

## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

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### Mission

*To establish a societal approach to maximize the personal potential of the nation's citizenry that begins with changing the way the country thinks about and addresses poverty.*

This effort seeks to create urgency in society to do the work of this recalibration, such that it views eliminating poverty as:

- a way to ensure sustainable national prosperity and security,
- an exercise in developing self-sustaining conditions at the individual, family, community, and societal levels,
- a win-win exchange between society and individuals, individuals and institutions, and
- a way to create the harmonious conditions that allow for continued innovation, economic growth, strong relationships, non-violence, health, etc.

Although a general direction is alluded to in the mission statement, it intentionally leaves us with the question: "If we change the way this country thinks about and addresses poverty, what specifically are we changing *from* and what do we want to change *to*?" The answer to this question is far too complex for anyone to claim they know what it is. After all, there is a broad range of ways we as a society think about poverty and an even broader range of ways we are attempting to address it. That is precisely the point; since such a range exists, the results of our collective energy and resources have worked at cross-purposes, resulting in inertia rather than in progress in any one direction.

The point of this initiative is not to attempt to answer this question, it is to have this country engage in a dialog about what it wants for its own future, what the stakes are if it does nothing and poverty continues to rise and the conditions of poverty spread, what it values for its residents, and whether those values are representative of the values put forth in the founding documents of this country. The remaining components of this theoretical construct attempt to lay out a foundation upon which this dialog, future strategies, and ultimately, 'the answer' can be built. There are obviously many, many details and challenges to work out, but the spirit behind this initiative is that they cannot be worked out without having the dialog.

### Vision

*If this effort is successful over the long-term, national prosperity will be maximized and fewer people will live impoverished lives because:*

- Every sector of society accepts that it has a role in building societal capacity, thereby increasing the number of people maximizing their personal potential and reducing the number of people living impoverished lives.

- Society proactively plans for increasing the number of its residents living fulfilled lives and decreasing the number of its residents living impoverished lives.
- Communities proactively plan for increasing the number of its residents living fulfilled lives and decreasing the number of its residents living impoverished lives.
- Individuals proactively plan for reaching their full potential.
- The education sector proactively plans and implements strategies to increase the number of people living educated lives.
- The human services sector proactively plans and implements strategies to increase the number of people reaching their potential and to decrease the number of people living impoverished lives.
- The financial services industry proactively plans and implements strategies to increase the number of people living economically secure lives.
- The health industry proactively plans and implements strategies to increase the number of people living healthy lives.
- The philanthropic sector proactively plans and implements strategies to increase the number of people living fulfilled lives and to reduce the number of people living impoverished lives.
- All levels of government focus their programs and policies on encouraging and enabling the above.
- Poverty is viewed by the mainstream as broader than the amount of income a person makes.

The vision statement provides the ultimate goal of this work – the desired future state. Since this construct serves as a foundation for future work, each one of the statements above serve as placeholders for each sector to develop its own change strategies aligned with the principles suggested on the next page. The vision embodies the principle that every sector of society has a role to play, which differs from our current construct which generally holds that either the individual or the government has exclusive responsibility for addressing poverty.

## **Imperatives**

*Among other reasons, we engage in this work because:*

- A society is at risk when it does not respect every individual, does not provide the mechanisms for each person and group to recognize and achieve their potential, and does not proactively work to remove barriers that stand in the way of achieving it.

- We have a moral imperative to take care of one another, as our “brother’s keeper.”
- We have an economic imperative to ensure that the capacity of individuals, communities, and the nation for innovation and prosperity is encouraged and sustainable.
- Individuals living in poverty are not able to fully contribute to the country’s economy or innovation. The stakes of allowing that to continue are high and the benefits of ensuring that every person is able to contribute fully in society as a producer and a consumer are many.
- Poverty is costly to all taxpayers, wherever they live, via the costs associated with social services, remedial education, law enforcement, welfare programs, etc.
- Individuals living in poverty do not have full access to and participation in the democratic system, though such participation is a right provided in the founding documents of our nation.
- No one in a country this rich should have to live an impoverished life.
- Despite significant investment in addressing poverty, persistent poverty exists. We currently spend hundreds of billion dollars in poverty-related programs without an overarching strategy or an acceptable return on the investment.

The imperatives provide a small sample of moral, economic, and social reasons why establishing a societal approach to maximizing the personal potential of the nation’s citizenry, starting with changing the way this country thinks about and addresses poverty is worth the effort (see also Chapter 1: The Case for Change). There are obviously many more reasons why such a change is in *everyone’s* best interest. This initiative encourages every sector of society to think about the reasons why it would be in their specific sector’s best interest to increase national prosperity and reduce the number of people living impoverished lives.

## Principles

*New ways of maximizing personal potential and thinking about and addressing poverty should be built upon the following principles:*

1. **Shared vision:** New ways of building personal capacity and thinking about and addressing poverty are built on a hopeful, shared belief in equal and unalienable individual rights and the profound belief in the human potential of every individual to succeed.
2. **Person-centered:** Effectively and efficiently assisting individuals in need means that the service delivery structure must focus on the needs of the individual or family, not on the needs of the helping system.

3. **“Poverty” as we know it is only a starting point:** Traditional definitions and mental models about poverty (e.g. models based exclusively on income determinants, which suggest poverty as a population) are starting points only.
  - “Poverty” is broader than the amount of income a person makes. Income is only a part of an individual’s ability to make life work and to be a productive member of society. Human potential depends on different types of capital –social, economic, and spiritual.
4. **Reciprocal Responsibility:** Full and equal responsibility for maximizing personal potential lies with the individual to society and with society to the individual. This means that our strategies must be equally focused on the behavior of society (and it’s institutions) and the behavior of the individual.
5. **Consistent with America’s tenet of market solutions:** Infrastructures and mechanisms to assist those in need should be developed by tapping into private resources and market solutions. Doing so would geometrically expand the resources and possibilities for maximizing societal capacity.
6. **Everybody has a role:** Every sector of society (government, private industry, non-profit, communities) has a role in creating a nation of capacity, reciprocal responsibility, prosperity, and opportunity. These roles may or may not be consistent with current roles.
  - *The role of systemic interdependence:* No one policy, program, community, strategy can create a nation of maximized capacity, prosperity, and opportunity alone. Therefore, each part of the system is dependent on the other for creating that future.
  - *The role of individual performance:* All parts of the system (read: nation) must fulfill their own obligations toward maximizing potential for capacity, prosperity, and opportunity in order for the whole system to be successful.
7. **Change is necessary:** We cannot create a nation of reciprocal responsibility, prosperity, and opportunity using these principles without fundamental change occurring in every sector of society.
8. **Leveraging resources:** We should strive first to make wiser application of existing resources in all sectors of society. Doing so encourages individuals or systems to align and strategically use the resources they have toward the outcome of success, as they have defined it.

The components of this new construct are viewed as preliminary; they are offered as a starting point for a national dialog about how it wants to think about and address poverty and more broadly, maximize the personal potential of every person. The rest is up to the collective whole.