
Community Economic Shortcomings

The Three-Legged Stool of Sustainability

Lee Walker Warren

THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL OF SUSTAINABILITY rests on Social, Environmental, and Economic supports. Without all three legs, any business, system, community, or relationship is doomed to struggle or fail.

Most of us sit in chairs these days, but if we harken back to the days of milking cows (in my case, this morning), it's important to reflect on the three-legged stool. Because three points define a plane, the stool will be stable on an uneven surface. An engineering feat and common-sense among country-folk, the metaphor can be applied to larger systems.

And so it is with sustainability. If one is aiming for a sustainable system, all three legs are equally important. One less leg, and the stool will fall over; one more leg, and the whole thing will be wobbly if the flat plane (life) is slightly uneven. No leg should be considered more or less important. And while there's room for fluctuation, every decision needs to keep all three in mind.



Organic tomatoes for sale—quality, quantity, customers...sustainable?

The problem

I was drawn to intentional community in 1996 when I was working in a corporate job during the week, then doing yoga and reading *The Nation* on the weekends. I realized that my life had become compartmentalized, and I searched for more values-based alignment. At the time, I was in my mid-twenties and ripe for adventure, so I quit my job, got the *Communities Directory*, traveled to and lived in many communities, and finally settled and built a co-housing sub-community within Earthaven Ecovillage in western North Carolina.

All along the way, the lack of business savvy in most of the communities I visited amazed me. Various communities routinely asked me to help with the accounting or step into management of a business. During my travels, I saw huge gaps in what seemed to me like common business sense. Most of the communities where I've lived have limped along financially, often with struggling or failing businesses, often with people living on the edge of poverty and very proud of it, and mostly with a population of folks who had no interest or literacy in economics. With a business degree, studies in economics and marketing, and coming from a family that budgeted money to the penny, I found these situations odd and confusing.

...neglecting the economic leg of the stool is an extreme reaction...

Fifteen years later, I think I'm beginning to get a sense of what's going on. I've come to believe that the neglectful approach to the economic leg of the stool is an extreme reaction to a society obsessed with profit. Because economic growth is the primary national and global goal, we have an American culture that has created slavery for profit, wars for profit, corporations with no responsibility, natural resource depletion, vast social inequities, destruction of the environment, and the collapse of many programs for equality and social and economic justice.

Being bright, conscious, and visionary, the counter-cultural folks who inhabit most intentional communities have set out to build a sub-culture focused on the very things that the larger society is forsaking. Swinging in the opposite direction, they have decided to focus primarily on the environmental and social legs of the stool. Examples:

1. The economy externalizes environmental and social costs. The counter-culture tries to internalize them by eschewing the use of chemicals, and by growing food, creating social systems, and using resources wisely.

2. First World countries measure success by Gross Domestic Product (which drives ongoing consumption and environmental destruction) and the counterculture reacts by reducing consumption, doing with less, buying locally, and valuing the labor of women, children, and other marginalized populations.

3. Our society focuses on materialism. The counter-culture chooses to focus instead on health, relationships, community,

environment, quality of life, and peace and justice.

These approaches are resourceful, ingenious in many cases, and certainly laudable. Thousands of people and the culture at large have been slowly influenced by the opposite view over time, but the change has been achingly slow. Part of the problem in the communities movement is, much to our chagrin, that we haven't been able to attract enough people to make the movement more mainstream and thus viable. We stay on the edge, struggling to survive.

The reason? The sole or primary focus on the social and environmental legs of the stool makes the whole stool seriously unsteady and in constant danger of falling over. Ignoring economics is a counterproductive approach to sustainable communities. Hoping that the economics will work themselves out leads in most cases to failure. It leaves a system vulnerable and unprepared to harness human minds, hearts, and efforts for the collective economic good. A source of income, for most people, is a crucial component to making life work. Unfortunately, this seemingly obvious point is not apparent to many community founders.

(*Manufacturing Automation*, Oct. 22, 2012) spells out the product/outcome/effect of focusing on only two legs:

- Environmental + Economical = Viable
- Economical + Social = Equitable
- Social + Environmental = Bearable
- Environmental + Economical + Social = Sustainable

If we address only economic and environmental regulation, we end up with a viable solution. If we consider only economic and social aspects, we end up with an equitable solution. If we consider only environmental and social issues, we end up with a bearable solution. So bearable we are, and bearable we stay.

The cautionary tale

Earthaven Ecovillage is a rural community located in a depressed geographic region without much industry. The nearby city of Asheville derives much of its economic inflow from tourism. Most of the founders of Earthaven had outside incomes and hoped to bootstrap the whole project through excited friends and



Earthaven is an aspiring ecovillage located in the Blue Ridge Mountains outside Asheville, North Carolina.

lovers-of-the earth types who would donate to the cause "just because" or get excited enough to build second homes here. Most of these now older folks' source of income is savings, retirement, Social Security, or outside funding (from families, pensions, etc.).

A few years into the village project, a bunch of young folks came along and hopped on the ideal of a sustainable village. This influx of youth led to a class and age divide. The young people then and now have been living hand-to-mouth, and trying to piece together a living from here and there. The social and environmental legs of the stool drew them here and focused them for a while, as they sought a refreshing refuge from the oppression of our materialistic, profit-driven world. But without a viable economic leg, there has been little personal sustainability for these younger members.

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Energetic, motivated, idealistic, hard-working entrepreneurial types, seeking to meet the needs of the villagers by a three-legged stool approach, have founded several businesses over the years. Of the five businesses (by business I mean employing three or more people for a significant length of time, consistently) conceived, born, and raised at Earthaven (The Forestry Cooperative, Useful Plants Nursery, Red Moon Herbs, Imani Farm, and Round Mountain Builders), only two are left, and they are struggling to survive. In my assessment, six factors account for this situation.

1. The Revolving Door - Many great people are drawn to community. Some of them stay and most move on, often to seek better economic opportunities. Because of the lack of economic stability, the people who are drawn here or who end up staying are under-employable. They are not really willing to commit to work or show up on time, resent having a boss, or just get tired of doing the same thing for a long period of time.

2. Small-Picture Thinking - Many of our villagers go out of their way to support local businesses, and our little valley of 100+ people provides a notable market for small-scale growers, sellers, and services. But still, some fail to understand how important it is to pay a little more to support a community business. For example, a founder of Earthaven still drives to town (50 minutes away) to buy eggs because they are cheaper than the eggs sustainably raised at the community. When business owners are dealing with a limited market, every customer counts, and many communarians still have a small picture of economics.

3. The Spiritual Dissociation - The idea that anything having to do with spreadsheets, economic analysis, or marketing must be bad drives a great number of people who live in community. One outspoken member of Earthaven actually views success and a focus on economics as antithetical to spiritual growth.

4. The Push Back - As an outgrowth of spiritual dissociation, economically minded people, when they venture into community,

are often met with suspicion, distrust, and criticism, even if these people have proven to be highly cooperative, socially minded, and ecologically conscious.

5. Lack of Support - Much time, energy, and money go into social programs and environmental regulations, but very little training or education, almost no support, and usually great regulatory hurdles are set in place for economic development. Our community charges four times the going area rate for agricultural leases, implements regressive ownership models for building farm infrastructure, and offers disincentives of all sorts for business owners.

6. Burned-Out Entrepreneurs - For those who step up to take action in a community setting, a combination of the revolving door, the push-back, an inconsistent workforce, and a lack of support often leaves those willing to take risks burned-out and resentful. This usually leads back to the revolving door. These folks leave, and the cycle continues.

The lesson: community needs economics

As one of the very few entrepreneurs at Earthaven, I'm grateful for the small and devoted market that has grown up around my products and services. It's a delight to serve the people in my region, in spite of the obstacles needlessly created by the community.

It's worth noting that the huge inputs and sacrifice necessary for our survival have been due in part to another economic factor. The closer a business is to a land-based livelihood (food, soil, herbs) the harder it is to make a reasonable living, most especially if that business is taking social and environmental factors into account. And the further one is from a land-based livelihood (banking, media, corporations), the easier it is to make a reasonable living, especially as one rising in the hierarchy of that industry. More to the point, the institutions furthest from the land are usually exploiting a larger land-base and more people in order to make that livelihood.

For these reasons which affect the entire society, my land-based life has been a struggle. Recently, I've decided to close down one of our farm enterprises because it's been consistently on the edge of folding, and my partners and I have grown weary of holding it up. It provided part-time income for over 12 residents at its peak, but an inability to find a good, committed workforce, combined with the burden of low economic return, and having very little acreage to grow the business, have left it economically unsustainable.

When I look around at 50+ people in our community, with only two or three business owners supporting all the young people, it feels discouraging. We need ten entrepreneurs, or ten funders willing to support those few entrepreneurs to take their businesses to the next level. But creating successful enterprises just isn't the focus of most people here.

So with the loss of the businesses and business owners, there is less draw, less opportunity, less viability, and less life, which ultimately leads to less community. There's no doubt that we need to solve the social and environmental problems of the mainstream systems, but ignoring the economics is like throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

And though the reasons are varied, the result is an irresponsible and unsustainable approach to growing communities. When



The Council Hall at Earthaven supports meetings and was once (during a very difficult period) the office of the Permaculture Activist.

community members minimize, diminish, dismiss, ignore, or undermine the economic base, it robs everyone.

Yes, we need to minimize harm to the natural world, create regenerative systems, care for soil, water, air, and the wild. And, yes, we need to treat people fairly, create harmonious and cooperative relationships, awaken from privilege to create a more just and socially equitable world. And, YES ALSO, we need to ensure that families and individuals are employed in the good and viable work of food production, small-scale industry, the arts, and services. We need an economically sustainable approach that provides income for all the people of the village—a fair, reasonable, and secure living for all. We need internal kick-start programs, opportunities for people to start small businesses without major capital investment, subsidies, support, and training, celebrations for those who take risk, and any number of other creative approaches to a real, working village-scale economic system.

In his article (*Communities Magazine*, Fall 2004), "How to Really Support Ecovillages (Not Just Hugs and Theories)," Enrique Hidalgo stresses, "The more wealth the alternative movement acquires, the better our builders will be paid, and the better chance ecovillages will succeed and not disintegrate from financial stress, and the faster we'll see change in the world."

In order to grow our communities, we definitely need a social focus and environmental values. But in addition, we need infrastructure, housing, systems, food, and jobs. Until we really embrace this, our lives will be bearable at best. △

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