

Bottom-Up Stimulus

Economy-2009

By Yossef Ben-Meir (Exclusive to CityWatch)

What development projects deliver short-term relief to people and long-term economic structural change for sustained growth and should therefore be part of the upcoming economic stimulus package? The answer: projects determined and managed by the local communities they are intended to benefit.

Depending on life conditions and challenges rural and urban communities face and the ideas they have for local development, projects communities typically prioritize to implement include roads, schools, clinics, community centers, daycare, and cooperatives. They are in private sector development, public health, green initiatives, training, and empowering people. They are in agriculture, manufacturing, and human services and development.

Community-level projects directly and more quickly impact local populations because of their proximity. Projects are located in local communities where they stimulate jobs and purchases of materials and equipment. As projects are designed, implemented, and functioning (more immediately because of community control and local reliance) stimulus takes effect. There is not a lag in waiting for a trickle-down of benefits.

Bottom-up stimulus would have groups of tens, hundreds, and thousands of local citizens gather together and assess their challenges and opportunities in the process of creating an action plan for development. "Participatory" planning activities help guide community members through dialogue and information gathering in order to develop solutions to their pressing needs. Their community projects funded by government will create multi-tiered, private-public partnerships, and advance both federalism and national unity.

In bottom-up stimulus, decision-making of local participants and partner groups is improved through information sharing and collaboration. Risk is shared in these community investments; local people and organizations also contribute in-kind, sometimes in the form of labor and partial financing. Bottom-up stimulus diversifies the economy and makes it more resilient in times of fluctuation.

The question now becomes: what programs can deliver bottom-up stimulus and should be earmarked in the economic package? Here are five recommendations that taken together can catalyze tens of thousands of viable community projects.

1. Double the size of AmeriCorps (to 150,000 volunteers) and thirteen-fold increase the Peace Corps (to President John Kennedy's goal of 100,000). To expand and reform, the agencies should recruit volunteers with generalist backgrounds and emphasize in their training and service the organizing of community meetings and partnership-building, a role their volunteers are positioned to perform. Investing in volunteerism (and the community projects volunteers catalyze) will reduce unemployment and unleash in the near future a powerful wave of social

entrepreneurs.

2. In public universities and colleges, support programs and new centers for community mediation, training, and development that enable students, faculty, and others to engage local communities and assist them in development planning and implementation. University-community partnership for development and “action-research” will bring win-win transformative benefits. State funded universities and colleges are being hit hard by the economic downturn and this is an important way they can contribute to and benefit from the stimulus.

3. At least double the funding for the soon-to-be called Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, in addition to President-elect Obama’s proposed reforms of the Council, including nondiscrimination in hiring, training to access funding, and serving 1 million students in summer and after school programs. I also suggest requiring religious institutions to have a separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization for the community-service related projects they administer to help avoid potential impropriety with public funds. The Council should encourage interfaith partnerships to increase project sustainability.

4. Establish a new fund that injects bottom-up stimulus in local areas suffering socio-economically and environmentally through no fault of their own; for example, because of natural and human-made disasters, and social dislocation caused by free trade. These communities of people are in serious need and stand to benefit the most from the process of establishing community-owned and managed projects.

5. Increase funding and training for community extension agents from government departments (e.g., Interior, Energy, Housing, Health and Human Services, and Commerce) and agencies (e.g., Small Business Administration and Environmental Protection Agency). Those in federal, state, and local government who interface with community groups can be ideally situated to bring people together to plan and implement development initiatives.

Robert Rubin, the self-described consigliere of Citigroup and former Treasury secretary, described as a “perfect storm” the events that led to the global financial collapse. The perfect storm then assisted the rise of Barack Obama, a leader quite familiar with the mechanics of community organizing and bottom-up social change and movements. The perfect storm - and the immediate and long-term economic results the country needs to navigate out of it - could now indirectly deliver its antidote: bottom-up stimulus.

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