

Another Economy is Possible!
Using the U.S. Social Forum to Create the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network
Julie Matthaei and Jenna Allard

Introductions

In this piece, we show how a group of economic activists and academics from different organizations were inspired by the U.S. Social Forum, and the Social Forum movement in general, to come together in a co-creative process. The original intent of the group was to create a block of sessions on economic alternatives at the U.S. Social Forum 2007 (USSF). However, in the end, we also used the USSF to create a new organization, the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network (U.S. SEN, www.USSEN.org), whose goal is to promote progressive economic transformation in the U.S. and the world.

We write this description as active participants in the events we describe. Julie is a professor of economics at Wellesley College who specializes in race and gender in U.S. economic history, feminist economics, and more recently, current movements for economic transformation; she is also co-director of Guramylay: Growing the Green Economy (www.growingthegreeneconomy.org), with her husband, Germai Medhanie. Julie was a key player in the working group which got together to plan the sessions and caucuses at the forum, and she organized, spoke at, and attended sessions and caucuses at the forum. She is currently on the Coordinating Committee of U.S. SEN, and wrote for and co-edited the *Solidarity Economy* book. A few months before the U.S. Social Forum, Julie met Jenna, a graduating senior at Wellesley who had a passionate interest in, and considerable knowledge of, the global solidarity economy movement. Guramylay hired Jenna starting June 1, 2007, and she became involved in the last month of preparing for the U.S. Social Forum. Jenna attended the USSF sessions and caucuses and video-recorded them. She then joined the coordinating committee as a Guramylay representative. Jenna and Julie co-edited, with Carl Davidson, a book of papers and reports from the U.S. Social Forum's solidarity economy activities, *Solidarity Economy: Building Alternatives for People and Planet* (2008).

Coming Together: Bringing a Discussion of Economic Alternatives to the First-Ever U.S. Social Forum

The planning of the economic alternatives track of sessions at the USSF came together under the direction of Emily Kawano. Emily directs the Center for Popular Economics (CPE), a nonprofit collective of over sixty economists which works to promote economic justice and sustainability through economic education. Realizing that the USSF was a great organizing opportunity, Emily had decided to organize a workshop track at the U.S. Social Forum, in lieu of holding CPE's annual summer institute; she also became a member of the USSF Program Committee. The first formal meeting to plan this track happened in January of 2007.

Most of our members were enthusiasts of the Social Forum movement, and had participated in, helped plan, and/or studied other Social Forums and the Social Forum movement. We were inspired and energized by the prospect of helping create, finally, the first-ever U.S. Social Forum. Further, we were familiar with the Social Forum movement's statement of principles, its motto, its multidimensional focus, and its

pluralism. All of these were to affect the form our organizing would take, as well as the content of our work.

First, the planning group crystallized around and was inspired by the Social Forum movement's motto, "Another World is Possible." This motto led us to create a group of sessions which went beyond the traditional critiques of neoliberal capitalist economics to focus on an economic way forward. We decided to showcase the alternative economic values and institutions that have been proliferating in the U.S., and this ended up leading us to include as well the solidarity economy movements abroad which have begun to create networks of these alternatives.

Because of this focus on "Another Economy is Possible," the project brought together people and organizations involved studying and creating such alternatives – many of whom had never met or worked together before. The core group included Emily Kawano of the Center for Popular Economics; Julie Matthaei of Guramylay, TransformationCentral.org, and Wellesley College; Ethan Miller of Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO) and the Data Commons Project; Dan Swinney of the Center for Labor and Community Research (CLCR) and the North American Network for a Solidarity Economy (NANSE); and Melissa Hoover of the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives. Also part of the Working Group, and participating in much of the planning, were Jessica Gordon Nembhard of the Democracy Collaborative; Heather Schoonover of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP); and Michael Menser of American Federation of Teachers (IFT) and Brooklyn College. Yvon Poirier of the Le Groupe d'économie solidaire du Québec (Solidarity Economy Network of Quebec, GESQ) was brought in by Dan Swinney in the spring to provide us with perspective and knowledge of solidarity economy organizing in Canada.

Our actual discussions of what kinds of economic values, practices, and institutions to showcase in our sessions were also influenced by the fact that we were planning and preparing for the U.S. Social Forum. Through bi-monthly conference call meetings, we developed a list of economic "sectors" we wanted to cover, and of groups within those sectors which we wanted to invite to present in our workshops as the USSF. These discussions required us to decide who was "in" and who was "out." Traditional Left discourse has tended to privilege the struggle against class oppression, and hence to showcase worker-owned cooperatives as the key to economic transformation because they transcend class exploitation; more extreme Left discourse dismisses even these classless experiments as reformist. In contrast, the Social Forum movement has coalesced around "un solo no" – a single no, to neoliberal economics – and, in the Zapatistas' words, "un million de si" (a million yeses, a million ways forward.) Also, as a movement of movements, it has brought together workers, farmers, women, lesbians and gays, environmentalists, and many others to struggle together against all forms of inequality and oppression – each of which stands to learn from interaction with one another – and affirmed pluralism, rather than one politically correct point of view.

So as our group discussed which economic processes and alternatives to include in our sessions, we found ourselves arguing ourselves out of the traditional narrow leftist boxes. We all agreed that we wanted to have panels on worker co-ops, and other economic alternatives such as community currencies, land-trusts, and community-supported agriculture. But some of us pushed to include other, more economically mainstream, practices. For example, Dan Swinney of CLCR, who was working for

community economic development in Chicago through the support of “high road” local, community-based corporations, convinced the group that we should be “system neutral” in our language, rather than explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-corporate. Leftists, he noted, have often painted themselves out of the picture with their strict adherence to Marxist orthodoxy and socialist ideals, while millions of small, privately held corporations are potential allies for our movements, as well as possible targets for conversion to coops. Similarly, Julie argued that Fair Trade organizations; organizations such as the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), which focuses on local small business; Co-op America, the Center for a New American Dream, and the Social Investment Forum which focus on socially responsible consumption and investment; and also progressive feminist, anti-racist, and environmentalist groups, should be included. Our planning group ended up evolving a “big tent” conception of economic alternatives and the solidarity economy in the U.S., where an individual or group’s participation was not determined by being perfectly aligned with progressive values (i.e. anti-classist, -racist, -sexist, -nationalist, -homophobic, and sustainable/ecological) – indeed, we realized that few were. Rather, we included groups and institutions that we saw as qualitatively transformative in their values and practices in at least one of these dimensions, as well as open, at least in principle, to striving to extend their commitment to economic justice to its other dimensions. As we found out later from our foreign colleagues in the solidarity economy movement, the bringing together of groups in this way to learn from -- and be pushed by -- one another is a key part of the solidarity economy movement, as it is of the Social Forum movement.

Another important way in which our group’s planning was affected by the Social Forum process was through our knowledge of a weakness of past forums – that they bring people and groups together for an inspiring event, but that the energy often dissipates afterwards, with little or no permanent effect. We were determined to use the USSF 2007 as an opportunity to bring together economic activists from all over the country to build an ongoing organization. Thus, from the beginning, we made plans for caucus meetings, among representatives from the different groups we were inviting, to engage in discussion of how to work together to further progressive economic transformation in the U.S. By April and May, we began to realize in our phone meetings that we wanted to propose the formation of a solidarity economy network in the U.S. at these caucuses – similar to the networks which exist throughout Latin America, and in Canada, Europe, Africa and Asia.

A final way in which the Social Forum movement affected our planning and process was its internationalism. The Social Forum movement began as an international movement, a coming together against the devastation wrought by neoliberal economics. It seemed highly appropriate, therefore, that we invite activists from the solidarity economy movement in Canada and Latin America to present in our workshops, as well as to participate in our caucus meetings. Dan Swinney, who knew international solidarity economy activists through his participation in NANSE, invited Nedda Argullo (Grupo Red de Economía Solidaria del Perú, Solidarity Economy Network Group of Perú, GRESP), Chilo Villareal (Mexico, Rural Coalition), Mike Lewis (Centre for Community Enterprise, CCE, Vancouver), Ethel Coté (Économie Solidaire de l’Ontario, Ontario Solidarity Economy Network, ESO, and Canadian Community Economic Development Network, CCEDNET), and Yvon Poirier (Le Groupe d’économie solidaire du Québec,

Solidarity Economy Network of Quebec, GESQ) brought wisdom accumulated through years of experience in their own social/solidarity economy organizing. We realized, with humility and appreciation, that we – in the center of the neocolonial, globalizing beast – were being “colonized,” seeded, educated, and mothered into creating a vibrant solidarity economy movement in the U.S. by these participants. And that, again, we were replicating the practice of the Social Forum movement, with its distinctly pro-South, anti-colonial perspective, and its refreshing absence of U.S. domination.

From the beginning, we were aware that we were going to be part of an historic moment – the first coming together of individuals and groups from across the U.S., inspired by and part of the Social Forum movement, to teach about, discuss, and hopefully create an ongoing organization dedicated to economic transformation. So we did our best in documenting what we did, through notes, sound recording, and video-recording.¹

At the U.S. Social Forum: Workshops and Caucuses

In all, the Solidarity Economy Working Group organized twenty-seven workshops on the solidarity economy for the U.S. Social Forum, under the rubric, “Building Economic Alternatives and the Social/Solidarity Economy.” We also listed fifty-three allied events in our program.² Because of previous experiences, our group requested and was able to arrange for almost all of the workshops to be held in close proximity to one another. We printed and distributed our own programs by email and in paper form, so that participants could see information about all of the workshops, and we also organized a Solidarity Economy Tent right outside the Civic Center, which provided a gathering-place and a clearinghouse for information. All of this organizing -- and the fact that discussions of economic alternatives seemed extremely resonant to many at the USSF -- certainly paid off: the workshops were well-attended, and the participants were enthusiastic. The idea of an economy organized around ethical values and human needs seemed intuitive. Many participants became excited about the solidarity economy framework, and wanted to learn more and find ways to participate.

These workshops featured a diverse group of speakers and a diverse range of topics. Staff at the Center for Popular Economics presented theoretical workshops, such as “Why We Need Another World: Introduction to Neoliberalism”, as well as workshops analyzing specific policy initiatives, such as “The Sky as a Common Resource: Fighting Global Warming by Asserting Equal Rights to our Atmosphere”, and “U.S. Inequality and What We Can Do About It.” David Korten, a well-known author and theorist, talked to an engaged group crammed into a small conference room in the roundtable discussion, “Beyond Reform or Revolution: Economic Transformation in the U.S.,” and also spoke on the panel, “Spirituality and Economic Transformation.” A debate between Michael Albert and David Schweickart about their respective economic models filled a ballroom, and drew many questions and comments. There were multiple workshops on worker cooperatives as a prime example of the solidarity economy, and on participatory

¹ Many of our videorecordings are available for viewing on Guramylay’s website, TransformationCentral.org.

² This program is also available on TransformationCentral.org, as well as a few documents concerning the solidarity economy, written for the USSF.

budgeting as a solidaritous method of surplus allocation. Many speakers focused on building vibrant local economies and also combating the injustices of globalized “free” trade. Dan Swinney, a member of the Working Group, presented his new project, the Austin Polytechnical Academy in Chicago, as a way to give underprivileged students “the technical competence and the social values to then intervene in production, and lead in its development with the values of the broader community at the core of the initiative.” (Allard, Davidson, and Matthaei, 106). In addition, solidarity economy activists from Canada, Mexico, and Peru spoke about organizing in their countries, and everyone – the organizers included – was amazed to hear what their networking already had accomplished.

The Solidarity Economy Caucuses provided our planning group with our first opportunity to meet face to face. Our goal was to educate one another, and the other invited participants, and to create an ongoing U.S. Solidarity Economy organization. The first caucus, held before the workshops commenced, was by invitation only. Led by the planning group, participants began the project of defining the solidarity economy, and discussed the challenges in building the solidarity economy. One of the highlights of the meeting was the presentations of international solidarity economy practitioners. Mike Lewis, the Executive Director of the Centre for Community Enterprise in Canada, talked about the distinction between social economy and solidarity economy organizing, describing solidarity economy organizing as a “cross-cutting approach,” a “cluster of shared values” that must “contend across all sectors” (Allard, Davidson, and Matthaei, 371). He argued that the solidarity economy framework was necessary to deal with the major crises of our time: climate change, peak oil, food security and sovereignty, water quality and access, and deepening inequality. Nedda Angulo Villareal, from the Grupo Red de Economía Solidaria del Perú (Solidarity Economy Network Group of Peru), talked about the solidarity economy in the Latin American context. There, the solidarity economy movement was galvanized by the failed neoliberal and structural adjustment policies of the 1990s. It supports the poorest of the poor, those who are excluded by the market and the state. Solidarity economy initiatives provide goods for the market, and welfare services for the community. During the discussion period, Nancy Neantam, President and Executive Director of Le Chantier de l’Économie sociale (Social Economy Working Group of Quebec), introduced herself and talked about her work. In Quebec, she is creating alliances of solidarity economy organizations based on vision and values rather than structure. All types of actors, from cooperatives, to non-profits, to territorial organizations and networks, to social movements, are engaged in the process of critiquing and building the movement. As we listened, awestruck, at all the work that had been done all over the world, we realized that we were being recruited into the international movement. Many of these organizers had been waiting years or even decades for the United States to finally get involved in the solidarity economy movement.

The second caucus, held after the workshops had ended, was an opportunity to reconvene and reassess, although we ended up welcoming in many new faces – people who had attended one or more of our workshops and wanted to learn more about the movement. Caucus attendees noted again and again that the U.S. Social Forum seemed the perfect environment in which to build the solidarity economy: presenters in workshops across the board kept relating their movement struggles back to the bedrock issues of structural and economic injustice, and Forum attendees were constantly looking

for concrete things they could do to make change and to create a more just economy in the present. After discussing the workshops, the caucus participants brainstormed ways to grow the solidarity economy movement in the U.S. At that point, Carl Davidson suggested publishing a book on the solidarity economy workshops at the U.S. Social Forum, to document the historic moment (and we worked later with him to bring this idea to fruition.)³ As the caucus attendees continued to dialogue, they realized that a permanent organization with membership could really help grow the movement. It could potentially promote the solidarity economy and develop educational material, research and map the existing solidarity economy, provide technical support, and advocate for policy initiatives. Attendees also had lots of ideas about how to create organizational structures that break down natural hierarchies, to maintain the breadth and diversity of the working group, and to consciously make educational materials accessible. The second caucus concluded with an enthusiastic consensus vote to create a U.S. Solidarity Economy Network, and to charge the planning group with the task of structuring and developing the new organization.

As we write this, it has been almost a year since the USSF and the founding of SEN. Still under the wing of CPE, we have created a website (ussen.org) with information about U.S. SEN, and articles and resources on the solidarity economy; developed a brochure and other educational materials; made presentations on the solidarity economy at the Union for Radical Political Economics summer conference, the Left Forum, the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives conference, and the Highlander Institute, among others; and sent a representative to a Venezuelan conference on the solidarity economy. We are planning our first conference for December of 2008 in New Orleans. U.S. SEN has joined the North American branch of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social/Solidarity Economy (RIPESS-NA, formerly NANSE) and, as such, is involved in planning for the intercontinental network's fourth conference, "International Forum on the Globalisation of Solidarity" in Luxembourg in the spring of 2009.

The Solidarity Economy and the World Social Forum Movement

With hindsight, it is not surprising that planning a block of economics sessions for the first U.S. Social Forum resulted in the creation of a U.S. solidarity economy network. In fact, recent history has shown that the Social Forum movement is uniquely well-suited for developing and spreading solidarity economy organizing.

Both the solidarity economy and the Social Forum movement share characteristics and yearnings. They both desire to synthesize the experiences, values, and visions of progressive social movements, while at the same time respecting their diversity. They both search for a plurality of answers to neoliberal globalization through participatory learning and reflection on our organizing and goals. For this reason, the Social Forum movement has contributed importantly to the deepening and spreading of the solidarity economy.

While economic alternatives such as worker cooperatives have existed for centuries, and regional solidarity economy organizing was happening even before the

³ The book is available at www.lulu.com/changemaker in e-format and book format.

first World Social Forum in 2001, the Social Forum movement has spread the idea globally and facilitated the creation of national and international solidarity economy networking. The Workgroup on Solidarity Socio-Economy (WSSE), a global network created in 1998, first began to use the Forums as an opportunity to discuss the solidarity economy, and their participation has generated numerous proposal papers. Discussions about the solidarity economy have continued to be present at every World Social Forum to date.

In addition, the Forum movement has strengthened the growth of local and national solidarity economy practices, institutions and movements in the places it is held. A prime example is the case of Brazil, which hosted the World Social Forum for its first three years in Porto Alegre. Solidarity economy vendors' successful efforts to convince conference organizers to live solidaritous values by purchasing their goods and services for these huge gatherings helped jumpstart a market and helped raise the visibility of the solidarity economy in the country. The Fórum Brasileiro de Economia Solidária (Brazilian Forum of Solidarity Economy, FBES) credits the Social Forum with leading to the creation of a Solidarity Economy National Secretariat within the government (2006). Knowing this history, Guramylay tried to organize a network of such vendors for the USSF, but was unable to get it off of the ground. Instead, however, the coming together of our group of activists and academics to plan sessions around the theme "Another Economy is Possible" resulted in the creation of the first U.S. solidarity economy network.

The Solidarity Economy Movement: Another Economy is Possible

We would like to end with a brief definition of the solidarity economy framework; explain why we think it is a key component of the movement for another United States and another world; and argue why you and your movement should join it! We are ending with this definition rather than beginning with it so as to reflect our actual planning and learning process. The members of U.S. SEN have been learning about the meaning of the solidarity economy through our work together, through dialogues with solidarity economy activists from other countries, and through reading.

The solidarity economy emphasizes our relationships to other people, and to our environment, and inserts solidaritous values into these relationships. Solidaritous values are cooperative, egalitarian, democratic, locally based, and sustainable. It strives for an economy based on human needs rather than an insatiable drive for profit. The ultimate aim of the solidarity economy is the breakdown of oppressive economic hierarchies of all types, the development of human potential, and the preservation of our communities and environment.

There are four distinct aspects to the interconnected and organic whole that is the solidarity economy. It is a collection of existing economic practices; a network of people and organizations engaged in these practices; a developing local and global movement that informs and advocates for these practices; and a theoretical framework for understanding and analyzing these practices. It can be a way of scaling up initiatives that work, of transcending political boundaries, and even of challenging neoliberalism.

Solidarity economy practices are growing into reality beneath our very noses, pushing up through the cracks in the current economic system, building "another

economy” block by block. Many of us are participating in them daily, be it by buying fair trade products, expressing our values through our work, or investing in a socially responsible way. Others are involved in collective solidarity economy efforts such as high road businesses, community economic development projects, localization projects, and many others. While there are thus many individuals and organizations in the U.S. which could be characterized as participants in the solidarity economy, there is no comprehensive network among them yet. One of U.S. SEN’s goals is to develop and disseminate knowledge of the solidarity economy framework to help create these links.

Another key goal of the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network is to build a solidarity economy movement in the U.S., by engaging progressive activists and social movements across the U.S. in a broad-based coalition to achieve deep-seated economic transformation. The present is an extremely propitious time for bringing social movements in the U.S. together around solidarity economy policies and vision, for two reasons: the state of our economy, and the state of our social movements. Eight years of the U.S. version of neoliberalism under George Bush have exposed the failings of “the economy as usual” much better than any leftist critique could. The offshoring of good jobs, flood of housing foreclosures, sky-rocketing energy prices and profits, and denial of the global warming crisis have pulled the rug out from under the middle class, not to mention the poor. It is increasingly easy to see that our “free” market, competitive, profit-driven economy isn’t working for most of us, and that structuring an economy around the values of materialism, greed, and competition is a mistake. It is time for U.S. social movements to come together to demand what we need from our economy – good jobs, financial market reform, safe and affordable housing, health care, food, transportation and energy, a government free from corporate control, a peace economy, time and support to the families who are raising the next generation, and a livable world for our children and grandchildren. At this time, social movements can benefit from the vision of an economy based in solidarity, and the developing knowledge of a concrete economic way forward, gleaned from real life experiences across the world.

The second reason that this is a good time for a solidarity economy movement to develop in the U.S. is the state of our social movements. Over fifty years of organizing along identity lines have taught us that our issues are all interconnected and also that equal opportunity and equal rights are not enough. They have also taught us to recognize and resist the divide-and-conquer, fear-mongering tactics which have, time and time again, caused us NOT to act in our collective economic best interest. Barack Obama’s successful campaign for the Democratic nomination is evidence of the possibility of emergence of such a coalition.

Finally, involvement in the U.S. solidarity economy movement provides our social movements with a way to connect, learn from, and support a vibrant global movement. Activists and organizations from around the world are grappling with problems similar to ours, and in many cases, are far ahead of us in creating innovative, solidarity-based solutions to them. Meanwhile here, in the belly of the beast, our government’s current policies have a disproportionate and negative effect on the rest of the world. Thus our domestic movements -- unified in a U.S. solidarity economy coalition inspired by the world social forum and solidarity economy movements -- can offer the world solidarity in the global fight against our government’s current imperialistic and pro-corporate economic foreign policy.

So, we invite you to join the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network. Share your movement-building wisdom with us, and help to create a broad-based movement for social and economic transformation in the U.S. and the world!

Bibliography:

Allard, Jenna, Carl Davidson, Julie Matthaei, eds. (2008). *Solidarity Economy: Building Alternatives for People and Planet: Papers and Reports from the US. Social Forum*. Chicago: Changemaker Publications.

Brazilian Forum of Solidarity Economy (2006, January) "The Management and Organization Experience of the Solidarity Economy Movement in Brazil," 4. http://www.fbes.org.br/docs/Brazilian_Solidarity_Economy_Movement.pdf (accessed February 1, 2008).