

# The Core Elements of Empowerment Economics

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## Introduction

Communities of color have distinct and at times overlapping histories and relationships to power and place. Their stories are held together by common threads of systemic oppression, inequalities, and locally grounded forms of resistance. Long at the forefront of movements to revision our society,

**Empowerment Economics** is a multigenerational, culturally responsive approach to building wealth and power in low-income, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and other communities of color.

these communities show us that achieving economic and racial justice requires a deep shift in power, priorities, and practices. In this spirit, we share Empowerment Economics, a framework that emerged from [financial capability and advocacy work](#) by a native Hawaiian community organization, Hawaiian Community Assets (HCA), and [other Asian American and Pacific Islander \(AAPI\) community leaders](#).

Empowerment Economics begins with situating each community's past and current wellbeing within the context

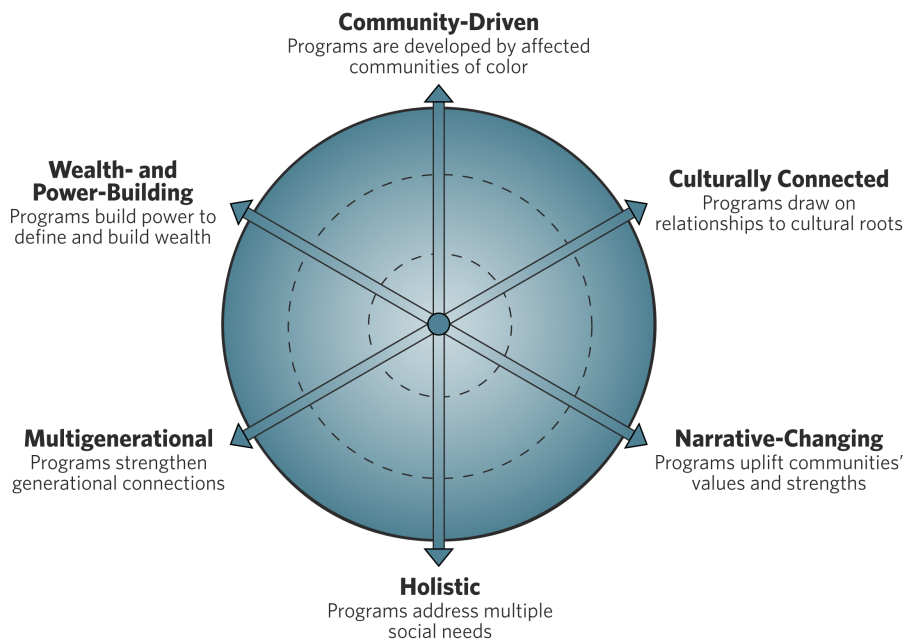
of racial, economic, and political systems. It provides a way for organizations and practitioners to challenge existing inequalities of wealth and power, which we know are deeply embedded, interconnected, and systemic. Empowerment Economics can serve changemakers as a vehicle for [rethinking, challenging, measuring, and shifting](#) the dynamics of their communities' social, political, and economic lives. While Empowerment Economics is grounded in and informed by AAPI leaders and organizations, this framework is accessible and open to everyone. We invite practitioners from all community organizations to experiment with, build on, and engage with Empowerment Economics to advance racial and economic justice.

## Core Elements: Pillars of Practice

The **core elements of Empowerment Economics** practice (see **Figure 1**) distinguish Empowerment Economics from traditional approaches to economic and community development.

They represent the principles reflected in the programmatic practices in *Kahua Waiwai*, HCA's financial capability and housing security curriculum. These core elements hold together the practices—both specific and diverse—of Empowerment Economics, developed in and across communities of color. Each core element is identified as a continuum with varying depths of practice. As such, programs can begin at different places on the continuum for each element.

**Figure 1: The Core Elements of Empowerment Economics**



These core elements serve as foundational pillars for practitioners to reflect on their program priorities, share best practices, and set goals by locating their place on the continuum within each element. They do not prescribe what a given program should look like. This leaves room for community organizations and leaders to engage with and embed Empowerment Economics in their work based on their unique community contexts. By specifying the core elements of Empowerment Economics, our goals are to share knowledge, uplift different expressions of practice, and build collective power to transform communities.

## The Six Core Elements of Empowerment Economics

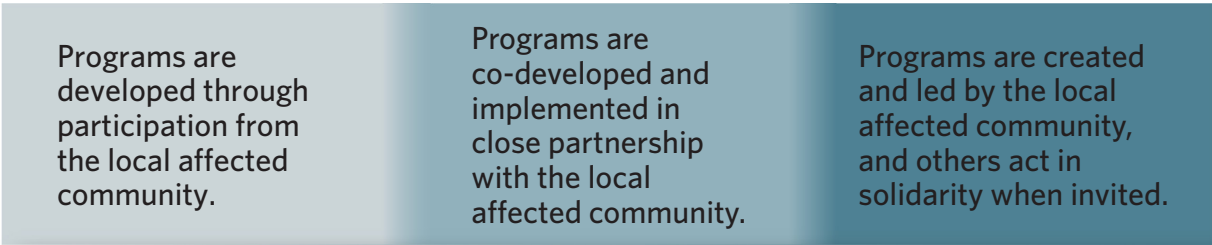
The six core elements of Empowerment Economics distinguish this framework from a more traditional approach to economic and community development. Below, we define each element, offer examples of how it might appear on a continuum of expression, and illustrate each with a vignette drawn from HCA’s model. The deepening color of the continuum’s arrow correlates with an increased embeddedness in Empowerment Economics; the rightmost box indicates the fullest expression of this approach.

1. **Community-driven:** Programs are developed by members of the affected community. These initiatives provide a path for deeper involvement, cooperation, and ownership by the local community.

### Traditional Approach

Programs address needs that are predetermined as important for the local affected community.

### Empowerment Economics Approach



*For example, HCA’s Kahua Waiwai financial capability curriculum was developed by, for, and with local native Hawaiian community members to address economic and housing insecurity. The curriculum was created through a community process that involved elders, youth, individuals facing homelessness, and other stakeholders. Kahua Waiwai trainers are community members who, in most cases, went through HCA’s workshops or experienced economic or housing insecurity.*

2. **Culturally connected:** Programs draw on relationships to cultural roots as sources of strength, vital knowledge, and new ways to shape community life.

**Traditional Approach**

Programs are not inclusive of diverse cultures and backgrounds in the local affected community.

**Empowerment Economics Approach**

Programs incorporate values and/or practices from the different cultures of the local affected community.	Programs strengthen connections within and between the different cultures of the local affected community.	Programs center cultural values in the co-creation of norms for the collective wellbeing of the local affected community.
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*For example, the Kahua Waiwai curriculum reflects the philosophy of “sense of place,” where home is the foundation—kahua—and waiwai, or water, makes life possible. Waiwai refers to a family’s spiritual values, teachings, and cultural traditions, built on kahua. It provides stability and opportunity for families to invest in a foundation for the future that will serve generations to come. The curriculum also emphasizes kuleana, “shared responsibility”, as a key value that sustains community and multigenerational wellbeing.*

3. **Narrative-changing:** Programs uplift the strengths, values, and capabilities of individuals, families, and communities. These initiatives change or replace harmful narratives with new narratives that empower members of the local affected community.

**Traditional Approach**

Programs perpetuate narratives about poverty and inequality that are focused on individual behavior and deficits within the local affected community.

**Empowerment Economics Approach**

Programs have a strengths-based narrative about the local affected community.	Programs transform existing harmful narratives within the local affected community.	Programs produce new narratives that change dominant understandings and empower the local affected community.
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*For example, Kahua Waiwai trainers use shame-free dialogue and strength-based narratives to facilitate participants' awareness of and power over their finances. They highlight historical injustices as root causes of current inequality and encourage participants to see local and community resources as plentiful. They emphasize that cultivating and managing resources to never take more than what is needed can meet family and community needs. The narratives in Kahua Waiwai reject the idea that indigenous people and practices are "behind the time." Instead, program practices demonstrate the significance of indigenous knowledge and culture to family and community wellbeing.*

4. **Holistic:** Programs address multiple social needs (e.g., housing, financial capability, leadership, workforce development, etc.). These initiatives target multiple levels of change to transform relationships between individuals, communities, and systems of power.

**Traditional Approach**

Programs focus on just one domain of work and/or level of need.

**Empowerment Economics Approach**

Programs address different social needs or levels of change in isolation.

Programs weave together practices that impact multiple social needs and levels of change.

Programs transform relationships between the local affected community and systems of power.

*For example, Kahua Waiwai trainers work closely with families on their financial situation by asking about their overall wellbeing and goals. In addition to offering housing stabilization and financial capability resources, HCA staff also work with participants to identify underlying policy barriers that prevent them from building wealth and power.*

5. **Multigenerational:** Programs reach multiple generations, facilitate knowledge-sharing, and strengthen connections within and across generations.

**Traditional Approach**

Programs focus on specific generations (e.g., youth programs).

### Empowerment Economics Approach

Programs address individuals from multiple generations in the local affected community.

Programs strengthen the roles and relationships of individuals within and between generations in the local affected community.

Programs bring together individuals across generations to share and build the wealth and power of the local affected community.

*For example, native Hawaiian community elders and youth worked together to develop Kahua Waiwai for adults and families. A separate curriculum was then created for young children. Program activities incorporate opportunities for intergenerational interactions, learning, and the exchange of knowledge, thereby creating spaces to share cultural ways and strengthen families.*

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6. **Wealth- and power-building: Programs build power to define and build wealth.** These initiatives integrate wealth- and power-building to define, protect, and grow wealth and power.

### Traditional Approach

Programs address financial capability and literacy in the local affected community, without acknowledging and addressing power imbalances.

### Empowerment Economics Approach

Programs incorporate different meanings of wealth and power that are specific to the local affected community.

Programs strengthen the different types of wealth and power defined and used by the local affected community.

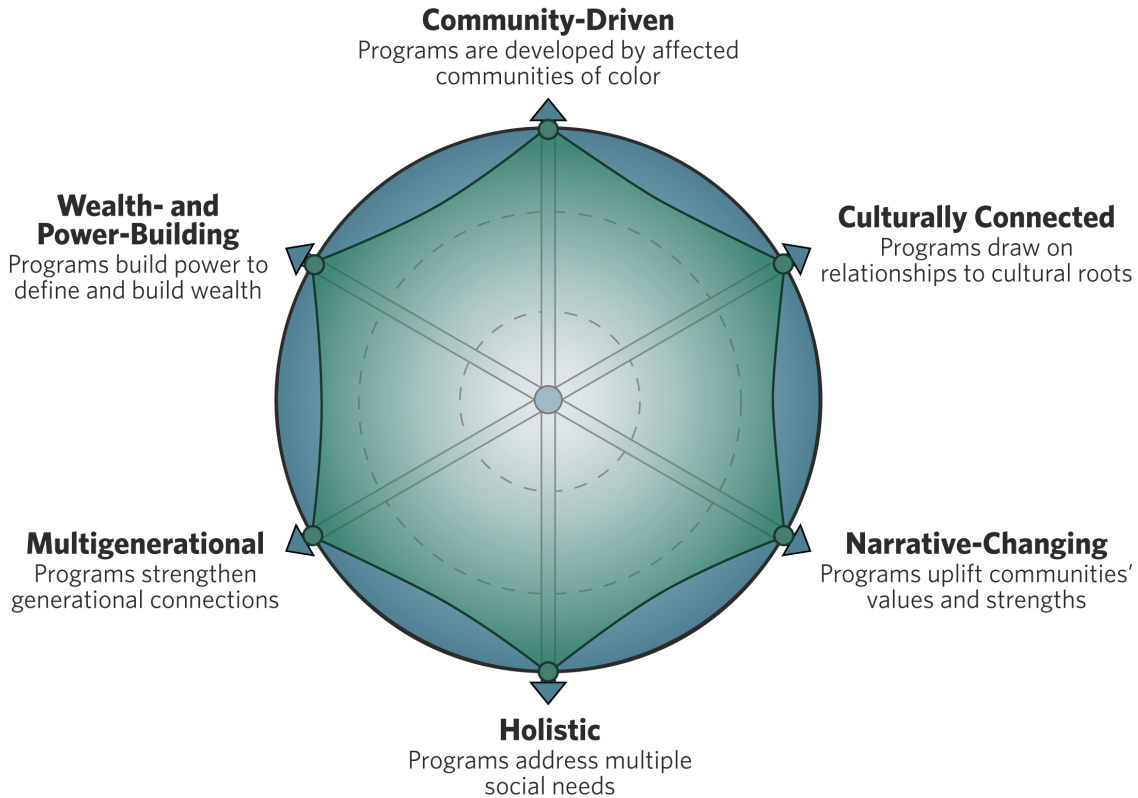
Programs by the local affected community build new forms of ownership of wealth and power.

*For example, in Kahua Waiwai, each chapter begins with a story on how native Hawaiian families approach wealth, resource management, and trust. The curriculum identifies and holds indigenous stewardship of the environment and local knowledge as part of the community's story of wealth and power. Recognizing that the lack of land and housing access was affecting many native Hawaiian families' wellbeing, the founders of HCA advocated with the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands for members of their community and secured stable housing for them on the home lands.*

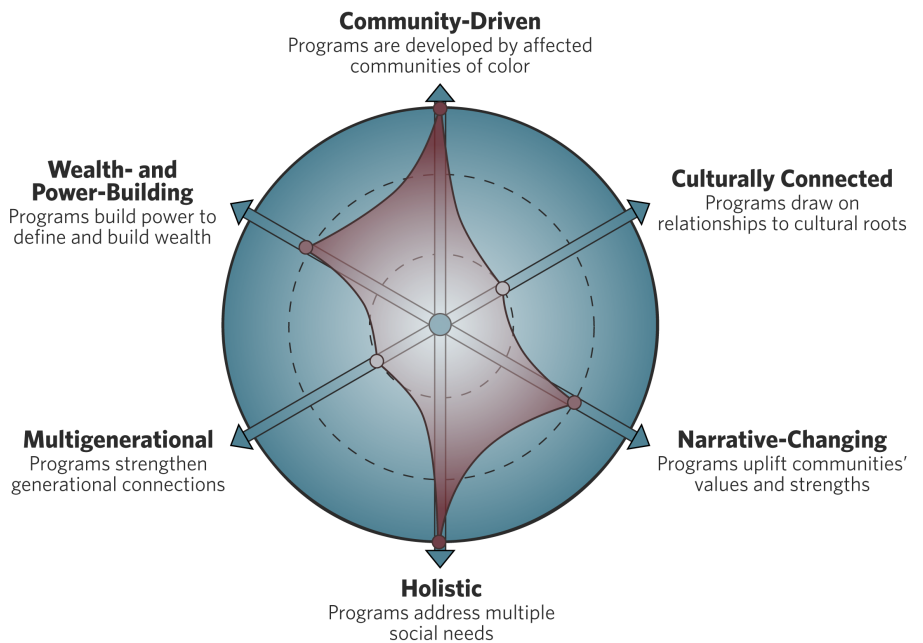
## Empowerment Economics in Practice

“Doing” Empowerment Economics requires that a program engage with each of the six core elements, at least minimally. If one or more core elements is missing in a program, that program is “informed by” Empowerment Economics. HCA is an example of an organization whose programs fully express each of the core elements (see **Figure 2**).

**Figure 2: HCA's Programs**



**Figure 3: Example Organization's Programs**



How much a program incorporates each element can vary over time and across contexts. For example, practitioners may observe that their programs fully express the core elements of ‘community-driven’ and ‘holistic’ while evincing the other four elements to lesser and differing extents (see **Figure 3**). By deepening practices in each core element, programs can become more embedded in Empowerment Economics and increase their impact over time.

## Empowerment Economics: Practice in Motion

In 2017, core organizational partners Hawaiian Community Assets, National CAPACD, and IASP coined the term Empowerment Economics in a [case study describing HCA's work](#). Since then, National CAPACD has built a network of AAPI organizations that were already practicing or are currently creating their own versions of Empowerment Economics. [Our second case study on HANA Center's youth empowerment program](#) provides a compelling example of what this approach looks like at a Korean organization hosting a multi-ethnic youth afterschool program.

The practice of Empowerment Economics involves multidimensional, place-based work that transforms relationships within and across different levels of society. To address systemic realities, programs embedded in Empowerment Economics offer community-driven, locally rooted, and culturally responsive approaches to growing wealth and power in low-income communities of color. For some organizations, adopting the Empowerment Economics framework may require a fundamental shift in perspective, priorities, and program practices. Others may observe that the core elements of Empowerment Economics reflect their own longstanding values and practices. No matter where practitioners find their organizations on the elements' continuums of expression, all can look to these core elements as pillars to strengthen programs that build on or borrow from the Empowerment Economics framework.

With a shared understanding of the core elements of practice, we can reflect on the extent to which our work builds and redistributes power in addition to wealth. We have heard from dozens of organizations in communities of color outside of the AAPI community that find that Empowerment Economics reflects their own ongoing organizing, community development, and/or resource-building work. We have also heard from other practitioners that this framework is aspirational or inspirational for them. In deepening practices around the six core elements of Empowerment Economics, we invite others to join us on a collective, intentional path toward racial and economic justice.

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This brief is produced as part of the [Empowerment Economics program](#), led by Hawaiian Community Assets, the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development, and the Institute on Assets and Social Policy.

**We want to hear from you.** For questions, comments, and other inquiries, contact:

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