

For the Surdna Foundation, communities should define their futures

By William Cordery

When people have asked me what compelled me to join the team at the Surdna Foundation¹ more than a year ago, I've often shared that I saw a philanthropic organization that is not only guided by principles of social justice, and working to address real societal problems, but one that is committed to investing in new ways of building economies, environments and communities that place those directly impacted by inequity at the center of making decisions on the best solutions.

In essence, I saw Surdna as a foundation that was driven to invest in a better, more just world with people at the center. And this was important to me as a former fundraiser and organizer for Project South, an organization whose work for racial and economic justice was guided by principles of investing in people, place and regional identity across Southern states. Few national foundations support marginalized communities in building local leadership and long-term infrastructure that not only works to address current challenges, but also prepares them for future challenges and supports their leadership.

As a family philanthropy, Surdna and the Andrus family have been practicing responsive philanthropy for nearly 100 years. Much of those years were devoted to direct service and programs for children. In 1989, the third and fourth generations of the Andrus family established Surdna Foundation's programs in environment and community revitalization, which came with a deci-

sion to expand the professional staff to broaden the foundation's effectiveness. By 1994, programs in effective citizenry and the arts were added. Guided by the principles of social justice, the foundation today seeks to foster sustainable environments, strong local economies and thriving cultures in marginalized communities in the United States.

Surdna Foundation is a national philanthropic leader working across both the public and private sectors to actualize smart and inclusive economic growth. I am especially excited by what our Strong Local Economies program has so far accomplished and the work that continues. The line of work, which I lead, is committed to improving the lives and economic opportunities for low-income communities, people of color, women and immigrants by investing in communities to win good economic policies, building and growing locally owned businesses, creating quality jobs and improving jobs that millions of low-wage workers hold by bringing up the labor market.

I am inspired by the vision of a country where communities that have been systematically locked out of economic mobility can realize true economic opportunities and security.

MINORITY BUSINESS INVESTMENT

One of the areas of work under the Strong Local Economies program is Business Development and Acceleration (BDA), which aims to create jobs and wealth in communities through thriving, diverse, sustainable local busi-

nesses increasingly owned by people of color, women and immigrants.

This past year we continued to focus our efforts on harnessing the power of the private sector to broadly promote quality job growth in local communities. Our work with minority-, women- and immigrant-owned businesses remain one of our larger areas of investment. Our program is able to provide grant dollars to business accelerators – private or nonprofit entities that provide early capital and technical assistance to start-ups and small businesses to assist with their growth. Many minority-owned businesses struggle to secure the capital needed due to their size, location and leadership.

The business accelerators we are supporting provide an array of services to a diverse business audience. One of them is Chicago United. As part of Chicago United's Five Forward 20/20 Initiative, each company commits to working with five local minority-owned firms over five years, better positioning local minority-owned firms to compete for corporate contracts. To date, Chicago United has produced partnerships with 21 area companies that reported spending an aggregate of more than \$350 million in 2014. Among these businesses, a select number of minority-owned enterprises created more than 4,700 jobs.

Some of the most compelling work happening in the BDA portfolio is the investment in converting small businesses into worker-owned cooperatives. In a recent report, *Ours to Share: How Worker*

Ownership Can Change the American Economy,² Surdna explored the opportunities of worker-owned firms to fundamentally change local economies and to build wealth for historically low-income communities.

With the pending retirement of tens of thousands of baby boomers that were successful in entrepreneurship, there is going to be a huge transfer of wealth in this country. That wealth could be transferred to a larger corporation in a buyout, to a developer for repurposing of their land or to the workers who've worked for those small businesses for years who would now have an opportunity to own a business and help drive the local economy. Transferring ownership of a business from just one person or group to the business' workers creates opportunities for workers to build wealth, to own their work and products in an entirely new way and to increase economic activity in communities that have suffered from years of stagnation and inequity.

Although this model of local economic drivers redistributing wealth is relatively small, there are immense opportunities to scale and make this a practice of wealth redistribution that is good for workers, retired business owners and local economies.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR AND BY THE PEOPLE

Historically, economic development projects do not benefit all populations and oftentimes exclude the communities we serve – low-income, people of color and immigrants. We believe that economic development can be done in a different way – a way that reaches beyond city centers and produces positive impacts on local communities, placing its residents at the decision-making tables and creating opportunities for economic mobility.

The attention being paid to growing income inequality and an uneven economic recovery this past year has created an opportunity to redefine economic development guidelines and practices to include equity and to engage people directly affected by development at the most local level. Surdna is working with a host of economic development, policy research and nonprofit and philanthropic partners to further advance an equitable economic development framework.

This summer, the Surdna Foundation, in partnership with the National League of Cities, PolicyLink, the Urban Land Institute and Open Society Foundations, launched the first-ever Equitable Economic Development Fellowship. This is a two-year, \$1 million effort

to promote equity, transparency and sustainability as driving forces in local economic development efforts. It also will provide participants with leadership development, technical assistance and peer learning. Leaders were chosen from six cities for the inaugural class: Boston, Charlotte, Houston, Memphis, Milwaukee and Minneapolis. We and our partners are hopeful that advancing an equity frame in these respective communities at this time will place local leaders in positions of influence at the cusp of impending economic development boom in these cities.

WORKERS AND THE ECONOMY

Through our Job Quality & Career Pathways (JQCP) line of work, we strive to improve the quality of jobs and conditions of work in low-wage sectors in this country as well as expand access to higher-paying jobs, identify and develop promising career paths in emerging industries and seek the overall improvement of economic mobility.

Over the past few years, advocates have fought for and celebrated tremendous policy wins that improve conditions of work for millions in this country – from increasing the minimum wage to securing paid sick and family leave, fair scheduling and other labor standards improvements that have the potential to transform the lives of working families. As a result, there are renewed efforts around the country to engage key stakeholders in the enforcement of job quality measures. Many cities have dedicated staff focused on policy implementation, but some cities still lag behind with insufficient staff, accountability measures or true commitments to achieve intended results.

Surdna is working to better understand the capacity needs and current challenges of government in addition to community-based interventions to realize the benefits of new policies to improve the quality of jobs. This past July, in (continued on page 8)



gathered from partners through conversations and interviews, so that those who are better at expressing themselves verbally than in written form can still report fully on the work.

Ultimately, the development of a system, process and metrics for an indigenous health evaluation model is centered around aligning the work or, in this instance, the grantmaking to the way in which that work is measured. Too often, Native communities are forced to analyze and assess their work in a way that does not support the work they have accomplished in the community.

In fact, modern Western evaluation methodology can undermine the work by using metrics that are not reflective of the Native context, such as culture, ecology, environment and history.

The model that Indigenous Methods has cultivated is an example of how community and cultural engagement has the potential to yield far richer information, which can be utilized in

more effective and efficient ways to the benefit of indigenous communities. ■

Robert Sturm and Lee Francis IV are consultants at Indigenous Methods. To learn more, contact robert@teoxihuitl.com.

Notes

1. "Diabetes in American Indians and Alaskan Natives: Facts at a Glance," Department of Health and Human Services, Indian Health Service Division of Diabetes Treatment and Prevention, 2012, https://www.ihs.gov/MedicalPrograms/Diabetes/HomeDocs/..Resources/FactSheets/Fact_sheet_AIAN_508c.pdf.
2. One of the decisions made during the process of updating the foundation's grantmaking model was to replace the word "grantee" with the term "community partner" to acknowledge shared learning, responsibility and goals.
3. Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Developmental research, public policy and the ecology of childhood," *Child Development*, March 1974, Vol. 45, No. 1, pp. 1-5.
4. Joan LaFrance and Richard Nichols, *Reframing Evaluation: Defining an Indigenous Evaluation Framework* (Alexandria, VA: American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2009).
5. Judy Beaudette and Allison Matsumoto (editors), *Seven Directions: A Blueprint for Advancing the Health and Wellness of Our Native Communities* (Tucson, AZ: Red Star Innovations, 2015).
6. Marlene B. Castellano, "Updating aboriginal traditions of knowledge," in G. Dei, B. Hall & D. Rosenberg (eds.), *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple readings of our world* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 21-36.

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partnership with the National Employment Law Project and Rutgers University Center for Innovation in Worker Organization, we convened leaders from worker organizations, government agencies and small business advocacy groups from across the country to share some of the challenges and opportunities they're facing, the importance of worker power, business compliance and revenue sources separate from local and state budget negotiations to fund enforcement of labor policies.

Over the coming year, we will explore how best to invest in efforts to safeguard all of the significant strides we've made in creating good economic policies as well as how best to respond to preemptive attacks that attempt to halt progress.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE AND PLACE

As we approach our centennial, the Surdna Foundation understands just how important people and place are to a community's ability to flourish. History has taught us that trickle-down economics do not work. In order to create the ecosystem needed for local communities to thrive economically, socially and culturally, we have to invest in their success at the local level.

Over the summer, the foundation staff conducted an exercise during a staff retreat that challenged us to summarize Surdna's mission-driven work in eight words. One of my favorite statements was "Communities define their futures. We support their goals."

As a social justice foundation, we are not alone in this sentiment. Although our collective resources are somewhat finite, if all of philanthropy was responsive in a way that put the resources into the hands of those most affected, we could lead a renaissance that would drastically reshape how communities and economies are driven. ■

William Cordery (@WilliamCordery) is program officer of Surdna Foundation's Strong Local Economies program.

Notes

1. To learn more about Surdna Foundation and its programs, visit www.surdna.org.
2. See <http://www.surdna.org/images/pdf/OursToShareWeb1.pdf>.