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## INTRODUCTION

**I**f ever there was a time that people needed new ways to talk with each other about poverty, prosperity, and community sustainability, this is it. In the wake of the “Great Economic Meltdown of 2008,” communities are being challenged to remain or, in some cases, become socially and economically viable.

This six-part book provides a new way of talking and doing based on a foundation of terms, constructs, models, and strategies that a number of communities are using to address poverty and prosperity in comprehensive ways. This collection of papers arises from *Bridges Out of Poverty*, which was written by Dr. Ruby K. Payne, Terie Dreussi Smith, and me in 1999. People who had read *Bridges* and attended workshops by that name began to self-organize to create communities that worked on poverty issues in new and creative ways. Since 2001 “Bridges Communities” have sprung up in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Slovakia. These papers chart the changes and development in Bridges work since 2001.

My primary purpose in publishing this compilation of papers is to help struggling communities pass on a high quality of life to the next generation. I also want to encourage existing Bridges Communities to respond to the challenges posed by the Great Economic Meltdown. These papers can be taken selectively to fill in gaps—or as a whole to inform people who are new to our work. I think of these papers as an overview of ideas that are foundational to individual, organizational, and community change. Creative people have taken

our ideas, added them to their own best practices, and developed programs and applications that already have delivered amazing results. Some of these stories appear on our website ([www.bridgesoutofpoverty.com](http://www.bridgesoutofpoverty.com)). Readers should know that Bridges Communities are active; we do, we learn, and we pass it on. Our community of practice is growing.

Bridges Communities have a working knowledge of poverty that can help those who have been impacted by the economic crisis. With a recent job-loss rate of 600,000 a month, many people will be driven into the “tyranny of the moment,” a feature of poverty that people who were already living in the rubble at the bottom of the economy are familiar with. Finding a place to stay, gas for the car, and food for the kids demands immediate, concrete solutions. In a shaky world, whether it’s due to a recent foreclosure or to persistent poverty, it’s tougher and takes longer to solve daily living problems. Instability robs people of their future orientation, their ability to resist predators (who provide concrete solutions at inflated costs), and the time they need to investigate solutions that will get them into a stable environment.

But it isn’t just people in poverty who experience the tyranny of the moment, it’s civilian populations in war, it’s victims of natural disasters, it’s organizations whose budgets have been slashed, and it’s cities and counties that have lost their tax base. The National League of Cities survey showed that 84% of U.S. cities recently report facing fiscal difficulties. Some 92% expected to have trouble meeting their city’s needs the remainder of this year, 69% have instituted hiring freezes or layoffs, 42% were delaying or canceling infrastructure projects, and 22% have instituted across-the-board cuts. Cities’ tax revenues are declining as property values drop, shopping slows, and unemployment rises.

The sudden economic collapse masks the already existing downward trend that underlies the problem. U.S. cities have been in decline since 1970. Using three objective indices of urban life—poverty

rates, unemployment rates, and real per capita incomes changes—just three cities in 1970 were in trouble with a normalized index more than 30% higher than the national average. In 1980, fully 20 cities were having difficulty by the same measure. In a study that captured data prior to the financial upheaval in September 2008, Moody's Economy reported that two-thirds of this nation's 381 metropolitan areas were in recession, and another one in five was at risk.

The point is that the problems our communities are facing today have been building for a long time. Families in poverty and those of us doing Bridges work knew that many communities were in trouble. The problems only came to light in a significant way in September 2008. In fact, our communities are in as much difficulty as the families who live in them. Now many U.S. cities are in poverty. The toll that poverty takes on individuals and families is increasingly being felt by community leaders and our communities in general.

We cannot allow the old and dead ideas that brought our communities to this point to be the answers for the future. We can't get through this recession by trying to get back to the way we were. "The way we were" contributed to these problems. There are forces afoot that are deeper than the present crisis—factors that transcend the current difficulties. For example, globalization as we know it isn't working very well for those of us in the West. While globalization narrowed the income and wealth gap between the rich nations and the poor nations, the income and wealth gap between the rich and the poor in the United States was widening. Of the 30 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the U.S. was already the third highest in income disparity, just behind Mexico and Turkey.

The old and dead ideas on how to build prosperous communities won't work either. We used to create wealth by manufacturing products like steel and cars. Then we convinced ourselves that we could let go of making physical products and, instead, create wealth by devising financial products around loans, mortgages,

and fees. These factors, among others, resulted in a downward pressure on wages that is very likely to extend beyond the recovery period for this recession and into the future. Well-paying jobs are at the heart of establishing economic stability. In Bridges Communities we know that to talk about poverty we also must talk about wealth-creating mechanisms.

The federal, state, and local strategies for getting people out of poverty before the economic downturn weren't working; in fact, the number of people in persistent and concentrated poverty was on the rise. Those piecemeal approaches to alleviating and preventing poverty didn't even have an intention of getting people out of poverty—only of getting people off public assistance. And now, due to the Great Economic Meltdown, there are even more people in poverty and more people out of work—plus it's becoming that much harder for people at the bottom to make the transition out of poverty. The old and dead ideas for getting people out of poverty won't do.

The Great Economic Meltdown did one good thing: It blew away the myths that all was well, that things were working, that with a little more hard work and “pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps” people would get out of poverty, that every entity doing its part would lead to the good life, that a little tweaking of the system would set everything right again.

Keeping in mind that each crisis brings with it opportunities for new approaches and positive changes, Bridges Communities have the knowledge base, principles, strategies, tools, and partners to develop innovative solutions. With our lengthening Bridges track record, we know how to avoid getting stuck in the tyranny of the moment and how to build a future story in the midst of chaos.

We would like to help other communities lay the foundation for high-impact and comprehensive strategies of their own. Through the Texas-based aha! Process organization (Dr. Ruby Payne's company, which provides products and training for those working with people in poverty), we worked with many different catalysts

and visionaries to help fuel and accelerate the work of Bridges Communities. We worked with the business community and found that the private sector could use the foundation we laid to quickly get good results with new hires from poverty. And we found a way to engage people in poverty, bringing them to the planning table to help solve community problems.

The papers compiled in this book tell the story of the development of the Bridges methodology and process. They point to how the Bridges Communities model can help neighborhoods and communities build a future where everyone can do well. This collection of papers includes a synopsis of the book *Bridges Out of Poverty*, explains how to engage people from all classes and sectors, expands on core concepts, describes how aha! Process and the community can respond to natural disasters and persistent poverty, illustrates how Bridges Communities are formed, and provides tools for Bridges Steering Committees.

These papers can help the reader in three ways: (1) They serve as “CliffsNotes” for the foundational ideas that come from *Bridges Out of Poverty*; (2) they describe new models, ideas, applications, and tools that we have developed as communities took ownership of the work; and (3) they present guidelines and action steps for the future.

The *first paper*, “*Using the Hidden Rules of Class to Create Sustainable Communities*,” describes and expands on the core constructs found in *Bridges Out of Poverty*. It offers accurate descriptions (mental models) of the living environments of poverty, middle class, and wealth. It holds up the lens of economic class as a way of analyzing the complexities of poverty. It also provides the community with a shared language with which to address both poverty and prosperity issues. This lexicon includes a:

- Definition of poverty that is much more than a simple income guideline.
- Description of the hidden rules of class to help us develop relationships of mutual respect.

- Review of the research on the causes of poverty so that we can become proficient at addressing all the causes, not just one or two.

The paper defines a community that is at risk—and suggests an accountability tool for communities, as well as principles for change.

We have learned much from people, communities, and organizations that already have applied Bridges concepts. Our work has been used by numerous neighborhoods and communities, including those that are largely African American, Native American, Appalachian, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, urban, and rural. People in poverty have informed and helped develop our books and strategies. They have used the workbook *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* to examine the impact that poverty has on them and their communities. Getting Ahead engages people in poverty as problem solvers, as vital members of planning and decision-making groups. The *second paper*, “*Getting Ahead Philosophy and Process*,” describes the philosophy and process for the Getting Ahead work-group experience.

The *third paper*, “*Additive Model: aha! Process’s Approach to Building Sustainable Communities*,” outlines the additive model used by aha! Process. In it we challenge the “chicken inspector” mindset of the deficit model and discuss the danger of not taking a comprehensive approach and, as a result, ending up blaming the individual. The additive model recognizes what people from all classes bring to the table and advocates for shared decision making. Community members are encouraged to see themselves as “barn raisers” rather than “consumers at vending machines.”

The paper on disaster recovery is particularly pertinent given the economic crisis of 2008 and 2009. When circumstances force us into survival mode, we can get trapped in the tyranny of the moment where we can’t see beyond next week—or even tomorrow—because we’re busy solving immediate, concrete problems. So it is that the very strategies and skills needed to survive during wars, natural

disasters, and persistent poverty are the very things that make us vulnerable to predators. Exploiting the vulnerable is easy if the service or product meets a tangible need and is delivered by those who feign concern and respect. Communities also can get stuck in the tyranny of the moment just as individuals can. The *fourth paper*, “*Disaster Recovery Plan*,” is a quick read on how to respond to disasters.

The *fifth paper*, “*Building Bridges Communities*,” describes how Bridges Communities were formed. It is a description, not a prescription. Every community has its unique history, population, leadership, circumstances, and approaches. Taking ownership of the Bridges constructs is the first step. This leads to self-organizing and taking action. The paper offers lessons learned from other communities; it also describes the role of the Bridges Steering Committee, guiding principles, start-up steps, strategies, and supports that are available.

The *sixth paper*, “*Whole System Planning*,” introduces the Bridges Continuum, a tool for BSCs. The continuum can assist in bringing all sectors and demographics to the table:

- The service and health sectors to help stabilize an unstable environment
- Education to prepare individuals to pursue their dreams
- The business sector to help people acquire income, assets, and wealth

The continuum covers poverty from cradle to grave and also provides for a balanced life and prosperous community. Poverty is typically addressed from the heart, from the moral and social justice perspective. This paper addresses poverty from the head as well, by providing metrics and fallout costs—and showing the benefits that each sector of the community derives from the work of the others. The business sector, for example, can see that early-childhood interventions can have a return of 15 to 17% on dollars spent by helping prepare children to learn. The sixth paper advocates for whole system planning and describes the role of Bridges partners and champions.



Readers unfamiliar with Bridges will want to read the first paper to learn Bridges core concepts before moving on. People already familiar with Bridges constructs, such as those who have attended our workshops or are serving on a Bridges Steering Committee, may choose to move directly to the paper that most interests them.

The *seventh paper*, “12 Thinking Tools,” is primarily designed for people who want to make changes at the institutional and community levels. Again, it assumes that the reader is familiar with Bridges concepts as found in *Bridges Out of Poverty*, *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World*, and the first paper in this book. Each thinking tool is described briefly using a simple pattern: (a) the problem statement, (b) a mental model representing the tool, (c) the context in which the tool is applied, (d) the core ideas, (e) ways to use the tool with brief examples, and (f) information on where to learn more.

Finally, a cautionary note. At the beginning of this piece I quoted Earl Miller of M.I.T.: “An insight is a restructuring of information; it’s seeing the same old thing in a completely new way. Once that restructuring occurs, you never go back.” Somewhere in these papers you might have had an insight or two. If that has occurred, I want you to know—you can never go back!

