

THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY INITIATIVE

2014 - 2021

Stories and Reflections on Building Spaces of Solidarity



A report by the Solidarity Economy Initiative (SEI)
of the Center for Economic Democracy
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Photo: SEI Cohort Meeting at Old Oak Dojo, Jamaica Plain

Starlings’ murmuration consists of a flock moving in synch with one another, engaging in clear, consistent communication and exhibiting collective leadership and deep, deep trust. Every individual bird focuses attention on their seven closest neighbors and thus manage a larger flock cohesiveness and synchronicity (at times upwards of over a million birds).

- Sierra Pickett

(as quoted in Emergent Strategy by adrienne maree brown)



Preface

This project was born in the latter half of 2020 during the time warp of the pandemic. Alexie Torres, a co-founder of the [Solidarity Economy Initiative](#) (SEI), wanted to look back at the 5+ years since SEI was launched and take stock of how far we've come and how the work has evolved. Ariel Brooks of [Center for Economic Democracy](#) and Jasmine Gomez of [Access Strategies Fund](#) had been facilitating the space for SEI since 2018 and wanted to tell the stories of the shifts in culture and thinking in our work. Though they each have transitioned from their roles, their vision remains the anchor for this project.

Our stories and how we tell them are part of how we define ourselves. Thus, one report can never capture all the complexity of our collective work. We, the authors, attempt to share the multiple and diverse voices and experiences of SEI. Because we authors are also interconnected participants in SEI, we use the first person plural to refer to our collective efforts, while trying to be precise in naming people and organizations involved in specific ways and the many differences among us. We acknowledge our biases and blind spots in curating these stories and take responsibility for any omissions or errors.


Like SEI's 2017 report [Solidarity Rising in Massachusetts](#), this project is intended to contribute to broader solidarity economy movements and other movements for liberation and justice. We hope that sharing some of our experiences and evolution may be helpful to our movement siblings and allies, who SEI continues to connect with, learn about, and be inspired by.

In addition to this narrative report, there is an accompanying Glossary of Concepts and a compilation of Voices of SEI. The Glossary provides short explanations of the terms and frameworks that have been used by SEI members to make sense of and advance our work. *Note that glossary terms are highlighted when first used in the report.* The Voices of SEI puts together video clips and extended quotes from SEI members telling their stories in their own words.

Penn Loh served as project lead and primary author of this report. Boone Shear helped conduct interviews with about a dozen SEI participants and helped shape the theoretical frameworks used to interpret our findings and helped review and co-edit. The 11 graduate students in Penn's Fall 2021 Solidarity Economy Movements course at Tufts University conducted another 14 interviews and developed the first draft of the glossary. *Note that all interviewees are identified by their roles at the time of their interviews and that some have since moved on to other roles.* Tufts graduate student Johnny Shively helped bring this project to conclusion by analyzing and compiling the findings from this second round of interviews and co-editing the final draft of this report.

Those of us involved in putting this report together give our deepest gratitude to the members of the SEI grassroots cohort and funders circle who shared their time generously for interviews. Your work during these past two years has been inspirational. You are all showing that the other worlds we want are not only possible but already being made.





Executive Summary:

Our Journey from Incubating Projects to Cultivating Ways of Being


Desires to build a **solidarity economy**, transform racial capitalism, and cultivate other worlds have been growing in Greater Boston and Massachusetts. The Solidarity Economy Initiative's (SEI) first report, [Solidarity Rising in Massachusetts](#) (2017), told the story of how a solidarity economy movement was emerging among lower income working class communities and communities of color. We were *fighting* the world as it is and *building* the world as it should be. This report tells the stories of how our work in the Solidarity Economy Initiative (SEI) has evolved over the past seven years.

What began as an ambitious, yet focused, effort to build vehicles for solidarity economy (SE), has deepened and broadened into a space for envisioning and practicing solidarity in all relations. What started as a *head-space* for learning and *hands-space* for doing has also become a *heart-space* for being in solidarity and deepening relationships. We are learning that the transformation we seek is not simply the changeover of one system to the next, but the cultivation of worlds that are not enclosed by a racial capitalism (and interrelated processes of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy). To extend Audre Lorde's (1984) metaphor, we are using some of the master's tools to build beyond the master's house. The triple crises of anti-Blackness, climate catastrophe, and pandemic, have made it even more evident that the master's house is doomed. While we continue to **fight and build** within this system, we are also struggling to break free from it, to build worlds beyond.

Since its launch in 2014, SEI has called itself a "grassroots and funder organizing collaborative", a "Grassroots **Just Transition** Incubator", a "social movement lab" and a "space for grassroots organizers ... to lead a Just Transition to a Solidarity Economy". These multiple ways of identifying ourselves reflect the fact that SEI members come to this space from different roles and have conceptualized our collective work in multiple ways. SEI has been categorized as a philanthropic project, impact investing initiative, social justice movement intervention, and economic development incubator. Throughout, SEI has centered leaders and organizations that are building people power in working class communities of color in Boston and beyond. SEI has supported a space for collective learning, relationship-building, and reflection towards transformation. It has also been a space for visioning and dreaming, while grounded in the lived realities of our communities.

While this report reviews SEI's work and evolution over the past seven years, it is not a single story of impacts of grantmaking or return on investment or the scaling up of the solidarity economy ecosystem. Instead, this report tells a more complex and non-linear story of how our process, goals, and theories of change have been evolving. We show how the people co-creating SEI are moving from seeing the initiative solely as a producer of solidarity economy projects to a space of practicing and embodying solidarity, deepening relationships, and being and becoming differently with one another. This involves a shift away from a preconceived set of outcomes and a letting-go of the need to define





ourselves in terms of growth and productivity. The SEI space now provides more fertile ground for transformative SE projects to organically emerge and grow. As Ariel Brooks of Center for Economic Democracy (CED) frames it, she sees SEI as an “an experiment in trying to organize in different ways, trying to act in different ways, trying to move in different ways, trying to bring to life alternatives that people don't believe in.”

This shift towards embodying solidarity rests on a relational and intersectional orientation. **Relationality** means that nothing exists on its own or in separation; humans and other beings exist only in deep interrelation with one another and Earth's life support systems. We may try to set ourselves apart as individuals or a species, but always remain woven interdependently into a web of life and communities. Intersectionality is a ‘both-and’ approach that resists rigid separations and simple binaries - race or class, capitalist or not, individual or community, nature or culture. At the same time that we build our commonalities, we must also account for the radically different, often violent ways that we are entangled with each other through relations of dominance and supremacy. It is through reckoning with our unevenly shared vulnerabilities and interdependence that we can cultivate solidarity through authentic relationships of care.


We look back at SEI's journey in two acts. In the first, from inception in 2014 through 2017, several progressive funders and a cohort of grassroots base-building organizations came together to explore and learn about solidarity economy. For us, it was important to start with base-building groups that are deeply embedded and building the power and leadership of communities most affected by intersectional injustices. SEI grew out of increasing recognition, particularly after the Great Recession and Occupy movement, that our social justice work was only making fragmented advances and lacked cohesive economic vision. In this first phase, SEI served as a learning space for expanding possibilities and overcoming the skepticism that “there is no alternative” to capitalism. Solidarity economy was defined, not just in abstract, theoretical terms, but as real-world practices and institutions such as the Mondragon Cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain. The grassroots partners had been fighting against the harms of the *world as it is*, and SE gave us something to build towards -- the *world as it should be*.

Solidarity economy is a movement of folks with an analysis of what is not okay and causing the issues that we have and have had historically and are building ways of being and actual projects aiming to shift the conditions of our world so that people can get their needs met, live in harmony with each other and the natural world.

- *Amethyst Carey*

It was fundamental to SEI that the groups building power in the communities most affected be the drivers of economic transformation. We saw our work as bringing a power analysis and social justice politics to join a cooperative sector that was more white and privileged. SEI sought to keep the *fight*





and *build* together in one movement. In the words of CED organizer Amethyst Carey, “solidarity economy is a movement of folks with an analysis of what is not okay and causing the issues that we have and have had historically and are building ways of being and actual projects aiming to shift the conditions of our world so that people can get their needs met, live in harmony with each other and the natural world.”

In this first phase, SEI branded itself as a “Just Transition Incubator” (Tanaka 2017). The theory was that a learning and visioning process amongst community groups would lead to development of projects, such as cooperatives, community land trusts, and policy campaigns that could be grown further through grants and investments of patient capital. Part of the promise of SEI was that our work would result in a larger SE ecosystem that could supplant the capitalist economy – like the weeds that grow in the cracks and eventually erode the concrete. Our aspirations were expressed in terms of linear growth and “scaling up”.

However, SEI’s progress was uneven and inconsistent. We realized that many of our own practices reinforced a capitalist mindset and white dominant culture. Specifically, the growth model and ideas of investment and scaling up were borrowed directly from extractive capitalist finance. In addition, we recognized that these ways of thinking pervaded even the nonprofit sector and funders. Nonprofits are embedded in colonial relations, known as nonprofit industrial complex (Incite! 2007), where grantees are dependent on funders and have to perform to their metrics and define themselves through funder frameworks. Finally, even though SEI co-founder Aaron Tanaka has often said, “we can’t coop our way out of capitalism,” we had hopes and expectations to incubate cooperative businesses that would thrive and prove the concept, even if that meant competing for survival in current market and policy conditions.


We can’t coop our way out of capitalism.

- Aaron Tanaka

We experienced both excitement and inspiration in envisioning what was possible, as well as cynicism and frustration in the slow pace of building viable models and feeling stuck within the systems we were trying to transform. Two of the original cohort nonprofits went under within the first few years due to lack of resources, while many others struggled with funding and leadership changes. After several years of learning and discussion, there were few new coops and campaigns that were seeded. Yet, SEI persisted and worked through these tensions and contradictions. We drew from frameworks and movements that our groups were already rooted in, such as intersectionality, [emergent strategies](#), relational organizing, and decoloniality. We learned from and have been inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement (as part of the Black radical tradition), indigenous struggles, and queer/trans movements.

What we began to realize is that our work is much more than just a transformed economy; rather, it is about solidarity in all of our relations. It is about overcoming the separations that capitalism (and other western modern rationalist ways of thinking) makes, dividing our ways of being into the economic,





social, political, cultural, and natural. It is about rejecting and breaking free from the grips of a dominant, singular *reality* – a [One World World](#) (Law 2011) – that molds and limits what we might become. It is about theory and practice (praxis), as well as reintegrating feeling (heart), doing (hands), and knowing (head) into how we want to be in the world. It is about practicing “a world where many worlds fit”, to borrow a phrase from the Zapatistas.

Our work is much more than just a transformed economy; rather, it is about solidarity in all of our relations.

As Lisa Owens of SEI member [City Life/Vida Urbana](#) (CLVU), put it, “capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism are all connected. These systems of oppression are all interrelated and necessary for capitalism to exist.” We became less focused on the destination and more on the journey itself. Instead of wondering how many coops have started up, we are asking “how do we have space for practicing new ways of being,” according to Carey. Owens learned about solidarity economy (before calling it that) through organizing, where “we would develop practices that mirror the world we wanted to live in -- acting on values of anti-capitalism, values of cooperation, long term sustainability, and interrelations between people and planet.”


Capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism are all connected. These systems of oppression are all interrelated and necessary for capitalism to exist.

- *Lisa Owens*

This internal shift took SEI into its second act, which began around 2018. In this second phase, SEI experienced a metamorphosis in how we see ourselves and our work together. Whereas SEI was originally conceived as a head-space for learning and a hands-space for doing solidarity economy projects, it has also become a heart-space for being in solidarity with one another. SEI explicitly envisioned itself through its [chaordic principles](#) as a space “for caring, different ways of learning, ritual, healing, as well as heart and soul-centered practices” ([SEI website](#)).

This recognition of the importance of heart-space has helped SEI members develop deeper relationships of care, as well as model ways of being that are not as stuck in capitalistic growth and nonprofit industrial complex. Monique Nguyen of SEI member [Matahari Womens Worker Center](#), says that in SEI, participants get to “a different level of respect and care beyond just the transactional coalition spaces.” SEI has used practices to center mind, body, and spirit, such as stretching and movement and listening to music. Gloribell Mota of SEI member [Neighbors United for a Better East Boston](#) (NUBE) describes SEI meetings as “mental, physical, emotional, spiritual alignment for the month.” Similarly, Heloisa Galvão of SEI member [Brazilian Women’s Group](#) says “It’s like having a shower after a very hard day of work. Relief. That’s what the meetings mean to me.”





This change in how SEI members show up with one another is recognized as not just something nice to do, but central to SEI's transformational goals. Minnie McMahon, of SEI member [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative](#) (DSNI), says that these practices are "totally contrary to the patriarchy and white supremacy and capitalism because it invites our full selves, because it connects our bodies and minds and hearts." Catalina Rojas of SEI member [Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity](#) (CCDS) says "We want to change the mentality of people from individual to collective thinking and not only to keep it in the mind but also to transfer that to the heart in order to know how to act accordingly."

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- *Catalina Rojas*

Through collective care and not rushing to produce projects, SEI has opened up critical space to dream and lay the foundations for transformative movement. For Nguyen, "our training is our practicing of patience and community. It's not outcome space in terms of policy and strategy." Mimi Ramos of SEI member [New England United for Justice](#) (NEU4J) acknowledges that "we may not have the 100 projects we dreamed about, but we were learning about so many new possibilities that it has given us space to dream differently and explore." For Deborah Frieze of SEI funding partner [Boston Impact Initiative](#) "it took a while to get that we were building a language field. We had a field to build in order to get to the action. We needed to learn a different modality. It felt slow and process heavy." But "we now have a SE movement that we didn't have before."

This integrated head-hands-heart space in SEI has also contributed to organizational transformations. [Neighbor to Neighbor Massachusetts](#) integrated the Just Transition framework into its overall mission and is now centering solidarity as a principle to be incorporated into policies as well as workshops and member assemblies. City Life/Vida Urbana added a third element to its *sword* (direct action) and *shield* (legal defense) housing justice strategy: the *offer* to bring homes into collective ownership and out of the speculative market. CLVU helped facilitate the transition of the Coalition for Occupied Homes in Foreclosure, which it had co-founded, to become the [Boston Neighborhood Community Land Trust](#).

At the same time that the SEI grassroots partners were undergoing their transformation, SEI also launched a Solidarity Philanthropy Leadership Circle in 2019. A cohort of 19 individuals representing 12 funders began their own process of learning about solidarity economy and reflecting deeply on their roles in perpetuating systems of dominance and oppression. Like the grassroots group process, their learning space was deeply relational. They drew on the Justice Funder's [Resonance Framework](#) for philanthropic transformation to help funders reduce extractive practices and build regenerative ones towards a just transition. This process led funders to question where their money came from, why their institutions even exist, and begin using their resources beyond grants through program related investments and redistributing assets to the field. Importantly, these funders and others contributed





over \$1 million to an SEI fund that is being allocated through a participatory grantmaking process led by the grassroots cohort.

When the pandemic struck in spring 2020, SEI members experienced a profound blossoming of solidarity practices. As SEI grassroots members moved into emergency response mode, they saw solidarity emerge in action through [mutual aid](#). According to Ramos, “we’ve seen people step in in very different ways in the wellness work. People caring about their neighbors and wanting to work with one another. We’re seeing block to block organizing with different leaders from different groups. We’re seeing the love between them. It’s been the hope of solidarity economy, but now we’re seeing it.”

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- *Mimi Ramos*


The deep relationships between SEI partners also enabled them to connect and collaborate in new ways. One aid project involving six SEI members (and three other groups) used emergency aid from the City of Boston Resiliency Fund to assemble wellness kits for families with COVID-positive members across Boston. Instead of buying commercially available masks, they sourced 2500 masks from the sewing cooperative that CCDS had been supporting in East Boston. Even though Luz Zambrano of CCDS had known some of the other leaders of this effort for years, she says that “this connection was so natural and organic.”

Now in 2022, as SEI is entering its third act, this report looks back to share reflections and lessons learned and lift up our diverse voices and experiences. SEI has meant many things to different people. Some have focused more on the learning (mind) or on the projects (hands), while others have prioritized the relationships of care and healing (heart). The integration of head, hands, and heart have created a critical space for collective dreaming and aligning towards a transformative movement that seeks solidarity in all relations.

One lesson learned is that progress in a transformative solidarity economy movement does not follow a linear plan of incubation, investment, and growth-to-scale. The starting point is always the relationships and the processes through which we work together. SEI has learned that patience and going slow have been necessary to deepen the connections and be deliberate about practicing solidarity. Collective learning has opened space for radical imagination, of going beyond the “master’s house”.

After seven years, SEI’s process has in fact generated some of the results that had originally been anticipated. SEI’s members have launched significant new projects, such as [Boston Ujima Project](#) and





the [Greater Boston Community Land Trust Network](#) (GBCLTN). Ujima is building a solidarity economy ecosystem, fueled by a \$4.5 million community investment fund allocated through a democratic process. GBCLTN brings together six community land trusts (CLTs), five of which have formed in the last 5 years, and others that are in formation. SEI grassroots members are developing strategic plans to allocate the more than \$1 million in pooled funding in three priority areas: land/housing, cooperatives, and popular education. In Fall 2021, SEI members helped lead a successful ballot campaign to amend Boston city charter to require a new participatory budgeting process by 2024.

Even as measured in conventional nonprofit terms, SEI has had tremendous success. Not only are these projects growing and attracting resources, but key organizations in the movement ecosystem have emerged and are developing. CED, the organizational home to SEI, became a staffed organization in 2018 and has grown into an anchor intermediary, providing resources and support for the solidarity economy movement. CCDS, which emerged in East Boston to support cooperativism in the Spanish-speaking Latinx community, was founded and is now fiscally sponsored by CED. During the pandemic, it tripled in size.

If we only focus on these outputs and metrics of progress, though, we are at risk of replicating nonprofit industrial complex. We would remain trapped in the master's house. However, SEI's journey has shown that the spaces of solidarity and care through which SEI engages with one another are vital for trying to go beyond the master's house. It is through these spaces that worlds beyond capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism may be imagined and practiced. As Jasmine Gomez of Access Strategies Fund expresses it, the master's tools "are what we have. Some people use them to try and dismantle. Some people use them to try and extend the life of systems so that they don't hurt our communities as much as they can, and I think some people use those tools to try and build something completely new. Whether or not we can is the experiment. And in that process, the healing and the relationship building is something that will come, that are not the tools of the masters."

Some people use [the master's tools] to try and dismantle. Some people use them to try and extend the life of systems so that they don't hurt our communities as much as they can, and ... some people use those tools to try and build something completely new.

- *Jasmine Gomez*

The rest of this report fills in the details around this introductory sketch of SEI's journey. We begin with a more thorough overview of solidarity economy. We then describe *who* has been involved in SEI and *what* we have been doing together. We explore each of the first two phases of SEI, discussing our initial goals and theories of change and the tensions and challenges we faced. We then give a more detailed overview of the Solidarity Philanthropy Leadership Circle. We conclude with reflections and lessons learned.





Solidarity Economy 101


Often represented as a set of post-capitalist practices and values, solidarity economy (SE) finds much of its origins in Latin America and Europe with contemporary variations on every continent, as well as an [international solidarity economy network \(called RIPESS\)](#). At the core of these efforts, SE aspires to transform capitalism and create an economy that values people and planet over profit through alternative and cooperative economic forms of production, exchange, consumption, ownership, and finance: things like worker and consumer cooperatives, community land trusts, bartering and gifting, time-banks, and so on.

Our 2017 report [Solidarity Rising in Massachusetts](#) showed the importance of centering the needs, desires, and knowledge of working-class, BIPOC communities in solidarity economy politics. Over the past decade in Massachusetts, solidarity economy has emerged as more than a set of economic values and principles. It is a movement for social justice in which cooperative, non-capitalist enterprises, practices, and values can be more supported and valued, just as they had for centuries in the liberation struggles, survival strategies, and ways of life of oppressed communities in the United States.

We are not starting from nothing. The seeds and sprouts of this movement [are] already here, established on the ground laid by previous struggles and liberation movements in the US and beyond. There is a long tradition of African American cooperative development strategies espoused by leaders from W.E.B. Dubois and Marcus Garvey to Ella Jo Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer. Many immigrants in our communities come from Latin America and the Caribbean where solidarity economy and cooperative movements have long been active. (Loh and Jimenez 2017, p.7)

Like other social justice movements, solidarity economy transforms along **three dimensions**: shifting consciousness, building power, and creating alternatives. The change work needed goes beyond just creating coops. Exercising collective power is necessary not just to control political and economic resources and policies but to change governance and political economic structures altogether. The consciousness work is not only about changing ideologies, but producing cultures and ways of being in solidarity. Indeed, the promise of solidarity economy is not only about transforming capitalism, but recognizing that economy – whether exploitative or liberating – does not exist independently or apart from other relations. Economy is inseparable from culture, society, and environment. Creating the conditions for solidarity economy means revealing and confronting everything that produces and maintains capitalist exploitation and dispossession: white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, colonial relations, and other forms of oppression. And it means organizing ways of being/knowing/doing that enable individuals and communities to relate to each other through love and care.





SEI members define solidarity economy in more-than-economic terms in various ways. Mike Leyba of CLVU says “for me the solidarity economy is a paradigm shift, and transitioning from an individualized system that exploits and extracts to a system that prioritizes people’s wellbeing, care for each other, and care for planet.” Elena Letona of SEI grassroots member N2N builds on this, saying “It’s not just about worker coops, it’s about rethinking the entirety of not just the economy, but it’s also about how we govern that economy in a way that is truly, more authentically democratic in nature.” Galvão expressed how “solidarity economy can be something you do with yourself, within your family. Usually, we think about the global thing, or the state of the country, or big action. But you can start with yourself at home.” Similarly, McMahon described solidarity economy as “the ways groups or individuals exchange support or interact in a supportive way.”

For me the solidarity economy is a paradigm shift and transitioning from an individualized system that exploits and extracts to a system that prioritizes people’s wellbeing, care for each other, and care for planet.

- Mike Leyba



Who and What is SEI

To understand SEI, we start with a look at who has been involved and what we have been doing. This snapshot, though, is an incomplete story, as SEI was always meant to create space for collective learning and visioning and relationships that would lead to new strategies and projects. SEI has been a collaboration of funders and community organizations, who have been consistently meeting approximately every quarter since late 2014. Member organizations have participated in trips and retreats, hosted broader public events, undertaken research and study groups, and launched various projects. Grants of \$5,000 to \$20,000 annually have gone to the grassroots organizations. Over \$1 million has been distributed as operating funds to cohort members and associated projects.

SEI Participating Organizations

The table below lists all groups that have participated in SEI, including some that are no longer involved or active.

Grassroots Cohort	Solidarity Philanthropy Learning Circle
Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE)	Access Strategies Fund
Black Economic Justice Institute (BEJI)	Boston Impact Initiative (BII)
Boston Workers Alliance (BWA)	Christopher Reynolds Foundation
Brazilian Women's Group (BWG)	Episcopal City Mission (ECM)
Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity (CCDS)	Fish Family Foundation
Centro Presente	Google
Chelsea Collaborative	Hyams Foundation
Chinese Progressive Association (CPA)	Josephine and Louise Crane Foundation
City Life Vida Urbana (CLVU)	Justice Funders
Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI)	Lenny Zakim Fund
Ex-prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement (EPOCA)	Partnership for Democracy and Education
Matahari Women's Worker Center	Peace Development Fund
Neighbor To Neighbor Massachusetts (N2N)	Radical Imagination Family Foundation
Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE)	Resist
New England United for Justice (NEU4J)	Solidago
	Third Sector New England (TSNE)
	unaffiliated individual donors



Amongst the grassroots cohort, there have been 15 groups engaged since 2014. Of the eight original groups that joined in 2014, two went under within several years (EPOCA, BWA). Another seven groups joined in late 2015 after the design phase, but two of those groups stopped participating after the first year (Centro Presente, La Colaborativa). Since 2018, there has been a consistent cohort of 11 groups. The grassroots cohort has convened their executive directors (and occasionally other staff) almost quarterly since 2015 for learning, relationship building, and collective visioning. In addition, 2-3 activities per year have involved other members of the grassroots cohort, such as broader public workshops, trainings, retreats, site visits, and conferences. The grassroots members have, to varying degrees, integrated the learning, collective visioning, and priorities into their organizations.

The initiative was originally spearheaded by Aaron Tanaka, founder of CED, and Alexie Torres, then director of Access Strategies Fund. Initial funding came from Access Strategies, which converted one of their grant programs on economic democracy to SEI. An initial steering committee included Torres, Tanaka, Penn Loh (also representing CED) and three other funders: [Solidago Foundation](#), [Third Sector New England](#) (TSNE), and Boston Impact Initiative (BII). In 2018, CED hired Ariel Brooks and Access Strategies hired Jasmine Gomez, who would both grow into staff coordinators for SEI. Ariel's hiring also marked the beginning of CED establishing itself as a staffed nonprofit organization.

In 2019, SEI launched a funder cohort - the Solidarity Philanthropy Learning Circle (SPLC), with 12 funders. This cohort has also been meeting quarterly on their own. Each cohort group has contributed \$15,000 to help fund SEI operational expenses and contribute to a SEI pooled fund.

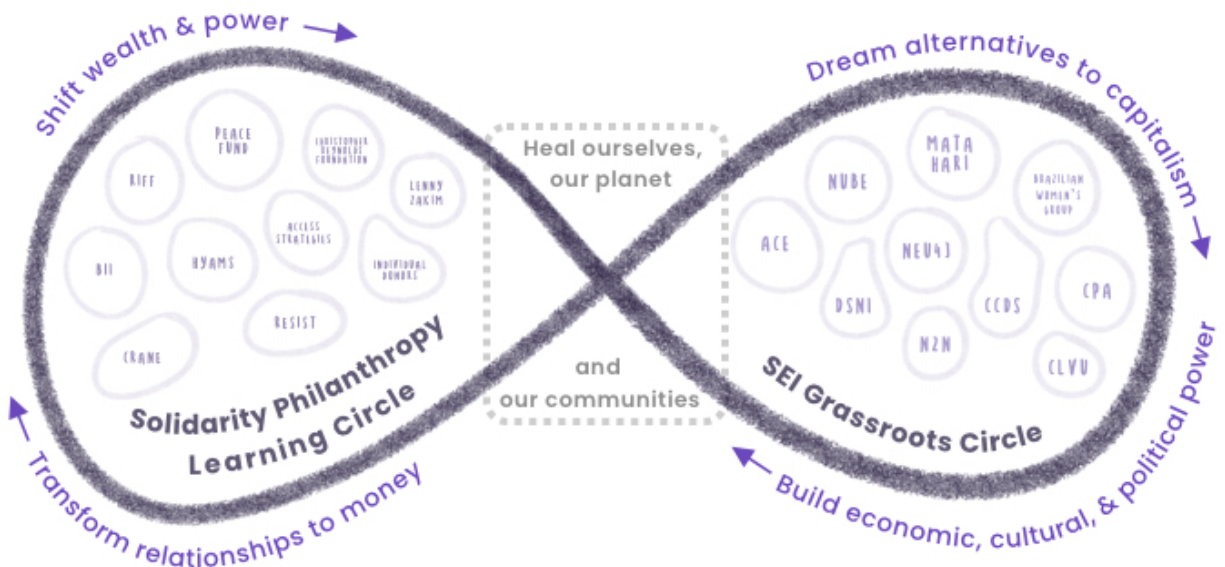


Figure: SEI's Grassroots and Funder Circles (by Johnny Shively)



Amid the 2020 pandemic and now into 2022, SEI remains active. Both grassroots and funder cohorts have continued to meet quarterly and have also begun to meet together starting in Fall 2020. The grassroots cohort has three working groups (land/housing, coops, popular education) that have developed proposals for projects to be funded from the SEI pooled fund, which has ~\$850,000. A second funder learning cohort began in 2021.

Just as SEI members bring their own definitions of solidarity economy into this work, they also hold distinct roles within the broader solidarity economy movement. For example, Zambrano of CCDS sees creating an ecosystem for cooperatives as one of the most important practices that she engages in for building a solidarity economy. Meanwhile, Elvis Méndez sees N2N's role in the solidarity economy as explicitly different than a cooperative network like Wellspring, claiming "we can help develop that future wave of local activists, municipal officials, and folks running for state office who are coming from that perspective that is anti-capitalist." Dwaigh Tyndal of ACE spoke about the importance of his organization's work creating a legal and regulatory framework, and CLVU participates in both fighting displacement and supporting community land trusts that will take housing off the speculative market. The space that SEI creates helps to keep all of these different partners stay in relationships of trust and aligned within a broader SE movement.



Photo: Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson at SEI Workshop April 2018

The table below shows SEI's key activities and coordination capacity over time.



Core SEI Activities	Other Activities	Coordination, Funding
2014 - 2015: Design		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design phase with 8 groups (ACE, BWA, CLVU, CPA, EPOCA, N2N, NEU4J, NUBE) • Participants include executive directors and members of funder steering committee • 7 Cohort Meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funder Briefing (March 2015) • Workshop: Race and New Economies, with 12 organizations and 60 participants (May 2015) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funder steering committee (Access, BII, CED, Solidago, TSNE) • Staffing: Aaron Tanaka (CED), Alexie Torres (Access Strategies) • Grants to SEI cohort
Late 2015 - 2017: Incubation and Capacity-Building		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 more groups join (BEJI, BWG, CCDS, Centro Presente, Chelsea Collaborative, DSNI, Matahari) • Quarterly meetings of cohort • Report: Solidarity Rising in Massachusetts (February 2017) • SEI Report Launch and Briefing (June 2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commonbound Buffalo national conference, attended by 8 SEI groups (June 2016) • Workshop: SEI Worker Coop 101 (December 2016) • Project Phoenix funder briefing (January 2017) • Workshop: SEI Finance 101: Demystifying Capital (May 2017) • Workshop: Solidarity Rising 101, with 120+ participants (July 2017) • Women of Color retreat (Oct 2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funder steering committee (Access, BII, CED, Solidago, TSNE) • Staffing: Aaron Tanaka (CED), Alexie Torres (Access Strategies) • Gloribell Mota hired as PT coordinator June 2017 - March 2018 • Grants to SEI cohort



2018: Transition

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 groups active (ACE, BEJI, BWG, CCDS, CLVU, CPA, DSNI, Matahari, N2N, NEU4J, NUBE) • Quarterly meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering of Massachusetts Solidarity Economy Network (MASEN) in Springfield (April 2018) • Workshop: Learning from Jackson with Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson, with 150+ participants (April 2018) • Social Justice Funders Network presentation (May 2018) • The Reinvest Report: Divesting from Injustice and Investing in Community, In New England and Beyond (July 2018) • Women of Color retreat (Oct 2018) • Boston Charter Reform Study group (Nov 2018 - Jan 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CED hires Ariel Brooks (Early 2018) • Access Strategies hires Jasmine Gomez (Summer 2018) • SEI Grassroots governance group begins (December 2018) • Grants to SEI cohort
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2019 - 2021: Emergence

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarterly grassroots cohort meetings (planned and led by cohort) • Chaordic Principles developed • Solidarity Philanthropy Learning Circle launched (12 funders, 19 participants) Spring 2019-2020 meets quarterly • First joint meeting of grassroots and funder cohort (December 2020) • Grassroots cohort starts 3 working groups (popular education, housing/land, worker coops) to develop priorities for pooled funding • 2021 SPLC second funder cohort begins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-day MASEN Conference in Worcester (March 2019) • Power Up! Movement and Solidarity Economy Teach-in (April 2019) • SEI Site visit to Montreal (May 2019) • Time on Clock of the World virtual event with CED fellows (April 2020) • Mutual aid and pandemic coordination amongst SEI partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ariel and Jasmine move into SEI coordination roles • Grants to SEI cohort • Funding raised from SEI Philanthropy Learning Circle members: \$15k per member, \$83k (Dec 2019) special gift from cohort member, \$1 million unsolicited (Jan 2020)
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Phase 1: SEI as Just Transition Incubator

2014 - 2017

SEI was launched as an intervention to gut-check the social justice movement organizing sector. What it aspired to become, according to its original design, was a Just Transition Incubator. This section will revisit why an intervention was needed, the initial theory of change, what actually transpired, and the challenges and tensions of these first few years.

The intervention was a coming-to-terms with the challenges our community organizing sector in Boston and Massachusetts faced in advancing systemic change. Through a series of conversations prior to the SEI design process, Aaron Tanaka compiled six themes analyzing the state of movement. Our 2017 SEI program report (Tanaka 2017) acknowledged that:


Despite the courageous and unrelenting efforts by our leaders, our communities continue to endure poverty, displacement, violence and trauma at a scale that is overwhelming and seemingly intractable. At the same time, corporate capitalism and the insatiable drive for profits have irreversibly degraded our ecology, with more extreme impacts accruing daily (Tanaka 2017).

We recognized that we lacked *long term vision for alternatives to capitalism* (theme 1), but that our communities were already experimenting with and doing *cooperative economic development* (theme 2). In our power building work, we needed more *multisectoral organizing* (theme 3), as we lacked alignment with small businesses, progressive finance, and faith communities, and we needed more *political power building innovations* (theme 4) to move towards self governance. And it was all too evident that our work could not ignore *healing and transformative leadership* (theme 5) and *organizational capacity building* (theme 6), as the historical traumas were in our communities and bodies, and our nonprofits continued to be underfunded and in precarious positions.

SEI started as a space for organizational leaders to articulate these collective challenges and develop vision and strategies to address them. It was a call for us to join the *fight* (against injustices) with the *build* (the new). Our groups were grounded in organizing and building power in working class communities of color. We were on the frontlines fighting against racial, economic, and environmental injustices. But what were we fighting for? What were we building? Answering these questions required us to deepen our collective economic analysis and move beyond just critique of capitalism.

As much as SEI was an internal movement intervention, it was also a reaction to the burgeoning field of 'new economy'. In the wake of the foreclosure crisis, Great Recession, and the Occupy movement from 2007-2011, calls for new economy were growing more mainstream. As SEI co-founder Alexie Torres framed it at the time, white progressives seemed to be getting all the attention and funding for





building cooperatives and the new economy. So how do communities of color not get left behind again? Thus, SEI was also a defensive move to assert the visions and leadership of communities of color for new economy and to ensure that our communities got a fair share of the resources going into this work, particularly from philanthropy and investing.

Developing economic vision posed its own challenges. As Lisa Owens describes, there was a fear of talking about the economy because “you leave that to the experts. You leave that to those people out there who know more than me. This has nothing to do with me.” Another SEI leader Dwain Tyndal goes further to say that even those of us in nonprofits in the social change field have internalized capitalist ways of thinking: “We all have to unlearn market economics, classical economics. We are functioning capitalists. That’s who we are. It’s an addiction. We are capitalists who function in the larger society. Capitalism reaches into how we think, how we feel. Nonprofits act like capitalist entities. We compete [with one another].”

We all have to unlearn market economics, classical economics. We are functioning capitalists. That’s who we are. It’s an addiction.

- Dwain Tyndal

Thus, learning about economics and developing our collective analysis was a central part of the design phase. Popular education around capitalism and solidarity economy continues to be a priority. SEI did this through a set of learning tools that included various theoretical frameworks and cases, many of which have been integrated into workshops and popular education curriculum for a diversity of audiences. These included the [five rules of capitalism](#) (derived from Center for Popular Economics), [diverse economies](#) iceberg and [solidarity economy egg](#) (developed by the community economies collective), [two loops model](#) of system change (from Berkana Institute). SEI itself published the Solidarity Rising in Massachusetts report in 2017 that laid out a 3-dimensional framework for solidarity economy movement (political, economic, and cultural).

Through dialogue and learning together – a form of head-work that started from the very beginning of SEI -- “we have moved beyond the place where we're afraid to think about the economy. We know that it's okay for us to do that. And that it's right for us to do that now,” says Owens.

SEI’s initial design, though, aspired to more than just the head-work. It positioned itself as a grassroots Just Transition incubator to do the hands-work. The first phase was a design process (in 2015) for grassroots community groups to shape the collaboration, followed by a year of capacity building to develop and incubate new solidarity economy projects and campaigns in 2016. Then in 2017-2018, it would move into a third phase of implementation, whereby these projects would scale up with more grants and patient capital from impact investors.

The multicultural worker-cooperative, [CERO](#) (Cooperative Energy, Recycling, and Organics/Cooperativa para Energia, Reciclaje, y Organicos), offered an exciting example of how solidarity economy enterprises could strategically respond to community needs and build movement



power. CERO was founded by community members involved in two non-profits: the Boston Workers Alliance (BWA), an SEI founding member, and the [Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health](#) (MassCOSH) Immigrant Worker Center which leveraged a 2014 state policy limiting commercial food waste and marshaled community and philanthropic investment to create a cooperative that turns food waste from area institutions and businesses into compost for urban agriculture. CERO members are active in the solidarity economy movement through public education, pushing the city on waste policies, and participating in initiatives like the Boston Ujima Project, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, and the Boston Recycling Coalition (Loh and Jimenez 2017, p. 29-30).

Deborah Frieze of Boston Impact Initiative (BII) explains that “SEI was a doorway for BII to community. CERO [organics recycling coop] was the compelling model. The intent was more CEROs. Let’s not just advocate for economic power but claim economic opportunity.”




Figure: SEI’s incubation model (Tanaka 2017)

This incubation process, though described very linearly, was anything but. From 2014-2017, there was an intensive design process with three-hour to day-long meetings. Organizational leaders and core funders not only engaged in the head-work, but also heart-work of building and deepening relationships. At a day-long retreat of the grassroots cohort in March 2015, Torres introduced a practice of setting up an altar, to which we contributed objects and explained their significance and meaning in an opening circle. The retreat ended with a dinner, which the group collectively cooked. These reflective and relationship building practices have endured, with opening check-in circles a regular feature of all cohort meetings.

The relationships between the funders and grassroots cohort were further deepened through intensive trips. In July 2016, more than a dozen members of SEI groups and steering committee attended the three-day Commonbound conference in Buffalo New York, convened by the New Economy Coalition. Many members of SEI participated in a women of color healing retreats in 2017 and 2018.





Though many of the participants already knew one another and worked together in many other coalitions and networks, SEI became a space for relationship building. As Monique Nguyen put it, my “personal relationships with other leaders have deepened, even though that’s not explicit. It’s like I see you and see what your aim and intention is to create a different world. That’s a different level of respect and care beyond just the transactional coalition spaces.”

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- *Monique Nguyen*


During this phase of SEI, the overall process was overseen by a steering committee of funders and CED. CED and Access Strategies were the anchors and dedicated the most staff time to plan meetings and retreats, administer grants, and engage other funders. But Solidago, Third Sector New England (TSNE), and BII all contributed funds, participated in the steering committee, and attended many quarterly meetings.

By end of 2017, SEI had a lot to report on (and boast about) in a conventional funding sense. The grassroots cohort had identified priority areas for capacity building, leading to a series of trainings and workshops that included Worker Coop 101, Solidarity Economy Finance 101 (Demystifying Capital), Transform Finance training. A large Solidarity Economy 101 workshop attracted more than 120 people from grassroots groups and beyond. Meanwhile, SEI hosted a national gathering of the national Project Phoenix funders learning cohort in early 2017 and released its report Solidarity Rising in Massachusetts with community and funding partners in June 2017.

SEI touted the work of “supported projects”, which included four emerging initiatives involving SEI partners. These included the Boston Ujima Project, Greater Boston Community Land Trust Network, a movement cooperative project, and Massachusetts Jobs not Jails Campaign. While none of these initiatives were conceived of through SEI, they all involved key SEI grassroots partners. For example, CLVU was co-incubating Ujima as a startup project. Ujima also involved at least five other SEI grassroots partners. GBCLTN, a network that DSNI first convened before joining SEI, involved four other SEI members.

Despite the authentic relationship building, creative ideas, and compelling initiatives that were emerging, SEI also encountered tensions and contradictions in this first phase. Some of the tensions were related to funder-grantee dynamics of nonprofit industrial complex. Even in cohort meetings, Nguyen pointed out that “SEI needs to figure out how to get out of posturing ourselves when we are going around in circle, instead of being real. Posturing is what we do all the time as nonprofits with our funders.” SEI members questioned themselves on what the time and energy spent in SEI would lead to and how members would hold themselves accountable to follow through on the priorities generated





through SEI. Because GBCLTN and Ujima had other origins beyond SEI, there were questions about what value SEI was adding to those efforts and whether it was appropriate for SEI to claim them as supported projects.

Several SEI priorities languished. An independent political power working group held several meetings, but no collective project evolved. SEI's connection to a statewide Jobs Not Jails campaign weakened when two of the lead groups tied to SEI, EPOCA and BWA, closed down. An idea for building a movement university and a grassroots management cooperative never advanced beyond being good ideas due to limited resources and capacity. One limiting factor during this period was that there were no fully dedicated staff to coordinate SEI. Rather, Tanaka of CED and Torres of Access Strategies each put in some time, but had many other responsibilities, with Tanaka launching CED as a startup organization.

Funding partners in SEI were also getting impatient. Maria Jobin Leeds of Access Strategies noted that "one of original aspirations was to invest in the projects, when they are investment ready. ... Like an angel investor." When after a couple years, there were not many new cooperatives in development, as Torres recounted, some were asking "where are all the coops?" Frieze of BII thought that "SEI gets credit for connective tissue, ... but not many new coops and enterprises got launched. CLT work was happening anyway."

SEI, itself, was also trying to organize other funders to contribute more resources, which meant that we were also posturing and positioning ourselves within philanthropy. SEI's 2017 program report can be read as a proposal to funders and investors to put resources into SEI projects. Price tags were attached to all of the proposed SEI projects, which ranged from \$200,000 to \$650,000.

Looking back at these first several years, it is apparent that there was a significant opening up of possibilities. SEI participants and steering committee collectively fueled their imaginations of economic change. They overcame their fears of talking about economy and capitalism. In addition to this head-work, SEI also contributed to the heart-work, deepening relationships amongst leaders and their organizations. The challenges that arose from this work appeared as frictions in several ways. First, there was a tension between the heart-work and hands-work. Members felt conflicted about the amount of time in relationship building alone, without seeing a direct contribution to their projects and campaigns. Second, there were tensions between the amount of time organizations wanted to dedicate to the head-work (learning about and integrating SE into their mission and strategies) and their need to respond to community issues and address organizational needs. Finally, there was a contradiction in how SEI was positioning itself as an incubator to build the pipeline of solidarity economy businesses and projects. In this posture, SEI was reinforcing a growth mentality and oversimplified investment paradigm that it was trying to change. To put it another way, we were using some of the "master's tools" to try to dismantle capitalism as we knew it, but it was still not clear whether we were building solidarity economy in the master's house or beyond it.





Phase 2: SEI as Transformational + Relational Space 2018 - Present

In 2018, SEI entered a process to redefine its role and purpose, addressing the tensions and contradictions that had emerged and creating space for a transformation that continues today. Several SEI members continue to focus on the incubation of solidarity economy projects, such as worker cooperatives and community land trusts. However, SEI has also become a space for participants from across the movement to come together and learn, to collectively envision a different future, and to practice dismantling and detaching from capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy in their daily activities and relationships.

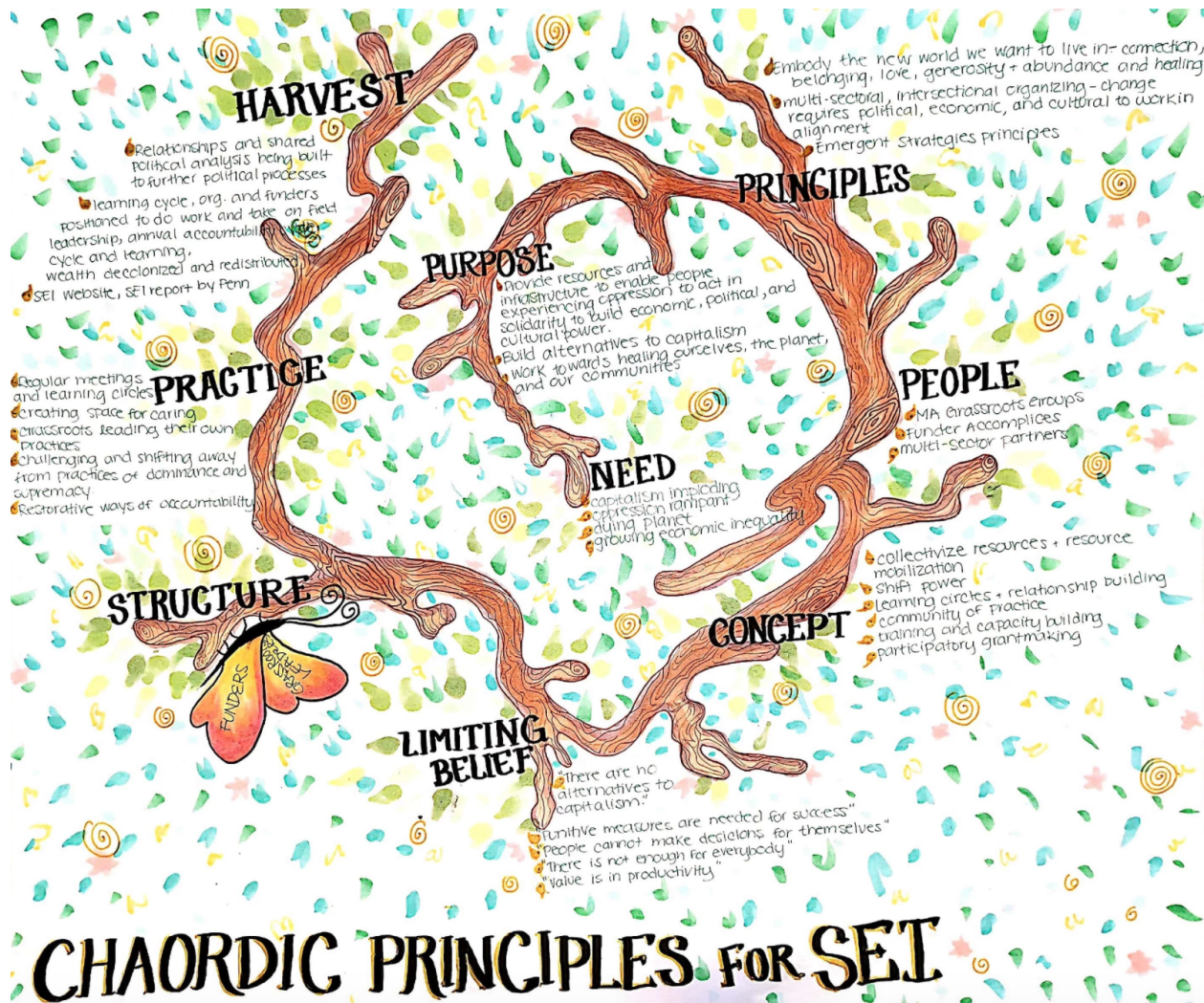
It has embraced a role as a heart space for members to engage with the spiritual and emotional dimensions of this work and to be in deep relationship with other members. In a world where success is measured through performance indicators and political wins, this may seem like an unusual way to come together. However, by nourishing the soil where its participants work, SEI is creating fertile ground for different worlds to take root. Numerous SEI members have described how this space has shaped their thinking and everyday behaviors, provided them with crucial allies in moments of crisis, and helped them bring their full humanity into this deeply challenging work.


Several factors helped SEI make this shift. First, SEI gained more staffing capacity. CED hired its first staff, Ariel Brooks, who started as Director of Operations in early 2018. Similarly in summer 2018, Access Strategies hired Jasmine Gomez as Programs Director. Both helped facilitate an explicit shift within SEI towards deeper governance by the grassroots cohort. Second, the steering committee, working with the grassroots cohort, developed a plan by mid-2018 to create a grassroots governance committee to take control of the program for the community cohort. Third, SEI decided to launch a funders cohort, with its own governance committee, to bring in additional funders and investors. A joint steering committee comprised of both grassroots and funder members would then oversee all of SEI.

In Fall 2018, SEI began a process to re-examine its mission and strategies. SEI had “struggled to identify a coherent theory of change that fit into traditional linear forms (e.g. Logic Model)” (SEI website). We used the chaordic stepping stones tool (as put forth by Dee Hock) to help us plan at the intersection of chaos and order and embrace creativity and emergence. This tool helped SEI to clarify needs and purpose, principles and concepts, limiting beliefs, and structures and practices. The steering committee, grassroots cohort, and grassroots governance group used this tool over a half-year period to draft its [Chaordic Principles](#), which are now on the [SEI website](#). These principles clearly define SEI as a transformational space of relationship and practicing solidarity:



- We will embody the new world we want to live in, a world of connection, belonging, love, generosity, abundance, and healing.
- Space is created for caring, different ways of learning, ritual, healing, as well as heart and soul-centered practices (including art, music, movement).
- Physical space is created as a container for envisioning.
- SEI is challenging and shifting away from practices of dominance and supremacy (including white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and more).
- We are loving and restorative ways of accountability to one another.





While this redefinition of SEI was taking place, we continued to convene and grow the space for SE movement among our communities as well as deepen connections with other allies across Massachusetts. In spring 2018, SEI collaborated with allies in Massachusetts to bring Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson (in Mississippi) to the state. A statewide SE network meeting was held in Springfield to launch the Massachusetts Solidarity Economy Network (MASEN). Akuno then headlined a day-long event in Boston with more than 150 participants to share local SE models and to learn from the experiences in Jackson, Mississippi. SEI also worked with the Social Justice Funders Network in Massachusetts to host a presentation and learning session on solidarity economy, further engaging with funders.

In 2019, the grassroots governance group began to take on its role and planned and led the quarterly session in March. Also in March, SEI helped support a 2-day convening of MASEN in Worcester, Massachusetts. Later that spring, SEI held its own teach-in for SEI groups and their members “Power Up! Movement and Solidarity Economy Teach-In” with Kali Akuno and several other CED Fellows (Jessica Norwood, Francisco Perez, and Gopal Dayeneni). A dozen SEI members also participated in a solidarity economy site visit to Montreal in Quebec Canada that May.


Grassroots cohort members describe this shift in SEI towards a space of practicing solidarity in ways that integrate the head, hands, and heart. Mimi Ramos of NEU4J says “we look at the whole body -- who we are spiritually and emotionally in our communities. I’m not the touchy feely person of the group, but I’ve come a long way. We are also a part of this work, so if we aren’t taking care of ourselves, then what are we doing? It’s just having a space to be who we are in a room. I appreciate the slowness that it’s taken to just get to this point. We may not have the 100 projects we dreamed about, but we were learning about so many new possibilities that it has given us space to dream differently and explore.” For Monique Nguyen of Matahari, “in SEI, our training is our practicing of patience and community. It’s not an outcome space in terms of policy and strategy. It trains us to think differently.” The patience in this relational space is a sharp contrast with the idea of producing projects in an incubator.

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Mimi Ramos

This slower, patient process has been critical for opening up transformational visioning and learning. Gloribell Mota of Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE) “appreciates that SEI lets us dream.” Elvis Méndez describes SEI as a space that helps him and his organization think through “what





does a just transition look like, away from an extractive economy and an extractive energy system towards one that is regenerative and treats people and the planet with respect.” Minnie McMahon of DSNI reflects, “the SEI space makes me feel like more is possible within DSNI...it’s a very inspiring space.”

For Dwaigh Tyndal, SEI provides a chance to “sit down and think about the bigger picture of the local, state, national, international economy and how we fit into that process...[it’s] an intellectual space to sit down and reflect on the work.” Numerous SEI members also describe the benefit of learning from one another’s analyses, triumphs, and mistakes. Heloisa Galvão says “I’m always learning from these people because these women are ahead of me...they bring different ideas and a different perspective. All of us come from somewhere, you know, Central America, South America. We come from a different experience, and we put all of that into who we are.”

For BI’s Deborah Frieze, a member of the original steering committee, “it took a while to get that we were building a language field. We had a field to build in order to get to the action. We needed to learn a different modality. It felt slow and process heavy.” But “we now have a SE movement that we didn’t have before.”

It took a while to get that we were building a language field. We had a field to build in order to get to the action. We needed to learn a different modality. It felt slow and process heavy. ... [but] we now have a SE movement that we didn’t have before.

- *Deborah Frieze*

These dreams and visions being inspired in SEI space are also helping member organizations shift how they are doing their work. Karen Chen of Chinese Progressive Association (CPA), says that she can now envision how CPA’s fight work can be connected to the build: “With wage theft, we should sue the owners and get ownership of the company. Then we can help people understand how to run a business in a way that helps us thrive but not contradict our values.” Neighbor to Neighbor convened a 2-day retreat in 2019 with Gopal Dayeneni (of Movement Generation and a CED Fellow) on Just Transition for 25 members, board, and staff. According to N2N Co-Director Andrea Nyamekye, “People felt like ‘damn, we have to do organizing differently.’ Not do door knocking in a transactional way - but hear what they want, other than getting them on board.” This year, Neighbor to Neighbor has dedicated themselves to centering solidarity as a principle and asking how it can be incorporated into policies as well as workshops, member assemblies and opening member meetings.

In addition to being a space for head and hands, SEI is also an important space for heart work incorporating emotion, spirit and body. Minnie McMahon of DSNI says “in the SEI cohort there’s more somatic awareness. Let’s ground, let’s breathe, sometimes we listen to music, sometimes we stretch. Stuff like that is risky in a lot of spaces. [The fact that] this is often built into our time together is really powerful, and it’s totally contrary to the patriarchy and white supremacy and capitalism because it





invites our full selves, because it connects our bodies and minds and hearts. It doesn't prioritize 'our intellect' or 'someone being in charge.' I think a lot of the care in that space is very contrary." Gloribell Mota adds SEI is creating spaces "where we gather with more intentionality. We ritualize the work we're doing so that we leave more affirmed and restorative, whereas in other spaces it's like 'we need to get these things done', overpacked agendas. There's not space for those interactions." She describes SEI meetings as "mental, physical, emotional, spiritual alignment for the month." Similarly, Heloisa Galvão of SEI member Brazilian Women's Group says "It's like having a shower after a very hard day of work. Relief. That's what the meetings mean to me."

We ritualize the work we're doing so that we leave more affirmed and restorative, whereas in other spaces it's like 'we need to get these things done', overpacked agendas. ... {SEI meetings are} mental, physical, emotional, spiritual alignment for the month.


- *Gloribell Mota*

SEI's value as a space that embraces and cultivates relationality became even more evident during the COVID pandemic that started in March 2020. SEI groups described how solidarity was put into action through mutual aid and the emergence of organic projects to help meet the crisis. For Deborah Frieze, SEI had built this "invisible field" that was "ready when COVID hit." Similarly, Owens of CLVU says that "sometimes it [our SE work] can feel amorphous. It may take a long time to come together. And then something like COVID happens, and things explode." For example, the Black Economic Justice Institute helped found the Black Boston COVID Coalition of over 75 organizations and made arrangements with a local laundromat to distribute more than \$4000 in laundry cards to residents. According to Elvis Méndez of N2N, "In Holyoke, mutual aid work moved into time banking, as a way to shift into organizing work that was based more in reciprocity and solidarity than charity."

One project involving six SEI members (along with three other community partners) illustrates how COVID response went to another level. With emergency aid from the City of Boston Resiliency Fund, they formed a consortium to assemble wellness kits for families with COVID-positive members across Boston. When they wanted to obtain 2500 masks for the kits, the consortium looked to the sewing cooperative that CCDS had been supporting in East Boston. Consortium members helped to source donated materials for the masks and paid the sewing cooperative for their labor. Even though Zambrano of CCDS had known some of the other leaders of this effort for years, she says that "this connection was so natural and organic." She goes on to say that "from this experience of solidarity we (CCDS and Puntada) felt that we could do something bigger and impactful working in partnership with other communities and organizations."

For some SEI groups, the aid work was exhausting and required new capacities, but also expanded possibilities for their organizing. Mimi Ramos of NEU4J says that "we've seen people step in in very different ways in the wellness work. People caring about their neighbors and wanting to work with one another. We're seeing block to block organizing with different leaders from different groups. We're





seeing the love between them. It's been the hope of solidarity economy, but now we're seeing it. We are connecting with folks we may never have connected with, who are looking for leadership and wanting to create the new systems and not having to have it be perfect." Different organizations collaborated to open up their space and put together food aid, including information on housing rights in the produce bags. Ramos wondered, "Why weren't we doing this before? How do we create a system of just taking care of each other to remain in our neighborhood?"

Similarly, NUBE in East Boston has been a part of Mutual Aid Eastie with a number of other organizations and volunteers.

Gloribell Mota of NUBE says that in the pandemic, it is not about theoretical debates over "whether we want alternatives to capitalism or to tweak it," which they have been talking about. But rather "mutual aid allows us to model how to meet needs on a small scale." She explains,

We wanted to connect neighbors with neighbors. This is what we actually want. People paid rent and went grocery shopping for one another. A wellness and health circle emerged. Volunteers supported people with technology gaps to apply for food stamps and unemployment. We did a lot of delivery of food. It started with 16 families and then 10 volunteers did outreach to 600 families. They were also supported by other nonprofits doing housing and environmental work.

- *Gloribell Mota*

Everyone receiving aid is required to do an orientation around the values of the work and sign up with a WhatsApp mutual aid chat list, to help match offers and needs. Mota says, for example, "Eastie [Farm] will say we have food available to be picked up. Someone else says we don't have a car to get there. Someone else says we can pick it up for you. ... It's community organizing meeting customer service."

Solidarity Economy is not something that can simply be declared but must be actively enacted and attended to by practicing solidarity through head, heart, and hands. For SEI, creating physical space and time to slow-down, reflect deeply, and learn together and about each other has enabled new capacities, relationships, and possibilities to emerge. The COVID pandemic has further detached us from the world as it is, as the only world. Emerging in this crisis has been the ways of being in community that solidarity economy movement had always desired. It has been easier to see that capitalism as a singular world was always a myth, and that other realities have always been there and yet to be nurtured and cultivated.





Solidarity Philanthropy Learning Circle

In addition to the relational transformations among the base-building groups of the SEI cohort, there are increasing desires among movement funders to become differently together. In April 2019, SEI launched its Solidarity Philanthropy Learning Circle (SPLC) with a cohort of 19 participants representing 12 funders. Through a series of seven sessions through 2019 and 2020, these funders went through a learning process that included many of the same frameworks as the grassroots cohort. The relationship-building element and the practice of solidarity were an explicit part of the design. Each funder contributed \$15,000 to SEI, with \$5,000 to cover the costs of their program and \$10,000 towards a funding pool to be allocated by the SEI grassroots members. By the end of 2019 one funder made an additional \$83,000 contribution to the pooled fund. At the beginning of 2020, an unsolicited gift of \$1 million was made to the SEI fund from an investor connected to the Ujima project.


The funder participants experienced profound shifts through the SPLC. Some were already part of the original founding of SEI, while some were just learning about SE for the first time. Like the grassroots cohort, funders recognized fundamental shortcomings in what they were doing and wanted to go beyond conventional philanthropic change models. Maria Jobin Leeds of Access Strategies said she “realized that our community groups couldn’t just depend on philanthropy - [they] would never have enough to do what they needed to do. If they were more engaged in the economy instead of just civic life and education, could they come up with more resources through community land trusts and coops?” David Moy of Hyams Foundation called out the nonprofit industrial complex, which he terms a “nonprofit hunger games” with nonprofits “all competing against each other for foundation dollars.” Moy further explains that funders, “talk about movement. We talk about ecosystem, yet we don't truly act as we're part of it. We act as if we are aside of it... We can't act as the sole decider of things.”

[Funders] talk about movement. We talk about ecosystem, yet we don't truly act as we're part of it. We act as if we are aside of it... We can't act as the sole decider of things.

- David Moy

In addition to the frameworks used by the grassroots cohort, the SPLC relied heavily on the Justice Funders’ Resonance Framework for philanthropic transformation to help funders reduce extractive practices and build regenerative ones towards a just transition. This led the Christopher Reynolds Foundation, according to Executive Director Andrea Panaritis, to begin a process of questioning “every aspect of who we are and what this money is for? Who should be making the decisions about it? Where did it come from, and what is our responsibility about that? ... Why do we even have this? Should this even exist?” Alexie Torres, Executive Director of Access Strategies notes how deep capitalist ideas are embedded in our work: “Capitalism and our economy is not just where we transact money. It's also our way of being. We are culturally capitalists in this country.” Panaritis believes that “we cannot be wedded to these past constructs” but that moving into new ones can feel like “you're





barreling down the highway with no guardrails.” Similarly, Josie Greene of the Crane Foundation said she was challenged in SEI by “a whole new world of language and ideas I had never considered, but that it was also very exciting.”

The cohort itself provided space for deeper relationships, which funders found to be of critical value. As Arrington Chambliss of Episcopal City Mission put it, my “response after the first cohort was ‘thank God, I found my people.’ There was an invitation to authenticity and belonging grounded by practices of personal and communal and transformation. This approach makes imagining interdependent and liberatory economy more possible.” Greene appreciated how the relational practices such as talking sticks, “gave me an idea of how if we are to be in solidarity, we can’t do it from a white cultural rigid lens.” Noted Chambliss “we weren’t in a room with a whiteboard and a carefully curated agenda and dynamics of posturing and insider-outsider impacting the vibe of the meeting – which is how I have experienced philanthropic spaces. We were at a dojo sitting in a circle and the first words spoken invited us into relationship with ourselves, the land, one another, and the common work.” Greg Jobin Leeds valued the space as “a brain trust to make a just transition in philanthropy” and to hold one another accountable. He said that “often as a funder, no one is there to hold you accountable. People don’t call you out.”

Some SPLC members have drawn on the learning and fellowship to begin changing their philanthropic practices. Episcopal City Mission implemented a \$200,000 Program-Related Investment (PRI) program to make four loans. According to ECM’s Ellen Sheehy, the “cohort influenced our thinking that loans could also go to grantees.” Greg Jobin-Leeds says that “being pushed by these frameworks and thinking, we decided to do more redistribution of foundation assets instead of exclusively giving grants. We transferred funds to a long-time partner, a working class Latinx-led group in Puerto Rico, which used the money to purchase property there, as well as in Boston.”

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The SPLC has also encountered challenges and tensions in its process. Despite members appreciating the relational practices, some participants felt that the balance was off, with too much time spent on the touch-feely, spiritual work and not enough on learning from one another and holding each other accountable. Another challenge named by SPLC funders is how to develop authentic relationships of solidarity between the grassroots and funder cohorts. The cohorts have been mostly meeting separately, with only a couple shorter joint sessions. Deborah Frieze feels that “it seems fragmented when it shouldn’t be.” Josie Greene asks, if it’s “real solidarity, shouldn’t we be all together all the time? Does this unintentionally reinforce the idea of separation between funders and grassroots.”





Reflections and Lessons Learned

SEI has been in a collective transformation process from its inception in 2014 to now. In the first phase, we expanded the sense of economic possibilities and sparked economic imagination beyond capitalism. Some members were hesitant and afraid to confront economy and did not feel like they had the knowledge to analyze capitalism. Many also felt trapped in capitalism, even if they understood its problems. The head-work in SEI has resulted in participants thinking more systemically and beyond capitalism. As described by Matahari's Nguyen, "SEI helped us think about the whole overall, to build an alternative ecosystem. When we joined, it was just about the childcare coop" that they were supporting their members to form. She explains that "before, we were beholden to the people who make decisions... SEI helped me deepen my belief and commitment to alternatives. Even when we lost funding, since we decided not to be part of a campaign on our legislators, I've been pushing the childcare cooperative and alternative forms of childcare." Liliana Avendaño, a co-founder of CCDS, describes how SEI is a space in which they can say that cooperativism "exists and defend it as real."

What was opened up as possibility in the first phase of SEI from 2014-2017 further broadened in its second phase beginning around 2018. Instead of seeing solidarity economy movement in narrow economic terms, such as creating cooperative businesses, SEI participants started to understand their work as creating spaces and conditions for practicing solidarity in all relations. Luz Zambrano, one of the founders of CCDS, draws a distinction between coops and their desire for cooperativism: "To us, cooperativism has always been beyond the business. We want what emerges from that economic piece, but it's the development of our community and the social and cultural aspect. That's why the work is much slower." The theory of change broadened.


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- Luz Zambrano

In this second phase, SEI has been more consciously navigating how we are using the tools of capitalism to build the new. To extend Audre Lorde's metaphor, SEI members are repurposing the master's tools to not just dismantle but transcend the master's house. It is tricky to use some of the master's tools and not be trapped by them and trying to do so can lead to many contradictions and tensions. As expressed by Greg Jobin Leeds, "solidarity philanthropy is an oxymoron. If there were true solidarity, we would not exist. The whole concept of mutual aid and solidarity: you're sharing it if you have it. Philanthropy is the acquiring and hoarding of resources."

To help navigate this contradiction, Lisa Owens suggests a framework to distinguish two types of SE projects: "Some are trying to use the tools of capitalism to build new institutions, but not trying to





divorce themselves from it. They grow what they can grow within the confines of the system. Sometimes they are a part of social movements and sometimes not. And then there are movement experiments, where the goal is to advance the movement, not necessarily to grow or be successful as a business.”

These deep shifts in SEI can be described in multiple ways. There is recognition that we need to shift our mindsets, cultures, and practices away from capitalist and western white supremacist notions of growth and production, which also show up in the nonprofit industrial complex. Given the intersectionality of all these systems of oppression, the solutions cannot be just alternative businesses. As a Just Transition Incubator, SEI set an expectation that its purpose was to produce a pipeline of investable solidarity enterprises. There were frustrations when the linear production of the coops was not playing out or seen as being slow. But in reframing SEI’s purpose and theory of change through its chaordic principles, SEI is now seeing its process and the slowness in a new light.

SEI has been shifting towards ways of being that center solidarity in all relations and embracing interdependence through relational practices. For Alexie Torres, this shift requires “courageously leaning into the discomfort of people don't think we're producing enough.” She continues, “I think we often felt anxiety like well, shouldn't we be doing something. How many products have you created? What does it take to shift a system and a way of being?”

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- Alexie Torres

This shift has also meant breaking down and letting go of the separations and binaries of western modern rational thinking (a One-World World), which are also a part of capitalism and white supremacy. These include the separations between thinking and doing and feeling, fighting and building, funder and grantee. SEI members are trying to unify the work of the head, hands, and heart. Amethyst Carey asks, “How do we have space for personal transformation and actively practice these new ways of being?” She continues, “It's hard to just imagine or think about something in theory, but when you actually get to practice it, it feels more realistic and it changes you.” For Elena Letona, “the work is getting us to be human beings again.”

Even in our attempt to describe and understand our collective efforts (such as this report), how do we center people and relationships, not money and capital? SEI members are now seeing solidarity economy as ways of being in solidarity, ways that have become even more visible during the COVID crisis. For Maria Jobin Leeds, what makes solidarity economy powerful is that “as a change paradigm, you could aspire to contributing no matter where you sit and no matter how much money you have. You can contribute to a solidarity economy.”



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- Maria Jobin-Leeds

SEI faces several challenges and opportunities heading into the future. First is building relationships between the grassroots and funder cohorts. Second, the community groups remain challenged by organizational capacity and individual burnout, even as transformative possibilities grow in the pandemic and racial justice crises. SEI participants are grappling with how to be accountable to one another in non-capitalist, solidaristic ways, that deepen the relationships and commitments to one another. The grassroots cohort is just developing plans for putting the significant amount of pooled funds to work. There are three working groups (housing/land, cooperatives, and popular education) that have been developing proposals for using the funds. The grassroots cohort, which has remained a closed group since 2016 will also have to decide on whether and how to engage other non-cohort groups. As Maria Jobin Leeds puts it, how can SEI have “some expansion beyond the choir”?

Despite these challenges, the COVID pandemic has also surfaced how solidarity can look in action. As Dwaigh Tyndal pointed out, “the mutual aid energy was not something that the Solidarity Economy Initiative started. It was something that happened everyday within our communities, especially in many of our poor, working-class neighborhoods. The people that develop the cutting edge practices are not academics or practitioners, it’s people on the ground.” Eny Lovo of NUBE described how coordinating mutual aid during the pandemic impacted her. “We start with ten families that we know that they need, and after one month or fifteen days we have 500, after 1000, after we finished with 1500 families that they need documents. Some people have documents, but the majority were undocumented people. I was so happy.” According to Gloribell Mota, “A lot of the organizations doing grassroots mutual aid work were connected to SEI.”

SEI’s experience offers a number of lessons for others in the solidarity economy movement. First, centering relationships and practicing solidarity and care are central goals. They are the ends and not just the means. As Luz Zambrano explains, “It’s all the relationships. If you don’t know who you’re with, it will be very hard to advance and make progress.”

Second, transcending the master’s house means also breaking the nonprofit industrial complex. It is not just funders who have to shift their identities and question their reasons for existence, but community and movement groups, too, have to shed their identities as grantees and being recipients. Seth Kirshenbaum of Resist says it is not as simple as having wealthy people give their resources up, because “in some ways it just re-entrenches the system. We’re just getting an influx of resources. There’s not a relational piece - not a shared stake.” Rather “We’re trying to create an interdependence and a shared governance and just experiment with democratic, accountable ways of moving forward.”



It also means we have to shift how we understand, measure, and assess our own collective efforts. We have to go beyond a growth mindset, in which we produce more efficiently and scale things up. Progress cannot be just about quantity but must also be about the quality of our relationships and interactions. Bigger is not always better, just as smaller is not always worse (or better). Scale is not just replication.

The lessons that SEI is learning are deep and challenging. They challenge how we think and see the world and reality itself. They are encouraging us to break free of the constraints of a singular, One World World dominated by capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy and to embrace the possibilities for creating and sustaining other worlds rooted in relationality, care, intersectionality, and emergence. They are asking us to fight to dismantle the master's house, while at the same time repurpose some of the master's tools to fight for and build a "world, where many worlds fit."



Photo: SEI Grassroots Cohort Meeting in East Boston





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