PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, POLICY REFORM

AND SCALES OF EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION.

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Introduction

Scale matters. Teach "scale." Whether your students are aiming to change their worlds through business, research, or advocacy work, they must be strategic at multiple scales simultaneously, which means that we, as teachers and practitioners need to be similarly strategic.

Today, I'd like to offer for your consideration six propositions about applied anthropology, "holism," and scales of policy intervention. For illustration purposes, I will use some recent work on policy reform for bridging the so-called "digital divide." At the end, I will argue that as teachers and practitioners of applied anthropology, we must attend more carefully to issues of multiple scales in analysis, intervention, and policy impact analysis, and I will mention some specific ways of doing so.

Six Propositions:

1.   Applied anthropology is motivated by social critique and by a commitment to give voice to the concerns of the underserved and disadvantaged

2:     The vast majority of primary data collection by anthropologists, applied or otherwise, focuses on the local. Articulating this local knowledge helps

build trust, engages the people with whom we work most closely, and helps dispel "blaming the victim" arguments by highlighting the constraints that outside forces impose on choices available locally. It also calls attention to local burdens borne in the name of national interest, and highlights local patterns and processes that are distinctive and worth protecting in the name of justice.

3: Public policy addresses general cases, rather than exceptional circumstances.

4: Anthropological critique often takes the form of "argument by exception": *Policy X is flawed, because it has failed to take into account its local impact on community Y.*

5: This form of argument is not persuasive with policy reformers, because it appears to be based on local self-interest. Local self-interest may engage our local collaborators, but meets with limited success in the policy reform arena, largely because exceptionalism is often at odds with prevailing principles of equity, and it is administratively inconvenient.

6: As teachers and practitioners of applied anthropology, we must recognize the sometimes conflicting aims of public engagement and policy reform. We must also recognize that to engage policy reformers effectively, we need to "walk the talk" of holism, and attend more carefully to issues of multiple scales in analysis and prescribing interventions.

For illustration's sake, let us turn our attention to the "Digital Divide,"
examining what contemporary observers have identified as the root causes for
local disparities in access to digital technology. The identification of root causes
is important, of course, because this sets the targets towards which policy
reforms are directed. It is reasonable to assume that if you start out by trying to
solve the wrong problem, it is only by accident that you will come up with the right
solution.

The Digital Divide

A large gap is found the world over, including the US, in public access to
digital technology (personal computers, Internet service). Some of our recent
work (Liebow and O'Malley 2002) focuses on developing strategies for bridging
this gap here in the US. Many observers hold the view that despite the apparent
ubiquity of computers in the land of plenty, significant disparities persist. [1] A
recent time series analysis by the US Department of Commerce (NTIA 2002)
indicates that income and race remain strong predictors of technology access. As
of 2001, the people who were not using the Internet from any location fell into
these categories:

- People in households with low family incomes — 75.0 percent of people
  who live in households where income is less than $15,000 and 66.6
  percent of those in households with incomes between $15,000 and
  $35,000.

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[1] Judith Goode is facilitating a policy forum on this issue here in New Orleans this week. The
focus of this discussion will be on how to reconcile the US Department of Commerce data that
come from the same source I am about to cite, on the one hand, with direct observations that
suggest fewer reasons to be optimistic that the divide is being narrowed.

- Adults with low levels of overall education—60.2 percent of adults (age 25 +) with only a high school degree and 87.2 percent of adults with less than a high school education.

- Hispanics—68.4 percent of all Hispanics and 85.9 percent of Hispanic households where Spanish is the only language spoken.
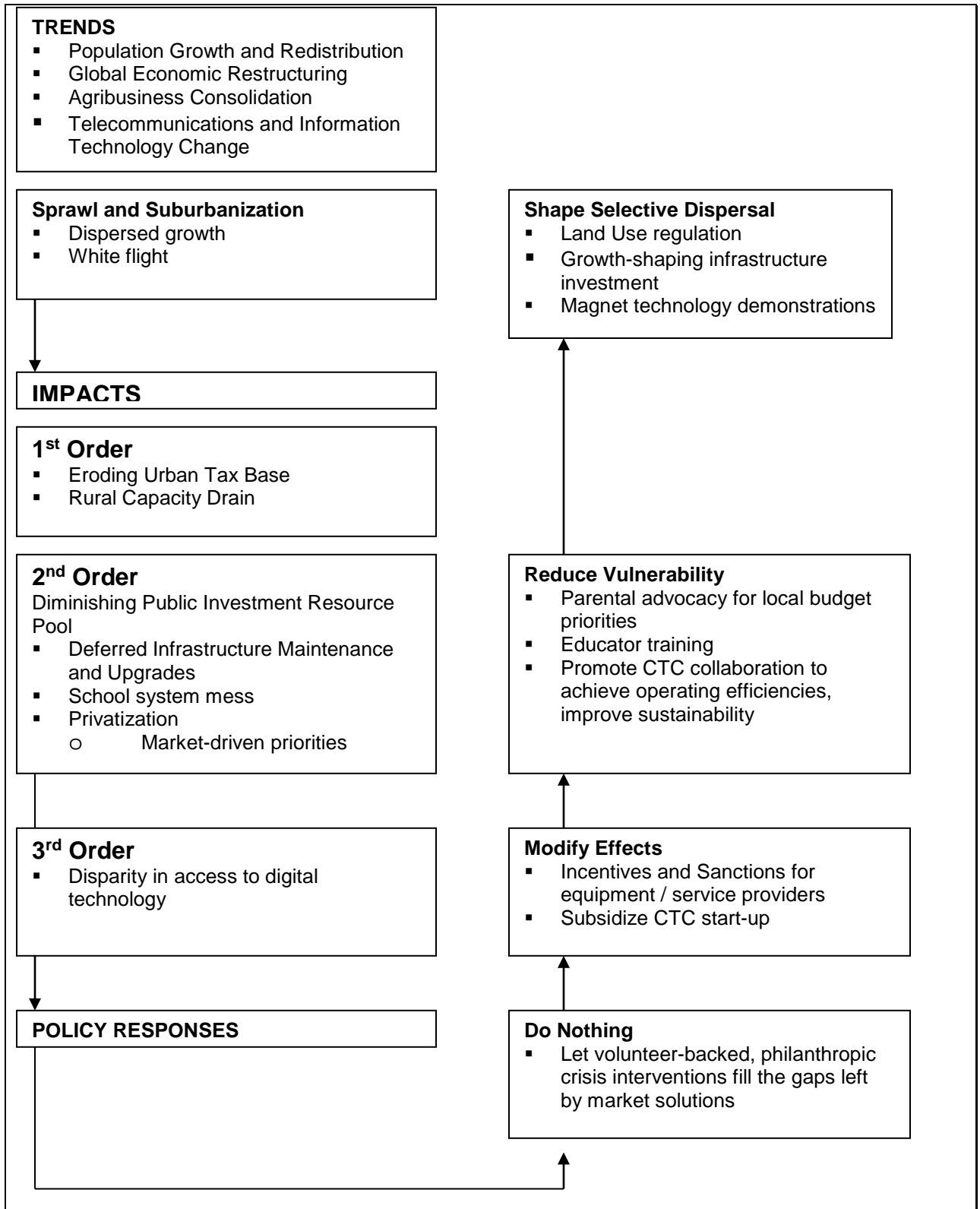
- Blacks—60.2 percent of Blacks.

The common wisdom derived from these observations is that such disparities in access are caused by a combination of three main factors: cost, mastery, and network effects.

- Cost is a barrier to low-income households
- Schools in low-income neighborhoods place priorities elsewhere
- Geographic technology "red lining" for broadband installation is well-documented
- Potential users have difficulty understanding technology, either because of literacy or language barriers; culture-specific content and instruction has been lacking
- Technology is not well integrated into school curricula
- User interfaces have been designed by techies in ways that shut out people with disabilities
- Network effects are observed - if a person's family, friends, and broader community are Internet users, there is an increased incentive for them to go online. On the other hand, if few of a person's family, friends, or community were online, there is less of an incentive to go online.

None of these observations are disputed. But what are the prescriptions for corrective action to better serve the public interest by extending access more fairly? I would like to suggest that there are several scales at which interventions are required simultaneously. While the most localized of these scales would permit the design of solutions that are most sensitive to specific circumstances, the more encompassing choice-constraining forces must also be reshaped for such local solutions to have any effect.

As depicted in Figure 1, I believe the digital divide, at least in the US, should be recognized NOT as a local phenomenon, but the local manifestation of several intersecting global trends. In urban America, the shift in central city economic base from industrial to service-sector activities has coincided with "white flight" to the suburbs that is certainly enabled, if not partly caused by stunningly rapid changes in telecommunications and information technology (Kotkin 2001). In rural America, the trend is consolidating agricultural production, and the results include economic dislocation, land use and population shifts, and a "brain drain". In short, the localized lens through which we view the "digital divide" allows us to see that it has at least two distinct dimensions – urban and rural. However, its root causes reside not so much in the immediate realm of content, access, and mastery, but in the distal realm of economic restructuring and land use changes that (1) threaten the public investment resource pool and (2) push immediate crisis-prevention measures to the foreground where they obscure our more encompassing gaze.

What sorts of policy responses are available to us? We could focus our public conversation on the pros and cons of the "adaptivist" response. After all, it *is* a policy response to avert our gaze, "Do Nothing" and let the market take care of business, with philanthropy expected to fill in the most gaping holes. This would retain public resources for issues deemed more pressing, issues for which no private interventions can be mobilized.

TRENDS
- Population Growth and Redistribution
- Global Economic Restructuring
- Agribusiness Consolidation
- Telecommunications and Information Technology Change

Sprawl and Suburbanization
- Dispersed growth
- White flight

Shape Selective Dispersal
- Land Use regulation
- Growth-shaping infrastructure investment
- Magnet technology demonstrations

IMPACTS

1st Order
- Eroding Urban Tax Base
- Rural Capacity Drain

2nd Order
Diminishing Public Investment Resource Pool
- Deferred Infrastructure Maintenance and Upgrades
- School system mess
- Privatization
  - Market-driven priorities

Reduce Vulnerability
- Parental advocacy for local budget priorities
- Educator training
- Promote CTC collaboration to achieve operating efficiencies, improve sustainability

3rd Order
- Disparity in access to digital technology

Modify Effects
- Incentives and Sanctions for equipment / service providers
- Subsidize CTC start-up

POLICY RESPONSES

Do Nothing
- Let volunteer-backed, philanthropic crisis interventions fill the gaps left by market solutions

However, we could also work to <u>modify the local effects</u> of disparate technology access by imposing conditions on telecommunications and cable licensees, assuring universal broadband service, and subsidizing the start-up of "community technology centers". Further, we could aim to <u>reduce the vulnerability</u> of these "effect-modifying" interventions, assuring the sustainability of community technology centers and educational institutions through various resource-sharing solutions.

These are not mutual exclusive alternatives. The larger the scale of our assessment, the more likely it is to include relevant factors. We must not lose sight of the concrete ways in which the anthropological hallmark of "holism" informs this public policy debate. The heart of the digital disparity matter, in my view is one of dispersed land use and public choices over investments in infrastructure. Every time we elect to pay for more roads at the expense of density-promoting public transit we are endorsing suburban sprawl and constraining our ability to achieve universal digital technology service. Every time we see a zoning variance granted to permit edge-city shopping centers, we must also note the steady incremental draining effect on our ability to properly equip our central city schools and community centers.

At the same time, the larger the scale of the assessment, the greater the chance that a policy prescription will lose the site-specificity needed to take action. What this means is that there is no single scale at which we can obtain a

full understanding of the dynamic conditions in which our collaborating communities must operate.

   Thus, as teachers and practitioners of anthropology, we must pay explicit attention to the implications of "holism", and to identifying multiple intervention points with the greatest potential for achieving the intended impact - local, regional, national, and transnational. The typical argument-by-exception form of anthropological critique can have only limited success as a policy reform strategy, since prescriptions for action that appear to be based on local self-interest may engage our local collaborators but fail to engage policy reformers. To help shape policy reform effectively, we need to step back from the local circumstances of our community collaborators and try to frame their issues in a context whose scales are the same as the multiple scales at which policy interventions work.

References Cited:

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