

## Solidarity economy and community development: emerging cases in three Massachusetts cities

### **Abstract**

Solidarity economy (SE) is a set of theories and practices that engenders ethical economic relationships and new possibilities for democratic and transformative community development. SE advances democratic community development by providing an alternative to capitalist ideology from which the core goals of solidarity and agency can be imagined, identified, and realized. Further, it advances a set of concrete economic practices that enact these goals while sustaining people and the planet. Politically, SE is a movement that can build power within and across scales and win supportive policy and public resources. Using the development of SE in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield, Massachusetts as examples, the article discusses the possibilities and challenges for SE projects to negotiate across differing values and politics, racial and class divides, and the challenge of accessing startup capital and building finance. SE suggests trajectories of “scaling up,” where local and regional efforts might be part of a strategy for deeper political-economic transformation. How SE expands depends on how actors in particular places and times take advantage of opportunities and overcome ideological, economic, and political challenges.

**Keywords:** democratic community development, solidarity economy, transformative community development

Community development has long aspired to address persistent poverty, social inequalities, and environmental ills. These problems are all associated with (though not reducible to) capitalist relations of production and exchange. Yet capital mobility and corporate consolidation seem to constrain the possibilities for local action, as cities and regions come to be imagined as necessarily competing with one another over limited resources, jobs, and capital investment in a global market. Indeed, under these ideological and material conditions, democracy itself is under siege; communities and governments find themselves disciplined by policies that cater to private interests and capital markets (Holland et al., 2007).

With these conditions, discursive space has opened from which new desires, possibilities, and practices for a more democratic and transformative community development are emerging; for example, cooperative development is being pushed by the mayor’s office in Richmond, California (Bohan, 2012); a network of worker cooperatives is growing in Cleveland, Ohio, with support of hospitals and universities (Loh, 2010); and a grassroots movement in Jackson, Mississippi led by late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba is pursuing alternative economic development

(Holbrook, 2013). Over the past five years in Massachusetts<sup>1</sup>, there has also been a flourishing of initiatives intent on creating democratic, cooperative, ethical, and sustainable economic relationships. These include worker and consumer cooperatives, community supported agriculture, alternative and local markets, community land trusts, mutual-aid organizations, transition towns, and participatory budgeting.

Despite this proliferation of “diverse economies” (Burke & Shear, 2014; Cornwell, 2012; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013), these initiatives are often seen as marginal, unrealistic, ineffective, or supplemental to the “capitalist system.” Indeed, it is difficult to imagine and truly want to go beyond the constraints and imperatives of global capitalism when it is understood as the all-encompassing economy and determining cultural force (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006). Thus, those who aspire to transform the structural underpinnings of persistent poverty, increasing inequalities, and environmental unsustainabilities, are challenged with overcoming both the violence and deprivations of the capitalist market, as well as the mental (and emotional) handcuffs of capitalism that limit imagination and beliefs about what is possible.<sup>2</sup>

This article seeks to understand these efforts through a solidarity economy (SE) framework, a set of practices and theories promoting democratic, just, and sustainable development. Solidarity economy is consistent with democratic and transformative approaches to community development. Specifically, SE aligns well with Bhattacharyya’s (2004) definition of community development as creating *solidarity* and fomenting *agency*, qualities that are often curtailed by capitalism. SE advances community development along three dimensions: ideological, economic, and political. First, SE shows that another economic system is possible and already here in various forms, waiting to be realized, organized around, struggled over, and expanded. Reframing economy is itself a political act (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013; Miller, 2010). Seeing economy in new ways disrupts capitalist hegemony and leads to moments of “ethical exposure” (Miller, 2013) from which new ideas and initiatives can be generated, thus expanding individual and collective agency. Second, SE enacts democratic and

solidaristic economic practices that sustain material wellbeing. SE can expand within regions but also establish inter-regional flows through fair trade networks, purchasing groups, and commodity chains (Safri, 2014). Third, SE is a movement that can build power within and between local, regional, national, and global scales and contest for state resources and policy. By shifting and extending community development in these ways, SE can address some of the critiques of community development, in which communities are conceived as isolated in place and homogenous in composition or part of autonomous regions that must compete against each other for jobs and capital investment. In sum, a SE approach can help reframe and relocate community development efforts away from isolated initiatives that are constrained and suppressed by capitalist ideology and move them onto the global stage as part of a movement that is transforming the very nature of economy.

This article begins with a brief history and theoretical overview of solidarity economy. It then discusses community development approaches, their limitations, and relationship to SE. The second half compares three cases of emerging SE work in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield, Massachusetts. In conclusion, we offer thoughts on the opportunities and challenges for SE as part of a project of transformative, democratic community development.

### **Solidarity economy**

Solidarity economy<sup>3</sup> is a global movement addressing economic and environmental crises through theories and practices embodying democratic, just, and sustainable development. SE movements exist throughout the globe but are most well established in Latin America, Canada, and Europe. In Latin America, SE has emerged from social movements struggling against neoliberalism, as a necessary response to social deprivation, and out of a desire to live ethical, sustainable values (Allard & Matthaei, 2008; Miller, 2006). With left progressive regimes, SE has become incorporated into government policy, for instance with the establishment in Brazil of the National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy in 2003 and the recognition of solidarity economy in Ecuador's 2008 Constitution.

In Europe, SE is often described as the “third sector” of economy, or *social economy* (Laville, 2010). In addition, well-known SE practices can be found in cooperative economies in the Basque region of Spain (Mondragon) and the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy (Hancock, 2008), as well as in solidarity purchasing networks in Italy (Grasseni, 2014). In Canada, SE has been particularly visible in Quebec, where labor unions, non-profits, and social movements established the Social Economy Task Force. Since 1996, this network has financed and organized around the creation of jobs in new sectors, such as the homecare industry, which employs more than 6000 in over 100 cooperatives and non-profits (Mendell, 2009). In the United States, SE movements are still at a nascent phase (though SE practices have long existed), but SE ideas are spreading through movements and frames like new economy, local living economy, generative economy, and sharing economy.

SE is being organized from the bottom up, connecting horizontally, and developing from the top down. SE practitioners and intellectuals are active in the World Social Forum, which brings together grassroots organizations, activists, and movements from the political left under the maxim “Another World Is Possible.” Networks of SE practitioners, researchers, and activists are connected through RIPESS (Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy). The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development held a conference in May 2013 on the “Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy.”

SE practices span across all three sectors of the economy: the private sector (market-driven, profit oriented), public sector (planned), and third sector (social economy) (Lewis & Conaty, 2012). They include cooperatives of all kinds, participatory budgeting, fair trade, community land trusts, mutual associations, community banks, alternative currencies, time banks, and more. SE aspires to be “a socio-economic order and new way of life that deliberately chooses serving the needs of people and ecological sustainability as the goal of economic activity rather than maximization of profits under the unfettered rule of the market” (Quiñones, 2008, p. 13). SE can be understood as a post-capitalist, post-development project that presumes that social and ecological well-being can and should be achieved, not by the logic of growth via capital

accumulation, but through economies shaped by the cultural needs, discourses, and aspirations of the people that animate them (Escobar, 1995; Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006).

The diverse conditions from which SE initiatives have emerged are complicated and rich. While there are contending definitions of SE, we see four underlying cornerstones. First is a view of *humans as interdependent, social beings*. Individuals are more than self-interested, utility-maximizers, the *homo economicus* of neoclassical economic theory (Polanyi, 2001; Mauss, 1990; Graeber, 2010); economic motivations also include collective wellbeing, ethical concerns, and moral values. Second, *solidarity* is the core value basis for social relations. Solidarity is about “broadening the sense of us” to balance collective and individual interests (Altuna-Gabilondo, 2013). Solidarity also encompasses our relations with non-human entities, thus incorporating notions of environmental sustainability. Put more simply, solidarity “implies a willingness to engage in a collective effort to create and sustain a caring society” (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 14). Third is *democratic practice*. Collective ownership and cooperative management are central to SE institutions like cooperatives, community land trusts, and credit unions. But beyond these enterprises, SE also favors more participatory and deliberative forms of democracy in state governance, such as participatory budgeting. Thus, democratic practice infuses both the economic and political spheres and is about empowerment and agency of people to change the conditions affecting their lives by influencing policy and economic decisions. Fourth is seeing a *diverse and plural economy*, beyond just the market. There are many extant forms of exchange, production, and ownership that function on different values than the capitalist market. Just acknowledging their existence can cut through the ideological constraints of capitalism, opening up new ways for people to understand and act in the world. At the same time, this “pluralist approach, eschew[s] rigid blueprints and the belief in a single, correct path...[and] builds on concrete practices, many of which are quite old, rather than seeking to create utopia out of theory and thin air” (Kawano, 2013).<sup>4</sup>

SE has much to offer the community development field, particularly those pursuing more transformative, democratic forms of development. How SE can or should “scale up” is a subject

of vigorous debate (Hanna & McLeod, 2014; Wright 2012). However, as discussed below, we contend that the proliferation of SE can best be understood, and advanced, through three interlinked dimensions: ideological, economic, and political. The next section explores the relationship between SE and democratic and transformative approaches to community development.

### **Democratic community development**

Community development is a field that has often been critiqued for lacking coherence and being ambiguous. A lack of theoretical clarity can be problematic for community development because the ends (the why) remain unclear (Bhattacharyya, 2004), while the process (the how) becomes the overemphasized, instrumental focus (Hustedde & Ganowicz, 2002). Without a theoretical foundation, any and all “initiatives at the local level are seen as contributing both to the community and to development” (Loxley, 2007, p. 7). Thus there is no basis for assessing whether community development is reaching its goals or whether the goals are worth reaching.

It is not surprising that, lacking a coherent theoretical foundation, conventional community development practice often finds itself straitjacketed by the ideological constraints of capitalist development. Community development aspirations for impoverished “inner” cities are often expressed in grandiose terms such as “eradication of poverty” and “neighborhood revitalization,” and embodied in Federal initiatives such as *Empowerment Zones* and *Enterprise Communities* of the 1990s and today’s *Promise Neighborhoods* and *Zones*. Yet these interventions remain solidly in the grips of the idea that we simply need to figure out how to make the capitalist market work for the benefit of communities. In this view, the role of community economic development is to fill “in gaps left by the dominant capitalist economy” (Loxley, 2007, p. 9), “direct capitalism” to correct market failures (Marquez, 1993), or help inner cities build on their competitive advantages (Porter, 1995). DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge (2010) see the mainstream community development field as having moved completely towards

the idea that “reliance on the market is *the* way to develop inner cities for the benefit of those living in them” [emphasis in original] (p. 69).

This market-oriented approach to community development has been critiqued in a number of ways. In order to attract private investment, market exchange-value becomes prioritized over community use-value (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Stoecker, 1997). Reliant on partnerships with government and outside investors, community development efforts have moved towards non-confrontational forms of organizing that can reduce attention to power relations and depoliticize the field (DeFilippis, 2004). Under market constraints, some community development corporations have professionalized their operations and relegated community participation to only the board level, thus reducing community control (Marquez, 1993; Stoecker, 1997). Together, these dynamics limit transformative possibilities and undermine the prospects for a more democratic community-driven vision of development.

As neoliberal policies have devolved responsibility for social welfare while cutting back public expenditures and increasingly privatizing essential public services, there has been heightened attention to community and local-level solutions to social problems (DeFilippis et al., 2010; Holland et al., 2007). This focus on the local brings both limitations for community development efforts as well as new possibilities. Two limits are worth exploring here, relating to conceptions of community in terms of scale and composition. The local is often conceived of as a static and bounded territorial community, neighborhood, or village (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Fraser, Lepofsky, Kick, & Williams, 2003). Once categorized as such, these locales become the spatial unit for community development analysis and intervention. While this inward focus can foreground community assets and agency, it can also elide the global and regional forces that profoundly affect and help shape the local. Similarly, Purcell (2006) warns of the “local trap, in which it is assumed that the local scale is inherently more democratic than other scales” (p. 1921). To avoid this pitfall, others argue scale should be viewed as flexible, where the local is produced by power relations, conflicts, and social processes operating from and between multiple scales (DeFilippis, 2004; Escobar, 2001; Fraser et al. 2003). Related, community is

often conceived of as groups of similar individuals in a geographic locale. Yet, communities are not homogeneous; they consist of variant groups, socially-constructed in relation to categories of class, race, gender, and other factors (Loxley, 2007), and with divergent ideologies and interests.

Regional equity is also an attempt to address the limitations of local community development, recognizing that the metropolitan region is a critical scale for political struggle and economic development. As with the local, “*there is nothing inherently progressive (egalitarian) or democratic about action at the regional scale*” [emphasis in original] (Swanstrom, 2006, p. 251). Thus, there are various strands of new regionalism with potentially contradictory goals that “represent place-specific political responses to the new forms of sociospatial polarization and uneven geographical development” (Brenner, 2002, p. 4). Progressive regional equity approaches identify regions as important sites of social and economic oppression and struggle, and present opportunities for movements to build multi-scalar power (Clark & Christopher, 2009; Pastor, Benner, & Matsuoka, 2011). Though business interests may acknowledge that inequality can be a drag on economic growth, “class interests have not disappeared” and “political struggle is required to move agendas” (Pastor, Benner, & Matsuoka, 2011, p. 446). Nevertheless, these strands presume a vision of economy based on capitalist growth, even as they attempt to ameliorate the impacts of racial oppression and class exploitation. SE can expand the frame of economic possibilities for regional equity towards more democratic models that go beyond capitalist firms and wage labor.

In contrast to market-oriented approaches are more radical and transformative conceptualizations of community development, ones that align well with the SE framework and aspire to address the limitations laid out above. Loxley (2007) defines a transformative branch of community development that “would replace capitalism, not just compensate for its deficiencies,” which include “lack of economic democracy . . . , its patriarchal autocracy, and its tendency towards recurrent crises and abuse of environmental limits to growth” (p. 10). DeFilippis (2004) points to collective ownership as the key to “transform the relations that produce the locality” and perhaps “challenge capital mobility and globalization” (p. 35).

Bhattacharyya's (2004) conceptualization of community development suggests a fundamental connection between community development and solidarity economy. Community development's purpose is the "promotion of solidarity and agency" (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 10), qualities that have been eroded via the rise of industrial capitalism, the nation state, and instrumental reason. Community is defined as solidarity, meaning "shared identity ... and norms, both deep enough that a rupture affects the members emotionally and other ways" (p. 12). Meanwhile, development is defined as agency, which "means freedom from unnecessary restraints (negative freedoms) and access to resources that make affirmation of the human will possible (positive freedoms)" (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 14). For Bhattacharyya (2004) solidarity and agency are at the "core of democracy", and "community development is part of the democracy project" (p. 14).

There is also recent attention in the community development field to the role of cooperatives and other alternative economic structures. DeFilippis (2001) argues that community development should look for ways in which social capital can be marshaled to create and collectively control economic capital for the benefit of the collective, pointing to community land trusts, mutual housing associations, and credit unions. Other scholars show how cooperative ownership structures strengthen social ties within and beyond the cooperative (Majee & Hoyt, 2010) and how cooperatives can contribute to community self-development, rather than pursuing outside industries (Zeuli, Freshwater, Markley, & Barkley, 2004). In addition, "cooperatives expand the ability of groups to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable, the institutions that affect their lives" (Majee & Hoyt, 2011, p. 52). In other words, cooperatives can create the material and ideological conditions from which people can exercise individual and collective agency.

It is important to note that SE-type ideas and practices are not new, but have long been embedded in the liberation struggles of those excluded from and displaced by capitalist growth across rural and urban areas, by virtue of race and class. In the late 1800s, these included the "poor people's cooperatives," Colored Farmers Alliance and Cooperative Union (Green &

Kleiner, 2009), and Knights of Labor cooperatives (Gordon Nembhard, 2014); in the 1920s, there was the Marcus Garvey-led Universal Negro Improvement Association's network of cooperative businesses (Shipp, 1996); and in the 1930s, there was the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (Green & Kleiner, 2009). Cooperative development strategies continued into the 1960s with the Black Panther's cooperative bakeries (Gordon Nembhard, 2014) and the Federation for Southern Cooperatives (Green & Kleiner, 2009). More recently, unions have begun to explore their role in worker cooperatives, such as the U.S. Steelworkers collaboration with Mondragon and the Cincinnati Union Co-op Initiative (Witherell, 2013).

These democratic conceptualizations of community development contain elements of SE principles and practices. Like SE, they aspire to transform society and the nature of economy, and in doing so overcome the material and ideological constraints of capitalism and enable people to act in solidarity. They strive to understand local action, communities, and regions as connected to and constructed by a web of social relations at multiple scales. The emphasis on agency and democracy allows the possibility for addressing differences within heterogeneous communities. Meanwhile, solidarity, if extended beyond the local, enables examination of the relations across communities and indeed between humans and the "natural world."

How then might a project of democratic community development, as understood from the SE frame, move forward along ideological, economic, and political dimensions? The cases below offer some insight into the constraints and challenges facing SE and raise a number of critical questions. Under the assumption that SE opens up new discursive space for divergent social actors to imagine economic possibilities, how can SE negotiate across difference and reconcile possibly conflicting approaches? Materially, how can SE efforts generate and access the resources they need, and what are the consequences of initiatives linking with nonprofit, public, and private partners? Politically, as SE seeks to build solidarity, how can individual and group differences and relations of power *within* and across communities be addressed, particularly around race? And how does SE navigate its relationships to the state?

## **A growing solidarity economy in Massachusetts**

We now present three SE efforts in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield — the three largest cities in Massachusetts. Springfield and Worcester, both mid-sized cities of ~150,000 and ~180,000 residents respectively, continue to be challenged by the impacts of deindustrialization. Meanwhile Boston, with a population over 600,000, is an economic hub for the region. All three cities have a high degree of racial and class segregation and corresponding high concentrations of poverty and unemployment. There are numerous efforts in each city striving to develop and expand social and economic possibilities, more than can be included in the scope of this article.<sup>5</sup> However, these three cases demonstrate a range of possibilities for and challenges to SE along ideological, economic, and political lines. Data for the cases come from participant observation by both authors, secondary sources, and three years of ethnographic fieldwork by Shear in Worcester and Springfield.

### *Springfield Wellspring*

The Wellspring Collaborative is an effort to create a network of worker cooperatives, owned by and employing low-income residents, through the purchasing power of local “anchor institutions” -- big non-profits and businesses that are structurally tied to the area and unlikely to move out of the region. Wellspring was inspired by the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio (Iuviene, Stitely, & Hoyt, 2010; Loh, 2010), which itself was modeled after Mondragon, the thriving network of worker cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain. Like Evergreen, Wellspring seeks to capture a portion of the regional anchor institution market to support the growth of a network of worker cooperatives. Wellspring’s analysis showed that the region’s universities and hospitals spend \$1.5 billion annually with less than 10% of that in Springfield (Rose, 2014). The import substitution model proposed by Wellspring not only generates jobs but keeps money circulating locally and builds local wealth through worker ownership. A portion of surplus generated by the worker cooperatives will help to develop more cooperative businesses, and thus be a self-generating source of economic capital.

To provide the startup resources for this model, Wellspring organizers developed partnerships with Springfield's anchor institutions based on the idea that this model could create entry-level jobs and stabilize neighborhoods. They received strong interest and convened a steering committee that included leaders from Partners for a Healthier Community, Springfield Technical Community College, Baystate Health, and Western New England College. As Steven Bradley, Vice President at Baystate Health, states, "as soon as you can get people to see it's another business model that just happens to be worker-owned, that it can seed the local economy in ways that the market doesn't, that it can provide both asset building and living wages, help people to buy homes – then you can get them on board" (Earle, 2012, p. 85). While initial support for organizing came from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the Center for Popular Economics, the steering committee secured a major foundation grant (\$200,000) in October 2011 and a matching grant from Baystate Health (\$50,000) that enabled them to start a two-year organizational and business planning process that included academics, economic development groups, and community organizations.

Wellspring opened its first business, the Wellspring Upholstery Cooperative, in Fall 2013 and is developing a 20,000 square foot cooperative greenhouse that will provide produce to the regional hospital and other institutions. The Upholstery Cooperative plans to hire six Springfield residents and then double that number within six years by serving New England's schools and colleges (Rose, 2014). A critical source of workers for the business is a 25-year old upholstery training program run by the Hampden County Sheriff's Department (Rose, 2014). As the network grows, the cooperatives will be horizontally linked through the Wellspring Cooperative Corporation. This governing structure will include the cooperatives (who will have the most seats) and anchor institutions, but also community organizing groups, organized labor, and other cooperatives from outside Wellspring. Wellspring is attempting to ensure that its governing practices are not only democratic but also bring together multiple interests to deliberate over the purpose and direction of the cooperative network for the good of the community.

By publicly aligning itself with dominant discourses around economic development — job creation, poverty reduction, and so on — Wellspring has garnered significant political and material support from public and private sector leaders, nonprofits, and foundations. Though Wellspring’s founders are explicit about their purpose for the project to transform capitalism, that perspective is not shared by all of the partners. As one central Wellspring member explained, “I have to be thoughtful about when and where to talk about (my politics). It’s important though. A big part ... of this process is about mutual education, it’s about learning from each other.” Thus, Wellspring has become a space where participants can develop relationships around a project based on SE principles, a space that does not require pre-existing agreement around politics or values.

#### *Worcester SAGE Alliance*

The Worcester Solidarity and Green Economy Alliance (SAGE) is a network of activists, cooperatives, and social justice organizations that is explicitly trying to build a solidarity economy. As a network, SAGE is constituted by a fluid set of individual and organizational actors. SAGE sees itself as part of “a movement to create a new world that puts people and the environment before profit” (SAGE, n.d.). SAGE believes that this movement requires action in three areas: 1) alternative economy; 2) resistance and reform against inequalities; and 3) social inclusion to end racism, sexism, and other forms of exclusion. SAGE grew out of the Worcester Green Jobs Coalition, which was organized in 2008 and anchored by several grassroots organizations that were already practicing cooperative and deep democratic principles. For some in the group, the goal was not just to have green jobs provided for them, but they also wanted to create their own businesses, work-lives, and economy. Thus in 2011, the Coalition changed its name to SAGE and explicitly adopted a SE framework (Grec, 2012).

One of the most heavily involved organizations in SAGE has been the Worcester Roots Project, a non-profit that is run by a staff collective and houses a variety of cooperative programs, such as Toxic Soil Busters, which trains and employs youth as organizers and lead-safe landscapers and generates earned income to support its programs. Today, due in part

through SAGE's efforts, Worcester Roots has become a co-op incubator, and houses a number of other cooperative and alternative economic enterprises: Worcester Energy Barnraisers, Youth In Charge, Future Focus Media, Nuestro Huerto Farm, and Diggers Co-op. Worcester Roots is part of the Stone Soup Artist Activist Collective and Community Resource Center, which also houses an ex-prisoners organization, a cooperative bicycle program, a workers center, ACLU of Central Massachusetts, Worcester Immigrant Coalition, and a Food Not Bombs chapter.

SAGE has expanded solidarity economy through a variety of "seeding," exposing, and networking tactics. SAGE has held an annual conference each year since 2011, attracting one to two hundred people to each, largely from Worcester, but also other parts of Massachusetts. In Fall 2013, Worcester Roots along with SAGE, hosted a Co-op Academy, involving 35 people and eight start-up cooperatives from Massachusetts and Rhode Island and became involved in a project to develop a union coop print shop in Worcester. Also in 2013, SAGE began a mapping project to document existing SE initiatives and potential connections between them.<sup>6</sup> These efforts have helped spawn even more SE projects, such as The Shop. Located in a repurposed industrial building, The Shop consists of numerous collaborative projects, which in 2013 included a biodiesel processor, a permaculture garden, a greenhouse, two "tiny" homes on trailers, a communal kitchen, a woodshop, a metalworking shop, a computer software collective, and several apartments for people to both live and work.

SAGE has focused much of its effort in the ideological and political dimensions. Conversations and popular education at SAGE conferences, meetings, and informal conversations around SE have infected the popular imagination of activists and organizers in Worcester and beyond, creating new imaginings and desires for economic development. SAGE has also built networks among SE projects across the state through its conferences and two statewide SE meet-ups in 2013 that involved key actors from all three cases discussed in this article. In this political dimension, SAGE has also become a space of negotiation (and potential transformation) across difference. For example, when SAGE recognized that its first conference was marked by a lack of racial diversity and lack of discussion of racism and other systems of

oppression, organizers developed the three principles described above to embrace social inclusion and resistance as core work of the solidarity economy and began to intentionally recruit more people of color as planners, participants, and workshop leaders, as well as undertake internal efforts focused on dismantling racism. Economically, SAGE's coops are emerging from people organizing themselves to meet local needs and creating spaces for promoting solidarity and agency.

### *Boston's emerging community food economy*

The Boston case is not a single project or coalition, but a collection of emerging food economy efforts in Roxbury and Dorchester (two adjoining Boston neighborhoods), driven by a network of interlinked nonprofit, social enterprise, and cooperative ventures. These efforts have not yet come together within an explicit SE framework, but represent elements of SE, and are a good example for seeing SE emerging from existing institutions and practices. This emerging food economy begins with the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's (DSNI) community land trust, which was founded in the late 1980s after DSNI won the right to use eminent domain to take ownership of vacant land in their neighborhood (Medoff & Sklar, 1994). The land trust now hosts a range of urban agriculture activities, including a 10,000 square foot greenhouse and two farm sites operated by the nonprofit The Food Project, as well as dozens of home and community gardens. There is also commercial farming in the neighborhood by City Growers, which operates four sites. City Growers is exploring the development of a producer cooperative among the farmers they train and working with DSNI to acquire more land through the community land trust model.

Food processing and retail are also part of the emerging food economy. City Growers was co-founded by local entrepreneur Glynn Lloyd, out of the desire to source locally-grown food for City Fresh, the catering company he founded in 1994. City Fresh delivers fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate meals to nursing homes, schools, and other institutions, and in 2012 employed 78 people (Kennedy, 2012). In spring 2014, the Pearl and Bornstein Food Production Small Business Center opened at the site of a former meat factory in Dorchester and houses Crop

Circle Kitchen, a social enterprise kitchen incubator. This \$14 million project was developed by Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation (DBEDC) and hopes to produce 150 jobs within five years. On the retail end, the Dorchester Community Food Co-op has been organizing since 2011 to launch a member and worker-owned store providing affordable, fresh, and healthy foods and green products, as well as space for community education and cultural activities. So far, they have over 300 member-owners (paying \$100 each) and are now working to develop the site for their store. In Roxbury, Haley House Bakery Café is a social enterprise that grew out of a social service organization providing a soup kitchen and shelter for the homeless in Boston's South End. In 2005, they opened the Café not only to provide dining and catering services but also to run a bakery training program for ex-prisoners and education programs for youth.

The final piece of the food system is waste processing. A newly formed worker cooperative, CERO (Cooperative Energy, Recycling, & Organics), plans to help local businesses separate their wastes, increase recycling, and reprocess their food scraps. They hope to capitalize on a 2014 state regulation that bans commercial food waste. CERO was started by African American and Latino workers who wanted to create their own green jobs. They were supported by two non-profits – Boston Workers Alliance and Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Health and Safety – which raised funds for a business development process and start-up manager. To develop their business plan, members went through a co-op academy run by the Boston Center for Community Ownership, the same entity that facilitated the co-op academy in Worcester. CERO recently completed a successful crowd-source fundraising campaign and has launched a direct public offering to raise startup capital.

While these emerging local food economy initiatives are not explicitly linked in a SE framework, the political and business ties between them are growing. These efforts can be seen as working towards a “cooperative alternative food network” (Anderson, Brushett, Gray, & Renting, 2014) with roots in non-profit, small business entrepreneurship, and SE frames. Materially, the Boston groups are relatively well resourced through a well-developed non-profit sector, with access to significant foundation and community development funding. While all are

part of localizing the food system, the economic scale of the initiatives ranges from hyper-local (residents growing to eat and share with neighbors) to regional (growing and processing for the metropolitan market). Collectively, these groups have built significant political power to influence policies and garner public resources. DSNI is in the unique position of having won eminent domain power. Several of the groups successfully advocated for the legalization of urban commercial farming in 2013 through zoning (Article 89). CERO coop is advocating for state and city policy and resources to support their business model.

### **Possibilities and challenges**

All three cases are efforts to develop more just, sustainable, and democratic communities and economies. They are advancing SE movement and practice ideologically, economically, and politically, though with different starting points and relative emphasis in each of the dimensions. Each are newly developing and locally situated projects, and in a sense, fragile experiments. Yet, they are shifting and expanding the frame of economic possibilities so that there is a desire to go beyond conventional models of capitalist growth. Ideologically, they contribute to agency by freeing imagination. In Springfield, leaders of elite anchor institutions have bought into the idea that worker cooperatives can generate new jobs and community wealth. In Worcester and Boston, SE has given new meaning to self-help and nonprofit programs (like gardening) that were not previously seen as part of the economy at all.

These SE ideas are circulating through and jumping between networks and places. Wellspring hosted a key leader from Evergreen in its early meetings and then took a delegation to visit Cleveland as it developed its strategy. Wellspring members have presented to SAGE, which is now developing plans for an anchor institution model in Worcester. Boston's CERO coop members have participated in SAGE conferences, including one featuring (via video conference) Daniel Tygell, former executive secretary of the Brazilian Forum of Solidarity Economy, thus exposing Massachusetts to the movement in Brazil. SE also provides a lens to reinterpret possibilities in already existing efforts; as illustrated in Boston, an SE frame shows

discursively the potential economic and political linkages that could be built in the local food system.

In the economic dimension, each of these SE efforts have different material starting points and are pursuing varying strategies, but all are building initiatives to sustain material, social, and environmental wellbeing and promote solidaristic behavior and democratic practice. Wellspring has the most planned strategy of the three cases, with its focus on developing cooperative businesses to serve the regional anchor institution market, eventually producing enough surplus in the network to launch cooperative businesses primarily through its own capital. SAGE's network is amplifying, linking up, and organizing around initiatives that are trying to meet locally identified needs with local assets. Both Wellspring and SAGE are working towards democratic governance models that balance the autonomy of economic cooperatives with the interests of the broader community. Boston's emerging food economy is not centrally coordinated, but is sprouting from the nonprofit, social enterprise, and cooperative sectors, each with varying commitments to democratic practice and solidarity. Though there are challenges to the further growth of this food economy in alignment with SE principles (as discussed below), the resources garnered by these efforts collectively are substantial, and some have been long established (e.g. DSNI's land trust) and beyond startup (e.g. City Fresh and Haley House Bakery).

In the political dimension, there are efforts in each of the cases to build political power to support SE and contest for state policy and resources. It should be noted that each of the cases is rooted in or connected to efforts to build power from among those most impacted by the current economy, namely lower income communities that are disproportionately Black and Latino. Within these communities, there is a further emphasis on creating jobs and economic opportunities, including for ex-prisoners. Wellspring has built a regional coalition of community groups with anchor institutions, which helped to legitimize its work and attract startup funding. Wellspring has also built the political ties to leverage resources from the prison training program for its upholstery business and the Springfield Public Schools and Parks Department for the

greenhouse under development. SAGE brings together a core of Worcester activists and organizers, but is also actively building the political ties among SE initiatives across the state, including Boston and Springfield. In Boston, the partners have collectively built significant power through previous struggles for community control of land, which resulted in DSNI's land trust and eminent domain power. More recently partners have successfully advocated to legalize commercial farming.

We have so far emphasized the potentialities created by SE, not because we believe that they will all be realized, but because they drive the desire to pursue transformative and democratic community development in the first place. Of course, there are challenges and constraints, most notably, potential internal conflicts, and unstable, insecure financing, to which we turn now.

In Boston, the diversity of approaches is a strength for broadening participation and partnerships, but without a shared SE vision — or commitment to principles of solidarity from which to negotiate vision and practice — these heterogeneous efforts may work at cross-purposes. For example, for-profit City Growers and non-profit Food Project may compete with one another unnecessarily as both try to acquire more land, and organizational needs may be prioritized over community needs. Similarly, in competing for funding, the for-profit and social entrepreneurial efforts may gain broader support and resources from government and investors over cooperative ownership models, given that they fit more easily into conventional market conceptions of development. Another potential conflict occurs between various approaches to meeting needs. For example, urban farms are trying to create good-paying jobs by selling to “high-end” restaurants and specialty food stores; yet many residents can rarely afford these outlets and may better meet their needs through community gardens. Without ways to negotiate these differences, initiatives may remain fragmented and weakened relative to the agencies and private sector partners that they may rely on for permits and funding; thus, they are at risk of the same kind of cooptation and taming of organizing and resistance for which conventional community development efforts have been critiqued.

With Wellspring and SAGE, there are also potential challenges over difference, particularly over race and class. Wellspring has assembled an impressive array of organizations and individuals who did not necessarily have prior political agreement. But the questions remain about how structural and ideological differences will be negotiated as Wellspring develops. Another concern is whether Wellspring will be successful in integrating new worker-owners, coming mostly from the ranks of un-/underemployed (including ex-prisoners), into a structure that was already developed. Similarly with SAGE, even though they recognized that they needed to actively reach out to communities of color, there are many questions that remain about how SAGE can more fully realize its anti-racist and social justice values. These internal struggles are built into SE's plural vision. While ideologically, SE opens up common ground for solidarity across difference, it requires ethical negotiation in the political dimension and enacting practices that embed democracy and solidarity in its economic relations. Thus, SE does not offer a stock answer for structure or governance. These must be produced and reproduced by those who are practicing SE.

Financing is another basic challenge, particularly for initiatives that are newer. The efforts in all three cases rely heavily on nonprofit funding, in particular private foundation grants. This relationship of funding dependency can direct efforts away from building SE and create feelings of precarity. As a result, instead of focusing on building SE, activists, organizers, and developers expend significant amounts of time and energy towards fundraising and grantwriting, and feel pressured to structure and present their work around terms determined or approved by funders. To address this challenge, Wellspring built into its model democratic, community controlled financing, dependent on the success of its cooperatives. Developing finance that is part of SE itself was one of the plenary topics of the 2013 SAGE conference. In Boston, the CERO coop's direct public offering is a means to democratize equity ownership with smaller, local investors.

## Conclusions

This article asserts that solidarity economy is a set of theories and practices that engenders ethical economic relationships and new possibilities for community development and is emerging as an explicit alternative to “neoliberal” capitalism. SE is already closely aligned with more democratic approaches to community development that look to oppose exploitation and oppression and transform economies. SE advances democratic community development by providing an ideological frame from which the core goals of solidarity and agency can be imagined, identified, and realized. Further, it advances a set of concrete economic practices that enact these goals while sustaining people and the planet. Politically, SE is a movement that can build political power within and across scales and win supportive policy and public resources.

SE suggests trajectories of “scaling up”, where local and regional efforts might be part of a strategy for deeper political-economic transformation. We see scaling as necessarily connected to each of the three dimensions of our analysis, which themselves are interlinked. Scaling up does not necessarily mean contiguous growth of a single enterprise or political formation, since scaling can also be achieved through the symbolic linking up of multiple efforts across many places and scales. In the ideological dimension, local-regional projects can recognize their relation to SE and connect to each other within and across geographies. Economically, SE efforts often begin in arenas that are shielded from or not served well by capitalist markets. They can pursue various strategies to grow locally and regionally and link to broader scales or simply to sustain themselves in place. No matter the material scale, SE’s challenge is to maintain practices that sustain democratic and solidaristic values. In the political realm, SE can build movements that proliferate SE ideology and material practices, as well as wield political power to win supportive policy and public resources at the city, state, national, and global levels.

The growth of Quebec’s social economy illustrates how scaling can occur along the three dimensions. Nancy Neamtan, Executive Director of the Social Economy Task Force, says that “much of what is called the social economy in Quebec today existed before 1996; we didn’t create it. But it had no common identity” (Neamtan, 2007, p. 273). Then, in 1996 labor unions,

nonprofits, social movements, and the provincial government came together in a summit to address unemployment and an economic crisis and created a “new vocabulary to express both the realities of the cooperative and non-profit sector, and its aspirations” (Neamtan, 2007, p. 272). With this political and ideological alignment, new public and private investment funds and supportive policies were established, further fueling the expansion of SE enterprises.

SE is not just an idea, a different way of doing business, or a political movement. It is all of those things at once. It necessarily develops in real places with real people, collectively negotiating and enacting values and aspirations. SE already exists in various locations, formulations and scales; different communities and initiatives can learn from, inspire, and cooperate with one another, though the specific forms and vehicles for SE will vary depending on context. What is clear to the authors is that expanding SE will not be possible without people participating in deeply democratic ways and taking action with each other to create the world that they want to live in.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Both authors have been involved in planning, organizing, teaching about, and helping to develop some of the initiatives discussed here. Shear has been active in Worcester and Springfield but has also worked with members and organizations in Boston. Loh has been most active in Boston, but has also worked with organizations from Springfield and Worcester.

<sup>2</sup> While a review of critiques of capitalism is beyond the scope of this article, we note the substantial literature regarding exploitation of workers and environment, inequality and concentration of wealth, the constitutive role of racism, white supremacy and patriarchy in capital accumulation, and limits on democracy and basic freedoms (Buck, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2014; Marx & Engels, 1978; Zizek, 2008). This literature compels us to confront and resist capitalism. In this article, however, we are interested in locating how and where communities are not only responding to the impacts of capitalism, but are building economies that reject capitalist imperatives and logics in favor of ethical practices.

<sup>3</sup> Solidarity economy is closely related to social economy, with various interpretations over the political boundaries of each project (see Laville, 2010). This article uses solidarity economy, not to stake out any clear boundaries but rather as a term that embraces the pluralism, diversity, and historical particularism of movements attempting to build non-capitalist economies.

<sup>4</sup> Many community development practitioners have long been aware of this expanded definition, notably through the Community Capitals Framework (see Flora & Flora, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> A notable example that we do not discuss is the Alliance to Develop Power’s efforts to build community economy in Springfield (Graham & Cornwell, 2009).

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<sup>6</sup> This project is part of a larger project to map Solidarity Economy in New England by a research collaborative led by Marianna Pavlovskaya of Hunter College. Mapping is a common practice used by SE organizers to make visible SE enterprises and initiatives and suggest potential connections, collaborations, research, and growth.

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