

Economic recovery begins at home

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— Twelve is a magic number. Our national debt is rising to 12 trillion dollars as our gross domestic product is falling toward 12 trillion. The Dow Jones Industrial Average is the same level now as it was 12 years ago, meaning those who depend on retirement savings have lost a dozen years of appreciation.

And 12 individuals can still make an immense difference to a flagging economy and to the lives of many.

As we talk about a failing economy and a national economic stimulus, perhaps we are resting our hopes in the wrong place. The problem with reliance on government and our focus on the gross domestic product is that they are imperfect proxies for our economic and social wealth. At times like these, we should also measure an increasingly important activity — the economic power of community helping community.

If there is one thing I have discovered here, it is that when the North Country faces a challenge, the North Country gets going.

North Country residents have been making a difference. The wonderful North Country Mission of Hope, with the support of organizations like the Plattsburgh Noontime Rotary Club and the Joint Council for Economic Opportunity, has been working hard to rebuild a school in Nicaragua. Another dedicated North Country group is helping out in the Dominican Republic.

I recently joined another dad and a dozen students and teachers from Foxborough, Mass., on an Alternative Spring Break effort in hurricane-ravaged Donaldsonville, La. Jarvis Green, the New England Patriots star defensive end, provided lodging and building materials that allowed us to rebuild the kitchens and bathrooms and repaint home interiors for two elderly women who were unable to complete or afford these tasks alone. The recipients were wonderful and truly moved by such a random act of economic empowerment.

Such helping hands have been creating joy in communities across this country and around the world. And while their fundraising for the airfares, and the cost of building materials, rental vans, or motels may inject thousands of dollars into the economy, the real value is much greater.

The problem with our emphasis on the gross domestic product is that it only measures monetary spending. When a group like the Mission of Hope or the Jarvis Green Foundation facilitates the efforts of dozens of people for a week, its value is not fully tabulated in our national economic tally. Nonetheless, they contribute to our collective well-being and the size of the economic pie by just as much as if the work was performed by contractors.

At times like these when we so need to depend on each other, it is indeed thousands of dozens of helping hands across the nation that can make an incredible difference. In some ways, they may even make a greater difference than normal. Sometimes doing unto others is more substantial than doing for oneself.

You see, households in a strong and robust economy renovate kitchens and bathrooms, schools and clinics, all the time. But while the gross domestic product values much less the \$6,000 kitchen for a 90-year-old woman in Louisiana than the \$60,000 kitchen in Westchester, the gross social product is much higher for the more modest renovation.

Perhaps at times like these we should be looking to create more social credits, even if we can no longer easily afford large, conventional spending that credits the gross domestic product. Imagine the good that could come if we each took a week of our vacation time, spring-break time or holiday time and really made a difference for others who cannot so easily provide for themselves. We would be rebuilding our own community and our economy brick by brick.

Rather than depending on government, we would be taking our economic future into our own hands.

We would be doing for others who cannot do for themselves but who would value our contribution immensely.

We would be increasing the assets of those with few assets, while at the same time increasing the asset values for their neighbors, too.

We would be generating positive social credits while at the same time generating spending in this country at the building supply store and perhaps with airlines, motels and rental agencies, too.

We don't have to jump on an airplane to do it. There are many in need right here in the North Country, and the savings in airfares and lodging could be put back into our own local economy.

While we would be donating our toil and sweat and our dollars, the gross social product and the gross domestic product do not care who buys, or for whom we build. Our economy benefits because we care.

If we can harness the latent energy of households in every community, we may also learn something about the rewards of giving back.

This is not charity alone. Ultimately, we would help ourselves by helping others. It can raise our economic spirits from lows not seen since that 90-year-old woman from Donaldsonville, La., was just a child.

Perhaps the efforts in our own community, a dozen individuals at a time, can constitute the true economic stimulus package. It will allow us to take our economic destiny into our own hands rather than relying solely on government and big business. After all, those that got us into this may not be the ones that best get us out of it.

Let us make a difference, starting in our own community.

Let us raise the spirits and the property values of the North Country first.

If every able-bodied adult across the nation devoted a week to improve our communities, we would add upwards of a quarter of a trillion dollars to the gross social product. This is greater than the direct stimulus from the current American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. And our collective efforts, a dozen individuals at a time, will do much more to brighten the lives of others and ourselves than did those tax-rebate checks last spring.

Are you with me? Please e-mail me if you know someone who can volunteer for a week at spring break or if you know of anyone desperately in need of the type of interior repairs students or volunteers can do. Let's

make this happen. Our community can prosper through the inspiration of a dozen at a time. Indeed, we always have.

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