

Mapping Your Solidarity Economy

by Djar Horn and Maliha Safri

The US Solidarity Economy Network provides invaluable assistance for beginning the process of identifying existing alternative economies in your region that can function as bases of support for new SE projects (see www.popular-economics.org/ussen).

The Jersey Shore Neighborhood Cooperative (JSNC) pulled together a diverse group, paying special attention to those who are already engaged with alternative economies and dispossessed populations. Our mapping project itself generated new relationships and crossed demographic boundaries: Haitian youth interviewing Haitian elders; African American youth dialoguing with white working-class seniors; African-American and Latino youth learning from women ex-prisoners. The committee consisted of community researchers and conducted educational outreach with possible interviewees. Community researchers included seniors, day laborers, youth enrolled in a carpentry class in the local church, and other local activists.

JSNC engaged in one-on-one conversations to assess people's interest in and understanding of the project and began to identify community researchers. Community researchers had multiple reasons for participating. The Mexican day laborers participated because they had a strong desire to organize a carpentry cooperative. The youth participated because the first conversation allowed them to reflect on the important contributions they make to their family and friends especially as caregivers. Our discussion of economy recognized their experiences and contributions as ex-prisoners, students or low-wage labor.

JSNC organized a set of workshops which addressed the goals and benefits of a collective mapping project: Who should we map? How do we define some boundaries for the Solidarity Economy (SE), without fixing them in stone? What sectors of the economy already exist?

The survey development is an intricate process which often changes during the course of the research. We recommend a GIS-experienced supporter (someone who works with Geographic Information Systems, a way of overlaying data and other information on a map, ed.), who can facilitate the process of data collection and map creation.

The supporters and researchers planned and presented a third workshop to share the experiences from interviews, help others practice interview skills and receive feedback on the survey. Participants expressed a need to move past research into "action." Reflection,

action and knowledge are circular processes. A result of the workshop was a list of SE projects that could develop from the research.

Participants better understood the research process once they imagined themselves organizing their own SE activities.

Community Researchers (CR) must be trained in research techniques to become comfortable asking questions about demographics, money, governance and participation levels in an enterprise or organization. The lead researcher should attend the early interviews to model and aid the CR in their techniques. It was important to take the time to develop leadership skills: set up the interview; start the conversation (get consent); engage the interviewee in a discussion about economic activity; complete the survey and record the interview.

Document, tabulate and record everything. Consider whether the work needs to be multi-lingual. Create a timeline to gauge how much time commitment is expected of everyone involved. Decide whether to fundraise for the mapping project and if stipends are necessary for the CRs.

The final product is a map which helps us to network within our community and nationally. Since the mapping project, we have begun a worker cooperative and developed a committee to support community gardens. Reflection on and discussion of the results allow CRs and interviewees to have the "Aha" moments when they realize the economic value of their work and their lives beyond surplus or profit value.

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photo: Djar Horn

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