

The Great Simplification

Stephanie Hoopes (00:00:00):

Our metrics show very clearly that there's a structural problem in the US economy, that cost of living is higher than what wages earn in a lot of areas.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:00:13):

While we have all these tools and resources available to us, there's still a lot of misrepresentation or under reporting of what's really going on out in the world.

Peter Kilde (00:00:21):

Regardless of what people want, we are going to be entering a period where poverty will inevitably increase.

Marc Perry (00:00:29):

We have to figure out how to make sure people understand that it is everybody's issue and that we are interconnected, and that's a message we have to start sending. People are not going to react until it starts to impact them directly.

Nate Hagens (00:00:43):

Welcome to Reality Roundtable number seven, where we discuss a central topic to the Great Simplification which is poverty. Joining me today are Stephanie Hoopes. Stephanie developed the ALICE Metric, which stands for asset limited, income constrained, but employed for a pilot study of low income community in New Jersey and is since overseeing the expansion to a national effort with ALICE data for all US counties as the national director for a program at United Way of Northern New Jersey.

(00:01:18):

Also joining me is Peter Kilde, who's been the executive director of West CAP, an anti-poverty community action agency in West Central Wisconsin for almost the last 30 years where they've developed and managed multiple low-income housing projects and various sustainable community programs. Also joining me is Marc Perry, who's the executive director for Community Action of Rock and Walworth Counties in Wisconsin where he provides training and technical assistance for cultural equity workshops with a goal of moving families toward economic self-reliance.

(00:01:55):

The Great Simplification

Lastly is Dalitso Sulamoyo, who is the CEO of Champaign County Regional Planning Commission in Illinois, whose services range from transportation planning, energy efficiency training, community service, and much more for low-income families. This is a topic that I don't know a lot about, but I recognize the importance of it, and I think this will be the first of many conversations on this topic on this podcast.

(00:02:22):

Please welcome Stephanie, Peter, Marc, and Dalitso. Greetings. Welcome to Reality Roundtable number seven. This month, we're going to talk about poverty specifically in the United States, but I think the lessons that we might learn apply to other places in the world. With me today are Peter Kilde, Marc Perry, Dalitso Sulamoyo, and Stephanie Hoopes. Stephanie, great to see you. Could you briefly introduce yourself?

Stephanie Hoopes (00:03:07):

Hello, Nate. Yes. Hi, I'm Stephanie Hoopes, the National Director of United For ALICE.

Nate Hagens (00:03:14):

Excellent. Dalitso.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:03:16):

Hi, Nate. Dalitso Sulamoyo, I'm the Chief Executive Officer of the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, which is in Illinois, and I'm also the Chair of the National Community Action Partnership.

Nate Hagens (00:03:27):

Marc Perry.

Marc Perry (00:03:29):

Good afternoon, Nate. Marc Perry, Executive Director of Community Action Inc. of Rock and Walworth Counties located in southeastern Wisconsin.

Nate Hagens (00:03:36):

And Peter.

Peter Kilde (00:03:37):

The Great Simplification

Yeah, good afternoon, Nate. So my name's Peter Kilde and I am the Executive Director of a rural CAP in West Central Wisconsin called West CAP, and we do a lot of stuff around affordable housing and everything else.

Nate Hagens (00:03:50):

And CAP stands for Community Action Partnership, and Peter-

Peter Kilde (00:03:53):

Community Action Program.

Nate Hagens (00:03:54):

Program, and of the four of you, Peter is actually one of my neighbors. He lives around 30 miles from here. Thank you all for being here. This is a huge topic. The reason that I asked you here is I think wealth and income inequality are already a serious issue in this nation, and I expect as energy gets more expensive and credit becomes less available and even what's happening with AI, that it's going to become a much deeper and wider issue, and so I would like each of you to give a five or six minute overview of your framing on poverty in the United States, and then we will have a conversation about it. Stephanie, would you like to begin?

Stephanie Hoopes (00:04:48):

I would love to start, and you've got a great group here, Nate, but I want to introduce your listeners to one more person and that's ALICE, and ALICE is an acronym for asset limited, income constrained, employed, and we all know ALICE, our neighbors, our friends, our kids, our parents. Many of us have been ALICE and we all got to know ALICE better during the pandemic, especially the essential workers who enabled many of us to quarantine, who took care of us when we got sick, and we all got to see a lot of ALICE families struggling.

(00:05:28):

One of the most poignant for me was seeing those families in a parking lot at McDonald's trying to connect to the wifi so their kids could do their homework. So that kind of thing just brought ALICE a lot closer to us, but ALICE is also a very specific measurement that we've developed at my organization, United For ALICE, and the measurement is it's households that earn above the federal poverty level, but below

The Great Simplification

what we call the household survival budget, which is the bare minimum, housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare, smartphone plan, and ALICE pays taxes.

(00:06:08):

So just the bare minimum for that household budget, and we are finding that instead of 12.8% of households below the federal poverty level struggling to get by, that there's another 28.6%. So in total, we have 41% of households in this country that are struggling paycheck to paycheck, working often, sometimes two jobs and not able to support their families. So the magnitude of what we're talking about here today is not 12 or 13% of households. It's 41% of households, and I think that that is a fundamental shift in the way we understand what's happening in terms of equality.

(00:06:57):

And in terms of policy, that we're having to address this in a much bigger way, and so I just wanted to share maybe a minute or two on what that's based on so that folks really understand that this is the minimum of what we're reporting. We have this household survival budget that we compile for every county across the country and then we look at income of households in that county and above or below that basic budget, you're ALICE or you're not, and so in comparison, the federal poverty level is one number everywhere in the country.

(00:07:41):

And this number was developed about 60 years ago when Lyndon Johnson needed a measure for the war on poverty and so that number then was developed based on the economy at the time, and there was a common understanding that food should be about a third of your budget. That number has been ticked up by inflation ever since. So there's been no adjustment for the way the economy has evolved and food is no longer a third of people's budgets, and we all know that there's great differences across the country and the cost of living.

(00:08:18):

We know that there are differences within states and between states, and yet the poverty level is that same number in New York as it is in Mississippi. So our ALICE metrics and the household survival budget are able to take into account those regional differences in the cost of living, and then there are differences in what people get paid as well. So it's where there's that gap between what the cost of living is and

The Great Simplification

what people earn, that's where you have ALICE households, and in our research over the last decade, we have found ALICE in every community that we've researched.

(00:09:01):

So we find ALICE in rural communities, we find ALICE in urban communities, and we also drill down and look at households by all different kinds of demographics, and there's no one ALICE story. So I hope some of what we can talk about today is dispelling some of the myths about who is struggling. People conjure up ideas about poverty and what we are able to show with the ALICE metrics is that there are households struggling of all shapes and sizes, all race and ethnicities, all ages, all family combinations.

(00:09:38):

And so we need to think bigger, and part of the reason we developed the name ALICE is to move away from that poverty language, which in many cases, has some moral connotations with it. People make assumptions about whether households are being lazy or have some moral failing, and our metrics show very clearly that there's a structural problem in the US economy, that cost of living is higher than what wages earn in a lot of areas across the country. So it's all of our problem. It's not just some families who might not be trying hard enough. That's not the right story.

Nate Hagens (00:10:27):

So ALICE stands for asset limited, income constrained, and what's the E?

Stephanie Hoopes (00:10:34):

Employed.

Nate Hagens (00:10:35):

Employed. I'm aware of this and I assume that many of our listeners are as well, but we're one of the wealthiest nations in the world as an average income, but that average, the mean is very different than the median, and in many ways, we are not remotely a wealthy country, given that you just pointed out 40% plus of families are in this demographic. So thank you for that overview. Marc Perry, would you like to go next?

Marc Perry (00:11:09):

The Great Simplification

Yeah, and honestly, thank you very much, Nate. Continuing really where Stephanie left off, as we look at circumstances related to the families that we serve in our organization and Community Action organizations, one of the things that we do at Community Action Agencies is every three years, we're required to do a community-wide needs assessment, and that needs assessment is a survey of people who receive our services and people in the community and other constituency bases.

(00:11:36):

And what we see and what we found over the last several years as the person who's responsible in our agency for our needs assessment gathering is individuals who are working sometimes two jobs and few occasions, three jobs, but are unable to make ends meet. So it's not that people aren't working, it's not that people are sitting around waiting for public assistance or support. It's literally that they're working and they're not making a living wage. We see people in circumstances like making monthly decisions about whether or not I'm going to pay my light bill or I'm going to put gas in my car so I can go to work.

(00:12:09):

We see people in situations making decisions about whether or not they're going to buy groceries that month, whether or not I'm going to let my light bill go for the month. The vast majority of the circumstances that we see is we see individuals who even if they are making their dollars stretch to meet their normal budgets, that one of the issues that they'll run into, for example, is if they have a crisis of any nature, their car breaks down, they have a flat tire, they have a bill that's out of the ordinary.

(00:12:36):

They're making those decisions about, oh my gosh, I have to get my car fixed because that's the way that I get to and from work and get my children to and from school, but if I get my car fixed, it's going to make me \$300 short for my electric bill. It's going to make me \$250 short for my insurance payment. It's going to make me short for my rental payment. So you're talking about families on a regular basis making decisions, on a monthly basis, making decisions about how their money is managed.

(00:13:02):

A lot of the conversation people come to us, or when we hear people talk about stereotypes or stigmas about the people we serve, we hear the thing about they're not good money managers or they don't manage their resources well when the reality is a

The Great Simplification

lot of our families manage the resources incredibly well. The simple fact is that there's not enough of the resource. They're not being paid enough to earn a living wage to support their families, and we have to make sure that we are addressing that issue. As I said, we see this circumstance all the time.

(00:13:34):

The other thing that we have to take a look at as we talk about families is specifically talking about child poverty. As a person who's spent almost my entire career as a youth development practitioner working with youth from challenged backgrounds, one of the biggest measures for me in terms of how healthy a community is is the health and wellbeing of their children. So looking at child poverty rates, looking at literacy rates, looking at numeracy rates, looking at health outcomes, looking at education outcomes.

(00:14:05):

Looking at youth employment opportunities, looking at youth incarceration rates, and looking at those numbers across the board, we're absolutely failing our children right now, and when it comes to racial disparity and disproportionality, BIPOC children are falling much further behind. We have to make sure that we're addressing, again, all of our children and all of our families, but we have to make sure we're paying attention to racial disparity and disproportionality because those numbers are incredibly disturbing.

(00:14:34):

I live in a state and work in a state where we have some of the worst racial disparity outcomes in the entire country. Wisconsin is widely considered the most segregated state in the United States. It's widely considered the state that it's the worst state for Black families to live in and the worst state for Black children to grow up in. So we have to start addressing all of our disparity issues in terms of wealth and income, but really pay attention to the fact that our children of color are struggling disproportionately.

Nate Hagens (00:15:05):

Thank you. I didn't know that about Wisconsin. I have so many questions for you, Marc, but I'm going to wait until everyone goes.

Marc Perry (00:15:16):

The Great Simplification

I have plenty data for you as well to back up the statements.

Nate Hagens (00:15:21):

Yeah, thank you. Dalitso, would you like to follow Marc?

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:15:25):

Sure. Thank you, Nate, and just to add to what Marc and Stephanie have presented, and I want to just share with you and your viewers that my background, I come from Malawi, which is in Southeast Africa, one of the poorest countries in the world, and so for me to be working on addressing poverty in one of the wealthiest, if not the wealthiest nation in the world is pretty interesting, but being that that's what it is, as you said, this is one of the wealthiest nations.

(00:16:03):

And yet we have this issue of poverty where there are a lot of households that are financially insecure, and I think at the crux of this is most households that are in poverty, it's because they cannot afford basic necessities. That is food and shelter. If I may just maybe illustrate something that was touched on by Marc and when he talked about families have to make decisions on whether or not they should pay the electric bill or some other emergency comes up and they have to divert their resources towards that.

(00:16:43):

Let's use one of the programs that Community Action operates, which is the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program. This is a program that we basically assist households with their utility bills and we essentially, when we go through the application process, we pay the utility vendor directly so the money doesn't go to the household, but we pay the utility directly on behalf of that household, and one of the things we're looking at, especially here in Illinois, we've realized that the reason why we have this program.

(00:17:17):

And the reason why people come to our doors is because they cannot afford their utilities. It's not because they, like you said, it's not because they're lazy or they don't want to pay their utilities. They simply cannot afford it, and I don't know about Wisconsin or I don't know where Stephanie is, but here in Illinois, our utilities have gone up significantly. My household, we were used to paying a monthly bill of maybe

The Great Simplification

\$100 a month to it skyrocketing to \$600 a month. So think about a household that is on limited income.

(00:17:54):

We've looked at households that are anywhere from zero to 50% of poverty, and unfortunately, we have to use that measurement because that's all we have to work with right now, but for those households that are zero to 50% of poverty, even after we've provided LIHEAP assistance, they're still paying 30 to 40% of their income towards the utilities. So there's no way for these households to really make it, and in most cases, if you can't afford utilities, that is also connected to you perhaps being evicted, especially if you're renting your apartment or house. You may up being evicted because you don't have any utilities.

(00:18:39):

And that's just one piece. What about rent? Depending on the community that you're in and depending on how much housing costs, a lot of families cannot afford to pay their rent. So it's an issue of affordability, but it's also an issue of income, as Stephanie pointed out. You have a lot of households that are working, and Marc, you said maybe some are working two, if not three jobs, but yet they're still not able to afford their basic necessities, and so we're trying to bridge that gap, but it's still not enough.

(00:19:17):

The question I think I have, and I'm sure we'll talk about this later on, is are we investing enough to address poverty? I just read the book by, I think the last name is Desmond, and one of the things he did is he did this calculation where he was able to determine that in order for us to even begin to really seriously address poverty, at the basic, \$177 billion a year, and I'm not sure that that's the investment that we're making so far to actually put a dent into poverty.

(00:19:56):

So there are a lot of things that we need to talk about because it's a multifaceted issue. Marc has brought up issues of equity that are, disparities that Wisconsin is dealing with, but we see those across the board in education, access to opportunities, healthcare as well as employment, and so it has to be a multifaceted approach if we're really going to be serious about addressing poverty in America. I'll stop there.

Nate Hagens (00:20:29):

The Great Simplification

Thank you. Again, I have lots of follow-up questions. Just one for clarity. You said that if a family or an individual is at zero to 50% of poverty, you mean the federal poverty level that's like a statistic?

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:20:42):

Yes. That's correct, the federal poverty level.

Nate Hagens (00:20:45):

And how much money is that today?

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:20:48):

I'll have to-

Nate Hagens (00:20:49):

Income.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:20:50):

I'll look it up while Peter goes.

Stephanie Hoopes (00:20:55):

So I can help a little bit with that is for a single adult, it's about \$13,000, whereas our survival budget for a single adult would be 25, \$30,000 just for those bare basics. It can tell you how woefully inadequate that federal poverty level is.

Marc Perry (00:21:14):

Yeah. If you start with that base of about \$26,000, then you need to add somewhere between 13 and \$15,000 per new other household member just to get the basics.

Nate Hagens (00:21:26):

And if you're at that federal poverty level, you're still paying full taxes to the government and all that?

Stephanie Hoopes (00:21:35):

Well, below a certain amount, you don't pay taxes, but ALICE pays taxes, and in some cases, ALICE households pay a higher rate of tax than wealthier households.

The Great Simplification

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:21:46):

Just something to also share is that even if you have households that are not necessarily defined as being in poverty, there are many of us who are one paycheck away from falling into poverty. It's a major illness, a major catastrophe happens to you. Next thing you know, you found yourself in the predicament of poverty.

Nate Hagens (00:22:10):

Or a recession that has nothing to do with the individual. Yeah. Okay. Thank you. Mr. Kilde.

Peter Kilde (00:22:19):

Well, thanks, Nate and thanks, everybody. Listening to this discussion a little bit, I'm reminded of a presentation I once did on poverty, which was basically poverty, it's a math problem, and people talk so much about behaviors and lack of motivation and all that kind of stuff. That just is not our experience, and the other thing that comes to mind again in listening to this is the amazing persistence of that 40% of the population that can't afford a survival budget. That was true pre-COVID.

(00:22:51):

It's been true for years through up and down and everything else, and I seriously wondered to the extent to which the 40% is structured into the economy. That's what drives the wage costs down, that's what supports imports, all kinds of things, but my main focus here today, at least for openers, is to connect this story of poverty in America with the Great Simplification and all the great realities that Nate's been able to share.

(00:23:20):

And just to let everybody know, Nate and I have been at this since 2010 when we all got together under a partnership initiative to spend a few days dealing with that stuff and that report, looking at climate change, resource depletion, debt-based economy and everything, it reads like prophecy today. This has not been a big secret, but looking at the realities of the Great Simplification, I'm just going to pick a couple of instances on one issue, and it's not the whole story, but there's a lot to unpack in here that I think is illustrative.

(00:24:04):

The Great Simplification

So the first one I'd talk about a little bit is what happened in 2005 when Katrina hit New Orleans. So that was the first major shot across the bow, what this thing looks like, and the pattern that was established there has been remarkably robust. We just see it again and again all over the world, but here's the story a little bit, and I should mention I have a very close relationship with New Orleans, starting with a memorable Mardi Gras 51 years ago and a love affair that's been through work and been through vacation and been through everything else.

(00:24:42):

I just love that city, and I actually was literally on a train headed for New Orleans when Katrina hit. They stopped the train in Chicago and I watched the whole thing unfold in a hotel room down there. It was an amazing experience, but in the community action world, I just started on the board and we were scheduled to have a meeting down there that week. Some people had went down early and experienced that, but the story of Katrina is basically that the more affluent folks, folks that had money and the means and a car got the hell out of there. They saw the thing coming.

(00:25:24):

You still see the images on the freeways and they fled, and the people who, and these are mostly white people in New Orleans, and the people that did not have those things, and again, mostly Black in that city at that time, were left to fend for themselves. 1,400 died in that. It was a horrific experience, and then again, what we see so often on these kinds of, I call them unnatural disasters these days because they are happening at such an unprecedented rate.

(00:25:56):

But the neighborhoods that where low income people tend to reside were also in the floodplains. They were on lower ground, they had greater risk, and then when the recovery came along, and this story, again, is so robust, turns out that most of that help on a per person basis went to the folks who were in the wealthier neighborhoods that actually had less damage. The Southern Poverty Law Center just came out with a big report on that in August 31st just a couple of months ago, and it really is quite a tale.

(00:26:37):

And it's corruption and it's people flipping contracts and making a profit. They're supposed to be rebuilding houses. They ended up at the end of the day with blue

The Great Simplification

tarps thrown over the roof and the houses were never able to be rebuilt or recovered, and then a lot of people just had to leave, and 15 years after Katrina, the census in New Orleans was 100,000 people less than it was pre-Katrina. They just lost it forever and then disappeared, and the other thing we started to see, and it's been accelerating ever since, is the cameras go away.

(00:27:19):

And they go on to the next crisis, and the people stay and the community action agencies and local governments and churches or whatnot are left to deal with those broken lives for a long time. Second thing I wanted to talk about just a little bit, it's a very similar story in Puerto Rico. In 2017, Maria was coming to Puerto Rico and the more affluent people got on boats, airplanes, everything, and left. That storm hit that island, killed 3000 people immediately and caused the biggest power outage in American history, 1.5 million people.

(00:28:03):

Same story when it comes to what happened, especially to the poor people in this community, and again, in Puerto Rico, we're looking at 40% of the population under the official poverty level so it's probably closer to 80, and it took 11 months for that electricity to be restored. Of the 4,600 people ultimately that died there, about a third of them was because they had no power. They couldn't get medicine, they couldn't get treatment. There was a big spike in suicides.

(00:28:40):

So it's really a hellacious kind of experience, and just for comparison, imagining what it would be like if Alexandria, Virginia or the Hamptons or Marin County, California was without electricity for 11 months. Are you kidding me? These folks are US citizens. True, they don't get to vote for president and they don't have any representation in Congress, but they do get to pay federal taxes so they're included, and it's just unheard of what was allowed to happen there.

(00:29:19):

And the only reason that can come to mind is we value low income people less than people of affluence. I thought about that a little bit with a story not too long ago, the five billionaires in the submarine who died, and that was in the newspapers and on the news nonstop for a month. I couldn't believe it, and yet when you had Paul Ehrlich on,

The Great Simplification

Nate, and he's talking about 10 million people starving in this planet every year, and you hardly ever see it.

(00:29:52):

But these patterns are consistent with anything you've seen, whether you're talking about native villages burning in Canada or in Bangladesh, what happened currently or very recently in Somalia, the same pattern shows up again and again. So ultimately, I think that really is a huge issue when you're talking about poverty, is it's also not a level playing field in terms of what happens when these natural disasters, so-called, occur, and that's not the whole story, but it's all you're going to get for the moment.

Nate Hagens (00:30:36):

Thank you. Yeah. So you're basically saying that Katrina and Maria in Puerto Rico are a microcosm for the larger reality of our income and wealth inequality probably in the United States, but also between countries globally, but we don't hear about that. I didn't know those stats about Katrina and Maria. I am aware of some of these things.

(00:31:00):

But I'm not an expert, so forgive me if these questions are naive. I'm just going to throw out some questions and you can each speak to each of them, or if you'd like to pass, we'll go on to it next. Working in this space and in the communities you work on, what is the mood of people in the 40% broader definition of ALICE? Is there despondency or is it anger, or can you give me a sense of your experiences?

Stephanie Hoopes (00:31:36):

I'll jump in because that's a great question, Nate, and seeing the number of ALICE households increasing through the last great recession, through the "recovery," and now into the pandemic era, we are seeing the system not working for 41% of households. Republicans, Democrats, it has not come through for them.

(00:32:04):

And so I think some of the more radical politics that we're seeing are people looking frustrated for new solutions, and so I think they're turning in all different directions. It's not that ALICE votes one way or another. It's ALICE is frustrated and is willing to consider candidates from very different places than they might have 20, 30 years ago because of this frustration. So I'll throw that out as a starter.

The Great Simplification

Peter Kilde (00:32:37):

If I can follow up on that a little bit. One of the things that really struck me in the last ALICE report, Stephanie, was that that population above the poverty line, but can't afford a survival budget pays on average 22% of their income in taxes, and so if you have a politician coming along and saying, well, you're obviously struggling, but you're struggling because you pay taxes that goes to support those group, name your minority, name your nationality or your working group or whatever.

(00:33:12):

That's a way easier message to conceptualize and accept than you're a failure, which is the other measure, and I really think that can't be emphasized enough. People outside of the field who aren't dealing with this all the time generally think that the poverty measure is accurate. So if you're not included in that, you're not in poverty and in this booming economy, you're not succeeding. Those are your choices. You can either be a failure, you can blame somebody, and we'd love to blame somebody and that's being exploited time and time again.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:33:49):

My observation, maybe not to the ALICE population, but just more in general of who we serve here at the Community Action Agency, one of the things we've seen particularly post-pandemic is the demand. We are seeing more new faces. We're serving more households than actually we did pre-pandemic. One of our programs has, at this point in time, we're serving 40% more than we did pre-pandemic.

(00:34:25):

So I think what the pandemic has done, and I know I'm glad Peter talked about Katrina and the cyclone that impacted Puerto Rico, but what we're seeing with the post-pandemic is how further behind households are now because of the pandemic. I think Marc talked about the youth. In our local community, we've just had some test scores shared with us and some of our schools, the testing has really gone further down and those are schools that actually have predominantly African-American and low-income individuals, and so we have a lot of work ahead of us, but I think things like the pandemic have really put people further into poverty.

Peter Kilde (00:35:16):

Marc, you have any comments?

The Great Simplification

Marc Perry (00:35:18):

Yeah. I think especially from my communities of color, my African American, Latino communities, what I'm hearing is a lot of frustration because especially in terms of the African-American community that's been talking about systemic issues for decades and largely to blind ears, or deaf ears, excuse me, largely to deaf ears and blind eyes, but it's a conversation that Black people have been trying to have systemically for decades in this country, and so now that the conversation is being had about other populations, the feeling is, yeah, we've been telling you this, but unfortunately, it took somebody white to say it in order for you to actually pay attention to it.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:36:02):

Something else too, which is quite a touchy issue and I don't know what's going on in your communities, but it's the issue of the asylum seekers and the challenge of resources to support those individuals that have come mostly, I think, from Venezuela seeking asylum here in the United States, and it's creating some divisions in some communities and even within immigrant communities, particularly those immigrants that came here years ago.

(00:36:36):

And they're seeing the kinds of resources that are being put out there to, and I'm not judging, but resources being put out there to assist asylum seekers, and yet those same resources were not put out there for them, or you have communities that have a huge homeless population, but then all of a sudden, we have millions of dollars to support this new wave of individuals that are coming into our communities. So that's creating some frustration and divisions within some communities, at least I know here in Illinois.

Nate Hagens (00:37:09):

I sent you all a short list of questions that I intended to ask, and I may actually get to those, but as you're speaking, I'm thinking of other things and I think I mentioned this on a, Frankly, earlier in the year, but the last time I was in San Francisco, I had a cab driver from Afghanistan. He was 21 or 22 and he was studying computer science at Grand Canyon University.

(00:37:35):

The Great Simplification

And he's like, "I plan to get a job and program, and if I am successful, I want to be in the United States, but I would hate to be poor or homeless in the United States. If ever I'm in that situation, I would prefer to go back to Afghanistan," and Afghanistan is one of the worst situations, and yet he would've preferred to be there if he was poor. So that really struck me that being poor in the United States is not a good thing, even for someone from Afghanistan to say that. Do any of you have an opinion on that story?

Peter Kilde (00:38:14):

Yeah, I'd say a couple of things. One of the more pernicious elements of this system, and actually, Dalitso touched on a little bit. He talks about, well, when we get LIHEAP money, it goes directly-

Nate Hagens (00:38:30):

What is that?

Peter Kilde (00:38:31):

I'm sorry. That's the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. We don't let low income people have that money, heavens forbid. We pay that directly to the utilities and that's true in just about all of the programs except the ones like social security that include the more affluent people. Then they get the money, and to me, it's so perverse, and as folks have pointed out, this is a community that probably knows better about managing money, being careful and whatnot, but I'll tell you a little story that just, to me, illustrates this.

(00:39:16):

It just drove me nuts, but in one of our programs, we were trying to do an incentive, I think it was on a vaccine program, and we were going to give gas cards, little cards to come along and the state, and I really like these people. I'm not criticizing the state. They're following the rules they have to, wanted to know how we would make sure that people wouldn't use that money to buy cigarettes or alcohol or maybe, heaven forbid, take the family to a movie.

(00:39:46):

It just can only be for gas, and I remember this state employee saying, "Well, it is the government money. This is taxpayer money, so we have to watch this," and I'm

The Great Simplification

thinking, okay, 100% of this guy's salary is also paid by taxpayer money. Nobody tells him that he can't take his family to a movie or buy a bottle of wine or anything, that kind of stuff, and we make people come in and essentially beg. They have to tell you exactly what they're spending the money on.

(00:40:18):

And provide all kinds of documentation to make sure that they're eligible under this kind of thing, and in this triennial needs assessment that Marc was talking about where we go out every three years and do intensive surveying, I thought it was fascinating that this year, the quality, the issue that got the highest response, 74% of the people responded that one of their top concerns was not having a voice. It's just like they can't control their lives because they have to beg, borrow, plead, whatever, just to stay alive.

(00:41:04):

And so efforts to, and I've done some of this, to get low income people onto boards and whatnot and to change that dynamic. So yeah, I can understand that guy from Afghanistan's perspective. I've been in poor countries where the quality of life in many ways is really high, but these people have close communities and they work together and they value each other and they have some sense of agency in that environment, and we deprive people of that to a great extent here.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:41:36):

Just a quick comment to what Peter shared. I think one of our biggest challenges is how do we, and I don't know if that's even possible, but how do we change the attitude of the public towards poverty? Another illustration would be judgments that people make when they see a family that's using food stamps to purchase food and saying, well, why are they buying steaks and why are they buying that?

(00:42:02):

It's almost as if because they're in poverty and they're using food stamps, the food that they should be purchasing should be substandard or not good food. Why don't they deserve to eat a steak just like you do, and so I think that's our biggest challenge is how do we change the attitude that the public has towards poverty to a point where we should be collectively working together to assist our neighbor, assist whomever it is that may be in that predicament so that they do get out and have a good quality of life.

The Great Simplification

Stephanie Hoopes (00:42:44):

So that is one of the things that we're trying to do at United For ALICE is to change that perception, and part of it is to put a spotlight on ALICE that we know that's working in jobs that keep our economy running, that we all actually know people who are struggling are many of the people in retail sales or cashiers or home health aides may be on food stamps, and so to really say these are people that you know, not only that you know, but that you are relying on to keep your economy running, to take care of your mother, to take care of your children.

(00:43:22):

And so bring it in closer so that it's something that people are touching and often not realizing, and I actually get people come up and say, "Gosh, I'm ALICE and I never thank you for explaining it. I thought I wasn't trying hard enough and here it is, there's this structural problem and maybe there are ways I can advocate for myself and put this out there," and I wanted to pick up on Peter's comments about how hard the public assistance system is in the state and local government across the board.

(00:44:02):

And we had this really interesting natural experiment happening during the pandemic where so many of those rules were put to the side and economic impact payments were distributed by check across the board, much higher levels than the federal poverty level. No strict requirements. You didn't have to go down in person and show three IDs and your bank account statement and all that.

(00:44:28):

And so suddenly, it's like, wow, look what public assistance can do, and then it all went away and so we're tracking to see what happened in 2021 with all of the impact payments and the child tax credits, really significant shift in public assistance and then out the door done by 2022. What's that going to look like when those numbers come in? We're all very worried, but it was certainly a learning opportunity for all of us to see what is possible with the government and what its impact will be.

Nate Hagens (00:45:07):

So obviously, I believe that getting more people aware of these things is important, which is why I invited the four of you on this podcast, but to Dalitso's question, what if everyone in this country of all demographics understood what you all are saying and

The Great Simplification

understood what's happening in our neighborhoods, in our communities, our cities, our states, that 40% of households are asset limited, income constrained, and they have jobs? Would that change the situation or would that continue to be swept under the carpet or whatever, or would more information about this issue help the issue?

Marc Perry (00:45:55):

When I was in high school, there were these two books that we read. One was Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. The other was...

Nate Hagens (00:46:04):

George Orwell?

Marc Perry (00:46:04):

George Orwell's 1984, and so we were kids. We were debating which one of those futures were we headed towards, and in high school, I remember us arguing George Orwell's 1984, we're headed towards this dystopian society where we're all going to be ruled by these... We're all going to become these mindless, but the reality of it is I believe we've entered Aldous Huxley's world, is that we have been appeased into not paying attention and not caring as long as my television is being delivered.

(00:46:39):

As long as I can play my Xbox, as long as nobody interrupts me watching my Tik Toks on my phone. In other words, as long as it's not on my front door, I could care less about it, and I think that's really our big major issue is that we have to figure out how to make sure people understand that it is everybody's issue and that we are interconnected, and that's a message we have to start sending and reinforcing and reinforcing over and over again. People are not going to react until it starts to impact them directly, or they can see the correlation between them and the person next to them.

Nate Hagens (00:47:14):

I agree with that on so many levels. Go on, Peter.

Peter Kilde (00:47:18):

The Great Simplification

Well, I was just going to say at this point, might bridge a little bit into the future and one of the things that we are looking at here, and going back to this two pager that you all received and put together a couple of years ago, largely based on the economic consequence of getting to this edge of limits where regardless of what people want, we are going to be entering a period where poverty will inevitably increase, and so there are going to be more people in that camp, if you will, and so we are literally on the horns of a dilemma.

(00:48:01):

We either don't do anything about climate change, otherwise known as the current plan, or to be so woefully inadequate in the response that the forces accelerating climate change are moving faster than the ones that would mitigate. The consequences of that will be devastating on the economy for all kinds of reasons, disasters, floods, food sources, you name it, supply chains, or if we do take action that is going to be effective, that will take so much energy out of the economy at this point, which is, what, 85% fossil hydrocarbons, Nate, if I have you right.

(00:48:41):

So that will shrink the economy so dramatically that we're going to see a great increase in the rate of poverty, and so those are the only two choices and it lends some imperative there to coming up with some kinds of ways to, and this is very complex, but to reframe the question a little bit outside of simple money and stuff, but the fact that there are quality of life lived experiences that can still create the best of all possible futures, as I've described it, but aren't dependent on acquiring more stuff or increasing the economic inequity. So the imperative here is mounting to reframe this thing, at least to some extent, or it's going to be extremely troubling for a very large segment of this society.

Stephanie Hoopes (00:49:45):

So while there's a huge argument that one can make that ALICE should have the opportunity to do better for their family's sake and for doing the right thing, there's also a huge economic argument for everybody that ALICE should or could be doing better because if ALICE earned a little bit more, would be a much better consumer, whether it be of going to the movies or solar panels for their house.

(00:50:17):

The Great Simplification

That when you're just getting by and only able to afford those basics or just afford those basics, you're not able to contribute to the economy in the way that if you earned a little bit more, you would, and so there is a huge interest in the wider economy for ALICE to do better and I love what Peter said about we need to link this to thinking about the future and how do we frame that. It's not just about going out and buying more stuff. It's about buying the right thing that can help our country, our planet survive long into the future in a more sustainable way.

Nate Hagens (00:51:01):

Here's another naive question, but is there a distinction between economic or material poverty and social poverty? The reason I ask, and Peter brought this up, is when I've traveled internationally, I come across communities that are quite materially poor, but they have wide networks socially and they're in things together, and at the same time, I know some wealthy people that have no friends and no social context whatsoever. They just consume stuff. So is there a resilience or a network that has to happen out of necessity that can be counted as a social capital to substitute for financial capital? I don't know if that made sense, but what do you all think about that, Marc?

Marc Perry (00:51:54):

So it was interesting because Peter and I were talking about like my upbringing, but growing up and being, I guess I grew up poor, but I didn't know I was poor until somebody told me because what I had was family, what I had was a community network, what I had was relationships. You had the neighborhood looked out for each other. You had everybody's parents in the neighborhood were everybody's parents. All of us kids, we all knew each other, we all knew each other's parents, we all connected with each other, we all participated in the same thing.

(00:52:34):

So collectively, we didn't want for what we didn't have or didn't know, I guess is the best way to put that. We were all in the same circumstance so we supported each other, we looked out for each other, we connected with each other, but we didn't have a lot of material wants because we knew we couldn't afford it, so we didn't ask for it. Our parents were pretty clear about what we can and cannot have. It was our parents made sure we had everything that we needed and every once in a while, something that we wanted, but in terms of being poor financially, I guess we were, but in terms of

The Great Simplification

missing out on morals, values, ethics, work ethic, things like that, I grew up very rich in terms of those things.

Nate Hagens (00:53:17):

So the corollary there is you didn't know you were poor, and maybe the top two quintiles of society should maybe learn that maybe they're not rich in the things that we should value over the long run, in my opinion. Dalitso, Stephanie, Peter, any comments on that?

Dalitso Sulamoyo (00:53:38):

Very similar to Marc's background, the background that I grew up in, a very collectivist approach as opposed to the very individualistic approach and hand-me-downs, nothing to be frowned upon. So like my younger brothers, they inherited my clothes and they passed it down the line. Nothing unusual about that. Nothing unusual sharing a bed with a sibling. So I think the way you framed it, Nate, as far as network wealth in a lot of societies, and especially the society I grew up in, that's very, very, very common.

(00:54:30):

But there is an approach that others have looked into, especially in this country, and that is the asset development approach, helping families to acquire assets as a means of getting out of poverty, and those assets would be defined as either maybe a home. So I know Peter, you do a lot of housing with your agency, getting an education or starting a business, but critical to that would be financial literacy and the ability to actually have savings as a means of acquiring an asset, and so there's a school of thought that looks into asset development as one way or as a vehicle of getting people out of poverty. It might be debatable, but it's one of the schools of thought that's been out there as well.

Peter Kilde (00:55:22):

To me, one of the big questions that comes to mind is what's the job of an economy, and if the purpose of an economy is to make the teeniest percentile super, super rich, we have a great system. It's working like a dream, but if you look at a country like Norway where there's much less disparity, a fraction, and the society takes care of its

The Great Simplification

low income people, it pays for its education, its healthcare, time off for being with your infant, a good rate of pay, all that kind of stuff.

(00:56:07):

And amazingly enough, it continues to be in the top ranked happiest country on the planet for the most people, and why we continue to fall for this notion that happiness comes from reduced taxes. Norway, they pay about 50% of their income in taxes and the country has a huge surplus because it doesn't subsidize its oil companies. It owns them and so they're able to support these programs, and the way we do things in this country with regard to poverty are just made up.

(00:56:46):

There's no law that governs this. It's just a result of a historical process that gets us to this end where we have this huge disparity of opportunity, of wealth, of resources, and we need to take a look at that. That's ultimately the fix is to, especially going into a shrinking resource and economy base, is going to be sharing what we have in a more equitable way and providing for those lived experiences that are truly meaningful.

Stephanie Hoopes (00:57:19):

So building on that, I think it's clear that there can be close and supportive communities of all income levels and there can be disconnected communities at all income levels, but some of our research shows that income is directly correlated to political participation, and communities that have higher incomes are more likely to vote across the board.

(00:57:49):

And I think to Peter's point, if you're not casting your vote, if you're not raising your voice, if you're not influencing the way the system is structured and who's benefiting, you're not going to benefit, and then that may be another big contrast with Norway where voter turnout is much higher than it is in the US, and so I see that as a real challenge for our country and growing as voter participation continues to decline and be among the lowest of developed countries.

Marc Perry (00:58:25):

Well, Stephanie, it's interesting you bring that up because one of the stats I was looking at most recently was a stat around civic engagement, looking at states with the least racial progress, and when you look at racial progress, civic engagement is

The Great Simplification

one of the areas where those states fall incredibly short in terms of socioeconomic status among people of color especially. So yeah, it definitely matters. Income is definitely relevant in terms of participation in government and other outcomes, but that one was pretty glaring to see that the states that had the least racial progress in a lot of economic areas also had the least racial progress in terms of civic engagement.

Stephanie Hoopes (00:59:08):

Right. And it's a matter of if you're working on Tuesday when the elections are held, if you can't get to a rally, if you're too busy trying to take care of the fires at home, that you don't have the bandwidth to be thinking about bigger issues, you can see all the links that are there to provide those barriers.

Nate Hagens (00:59:30):

So do the answers to this have to be at the national and state level, or are there people listening to this show that live in a community and irrespective of their income level, are there things that a community can do to integrate other people and make sure that their community is stable, people listening in Topeka, Kansas or Red Wing, Minnesota, for instance, that want to get ahead of the curve and make sure that their community is stable and people of all types are taken care of?

Dalitso Sulamoyo (01:00:06):

One thing to share with your audience is that Community Action, and not the only answer, but because I represent Community Action, we have a presence in 99% of America's counties. We're also in Puerto Rico, we're in Guam, US Virgin Islands, and so I think every community pretty much has a community action agency that, as Marc pointed out, we all do these community needs assessments that engage the community to try and determine what are the issues going on in our community as far as poverty is concerned?

(01:00:44):

What are the priorities? Where should we focus our resources to try and address those particular issues, and so that's an opportunity, I think, for individuals within our respective communities to provide input to organizations like Community Action on how either poverty should be addressed or how to integrate some of those populations

The Great Simplification

or individuals that may be silent and not heard as we're trying to address these issues at a community level.

Marc Perry (01:01:16):

So I'm going to say something that I hope doesn't get me into trouble, just to piggyback on what Dalitso just said because those resources coming into our organizations are critically important so I never want to diminish the need for resources, but sometimes the answer is not more resources. Sometimes the answer is taking off the regulation and the handcuffs so that locally, we can use the funding the way that we know it needs to be utilized. There is nobody who knows what's going on better in Rock and Walworth with counties than I do. So give me the resources that I need in the manner in which I need them so I can address the issue.

(01:01:50):

That is one of the biggest issues that I've encountered, especially increasingly over the years, is we have more and more regulation that comes with the funding resources that we receive, is that we're not allowed to use the funding in the way that our needs assessments determine that we need to be able to use them. The answer isn't always more money. The answer is take away some of the stipulations around the resources so that we can actually use the funding the way it needs to be utilized, and I'll give you just a quick, really simple example. I have a funding source that allows me to buy mattresses, but not box springs or bed frames, and I am not making that up.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (01:02:29):

Nate, one quick thing. This point was pretty poignant when one of my staff shared that I spend more time writing reports than I do spend time working with our clients, and that's to Marc's point. We spend a lot of time writing reports, and those things are important. I'm not saying they're not, but when you're spending more time doing that than actually working with people, something is wrong. There's got to be a balance to that.

Marc Perry (01:03:00):

I had a federal funder say to me, I get that I'm asking you to spend \$1,000 to tell me how you spent \$100.

Peter Kilde (01:03:07):

The Great Simplification

Right. One of the ways that I have described our work in community action is to absorb bureaucracy so that people on the other end get real services they need, but I do want to comment just a little bit on what both Dalitso and Marc were saying in different ways. When Dalitso was talking about being in 99% of the counties and Marc is talking about the kinds of things that are happening in Beloit and other places, he's got stuff going on down there like a community garden that's completely unregulated.

(01:03:42):

Anybody can plant who wants, anybody can harvest who wants. It's a magnificent success, and I was at a conference about 10 years ago with Dennis Meadows, the author of *Age of Limits*, and I'm sorry, *Limits to Growth*, and just a real icon in this, and we were having lunch together and I says, "Well, Dennis, how important do you think developing a sense of community will be towards addressing this future," and he says, "It's the only thing that'll work." We tend to undervalue that piece of it.

(01:04:21):

So the kinds of things that are possible in terms of, and it's not just hard work and negative. Being involved in the cultural experience of your local communities and supporting the arts and supporting community festivals and farmer's markets and other places that build that sense of community is also really important work, and again, as Marc points out, we don't get any funding to do that kind of stuff, but it's extremely important in terms of getting to this quality of life issue, which is how we need to measure wealth going forward.

Stephanie Hoopes (01:04:57):

So Nate, I think you ask a great question, and I really believe local level is the way to go at it and the work that local community action programs are doing is fantastic. We have a tool that I think could help you measure and advocate even further for the work you're doing. It's called the ALICE Economic Viability Dashboard and you can find that on our website, UnitedforALICE.org, and the other thing that you do really well is convene other partners.

(01:05:27):

And the problem when you have 40% of households struggling, it's beyond the scope of what one community action partner can do. So to bring in companies, to bring in local government, to bring in education institutions is vital, and there's two sides to the equation. Anything that you can do to reduce the cost of housing, of childcare, of

The Great Simplification

transportation, all those things help ALICE incredibly, and then on the other side of the equation, anything you can do to raise wages or reduce taxes.

(01:06:07):

Things like tax credits and the guaranteed income pilots can make a huge difference, and then in the long term, that's increasing education and training, and I know that you all are involved in all of those things, but when you look at that ledger like that, there's different things are going to be more important in different communities and those local organizations are the ones who are going to know the best. So bring in the right partners and focus on the most important things.

Nate Hagens (01:06:37):

So this has even further widened my eyes to the situation of poverty and limited income in the United States. We're talking about it as a triage situation, but can each of you share something positive and emergent and maybe unexpected on how people are responding to this deepening problem in our country?

Stephanie Hoopes (01:07:07):

Well, I do think awareness is critical and we have seen some amazing response when the right person reads the ALICE report for their area, and we've seen companies literally look at the survival budget and raise their wages. We've seen community colleges read the ALICE report and change their offerings to shorter courses that cost less, that are more linked to jobs. We've seen childcare pilots start that recognize families need that childcare to be able to go to work and putting more money in the system so that both ALICE parents can go to childcare and ALICE childcare workers can support their families. So those are a couple of examples.

Marc Perry (01:07:59):

Yeah. I think a couple of places, I'm working with a lot of teens and seeing a lot more youth take more ownership in their own lives and more personal responsibility and accountability, taking more stock of their futures, planning earlier, asking the right questions, focusing sooner, really trying to break, especially with the young people I work with, really trying to break the cycle of poverty that they've been in for, in some cases, three, four, five generations.

(01:08:29):

The Great Simplification

So that's been really positive is seeing youth look for whatever resources are available, look for avenues out of the circumstance that they're in, and then take advantage of those situations. We have a few programs that we offer for youth, and seeing young people gravitate towards those programs and really take stock in and want to be a part of, not being referred to or made to, but choosing to step into those programs and services, and then the other places, as we see men and women coming out of the criminal justice system.

(01:08:57):

Coming into some of our employment programs and some of our other programs and services who are just saying, enough's enough. I'm not going to go back into the system. I'm going to break the cycle of recidivism and I'm going to do better for myself and better for my children. So there are people who are paying attention in a different way, especially to see young people doing it, but to see older adults as well who are some hard lessons learned are making some turnaround, but young people who before they get to any place where they've made poor decisions or made decisions that have gotten them into negative circumstances, choosing the correct path the first time.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (01:09:35):

Yeah. A couple of positive things here in Illinois, the University of Illinois, which is in the community that my agency is located in, and we have three universities that are part of the University of Illinois system and back in, I think, 2021 or so, they passed that low-income students can actually go to the university for free and I believe it's \$50,000 or less annually don't have to pay tuition. The other thing that is just as recent as last week, we have passed major legislation in the state of Illinois, one of which is the Clean Energy Jobs Act.

(01:10:20):

And it's got a lot of cool things in there, everything from solar energy to deep weatherization work, but what's really interesting is within it, there's a provision for low income discount rates and our regulated utilities presented their plans to the regulating body, which is the Illinois Commerce Commission, and from what we understand, once this is implemented, which will be in 2024 next year, low-income households, and that's going up to, again, we're using the current federal poverty level, but going up to 300% of poverty will get a discount applied to their utilities.

The Great Simplification

(01:11:06):

And for those households that we serve with our low income home mileage assistance program, also known as LIHEAP, they'll be paying something like 6% of their income towards utilities, which is what we deemed to be affordable and that's pretty revolutionary for Illinois, that this is something that our households will be able to have once this is implemented next year. So I think that's positive. This is something that was passed on, well, somewhat on a bipartisan basis, but it does have quite a bit of support here in Illinois. So we're anxious to see how that unfolds and maybe other states may be able to replicate what we're doing.

Nate Hagens (01:11:46):

So I want to keep my word and I know some of you have time constraints. I asked you all here because I really think this is not only an issue now, but going to be a much bigger problem for the United States and the world in the coming decade.

(01:12:06):

And I really wanted to say, what do the realities of the Great Simplification, to use my language, mean for the future of poverty in America and how can we prepare for this as communities and as a nation or a government? That conversation, that question would take a whole hour and a half itself, but maybe I'll just close with each of you weighing in on what aspect of that question do you think is important and you could perhaps take a deeper dive if we talk again in the future?

Stephanie Hoopes (01:12:41):

Well, I love that question so I'm going to jump in and go first, Nate. You've got us all thinking about our short term and then this way bigger long term that is looming. So I think about it in terms of ALICE, when there's a sea level rise, where's ALICE going to move? So it's one thing if it's your second home that's gotten flooded, you got a place, your first home, but if ALICE, that's their only home, where are they going to go? How are they going to afford to move one county over or move to higher ground?

(01:13:19):

So that's the kind of thing that I think your question and this focus has got to get us all thinking about is where is this move going to happen? Who's going to pay for it? How's it going to play out over time, and everyone will be affected, that we see that with the natural disasters that we're having now when a community's flooded or

The Great Simplification

burned or a tornado blown over, whatever. When ALICE is also the emergency responder and yet trying to take care of their family, how much slower a whole community is to recover. So we need to figure it out for all of us.

Nate Hagens (01:14:04):

My thesis is it's possible that no one will be able to pay for it and what are we going to do then, but that's a very big question. Peter, and then Marc and Dalitso.

Peter Kilde (01:14:15):

I just want to say a couple of things that are kind of related. One is we have found in our, say, this affordable housing development work where we got this big national award for being the greenest healthy housing in the country, always that was caged in a frame of this helps the people living here. We never have to increase rents because all the costs are upfront, helps the community that needs the workforce and it helps the future we all share.

(01:14:46):

And that message is starting to resonate as are some more things happening on a local level. From a macro sense, and this is the beginning of a very big conversation, my understanding of history is that these things usually change when they break, and you can go back to whether it's The Depression or top-heavy governments that fall apart or wealth, all this kind of stuff.

(01:15:14):

It's out of those things that reform happens, and I think there's a lot of hope in that. This system is unsustainable. We know that. It will fail. We know that. So getting some things on the ground that are the seeds that we can then grow on in terms of local communities and relationships and all that kind of stuff, I'm seeing that message actually working and I'm very encouraged by it that and young people, but that's a whole nother story.

Nate Hagens (01:15:46):

Dalitso, Marc, any thoughts on that? It's almost unanswerable, but I'm wondering which part of that do you focus on and do you have a thought on?

Dalitso Sulamoyo (01:15:56):

The Great Simplification

I think one of the things, and I know this topic today is about poverty in America, but we have to look at poverty globally. One thing that the pandemic, I think, reminded us is how interconnected we are as a world. The whole supply chain issue, that I think there's still some effects of that right now.

(01:16:18):

So I think we have to look at this more from a global perspective because if we're only going to focus on just the US or our communities, to what you've laid out, Nate, I think it's going to be an ongoing challenge. So we have to approach this globally and I don't know how we do that. I don't know how we unite globally to address these big issues, but from where I stand, I think a global approach is something we need to really think about.

Nate Hagens (01:16:51):

Well, this is a global story and this is a global podcast. There's only 37% of the listeners are in the United States, but I live in the United States and I think our country is asleep to the issues that you've brought up here. So I at least want to get people more on understanding what's going on.

Marc Perry (01:17:09):

I think as we're talking about this, the emphasis and focus has to be on, as we're talking about future and bridging gaps, the emphasis has to be on our youth. It has to be. Part of the future of our global society is getting our youth to understand that they are interconnected, that the world is much bigger than the couple blocks that they live on or the few friends that they hang out with, that things that are happening all over the world impact them every day.

(01:17:37):

So if we can get our young people to start seeing beyond the few blocks that they live in and seeing the larger impact of the decisions that they make and the decisions that other people make, and understand how something that happens across the world may indirectly or directly benefit them, that's where the hope comes from. That's where you think there's something positive that could happen is that education and that connection. I need our young people to understand that the world is much bigger than they see it now. It's much bigger than the phone in front of their face, but part of that

The Great Simplification

is as adults, we have to do a much better job of exposing our youth to a broader world as well.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (01:18:21):

I think one of the other challenge, Marc, you may have touched on this earlier, is that while we have all these tools available to us, social media, there's all kinds of platforms with all kinds of information right at your fingertips, there's still a lot of misinformation and I think about other disasters that are happening across the globe that you never hear about here in the United States.

(01:18:50):

Peter, I shared with him and our colleagues on the national board, a tropical cyclone that impacted where I'm from, Malawi. Thousands of people died. Thousands of people were displaced and never made the news here, and so to your point, Marc, I think yes, we need to really expose our youth, but I'm challenged with the fact that while we have all these tools and resources available to us, there's still a lot of misrepresentation or under-reporting of what's really going on out in the world.

Peter Kilde (01:19:24):

Which is why I appreciate what Nate is doing so immensely. It's just been extraordinary, Nate. Thank you.

Nate Hagens (01:19:32):

Well, as I've alluded to once or twice already, this is just opening this can on this discussion. It is a huge, huge discussion and I would love to have all of you back to take a deeper dive on this, but for now, this has been a great introduction to ALICE and poverty and the situation in the US with a few examples. Would each of you like to share a few words of wisdom on this topic or general wisdom before we wrap?

Peter Kilde (01:20:08):

There's a middle way here. You tend to find the camps are you're in denials of reality of various kinds or in immobilization. It's just too depressing, it's too heavy and all that kind of stuff, and I look at it a little bit like going to the doctor and getting a serious diagnosis. You got pancreatic cancer or heart disease or something.

(01:20:35):

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Okay, what do you do? You just pretend that's not real and go off and die, or you adapt to it. You take the treatments that are required and enjoy the best of all possible futures, and I think there's a tremendous amount out there that's possible, but it also has to do with reframing how we assess those values and that shift happens through experience, and it's starting to happen and I find that very encouraging.

Stephanie Hoopes (01:21:10):

Well, Nate, I'm very appreciative that you have organized this creative group together and the chance to start digging into this, and I am especially grateful for the framing that you bring to this that's making people think about it in a different way.

Nate Hagens (01:21:28):

Thank you for your work, Stephanie. Marc, any closing thoughts?

Marc Perry (01:21:33):

I think what we have to all, at some point, we have to come to a consensus about standards of quality of life and we all have to decide that nobody is allowed to fall below that standard, and until we figure out what that threshold is, until we figure out what that basic standard, and that's the baseline. Until we figure out what that baseline standard of quality of life is, we're going to continue to struggle. We're going to continue to be isolated and alienated, but we have to decide that everybody's life is of value and decide that no human being lives below this standard across the globe, and until we come to that consensus, we're going to struggle.

Dalitso Sulamoyo (01:22:09):

Yeah, I agree with that and I will close by wondering if there's still a lot of lessons that we need to learn from what we just came out of with the global pandemic and how vulnerable all of us were, and maybe to some extent, still are as a result of the pandemic, and I think it would be a complete missed step if we don't take any lessons from that and really put that into context as far as this issue of poverty that we've been discussing on this podcast today.

Nate Hagens (01:22:43):

Thank you, Dalitso, and thank you all for your time and your work on these issues. If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please subscribe

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