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ARTICLES

Deconstructing Neoliberal Community Development Approaches and a Case for the Solidarity Economy

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The solidarity economy movement is a burgeoning global justice movement that focuses on economic justice, sustainability, and democratic processes. Social workers care about alleviating poverty, but they generally adhere to neoliberal strategies and ignore transformative approaches to economic justice such as solidarity economics. Recent neoliberal community-development efforts center on approaches such as asset development, human capital building, and social capital enhancement. Solidarity economy seeks to boost economic and social development that promotes shared ownership, sustainable production/consumption, and fair distribution. In this article, we launch a critique of current approaches to community development and argue for a solidarity economy approach.

KEYWORDS *economic justice, solidarity economy, community development, social capital, poverty*

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Community development and poverty reduction have been at the heart of many social work interventions. Recent approaches have centered on the roles that social capital enhancement (Brisson & Usher, 2007; Saegert, 2006); human capital building (Zhan, 2007); and asset development (Johnson & Sherraden, 1992; Zhan, 2007) can play in decreasing poverty. The emphasis on such approaches on the part of social workers is arguably a natural result of neoliberal attempts to destroy the social safety net infrastructure in the United States and other countries. Socially stratified neighborhoods and marginalized communities are experiencing a host of deleterious outcomes, whether it is unemployment, high incarceration rates, violence, poor health, or low educational achievement (Sastry, Pebley, & Zonta, 2002). As a solution, social capital approaches affirm the role that networking and trust building can play in alleviating such poverty and concomitant social problems (Saegert, 2006). Similarly, theories of human capital posit that educational advancement and job-related training will result in greater levels of economic well-being, and asset building such as home ownership will yield analogous results (Zhan, 2007). However, without access to financial capital and legitimate democratic engagement in economic processes, economic stratification persists (DeFilippis, 2001).

The social work profession acknowledges that poverty results not only from economic dynamics but also from social and political dynamics (National Association of Social Workers, 2009). Social work has held a critical interest in the economic well-being of individuals, families, and communities in their environments. Historically, Jane Addams favored widespread progress over individual progress. This was reflected not only through her settlement-house work but also in her work with children, public parks, adult education, and labor organizing (Lasch, 1965). Yet today the actual number of social workers engaged in economic justice work appears to be extremely small when compared to the number of social workers engaged in clinical and administrative work (Specht & Courtney, 1994). The quality and quantity of social work engagement in development, organizing, and advocacy efforts related to economic justice, particularly in the context of the recent economic crisis, leaves much to be desired.

Given a declining interest in economic justice in the profession, coupled with a growing interest in the ideas of social capital, asset building, and human capital development, we wonder just what role new ideas about solidarity economics can play in the field of social work, especially when it comes to program development, community organizing, and policy practice. In this article, we analyze some of the current arguments that favor approaches focused on social capital, assets, and human capital development. Drawing from a social constructionist tradition of analysis and aligned with the critical tradition, we deconstruct the rhetoric and discourses of contemporary approaches to community development (Pyles, 2009). We present the philosophical underpinnings and provide examples of solidarity

economy organizing. We then consider social work in relation to some important dimensions of solidarity economy (SE) and seek to offer some provisional answers to the question How can the social-work field make use of the ideas being developed through the solidarity economy movement?

NEOLIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

Neoliberalism is a term that has been used globally since the 1980s to describe the economic philosophy and practices associated with the contemporary globalized economy in the form of corporatization (Chomsky, 1999). The neoliberal philosophy adheres to a belief in unfettered market growth and deregulation, with social welfare retrenchment as its hallmark. There is mounting evidence that the practices of neoliberalism are having detrimental consequences across the globe, with its victims being workers, women, the environment, food systems, and indigenous peoples (National Labor Committee, 2004). High prices for food and oil, continuing war, threats presented by climate change, lack of access to health care and education, rising debt, and unemployment have led to vast resentment of the neoliberal model (Chatterton, 2005). Neoliberalism appears to have little genuine concern with universal poverty alleviation or ecological sustainability. Instead, neoliberalism seeks to undermine economic equality in order to increase the growth of a small minority (Chomsky, 1999).

Recent social work interventions in the area of economic and community development are often focused on the neoliberal term *social capital*. Social capital, as defined by political scientist Robert Putnam (2000), is a prerequisite for group membership and action; this membership, in turn, produces wealth. Social capital arises out of networks of trust, the meeting of obligations, and reciprocity. This trust arises as a consequence of informal values and norms within a community (Fukuyama, 1999). There are three types of social capital that are constructed on the basis of connections among differing races, classes, ethnic groups, and so forth, all of which are assumed to be positive. They include bonding (connections among people of the same race, class, etc.); bridging (connections among people of different races, classes, etc.); and linking (connections between poor people and institutions; Lang & Hornburg, 1998; Putnam, 2000). There are also concepts that are used as measurements of social capital, which include cohesion, trust, social networks, and the tendency to exchange goods and services. Studies have shown that such concepts actually do exist, but whether or not they serve to eliminate poverty is debatable.

Scholars have criticized the wisdom of the social capital theory that affirms the belief that increasing social capital results in better individual

and community outcomes, noting instead that the theory ignores global economic trends, scientific measurement, moral miniaturization, and histories of oppression (Defillipis, 2001; Fukuyama, 1999; Grootaert, 1998). Social capital, after all, exists in many groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, gangs or mafias, and many corporate lobbying groups. This social capital serves to increase poverty and inequality by disregarding democracy and increasing division and fear among Americans. In the end, it can be argued that social capital generally can make for a much more unhealthy American civil society. However, we believe that this is not the case. The reason for the current confusion and arguments about social capital is that no distinction between negative and positive social capital has been established in the literature. Instead, studies tend to determine the positivity or negativity of bonding, bridging, or linking social capital. For example, studies have shown that the existence of bonding social capital among poor people does not necessarily decrease poverty and lead to social or neighborhood advantage; indeed, it can actually make things worse (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988; Dawkins, 2006; Friedman et al., 2007; Hays & Kogl, 2007). Studies concerned with bridging and linking social capital have generally concluded that bridging and linking, although potentially leading to decreased poverty, rarely happen because of vast societal stratification by race, class, or ethnicity (Butler & Robson, 2001; Hays & Kogl, 2007; Musso, Weave, Oztas, & Logas, 2006). Such findings signal a fundamental problem with the assumptions that positive or negative social capital can be determined by group membership. This assumption, unfortunately, disregards the fact that all forms of social capital are subject to power differentials, whether they are gender, time in the neighborhood, or ability to use force. Thus, we conclude that social capital that is negative is inherently undemocratic. Positive social capital, on the other hand, takes place through groups that are democratically self-governed and that have social values that extend beyond the accumulation of wealth.

Human capital approaches to poverty alleviation are premised on the idea that the lack of access to educational opportunity is largely responsible for poverty, so remedying this problem is best achieved by creating opportunities for individuals to develop their knowledge and skills, thereby leading to higher wages. This idea has been prevalent in the welfare reform literature as a response to the public policy emphasis on work-first approaches to welfare that began in the 1970s and culminated with the implementation of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program in 1996 (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). One study by Zhan and Pandey (2004) exemplifies some of the findings in this area, namely that having education, especially post-secondary education, significantly improves the economic well-being of single mothers, much more than does past work experience. Unfortunately, such findings tend to reify the false belief that lack of human capital alone causes poverty.

The asset development approach is grounded in a reasonable critique of welfare policy approaches that overemphasize the role of income and underemphasize the impact that capital accumulation plays on people's overall economic well-being. With this approach, however, we see very little analysis of neoliberal attempts at free market deregulation and elimination of social safety nets as some kind of warped opportunity for poor people. Advocating these individualist, market-driven approaches contradicts the concern for community that has been characteristic of social work. Social workers partnered instead of critiqued homebuilders, realtors, and banks during President George W. Bush's ownership society. When housing markets surged, social work researchers were so enthusiastic about the "relationship" between poverty and homeownership or saving that they rarely considered or even attempted to understand the riskiness of subprime mortgages, the costliness of home ownership, the hardships of saving on substandard wages, or the instability of low-income jobs (Johnson & Sherraden, 1992; Scanlon, 1998).

The use of neoliberal approaches to help poor people puts poor people and even middle-income workers at a substantial disadvantage, either by expecting them to rely only on themselves (individualism) or to rely on the "generosity" of wealthier interests. Social movement studies and community organizing scholarship have shown that redistribution of wealth, power, and resources is more likely to occur when poor and middle-income people have collectively resisted the interests of the wealthy, instead of creating partnerships with them (Scott & Fruchter, 2009). Social workers have gotten caught up in this neoliberal logic, when really, we argue, they should be trying to change it. In the end it would seem that the values and discourses that justify the various neoliberal theories of poverty alleviation (e.g., home ownership, partnerships, etc.) run counter to the interests of those in poverty. Interventions grounded in social capital theory, asset building, and human capital development basically preserve the status quo.

Solidarity Economy

Environmental activists and economic justice philosophers are noting a global Great Turning, that is, a movement from an industrial-growth society to a life-sustaining society that values the sharing of and preservation of resources for future generations (Korten, 2006; Macy & Brown, 1998). One of the manifestations of this Great Turning is the SE movement, which upholds the belief in a more just, sustainable, and democratically operated economy. With origins in Latin America and Europe, SE organizing is taking root in the United States and offers some potentially important implications for social work.

SE organizing focuses on all aspects of economic life, including production, distribution, and consumption. The SE may best be understood as an

organizing strategy that democratizes economic relations so that participants are connected by the values that imbue their activities (Lewis & Swinney, 2008). It is a set of practices that emphasizes environmental sustainability, cooperation, equity, and community well-being over profit. The SE is concerned with the means by which communities stand in solidarity in order to live sustainably and to attain full human functioning. These communities are creating institutions that are self-governing and proactively anti-oppressive, that is, non-hierarchical, environmentally sustainable, and so forth. Current examples of these types of institutions are numerous, from the factories that have been collectivized in Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Venezuela to cooperative businesses, such as the Evergreen Cooperative Laundry (ECL) in Cleveland, Ohio, the Black Bear Bakery in St. Louis, Missouri, and Algoma Steel in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada (Bertucci, da Silva, & Schiochet, 2009; MacLoad, 1997). Such businesses may, on the surface, appear to the wholesale or retail consumer to be like any other company. ECL, for example, provides laundry services to the health care industry in Cleveland, Ohio. What is different, though, is its commitment to environmental sustainability and to investing in local community development. It is entirely worker-owned, and employees receive training in operations, sustainability, and ownership principles.

The term *solidarity economy* has been relatively unknown in the United States until recently. It is closely allied with global justice movements, including the Social Forum movement. The U.S. Solidarity Economy Network (SEN) was strengthened by its organizing work at the U.S. Social Forum, which was held in Atlanta in 2007. At the forum, the solidarity economy was described as “an alternative development framework . . . grounded in practice” (www.populareconomics.org). The SE generally rests on the following principles: solidarity and cooperation; equity in all dimensions (race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.); social and economic democracy; and sustainability, pluralism, grassroots-level organizing, diversity, and putting people and the planet first (Allard, Davidson, & Matthaei, 2008; Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005). One of the key points of SE is to affirm the many types of economies already in existence (such as subsistence farming, informal economies, fair trade, etc.). These economies go beyond the limited and false dichotomy of a capitalistic economy (unplanned) versus a socialist economy (planned); the point is to continue to grow and advance these alternative economies as a strategy for development and social change.

Overall, the SE is a new way of conceptualizing a variety of transformative economic values, practices, and organizations with the goal of enhancing democracy and distributing resources more equitably. The idea of SE is rooted in a broader Marxian critique of corporate power and, more recently, it has emerged through an analysis of globalization and neoliberalism. For example, SE advocates contest the existence of corporate personhood, the benefits accrued to absentee owners, the marginalization of

workers, the fetishism of commodities, and the negative impact of expanding markets to the environment and indigenous peoples. SE advocates argue for and engage in practices that favor worker ownership and empowerment, sustainable consumption, and fair distribution.

Although SE has its roots in indigenous communities and is arguably thousands of years old, some of the earliest efforts at SE organizing as an intervention strategy occurred in the United States in the late 1800s. The Farmers' Alliance formed as an amalgamation of various farmers' unions and alliances between the 1860s and the 1890s (Hicks, 1931). These alliances, which formed as a direct result of corporate monopolies and inequitable banking conduct in the crop-lien system, were established to create unity among farmers. This unity was used to form cooperatives that could take back the farming economy by controlling grain storage, milling, warehousing, meat and fruit curing, leatherwork, brick making, and the creation of general stores. The unity ensured higher commodity prices for the farmers and helped to protect them from powerful groups that were unsympathetic to farmers, such as monopolies and certain government officials (Hicks, 1931). In San Luis Obispo, California, a very active chapter of the Farmers' Alliance was able to force the Southern Pacific Railroad to lower its shipping rates because the cooperatives created increased competition in the marketplace (Magliari, 1995). The Farmers' Alliance also strengthened the social and economic conditions of rural Americans (Hicks, 1931). The alliances advocated for a more equitable tax structure, regulation of commerce by Congress, progressive income taxes, and the abolition of national banks and monopolies (Hicks, 1931). By the 1890s, the People's Party had created a populist foundation that further decreased poverty by representing farmers and influencing state and national policy throughout the 1900s (Hicks, 1931).

Fifty years later in Spain, a Basque Catholic priest, Father Don Jose Arize, sought to decrease unemployment through a series of study circles and workshops (Morrison, 1990). These circles concluded that building institutions that put workers first would reduce poverty. Today, those circles have evolved into Mondragon, which is made up of more than 100 cooperatives and 100 subsidiaries, amounting to revenues of \$24 billion as of 2007 (Mondragon, 2008). Mondragon cooperatives manufacture a wide range of products and services, including computer chips, alternative energy, food, health care, housing, communications, and financial services (Mondragon, 2008). Mondragon ensures democratic representation through a one-member, one-vote policy for members of the cooperative. The town, as a result, also experiences an equal distribution of revenues, resulting in a solidly middle-class citizenry (Mondragon, 2008; Morrison, 1990).

Recently, researchers and activists have begun the task of mapping the SE as a way to affirm existing SE practices. The preliminary findings of a study in Boston revealed SE activities in the areas of food

(e.g., community-supported agriculture, caterers); banking/investment (e.g., credit unions, community currencies); housing (community land trusts, housing co-ops); clothing (clothing swaps, fair-trade clothing); transportation (Zip Car, bike co-ops); bookstores/presses (used bookstores, South End Press); media/information (Dollars and Sense, Weekly Dig); education/training (Haley House, South End Technology Center at Tent City); retail (Ten Thousand Villages, freecycling); childcare/eldercare (parent-child-care co-ops, cooperative home care); energy/environmental health (Coop Power, Mass Green Jobs Coalition); health care (free energy work); and social movement/solidarity organizing (Boston Workers' Alliance, Jobs with Justice) (Matthaei & Nagin, 2009).

Social Work and the Solidarity Economy

U.S. civil society has a rich history of associationalism (Anheier, 2005) that has promoted community responsibility for educational, cultural, social, and welfare responsibilities. Philanthropy in the United States was deeply intertwined with associations, which led to social movements like the abolitionist movement and the women's movement. This has resulted in a liberal model of civil society, a model in which there is low government spending for social welfare and a large non-profit sector, which engages in service delivery and advocacy. Within this model is a high respect for the de Tocqueville view of the capacity of voluntary associations to promote egalitarianism and social development and to constrain tyrannical rule. By the mid-1950s, according to Anheier (2005), the culmination of these associations and their institutional innovations (which included philanthropic foundations, privately endowed universities, charities, voluntary associations, etc.) came to be known as the third sector. This third sector was independent of the first sector (business) and the second sector (government) of the economy and had the ability to create an organizational infrastructure for social movements that crossed class and race lines (Anheier, 2005).

Increased federal government programming did not adulterate the independence of the third sector until it was devolved and privatized in the 1980s. This led to a number of third-sector organizations like non-profits running first- and second-sector institutions. The remaining third sector, which will be referred to later, does not seek to follow the rules of either of the other two sectors. Rather, there is a definite focus on social values, which also increases economic development. Organizations that fit into this third sector are SE organizations. These SE organizations have the mission to serve their members or community, not shareholders (Lewis & Swinney, 2008). They are self-governed, which means they are independently managed and democratic; decisions represent all members, community residents, or stockholders (Anheier, 2005). These organizations are value imbued, meaning that their purpose is to promote social objectives.

TABLE 1 Social Work in the Three Sectors of Solidarity Economy.

Sector	Program
First Private and profit-oriented	IDA, microenterprise/microfinance, financial education, home ownership, education/promotion, job training (human capital), small-business education/assistance, affordable housing using TIF/mixed-income affordable housing, Section 8, marriage initiatives, father involvement
Second Public service/ planned provision	Medicare/Medicaid, Social Security, unemployment insurance, prisons, substance abuse, mental illness, education, crisis intervention, international relations, including foreign aid, immigrant/refugee assistance, youth programming, child welfare environmental and worker protection
Third Self-help, reciprocity, and social enterprises	Time-dollar programs, community development, community self-help, community/neighborhood college programs, settlement houses, youth programs in the context of community development programs, CDCs, neighborhood associations/community action programs, Head Start programs, community gardens, Habitat for Humanity (sweat equity programs), individual self-help groups (AA/NA, etc.), political/social/economic advocacy (unions can be included here), coalition building

AA = Alcoholics Anonymous; CDC = community development corporation; IDA = individual development accounts; NA = Narcotics Anonymous; TIF = tax increment financing.

Table 1 shows the social work organizations that fit this third-sector category. It also distinguishes them from adulterated social work organizations that fit first- and second-sector categories. In many ways, these social work organizations correspond to de Tocqueville traditions in promoting egalitarianism while still promoting economic development and increasing poverty. Characteristics of SE thus represent a positive form of social capital in which groups form around democratic and social principles in an attempt to increase the economic prospects of their members.

On the other hand, adulterated organizations must adapt to value-based ideologies, namely, the “deserving” versus the “undeserving” poor as well as cost-benefit analyses, which favor the first sector of the economy in order to survive (Anheier, 2005; Dinitto, 2007). Policies that favor these programs usually focus on preserving economic stability by promoting self-sufficiency whenever possible, even though there is much evidence from social workers and other social scientists that this is ineffective (Dinitto, 2007). Thus, much of the policy provisions are focused on who is able to work and who is not. This is especially obvious in TANF program as well as in more recent policies concerning immigrant assistance. For individuals who have disabilities and children, there is an attempt to create stabilization for the cheapest price possible through the child welfare system, the mental health system, and more recently through the prison system (Rice, Kelman, & Miller, 1992; Steurle, Reynolds, & Carasso, 2007). Other programs could not exist without their simultaneous ability to bring revenue to the first sector of the economy, like food stamps or Section 8 housing (Dwyer & Mayer, 1975), or increase

involvement with it, like microenterprise, homeownership, and job training (Johnson & Sherraden, 1992).

In the current political climate of social welfare retrenchment, effecting change in the arena of governmental policy can be challenging for social workers. Social workers' access to political power at this point in history is limited. Currently, only 10 federal legislators are or have been social workers (National Association of Social Workers, 2007), and politicians rarely rely on information from NASW to make decisions; instead, they rely on information from economists, business interests, journalists, medical doctors, lawyers, and others from more "respected" fields (Golden, 1998). Because of our obvious point of view and our declining interest in grassroots community organizing and connection to people in poverty as well as social work's attempt to retain alliances with the first and second sectors, we have lost the leverage to push through the goals not only of a viable social safety net but also of innovative solutions that could transform economic and social relations. The research on social programming has shown overwhelmingly that decreased funding has increased poverty along with concomitant social ills (Rank, 2006). Shifts from an industrial economy to a service economy; global outsourcing, which has lowered wages, along with increasing deregulation; and the destruction of the social safety net are also responsible for increasing poverty in the United States (Chomsky, 1999; Sweet & Meiksins, 2007).

Social workers, at least in the rhetoric, have resisted efforts on the part of government to devolve and fragment social safety nets to promote work-first policies, knowing full well that these policies require vulnerable people to take substandard wages and put their loved ones at risk for further marginalization. Social workers, however, remain pragmatic and have attempted to make the best of the narrow funding streams that provide resources to those considered particularly vulnerable and deserving (second sector) or that create programs for the able-bodied that promote individual self-sufficiency or increase the wealth of the first sector. These interventions essentially break people into two groups: people who can work and people who cannot work. Those who cannot work are subject to second-sector policy, which distinguishes between the deserving and the undeserving. Those who can work are subject to either first-sector or third-sector programming. The first sector, stimulated by government revenue, may have shown mild success but could help only a few people because of high costs, in the case of individual development accounts (Flacke, Grossman, & Dailey, 2000; Rohe, Gorham, & Quercia, 2005), which showed the costs of creating individual development account programs; or did not equip people adequately to compete in an increasingly competitive job market, in the case of human capital job training programs (Banerjee, 2002) or in the market itself, in the case of microenterprise (Sanders, 2002). These interventions stem from the assumption that people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and by the power of their own individualism can compete against large corporate conglomerations that control wages and prices.

There is also the traditional third-sector notion of communities' pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, as is evident in Habitat for Humanity programs, local 12-step groups, community-development non-profits, community development corporations, neighborhood college programs, time-dollar programs, and Head Start. In many ways these programs also correspond to the third sector of the economy and can be considered part of the SE. These programs are steeped in social work traditions and have been highly successful when funded properly (McKey, 1985; Richey, 2007). There has been some coalition building among these groups, but committed political advocacy simply cannot take place because of lobbying restrictions on 501(c)(3)s and the stronger emphasis on service delivery. Thus coalition building must involve 501(c)(4) tax status, which simultaneously lacks access to certain grants for service delivery and economic development.

Increased conservatism among social workers is a likely explanation for social workers' having avoided SE interventions, according to Reisch and Andrews (2002): "The lack of a strong class consciousness and its organizational manifestations, such as trade unions; the myth of equal opportunity and political pluralism and the individualistic and materialist aspirations they foster" (p. 228). Reisch and Andrews (2002) also think social workers have avoided ideas that could be considered radical because of their focus on specific needs rather than on universal rights as well as their concentration on professionalism. Fukuyama (1999) argues that both the left and the right wing concentrate on excessive individualism at the expense of community (the left emphasize lifestyle, the right, money). This has led to a much smaller, more polarized radius of trust, closed selfishness, and diminished communal responsibility, which result in the moral miniaturization of group participation and brings little positive social capital or, in our belief, the potential for SE.

Social workers' investment in what some have referred to as "the non-profit industrial complex" (Incite, 2007) may also be responsible for the lack of interest in the SE movement. Instead, social workers focus on programs and services that are fundable in lieu of grassroots endeavors that might contribute to the goals of SE. The pressures of maintaining funding streams and fee-for-services activities and engaging in service provision are key forces that have served to depoliticize social work.

Nueva Esperanza: Solidarity Economics in Action

One can point to Nueva Esperanza in Holyoke, Massachusetts, as a type of intervention in which the social work profession should be front and center when it comes to organizing for affordable housing and poverty reduction. Nueva Esperanza is a community land trust (CLT), a model for affordable housing that seeks to create shared wealth and responsibility for land by separating ownership of land from permanent structures like buildings, co-ops,

and apartment buildings. The city of Holyoke, which was suffering significant white flight and disinvestment, planned to phase out residential and commercial facilities in favor of industrial facilities, resulting in increased numbers of absentee landlords (Meehan, 1996, p. 96). In an atmosphere of protest, local citizens formed a community development corporation, Nueva Esperanza, which pushed CLTs into the forefront (Meehan, 1996). The result has been important because the CLT could buy houses more cheaply in a depressed market and sell them at reasonable rates without being concerned with profit making. The homes were kept affordable by CLT lease agreements, which led to a more sustainable form of development.

Through CLTs, a new business model is evident; it is commensurate with the aims of social work but, unfortunately, has not been addressed by the field adequately. Community members were able to find affordable housing and the stability that comes with it as well as have the opportunity to build a meager but altogether more stable form of equity, which is dependent on long-term participation in the community (Foldy & Walters, 2004). The CLT does not require poor people to gamble on the housing market; it expects them to work together to protect the interests of one another by taking away the incentives to flip properties or leave them behind in foreclosure or disinvestment. The CLT does more than try to promote asset development or community cohesion; rather, it aims to redistribute wealth and promote self-governance (Foldy & Walters, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Creating organizations, collaborating with organizations, and creating organizational collaborations are precisely the activities of social workers. So one has to wonder why social workers have not dared to touch on the economic-development potentials of creating more democratic distribution alternatives that workers own and control in order to ensure that their best interests are considered. Creating non-profit, collective, or cooperative infrastructures for the production and distribution of goods would seem to be the first step toward providing increased opportunity to contribute truly and to influence economic structures that are more powerful at this point than programs based on bootstrap capitalism (Stoesz, 2007).

Social workers have historically battled the anti-regulatory tendencies of unfettered capitalism, which produced vast inequalities, by helping clients, colleagues, and communities become more aware of their resources (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). However, it is unclear whether the last few generations of social workers have been attuned to the effects of global corporatization or, rather, to the effects of too extreme a focus on the first sector of the economy. Walmart, for instance, has been shown to decrease economic prosperity substantially, especially in the geographic areas in

which stores are built (Basker, 2007; World Bank, 2005). On the other hand, business models like those in Mondragon lead to much more sustainable economic growth, which substantially decreases poverty. Social work practitioners and researchers pay little attention to Walmart or Mondragon, even though their effects are clear. It is the job of evidence-based practitioners and researchers to point out these phenomena, analyze the ways those economic structures affect communities and individuals, and present alternative policies and programs. Thus, it is necessary that social work practitioners and researchers increase their understanding not just of the economics taking place through social programming but also of the economics that occur through deregulation and alternative models of economic development. Furthermore, social work curricula could focus on topics that would further the development of the SE. Such topics would include the impact of global capitalism on communities and the role that democratic organizational structures can have on outcomes. In addition, it is vital to create environments in which community members, students, practitioners, and scholars can engage in critical analyses of the basic assumptions of current community development approaches and social work organizational structures. Finally, it is necessary that social workers make efforts to improve the lobbying power of their organizations. For-profit organizations can engage in unlimited lobbying and now face no limits when it comes to campaign contributions. This inability to influence government policy should be seriously considered by social work organizations, researchers, and other organizations advocating for the needy.

It is the role of social workers not only to enhance the safety net but also to ensure access to economic structures for the most marginalized in society. When social workers find there is limited access to those structures, those systems must be changed and alternatives must be envisioned. Social workers must realize that we are dealing not only with a dwindling social safety net, which hampers our abilities as social workers, but also with a very empowered corporate elite that aims to decrease economic and social equality and exploit natural resources in order to increase their profit margins and with an unempowered majority that seeks access to economic and social development. In order to fight oppression, we must consider all three. It is not clear to what extent social workers will embrace SE, given a cultural context of individualism and an economic backdrop that focuses on growth and profit. However, in an environment in which localism and green jobs are gaining greater attention, in which dissatisfaction with unregulated capitalism has become more evident, and in which globalization and rising energy costs have made jobs more difficult to get and keep, it is evident that social workers must promote new ways of bringing sustainable economic development programs to the increasing numbers of working and non-working poor (Gaiger, 2004). The window of opportunity is here, and it would seem that social work as a field is in a position to be a critical agent of change.

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