

Solidarity Economy Organization in the U.S. Context: A Think-Paper Towards First Steps

By the Solidarity Economy Working Group for USSF 2007, June 2007

“**Solidarity Economy**” is a framework for connecting alternative economic practices and institutions which are grounded in solidarity and cooperation, rather than the pursuit of narrow, individual self-interest, and that promote economic democracy, alternative models of local economic governance, equity and social and economic sustainability rather than the unfettered rule of the market. By linking diverse transformative economic efforts together as parts of a common movement on a scale from the local to the global, the solidarity economy approach creates a shared space of debate, exchange and collective growth for its participants and works to strengthen and develop grassroots alternatives through networking and mutual support.

The Solidarity Economy Working Group for the U.S. Social Forum 2007 has written and posted this “Think-Paper” for the purposes of developing a stronger shared language-- that of the “solidarity economy”--for the development of economic alternatives in the U.S., linking with current international efforts to build alternatives to neoliberal globalization, and building toward sustainable, long-term organizational structures for the creation and promotion of these alternatives.

Our thinking in the realm of solidarity economy organizing can be guided, in part, by the following questions:

- 1) What forms of economic solidarity already exist in our midst?
- 2) How do we identify them? How are they distinguished from other initiatives?
- 3) What do these initiatives need to be strengthened and supported?
- 4) How do we foster the *conditions of emergence* for more such initiatives?
- 5) How do we work to connect these initiatives together in webs of mutual support and recognition?

The following document presents some possible directions in which solidarity economy organizing in the U.S. context might go. It is meant as a starting point for further discussion, elaboration and planning. We suggest first an overview of possible strategies, then briefly outline a possible structure through which such strategies might be implemented.

Some Possible Strategies For Solidarity Economy Organizing in the U.S.

1. Developing a shared definition of the solidarity economy. Defining, through dialogue and constructive debate, a collective understanding of the values and visions that constitute a solidarity economy movement in the U.S. context.

2. Mapping the existing solidarity economy. Inventorying existing initiatives, practices and visions in the U.S. and abroad with the aim of identifying allies and increasing the visibility and viability of diverse elements of the solidarity economy. The Data Commons Project, currently working to build a collaborative database of such initiatives in the U.S. can provide the technical and organizational base for such an effort (see <http://dcp.usworker.coop>).

3. Networking across diverse sectors in the U.S. Fostering a shared “movement” identity, building cross-sector relationships and facilitating mutual support among diverse organizations and initiatives that are engaged in solidarity economy and economic justice work.

4. Popular education and publicity for a solidarity economy. This might involve: the creation of clear and accessible educational materials; the development and practice of participatory workshops for community and church groups, schools, activist organizations, businesses, business organizations, labor unions, etc.; and the development of media strategies to “mainstream” the solidarity economy into a larger sphere of public consciousness.

5. Public policy development and advocacy. Developing a strong public voice for the solidarity economy vision of economic and social development in the US and abroad, along with collaborative efforts to develop and implement public policies in support of this vision.

6. Strengthening existing U.S. and international solidarity economy initiatives and supporting the creation of new ones. Investigating and developing ways to build collaborative support systems for solidarity economy development.

These could include such initiatives as solidarity development loan funds, movement-wide cooperative insurance and pension systems, solidarity exchange/commerce tools (such as an online “marketplace,” cross-sector barter exchanges, and a “Solidarity Made” marketing label/certification), and development resources and technical support.

7. Developing stronger relationships with global solidarity economy networks and organizations. Facilitating increased interchange between solidarity economy organizers in the U.S. and others around the world.

A Draft Vision of a U.S. Solidarity Economy Network

Rationale: In Latin America, Europe, Canada, Africa and Asia, solidarity economy organizing has taken the form of local, regional, national and international networks that link together diverse economic justice initiatives. The Brazilian Solidarity Economy Forum, for example, brings together twelve national networks and membership organizations with twenty-one regional Solidarity Forums and thousands of cooperative enterprises to build mutual support systems, facilitate exchanges, create solidarity enterprise incubator programs and shape public policy. Many such regional and national networks are convened globally through the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS). In North America (Mexico, Canada, the US and the Caribbean) organizations have come together under the banner of the North American Network on the Solidarity Economy (NANSE)

The creation of a national-scale network in the United States would be a powerful step in the direction of: a) developing a stronger and more unified progressive vision for economic alternatives to based on the values of the solidarity economy; b) building deeper shared identities and mutual-support relationships between existing U.S.-based efforts to create such alternatives; and c) joining and learning from international efforts to build viable and powerful alternatives. The following is a first-draft sketch of what such a U.S. network might look like:

The **mission** of the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network would be to connect a diverse array of individuals, organizations, businesses and projects in the shared work of building and strengthening regional, national and international movements for a solidarity economy. Through publications, a website and mailing list, and face-to-face gatherings, the network would facilitate: ongoing communication and dialog relating to the development of solidarity economy ideas, values and practices; the sharing of experiences, models and skills; and the creation of collaborative, movement-building projects between network members.

Network **membership** could be open to any organization, business or individual who shares the mission of the network and actively works to promote values, visions and practices that are resonant with the solidarity economy idea (without necessarily using the term “solidarity economy”). Members could be distinguished through a set of categories:

Solidarity Economy Initiatives. Organizations, businesses, and groups working to directly implement specific solidarity-based structures and principles in their operation.

Solidarity Economy Networks and Associations. Organizations which network, convene, or coordinate multiple solidarity economy initiatives and/or support organizations. The U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives is an example.

Support Organizations. Organizations that provide direct or indirect support (through research, funding, technical assistance, media, or other avenues) to solidarity economy initiatives and/or to general efforts to develop a solidarity economy.

Allied Organizations. Organizations whose work may not involve the direct creation of economic alternatives, but is crucial nonetheless to the success of such efforts and to our shared work of creating economic justice.

Individuals. Individuals who seek to support and participate in the building of a solidarity economy.

The network could be coordinated by a national Coordinating Committee of 10-20 people, elected by the network membership. An initial ad-hoc Coordinating Committee might be necessary until the network solidified its structure and capacity to engage in such voting. Organizations in the network membership would select two delegates to participate in network decision-making processes. Votes could be weighted based on membership categories.

Developing the resources and structure with which to support at least one paid staff person for the network might be a high priority. Identifying sources of initial financial support from foundations and other donors may be a crucial first step in the overall organizing process. Another possible source of revenue might be through a sliding-scale membership dues.