

The international organization Community Solutions is funded by the MacArthur Foundation to eliminate homelessness. Its programs treat homelessness as a community problem, and it notes that “research further reminds us that while government departments and local systems often operate within isolated silos, addressing homelessness is not the sole responsibility of any single agency. It necessitates community-wide systems change” (Chimowitz & Ruege, 2023, “Conclusion,” para. 1). The organization prioritizes housing but stresses that “providing a continuum of supportive, medical, and social services ... can not only improve the livelihoods and wellbeing of individuals and families, but also alleviate strains on public budgets over the long term” (“Conclusion,” para. 2).

Vital Communities is an example of a network of communities working together to address the challenges of sustainable community development. The organization was established in 1993 to serve the Upper Valley on the Connecticut River in the U.S. Northeast, which encompasses 69 cities, towns, and districts, including Norwich and Hartford in Vermont, and Hanover and West Lebanon in New Hampshire. As it notes on its website,

The Upper Valley of the Connecticut River is made up of thousands of visible and invisible networks of people working together: launching businesses, growing food, creating art, making homes, teaching, healing, caring for the environment, and running the governments. ... Vital Communities works to build a thriving Upper Valley by focusing on the biggest issues facing our region including housing, transportation, climate disruption, and access to nourishing food and a resilient local economy. (Vital Communities, n.d., para. 1–2)

Current government programs support specific purposes that communities must integrate into comprehensive development strategies to further their purposes. After the federal government's recent withholding of funds, cancelling of contracts, and cutting budgets for climate change mitigation and other environmental and social programs, there seems to be little hope for significant, dependable, long-term government support for any specific aspect of community development.

So, what does this suggest about changes in government programs? I believe there is widespread public support for community development as a generic concept or ideal. However, the various programs that affect communities are so fragmented that it is difficult to translate public support for communities into political support for specific government policies. Also, there are

political disagreements over development priorities, such as economic development versus climate change mitigation, or economic development versus sustainable development. With public support—or, preferably, public demand—politicians might be willing, and perhaps relieved, to devolve or shift primary responsibilities for community development priorities and programs from federal and state levels to the community level.

As I have suggested previously, federal programs might function more effectively if all community development programs currently administered through HUD, USDA, HSS, and other departments were consolidated under a new Department of Community Development. Regardless, Congress could mandate that local

communities be allowed to determine their own priorities and programs, as long as they serve the public interests. Current government grants that currently support specific purposes, such as affordable housing and poverty alleviation, could be bundled into generic block grants to support community development. Cities, towns, villages, or counties could then use these funds in any way they choose to support their community development strategies.

State, federal, and local government funds currently appropriated for purposes such as food assistance, housing, healthcare, energy, education, and transportation could then be used more effectively and efficiently, as individual programs would be integrated into comprehensive community development systems. This would allow people within local communities to use government funds to meet their unique needs and preferences. The role of government agencies would be limited to ensuring that funds are used to serve the public interest, rather than being diverted to private interests. Within these bounds, communities could determine their own programs and priorities.

Some communities would likely prioritize economic development, but priorities would be

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determined locally rather than statewide or nationally. Other communities would be empowered to pursue sustainable community development—ecologically, socially, and economically. In communities that prioritize sustainable development, businesses may need to sacrifice some short-term economic benefits to ensure long-term ecological and social sustainability. Community members might need to modify their lifestyles to accommodate local businesses. They might also need to devote more time and energy to building personal relationships and protecting the environment. However, those making the changes would reap the benefits. The changes would improve their individual quality of life as well as the overall quality of life in their communities.

It might be easier to gain the necessary consensus regarding program priorities if the boundaries of communities for government funding purposes were not restricted to those of existing state and local governments. Perhaps the new legal entities could be established as comprehensive community-development districts. The legal structure of these districts would be similar to that of current Economic Development Districts (EDDs) (U.S. Economic Development Agency, n.d.) or Community Development Districts (CDD) (Keating, 2014), but their purpose and programs would be more comprehensive. For example, CDDs are typically established for specific residential developments to finance infrastructure, amenities, or specific services. EDDs focus on economic development rather than comprehensive community development.

Development communities would need to be large enough to allow for some economies of scale in carrying out their functions, but small enough to maintain the sense of interconnectedness and common interest essential for effective self-governance. Communities might develop their own wind or solar farms to provide sustainable energy. They might own their own bank or credit union, where

community members' deposits would provide reserves for development loans to local businesses to produce goods and services to meet community members' needs. These local lenders would have the legal authority to loan far more money than they hold in reserves, essentially creating new money for the specific purpose of supporting community economic initiatives.

Some essential community functions might need to be carried out directly by the community. For example, communities could own and operate their own processing facilities, grocery stores, and restaurants to ensure access to nutritious foods for those most in need. Communities might also construct local neighborhoods of energy-efficient housing units, designed to foster positive community relationships, and made available to residents at affordable rental rates. In such instances, the

emphasis would be as much on building communities to care for public-owned facilities as on building the facilities. Flexibility in federal, state, and local funding would allow the local experts—the people in local communities—to decide how best to use the funds appropriately to support the development of their communities.

There is no guarantee that the people within communities will make the best decisions for their future. But as long as local

decisions do not impose economic, social, or ecological costs on the world around them, there is no better guide to how people should live together than communities of people making decisions collectively, for themselves. There is no best strategy for community development or best set of government policies because every community has different needs and preferences.

The world changes only when people either change their communities or allow their communities to be changed for them. Community development policies of the past have not worked and are unlikely to work in the future because they impose development programs on communities rather than help communities develop themselves. The

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result has been community degradation and societal disintegration rather than community development. There are no guarantees of success, but as thoughtfully argued by Margaret Wheatley (2011),

“The world changes as local communities become self-determining” (p. 3). It’s time to radically change community development policy, before it is too late.

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