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In It Together

By [BOB VAN METER](#)

The latest book by Bill McKibben, the well-known environmental journalist and activist, poses a provocative question for community economic developers: How do we improve the lives of the people in communities: By giving them tools to operate in a “mainstream” economy that often carelessly discards human communities or by helping to build a new locally-oriented economy that values community? McKibben has produced a 232-page manifesto for an alternative future where the good life is not about more goods but about more happiness. He believes that happiness is found in human community, not in increased consumption. Economic growth as an intrinsic virtue has been challenged before by social critics, but McKibben’s argument is more practical and immediate than most, marrying recent social-science research in economics, sociology, and psychology with the facts of resource depletion and climate change to make his case.

This is not so much a hymn to a pastoral past but a richly textured thesis in which McKibben contends that the current course of American society is dangerous environmentally (primarily because of climate change), unlikely to be sustainable (because of declining fossil-fuel resources), and failing to make us happier human beings. “From problem to plan. If hyper-individualism is damaging our lives,” McKibben asks, “What can we do about that?” In response, he offers a vision of how we can live differently and gives examples of those who already have made the paradigm shift toward community.

One of the most appealing aspects of this book is how McKibben has integrated the perspective of writer and essayist Wendell Berry in his vision of a future that is both urban and rural. The book is dedicated to Berry, who has been a personal lodestar for me. Berry’s essays, novels, and poetry constitute a lifelong effort to describe and argue for a way of life that respects both land and people and brings economic and human relationships into harmony. His wonderful book of essays, *What Are People For*, foreshadows McKibben. In Berry’s words “A good community, in other words, is a good local economy.”

Berry writes about his native Kentucky (where my own family’s roots are as well), but his focus on rural and small town life means that he does not speak directly to the challenges of urban community that most organizers and community developers face. McKibben, in contrast, does speak to urban activists with descriptions of how local systems of agriculture can sustain large urban communities and how the relationships nourished by a local economy in an urban neighborhood can be as rich and meaningful as the rural relationships that Berry describes.

McKibben begins with the question, “What is an economy for?” He concludes that it is to provide for human happiness, not to produce goods and services. The goods and services are a means to the end of human happiness. He then gives a brief overview of the work of a number of economists who have increasingly sought to measure human satisfaction and happiness rather than simply material well-being.

Beyond a threshold of material well-being (McKibben cites international research published in 2004 by Ed Diener and Martin Seligman that shows the threshold to be a \$10,000 per-capita income), further increments of material goods do not make people happier, McKibben argues. He cites a variety of recent studies that all make the point that if material goods come at the expense of time, happiness is diminished even as material wellbeing is increased. His reporting ranges from his home in Vermont to the frontier of the new global economy in China where he interviews young workers who clearly have not achieved the material threshold of well-being that McKibben asserts but are already conflicted about the value of the material well-being that they are achieving.

The most interesting part of McKibben’s argument for those of us in the community economic development field is his case for the importance of local economies that keep people in communities in a productive relationship with each other. McKibben goes into detail about the movement for local food. He describes how farmers have connected to local buyers and built economically viable businesses. And he examines the ways in which the industrialized food system impedes the trend toward localism. For example, oats, which were grown in Vermont for two centuries, now aren’t grown there because of the lack of public-policy support for a

diverse local agriculture and can't be milled locally because of the disappearance of oat mills.

McKibben argues that the industrialized food system is unhealthy for consumers in part because the large-scale production of poultry and meat results in a reliance on antibiotics. The system relies on tremendous inputs of cheap fossil fuels, from fertilizers to the transport of food around the country and world. From the giant sewage lagoons created by concentrated animal feed operations to the nitrogen run-off from heavily fertilized fields into rivers and streams, it is destructive of communities and the environment both in the United States and around the world. And it produces unsafe conditions for many of the workers in the system worldwide.

Despite the apparently overwhelming dominance of the industrialized food system, McKibben sees strong evidence of a steady drive toward localism in American farming and consumption habits. He cites the spread of farmers markets and community-supported agriculture as evidence for the power of the local economic idea. Despite little or no support at the level of national public policy, farmers markets have multiplied over the past 30 years, so that there are now 3,700 in the United States. In a suggestive detail, McKibben reports that sociologists have found that consumers have 10 times the number of conversations at farmers markets as they do at supermarkets.

McKibben describes other efforts to create "human-scale" economic relationships, including efforts to create a local currency now underway in Burlington, Vt., a community-owned clothing store in Powell, Wyo., and local energy producers from Colorado to Massachusetts. He describes how a locally owned radio station in Vermont, WDEV, plays a central role in binding its community together. He reports on the move away from industrialized food production in both the industrialized West and in the developing world. He explains how Cuban agriculture shifted, out of necessity, to a low-energy, local model in the early 1990s in the wake of the cut-off of Soviet subsidized oil and a Soviet market for sugar. While McKibben says Cuba's new agricultural system is working well, he holds no brief for the Cuban political system.

Energy prices remain the Achilles heel of industrial food production, as industrial efficiency and low food prices depend on high inputs of cheap oil and natural gas. Small local producers can produce more food from an acre of land than industrial agriculture can but require much more human labor. The elimination of human labor and the substitution of fossil fuels in agriculture have had negative consequences for communities as well as for the environment.

Citing evidence from several studies, McKibben makes the case that we are demonstrably healthier and happier in community. He argues that the erosion of community has coincided with an estimated 10-fold increase in the incidence of depression during the twentieth century in the United States, according to a 1985 study. The glorification of individualism has been accompanied by growing economic and social inequality and a disconnection of the wealthy from any community other than the rich. McKibben tells a story about Bentonville, Ark., home-base of the Wal-Mart empire. The community could not afford a sewer system despite the \$90-billion personal fortune of the Walton family, who ostensibly lived in Bentonville.

In a passage that speaks directly to community development, McKibben points out that while communitarians, social conservatives, and progressives have stressed the importance of community, their perspective has been primarily moral and sometimes takes on an almost magical or mystical character. He writes, "But it is our economic lives, even more than our moral choices, that play the crucial role in wrecking or rebuilding communities. We need to once again depend on those around us for something real. If we do, then the bonds that make for human satisfaction, as opposed to endless growth, will begin to reemerge." McKibben emphasizes the importance of the economy in building or destroying community in contrast to the emphasis that sociologist Robert Putnam places on the role of voluntary organizations in his book *Bowling Alone* and in other work.

Community is built out of both the social capital of voluntary association that Robert Putnam documents but also out of the economic relationships that exist in a community with a local economy. McKibben believes that a social structure where people know their neighbors creates a society where greed will be tempered by the social ties of community. He asserts that today's "hyper-individualist" capitalist society is not something that Adam Smith, who believed that market forces would be tempered by social forces, would recognize. The current subprime mortgage debacle is a graphic illustration of how dysfunctional the market can be in meeting the needs of community. The distance between the hedge-fund investor and the low-income borrower in an urban neighborhood allows the hedge-fund investor to escape accountability for the consequences of his actions.

The community-development field currently faces fundamental questions about its ongoing role. Many voices in the world of foundations and intermediaries (organizations that operate between policymakers and practitioners to facilitate the work) call for community-development groups to "go to scale," equating growth with efficacy. (See [Balancing Act by Dee Walsh and Robert Zdenek](#)) Recent initiatives by the Fannie Mae and McArthur foundations and others have sought to strengthen large producers of affordable housing to the exclusion of neighborhood-based organizations. Public support for community development corporations as community developers as opposed to affordable-housing developers seems harder and harder to come by. In my own state of Massachusetts, for example, a state program that supported community development, broadly defined, for two

decades, nurturing the growth of community development corporations, died about five years ago. It has been partially replaced by a program focused on increasing the capacity of nonprofits to produce affordable housing. Community development corporations in rural western Massachusetts that have emphasized growing local businesses lost funding, and the focus of other organizations narrowed. Banks, corporations, foundations, and public officials seek “efficiency” in our sector, which they often define in terms of bigger organizations on a larger geographic scale. We are certainly subject to the same impetus to growth that animates the whole society, as McKibben makes clear.

With his emphasis on the importance of local economies in building community, McKibben points the way to another path for the future of the community-development movement. Community development corporations are, despite mergers and growth, by and large local, accessible institutions. Many of the things that community development corporations already do nurture and support local economic activity, from micro-business technical assistance to revitalizing neighborhood commercial areas to rehabilitating housing in existing communities. Community development organizations like the Lower Cape Cod Development Corporation and the Franklin County Community Development Corporation in Greenfield, Massachusetts have worked to develop local businesses such as The People’s Pint in Greenfield, a brew pub that brews beer made from local grain. Other community development organizations such as Viet Aid in Boston have begun a cooperative cleaning company that cleans with green products.

Community development corporations as geographically based organizations are also a place where local political action can be nurtured to support a different version of the future. My own organization, the Allston Brighton CDC, has advocated transit and open space improvements so that our neighbor Harvard does not simply build a green building or a green campus but helps us build a green community. If the economic future that McKibben points toward is going to happen it will of necessity be accompanied by changes in the allocation of public resources.

Community development corporations and other community economic development enterprises seem uniquely positioned to serve as catalysts and advocates for the kind of future that McKibben argues for. We can and are integrating a vision of a community that is both environmentally and socially “durable,” to use McKibben’s term. It means that the emphasis placed on green building in the affordable-housing field over the past several years needs to be expanded toward an emphasis on building communities that minimize our reliance on fossil fuels, communities where more of the food people eat is locally produced, where one need not own a car, where the public open spaces take precedence over private luxury, and where social and economic inequality is substantially reduced.

Many of us became organizers and developers because we placed a high value on community. McKibben makes a convincing case for the urgency of moving our society toward the same hierarchy of values. If community development organizations embrace his vision, then they may choose to deepen their work in one local community rather than become large-scale regional housing developers. My own organization has developed a strong capacity in homeownership education, financial literacy, and managing individual development accounts, and our programs serve a broader constituency than the 70,000 residents of our Boston neighborhood. Yet we remain locally focused in our housing development and community-organizing and planning work.

If “going to scale” means that our organizations are not accessible, human-scale institutions that can effectively serve as catalysts for local communities, then perhaps “going to scale” is a Faustian bargain that we should not accept. The economic realities of maintaining an organization, however, push all of us toward some kinds of growth, so the challenge may be in balancing a special service or product that does go to scale with the local geographic focus that McKibben reminds us is essential to fostering community.

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