

Poverty, Prosperity, and National Security

By Nancy L. Polend

February 2, 2006

Maybe you care about poverty in this country, maybe you don't. Maybe you care about our nation's economic prosperity, maybe you don't. But I'm sure you care, at least a little bit, about national security. I care about all of them and how they connect. As a nation, I believe that we need to make this connection for our own collective good. To begin, allow me to jumpstart your thinking about how one issue affects another because, frankly, I believe our nation, and, perhaps, our humanity, depend upon coming together to change the foundation of the equation—poverty. I hope this notion will be the spark that helps us, as a society, recognize that it's in *all* of our best interests to begin working on poverty, not just for people who live in poverty, but also for the rest of us. I fear that it will uncover an indifference to poverty that will ultimately cost each of us our prosperity and security. I hope these ideas will initiate action. I fear that they won't.

As delusional as it may sound, I know of a way to bring us together to create a nation with prosperity and security for *all*. You know, as in the founding principles of this nation. I'm no economist or sociologist, but I know that if more people contribute to the economy as healthy, vibrant producers and consumers, we all do better and are more prosperous than if fewer people contribute. And I know that when there is prosperity, security follows. I also know this at a personal level: I feel more secure when I'm prosperous than when I'm not, don't you? If we stop and think about that for a minute, we find that it is true at *every* level of society. Simplistic perhaps; economists and sociologists can fill in the details. I want to point out some things you may not be aware of—current trends and how we've dealt with poverty so far—to get us thinking more broadly. And then, I'd like to propose a specific whole-system strategy that may actually get us all working in the same direction as a nation, for the same purpose, for the common good. Consider this strategy as an alternative to what *hasn't* worked.

Don't get me wrong, I don't believe I have "the answer" to poverty, prosperity, or national security nor do I believe *anyone* does—each issue is far too complex. Just watch the news; if someone knew the answer, we'd be seeing quite a different picture. What I *do* know is a workable way to find the answer—an "answer-to-the-answer," so to speak. You see, the answers ARE out there. Somewhere in the brilliance of our innovative and "can-do" collective mind, we have an answer to poverty, prosperity, and national security, but we haven't yet approached it in any unified way. Sure, we've made progress, but honestly, things are not working particularly well in any of these areas at the moment, and there's an ever-present sense of impending doom in each of them. Like waiting for an approaching horror scene in a movie; we all seem to hear the music signaling that something scary is about to happen, but we don't know what to do about it. As we continue to watch the movie, we realize that the plot has thickened. In the poverty plot, we see that we have created a booming service economy that we all know and love, especially when we're the ones getting the service. The plot thickens more and the scary music starts. We realize that many workers who keep our service

economy running don't make enough money to support their families and can't take advantage of the very services they provide. This scares us because we've built this country on the belief that hard work brings the American Dream, and the reality associated with the scary music threatens this belief. The prosperity plot also thickens because it's interdependent with the poverty plot. They are scenes in the same movie—produced, directed, and filmed by the same society. In this plot, we see that the economy is interdependent—every segment of society has a role in the health of the economy.

The scary music becomes more intense when we see that the economy is being divided into two ever-distant halves, or, more accurately, two “haves”—the “haves” and “have-nots.” The have-nots work hard, but can't support their families, let alone go out in the marketplace and spend, spend, spend, to support our economy. The music in this scene is almost deafening and when I hit the pause button to take a break from the volume, I wonder how willing we are as a nation to allow the gap between rich and poor to grow until it breaks down the entire economic engine. After all, it can only run on two cylinders at a high r.p.m. for a limited time. If we allow that to happen, you don't need me to tell you what that would do to national security. Just look at the international examples of how secure nations are when only two ends of the financial spectrum interact. But, I'm not here to paint a picture of doom and gloom. On the contrary, as I said, the answers ARE out there and there is a way to find them. Let's back up a minute and let me tell you what you're in for, should you choose to continue reading.

You've probably figured out that this is a no-nonsense, practical kind of article. There aren't many statistics, and I can guarantee there won't be any five-syllable words you will need to look up in the dictionary. I will attempt to be brutally honest with you. I believe it's time to get real as a nation about poverty. In my travels as a leader of a large poverty project and as a regular gal, I have been exposed to some of the best thinking on the issues of poverty and prosperity. I'm thankful that some of it sunk in. What made it through my personal sorting process congealed with my own observations into a complete storyline, which I am now desperately trying to put into words. Researchers, I ask for your indulgence and encourage you, mentally, to refer to statistical studies that support what's here. To everyone else, simply refer to your own experiences and common sense. After all, that's all I'm doing.

In the spirit of honest disclosure, I'll also confess that I'm no expert on poverty. I'm not a researcher, sociologist, or politician, and I haven't written any books. I did, however, lead a project to develop new ways to think about and address poverty that initiated me into those circles and pointed me to what I now consider my life's work. I'm not politically active; I've not yet lived in poverty (though I have close relatives who have, despite a life of hard work), nor have I lived in luxury. I am the daughter of an auto mechanic and a secretary; “normal folks,” you might say. I'm not an advocate for the poor, nor am I an advocate for the rich. I'm more of an advocate for *life*, of human beings, of potential, of all of us. I'm writing this not because I have a political agenda to promote or a book to sell, but because I care about our individual and collective well-being. I believe we can do better, and I want to invite you to a specific, collective process that will help us develop “the answer” together.

I'm focusing on the poverty part of the Poverty, Prosperity, and National Security Equation because it's not usually the first thing people think about when they think of national prosperity and security, and I think it needs to be a part of the conversation. I don't need to tell you that we see lots of action in the news about prosperity and security, but not a whole lot about poverty. You already know that. As we saw during and after the Hurricane Katrina disaster, it takes an "act of God" to get us talking about poverty (and then mainly to assign blame). But change the interest rate .01% or intercept a lost Piper Cub whose wing touched forbidden airspace and we are sent into a veritable frenzy. Even if you're not all that interested in poverty, I hope you'll read on to explore some things about poverty and its connections to things you ARE interested in. Otherwise, I'm doing all this thinking and writing to preach to the choir. What would be the point in that?

Speaking of the choir, I'm not saying that we haven't paid any attention to poverty. On the contrary, there are thousands of people and organizations that dedicate themselves to addressing poverty in a myriad of ways. In fact, a lot is happening in each of the three areas I'm trying to help us connect. The poverty folks work mainly in the background and are some of the hardest working, most dedicated folks you'll ever meet. My own small contribution so far pales in comparison to what I know people are doing out there and have been doing most of their lives. The government, along with foundations and private funders, invests hundreds of billions of dollars annually on anti-poverty programs. Community and economic development folks create incredibly innovative solutions one community at a time, often on shoestring budgets with too few staff. Researchers and scholars have done tremendous work to help us understand the complex, dynamic, and systemic nature of the problem. Economists help us understand the interdependencies in our economic system and can show us what poverty costs us as a nation, at least in terms of dollars. I know less about the specific work of the national security folks. I know that we, the general public, are pretty focused on their work, and that they are also very dedicated. These are all good things.

So, I'm not saying we're just sitting around doing nothing, and I'm not saying we haven't made progress. All I'm saying is that we haven't put the kind of *unified* attention to the poverty part of the equation that would help us get the return on investment that we're looking for. I don't know how much the country invests in developing the economy or on national security, but I know that the federal government alone invests over \$400 billion (yes, billion, with a "b") a year on anti-poverty programs. Foundations and faith-based organizations, among others, also invest significant amounts. The question is: are we getting an acceptable return on that investment? The programs funded by these investments have helped get more people working than ever before. The problem is that they are still poor. In other words, they do a good job helping the extremely poor become slightly less poor. I find that the national trend of working and still not being able to support your family makes it hard to continue saying, with a straight face, that "the American Dream is possible with hard work."

As for the prosperity and security parts of the equation, I believe that coming together about poverty in ways that allow the massive space of our common ground and interests to emerge will be a *huge* "leverage factor" for getting returns on our prosperity

and national security investments. I'm not saying we need to invest more money in our anti-poverty efforts. I'm saying we need invest more systemic and unified *energy* on it—the kind of energy that produces shared meaning to motivate people from every sector of society to action and that melds individual effort into collective action. This is not a radical concept; we do it all the time. Times of disaster come to mind quickly, but we've come together systemically—despite our individual differences—on a whole host of large and small social issues that have benefited us all in some way (e.g., drunk driving, seatbelt use, smoking, obesity, discrimination, teenage pregnancy, and neighborhood watch groups). Yet, we haven't put that amount of systemic energy into reducing poverty. For that matter, we don't even have a national policy to reduce poverty, so it's not at all surprising that we aren't focused on it as a nation. We have allowed its complexity and our differing views about whose responsibility it is to keep us from finding our common ground and interests that would lead to a solution.

Rather than applying a systemic approach to a systemic issue, we've pretty much put the onus of responsibility on the federal government *or* on the individual living in poverty (e.g., "Let us do it for you!" and "Do it yourself; pull yourself up by your bootstraps."). I don't know about you, but that doesn't seem too systemic to me. We have trouble going beyond the two ends of the continuum of responsibility to see the truth sitting right there in the middle. Every sector of society has *some* responsibility. If drunk driving or the health risks of smoking had been approached in the same two-pronged, simplistic way, we'd still be paying the price—in human lives and in medical costs—just as we all still pay the price for poverty. If only we would look away from our electronic gizmos (often manufactured by workers who can't afford to buy them) long enough to see! Because we have toggled our focus between the two ends of the continuum—changing the behavior of the government on one end and the behavior of the individual on the other for ensuring individual opportunity and self-sufficiency, we have not placed equal focus on behavioral change for other parts of the system, which fall all along the continuum of responsibility.

Despite the fact that every part of the system engages in some type of behavior that hinders the ability of individuals, families, communities, and society to thrive, we haven't looked very hard to identify those behaviors or to change them. Researchers and advocates have done a lot of this work, but they are, themselves, part of the system and can't very well be expected to change systemic behaviors on their own. I'm not implying that our societal institutions purposely hinder anyone's ability to avoid or get out of poverty. In fact, it's often only when you look at the behavior or specific policy of one societal institution *in relation to another*, that you see how they combine to hinder this ability. I'm suggesting that if we begin problem-solving in a systemic way from a point of common interest, we'll uncover many things that individual sectors and institutions do that create unnecessary obstacles to self-sufficiency and the American Dream.

Until recently, I hadn't a clue about any of the more dysfunctional aspects of the system and how they combine to make it much more difficult to avoid or get out of poverty. Like me, most never-poor people have no reference points or experiences that would naturally point them in a direction to discover these unknowns. I know that low-wage workers living in poverty are intimately aware of how this works, but it was only when I

was exposed to a diverse set of people, with a variety of world views, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives that I even began to understand. Our institutions often work against each other and, in some cases, against the very principles on which this country is founded. Again, I'm not implying intent. In fact, I think that because we've never gotten the whole system "in the room" together, there is no way to even *know* where or how the counter play of separate societal entities combines to fly in the face of our own, treasured American principles.

I believe that once we start engaging in systemic problem-solving, the act of charging low-income individuals 200% interest to buy a car or furniture while charging single-digit interest rates to those with higher incomes will be recognized as a practice that ultimately does not serve us well as a nation and one that we can improve. We'll realize how futile it is to demand that low-wage workers budget carefully and save, while at the same time relocating what little financial means they have into the bank accounts of corporate and financial entities charging elevated rates. We'll discover that it would be in our society's best interest to figure out how to provide everyone with access to asset-building approaches like 401k plans and other benefits that many middle- to high-income workers have as employees of businesses that recognize the value of their workers. We'll learn as a nation that many mainstream goods and services, if accessible at all, cost more for those with low incomes than for those with higher incomes. That's right; it costs more to be poor. For example, the next time you are in a poor urban area, notice the gas prices, and then head out toward the suburbs. Compare prices. (Note: before you head out to do this comparison, you may want to fill your tank in the suburbs.) As we engage the whole system, we'll discover a host of other situations in many areas of society, education, health, employment, technology, that make it difficult to avoid or stay out of poverty. These areas can be aligned to work together to produce a stronger, healthier, more prosperous nation for all of us and our children. Since one out of every four children lives in poverty, they may only be able to dream about the American Dream.

It's time for us to realize collectively that no sector or individual, including government or individuals living in poverty, can deliver the complete answer to a systemic issue. We've been putting off this realization for at least 40 years, despite the fact that all the research points us to a set of interdependent causes and effects. We seem to want to solve this problem, but when we look around, no one seems to have the answer. That's because the answer is not *within* any one place; it is *among* us. There are lots of individual strategies from a host of individual sectors of society (e.g., education, human services, financial services, community action, workforce development, public health) that serve as valuable pieces of the puzzle, but not one of them provides the complete answer. So why do we argue so vehemently about one strategy over another if none of them individually can possibly address the entire problem? Despite the individual merit of many of these strategies and despite the positive intentions of their proponents, it does little good to argue about which strategy (or whose) is best, because none of them taken individually will get us where we know we need to be as a nation. We might as well try to construct a puzzle blindfolded, using puzzle pieces that don't fit together in the first place.

If we only invested half the time, energy, and money finding common ground and developing strategies holistically as a system of interdependent stakeholders that we've spent defending one strategy over another, or one world view over another, we'd be much closer to sustaining national prosperity and security. Although we'd like to believe we already have this, we know in our hearts we don't. If we look beyond our positions on the state of the nation, and are brutally honest, we know we can do better, we just don't know how. Highly visible representatives from both political parties have said publicly that "poverty is unworthy of our nation's promise." Despite my aversion to politics, I have to agree. We know we fall short of living our nation's founding principles, we just don't know what to do about it; you might call it a "collective flummox."

There is something we can do—even in the comfort of our own homes—that can begin to move us out of this "deer-in-headlights" collective flummox. We can realize that it's okay if each of us views the issue from a different perspective for a different reason. In fact, not only is it okay, but the research into problem solving strongly suggests that the more complex the issue, the more complex the ingredients must be to solve it, and the poverty-prosperity-national security thing is about as complex as it gets. Many of us claim that we "embrace differences" and "encourage divergent viewpoints," but as we all know, walking that particular talk is "easier said than done." Come on, I'll admit it if you will. My "embraces" sometimes more closely resemble chokeholds designed to squeeze the life out of any opponent. Of course, I am speaking symbolically, not literally. In any case, I hereby give us all permission to bring all of our perspectives to this issue. Don't EVEN think I'm kidding, because by the end of this article, I'll actually show you a specific process that will allow you to do just that.

If the thought of fellow humans suffering in poverty makes you care about this issue, fine. If the thought of American institutions inadvertently or intentionally reneging on American principles gets you fired up, fine. If your faith tells you that we are all created from the same Source and calls you to compassionate action, bless you. If the thought of another day choosing between paying your electric bill or feeding your kids drives you to action, more power to you. If you want more people to have enough money to buy your company's products, great. If you don't like the prospect of poverty as the fuel for internal or external threats to national security, "Semper Fi." If the \$200 billion annual loss in tax revenue attributed to school dropout rates makes you want to prevent poverty from happening in the first place, great. If you want to make sure your children and grandchildren have a real shot at living the American Dream, peace. If you want poor people to pick themselves up from their own bootstraps like you did, fine. If you don't give a rip about any bleeding heart mumbo-jumbo, but want to see your stock profile grow, that's fine, too. We don't need to agree on WHY we care about it, only that we do. THAT'S what's going to get us in the room together and solve this thing, not standing in separate corners spitting at each other. There can be no winner if we are fighting ourselves; solving this will allow us *all* to win.

Regardless of which of the above statements you most identified with, there *is* something in it for you to come to the collective problem-solving table. We *can*, as a nation, view eliminating poverty as:

- A way to ensure sustainable national prosperity and security;
- A way to truly embody the principles upon which the nation is founded,
- An exercise in developing self-sustaining conditions at the individual, family, community, and societal levels;
- A win-win for society, institutions, and individuals; and
- A way to create conditions that allow for continued innovation, economic growth, strong relationships, non-violence, health, and harmony.

Yeah, I know. When seen through the lens of our cynical selves, these statements seem to come from a Pollyanna. I'll admit that. Distract your cynical self for just a moment and be honest. Is there anything undesirable in the above statements? I certainly hope I'm not the only one who thinks these are all good things that we'd want to create. The simple fact is this: We can't create new strategies using old thinking and we can't find a viable answer that is in all of our best interests if we think about poverty the same old way. I figure that unless our current thinking has been forcefully streamed into our brains against our will, we've created how we think about poverty by ourselves and that we can just as easily create something else—something more useful, more sustainable, more innovative, more in line with the principles upon which America is supposed to be built.

There's always a sense of “now what?” hanging in the air when conversations about poverty make it to the news or at public events. I've attended a few of these events and I've seen some of the news coverage that pops up. The results are often similar. The experience leaves us with just enough information to be outraged, sufficiently called to action, or hopeless. The trouble is that if we are lucky enough to feel called to action, there's no “there” there; no place to put our energies. This unfortunately places us in one of the other two categories—either outraged or hopeless. If this cycle is repeated often enough, even the most dedicated among us reunite with our cynical selves and give up. Prepare to put your energy (even your cynical energy) somewhere, folks. There IS a “there” there.

Let's get to it. I promised that I would lay out a specific, concrete, actionable strategy and it won't do any of us any good if I'm walking alone. I'll start with the general and move to the specific because I want us to be grounded in our common experience before I reveal something new. Trust me, I'm a professional, which you'll know for certain when you see that I'm about to tell you something you already know and then act like I'm the one who's brilliant. Here goes: I think I have sufficiently established that poverty is a systemic problem that affects us all, and that as such, it requires systemic thinking and problem-solving, and that no one (person, organization, political party, or sector) has the silver-bullet “answer” that will solve the problem. What a revelation! We cannot afford to keep believing that one small part of the system is going to crack the “flummox code” and figure this thing out by itself and that, if by some miraculous set of circumstances it does, that it could implement its solution by itself.

Given these facts and high stakes we all face if we do nothing, the simple truth is this:

We have to get the whole system together to figure it out.

There is no simpler way to put it. Here's where it gets really exciting; where the music in the movie signals hope and perseverance; where the task gets manageable. Scoff if you will, but there's already a way to get the whole system together to figure it out. In fact, we can use it not only to bring the whole system together, but also to plan for, commit to, and actually get it to implement solutions quickly—on a national scale. It is not the “answer,” but rather, the “answer-to-get-to-the-answer.” This “answer-to-the-answer” is a real program in a real organization; it uses a real, tested methodology; and involves real people—mainly you, as parts of the whole system. I say “program” because that's the term we use to distinguish one body of work from another. In this case, the work of the “program” is to serve as the mechanism for the *real* work—out there, in our collectively flummoxed system. I point this out so that you know that the “program” is not another “place” where the work happens in a vacuum, where the “answer” is developed, and then “delivered.”

If we think that any “program” has the answer—even this one, we're right back to square one—waiting for some “place,” some “program,” some single “entity” to solve our problem. As one who is diligently trying to capture in words the futility of that belief, I have no desire to perpetuate it. All this buildup is to say that the work of the program is the map, not the territory. It's the vacation plans, not the vacation; the route, not the journey; the post office, not the package; the equation, not the answer. You get the point. You might be wondering, “Well, if this darned thing already exists, where the heck is it and how can I get some?” The program is new, so between its newness and the relative obscurity of its parent organization, you probably haven't heard of it. Believe it or not, that's a good thing. The people and organizations that do their work outside the hype are often too busy making a difference to become popular.

So, a little bit about the organization as an introduction and then on to more details about the “what's and the how's” of the “program...” The organization itself is pretty small, but its reach and credentials are global, and, though it has made significant impacts in communities worldwide for fifteen years, it remains obscure because it does its work without fanfare and without marketing. The phenomenal outcomes the organization has initiated using its tested methodology are reported in newspapers across the globe, but the method for initiating them and the organization behind it are rarely named. Again, I'm speaking of the map and it's time to move on to the territory. There will be plenty of time to study the map later.

So, how do we get the whole system together to work through its collective flummox and get this nation out of its fitful sleep and back to the American Dream? We use an existing approach that:

- *Starts at the community level*, where the people know what supports, strategies, or solutions they need to fully address community poverty and increase prosperity for all. No federal or other outside entity can know what supports, strategies, or solutions any particular community needs to address its issues of

poverty and to build community prosperity; attempts to prescribe solutions to communities often fail.

- *Engages the “whole system,”* to include broad participation, including residents, members of multiple sectors the community itself identifies, including local, state, and federal policy makers. Each community brings together 60 to 80 stakeholders who collectively have the authority, resources, expertise, information, and need to act. Together, as they begin to develop action plans, they don’t need to ask permission from anyone who isn’t there. This principle removes the single biggest barrier to large group planning—not having all the key players in the same room.
- *Was created for the express purpose of helping people go beyond problem-solving to make systemic improvements in their communities.* It has been employed with virtually all social, technological and economic issues in North and South America, Africa, Australia, Europe, India, and South Asia. People achieve four outputs from a single session—shared values, a plan for the future, concrete goals, and an implementation strategy.
- *Uses a methodology that is proven to enable cooperation in complex situations of high conflict and uncertainty.* The methodology relies on tested principles for helping people collaborate despite differences of culture, class, gender, age, race, ethnicity, language, and education. The method works equally well with communities, schools, hospitals, churches, government agencies, foundations, and NGOs with documented success. Because the methodology is culture free, requiring only that participants share their experiences, it has helped thousands of people carry out action plans that once were considered impossible.
- *Is proven to produce positive outcomes.* Hundreds of communities have created action plans with a high commitment to implementing the plans they create using this approach. Participants often start implementing plans they claimed were unthinkable and achieve long-lasting outcomes. A few examples of outcomes include the demobilization of thousands of child soldiers from the front lines of war in Sudan; the reduction of African-American infant mortality rates in Milwaukee, WI; the formation of America’s Promise, the Alliance for Youth; the resolution of racial tensions between two Berrien County, MI communities and the collaborative integration of economic development; and the reconnection of struggling members of the rural community of Ko’olau Loa, HI to their healthy traditional values.
- *Creates broad responsibility for action:* Managers and facilitators work in such a way that participants develop their own conclusions, manage their own small group work, and take responsibility for whatever they choose to do. In short, they help people with differing experiences and views listen to one another and to discover their shared commitments. Those in leadership roles find previously unavailable backing and resources. The principles of the methodology enable broadly supported action plans that are creative, practical, and ready for implementation. This methodology differs from “town hall” meetings, because

participants walk away with plans that they created, they supported, and that they can realistically implement together.

- *Bridges the gap between communities and policy.* While communities have the largest stake in creating prosperous conditions for themselves and often have significant capacity to address their own issues of poverty, one of the major challenges communities face in being truly able to address local poverty issues is the inability to influence policy at higher levels of government to create practical, effective policy conditions. The program will engage interested communities nationwide in meaningful planning and rapid action that *includes* the participation of local, state, and federal policy makers. Following this, similar planning and action by the policy makers themselves creates action plans for developing enabling policy. This method of community-to-policy planning and action bridges the gap between the community—where the issues of poverty are directly experienced and the implications of policy are felt—and the policy making engine, which is typically isolated from community-level reality and the implications of its policies.
- *Builds community-by-community to create national impact.* In the first cycle of the program, eight communities will participate and produce their “prosperity plans.” Higher-level policy issues that hinder communities’ ability to create sustainable prosperity will naturally emerge during this cycle and will be used in subsequent policy planning sessions. Policy makers from all of the individual community planning sessions will then convene using the same methodology to develop action plans for developing enabling policy. The learning and outcomes from a complete community-to-policy cycle would be documented and analyzed to inform the next cycle, which could include even more communities and policy makers in a single cycle. Therefore, not only would each participating community become more prosperous from implementing the action strategies they develop in the individual action conferences, but their efforts would be collectively leveraged to produce the higher-level policy changes they need to become even more prosperous long after their individual conference. As the cycles continue, several thousand residents of dozens of communities across the country and hundreds of policy makers—all focusing on addressing poverty and creating prosperity in new ways—will have actively participated, making lasting change at the national level inevitable.

Pretty ambitious, isn't it? Well, frankly, it has to be; the scary music is still playing and we're all in this movie theater together. The economy *is* running on two cylinders, and as a nation, we *are* falling short of following our coveted American values. If only it were just a movie, we could all pick the gum off our shoes and head home (if we have one), glad that stuff like that really doesn't happen in America. But it *is* real; it *is* the situation in which we find ourselves. We're the ones who created it, and we're the ones who have to fix it. The Wright Brothers didn't get a plane in the air by thinking about it staying on the ground and we won't create sustainable national prosperity and security for all by thinking it's impossible. So, while the approach might be ambitious and new, it sure beats doing the same old thing, because we *know that's not working*. Besides, it doesn't cost anywhere *near* the billions of dollars we spend every year trying to dream up parts

of a solution, by parts of the system, for parts of the problem. By developing whole solutions, by the whole system, for the whole problem, we not only get a better return on our investment, but the investment itself is disbursed among many sectors.

For as little as \$100,000 per sector, per year, we'd *at least* have the whole system working on the issue, which is more than we can say about our current approaches. The plans that affect the *whole* system would *at least* be created by the *whole* system using information from the *whole* system. The high level of commitment translating those plans into real action that has already been demonstrated will *at least* increase the likelihood that the plans lead to real change. The community-to-policy cycle will *at least* ensure that the people making the policies are grounded in the direct experience of community realities before going back into their policy community. Any of those "at leasts" makes it worth a try. There's way more to lose by not trying, if you ask me.

Well, I've kept you long enough. Now I'll tell you what all this is called, where it lives, some of the initial plans, how to find out more, and how to become involved. The "program" is called Prosperous Communities, Prosperous Nation (PCPN) and it is a new national, community-based approach to creating sustainable prosperity for all. It lives in the Future Search Network (FSN), a well-established non-profit organization with over 350 members across the country who are trained facilitators in the Future Search methodology. Over the last twenty years, Future Search has proven that it can create lasting change, community by community and issue by issue. It continues to do so. In its new program, FSN is expanding its mission by focusing the methodology and the Network on a single, systemic issue, and in the process, leverage these national community outcomes into lasting national change and increased prosperity for all. While the overall strategy, specific approach, methodology, and the nationwide network of facilitators are already part of FSN, PCPN is in the early developmental stage. As funding becomes available, the program will immediately go "live," and materials, infrastructure, technology, staff, and other program resources will be phased in. The FSN web site is filled with information on the organization, the Method, Future Search stories from around the world, training events, and benefits of membership, and is adding more and more PCPN information all the time (<http://www.futuresearch.net>).

If you are still with me, you must be intrigued, outraged, curious, or excited (or you're incredibly bored, but nevertheless dutiful). Whatever your condition, I invite you to become involved; you are an important part of the system and you hold part of the answer. There are numerous ways to make sure that your part of the answer gets into the shared pool of possibilities, including:

- Visiting <http://www.futuresearch.net> to find out more
- Becoming a community leader for a PCPN Future Search
- Signing up to be a corporate sponsor of PCPN
- Becoming an advisory team member (all sectors wanted)
- Joining the team of trained facilitators

- Investing financial, technology, or administrative resources in PCPN (all sectors wanted)
- Sponsoring a specific PCPN community Future Search
- Participating on a community planning team to plan for a PCPN Future Search
- Contacting PCPN by e-mail at prosperouscommunities@futuresearch.net to explore other ways to participate

Because you are part of the system, hold part of the answer, and stand to benefit from the solution, I hope you'll consider doing whatever you're able to do, even if it's only to think about it some more. Even if you only begin to notice aspects of our individual and collective behavior that contribute to the problem or that place exclusive blame on one part of the system or another, you're an active participant in the solution. This type of participation is just as important as the external, direct participation I've described, if not more so. This kind of internal participation is the glue that will hold us steady enough, long enough, to allow the external work to begin producing the changes we need to make in our structures and systems to support prosperity for all. Of course, if you are motivated toward more direct support or action, I'd sure like to hear from you.

The stakes of doing nothing are high and getting higher. The cost of poverty on our collective prosperity can be felt in our economy and national security, as well as in emotional, moral, and spiritual terms. We've never been a nation that sits back and allows something to threaten what this country stands for or that gazes indifferently at human suffering. In the case of domestic poverty, we are doing both. It's time to pool our collective resources, experience, knowledge, and energy to move beyond our philosophical positions, beyond research studies, beyond sound bites, and beyond rhetoric. We need to begin working to create the kind of prosperous communities and nation we are capable of and that this nation was founded upon. If we fail to at least try, it won't matter who any of us thinks is to blame or who was "right or wrong," because we'll all suffer. I can't imagine us letting it get to that point and we don't need to. Let's roll.

Nancy Polend is the Program Director for the *Prosperous Community, Prosperous Nation* Program. Nancy has worked in private industry, federal, state, and local government, and in non-profit settings, focusing several years of her career on providing training and consulting services to state and local human services agencies. Nancy served as Project Manager for the 21st Century Model to Address Poverty Project, a two-year, multi-million dollar project to develop structures for changing the way the country thinks about and addresses poverty.