

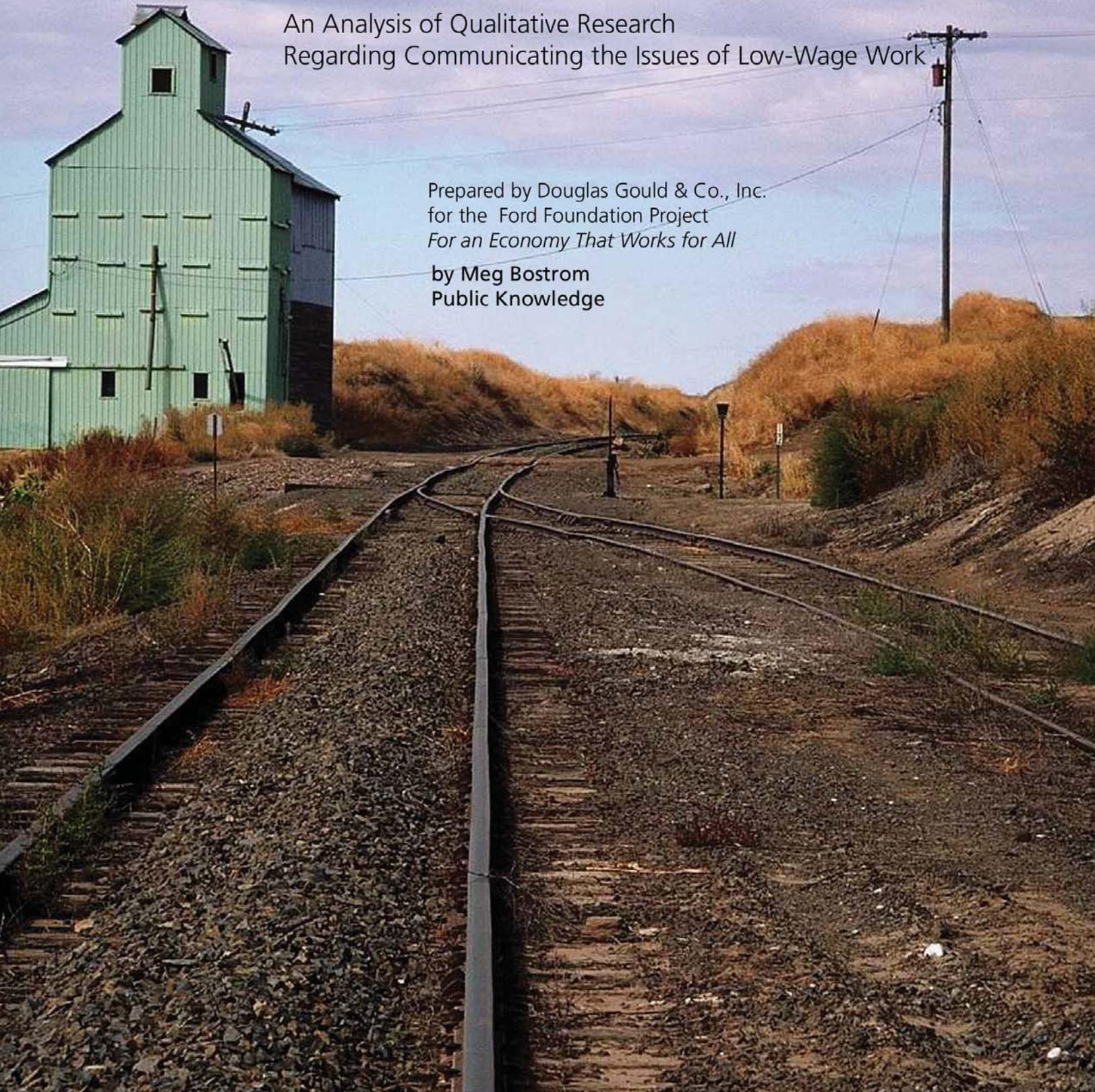
Broken Communities

Broken Communities Planning for Tomorrow

An Analysis of Qualitative Research
Regarding Communicating the Issues of Low-Wage Work

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for the Ford Foundation Project
For an Economy That Works for All

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Public Knowledge



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Introduction

It seems that virtually every American has a palpable example of an economic decision that has had serious consequences for their community. Factory closings, corporate abuse of government incentives, mass layoffs and other actions have put severe strain on many communities. Focus group participants tell stories of families that are struggling to make ends meet, prices increasing at a rapid rate, and increasing anxiety about their children's futures. The problems seem overwhelming and the solutions non-existent.

In this economic climate, the Ford Foundation's For an Economy that Works for All project set out to develop a communications framework that would build upon earlier research to advance a range of policies to assist low-wage workers. Three years ago, prior to the most severe phase of the economic downturn, the dominant media story concerning low-wage workers was a story about individuals stuck in bad situations. The public closely associated this approach with poverty and the poor, which positioned any action on behalf of low-wage workers as a charitable act. Research indicated that this lens is ineffective because it causes the public to focus on the individual's decisions that led to his or her failure. Therefore, to build support for public policy, the first phase of research recommended that the policy conversation occur within the realm of the economy, and that the lens on the issue be widened to add context beyond individual stories, so

that the public could see systemic influences.

The current economic climate provides an enormous opportunity to have a conversation about systemic problems in the nation's economy. The public is highly attentive to economic news right now. Throughout the focus groups, people referred to news they had recently seen or heard and could accurately explain information they learned from those sources. They are anxious to understand the economic problems they see: unemployment, outsourcing, families struggling to make ends meet, and college students with no work prospects, among others.

Most cite one of two reasons for the nation's unemployment and underemployment. Some point to the cyclical nature of the economy and are simply waiting for it to improve. Others blame greed: workers who want higher salaries, unions that have overpriced the American work force, corporate executives who are more interested in profits than people, and a society that demands instant gratification. This second way of thinking leads the public toward solutions such as moral education, lower wages for workers, and constraints on CEO pay.

Less dominant in the public's understanding of these issues are the troubling trends in job quality and standard of living. To build support for policies to address the needs of low-wage workers, the public needs to stop seeing the economic problem as cyclical or moral, and instead begin to

understand the problem as structural – one that government and society can address and one to which every person is connected.

Language, such as economic infrastructure or economic engine, allows people to see this problem as tangible and one that can be addressed. The public also needs to hear causal stories and explanations that will provide the reasons for supporting the recommended policy solutions. For example, informing people of the choices government makes to attract business to an area, and the effect of those choices on a community's economy, makes the problem understandable and the solution obvious. Understanding the ripple effect of the Earned Income Tax Credit on the economy connects the needs of low-wage workers to all Americans. At this point in the research, these findings suggest that communications should incorporate the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation**
Characterize the economy as a system, as a structure that can be influenced. Avoid talking about the cyclical nature of the economy or implying societal reasons for economic problems, such as greedy or unethical executives. Metaphors for the economy that help people see it as a structure include economic infrastructure, economic engine, and economic landscape.
- **Recommendation:**
Discuss broad trends and causal stories that provide the context for why policy change is needed. Avoid sympathy

stories about individuals – they typically leave the reader blaming the individual

- **Recommendation:** Connect all sectors of the economy together in an interdependent relationship, so that people understand the value of low-wage workers. Avoid setting low-wage workers apart from society, for example, through a discussion of charity or sympathy for the poor.

In addition to creating new understandings of the economy, advocates need to communicate the values that will motivate public action. The most compelling values for this issue are responsible planning, opportunity, and stewardship. The public desires visionary leadership that will plan for today's needs and for our children's opportunities in the future. Communicators should avoid creating a conversation dominated by sympathy, poverty, disparities, class warfare, or partisanship.

One other compelling value emerged in this phase of research – community. The public sees how communities are destroyed when a major employer leaves. Focus group participants are angry with “grab and go” employers who take government tax incentives, send profits to the corporate headquarters, and then leave a community as soon as a better offer emerges. Instead, they want to use incentives to support local independent businesses that are connected to a community. Strengthening communities is a compelling objective for economic

development efforts. These findings suggest the following recommendations:

- **Begin the conversation with the Level One values of responsible planning, opportunity, stewardship, or community.** Avoid having the communications dominated by sympathy, poverty, disparities, class warfare, or partisanship.
- **Include “strengthening communities” as an objective.** Distinguish between local independent businesses that are connected to community, and national or multi-national corporations that have no relationship to the community and that take profits out of the community. Avoid centering too much attention on one company.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in building public will for policy action is convincing the public of an appropriate role for government. Government is inept, corrupt, and uncaring, they assert. At the same time, the public expects and desires government action to address these problems. Communications need to connect the public to government rather than treat government as a distinct and separate entity. This suggests the following:

- **Convey that we all have a stake in making a difference on this issue.** Avoid positioning government as “they,” as separate from the public.
- **Use the value of community to remind people that citizens are**

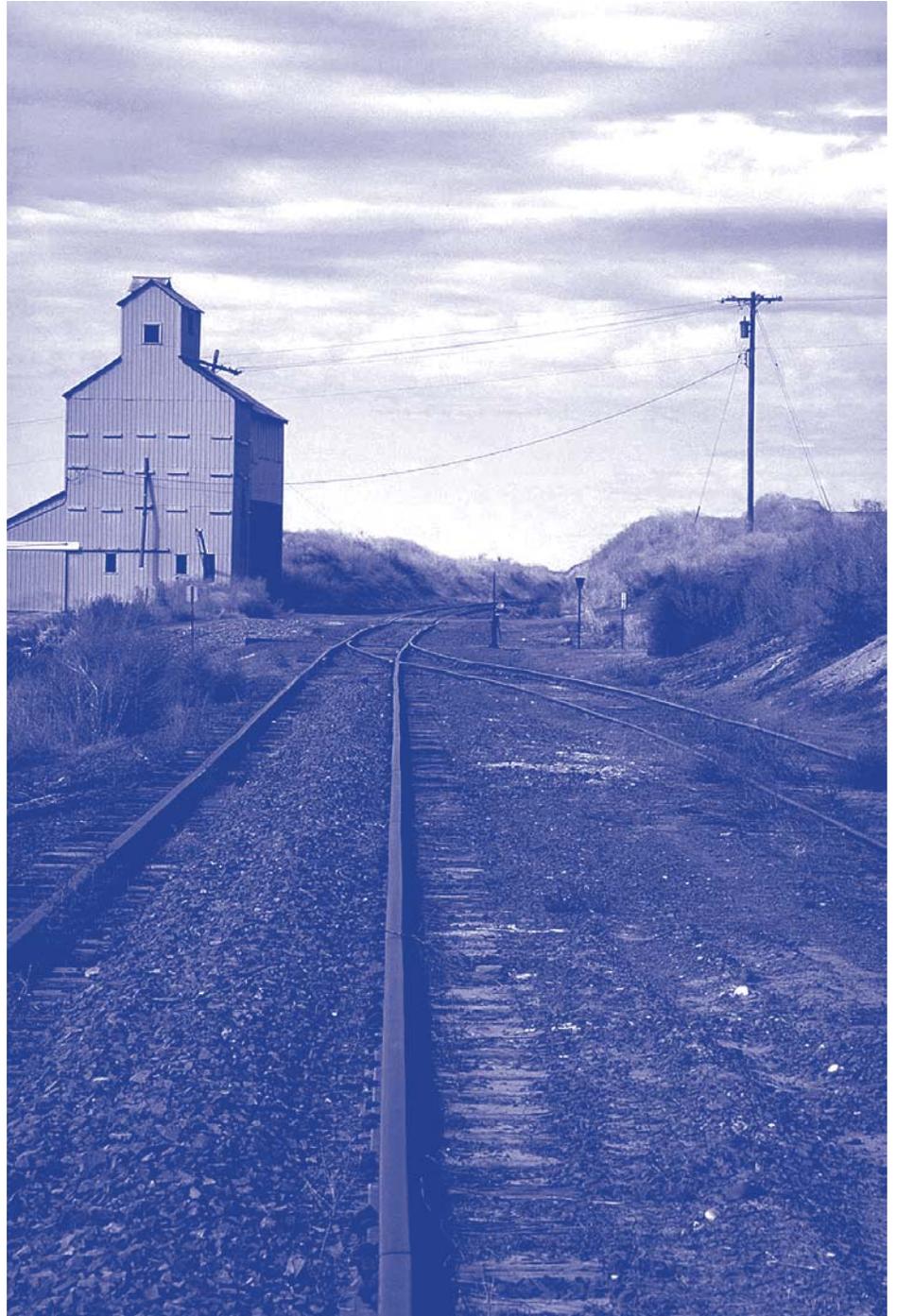
government. For example, try: Communities, which include citizens, businesspeople and elected officials, are working to solve these problems.

Finally, the size of the problem and the size of the solution need to be matched carefully. The public becomes quickly overwhelmed by the size and scope of these issues. At the same time, focus group participants were frequently overwhelmed by the solutions presented in the group discussions. To be most effective, the problem needs to be tangible and manageable, and the solutions need to be characterized as straightforward and practical:

- **Make the problem manageable and action practical; highlight solutions and match the size of the solution to the size of the problem.** Avoid a crisis conversation, which typically makes the task seem overwhelming.
- **Incorporate examples of highly-skilled, low-wage jobs when it is necessary to talk specifically about low-wage jobs.** Also, include the per hour and annual wages for the minimum wage and poverty levels when appropriate – do not assume that people already understand these figures.

The task presented by the Ford Foundation is not an easy task and it cannot be accomplished with a new slogan or a short public service campaign. Building long-term support for a range of policies to enhance the lives of low-wage workers requires an

alternative to the “free market” model of the economy and Ronald Reagan’s “trickle down economics.” It requires new stories, mental models, and attributions of responsibility. Deliberate, sophisticated, and repeated use of the new communications constructs will be required for the long-term to create public understanding and support.



Methodology

A total of eight focus groups were conducted with engaged citizens, meaning people who: are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue. Four groups were further divided by socioeconomic status and two groups were conducted solely among African Americans and Hispanics. Specifically, the groups were:

Seattle, February 25, 2004

Blue collar, mixed race
White collar, mixed race

New Jersey, March 8, 2004

Mixed race and class
African American, mixed class

Dallas, March 11, 2004

Mixed race and class
Hispanic, mixed class

Indianapolis, March 17, 2004

Blue collar, mixed race
White collar, mixed race

Public Perceptions of the Economy

Economic Concern

This is an opportune moment to reframe the public's understanding of the economy and to build public support for the policies that are needed to make the economy work for all. Right now, the public is paying a lot of attention to news about the economy. Throughout the focus group conversations, participants referenced recent news sources and demonstrated significant knowledge of the issues. "I was just reading an article in The New York Times where a lot of software companies and CPA firms are outsourcing to India. I was very surprised by that," one Hispanic woman from Dallas remarked. Others accurately referred to statistics they had recently heard about the economy. "What was it they said?" a Dallas woman asked. "They only had 21,000 jobs available last month?" The level of specificity in their comments demonstrates that they are currently highly interested in economic news.

Focus group participants hear from national leaders and the news media that the economy is improving. However, their personal experience tells them the economy is not improving. "I don't think it's in as great a shape as they want us to believe," stated an African American woman from New Jersey. "When I say 'they,' I mean the government. Like he said, it's 5.6 unemployment. Oh, yeah, that doesn't look bad. But it depends on where you got that 5.6 from...in certain areas, the unemployment is crazy." They recognize that the stock market is

performing better than in the past and that company profits are up. However, they are less concerned about stock market performance than they are about jobs. They are deeply worried about unemployment and underemployment. "Even though the Republicans are saying that the economy is doing much better, jobs are still not being produced," argued a Dallas Hispanic woman. "So to me that's a contradiction in terms."

Focus group participants believe prices are increasing faster than wages, and employment benefits are shrinking. This results in increasing economic pressure on working families. "It's just a struggle to make sure you have all your bills paid and to make sure that you have food in the house and the people around you are comfortable," described a Seattle white collar woman. "Twenty-five years ago, when I worked at K-Mart as a supervisor, I was one of the last full-time employees they hired," a Seattle blue collar woman explained. "After that, they only hired part-time, because they would not give you vacation time, sick leave, or medical coverage."

This problem is tangible and emotional. Several focus group participants tell personal stories about the difficulty of getting and keeping a good job. "I have a lot of friends and family that have really been having a hard time, laid off, just financially," one Hispanic woman from Dallas worried. "It's just so scary for me and my family that every time I let go of something, some type of money, I'm like, 'I shouldn't do this.'" "I can't tell you how many of my good friends and family members don't have jobs," a Seattle blue collar woman insisted, "and

people are scratching and clawing." They are particularly concerned about the job market that recent college graduates face. A few years ago, college graduates were able to land good-paying jobs, they insist, while today many are interviewing for months and settling for less. "My daughter graduated from college in May and she's still unemployed...What do they do? The loans are coming in. We have to pay and there is nothing available. It's really frustrating," a New Jersey woman shared.

While they believe the economy is weak across the country, voters in Indiana and Washington State tend to believe their regions are in worse condition than the rest of the country. "Across the nation maybe the unemployment rate is going down," stated a Seattle blue collar man, "but here in our area, the unemployment rate is horrendous." "Nationally it seems to be doing better than in Indiana," said a white collar man from Indiana. "We're very slow to recover." "This morning [the news] said Indiana was leading in job loss throughout the United States," a blue collar man from Indiana remarked.

Factors Determining Economic Success or Failure

Individual or Systemic

Focus group participants hold two competing understandings of the economy that lead to different policy outcomes. When concentrating on an individual's economic achievement, focus group participants point to hard work as leading to success and moral flaws as responsible for failure. People fail or

succeed in the American economy based upon individual abilities, they assert. However, when they imagine the economy as a broader system, focus group participants readily see how actions can reverberate throughout the system. In this mindset, the economic environment has a strong influence on an individual's or a community's success or failure.

The first phase of research, conducted for this project in 2002, found that the media's tendency to focus on stories of individuals caused the public to blame those individuals for their hardships. "While sympathetic to the plight of a struggling individual, they can only see causes and solutions that are inherent to the individual. The dominant news framing of the working poor as stories of individual problems and solutions underscores existing beliefs instead of helping the public get beyond a mental picture of individual success and failure to see systemic problems and solutions." ("Responsible Planning for the Future," Bostrom 2002)

In the current phase of research, the lens was pulled back from a tight story focus on individuals to include a broader context for the American economy. With this wider lens, focus group participants are able to have sophisticated conversations about the economic system and the influences on the system. For example, throughout the groups, participants discuss that without jobs, people cannot buy products or services, and the economy will fall apart. "Companies, they're only looking at the bottom line," a New Jersey man stated, "but they can look at the bottom line all they want, but if there's nobody to buy the products because they can't afford them

because they don't have jobs – it's just a vicious cycle."

Similarly, people express a systems view in regard to prices, which can be advantageous to advancing a progressive policy agenda, or can hinder it. In explaining why lower gas prices would affect the economy, a Dallas man explained, "All of your costs would be lower. UPS delivery would be cheaper, FedEx, all transportation across the nation." This line of thinking also provides a reason to oppose increasing wages. "You may lift wages, but if everything else's costs triples, what good will that do?" a Dallas Hispanic woman wondered.

People also demonstrate a systems view in regard to outsourcing. Companies outsource to increase profits for shareholders, and shareholders support outsourcing because they want the stock prices to rise. Consumers support outsourcing because they want inexpensive products. "We're not willing to pay more for the products," a Dallas Hispanic woman insisted. "We're not willing to pay the employees. We outsource to China. Everything we buy is practically made in China."

Because the public already demonstrates systems thinking on this issue, it should be possible to insert new linkages that will lead to support for the policies that will benefit low-wage workers. This opportunity is explored in more detail later in this report.

Cyclical, Societal or Structural

Two years ago, the dominant public image of the economy was

that of a force of nature that should be unconstrained. A free market was the ideal state. This line of reasoning was not conducive to government intervention in the economy. However, the recent economic downturn and significant news coverage concerning economic trends have resulted in a public that is beginning to see problems in the American economy that can and should be addressed. Problematically, they frequently cite morals as the source of the problem – the U.S. is becoming a greedy society that demands instant gratification. When morals become the problem, policy change is largely invisible as a solution.

While a few focus group participants remark that the economy is cyclical and the only solution is to wait until it improves, most now believe that action should be taken to address economic problems. "I think we have an opportunity and challenge that we need to make sure that all the new jobs that are created are not just service jobs with far lower pay," stated a Dallas woman.

Several understand that the economic base is shifting. "I think Indiana has traditionally been factory, industry, part of the Midwest. As we lost a lot of jobs in those fields, then there's a lot of other service jobs that opened up," a white collar woman from Indiana shared. "However, the pay is much less." Furthermore, every group of participants angrily point to outsourcing as a visible example of how the structure of the U.S. economy is broken. "The thing is, is that the wages overseas, in Mexico, in these Third World countries, are so little," a



Seattle blue collar woman argued. “It’s cents on the day is all, and so they can afford to ship it and bring it back and still make big money.”

Time and again, focus group participants suggest that greed, selfishness, and a poor work ethic are the underlying reasons for American job loss. According to many focus group participants, Americans are too greedy, and competing in a global economy will require sacrifices on the part of American workers. “We have ourselves to blame for a lot of this,” a blue collar man from Indiana insisted. “The jobs that are out there,” argued an African American woman from New Jersey. “We have gotten ourselves to the point where [people say] ‘I will not take that particular job because I went to school. I graduated with honors, whatever. I’ve had this particular position for 10 years, so I have this amount of experience. I am not going to go out there and flip burgers for McDonald’s for \$5.10 an hour. I refuse.’ So now you’re going to try and continue to get the job that you feel that you are entitled to.”

Unions are part of the problem, they assert. “I think they do more harm than good when it comes down to – for the salaries, you get the big salaries, but then it’s pushing the companies that are paying these salaries out of business. They can’t afford to pay, and so then they go out of the country to get people,” an African American woman from New Jersey explained. “I’ve been union all my life... we want to work, we want to make money and that’s why we go to work,” a blue collar man from Indiana described. “There again, why do you think the manufacturers are there? They want to

make money. Maybe they’re making more than their fair share. But when we go in to negotiate with them, they say, ‘Well, listen, we’ll pay you \$8 an hour and if you can’t do it, we’re going to close up and go home.’ And the workers say, ‘Close up. I’m not going to work for \$8 an hour.’ One of our problems, we’re to blame for our own.”

Society is also part of the problem; Americans are raising spoiled children. “Go by Plano High School during the day, and you look at the parking lot,” suggested one Hispanic man from Dallas. “And look at the cars in the parking lot that high school students are driving. SUVs, BMWs, Mercedes, all that kind of stuff... What are we teaching those kids? Granted, their parents made it, their parents have been able to afford it and provide for their children and give them that, but what are they really teaching those kids?” “Not an appreciation for money, that’s for sure. It has no value,” responded a Dallas Hispanic woman. “Your home 30 years ago was Spartan compared to your home now,” remembered a blue collar man from Indiana. “There weren’t any game boxes and TVs in every room and stuff like that. It was a totally different lifestyle.”

This path of reasoning leads focus group participants to sacrifice and hard work as the solutions – lower wages and benefits, less consumerism, and teaching children morals. “I think we all are [responsible]” stated a Dallas Hispanic man. “The government, we all are. Parents, everybody. We just have to start – we have to get off our high horse. We used to think that the U.S. was the top of the world and no one could compete with

us. Now we have to bring ourselves down and realize that we are competing with the world.” “I think that people here in the United States need to stop taking things for granted and start investing in people and being less greedy,” warned a Dallas Hispanic woman.

Immigrants demonstrate the kind of work ethic that is needed, according to focus group participants. “The Orientals come over here,” stated a woman from Dallas. “They can’t speak the language. They work hard, terribly hard, two three jobs and a bunch of kids, and the whole thing, and somehow they manage. Not all of them do, of course, but an awful lot of them do. I think it is the land, still the land of opportunities for those people that are willing to work hard.”

That immigrants are willing to work for less money undermines American workers. “Our market’s being flooded out by the cheap labor coming over here, so what it’s doing, it’s lowering our standard [of living],” a Seattle blue collar man explained. “That’s where these people from other countries come in, and they’re just working for nothing,” stated an African American man from New Jersey. “That messes up for us. I’m pretty sure everybody around here sees, when they go to car washes and places like that, who do you see?” Some believe the problem is spoiled Americans who are too picky about jobs, while others believe the problem is disloyal employers that will fire employees to hire cheaper ones.

Corporations are also greedy, according to a majority of focus group participants. Corporations are driven by a desire to maximize profits, either

due to executives' personal greed or due to their desire to present favorable reports to stockholders. Executive greed results in exorbitant salaries and bonuses for management, while workers lose wages, benefits, or jobs. Focus group participants are infuriated by CEOs who get bonuses for laying off workers. "AT&T just now merged with another company, and all the big CEOs and all the big executives got big bonuses and everything, while the employees were losing their money," a Seattle blue collar man noted. This is unfair and short-sighted, they note.

When in this last mindset, focus group participants see three categories of solutions. First, they believe society's morals need to change. Americans need to raise children who no longer expect instant gratification, so that when they become stockholders or corporate executives they will not expect immediate profits. Second, they want to put constraints on CEO pay and bonuses and create protections for workers. Finally, when in this mindset, several point to the role for unions in protecting workers from corporate abuses. "But I do think that we need to keep the unions in so that the wages will be higher, so that we can afford to send our kids to college," a blue collar woman from Seattle warned.

What is less dominant in the public's understanding of these issues are the structural trends in job quality and standard of living. One woman from Dallas agreed with the need for a better work ethic, but also asserted that the problem is more than morals: "[we need to] stress education, as well as hard work. And that no one owes them a damn thing unless they earn it. But, it

is also true that there are an awful lot of good people without jobs that can't get jobs. Well they can't get jobs because the companies are downsizing to save money. You know, it's that vicious cycle." To build support for policies to address the needs of low-wage workers, the public needs to stop seeing the problem as cyclical or moral, and instead begin to understand the problem as structural – one that government and society can address and one to which every person is connected. "When you think of the economic infrastructure, you think of people that make products, people that consume those products, and how all of those are linked together and how they relate," a Dallas man remarked.

The Role for Government

Even when the public begins to see the country's economic problems as structural, there continue to be several perceptual barriers to public support for an active role for government: The task is overwhelming; the solutions are not significant enough to make a difference; government is ineffective; politicians are self-centered or corrupt and they do not listen to the people. Even so, the public is looking to government for action.

First, the size and scope of the problem make the task overwhelming. "I'm consumed in my own little world, in my own little just paradigm," a Seattle white collar woman confessed. "I'm reading this and I understand what it's saying...that it's happening everywhere that things are growing, but I don't know. I don't have an answer and I don't really even – this is big potatoes

and I'm still at the small potato level." "With the advancements of robotics the way they're going...the human workforce in 20 years will probably be 30% smaller than what it is today because of technology, because of robotics. There's no solution," a Dallas Hispanic man stressed.

The size of the problem does not fit the recommended solutions. After reading the case for enacting several policies to address the nation's economic problems, a New Jersey woman asked, "How is it going to be done? This is all nice. It's a great proposal. It's a great anticipation for a better future, but how is this going to be done?" In response to another list of recommendations, a Dallas woman remarked, "He thinks all we need to do is raise the minimum wage and that's going to take care of everything. And that's just too simple." To move the public toward action, the problem needs to be manageable, and the solution needs to be significant enough to address the problem.

In addition, some focus group participants assert that many rely too heavily on government. "Well, I don't believe the government can do everything," a Seattle white collar woman argued. "Don't depend on the large corporations. Don't depend on the government. Figure out a way to try to make it happen for yourself."

According to focus group participants, when government does act to improve the economy, politicians frequently make decisions that are not in the best interests of workers or taxpayers. Washington State focus group participants worry about millions of dollars in giveaways to Boeing, and



Indiana residents talk about giveaways to United Airlines. “Boeing got a billion dollars in tax cuts and it saved 1,200 jobs,” a Seattle blue collar man argued. “That’s all, 1,200 jobs for billions of dollars.” They support government incentives, but only with accountability. “I think you give the incentives as long as you’re not giving the farm away...they’re just not vapor jobs...They’ve got to be something that they can truly document,” a white collar man from Indiana insisted.

They believe that politicians seek to advance their own interests, not the interests of the common person. Politicians are either self-centered or corrupt. “We vote for our representatives and our president and we hope that they would be the people that would be representing us,” a New Jersey man remarked, “but it seems that with each new administration that comes in, all their interests lie with corporate America and oil companies and the lobbyists who are representing them and who they can pay off and they’re not representing the little guy.”

Politicians demonstrate that they have the wrong priorities. “The problem is that they won’t bat an eye at spending whatever it is, 5.5 billion, to see if – to confirm that the dust on Mars is red,” an African American man from New Jersey argued. He went on to explain, “We spend on these – I won’t say frivolous endeavors, because it’s not frivolous...space exploration, but they certainly are not priorities the same way feeding those of us that we probably could are.” Politicians do not listen to the people, they say. “We voted down the stadium twice,” a Seattle blue collar woman argued. “And the

Governor said, ‘the people don’t know what they need. They need the stadium.’ We had a stadium.”

Throughout, discussions of government by focus group participants suggest they do not feel engaged in civil society. The people’s role is to vote for public officials, and public officials are then supposed to represent people’s best interests. Beyond voting, focus group participants rarely suggest a role for themselves in championing a political issue. This creates an “us versus them” perception. This battleground perception is further developed by the view that nobody wins political arguments. “When Congress gets involved in this, you have too diverse opinions and nothing ever happens,” a New Jersey man insisted. “One says blue, the other says gray. They never get somewhere in the middle and work again.”

Despite people’s cynicism about government, focus group participants repeatedly refer to the need for government action to address these issues. The comments ranged from specific suggestions for incentives and punishments, to broad statements about government’s priorities. Importantly, the comments indicate that people understand there is a role for government in addressing economic problems. “If the government takes some responsibility, so for example, if the state or the federal government were to provide... [to a] small business owner. ‘Here, we’re going to pay half of your medical care costs for the first two years,’” suggested a blue collar woman from Seattle. “Tax some of the large companies,” a New Jersey man insisted. “If they want to send all these

jobs overseas, make them lose some of their tax benefits that they get.” “Well, I believe the government, the President in this case, should focus more in this country rather than worrying so much about other countries,” a Dallas Hispanic woman complained.

Changing the Conversation

As noted in the Introduction, the objective of this research is to develop a communications framework that will advance a range of policies to assist low-wage workers. To that end, focus group participants reacted to a series of “news articles” that were designed to represent different frames to advance the policy discussion.¹ The mark of success was not which frame focus group participants liked the most. Rather, the objective was to determine how focus group participants’ dialogue and understanding of the issues changed as they considered each frame. By determining the strengths and weaknesses of each frame, it is possible to determine the mix of frame elements that will result in public support for policies to assist low-wage workers.

The cognitive sciences teach us that people communicate on different hierarchical levels. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff has developed a formula describing three integrated

levels of thought. The first, or highest, level of thought is the values level, such as the value of opportunity. The second level of thought is the issue category level, such as education. Finally, the third level of thought is the policy level, such as Headstart programs. By communicating at the most widely accessible level, the values level, communicators ensure that specific policy issues are better understood by the public.

An example of communications that follows this formula is: *We all want to provide children with the best possible opportunities to succeed in life. That’s why public education is so important — it gives children the tools they need for future success. Policies that help student achievement, like Headstart, are effective in giving children better opportunities to do well.* Effective framing relies upon a careful and deliberate navigation of levels of thought.

Furthermore, all of the news articles tested in the focus groups were designed to reflect the learning from the first wave of research:

- Use the Level One values of responsible planning, fairness and opportunity;
- Make the Level Two issue the economy, not poverty;
- Design stories about systems and trends, not episodic individual stories;
- Convey that the economy can be influenced;
- Use a variety of messengers;
- Be careful about tone; and
- Bridge to a variety of solutions.

Of course, there are hundreds of stories that can fit the recommendations listed here. This wave of research was designed to build upon the recommendations to provide more specific guidance about communications approaches, including the mix of values that should be communicated, the most influential tone, and specific language choices that enhance the clarity of the frame.

Levels of Thought		
Levels	Lakoff Model	Example
Level One	Values	Opportunity
Level Two	Issue Category	Education
Level Three	Policy	Headstart

¹The news articles and authors are fictional. Using facts provided by the advisory groups, Public Knowledge constructed the articles to meet specific criteria for testing. They should not be used as a source for factual information.

The Societal Responsible Planning Frame

This frame features the value of responsible planning to discuss the changes that society needs to enact to protect the American standard of living. The article focuses on the changing complexion of the middle class, and the growing numbers of jobs that pay low wages. The tone is straightforward, balanced, and practical. No particular institution is blamed for the situation, but society as a whole is expected to pull together to address the problem. The frame includes a metaphor for the economy (economic infrastructure) to reinforce that the economy is tangible and can be influenced. The message is delivered by an economist.

This framing effectively defines low wages as a structural problem in the economy. The national trends in occupations and wages cause focus group participants to worry if America will become a two-tiered society. This is an urgent problem facing the entire country, they believe.

Focus group participants are stunned to learn that the national shift to lower paying jobs has resulted in one in four American workers earning poverty level wages. Americans already know that the economy is becoming more reliant upon service-oriented jobs, so it is relatively easy for them to incorporate the new knowledge about how the wage structure is changing with the shift of industries. “Well, what jumps out at me is this line in the second paragraph, ‘according to a

report...there has been a nationwide shift from the higher paying,’ which is true,” a Seattle blue collar man explained. “And when I read this, I said, ‘hey, this is perfectly right.’ ...because they’ve taken the highest paying jobs here, and they’re trying to get rid of those, and they’ll get three lower paying jobs to go. But you’ve eliminated the skilled job. Now that skill is gone. Now you’ve got unskilled workers coming up, and where are you at?”

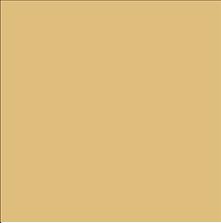
The success of this frame depends upon including examples of highly skilled low-wage jobs to inoculate against the critique that these are burger-flipping jobs for high school students. The first round of research found that most people assume minimum wage jobs are entry-level, unskilled jobs. They are unconcerned about the low wages provided by these jobs, because they believe that people will advance to better paying positions. By including examples of skilled, desirable jobs that are low-wage, very few participants remark that these low-wage jobs are entry-level. Instead, some identify with the situation. “It’s not surprising to me,” a Seattle blue collar woman remarked. “It’s not for me, because classified school employees fit into that category. Everybody – a lot of people I know fit into this.” Similarly, including specific figures for the hourly wages that result in poverty level annual earnings helps people identify with the situation.

The structural metaphor of the economy helps people to see these issues as systemic, not individual. Several talk about the United States becoming a two-tiered society. “What jumped out with this lower paying job

thing, what I see in this is that we are becoming a two-class society,” stated a Seattle blue collar woman. A Dallas woman explained, “I think definitely there are more lower wage jobs, more jobs are lower wage as the percent of the total it used to be. There’s less of the good union jobs; there’s less of the garment workers. There’s less of those middle class jobs, and if we’re not careful – we need to make sure we’re educating people to do the kind of jobs the economy needs which is more of the technological jobs, more of the healthcare profession jobs, etc. and if we’re not careful it could keep getting worse and worse.”

Importantly, this approach is effective because it causes respondents to worry about the nation’s standard of living in the future which then triggers their concerns about a two-tiered society. The key to its success is providing specific examples of the changing structure of the economy paired with a warning for the future and a call for planning a different future. It would not be effective to simply communicate “America is/is becoming a two-tiered society” because people continue to believe that opportunity exists for anyone who is willing to work hard.

The weakness in this frame is its ability to create public support for specific solutions and to place responsibility with government for addressing the problem. While most expect government action to fix this problem, they are unenthusiastic about the proposed solutions and have little faith in government’s ability to make the right decisions. However, some express support for government-funded jobs programs.



What Kind of Economy is America Building?

The country's economic infrastructure is being weakened in ways that will impair the American standard of living for the long-term if we do not take steps to address it now. An increasing percentage of American jobs are low-wage: fully 30 million Americans - one in four U.S. workers - earn \$8.70 an hour or less, a rate that works out to \$18,100 a year, which is the current official poverty level. These low-wage jobs usually lack healthcare, child care, pensions and vacation benefits. The result is that we are changing the very complexion of the United States as a place where middle class workers can buy homes, send their kids to college and get good healthcare.

According to a report by the Economic Policy Institute, there has been a nationwide shift of jobs from higher-paying to lower-paying industries, making the structure of the economy increasingly reliant upon these insecure jobs. Three of every four new jobs created between 1989 and 1999 were in low-wage service industries. At this pace, by the end of the decade, the low end of the job market will account for more than 30 percent of the American work force. These are not necessarily undesirable jobs, but they are jobs that do not pay well, like bank tellers, child care workers, sales people, and nursing home assistants, to name a few. Wages, after being adjusted for inflation, declined for the bottom half of all workers over the past decade. Even college educated men experienced a decline in wages.

Seattle ending: We need to take steps now to stop the wage race to the bottom, by increasing the minimum wage, providing job training for the industries we want to develop for the future, and using government incentives to support the responsible companies that invest in workers and provide good jobs that support families and strengthen communities.

Dallas ending: We need to take steps now to stop the wage race to the bottom, by increasing the minimum wage by \$1.50 over two years to reach \$6.65 per hour which will generate more spending by workers and stimulate the economy. We also need to provide job training for the occupations we need to develop, such as training to address the nursing shortage. Finally, we should use government support to rebuild our decaying infrastructure - highways, schools, water treatment plants, etc. - to provide good jobs that support families and strengthen communities.

Chris Powell, Economist, Economic Policy Institute

For a few, the solution to the problem is to live through the shake-out. “The process goes through shake-out periods and we’re going through one of those periods again,” said a Seattle white collar man. “If you lived in the northeast, you used to have all the mills there and then they shifted down south and now they’re gone. For the most part, they’re all over in India, or Malaysia, or Singapore with the new technology. Steel. We’ve gone through all of this. Japan used to be and Germany used to be great steel producers. Not any more.”

Most, however, expect government to take action to address these issues. “I think that it’s the government that should take some accountability for that,” a Seattle blue collar woman argued. “They’re the ones allowing it.” However, as noted earlier, there are significant barriers to supporting a role for government. For example, several focus group participants support the recommendation for government incentives, but they also have witnessed corporate abuse of government tax breaks. These negative past experiences undermine support. “It’s the governor shooting the state in the foot,” a Seattle white collar man complained. “I think it’s great to give tax breaks, but the taxpayers bear the brunt and this is a company – I’m speaking specifically of Boeing – they are making a product and selling it internationally, globally, and I think it’s great to get a break, but at the expense of what?”

Furthermore, focus group participants insist that lifting wages would only be a temporary solution. As wages increase, so do prices, putting workers back where they started. “I don’t think

it would help in the long run,” stated a Dallas Hispanic man. Another explained that it could result in a worse job situation: “[the opposition’s] main argument is if we have to raise the minimum wage in order to pay for our employees, we have to cut back on their benefits or we have to lay off employees in order to do that.”

Instead of funneling more money to corporations and workers, and hoping the money will result in an improved economy, a few focus group participants wonder why jobs programs are not the primary solution to unemployment. One Hispanic man from Dallas explained, “In the ’50s and ’60s, the government had programs with our national parks and our highways, that they would take individuals who were the low educated people – they didn’t finish high school, that kind of thing – and they would put them in new jobs where it helped build the community. Those kinds of programs don’t even exist anymore.”

Specific phrases tested in this article need to be used with caution. “Wage race to the bottom” is strong language, but it can inadvertently pit the public against low-wage workers unless blame is placed elsewhere. “Secure jobs” and “insecure jobs” are misunderstood as “job security.”

“Wage race to the bottom” is very powerful language for focus group participants. It causes them to think of outsourcing as well as immigration. In fact, some people transition very quickly from outsourcing to immigration, resulting in a few focus group participants incorrectly

misinterpreting the articles’ discussion of a structural shift of jobs as meaning shifting jobs to different people. One Seattle blue collar man explained his understanding of the shifting economy: “I read an article like this in the newspaper here, and this is true because your skilled workers are getting laid off, and those skilled workers are being replaced by the underclass workers.” This line of thinking can inadvertently create an “us versus them” mentality that puts the needs of low-wage workers behind one’s own needs, rather than create a sense of economic interdependence. “Wage race to the bottom,” while powerful, needs to be used only with careful construction so that low-wage workers are not blamed for low wages.

Finally, the language of “secure jobs” and “insecure jobs” is ineffective in advancing the conversation. People misinterpret these words as referring to “job security,” meaning a life-long job, which they believe no longer exists in America.

The Economic Mobility Frame

This frame uses the value of opportunity to discuss changing trends in economic mobility. Importantly, this frame puts effective solutions first to determine whether or not leading with solutions makes change seem more achievable. Furthermore, it does not try to place blame for economic problems on any sector of society. The metaphors for the economy are movement and growth. It is delivered by an advocate, from an organization whose name reinforces the frame. (This is not about testing the organization's awareness levels or name; it is about understanding how people hear a message when it is delivered by an advocate.)

Several focus group participants are receptive to the notion that opportunity may be more difficult to find in America – particularly if they had already been exposed to other articles before reading this one. Several are stunned to hear about the percentages of people stuck in poverty due to the declining purchasing power of the minimum wage. They are unconvinced, however, by comparisons to other countries. Vision and planning are critical components of the message.

One of the most successful elements of this message is the concept of planning. Focus group participants worry that government is not getting ahead of this problem. “Being in the military, we look three years ahead in our budget – what we’re going to need

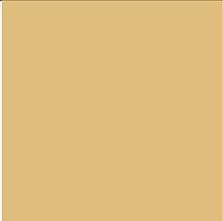
three years ahead,” a Seattle white collar man explained, “and I don’t know if the government’s doing a real good job of that right now – planning what we’re going to need, where we’re going to need to be five years from now and what our kids are going to need five years from now...it all goes back to their not thinking about far enough in the future to fix what we have now that’s broken.”

Furthermore, several focus group participants find compelling the statistics demonstrating that opportunity is disappearing in America. The declining purchasing power of the minimum wage and the increasing percentages of families stuck in poverty again point to structural problems. “The growing lower income people – going from 49% to 53%,” a New Jersey man indicated. “That’s frightening. And now with two people working, you still can’t make ends meet.” This is not the image of opportunity that most believe existed in America. An African American man from New Jersey asserted, “That’s mind-staggering. He’s saying the reason for that is, you have these places like Wal-Mart that come and they create tens of thousands of millions of jobs that pay less than poverty line wage...I mean, we’re the United States of America. You can say, OK, I’m giving you a job, but you’re not really giving me a job. What you’re really doing is insulting my intelligence, and that’s going to make me want to do something maybe I’m not supposed to be doing to make ends meet, or maybe I have to work two or three jobs. So it’s not really even really, really a solution. It’s like putting a Band-Aid on a broken arm.”

Comparisons between the mobility of workers in the United States and other countries do not advance the argument. Some reject the reference because they have not visited other countries, so they are not an eyewitness to this assertion. “How do you know?” a Seattle blue collar man argued. “How do you know what they’re saying [is true]? How do you know what France – I’ve never been to France.” At other points in the conversation, focus group participants assert that European economies are different and cannot be compared to the U.S. “Well, you can’t compare us to the other countries because their governments are totally different from ours,” a blue collar woman from Indiana insisted. “Very different. Like Sweden, their government is much different than the U.S. government.”

The solutions listed at the beginning of the article were unable to motivate public action or public support for a role for government. However, the article does convince focus group participants of the need to plan for future jobs, which builds support for public education but not for job training.

The solutions listed at the beginning of the tested article sound nice, but they are not widespread or substantial enough to make a difference according to focus group participants. A New Jersey man suggested that the solutions listed “are few and far between and they’re very minimal and they really don’t make a big dent. For instance...the New Jersey governor said that he was providing scholarships, but if you looked to see what the scholarships here in New



Opportunity Jobs in a High Growth Economy, Version 1

Every day we read stories about the national economy, but there are several stories of hope and success that you rarely see: The community organization that brought economic development to an inner city neighborhood, resulting in good-paying jobs where there had been few; the union that instituted job training programs for displaced workers; the state government program that funded college scholarships for top high school graduates, regardless of their ability to pay. These pilot programs are successfully bringing opportunity back to communities where it seemed all but gone.

These solutions are needed now more than ever, because the notion of America being a highly mobile society full of opportunity isn't as true as it used to be. In fact, the economy is slowly stratifying along class lines. Some 49% of families who started the 1970s in poverty were still stuck there at the end of that decade. In the 1990s, the figure increased to 53%, even after accounting for two-wage earner families. One reason is the creation of millions of jobs that pay less than a poverty-line wage of \$8.70 an hour. At \$5.15 an hour, the purchasing power of the minimum wage is 25% lower than it was in the 1970s. What today costs what it did in the 1970s? The U.S. economy provides less mobility for low-wage earners, according to an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study, than do the economies of France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, Finland or Sweden.

To create opportunity for advancement, we need to plan for the kinds of opportunity jobs and a high growth economy that we will want and need in 10, 20 or 30 years. This will require investing in education, job training, and targeted industry incentives.

Shawn Rogers, Jobs for the Future

Jersey, what they were, they were about \$500 given to each family for community college.” Furthermore, these examples are ineffective in building support for a role for government, because most participants see the actors who are advancing the solutions as nongovernmental entities. “What stands out to me is that these community organizations and these unions are taking it upon themselves to make sure that the people are trained or building within the community and not depending on the government to do it,” stated a Seattle blue collar woman.

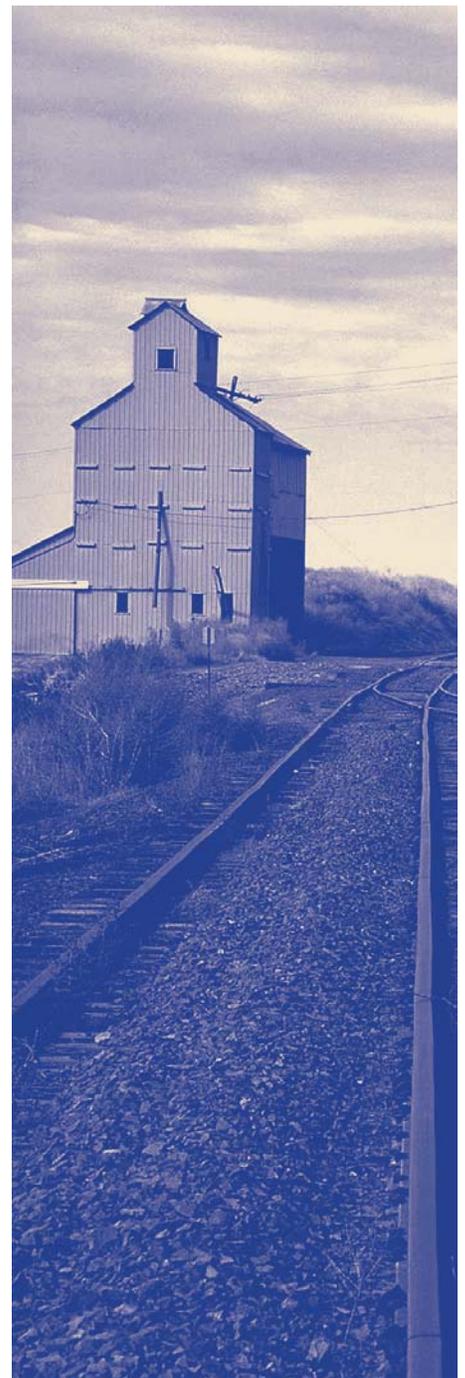
The planning frame, in conjunction with powerful statistics demonstrating economic decline, convince focus group participants that the objective needs to be planning for the future for the kinds of jobs that will pay well and allow an opportunity for upward mobility. However, as written, this approach does not incorporate the kinds of policy recommendations that focus group participants believe will achieve that objective. This frame positions job training as one solution to the problem, but participants reject that job training is the right solution. While they support job training, it is not the right solution because job training already occurs and there are no jobs once a person has been trained, they insist.

At the same time, this frame builds support for public education to ensure that children have transferable skills for the future economy. “And it all goes back to education,” an African American man from New Jersey stated. “For a person to make the type of money that they need, education is key.” Another added, “And to have that

upward mobility, you have to be educated, so it all boils back to what Cory was saying in the beginning, that you have to have an educated society to provide that upward mobility.” Problematically, several participants indicate that this solution – education – also needs fixing. “With the advent of technology, things are changing so rapidly and our educational system is not prepared to deal with it,” a New Jersey woman expressed. “It’s woefully behind. It’s sad. And I live in a fairly decent school district, but I look at what they’re trying to do and they don’t have a clue.”

On economic issues, it is very easy to incorporate terminology that people will misunderstand. “Economic mobility,” for example, was misunderstood by some participants. “Opportunity job” is an effective term for upwardly mobile employment. “Economic mobility” is a complicated term for several people. A few believe it has something to do with one’s ability to physically move. “When you said, less mobility, you’re talking within an organization, or within a country?” a New Jersey man asked. Another added, “If I wanted to move, I’ll move. I don’t want to move.” Language such as “ability to get ahead” or even “upward mobility” would be clearer.

“Opportunity job” conveys a great deal about the kind of job being referenced. It paints an image of a job that provides advancement, opportunity for growth and upward mobility. “One that offers advancement, or at least the opportunity for advancement,” a New Jersey woman explained.



The Bubble-Up Economy Frame

Midway through the testing, it became apparent that a list of specific solutions was not an effective way to begin the conversation about economic mobility. The frame was rewritten to incorporate a model for the economy based on putting more money in the hands of low-wage workers. The Ford philosophy and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) example were developed to convey the economic value of an infusion of money in the low-wage sector.

(Since this frame is a revision of the prior article, only new points of analysis are mentioned here.)

Illustrating a ripple effect in the economy through the examples of Henry Ford and the EITC creates an understanding of the beneficial connections between the wages of low-income earners and the rest of the economy. This frame sparks conversations among focus group participants concerning the economic interconnections among people. Without jobs, they explain, people cannot buy products and the economy weakens even further. A Dallas man explained his view of Ford's approach: "I'm familiar with this and I think it's on target. Paying workers more than he thought he could or had to, because who is going to buy his products unless they have money? Yes. I think it's a pretty good thing." Another added, "Take Christmas, for example. The more money that the consumer has to spend, the more

money that they put into the economy. So increasing the pay that someone is paid, that benefits the economy a lot."

However, the Henry Ford example should be used carefully. When used to demonstrate a philosophy of the importance of paying workers well, it can create positive interconnections with low-wage workers. But this example also reminds focus group participants of how differently CEOs operate today. One Hispanic man from Dallas told of a story he read "about a CEO that got a \$10 million bonus for one year and that was the same company that laid off, what, 35,000 people that year. Something's not right there, and it's not just that one company. It's all the way across industry." The danger of this perspective is that it can easily trap the public in a nostalgic view of a time that they believe will never come again.

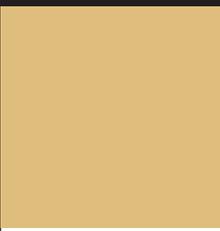
Once introduced to the concept of an economy that bubbles up from workers, it becomes a mental model that many focus group participants rely upon as they consider policy solutions. However, several focus group participants do not distinguish between the EITC and a general tax cut. They have learned over the years that tax cuts stimulate the economy. Several insist that "trickle-down" tax cuts and "bubble up" tax cuts would both be effective. Since progressives have not created a response to trickle-down economics, the public has no rationale for why putting more money in the hands of the lowest income workers is likely to have a more beneficial effect on the overall

economy than any other tax cut. This approach needs more visibility.

Those focus group participants who were exposed to the "bubble up" model came back to the model repeatedly throughout the conversation to explain why certain policies are a good or bad idea. For example, a white collar man stated, "I think that they're trying to somehow increase money for lower-wage people so the money gets back in the system. I mean it sounds good."

However, several participants have difficulty recognizing why tax benefits to the lowest income workers are more beneficial than general tax cuts. They do not have an existing cognitive model that is relevant. "I had a hard time determining how you could give somebody \$62 million and they can spend \$248 million," a blue collar man from Indiana stated. "You're not thinking ahead," another replied. "I spend it at your store, you spend it again – they're talking about how it grows on top of each other. They're not talking about one person spending four times what he got." "It seems like the flow of money is never really going to stay local," a white collar man from Indiana suggested. "Yes, it may circulate a couple of times, but it's a small percentage of what actually this meant."

Without an understanding for the economic impact of "trickle down" compared to "bubble up," an expansion of the EITC sounds like any other tax cut. "I was thinking Bush did this a couple of years ago where he was talking about giving your income tax credit in advance, not having to wait for a year for you to file your return



Opportunity Jobs in a High Growth Economy, Version 2

Henry Ford had it right more than 100 years ago when he insisted on paying his workers a higher than average wage so they could afford to buy the cars they produced. "There is one rule for the industrialist," he said, "and that is: Make the best quality of goods possible at the lowest cost possible, paying the highest wages possible." This simple lesson is one we need to learn again if we are to maintain our standard of living.

When more money is placed in the hands of those who need it most, the effect reverberates throughout society. For example, the city of Miami expanded the earned income tax credit, returning \$62 million to low wage workers. This generated four times the economic impact (\$248 million) because of the recirculation of spending in the community.

The notion of America being full of opportunity for everyone isn't as true as it used to be. In fact, the economy is slowly dividing along class lines. Some 49% of families who started the 1970s in poverty were still stuck there at the end of that decade. In the 1990s, the figure increased to 53%, even after accounting for two-wage earner families. One reason is the creation of millions of jobs that pay less than a poverty-line wage of \$8.70 an hour. At \$5.15 an hour, the purchasing power of the minimum wage is 25% lower than it was in the 1970s. What today costs what it did in the 1970s? The U.S. economy provides less ability for low-wage earners to get ahead, according to an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study, than do the economies of France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, Finland or Sweden.

Part of the solution lies in lifting minimum wages and benefits to halt the wage race to the bottom. But creating opportunity for advancement will also require planning for the kinds of good jobs and a high growth economy that we will want and need in 10, 20 or 30 years in opportunity industries like healthcare, clean energy systems, and biotechnology among others. To lead in these industries we need to invest in education, job training, and incentives targeted toward opportunity industries.

Shawn Rogers, Jobs for the Future

and get back whatever it was – the \$400 – two or three years ago,” a white collar man from Indiana remembered. One white collar man from Indiana explained why tax cuts to the wealthy would benefit the economy more than tax cuts to the poor: “They’ve got the most money, so if they’re able to not pay as much [in taxes], then they’ll put more in the economy, or if they’re CEO of a company and there’s more money to be made, then they’ll hire more. For the low end, I don’t look at it as any economic benefit.” Another white collar man from Indiana suggested that all income levels could help the economy in different ways, so a broad tax cut would be best: “I think general tax cuts across the board, because I think the poor will spend it within the community. I think the rich, while they invest it, they’re investing it back in to the corporations by the purchase of stock.”

“Opportunity industry” does not communicate the intended image. Focus group participants believe this refers to any industry in which there may be economic opportunity, i.e., a fad. The label “opportunity industry” suggests any industry in which there are opportunities for jobs. For some, it sounds like investing in a fad. A white collar man from Indiana described opportunity industries as “whatever is the new thing at the time. Like a few years ago it was the dotcoms, and now you have like the low-carb diet stuff and that sort of thing.” “Like opportunistic people,” a blue collar woman from Indiana explained. “Here’s what’s hot, we’ll go to that. It’s not necessarily going to last.” Focus group participants would be more receptive to government incentives for these

industries if they were more clearly identified as emerging industries, to clarify that what is being proposed is incubating promising industries, not giving tax breaks to existing multinational corporations for status quo activities.



The Stewardship Frame

This article features a futuristic form of the responsible planning value – stewardship, i.e., leaving the economy in good shape for our children. Again, the tone is neutral and no blame is assigned, but a series of government policies are suggested as solutions. The metaphor for the economy is health and economic well-being, quality of life. It is delivered by a union leader.

Connecting today's economic trends to the next generation's prosperity is a very effective frame for communicating on this issue. This is a very motivational frame. It seems incomprehensible to focus group participants that American society would not do everything possible to prevent worsening conditions for future generations. “I think the future of our children is at risk,” a Seattle blue collar woman warned. “We’re looking right now at our children being worse off than we were,” a New Jersey man worried. “You always want to have your children do better than you are. This tells me that we’re in a shit sandwich coming up, here.” An African American man from New Jersey reported that this article “said exactly what my point was, which is, we have to invest better in the future, to make sure our children will be better off. So I agree with that. I think he hit it right on the head.” “Something has to be done about the economy for the future of the country, for children and everybody,” an African American woman from New Jersey insisted. “I don’t know if it’s going to be with better wages or education. I think all of that combined, we have to do something about the economy,

because the country is just going down.”

The risk shifting approach is very effective in communicating problems facing the health insurance industry. Importantly, however, the public’s concerns about healthcare could overshadow their concerns about the economy. Since public understanding of the healthcare issue is somewhat more developed, the discussion can quickly become polarized. They want government to address healthcare, but they are nervous about “socialized” medicine.

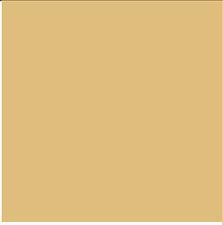
Focus group participants are stunned to find that one in four workers are without health insurance, and they readily see how risk for health costs has transferred to them. “Where the factories used to always take care of our healthcare and all of our benefits and everything,” a blue collar man from Indiana explained, “now they’ve loaded it all down to us and making us have to pay for it and get it, or we don’t have it.” “In the ’70s, healthcare, that was just a given. When you got a job, they provided healthcare,” a Seattle white collar woman remembered. “... but I talk with a lot of my friends and stuff like that and they pay out the nose for their healthcare in these days.”

They want government to act. “The government needs to better watch the HMOs, the insurance industries,” a Seattle blue collar man argued. “They need to, some kind of way, come up with some kind of team or something... this is their job right here, is to oversee all of these prescriptions, all of the healthcare issues. That’s your

job, because if there’s no one running the train, anybody’s going to drive.”

However, they also think this problem is too big to solve and they worry that government will make the situation worse. “These are monumental tasks, though, to try to turn this around,” a New Jersey man worried. “This is heavy stuff, here... what are you going to use to get there? This is that whole thing where we always get caught up in politics, or whatever. It’s not driving it in the right direction. We always get stuck.”

Their experience with health reform efforts during the Clinton Administration reinforced their perception of the difficulty of the task. In discussing Hillary Clinton’s efforts, a New Jersey man stated there was “too much fighting going on down in Washington with the lobbyists down there for her to take on and that was – what, 12 years ago when she said that? And we’re no better off now. We’re probably worse now than we were then.” They quickly mention “socialized medicine” and waiting lists. “But the only thing with social medicine is if you have everybody on the same plan, you can’t get to your doctor until 30 days down the road,” a blue collar woman from Indiana warned.



Ensuring Our Children's Future

Future prosperity requires that we start thinking today about the industries we want to develop, the infrastructure we will need, and the investments society makes in today's workforce. But are we planning for the kind of future that ensures our children will be better off? Indicators of economic well-being suggest that the nation's economy is unhealthy and needs intervention to prevent long-term damage.

The economy has become more uncertain and anxiety producing over the past 30 years. By fixating on the day-to-day ups and downs of the economy, we have missed an important trend: that economic risk is increasingly shifting from government and corporations onto workers and their families. For example, the instability of family incomes was roughly five times greater in the 1990s than in 1972. Part of this is due to declining wages (the purchasing power of the minimum wage is 21 percent less than it was 25 years ago), but part of it is due to weakening benefits. In the 1970s, healthcare coverage was practically universal for corporate employees. However, by 1995, one of every four workers in the nation's top employers did not receive healthcare benefits. And many more have to make substantial contributions to pay for healthcare.

We have to choose between two paths. One path allows these trends to continue, leaving our children to face a future of risk and insecurity. But there is another path - one where we take steps today to ensure our children's future economic security: universal health insurance to protect against the consequences of a catastrophic illness, a higher minimum wage to lift families out of poverty, and improved education, including education in the early years, to provide the best opportunities for the future. Our children deserve this better future.

Robert Ahrens, Union leader

“Economic well-being” is a term that suggests safety and security. It is the goal for a family’s income. “Economic security” is interpreted more narrowly – it reminds people that jobs are no longer secure. “Economic well-being” conveys comfort, security, and “we’ll be all right.” “We’re financially going to be OK,” stated a blue collar woman from Indiana. “The health of the economy, if it’s thriving or plateauing,” explained a white collar woman from Indiana. A white collar man from Indiana explained that it means, “Being able to have enough income to take care of your family, your mortgage, the insurance.” “My interpretation of economic well-being is like I stated at the start of this,” said a blue collar man from Indiana. “I can remember when I was working for 80¢ an hour and I had stability. Wages, the cost factor increased over the years, but there was a status quo. That’s the catch-22, but that’s the economic stability.”



The Corporate Responsibility Frame

This approach lays the blame for the country's economic problems with corporations. The value of responsibility is adjusted to be about corporate responsibility to communities. The metaphors for the economy are weak structures and facades – house of cards, shell game, and paper wealth. It is delivered by a CEO, with the intent of conveying that there are good companies that have a responsibility to their communities, and there are “grab and go companies” that do not care about the communities in which they work.

Focus group participants are angry and frustrated with unethical corporate behavior. They want corporations to make profits, but those profits should be used fairly to benefit workers and communities, not hoarded by a few greedy executives. This frame connects with focus group participants' current attitudes toward companies. They are angry about corporate executives' greedy behavior and lack of responsibility for workers' well-being. “The pay isn't commensurate with their responsibility,” a Seattle white collar woman argued. “It's really – they're raping the lower people to justify their large incomes.” Too many executives, they believe, do what they can to benefit personally. That executives would receive bonuses while workers lose their jobs defies common sense. A Dallas woman stated, “Giving them these ridiculous salaries and imbecilic

severance pay when the company is going down the tube is so moronic it's unreal... a change in attitude about that would reverberate in the community and with all the other companies.”

At the same time, they do not want to blame all corporations for the behavior of a few. “We should only bash the bad corporations, not bash every corporation just because they are a corporation,” a Seattle white collar man remarked. “There are corporations that are good.” Focus group participants want corporations to be profitable because only a profitable company can help workers, communities and the economy. “I don't think you improve the economy by destroying large corporations and/or by winning exorbitant state law suits against them,” a Seattle white collar man insisted. “I think companies making a lot of money is a damn good thing,” stated a Dallas woman. “I think that there's another side that sometimes people say ‘well if you made that much, if company X makes that much money, they should do something to help the community.’ I think they should.”

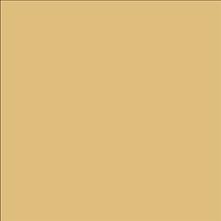
The challenge of this frame is whether the public anger can be turned toward positive solutions. If corporate misbehavior is perceived to be about morals and instant gratification, then the only solution focus group participants can see is teaching their children better morals. However, if the problem is defined as a lack of connection to community, then focus group participants can see the value of supporting local, independent businesses that are connected to communities, instead of multinational

corporations that have few local commitments.

Short-term thinking is the problem, they say. “The salient feature is the short term profit motivation,” asserted a Dallas woman. “I think that really is a highly destructive idea.” This desire for instant gratification permeates society. “You don't have to make all your profit today,” a Dallas man explained. “We're so accustomed as a society, I mean we drive through McDonald's and we get our instant food. We turn on the TV and we have our instant entertainment... and we just become accustomed to having everything now.” According to some participants, the only solution to this problem is teaching morality and changing societal expectations. The society expects instant rewards and business leaders integrate that objective in their corporate cultures. Society needs to teach children different morals, they insist.

Others, however, see that the problem is a lack of corporate commitment to workers and communities. They insist that one solution is to stop allowing so many government incentives for huge multinational corporations, and instead invest in independent community businesses. “Maybe if there were more, I guess, less of a monopoly with some of the larger corporations and more competition,” a white collar woman from Seattle suggested, “and then you wouldn't have these companies who were behaving badly.”

Individuals need to take some responsibility as well. Consumers want low prices, which can only be accomplished with low wages, they



The Secrets of Highly Defective Companies

Too many companies and investors care only about the next quarterly earnings report rather than the communities in which they operate and the nation that sustains them. And our policies reward companies that demonstrate the least responsibility to American communities. This needs to change.

The real lessons from Enron and many other recent corporate "scandals" is that the issues do not stem from any criminal wrongdoing. Most of Enron's maneuvers, for example, are not only legal, they are widely practiced. Increasingly, corporations are setting up a house of cards with a façade of paper profits. The fact is that CEO compensation bears little relationship to company performance. In fact, we reward companies that undermine American workers and communities. At the 50 companies with the most layoffs in 2001, median CEO pay rose 44 percent in the following year while overall CEO pay climbed only 6 percent. Our government policies encourage short-term profit motivation. For example, we allow tax deductions for the shell game of stock options, which resulted in \$3.6 billion in tax deductions in 2002 just based on 350 leading firms. These deductions cost our communities. The amount of these options-related corporate tax deductions is roughly equivalent to the combined 2003 budget deficits of seven of the top ten largest U.S. states.

Companies that try to strengthen communities are undermined by those that are rushing to move jobs out of the country. A Microsoft executive has instructed department heads to "Think India" and to "pick something to move offshore today." This is deliberate job destruction and an open assault on America's unifying social ethic that "We're all in this together."

Seattle: Instead of tax deductions for companies with a façade of paper profits that lay off workers while hoarding wealth for executives, we need to change our policies and reward the solid corporate citizens that sustain good paying jobs, recognize their responsibility to the communities that support them, and treat their workers with respect and as members of a team.

Dallas: Instead of tax deductions for companies with a façade of paper profits that lay off workers while hoarding wealth for executives, we need to use our policies to strengthen families and communities. That means helping small businesses afford healthcare benefits for all their employees, expanding tax credits to low-income workers, and targeting economic development incentives to bring good jobs to our communities.

Alex Taylor, business owner and President of the local Chamber of Commerce

believe. “But we created it ourselves, because if we want it made in America and we want to pay the people in the manufacturing here in the United States, if you want to pay them \$25, \$30 an hour to produce something, then the price of those goods is going to be double than what it is now when it’s produced overseas,” a Dallas Hispanic man explained. “So are we willing to pay that? That’s just it. Are we willing to pay that? And you can see that every day, because people won’t buy stuff. They’re waiting for it to go on sale.”

Focus group participants are not dissuaded by the harsh tone and strong metaphors; they accurately represent how focus group participants feel about corporate America.

Language asserting that CEO pay is not commensurate with company performance is very powerful. The recommendation to regulate stock options, however, is largely ineffective.

Finally, some focus group participants have a very good understanding of stock options. Dallas participants, for example, have quite a lot of experience with stock options and understand it well. Many other focus group participants, however, think of them simply as stock with no additional benefits. Few understand why stock options need regulation.



The Governmental Responsible Planning Frame

The Governmental Responsible Planning Frame begins with the value of responsible planning, but directs responsibility toward government and corporate choices and how those choices affect the economy and the American standard of living. The metaphor for the economy is an economic engine and damage to that engine. It is delivered by a politician.

The most compelling part of this message is the call for long-term planning rather than short-term decision making. Focus group participants recognize that many decisions are made without understanding the long-term consequences. “There have been a lot of decisions that have been made based on what this month’s bottom line is going to look like rather than what is – where are we really going over the next 36 months or the next 72 months,” a Dallas woman remarked. “What he’s saying is, don’t sacrifice long-term stability for short-term profits,” explained an African American man from New Jersey. Added another, “Right, like we were talking about before about putting a Band-Aid on what needs stitches.”

In fact, several comment that frequently companies deliberately damage their long-term prospects to appear to be more profitable in the short term. “They do everything to make their stock look better to the stockholders,” explained a white collar man from Indiana. “So that’s why they’ll have in their annual report that they’re doing all this cost-cutting... But what, again, you don’t realize is they

may be cutting off their nose to spite their face.”

This call for long-term vision sounds unique. “He uses the word planning a lot and I think that’s something that hasn’t ever been said before and I think that planning is the right way to go – for the long term, not for the short term,” stated a New Jersey man.

As with so many of the other test articles, the weakness in the approach is its ability to convert public concern to support for societal action. This frame’s emphasis on government choices and political action causes many to suggest the government is inept and corrupt, therefore change is impossible.

The conversation following focus group participants’ exposure to this frame turned toward inept government that cannot do anything right and corrupt politicians who say one thing and do another. Once the mindset of failed and corrupt government is triggered, the problem becomes overwhelming — change can’t happen because politics and lobbyists will keep it from happening. A Dallas man warned, “Never, never, never. You’ve got too many lobbyists with big international companies that are going to say no, we don’t need to do that.” Politicians can’t be trusted, because all they care about is reelection. “It just seems that they’re always saying, ‘I can do all this for you, but it’s going to take time. So you need to re-elect me, you need to get me back in there... and it’s not my fault it didn’t work,’” said a blue collar man from Indiana.

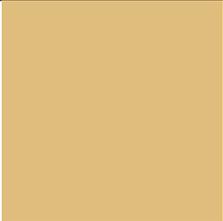
However, if the responsibility for change is shared by all, solutions seem

feasible. “Well, we all have to work at it, the planning,” remarked a Dallas Hispanic woman. “The government can plan all this, but we as a community also have to work at it.”

Comparing the United States to other countries is not an effective approach. Focus group participants say the comparisons are not justified because the other countries are socialist economies. Focus group participants reject the international comparison. Those are socialist economies with very high taxes, they assert. A Dallas woman referred to the countries as socialist and went on to explain why the comparison doesn’t hold: “I think the way they compare with the Swedes, Canadians, etc. I think the – paying people more money for minimum wages jobs [sounds socialist]. I think in general that’s the tone of it. Not having global trade, not letting other people in, immigration laws. Deregulation, deregulating all the industries... basically saying we shouldn’t have done all that.”

If the United States wants to follow the lead of these other countries, the result will be higher taxes. “When they keep talking about the other economies – European economies – my understanding is their taxes are really pretty damn high compared to ours. So if the way to fix this is to increase taxes and then guess who it hits. The people in the middle,” a New Jersey woman explained.

The long list of policy references are intellectually challenging to the reader. Furthermore, including immigration within a series of issues causes focus



Short-Term Decisions with Long-Term Consequences

As a society we make choices that have consequences, and it is quickly becoming apparent to many that we need to make different decisions concerning the nation's economic engine.

A series of political and corporate choices over the past 25 years have damaged the economic engine and undercut workers, especially those in lower pay grades. Those bad choices that harmed our economy included the push to increase global trade, change immigration law, deregulate industries that had been highly unionized, and a corporate shift to maximize immediate profits, rather than a long-term vision centered on investing in people, communities, and infrastructure. Those decisions worsened job conditions and exaggerated disparities in income and wealth. The result is that the American standard of living, formerly the best in the world, is falling behind. Americans in the lowest income brackets now have living standards that are 13 percent below those of low-income Germans, 24 percent below Swedes, and 15 percent below Canadians.

With good planning we can repair the nation's economic engine and have an economy that works for all -- companies, workers and communities.

NJ: That means planning for long-term stability over short-term profits by investing in worker training, decent wages that support families, fair trade policy, and immigration laws that build the country rather than worsen wages and working conditions.

Dallas, IN: The Blueprint for Economic Security, an initiative being introduced in Congress, is the first step toward planning for long-term economic security by investing in worker training, increasing minimum wages, basing international trade policy on fair standards for work and environmental protection, and enforcing immigration laws that build the country rather than worsen wages and working conditions.

The improvements we make today in creating strong communities and a secure workforce, will pay off in a finely-tuned economic engine that will take us all to a more prosperous future.

Pat Reynolds, State Legislator

group participants to focus on immigration. Focus group participants struggled to understand the list of political choices in the second paragraph of this news article. Frequently, participants were unclear if the second paragraph was intended as recommended future actions or a list of past mistakes. Fewer policy references, simpler language, and a more detailed explanation of negative consequences, would make this approach more compelling. Even so, focus group participants understood the broader point that the economy has been influenced by deliberate choices that were sometimes wrong.

Focus group participants have very strong opinions about the economic effect of immigration and outsourcing. Including immigration and outsourcing within a mix of other issues results in participants giving significant attention to immigration and outsourcing, and little attention to the other issues. “We’re sending all these jobs out,” a Dallas Hispanic man asserted. “We’re setting up all these factories; we’re closing down factories in the United States, opening up factories anywhere overseas. And what we’re doing is we’re depending too much on them, and what’s going to happen is we’re going to find ourselves with some kind of revolution in this country, because people are just going to get fed up with it.” If a communicator wants to call attention to a range of problems, the message will be more effective if immigration is kept separate from the other issues.

The “economic engine” metaphor is a strong image that makes many connections for focus group participants.

“Just imagine if you’ve got a lot of gunk in the engine and it wasn’t running well,” described an African American man from New Jersey. “A finely tuned engine means that everything is working well.” “I just pictured a train derailling,” added a blue collar woman from Indiana. “I thought economic engine,” said a blue collar man from Indiana, “I saw growth, I saw everybody working, I saw people

trying to get this thing going in a positive direction.”



The Unfair Monopoly Frame

This frame features the value of fairness to discuss wages and smart economic development. It blames government for making decisions that are not in people's best interests. It is the only frame that features a specific company, to see if the attention to one company helps to make the case or if it simply distracts people into consumer solutions rather than societal solutions. The economic metaphors are agricultural – landscape, thriving, stagnant. It is delivered by a community leader.

By the sheer size of Wal-Mart, focus group participants understand that the company can have a strong impact on the nation's economy. However, they believe that Wal-Mart's size is also the reason that the company can provide good quality products at low prices.

Focus group participants are stunned by Wal-Mart's size and scope. "It says one in every 20 new jobs, \$1 in every \$5 spent on groceries. That's a staggering number when you think about how significant that is to our whole economic landscape," an African American man from New Jersey remarked.

Focus group participants believe Wal-Mart's size allows it to keep prices low. "Well, Wal-Mart has a million stores, so they're going to sell their card for \$1," a blue collar man from Indiana described. "So you just basically price out all the smaller competition, because you can do so much volume." Making people aware of the high

percentage of imports at Wal-Mart does little to change their opinion because they believe every other company imports from China as well.

Several focus group participants also recognize that the company's hiring practices contribute to low prices. "A trend that's going around the United States now is they hire a lot of part-time people," stated a New Jersey man. "You hire part-time people, you don't have to pay any benefits." "Plus, they're non-union," added another. "Right. They'll make them work 30 hours a week, or whatever like that and they're not eligible for benefits." For the most part, workers' nonunion status does not hurt Wal-Mart's image. Focus group participants believe workers have a choice concerning whether or not to unionize. "Well, I mean, the workers themselves, they have a right to vote and I don't think he's [Wal-Mart's owner] ever deprived them," argued a blue collar man from Indiana. "So it's the workers themselves that have selected not to be organized or recognized by the union."

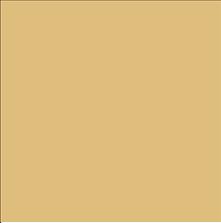
The controversy that they are familiar with concerning Wal-Mart's expansion is about image, not wages. Remarked a blue collar woman from Indiana, "It's like slapping a Dollar store in instead of a Dillard's."

When focus group participants see this story as being about consumer choice and corporate competition, they support Wal-Mart's ability to expand into communities. However, when participants see this story as being about community planning, then job quality becomes an important criterion. They want to use incentives

to strengthen the local economy, not undermine it.

Choice and competition are important values. If this story is positioned as Wal-Mart versus independent retailers, then consumer choice wins. Consumers should be allowed to shop where they want, focus group participants assert. "It's what America was founded on, competitiveness," insisted a blue collar man from Indiana. "If the demand wasn't there, there would not be a supply for it," stated a white collar man from Indiana. "I think it's just the way that business is done in America," said a white collar man from Indiana. "It's just the way that it is... Competitive advantage."

However, when the substance of this story is about community planning – making decisions that benefit the local economy rather than undermine it – focus group participants have a better understanding of why job definition needs to be a part of the conversation. "That's the thing that hit me is the jobs that these places are supposedly creating are not – they're not the jobs that are going to sustain a community," said a white collar man from Indiana. When in this mindset, they recognize why an increasing reliance on Wal-Mart jobs would force wages down. "You got two guys working for two companies," a New Jersey man explained. "One guy is making \$10 an hour and Wal-Mart moves in paying \$5. Well, company A goes out of business. Now you got somebody that's making nothing and the guy that's making \$5 an hour." A New Jersey woman adds, "Yeah. Plus which, even if another business does come in, it doesn't have the incentive to pay the \$10 an hour



Wooing Wal-Mart

Every day state and local governments make decisions that alter our economic landscape. We need to ask our elected officials, "Are your decisions cultivating good jobs that keep our communities prosperous?"

Local governments have become so hungry for economic development that they are short-sighted about the consequences of their decisions. Take Wal-Mart, for example. Wal-Mart creates 1 in every 20 new jobs in the US; it now accounts for \$1 in every \$5 spent on groceries. It does more business than Target, Sears, Kmart, JC Penney, Safeway and Kroger combined. It is an entity of such proportions that it can reshape our economic landscape at will. Frequently, municipalities defer local taxes and subsidize new projects, giving Wal-Mart a competitive advantage over smaller existing businesses. Typically, Wal-Mart retains all sales taxes for a certain number of years, which underprices local competitors and takes funding away from local governments. Profits then go out of the community to the corporate headquarters; they are not reinvested locally. Instead of responsible, civic minded local businesspeople, you have transient store managers.

Furthermore, businesses like Wal-Mart destroy thriving jobs while substituting stagnant ones. Discretionary income is a zero-sum game—a family only has so much to spend so bringing in a major retailer undermines existing businesses. Every Wal-Mart job created destroys 1.5 jobs at competing businesses, and the average salary is only \$12,000 a year, less than half the national median. We are quite literally shopping ourselves out of good-paying jobs by pushing product prices lower and lower.

A thriving economy requires working families that are self-sufficient, but our increasing reliance on Wal-Mart jobs forces wages down. Instead of give-aways to grab and go employers, we need to invest in and support local businesses that reinvest in our communities and use incentives to attract good employers that treat workers well, like Costco, Target or any number of other civically-responsible companies.

Reverend Zachary Wear, United for a Fair Economy

now because Wal-Mart's only paying \$5."

One important element of this story is indicating whether or not the dollars stay in the community. "The people are not making money that they can put back into the economy, like you're making \$12,000 a year, if you have a family, that's nothing," explained an African American woman from New Jersey. "So you don't have the money to spend, and Wal-Mart is not putting it into the community, putting it back, so it's just going out. The money is just going to Wal-Mart's headquarters. Nothing is helping the local town where they're located."

A second important element of this story is the concept of "a level playing field." Focus group participants think it is unfair that Wal-Mart would be given a competitive advantage over existing, independent businesses. "I'm not pro or anti-Wal-Mart," a white collar man from Indiana stated, "but deals like this are, in my opinion, are not good for the economy or for the people." "They are given an unfair advantage," a white collar man from Indiana remarked. "It'd be like fielding a professional football [team] against a high school team. With all the extra experience these guys have and the size, there's no way that the little guys are going to last for very long." The solution, according to an Indiana white collar man, is to "Treat Wal-Mart as you would any other business. No incentives. If they want to be part of the community, then they're going to compete like any other business."

Many focus group participants were already angry about government giveaways. This frame helps them put

those past experiences into a broader pattern. "Well, this is just the Wal-Mart issue," remarked a blue collar man from Indiana. "I mean we've got stupid stuff happening here, too. We've got this stuff about the Colts all the time in the paper, how much – how many millions we're going to give the Colts." "But with the incentive, there has to be a projection into the future," a blue collar man from Indiana asserted. "Why are we going to bring in a manufacturing job that's only going to be here for eight or ten years?" Added another, "We have to have vision with our decisions."

The phrase "grab and go employer" is particularly effective when referencing companies that come into the community for a tax break. They grab the tax break, but the profits go elsewhere and eventually the company will leave anyway. A New Jersey woman described grab and go employers as, "The money's not coming back into the community in which they're located. It's going elsewhere." "They're not anchored in the community," added a New Jersey man.

The message's effectiveness is undermined by featuring just one company's behavior. This approach reinforces consumer solutions rather than promotes citizen action. Furthermore, it forces people to be "for" or "against" Wal-Mart, rather than bring attention to the bigger issues. Instead, when people are able to see this example as being about commitment to community, they support incentives for independent businesses and tougher commitments from new businesses to promote

"thriving" jobs rather than "stagnant" ones.

Focusing on Wal-Mart as the problem prohibits people from seeing larger trends and solutions. First, when Wal-Mart is the problem, the obvious solution is to boycott Wal-Mart, which makes policy change invisible. Furthermore, many participants do not want to stop shopping at Wal-Mart, even though they recognize the problems. "It's a place where you can go to get quality—if you're getting clothes, quality clothes – or if you need groceries or things like that, it's very, very reasonably priced," argued a white collar man from Indiana. "So in that aspect, I think Wal-Marts are good, because it allows the family that doesn't make \$40,000 a year to be able to go somewhere and get good quality products." This creates an inner conflict and forces people to be either "for or against" Wal-Mart, rather than "for or against" policy solutions. "At the regular place where they sell this stuff, the hardware store, they want \$49," an African American man from New Jersey explained. "Wal-Mart had it for \$25. I had a decision to make, but I made it quickly. And I would have loved to keep the local hardware place in business, but at that point I had a personal decision to make."

Those focus group participants who are able to see the bigger trend point to a different solution: Provide the kinds of incentives that will help local independent businesses grow, rather than use tax dollars for large national chains that are not anchored in a local community. "I believe a solution is a rededication and commitment to independent local businesses, supporting them," suggested an African

American man from New Jersey. To do otherwise results in an unfair competitive advantage for large corporations. “Give [tax advantages] to the small guy,” suggested a New Jersey man. “You don’t throw all these great advantages and coupons to the big people. Let’s move it down to the little fish.”

Ultimately, this is about commitment to community. Focus group participants have witnessed the abandonment of communities by large corporations. “Because if Wal-Mart doesn’t do well, they’re out of there,” a New Jersey man insisted. “They’re going to leave. They’ll vacate the building and now you got an empty building and a whole bunch of empty store fronts. Now what are you going to do?” When tax incentives are used to attract an employer, then the community needs to insist upon restrictions for those incentives. “The solution is to make sure that these companies, when they come into the community, that there’s set rules about what they’re going to provide, maybe put something back into the community,” an African American woman from New Jersey remarked.

“Thriving” and “stagnant” are good terms to describe jobs with and without opportunity. “A thriving job would be someone who owns a business, where a stagnant job may be the stocker at Wal-Mart,” explained a white collar man from Indiana. “A thriving job would be one that you can support a family with, but not \$12,000 a year. That is a stagnant job because you can’t—what can you do with \$12,000?” asked a white collar woman from Indiana.



Messengers

Economists are strong messengers because they are seen as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and unbiased. “It looks like he’s just telling it like it is,” stated a blue collar man from Seattle. A Seattle white collar woman explained, “He has looked at the past and he is able to forecast the future – seeing the pattern and how it’s going and what’s going to happen because he has a knowledge, basically that’s what he does...He really has no agenda, but he’s just saying, ‘this is what I’ve observed. This is what’s happening. This is what’s going to continue to happen.’” Importantly, economists’ effectiveness can be undermined if people believe they have a political agenda, or if they are affiliated with a political institution.

Local business owners can be very effective messengers if they demonstrate a genuine commitment to the community. “I think he sees himself as one of those companies that try to strengthen communities, as opposed to the larger corporations that are trying to rush jobs out of the country,” a white collar man from Seattle explained. “I’m a part of my Chamber and I know the business people that I talk with,” a Seattle white collar man stated. “I know how they think. It’s the strength in the community and I’m sorry, but my heart is with the community and if the community is strong...a good chunk of the problems are going to be dealt with.” “Credibility is higher, I think, because he’s doing it. He’s in society,” remarked a Dallas Hispanic woman. At the same time, they recognize that business people represent just one viewpoint. They do not represent all viewpoints. “He sounds like he’s very

involved and has thought through it,” stated a Dallas woman. “But I think he’s not really representing but one little piece of the puzzle.”

Focus group participants have mixed opinions about the influence of union leaders. Several trust union leaders to accurately represent the needs of the working person. “He’s still for the working person,” remarked a blue collar woman from Seattle. “I think he’s saying, probably, what every one of us in this room feels,” stated a New Jersey man. Others, however, believe unions have become too weak to be influential. “When I was little,” a white collar woman from Seattle shared, “my mother had been a Teamster working in the shipyards and she used to tell me how fantastic it was, how they were at the top and nobody messed with the Teamsters and they had a strong union and the leaders of the union went to bat for the employees. I don’t see that any more. Wal-Mart? Non-union. Starbucks? Don’t think they ever heard of a union.” Finally, some say the messenger’s influence simply depends on the individual union leader – are they trustworthy or are they simply trying to advance their own interests? “There have been some corrupt union leaders who were as bad as corporate executives that were only out for themselves,” a New Jersey woman asserted. “And then there have been some who’ve really looked out, well, for the well-being of their membership and the common worker. So it just depends on who it is.”

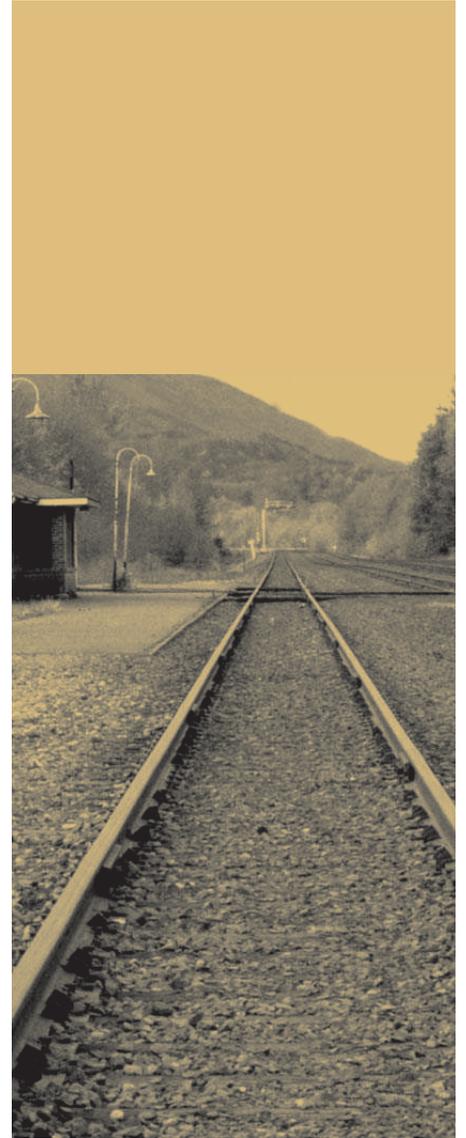
Most focus group participants are suspicious of a message coming from a politician. However, several focus group participants believe

politicians are well-positioned to make a difference, in which case their opinion carries a lot of weight.

As noted earlier in this analysis, focus group participants believe politicians are more interested in their own personal advancement than in fixing problems. “He’s a politician,” remarked a Dallas Hispanic man. “And the ‘Blueprint for Economic Security, an initiative being introduced in Congress,’ well, Congress is the biggest inhibitor that we have. What are the chances of getting them – getting all of them on the same sheet of music without all their outside influences?” Others suggest that a politician’s opinion carries significant influence. “They see a problem and at least it’s somebody of some credence that possibly, if they’re an elected official, maybe they can do something about it,” a New Jersey man asserted. Since focus group participants were reacting to a fictional politician, their reactions are probably more negative than if they were reacting to a known and respected politician. Finally, the party identity of the politician was deliberately not included. Participants struggled to guess the politician’s party identity so they could interpret the message through that filter.

Focus group participants mistrust advocates from unfamiliar organizations. They look to the name of the organization for clues about its perspective, but they have learned that organizations frequently have names that are the opposite of their agenda. “I’m a little skeptical about some of the information here. If I’d heard it from an economist, I might feel differently,” stated a New Jersey woman. “I think sometimes they come

out with these false organizations where they're in it for their own gain," stated a man from New Jersey. "Before you know it, somebody's in jail because they just ripped off a bunch of people, making donations to them and the money's not going anywhere but in their pocket." "Sometimes the names are deliberately deceptive. So I'd have to find out about them. I don't give a lot of merit to a name because it doesn't always mean a lot," stated a New Jersey woman.



Creating Policy Support

As noted in the Introduction, the objective of this research effort is to develop effective communications to advance policies on behalf of low-wage workers. This section provides an overview of focus group participants' reactions to a range of policy alternatives, and it reviews the test messages' influence on policy support. Focus group participants frequently incorporated elements of the test frames as they discussed reasons to support specific policies. Frequently mentioned reasons to support policies include: the ripple effect of increased income, children's futures, long-term vision, opportunity and stronger communities.

Policies to Increase Income

Increase the minimum wage

The first phase of research for this project reported that the public voices a number of barriers to increasing the minimum wage. One of the most significant barriers noted at that time was the public perception that minimum-wage jobs are temporary, entry-level jobs, not jobs on which to raise a family. ("Responsibility & Opportunity," Bostrom 2002) Since the messages tested in this round of research were re-framed as being about the economy, rather than the working poor, the image of minimum-wage jobs as entry-level jobs was rarely voiced.

Other barriers, however, continue to emerge. Focus group participants view an increase in the minimum wage as a temporary fix. Once wages increase, they believe, prices will follow. "You may lift wages, but if everything else's costs triples, what good will that do?" a Dallas Hispanic woman wondered. "We have people working on the assembly lines in Arlington at the GM plant," a Dallas Hispanic man explained. "They make \$25, \$30 an hour. And what's the result of that? Look at the kind of price you have to pay for cars and stuff." This cycle of spiraling costs means that low income workers will never get ahead unless they advance beyond minimum wage jobs. Furthermore, they worry that businesses could not absorb higher wages. "It puts a strain on small businesses, like the shops that make America what it is," stated an African American man from New Jersey. "Everybody would love to pay their workers a salary that they can really raise a family up, but not every institution, not every business, especially small business, is able to do that."

The tested news articles are not able to completely alleviate these concerns. However, after being exposed to the news articles, several focus group participants use themes from the articles to discuss their support for an increase in the minimum wage. Focus group participants begin to talk about a multiplier or ripple effect, improving the economy, creating more jobs, providing more money for people to spend, and strengthening communities. The frames are able to build support for increasing the minimum wage, particularly when people understand the economic

impact of putting more money in the hands of low income workers.

Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit which results in more income for low income families

Focus group participants demonstrate more support for an expansion of the EITC than for an increase in the minimum wage. They believe that increasing wages result in higher product costs, but a tax cut does not have the same effect. When they think about increasing the minimum wage, they think about the employer who has to pay, and the customers who have to pay increased prices to result in increased wages. But with the Earned Income Tax Credit, focus group participants are not thinking about an employer or a customer. They see a different infusion of money into the system. Most focus group participants say they support this action because they want to help the working poor get ahead and to provide hope – it is morally the right thing to do. Focus group participants who were exposed to the Bubble-up Economy Frame tended to discuss the ripple effect, the economic impact of this policy change.

Expand publicly-funded work supports for low-income workers, such as child care subsidies, and healthcare assistance

Again, focus group participants mention one of two reasons to support this action: charity and economic impact. Those focus group participants who were exposed to the Bubble up Economy Frame were more likely to discuss the economic impact of this policy – with more discretionary

income, more money will be put into the economy.

Policies to Create Jobs

Provide government tax credits to encourage the growth of new industries with good jobs

Since many focus group participants have watched their state and local governments give tax credits to companies that later reneged on providing good jobs, focus group participants are wary of this policy recommendation. Early in the conversation, several focus group participants insist that these tax dollars are wasted. After being exposed to the frames, focus group participants are more precise about their requirements for industry incentives. Job quality becomes the central criterion. They want guarantees that the jobs will provide opportunity for advancement and wages that support communities.

Focus group participants define “new industries with good jobs” as any industry that is new to an area. They are as willing to encourage the growth of steel manufacturing as they are biotechnology. Their only concern is job quality. “It’s a pebble in a pond, where the rings go out and the grocer that is working, the gas station, the plumber, the carpenter, the economy in general is benefited by a higher wage for the minimum wage earner,” explained a white collar man from Seattle.

When their attention turns to developing emerging industries, focus group participants want government to support business, not create business. Visionary planning is an appropriate

role, but they do not want government to get in the business of business.

Give companies incentives to start businesses in low-income communities that need jobs

Fundamentally, what focus group participants want are strong communities. When a major employer leaves an area, an entire community is weakened. It is this lack of commitment to community that is the biggest critique of major national employers. Focus group participants support incentives to start businesses in low-income communities because they want to build stronger communities and support small, independent businesses.

Government jobs programs

While it was not specifically addressed in the list of policies that focus group participants reviewed, at several points in the focus group conversations, participants would refer to government jobs programs that no longer exist. “When I was coming up in the ’70s,” an African American man from New Jersey explained, “they had programs for kids; in the summertime when they got out of school they had jobs for them...they helped kids out so they can get a better education and pay for themselves to go to school, to get a better education, but now they don’t have none of that. Kids walk around all summer doing nothing. This is really messed up.” Several suggest that this is an appropriate role for government in addressing joblessness.

Global Trade Policies

Negotiate international trade agreements that take fair labor and environmental practices into account

Even after lengthy discussions concerning the national economy, very few focus group participants could link international trade agreements to the nation’s economic interests. Focus group participants support trade agreements that will take labor and environmental practices into account, but their reason for supporting these agreements is to improve the quality of life in Third World countries. They believe fair practices will limit sweatshops, child labor, and environmental degradation. All of the benefits that focus group participants mention are benefits to people in Third World countries. They find it difficult to link the circumstances of people in Third World countries with the status of the US economy. Once the link is explained, they understand it, but they wonder how to force other governments to adhere to the standards.

Close tax loopholes that encourage companies to move overseas/ Provide incentives for companies to keep jobs in this country rather than offshore them

Focus group participants unanimously support closing tax loopholes so that more jobs would be kept in this country. However, several are skeptical about providing incentives to companies to keep jobs in the US, because they want to know more about how the tax incentives would work. They have seen too many

instances of corporations abusing tax incentives.

Tax Policy

Close corporate tax loopholes so corporations pay a larger proportion of the country's taxes

Focus group participants would like to see corporations pay a larger share of the country's taxes. They perceive this as a fairness issue — citizens have to pay taxes while corporations are frequently able to avoid them. They are concerned however, that if companies do pay a larger share of the taxes, they will simply pass that cost on to consumers.

Reduce the national budget deficit by increasing taxes on the wealthy and corporations, but maintaining tax cuts for the middle class

Increasing taxes on the wealthy would reduce disparities between the rich and everyone else, according to focus group participants. They believe this also makes economic sense because the rich have more money with which to pay. Few believe that the wealthy and corporations ever end up paying more.

Education and job training

Increase government grants to community colleges for job training for displaced workers

The strongest reason to support job-training is to provide opportunities for workers, which focus group participants are willing to do. However, they are concerned that new training programs will be developed when they are not needed. “Why go

get trained? The jobs aren't here anymore,” stated a cynical Seattle blue collar man. “There is training,” a Dallas woman insisted. “Those people that want to be nurses go to nursing schools.”

Increase funding for public education

Throughout the focus group conversations, participants would repeatedly refer to the importance of educating children for the future economy. Future success will hinge on a good education, they believe. At the same time, many focus group participants believe that public education is in need of significant reform. They point to education as the solution, but the solution is broken. “I don't think the school systems have a clue what's coming up. I don't think they have a plan for the future,” a New Jersey man remarked. “In the long term, you have to invest in the schools, because these kids are bad, and they're growing up worse, and nothing's being done about that,” worried an African American man from New Jersey.

Healthcare Policy

Ensure affordable healthcare coverage for all

Focus group participants can readily see how healthcare relates to their own economic stability. They find it more difficult to position healthcare as an issue for the broader economy. When they attempt to describe why health matters to the economy, some suggest that unhealthy people can't work or that healthcare coverage results in a healthier workforce. Even after being exposed to the messages,

only a few mention that businesses struggle to afford health insurance or that the burden of premiums keeps families from putting more money into the economy.

Immigration Policy

Reform immigration laws

This country is conflicted about immigrants. On the one hand, Americans take pride in being a nation of immigrants and they admire hard-working immigrants who are sacrificing for their children's future. “We're supposed to be the melting pot,” an African American woman from New Jersey insisted. “We were built on everyone else. America is not one person. It's not black America, white America, German, it's all of us. All of us, because now it's a composite of all of that.” At the same time, they believe that the influx of immigrants pushes wages lower. “I'm not prejudiced or nothing, but we've got to shut the gates,” argued a blue collar man from Seattle. “I'm sorry. The United States is being flooded. We are being flooded by these immigrants that are coming in. They have no healthcare. They have nothing, but you know what, they can go to a damn hospital and they can get better coverage than I can.” “So many people come over here now, and it's so hard for people to get jobs,” stated an African American man from New Jersey, “because you've got so many people working, like the Asians and the Mexicans, that work for nothing, so that makes it bad for us. And it's really hard.” What most can generally agree upon is that existing immigration laws need to be enforced.

Terms and Phrases

Several specific terms and phrases were tested in the course of the focus groups. The objective of this exercise was to develop language that would reinforce the broader frame elements. This section is a brief overview; the effect of several of the terms was stated in more detail in previous sections of this report.

The Economic System

As noted earlier in this analysis, effective communications need to position the issues facing the economy as structural problems, not cyclical or societal problems. Several terms reinforce a perception of the economy as a structure:

- Economic infrastructure
- Economic engine
- Economic landscape

Furthermore, focus group participants describe positive associations with the term “economic well-being.” It is less effective in creating a structural image of the economy, but it reminds people of the ultimate purpose of a strong economy, i.e., to provide for a family’s or a community’s well-being. “Economic security” is far less effective because it reminds focus group participants that jobs are no longer secure. “Drag and lag” economy accurately describes the economy the U.S. currently has – slow, stagnant, no growth, falling behind – but it does not convey the structural imagery that then allows people to understand that

the economy can be influenced by public action.

Jobs

The following terms are able to vividly communicate mental images comparing opportunity for advancement with dead-end jobs:

- Thriving job, stagnant job
- Opportunity job, unpromising work

Furthermore, “family-friendly work” brings to mind work with flexibility and good benefits, and an approach to work that strengthens families and communities. However, it also limits the discussion to workers with young children.

Several other terms bring to mind unintended interpretations:

- “Secure jobs” and “insecure jobs” are less effective terms since people misinterpret these words as referring to “job security,” meaning a life-long job, which they believe no longer exists.
- “Lock in jobs” or “lock in labor” conveys “dead end” to some participants, but many participants interpret these phrases as meaning “security,” i.e., a person is locked in to a secure job and retirement benefits, etc.
- “Deficit work” is confusing; participants do not know how to interpret it.
- “Straitjacket employment” implies a job with strict rules such as

dress codes, or stressful jobs such as air traffic controllers.

- “Dependency work” is interpreted as low-wage and dead-end by some, but several others believe it is any kind of job at any income level that a person is dependent upon.
- “Rigid jobs” are jobs with limited opportunity for advancement, but also jobs that are unchanging and boring, which can indicate a variety of jobs including government, management and assembly-line jobs.
- “Opportunity blockers” brings to mind a range of barriers to opportunity including bad management, government regulations, lack of education, taxes, etc.

Employers

“Grab and go employer” is an effective, vivid term to refer to companies that come into a community for a tax break, and then send the profits elsewhere or leave when the business becomes less profitable. These companies have no commitment to the community.

As a way to communicate the goals that employers and employees should share, “fair work; fair profits” has mixed results. It suggests balance, responsibility, dedication, and loyalty. However, it also sounds unrealistic to focus group participants: “utopia,” “a dream,” and “non-existent.” This phrase should be used cautiously. It could be effective in talking about those employers who represent this ideal,

particularly small, independent businesses. It should not be communicated as the broad objective for national policies, because it is too lofty an ideal to reach, according to focus group participants.

“Opportunity industry” does not communicate the intended image of a new, growing industry. Focus group participants believe this term refers to any industry in which there may be economic opportunity, i.e., a fad. Instead, “emerging industry” would be more effective.



Conclusions

The next phase of research will quantify the conclusions and provide more precise recommendations about the influence of these frames on policy support. At this point, the research indicates that communicators can build public support for policies for low-wage workers by:

- Beginning the conversation with the Level One values of responsible planning, opportunity, stewardship, or community. Avoid having the communications dominated by sympathy, poverty, disparities, class warfare, or partisanship.
- Characterizing the economy as a system, as a structure that can be influenced. Avoid talking about the cyclical nature of the economy or implying societal reasons for economic problems, such as greedy or unethical executives. Metaphors for the economy that help people see it as a structure include economic

infrastructure, economic engine, and economic landscape.

- Discussing broad trends and causal stories that provide the context for why policy change is needed. Avoid sympathy stories about individuals – they typically leave the reader blaming the individual.
- Connecting all sectors of the economy together in an interdependent relationship, so that people understand the value of low-wage workers. Avoid setting low-wage workers apart from society, for example, through a discussion of charity or sympathy for the poor.
- Making the problem manageable and action practical; highlight solutions and match the size of the solution to the size of the problem. Avoid a crisis conversation, which typically makes the task seem overwhelming.
- Conveying that we all have a stake in making a difference on this issue, perhaps through the value of community to remind people that citizens are government. Avoid positioning government as “they,” as separate from the public.
- Incorporating examples of highly-skilled, low-wage jobs when it is necessary to talk specifically about low-wage jobs. Also, include the per hour and annual wages for the minimum wage and poverty levels when appropriate – do not assume that people already understand these figures.
- Including “strengthening communities” as an objective. Distinguish between local independent businesses that are connected to community, and national or multi-national corporations that have no relationship to the community and that take profits out of the community. Avoid centering too much attention on one company.

About the Author

Meg Bostrom, President of Public Knowledge LLC, is a veteran communications strategist with a unique perspective resulting from her rich and varied experiences as communicator, public opinion analyst, advertising agency executive, and political consultant. With degrees in both communications and public opinion research, Bostrom's work is grounded in a cross-disciplinary focus.

She started her career as a political pollster: Senior Analyst at Greenberg Lake, Vice President at Mellman Lazarus Lake. In both of these capacities, Bostrom consulted for a variety of nonprofit groups, political candidates, foundations, national associations, and corporations. Desiring a better understanding of how communications is developed and implemented, Bostrom joined Trahan, Burden and Charles, an advertising and communications agency headquartered in Maryland. As Executive Vice President of Strategic Planning at Trahan, she was responsible for determining communications strategy for a variety of national and international corporations as well as non-profit organizations.

With practical communications experience added to her background in research, Bostrom launched her own business in 1998 to bring her personal passion for social issues to bear on specific communications challenges. The organization has researched public opinion and analyzed communications strategies on a variety of social issues, including the environment, children's issues, foreign policy, health care, and the working poor, among others.

