

Grand Challenge #2: Community and Economic Development: Where to Begin?

Despite the steady, albeit slow, growth in the U.S. economy in recent years, millions of Americans and thousands of communities continue to experience chronic poverty. In 2015, there were 43.1 million people living in poverty, including about 15 million children in the United States—21% of all children.¹ It is clear that economic opportunity has not been accessible to all Americans and there continues to be deep pockets of persistent poverty throughout the country. The insidious nature of poverty undermines an individual's self-esteem and aspirations, the family's unity and stability, and a community's power and purpose. It is associated with food insecurity, poor health outcomes, substandard housing, poor educational outcomes, civic disengagement, failing community institutions, and much more.

Communities, many rural, are facing outmigration and dwindling economic bases as a stream of young people move away seeking better paying jobs. Schools close, businesses fail and rural communities discuss cutting services and consolidating school districts and county/city governments. Urban communities face varied challenges associated with urban core decay or gentrification, crumbling infrastructure, environmental health issues (e.g., Flint water crisis), crime and law enforcement, and more. Even the definition of community has become fluid as the needs and priorities of *communities of place* mix with the *communities of interest* that are fueled by social media.

Land-grant universities are uniquely positioned to help build the human and community capacity needed to fight poverty. Extension can provide expertise and resources that help individuals, families and communities understand the context of poverty, increase necessary knowledge and skills, strengthen local institutions, and empower communities to define their own pathways to economic security.² Public universities can lift students and their families out of poverty in a single generation by providing access to higher education and the rewarding careers that a college degree affords.³ Research can drive innovation in technologies and applications that can increase local economic activity, shed light on socio-economic barriers to job and business creation, and help quantify the economic impact of various development approaches.

Some models of collaboration on economic and community development exist within the land-grant system. For example the regional Rural Development Centers (Western, Southern, North-Central and Northeast) work with USDA NIFA and their region's land-grant institutions to develop and support innovative extension programming on multi-state and regional levels. Professional organizations such as the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) help community development practitioners network, share best practices and leverage resources. Yet, the need is great and varied, much work remains, and the response of the land-grant system has generally been uneven and uncoordinated.

How will the land-grant system respond to this challenge?

¹ National Center for Children in Poverty. nd.

² Weber, Bruce A. 1987. Extension's Roles in Economic Development. *Journal of Extension*, 25(1).

³ Leonhardt, David. January 18, 2017. "America's Great Working-Class Colleges." *New York Times*.