

Women and Assets: The Promise of Asset Development

By Larry W. Beeferman, Director, Asset Development Institute, Center on Hunger and Poverty, at the *Women and Assets Summit*, March 31st - April 1st 2003

All of us here share a commitment to effecting change, to enabling more women – all women – to enter the economic mainstream, indeed, move squarely within the economic mainstream. Each of us here, in our day-to-day work – as policy advocates, scholars and researchers, program managers, union leaders, persons in business, and otherwise – directly or indirectly, in ways great or small, contributes to making that change. What is special about your being at this Summit is your willingness to take time out from that daily commitment to step back and take up a different and very important task. Our task is to explore a shared vision for change, not as an abstract proposition, but as the basis for specific ideas and specific actions we can take ourselves and in concert with one another to make that change happen.

Why do we need a shared vision?

Women as a whole have made great economic strides. Women have dramatically increased their participation in the labor force and start-ups of business. Over the long term at least, women have narrowed the pay gap that separates them from men. Women have entered and succeeded in many trades and professions from which they had been excluded. Women have reached positions of responsibility and authority in corporations, unions, and numerous other institutions. Women's financial contribution to the economic well-being of married households has dramatically increased. In other households, women are the primary economic support for themselves and, if there are children in their care, for them as well.

Yet, despite women's advances, many women have been left out of the economic mainstream. Others, dragged by the ebb and flow of current economic and political tides, have been leaving it. Still other women have entered economic life as ostensible equals but, in fact, have still not advanced as far as their male peers. Meeting that challenge is the bread and butter of what each of you does in your own way every day. But however hard our work and brilliant our solutions, we must gain the broad-based public support that is critical to effecting significant change in our however imperfect, democratic polity.

A vision of why that change is warranted is absolutely essential to gaining that support. And it must be a shared vision. Why? First, because the issue is not merely or only a one of many women being "poor" based on a measure of income. Rather, it is question of the factors that determine whether they and other women can gain economic security and enjoy economic opportunity. Those factors are multiple, they are interrelated, and their impact is felt over an individual lifetime. While each of us focuses more on one than another factor, we all must understand their relationships and joint or cumulative

impact. But more important, we must together determine which are most important, so we can set priorities, in light of the limits of time and the constraints of means. Second, a shared vision is the basis for a shared purpose that both inspires and strengthens what we do. Third, even in the best of times, those further from the economic mainstream are less likely to have the resources to make the case for change, and these are hardly the best of times for them. A shared vision and shared purpose enable us to husband and marshal our resources to achieve our common goals. Finally, we will likely not achieve really significant change today or tomorrow or over the next few months or perhaps even during the next few years. A shared vision will give us a clear sense of where we are heading over the long term. In the short run, it will enable us better to take advantage of propitious currents and winds and avoid ones that are destructive or drive us off course.

But if it is a shared vision that we need, what do we mean by those words, particularly in relation to the results we want to achieve? First, we mean it in a motivational sense – to gain the broad and sustained support from the American people that we need to secure change. For that reason, such a vision must relate in a deep kind of way to whom we believe ourselves to be as a people – the values and commitments we claim to share and hold dear. It must recall us to special times in our history – not some idealized golden age or era – but rather when we as a people, in fact, acted together with foresight, determination, and courage, to realize those values and fulfill those commitments. Second we mean “shared vision” in terms of substantive outcomes that would be really significant if the opportunity and the means were available to achieve them. For that reason, the character and goals of the policies we craft must not only comport with our self-conception as a people, but must also enable us, in fact, to better become the people we imagine ourselves to be. They may very well call to mind policies of a kind that were a singular achievement for the society that we once were. But they must embody means for change that are practicable in the society we have become. They must reflect the pathways by which people in our society can advance toward economic well-being and the means by which they might progress. And if we anticipate that such policies can become a reality, we must also seriously believe that they will make a real and sustained difference in people's lives.

Before I proceed to sketch out a vision, one that we believe has great promise in the terms I have described, I want to add a personal note. We at ADI – with the help of many others – have devoted much effort to refining the perspective I share with you today. But for this Summit it was essential that we think really hard about whether the vision reflected women's circumstances, needs, and priorities. I must say that after canvassing a wide range of scholarly and policy work, I was especially struck by the tremendous importance of what one might refer to as the hidden economy of care taking. Of how important it is to the visible economy in its market dimension. Of how very important it is to opportunities and outcomes for women. I hope that what I have to say here reflects that learning. No doubt others appreciated that importance much sooner and with greater insight than I, so we welcome you to weigh in on the subject. Our keynote speaker, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, will highlight that issue in her address.

Asset Development as that Shared Vision: A Solid Basis For Crafting Significant Policies That Can Make A Real Difference in People's Lives

What we call asset development, however phrased, but properly understood, can be the basis for the shared vision we need. Why? First, asset development offers a solid basis for crafting policies, which, if implemented, would really make a real difference in people's lives. Most important, because it focuses on *assets*, defined broadly as the capacities and resources that, in our society, enable people to have choices about what the good life is for them, to make those choices, and have a reasonable chance to realize them. But it is also extremely important, because it focuses on *development* in relation to assets.

Asset development puts squarely in view the significance of the individual life course and successive stages within it, each and all characterized by the potential for change and growth. During childhood, that means a healthy birth, a safe and stimulating childhood, a solid base for life literacy, healthy habits and the skills to succeed during adulthood.¹ During that phase of adulthood most focused on work that means maximum development of capacities and resources applied now and accumulated for the future. During later phases of adulthood that means application of those capacities and resources in new ways not limited to work and preservation of them in the face of inevitable diminishment.

Asset development focuses us on how the capacities and resources – and attendant choices and opportunities – we have at one life stage impact those we have at succeeding stages. Asset development speaks to us not merely about where we are now in our lives, but also about a shared aspiration for change by which we build upon and move beyond it.

Because asset development focuses on *all* of the key capacities and resources that enable people to have, make, and pursue choices about their lives, it spurs us to take serious account of the relationship between individual development and the networks and communities that sustain it. This is important, first, because it reminds us that a productive and just society requires that we invest in *all* individuals and the diverse communities that give them essential encouragement and support. Such communities can be our immediate families, our friends and neighbors, those with whom we share a special purpose (labor solidarity, the achievement of civic goals, or spiritual striving and fulfillment) and those with whom we share a political community.

Asset development also is important because it makes a connection to the critical role those networks and communities play in making *real choices* and *real chances* for change possible. Having and making choices is, of necessity and most immediately a matter both individual and personal. Some choices – those that go to the core of identity and dignity – should and must remain solely individual and personal. But the reality is that other choices are not solely individual because others have a stake in the choices that we make and we have a stake in the choices that others make.

For the latter kind of choices, each of us must have voice. That is, when decisions are

made that affect our ability to pursue and advance along a path that we have chosen, we must have the chance to speak and be heard. The structures and processes through which voice should be expressed and heard will vary with the context – within families, civic and workplace-based communities, or different kinds of political community. But they are essential to meaningful choice in each of those contexts. Moreover, a condition for having a voice in these varied contexts – of full and meaningful participation – is a sense of personal identity and confidence, and competence to assert it.

For those reasons, asset development connects us to successive waves of activism by women asserting their voices more loudly and more effectively, struggles from which not only women, but all of us have benefited. The history of such activism reaches at least as far back as the formation by women in the textile mills of the Lowell Female Labor Reform association and the entry of women into the moral reform and abolitionist movements during the middle of the nineteenth century. These, in turn, set the stage for a political movement on their own behalf, culminating in the First Women's Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls and the Suffragist movement leading to ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. They were followed by the joining of forces of working and upper-class women in the Women's Trade Union League and, later, the emergence of a new consciousness about women's roles and potential – symbolized by Rosie the Riveter – during and after World War II. The result was the struggle during the 1950s against a myopic vision of feminine domesticity, led by middle-class and professional women that led to the Equal Pay Act and the creation of a President's Commission on the Status of Women. These helped set the stage for the rise of the modern women's movement in the early 1960s. The movement blossomed, driven in part by women's insistence that the promise of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act be enforced. It led to the founding of NOW as the precursor of a vast array of organizations – of working women, of business and professional women, of women of color, and many others – that up and to this day give voice to their insistence on having a full and rightful place in political, civic, economic, and, yes, domestic life.

Asset Development: A Means to Gain Broad, Popular Support

First, asset development enables us to speak about the *needs* that the vast majority of us have *in common*; needs, which if met, fuel *shared aspirations* for economic well-being. Key assets include:

- Earnings to sustain growth during a working lifetime; Knowledge and skills to enhance those earnings;
- The physical and mental health to fully use knowledge, skills, and other capacities;
- Pensions for support in retirement;
- Insurance or other protection against risks – labor market risk, such as unemployment and personal risk, such as illness and disability;
- Financial resources to complement and enhance all of the former;
- Networks of personal, community, and professional connections that support and empower; and
- A geographic community-based infrastructure of resources and services.

Second, asset development connects us with key values by which we define ourselves:

- *Opportunity* (linked to *choice*): A shared belief that all of us can and should have a meaningful choice about what the good life means to us. That all of us can and should have a reasonable chance to achieve it. In turn, that belief is grounded in a recognition that people can change their lives; that they can expand upon their capacities and build upon their resources in ways that widen their choices, heighten their aspirations, and increase their chance of fulfilling them; that for most of us, success requires a series of opportunities that build on one another and accumulate over the course of a lifetime of effort; and that if we miss one or even a few steps, things are more difficult, but achieving success is still possible; but if we miss too many steps, success may be out of reach.²
- *Fairness*: While Americans may be loath to prescribe economic outcomes, they surely embrace the importance of there being no unfair advantage in the pursuit of opportunity.
- *Responsibility*: Capacity is a material and a moral basis for personal and social responsibility.
 - *Personal Responsibility*: An individual should display initiative in developing and using his or her own capacity to contribute not only to that individual's own well being but also that of his or her family and the larger community. That initiative is inspired when meaningful individual action seems possible; when the means to carry it out are within reach; and when there is a real prospect of a more rewarding future that sustains hope.
 - *Social responsibility*: There should be sufficient reward for those whose lives embody personal responsibility. There should be sufficient support to those not capable of seizing opportunity and those who have failed in the attempt, but who can begin again. We find strength within ourselves, but our strength is in others as well. Namely, we find it in supports and encouragement from our families and others who constitute the diverse communities in which we live our lives. But we also find it in government resources and authority to assure basic security, sweep away barriers, and open new gateways to opportunity.

Third, asset development also enables us to construct a *positive* narrative. What do I mean by that? Challenging the *status quo* usually means having to deliver bad news: about how we fall short as a society; about the deprivation and loss that all too many people suffer as a result. Now, delivering that bad news is our obligation; it is also essential to advocacy for change. But we run the risk of relying on it too much or to the exclusion of good news. We must “marry” the bad news to good news. Asset development enables us to convey good news because it embodies a story of aspiration, hope, and change (for the better) if – and that is an important if – the requisite means are available to make it.

Fourth, this shared, asset-based vision of a just and productive society comports and connects us with a cluster of major social policy achievements. These policies were fashioned during a period that reaches back well before the New Deal and runs through the Great Society to the present. Many form the basis for what some have termed the "insurance-opportunity" state. I think it might better be referred to as the "security-opportunity" state.

The hallmarks of the security-opportunity state have been protection in the face of commonly shared risk of harm to well-being and enabling of upward mobility, once basic stability and security are assured. To mention only a few:

- The unemployment insurance system offered security in the face of labor market risk; Medicare and Medicaid, security in the face of personal health risk; Social Security and SSI, security in the face of financial risk associated with disability, aging, and death of a spouse or parent; what was originally Aid to Dependent Children, security – at least some – in the face of the risk of family disruption or transitions.
- The National Labor Relations Act was primarily a means to enhance job quality, particularly wages – complementing the minimum wage and other provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act – and protect against the risk of threats to job security through arbitrary action.
- Over the decades many families gained security and a financial stake through homeownership because of the support of a veritable alphabet soup of government agencies or government promoted organizations. Among them have been the Home Owners Loan Corporation, the FHA, the VHA, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and Ginnie Mae. They rescued failing homeowners. They created and continually reinvented the system of housing finance, through long-term fixed rate and adjustable mortgages, mortgage insurance and guarantees, deposit insurance, and the secondary market. In turn, individual financial asset-building through homeownership has been underwritten by massive federal tax subsidies.
- Similarly, our system for building individual pension wealth has been achieved with massive tax subsidies, spurred and protected by government regulation (ERISA) and insurance (Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation).

The history of major policies, of course, extends back further back and is even richer. Think of how the Homestead Act jump-started millions with an asset that was often key to opportunity in its time, land to farm. Or how the GI Bill jump-started millions with the kinds of assets that are more critical to economic mobility in our era: resources to gain an education or start a business and provide a basic income to sustain veterans while they pursued their efforts.

Implicit in all of these policies has been a link between the well-being of the individual to that of the larger society in a virtuous circle. These policies invested in individuals and enabled them (in some measure) to gain a secure basis from which they can create wealth through their productive contribution to society. These policies enabled those who have suffered misfortune to start anew. They sustained others in the face of limited opportunity. In turn, these policies of social investment helped assure that the wealth so created was shared in ways to enable yet more individuals enter upon and advance

economically along similar paths. They were, in their own time and in their own way, asset-based policies, although not called as such.

Building Upon Past Achievements To Assure The Full Inclusion of Women

But, however great the achievements of the security-opportunity state, this Summit must grapple with at least two key facts. First, from the start, the policies I mentioned (and others) failed to bring many – particularly women and minorities – fully within the circle and that remains true today. For example, neither ADC originally nor its successors, AFDC and TANF, nor unemployment insurance, nor even the National Labor Relations Act, nor in certain respects, Social Security, were crafted or amended to fully take account of women's dual roles as workers and entrepreneurs and as caretakers. Women – particularly women who have been heads of households – have not been in a position to take full advantage of the tax subsidies that sustain home ownership and financial asset building for retirement. Similarly, they do not benefit as much from tax-subsidies for employment-based health insurance that not only protects mental and physical health but also averts the potentially devastating financial costs of medical care. Certainly women were never situated to significantly benefit in their own right from the GI Bill or from the Homestead Act. In all of these cases – and others as well – for women of color, the disadvantages of gender were and are still compounded by race and ethnicity.

Second, we live in a society several steps and some distance removed from the eras in which many of those achievements were made. Ours is an economy more dynamic, competitive, complex, interdependent, and global. Our population is more diverse. The institutions of family, civic engagement, enterprise, and government life have taken on new forms and newer ones are likely in prospect. These changes – some wrought by women and for the better – have created a different calculus of risk and opportunity. That new calculus challenges us all to gain the capacities and resources we require to protect against those risks and seize those opportunities. But for women, the challenge is two-fold: As women strive to enter the economic mainstream more fully as equals, they must also must navigate within it as its direction, flow, and intensity dramatically change.

For these reasons, we need to take a hard look – and that means without preconceptions – at how best we can preserve and extend the achievements of the security-opportunity state. In taking that hard look, what are some of the key realities we need to consider?

Some are unique or peculiar to women. One relates to the vital importance of care: for children; for the sick, injured, and disabled; for the elderly; and for a spouse or partner as well. First, because our economic well-being in great measure rests on such care: As caretakers of children – as “parents” – we develop the capabilities of our next generation of citizens. As caretakers of the sick, injured, and disabled, we sustain and where possible, renew or strengthen the capabilities of our adult contemporaries. As caretakers of the elderly – we help them preserve or husband capabilities in the face of limitation and decline. As caretakers of a spouse or partner, we provide the material,

psychological, and emotional supports that afford him or her security that sustains them and enables them to seize opportunities that lay outside the sphere of the family. Second, because in increasing measure – whether by reason of economic necessity, cultural change, or personal choice – the lines between the provision of such care by market and non-market means have been breached and blurred.

But third, because regardless of the balance of market and non-market means, historically and in our own time, women have been socially assigned most of this demanding and necessary work.

Another key, overlapping reality concerns “gender specialization.” The social assignment of women to the roles to which we have already referred is a very important aspect of that. But the phrase has a broader meaning. It encompasses other kinds of obstacles or barriers, particularly if we think in terms of choice and opportunity. If asset development is about having, making, and pursuing choices, then “gender specialization” reflects limitations on those choices.

Some limitations are imposed by others. For example, by their intentional acts of discrimination (unequal pay for comparable work; exclusion from non-traditional jobs); by their reliance on preconceptions about what women seek or can be expected of them (glass ceilings and “old boy” clubs); by violence and abuse that denies women the basic physical security that is the predicate for all other choices.

Women themselves may impose other limitations on their choices. On self-confidence, a sense that “I have the ability to do this.” On aspiration, a belief that “It’s a proper thing for a person like me to do.” On an estimate of self-worth, a sense that “I deserve this.” Of hope, a belief that “If I do this I can succeed.” Other self-imposed limits – ones that result from women supposedly being more risk averse and altruistic than men – may disadvantage women; but perhaps they are proper constraints in the service of preservation and solidarity that all of us might choose.

For these reasons alone, women’s poorer economic outcomes compared to those for men are both a symptom and a cause of these inequities.

Even if women overcome the barriers of gender specialization, other realities adversely impact on both women and men, though they may make it more difficult for women to enter and thrive in the economic mainstream. More “flexible” and diverse work relationships offer to some varied and economically rewarding ladders of job opportunities within and across enterprises and across jobs and self-employment; but offer to others less equipped not only less rewarding job or self-employment choices, but also threaten them with economic uncertainty and insecurity when transitions are forced upon them. There are more diverse ways to save, invest, and gain and employ credit that offer to some varied and rewarding opportunities to build and protect financial assets for use during a working lifetime and retirement; but exclude or create obstacles for others with little financial wherewithal and place those slightly better off at risk of being preyed upon or abused. There are more diverse and complex family arrangements that offer to some enjoyment of varied and rewarding relationships of

care, trust, and support; but confront others with instability, threats to personal and economic security, and barriers to such relationships.

Policies That Bring and Sustain All Women Within the Economic Mainstream

Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of such policies: those that directly address women and the challenge of gender specialization; those that address both men and women; and those that address men, because helping men may help women as well.

Consider policies that address gender specialization. With respect to gender specialization in care taking, which among the three broad policy approaches that economist Barbara Bergmann has described do we pursue? Do we aim to integrate men into family work and women into market work, with family-friendly practices at the workplace? Do we accommodate or even spur the "commodification" of family work, that is, pay for cleaning, cooking, and child or other care, while women join the paid labor force or start businesses? If so, how do we do it in a way that properly values and does not degrade or exploit such work? Do we better value "women's work" at home financially, but in a way that does not degrade or show disrespect for it?

Different policies relate to other kinds of gender specialization. Do we rely on existing laws, but aim to strengthen enforcement mechanisms to open up choices, say for jobs or credit? Do we strengthen those laws to increase the quality of jobs that are chosen, by moving beyond equal pay for equal work to comparable worth? Do we devise ways to better enable women to speak and have their voice be heard within the communities and networks that connect them to opportunities?

Still other policies address both men and women, but may have a greater impact on women. Consider financial risk and opportunity. First, *financial risk*. Do we strengthen systems of social insurance against risk of financial harm or complement or even replace such systems with ones that spur self-insurance sustained by individual financial asset building? For example, do we strive to enhance Social Security as a central pillar for basic income support in old age? Or should we complement it with an at-least-as-universal, but individually based system of supplementary support for greater comfort during those years? If so, should such a system be better built under the umbrella of Social Security; upon the current system of individual, citizen-based accounts like IRAs; or the system of individual, but employment-linked accounts like 401(k)s? Second, *financial opportunity*: Do we open up to all a system of incentives that spurs individuals to their build financial assets targeted to specific purposes, or create a universal system for generalized asset building purposes over a lifetime? For example, do we aim to universalize the homeowners mortgage interest deduction, making it a refundable tax credit? Should we try to do the same for 529 education accounts? Or Individual Training Accounts? Or do we seek to establish an at-birth or other kinds of universal stakeholder accounts that can be used for many purposes and offer incentives for saving in those accounts?

Consider labor market risk and opportunity. With respect to *labor market risk*, do we broaden and strengthen the system of insurance against labor market risk *or* do we complement it with a system to which individuals, employers, and the government contribute? For example, do we work to extend unemployment insurance to better reach those not well covered or not covered at all, such as temporary or part-time workers or certain low-wage workers? *Or*, however we strengthen that system, do we complement it with one that enables people to plan and provide for themselves against certain of risks with the individual, government, and employer sharing the cost? With respect to *labor market opportunity*, to enable individuals to gain the knowledge and skills they need to step onto and move up career ladders as workers and/or entrepreneurs, do we enhance the current mix of episodically appropriated grants and authorized loans and array of tax credits that benefit only some? *Or* do we construct a different, sustainable system of investment in human capital in which all stakeholders – workers, businesses, and government contribute financially to building knowledge and skills, e.g., accounts with contributions from all three; refundable tax credits; or loans against Social Security or other retirement asset assets, repayable contingent on sufficient returns (earned income) from the investment?

Again, how do we assure jobs of minimally adequate quality? Do we seek to increase cash earnings through a higher minimum wage indexed to inflation? *Or* do we aim to further increase the size and broaden the scope of coverage or the EITC? Do we strive to increase job quality in the form of non-cash benefits, such as health insurance, by mandates or incentives? *Or* aim to establish job-based but not job-specific benefits that are more portable? *Or* try to increase the scope of coverage in ways not linked to employment?

Consider, finally, the risks and opportunities associated with family transitions. Do we strengthen the system of support for families and taxation of income that targets family types – based on marital status, parenthood, and family size? *Or* do we support and tax individuals as citizens regardless of their choice of family relationships? Do we strengthen or adapt the system of support for families based on links to work, e.g., the earned income tax credit? *Or* do we strengthen and supplement supports directly based on care taking, e.g., replace the child care tax deduction with a refundable childcare development credit? *Or* revamp the child tax credit, weakening the link to earnings? Do we strengthen the current system of support in case of divorce or desertion? *Or* do we create a system of family transition insurance that provides time-limited – and perhaps, diminishing over time – income or lump sum support to make those transitions successful?

Whatever our approach, as a matter of policy and politics, success will depend on how we reinvent and strengthen forms of collective action. As a matter of policy, they are often essential to enabling individuals to identify, enjoy, and pursue opportunities. In some cases, they are critical to individuals gaining or enhancing the rewards that opportunity seized brings. As a matter of politics, these means of collective action may very well be essential to building the constituencies that will insist that these policies be enacted.

For example, with respect to unions, do we strive harder to strengthen them in their traditional form? Expand their role to provide services other than those delivered through traditional collective bargaining arrangements? Link that expanded role to community-based organizations? Or do we encourage forms of ownership that increase employees' personal stake and voice in the governance of enterprises? Or, more narrowly, can we democratize the governance of pooled resources such as pension savings?

For similar reasons, we must address the role played by community development corporations, community action agencies, community development finance institutions, and the myriad of other established and emergent community-based institutions. Which policies will make those institutions more effective in enabling asset-building in ways that government is not likely to be competent? Spur those institutions to be organized and governed in ways that give greater voice to those whom they serve, particularly women?

Lastly, we might also consider how policies that focus directly on asset-building for men – as partners, as parents and children, as colleagues, and as fellow members of the larger community – are a means to ensure greater economic well-being for women as well. Policies that enable men to succeed as parents – whether in the home or as non-resident and/or non-marital fathers; better succeed at being loving, reliable, and supportive partners; and succeed as economically productive individuals who can better contribute to their own well-being and the families of which they are a part.

Building a Stronger Frame

To better devise all of these policies and communicate their importance, there are other things we need to think about. First, we might enrich our concept of asset development. For example, “human capital” is quite properly thought of in terms of physical or cognitive functioning – reflected in knowledge, skills, and experience gained. And realistically, it includes the physical and mental health that adequate health insurance and appropriate medical care help assure. But, as the economist Nancy Folbre has suggested, should we also include the capacity for “self-regulation” that is associated with an ethic of work and responsibility? Or the skills, attitudes, and motives that enable people to care, to meet others needs and wants in that way? Similarly, should we better acknowledge that while asset-building must be a matter of “self-investment,” it is not only a matter of self-investment. Isn't building human capital largely a social process in which capabilities are gained through a myriad of relationships in which women play a key role? If so, that, in turn suggests, that however accurately and evocatively we characterize the role of “caretaker,” the word does not fully express its significance. Perhaps we might better term those who are “caretakers” – mostly women – as silent or hidden investors in the well-being of those for whom they “care.”

Second, we must also devise new measures of asset-based outcomes that highlight the importance of assets and mark progress in terms of asset-building. For example, we believe that THE ASSET INDEX that ADI has crafted is a significant first step in that effort, incorporating job-based and related assets, human capital, and financial asset measures of economic outcomes on a national and state-by-state basis. But we have yet

to track the progress of women specifically in these terms. Even with respect to just job-based and related assets, we need an indicator like the official poverty level, but more realistic, yet equally understandable. That indicator might be based on an absolute measure: one typified by the excellent work already done with Wider Opportunity for Women's self-sufficiency standard or the Economic Policy Institute's family budget; or similar efforts by state-level policy organizations. Perhaps the measure should take account of what people need to save, at least those amounts necessary to ride out personal emergencies and crises if no other financial help is available. Alternatively, the indicator might be based on a relative measure, like ones used by HUD, that highlights the economic distance between those least well off and the standard of well-being of many of their contemporaries. Such a measure – one generally used in Western Europe – might be set as a percentage of median income. In addition, we might also include non-market based measures of capacities and resources that are critical to economic outcomes. For example, we might incorporate a measure of the hidden economy of care – paid or unpaid – that sustains individual and community asset-building.

Conclusion: Thinking Big for Success Over the Long Run

In all that we do, we must think big and for success over the long run.

In that regard we are informed, cautioned, and encouraged by the four factors Theda Skocpol suggests were critical to this country's greatest social policy achievements. Benefits were seen a return for expected service by individuals to the community and the nation. Policies were structured to include beneficiaries across lines of class and race. Policies emerged and grew through partnerships between government at various levels and civic membership associations or membership movements. There was access to secure, rising sources of revenue, seen as legitimate and applied in a way to reinforce the expectation that they are a return for individual "contributions" made.

Asset development – which links security to opportunity; which links capacity and resources to opportunity; which links fair reward to capacity gained and opportunity seized – is a means by which we can reframe the meaning of and the relation between "service expected" and "benefits" received.

Asset development – which speaks to shared needs, universal aspirations, and inclusion in the opportunity structure for all – is a means by which to guide how we fashion policies that cross lines of class, race, and gender.

Asset development – which speaks to the critical role of communities of choice and purpose, small and large, and the importance of voice within those communities to both personal growth and political change – is a means by which we can begin strengthen the associations and movements that will inspire and spur significant policy change.

Asset development, as such, offers no "magic bullet" answer to challenging questions of public finance, taxation, and revenue posed by significant policy change. But, current fiscal exigencies aside and over the long term, we can be confident, if we are creative.

Recall that despite popular aversion to taxes and in the midst of the Great Depression, unemployment insurance was important enough to justify the employment-based tax on employers that funded it; Social Security was important enough to justify an employment-based tax on employers and employees. The largest pre-New Deal benefit program, that of veterans' pensions, was funded by rising tariff revenues. In our era, might policies be funded by taxes on Internet sales? Or more generally, by a national value-added tax, if it can be made progressive? Might children's opportunity or similar accounts, if they make sense and have political traction, be sustained by revenues from the estate tax or perhaps even better, a wealth tax?

I have set out, in brief, why asset development – however phrased in a technical or popular sense – can be the basis for the shared vision we must have and the policies we need to craft to make meaningful change possible over the long term.

Our panelists and you will soon assay that vision and significant and practicable policies that embody it.

When you do, not only do we hope, we urge – even insist – you probe them critically, but of course constructively!

Certainly, should they lack merit, they will not survive the test of fire to which you talented, experienced, and committed group of people will have put them. Even so, we will have succeeded for we will have a stronger, more informed, and shared understanding of the larger task that faces us.

I believe we will be more successful, in part because we have before, engaged and been challenged by diverse groups through a similar process from which we have all learned. If so, we will have enriched the vision I have sketched here. We will have begun to embody it in significant and practicable policies that can inspire and inform the endeavors to which each of us will return after this Summit.

Finally, I believe that yet greater success is within our reach. We can leave this Summit committed to continued dialogue and, even better, collaboration.

Clearly, we will have only begun an endeavor that will not only demand more reflection and debate, but also require that we bring many others into the conversation. We at ADI and our colleagues at NCWA look forward to working with you on that endeavor during these two days and in the future.

¹ Adapted from “Colorado: The State of Opportunity Report,” Bell Policy Center, Denver, Colorado.

² Adapted from “Colorado: The State of Opportunity Report,” Bell Policy Center, Denver, Colorado.