



Kiss Me: I'm the Nonprofit Economy

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Community Building in Hawai'i

By Bob Agres

President George W. Bush announced the dream of an “ownership society” in his 2005 inaugural address—a society in which all citizens are able to find the “dignity and security of economic independence, instead of laboring on the edge of subsistence” and are given “a stake in the promise and future of our country” through the widening of opportunities for ownership of homes and businesses, retirement savings, health insurance,” and so on. This dream, however, flies in the face of statistics that tell us that:

The wealthiest 20% of American families hold more than 83% of the nation’s household wealth, while the bottom 60% hold less than 5% (Wolff 2001); and

In 2003, federal tax expenditures totaling \$335 billion subsidized family savings and investments, with a third of those benefits going to the wealthiest 1% of Americans while less than 5% of the benefits went to the bottom 60% of taxpayers (Corporation for Enterprise Development 2005).

The Call

Alperovitz’s call for a “community building ownership society” through “wealth-oriented strategies” that truly accrue assets and benefits for all in the community is, therefore, timely. It adds to the growing voice for a more equitable and just definition of an “ownership society”—one that truly works to strengthen community.

His sobering analysis of factors that have fomented over time to cause the current shift in power to the right—changes in the power of organized labor, the South, and corporations due to globalization—speaks to how deep-seated these factors are and the scale of change in attitudes, mind-sets, and choices that will be required to reclaim our wealth, liberty, and democracy.

The Challenges of Race and Class

Issues of race and class are important in this conversation. Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro’s *Black Wealth/White Wealth* argues that exclusion of poor people—and African Americans in particular—from benefits of publicly sponsored asset building opportunities has resulted in the “sedimentation of racial inequality.” They demonstrate how the legacy of discrimination in asset-building policies explains wealth disparities between blacks and whites. In *The Hidden Cost of*

Being African American—How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality, Shapiro continues with further evidence of the persistent and significant racial wealth gap even between blacks and whites with similar levels of education, income, and job status.

Yet, despite evidence to the contrary, we continue to believe in the American dream that anyone can make it in our society. But access to opportunities for building assets and wealth for all will continue to be an illusion as long as we do not attend to the structural ownership and control questions that underlie system-wide and long-standing inequities based on race, class, and culture.

Renewal of Commonwealth

Many Americans struggle with the conflict between a fiercely individualistic approach to ownership and an aspiration for common well being. This contradiction is too often resolved toward ownership, which lacks any implied obligations to community. The nonprofit sector, however, is established to benefit the common good and ensure that we remain balanced. The individual ownership model is not immutable, nor does it stand alone as the only cultural model in the country.

We are working toward developing an asset policy agenda for Hawai'i that takes into consideration the native Hawaiian perspective of wealth. The native Hawaiian concept of wealth is *waiwai*, or literally, “water water.” In old Hawai'i, it was everyone's *kuleana* or “responsibility” to *malama i ka wai* or “to take care of the water” because, of course, water affects everyone's livelihood.

On the island of Moloka'i, Ke Aupuni Lokahi and Moloka'i Ranch are working to establish a community land trust to protect the land and significant cultural sites, and ensure access to traditional gathering areas. They are also establishing a community development corporation to address affordable housing, social, and economic issues. The initiative involves more than 50,000 acres to be controlled by the community either through ownership or easements plus significant resources and revenue-generating opportunities.

These plans are breathtaking, but to develop an inclusive process to establish these community-controlled structures, these folks understand that they have to construct processes for community healing. They are building capacity to enable allow members of the community to collectively conduct the rigorous analysis necessary to enable them to come to their own conclusions, carry out personal and community soul searching, and wrestle with their own values and principles to figure out how much they are willing to “give” on their long-held beliefs in order to make what appears to be a huge opportunity real.

Hawai'i County (island of Hawai'i) wants to use a wealth creation framework to conduct their community development plan process as part of their general planning. They want it to be inclusive, community driven, and action oriented, protecting community, cultural, and environmental concerns while shielding individual private rights. This is a huge opportunity, but fraught with challenges in balancing community capacity and leadership with technical expertise and guidance that can assist community members in making their own informed decisions.

To move forward with an integrated to scale strategy, there are some barriers and that need to be addressed:

To address issues of scale and impact, we need to develop a more integrated and systems approach to the use of common wealth-building strategies and structures (CDFIs, CDCs, land trusts, cooperatives) among community building, community development, and economic development organizations. More integrated regional approaches will allow local efforts to address issues surrounding globalization. The values base that underwrites co-ownership strategies is also critically important. CDCs, cooperatives, CDFIs, and community land trusts are usually intended to be wealth-building structures *and* democratic organizations. Without a strong values base that informs structure could even be counterproductive.

We also need to address the scale. Do we mean these efforts to be experiments from which we will learn to transform the existing system, or will the results of our work be a parallel system, or will it be perceived as a small complement to the existing system? A more deliberate understanding of our intention for these structures will provide clarity around what changes in research and action and public messaging need to be pursued.

To move toward an ownership society that is equitable, just, and culturally relevant, we will need to act on several fronts—shaping and moving asset policy, ensuring informed practice at the community level, and shifting resource investments to new approaches that build individual and community wealth. This is our work.

About the Author

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