

Reflections on Sustainability in a Period of Economic Upheaval

By Phillip Henderson

The past two years have been a terrible economic time for the United States. Nearly every segment of the economy has shrunk, and the job statistics have been dismal month after month. While Americans of all walks of life have suffered, people of color, and African Americans in particular, have been beaten up disproportionately by this economic downturn. For them, this Great Recession feels more like a Great Depression. The Surdna Foundation's aim to foster the development of just and sustainable communities has never felt more timely or more right than at this moment.

Surdna did not come to work on just and sustainable communities by accident. Several years ago, we began a process of retooling our grantmaking, sharpening the focus, and looking again at what it was we were trying to achieve. Surdna, a 93-year-old family foundation, looked back to our roots and values, reexamining our grantmaking strategies over the past twenty years, in particular, in an effort to distill the most essential elements of the foundation and help us focus on our core strengths and history even as we moved forward. What we saw from this process were significant historical threads of work building strong communities, helping those who have struggled to keep pace with the changing world, giving voice to those without power and celebrating the diversity and creativity in society. In addition, Surdna always has had a strong set of programs focused on people and the environment. So it's not surprising that out of this examination



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emerged a newly-framed mission for the organization – fostering just and sustainable communities with a focus on strong local economies, healthy environments and thriving cultures.

As we were in this process of refining our programs, the economy went into a tailspin. Not only were those we served – both our nonprofit grantees and the communities they worked with – in great distress, but our own endowment had shrunk by nearly a quarter. This unfolding emergency added greater urgency to our efforts to be clear about what it is that we were trying to do with our funding, our presence and our reach. Many foundations in this period significantly increased giving and attempted to fill the gaps that were emerging as corporate giving and government dollars were declining. This was particularly true in the case of funders working directly on social service provision or for community foundations whose core funding for local food banks and shelters was an important part of their mission.

The Surdna Foundation did some emergency funding, with grants to help national groups respond to the foreclosure crisis, off-cycle grants to key local partners that were facing budgetary shortfalls, and grants to help fragile arts groups make it through this difficult market. But, overall, Surdna did not respond to this crisis with a package of emergency measures. Partly, this was because our national focus meant that we were not the first line of defense against the massive local trauma faced by nonprofits and community members. But our response also was reflective of where we were in our mission conversation. Instead of focusing our minds on the immediate catastrophe, we were focusing on different aspect of this recession. We were most intrigued by the confluence of two remarkable events: the massive infusion into the economy of resources from the Obama Administration's economic stimulus package and the gathering momentum behind the concept of sustainability as key to our economic future.

Our internal work had led us to the conclusion that the work of the future was to foster the growth of communities that would be resilient in the face of recession, that would be inclusive and fair to all community members, and that would balance economic, environmental and cultural needs. This for us was the answer to the recession, and it was remarkable to see both that these basic ideas were percolating out in society, and that the federal government was infusing unprecedented amounts of

money not just to short-term job creation and tax cuts but into longer-term investments in a sustainable future for our communities and our country.

In our new work around social justice and sustainability, Surdna's emphasis has been on understanding and responding to the complex *interconnectedness* among the cultural fabric of our communities, the difficult environmental challenges locally and globally, and the deep economic needs of the most vulnerable segments of our society. While we now have three freestanding grant making programs – Strong Local Economies, Sustainable Environments, Thriving Cultures – we have spent a great deal of time seeking to understand the intersections of these three spheres. So, issues like the growth of the green economy, land use, transit and transit-oriented development, the cultural economy, community driven design and the role of food systems have captured our imagination. We have come to see that future communities, those that will afford residents economic opportunity even during difficult economic times like these, not only need to be places of economic vibrancy, but also require strongly reinforced cultural and environmental systems, too. And, perhaps most importantly, we have come to see that without social justice, no community is truly sustainable.

Over the past two years, Surdna has begun to reshape our grantmaking towards this sense of social justice and sustainability. Our work with groups like Green for All and Partnership for Working Families to explicitly link the budding green economy to employment opportunities for the urban poor has been one clear example of where social justice is infused directly into our work on sustainability. We have retooled our work on community revitalization to a focus on building strong local economies by connecting the worlds of community development,

economic development and workforce development to demonstrate how both investing in people and places promotes greater economic opportunity for all. Our participation in the remarkable coalition of funders and nonprofits working on an inclusive economic development strategy for the Central Corridor light rail project linking Minneapolis and St. Paul is a great example of our efforts to tie together transit, local small business development, and diversity and affordability into one project. Similarly, we have been hard at work with our partners in Baltimore on the planned Red Line transit corridor to help ensure inclusiveness and local community engagement and leadership are imbedded in this important project. We also have been working with groups like WIRENET and the Fund for Our Economic Future in northeast Ohio to help both businesses and workers in older industrial economies of our nation retool to take advantage of the new economic opportunities emerging from the demand in renewable energy and the push into green manufacturing.

We see projects like these not only as immediate sources of local jobs for

hard-hit communities, but investments in a new kind of future for long neglected places. This is a perspective we see resonating strongly in the choices the Obama Administration made early on, especially through the 2008 stimulus package. The stimulus, to be sure, had two important aims. The first was to pump significant resources into the economy immediately to ensure a shorter and shallower recession. The jury is still out on that, and we will have to leave it to historians to argue whether the stimulus achieved that aim. But the second aspect of the stimulus, a massive set of investments into transit, high speed rail, solar and wind power, and countless other programs is only now kicking in, and this portion of the stimulus may well represent the lasting impact of this administration.

This parallels the two kinds of action that philanthropy has taken in response to the sharp and deep economic contraction. One kind of action was the short-term emergency funding described above, while the other, which is where Surdna finds itself, was to see the crisis and the remarkable energy of the Obama Administration as a once-in-a-generation *(continued on page 11)*



Green Jobs Day of Action, Oakland, Calif., September 2008.

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ists resort to blatant lies to confuse their own constituency and legislators, as when for-profit landlord lobbyists painted a bill to curb discrimination based on renters' source of income as a "rent control" bill. "We are combating these tactics by bringing in national experts who can help our members and allies in the legislature understand complex topics," said Thomas. "And our long-term hope is that we can better educate elected officials about the challenges the poor, tenants and the homeless face, so that legislators are less vulnerable to being confused and manipulated."

Advocates urge grantmakers, when making funding decisions, to keep in mind what communities are up against. Thomas noted, "It's labor intensive and costly to get service providers and affected constituents to Olympia to tell their stories to legislators. That's who elected officials want to hear from. We



Photo by Bill Wartley, Washington State Housing Finance, courtesy of the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance.

need more money just to do that."

Legislators also have confirmed what advocates already know – that nonpartisan voter registration and education are critical if advocates want to break through the wall of paid lobbyists who spend 24/7 at the Capitol.

Funders who want to see progress on issues that require challenges to entrenched and well-financed interests need to make a long-term commitment

to their nonprofit partners and provide flexible resources so they can get the job done. SPAN's Beverly Spears added, "It took us five years to win. That's the nature of advocacy. We depended on a lot of different sources of general operating funding to keep the momentum going."

Creative organizational structures, coalition-building among diverse sectors, statewide grassroots organizing, strong messaging, personal testimony and nonpartisan voter engagement all are proven strategies that advocates have used in successfully fighting powerful, entrenched interests. ■

Lisa Ranghelli is director of the Grantmaking for Community Impact Project and co-authored Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing and Civic Engagement in the Northwest Region.

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opportunity to reshape the future trajectory of our communities, our economy, and our social fabric. With our sharpened emphasis on sustainability, Surdna and many of our fellow foundations have found great partners in Washington who are intent on pushing sustainable practices into the mainstream of our economic future. From the Department of Housing and Urban Development, to the Department of Transportation, to the Department of Energy, the notion of sustainable communities has become the byword among the leadership. Even the National Endowment for the Arts is in on the conversation.

At Surdna, we see unprecedented opportunity in the period ahead. This economic crisis has been deep and we are not out of the woods yet, but the long-term prospects for building more

resilient and vibrant communities never have seemed more possible. With huge federal dollars being poured into innovation in spheres that will stimulate smarter and more sustainable economic development, like clean energy, a smarter electric grid, and more thoughtful transportation and land use policies, we see the table being set for strong and inclusive economic development in America's communities. Foundations like ours continue to play a key role in ensuring that these investments are made wisely and have the maximum impact over time, but we also must use our convening power and grantmaking influence to help ensure that the next economy includes those who have been left behind by structural racism or stagnant middle class wages.

Surdna's focus on the long term and

on the whole community, we believe, is the best bet. We all have been buffeted by the countercurrents of the deep economic distress of our communities on one hand and, on the other hand, the substantial down payment we are seeing in the economy, indeed the society, of the future. At Surdna, success will depend not only on whether concepts of sustainability become core to our collective understanding of what the future looks like, but also whether all members of our society participate and thrive in this future. In fact, we cannot see how a society can be sustainable without embracing the values of fairness and justice at its core. ■

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