EQUITABLE ENTERPRISES

Re-Working the Future

Strategies for building enterprises in the 21st century

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en·ter·prise | \ ˈen-tər-ˌprīz , ˈen-tə-ˌprīz \

1: a project or undertaking that is especially difficult, complicated, or risky

2a: a unit of economic organization or activity especially: a business organization

b: a systematic purposeful activity

3: readiness to engage in daring or difficult action: initiative

Source: Merriam Webster

What if we could build a more equitable world

by building more equitable enterprises–ways of creating value that generate community wealth and wellbeing?

What if the building blocks of that future

are already present in organizations and communities worldwide?

What kinds of experiments could we undertake

with these building blocks today? How might these experiments change our fundamental strategies for harnessing human energy and talents to create a more equitable, democratic, and sustainable world?

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This map is an invitation to explore opportunities for creating more equitable enterprises. It outlines some key levers and strategies we can employ and points to examples of efforts already underway. We see such efforts as signals of future possibilities. Today there might be few. But imagine if the equitable enterprise were not an exception but a default condition? What would it mean to you and your community? What can you do today to help build this future?

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HOW TO USE THIS MAP

This map is a resource for designing a new social contract for global and local enterprises. It's a map of forces transforming enterprises today and opportunity spaces for building a future of more equitable enterprise. Here are some ideas for further engagement:

Create a vision of what equitable enterprise looks like for you:

Develop strategies to fulfill your vision for change. These may include:
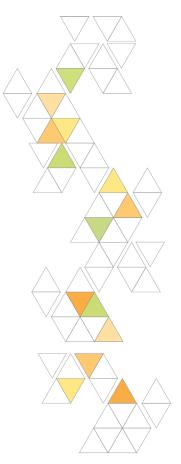
- **Formulating a platform of legislative and legal reform** to assure meaningful access to benefits across boundaries of all kinds; to place limits on massive personal wealth and support community wealth; to foster interoperability across the changing platforms of daily enterprise; to reverse the tide of privatization and create more public spaces and resources; and to reimagine democratic norms, processes, and platforms for enterprise in those spaces.

- **Fostering cultural experiments** to redefine the role of work in equitable communities; to eliminate debt as a driver of economic growth; to encourage appropriation of underused spaces and resources by communities of artists and activists; to redesign learning as an infinite rather than finite life phase; to use ledger technologies to create distributed cooperative organizations, and to foster conversion of local mom-and-pop shops to co-ops as mom and pop retire.

- **Building movements** to forge new platform cooperatives that support worker voice within trades; to re-think banks and the flows of capital in communities; to scale collective ownership in regional federations of cooperatives; to incorporate cooperative enterprise into the curricula of schools at all levels; to create platforms for cooperative cyber-security and open-source investigation; to support more sustainable and resilient supply chains; and to foster grassroots investment in community wealth.

Map the spaces for experiments in equitable enterprise

This map provides a high-level view of high-potential spaces for experiments in equitable enterprise.

- **Bring the view down to ground level** by collecting your own signals of experiments and invention in one or more of the zones.

- **Identify additional strategies** in each zone to expand the design toolkit.

- **Think small and big:** look for neighborhood innovations and find ways to network neighborhoods to learn from one another's experiments.

- **Create a blog or podcast**, or social media channel to record the learning moments from your experiments.
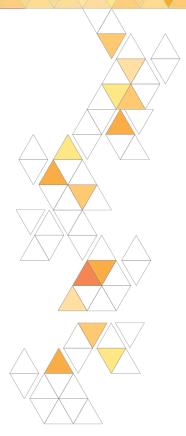
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ENTERPRISE
A moment for experimentation

How we come together to create value is a product of many forces—available technologies and resources, prevailing laws and regulations, cultural and social norms, education, knowledge, and understanding. For over one hundred years, corporations with formal management structures, mission statements, investors, and employees have been our central model for doing so. We almost can't conceive of a different way of getting things done. And yet, throughout history, humans have made discoveries, created, produced, and traded—engaged in enterprise—in many ways. It is hard to imagine it today, but until the late 19th century, doing wage work, i.e., working for someone else, was considered highly undesirable, placing one in a position of subordination and dependency to a master.

Today we are in the early stages of building a new operating system for creating value and getting things done. There are many forces impacting the landscape of this new world, including climate change, global economic conditions, shifting cultural norms and expectations. Three pivotal forces, however, are transforming how enterprises are created, the different forms they take around the world, and the very nature of employment: the rapidly evolving digital coordination economy, the realities of an increasingly integrated global labor availability, and the financialization of the economy and society.

To start building equitable enterprises, it is essential to examine how these three pivotal forces are transforming business organizations, potentially amplifying wealth and power inequalities.
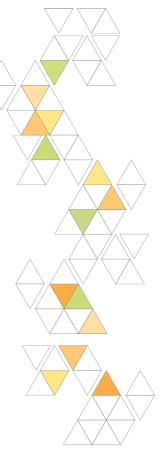
Digital Coordination Economy

Digital networking, distributed computing, and analytics tools and technologies are combining to catalyze a worldwide digital coordination economy. In this economy, algorithms are being used to identify and match those in need of something with those who can provide it, including humans and nonhumans alike. Companies like Uber, Upwork, Spotify, and many others that build and manage platforms for algorithmic coordination are harbingers of this economic transition, a transition comparable in scope and impact to the shift from agricultural to industrial production. As the world becomes increasingly dominated by digital coordination platforms, work can be divided into tasks that can be matched algorithmically with people who have the right skills and time to accomplish such tasks. Some platforms, such as Thumbtack and Lyft, rely on people in a particular geography to fulfill the tasks. Others, like Upwork, tap into the global supply of talent to do everything from coding to editing and translation on demand. For instance, many next-generation platforms could take humans out of the production altogether by delivering autonomous vehicles to people who need rides. From there, it's easy to envision a system where economic value is often created entirely without humans or with the help of very few of them. In this "economy of things," smart objects and systems will exchange value and trade services autonomously.
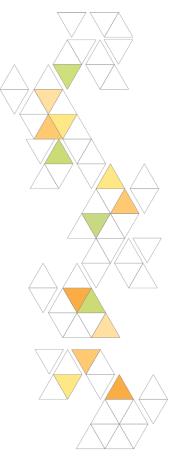
While digital coordination can provide greater flexibility to many workers and potentially increase economic productivity and economic growth rates, it breaks down traditional notions of stable and predictable jobs, transforms power dynamics, and can drive even greater wealth and income inequalities. Platforms supported by a handful of investors and employing a tiny workforce can generate enormous returns for a few while depriving many of the key assets, dignity, and protections they need.

Global Labor Arbitrage

As a result of globalization, labor markets in the US and many European countries have become more integrated, putting workers in direct competition with their lower-wage counterparts worldwide. While globalization has promoted economic growth globally and decreased wage gaps between higher- and lower-income countries, it has also led to the shrinking bargaining power of workers, outsourcing and disappearance of many jobs, and wage stagnation in the US. The growth of digital coordination economies takes global labor integration and arbitrage to a new level. It enables manufacturers, services, and knowledge firms to hire piecemeal workers on platforms like Upwork, BetterHelp, Skooli, where editors, coders, translators, tutors, and consultants from around the world can bid against each other to secure tasks. Over the long term, this is likely to lead to greater convergence in wages globally. Still, in the short term, it puts downward pressure on wages, even in occupations traditionally considered higher paid and requiring more advanced degrees.
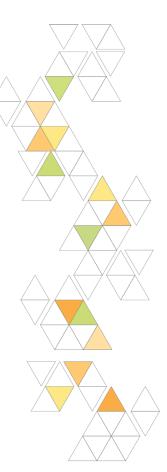
Financialization

At its simplest, financialization involves using money to make money. Financialization establishes the primacy of financial institutions, financial considerations, and financial actors in all aspects of life in a society. As a result, the financial sector receives outsized rewards at the expense of sectors that actually produce real goods and services. It leads to increased income and wealth inequalities since rewards go to investors and large shareholders at the expense of wage earners. Financialization entrenches such inequalities as those with initial access to financial capital accrue greater returns while those without it tend to fall farther and farther behind. Furthermore, financialization has a profound effect on most other non-economic aspects of our daily lives as financial terms and metrics come to dominate our vocabulary and values. It frames how we set performance goals and measure success in non-business enterprises—the arts, science, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. Sociologist Max Haiven defines financialization as the dispersion of financial ideas into mundane daily life. He argues that financialization "is not merely an economic and political shift; it is also a socio-cultural one."[1]

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1. Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life
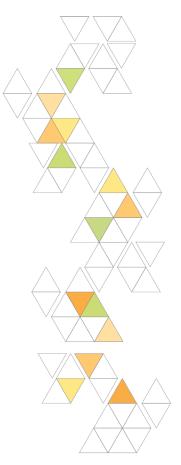
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Financialization (cont.)

A new generation of technologies makes it possible for people to come together and create things never thought possible before, such as a vast open digital encyclopedia. These same technologies undermine traditional notions of jobs, industry boundaries, and market power, leading to more incredible wealth and income inequalities. Many Institutions, laws, regulatory regimes, social norms, and expectations of the previous era are not suited to the new reality. Today they are failing to deliver shared prosperity for vast swaths of the population, exacerbating racial wealth inequalities and fueling greater levels of polarization. This is taking place amid a deepening climate crisis, which demands new forms of enterprise and collective action.

And herein lies the opportunity. The enterprises we create are not pre-ordained. They are a product of our actions. Digital technologies' shape and impact are based on the social and economic framework we build around them. We can shape them to achieve equity.

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EQUITABLE GLOSSARY
Words to spark experiments

To envision a world of equitable enterprise in the digital era, we need a vocabulary to describe new dilemmas and approaches.
We also need to slay some zombie ideas–ideas that have been killed by evidence but refuse to die. Below is a glossary of key terms that can spark our imagination as we embark on new experiments. Several of these come from our advisory team of academics, theorists, thought leaders, and on-the-ground activists.

cooperative: an enterprise organized to democratically distribute rewards to workers, consumers, and/or producers. *A union co-op is a partnership between worker cooperatives and unions* that secure worker interests across many different enterprises.[2]

digital distributism: leveraging both the digital infrastructure and the participatory ethos of the digital environment to allow for community and worker ownership of the means of production. In a distributive economy, production is collaborative, investment is organized as a form of crowdfunding, and *the scale of enterprise is strategically bounded.* (See subsidiarity, page 14.)[3]

durable dominance: the tendency for dominant groups, actors, or ideas to retain their positions of authority and power even as the pool of contenders grows—primarily due to processes for directing mass attention in large systems.[4] See *mass attention, page 14.*

federated scale: the organization of small, local, autonomous units of enterprise—often cooperative—into a larger community or network of enterprises to benefit from the strengths of small, local endeavors at larger scales. Unlike aggregation, replication, or centralization at scale, federation focuses on autonomy and cooperation.

2. For a history of African American cooperatives, see Jessica Gordon Nembhard's book *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. .

3. For more on digital distributism, see Douglas Rushkoff's book *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus*

4. Johan S. G. Chu. 2018. A theory of durable dominance. Strategy Science, 3: 498–512.

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fissured work: various types of contracting, outsourcing, and franchising relationships in which workers perform their duties through loose networks of intermediaries or as free agents instead of directly for the corporations that ultimately profit from their labor. Fissured workers are often monitored and controlled as closely as any regular employee, but they do not enjoy labor protections, stock ownership rights, and many other benefits of traditional employees. Fissured work may offer personal flexibility but little organizational commitment or liability on the employer's part.[5]

interoperability: the ability to plug pieces of one system into another, lowering switching costs for users while enabling innovation and diverse participation in the system. There are three kinds of interoperability: *adversarial,* where outsiders reverse-engineer a system to create plug-ins for competing devices and services[6]; *cooperative,* where people agree to standards that let many different devices and services plug into the system; and *indifferent,* where plug-ins work without substantially impacting other parts of the system. Adversarial interoperability has been primarily blocked by digital systems' *terms of service* that make it a crime to create plug-ins or even to repair them.

labor monopsony: a market for workers in which a single employer is the primary buyer of labor. A labor monopsony can be bounded by trade or geography—for example, a company town. It can also be dominated by a union or some other institution of collective bargaining—for example, a union town.

labor reclassification: a strategy for changing the terms of employment of workers in a way that changes the responsibilities of their employers under the law, such as reclassifying employees as contractors who must pay for their own Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment insurance.

lumpy organizing: an organizing strategy that emphasizes a mix of dominant and non-dominant organizations, social support for small-scale local issues, and shared platforms for deliberation and action—all built on best practices for directing mass attention in a digitally connected world.

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5. See David Weil's *The Fissured Workplace*

6. See Cory Doctorow's writing on interoperability here, here, and here.

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weapons of mass attention direction: various tools and technologies, from search engines to algorithmic recommendation and ranking services that can direct the attention of large networks of people to instigate social change and channel profits. Social media platforms serve as platforms for directing such attention by using "likes," "clicks," and other engagement mechanisms.[7]

natural monopoly: a situation that occurs when there is only one firm in an industry—typically because of high fixed costs that make it impractical to have more than one firm producing the good. Tap water is an example of a natural monopoly. With appropriate regulation and government oversight, natural monopolies can offer a foundation for both cooperation and competitive innovation.

predatory inclusion: practices and policies that exploit traditionally marginalized groups, such as predatory debt practices in Black communities that expand high-interest loans under the guise of providing credit for communities that have historically been discriminated against.[8]

social emergency: a legal, political, or cultural threat to the well-being of an entire community, comparable to extreme weather events that prompt emergency responses from both governments and local actors. Examples include state-sanctioned violence against communities of color, refugee and migrant abuse, and militarization of hate groups.[9]

subsidiarity: a prescription for social organization in which the goal is to scale activities or entities to be as small or as big as they need to be to accomplish their functions—but no bigger or smaller.

Institutional terroir: traditionally, the distinctive taste of a wine that results from the combination of environmental factors in the region where it is produced—but applicable here as the social, political, cultural, historical, institutional, resource endowment, and regulatory environments in which private enterprises are started and operate.[10]

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7. See: Johan S. G. Chu & Sung-Chul Noh. May 2021. Weapons of mass attention direction: Durable dominance in the Korean popular music industry. Northwestern University working paper.

8. For more information on predatory inclusion, see Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership

9. Read a more in-depth definition of social emergency by Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine here and watch Kenneth discuss social emergencies here.

10. Jerry Davis discusses the particularities of American institutional terroir here.

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EQUITABLE ENTERPRISE
Three strategies, hundreds of experiments

In this moment of digital transformation and vast wealth inequality, how do we begin to imagine experiments that could lead to more equitable enterprise—toward better work, stronger communities, and systems of governance that meet the needs of all community members?
How do we create a new terroir for an equitable enterprise?

If we fall back on old narratives, answers to these questions may divide us. Big government vs. individual initiative. Public goods vs. private goods. Progress vs. stability. These are polarizing stories.

But in the spirit of lumpy organizing (that is, mixing scales and modes of participation), we might start instead from a blend of three core strategies: regulating, opting out, and cooperating. These strategies involve different mechanisms–legal and punitive in the case of regulation, voluntary exit from existing structures or deliberate creation of alternative ones in the case of opting out, and suasion or aggregation of voice and power to change prevailing models in the case of cooperation. Think of them as design templates for equitable interventions that cut across our narrative divisions and help us begin to design bold new experiments in emerging zones of possibility.

regulate:
Limit abuse and enable equitable participation

Regulations are a starting place for establishing a new terroir that supports more equitable enterprise. They are the agreements we hold and turn into code—whether it's legal code or the digital code embodied in new platforms.

In today's world, wealth and technology are running ahead of the law. They are setting new norms in ungoverned territory by protecting the interests of leading-edge innovators over the communities that are building them. The vast expansion of digital IP rights, terms of service agreements, and reclassification of platform workers as contractors are all cultivating a terroir of red-flag inequality.

In this critical moment, we need to find wide-reaching legal levers—such as guaranteed interoperability or the right to repair—to avoid dominance by a few tech giants. We need to imagine new legal infrastructures that support more cooperative forms of organization, such as the proposed Cooperative Economy Act in California that seeks to spur the growth of cooperative contractors. We need to reinvent the framework for worker benefits to ensure that health care, disability insurance, and retirement benefits accrue across platforms and "gigs." We need to rethink the kinds of funds that can support these benefits.

In short, we need to check the runaway power of a few "digital colonists" and build the basic legal and organizational infrastructure for broad-based, cooperative, democratic, and equitable development of the emerging digital terroir.

opt out:
Disrupt and redefine

Underlying the obvious inequalities of today's economic and social systems are layers of cultural beliefs reinforcing those inequalities. Work is the path to wealth and freedom. Ownership rights naturally pass from parent to child. Education gives everyone an equal opportunity to compete for wealth and well-being. Debt is the result of poor economic decisions.[11]

In a crisis of inequality, these cultural assumptions deserve a second look, and opt-out strategies zero in on this process of disruption and redefinition. But in practice, opt-out strategies don't simply say "No" to existing cultural norms and values. They upend commonly held but faulty assumptions and show how cultural adaptations and innovations can quickly move markets and societies to respond to looming crises—often in unexpected and inventive ways. Co-opting, hacking, squatting, and appropriation are all ways of redefining the culture by opting out of what's not working. They take on intractable problems, and even if their experiments may seem unpalatable or unsustainable, or naïve, they often hold the outlines of an emerging future.

Opting out is a fertile, if uncomfortable, ground of cultural innovation. As such, these strategies may be essential to building a new and more equitable terroir of enterprise.

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11. Astra Taylor is working to change narratives around debt.

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cooperate:
Tap deep streams of solidarity

Finally, we come to cooperative strategies. If regulation is about reimagining the institutional and technological underpinnings of enterprise and opting out is about cultural transformation, cooperation takes us deeper still into our human instincts as a species.

Cooperation leverages the power of us as actors in a complex system. These strategies deepen our connections. They shine a light on our interdependencies and turn them into strengths rather than vulnerabilities. They make us smarter. They do this through conscientious and codified commitments to shared resources, shared learning, and shared decision-making. They build community wealth, not just individual wealth.

Cooperative enterprises scale in different ways than their competitive counterparts. While competitive enterprises typically grow by creating hierarchies and pyramids that benefit a few at the top, cooperative enterprises grow in clusters of communities. These clusters connect more like the root systems of an old-growth forest than the command-and-control systems of an advancing army.[12] They are thus inherently bottom-up in their orientation. They privilege solidarity in the face of any social emergency.

The path to a more equitable future, then, is a blend of experiments that build literacy in these three strategies to cultivate a new terroir for our 21st-century enterprise.

12. Read Suntae Kim and Ana Kim's take on going viral vs. growing like an oak tree here.

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MAP STRUCTURE AND LEGEND

EQUITABLE ENTERPRISE MAP

EMERGING ZONES OF POSSIBILiTY
Six different levers we can activate in order to create more equitable enterprises

CORE STRATEGIES
Three for each Zone of Possibility:
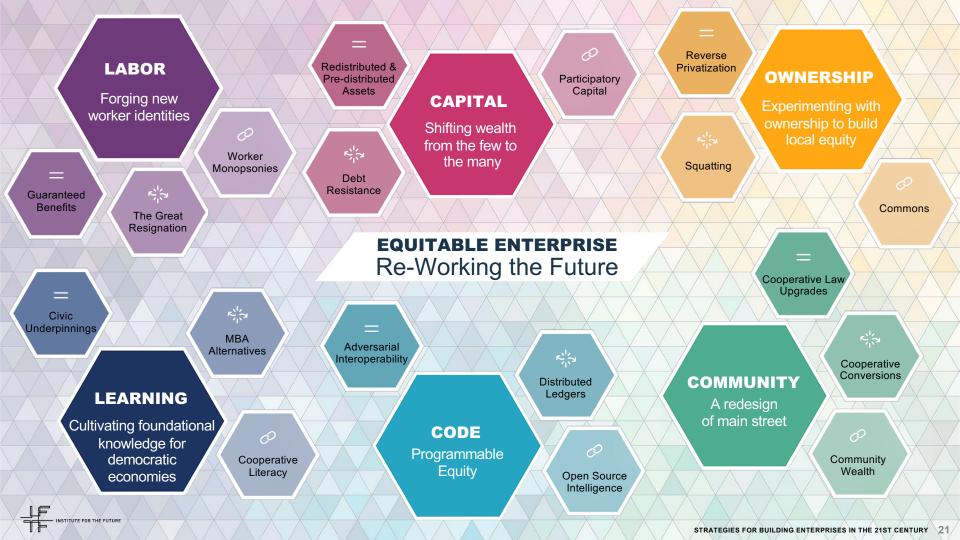Regulating, Opting Out, Collaborating
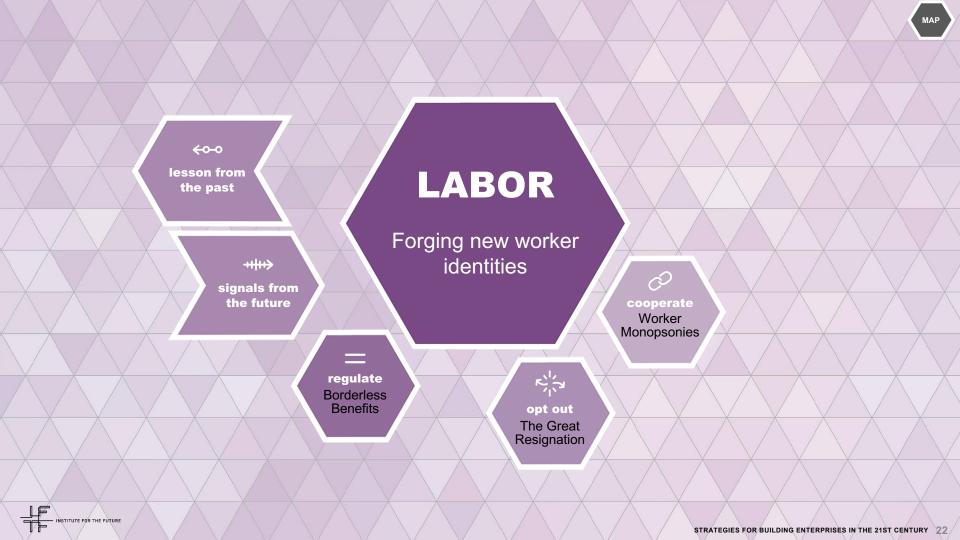
LESSONS FROM THE PAST

SIGNALS FROM THE FUTURE

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LABOR
Forging new worker identities

Redistributed & Pre-distributed Assets

CAPITAL
Shifting wealth from the few to the many

Participatory Capital

Reverse Privatization

OWNERSHIP
Experimenting with ownership to build local equity

Worker Monopsonies

Debt Resistance

Squatting

Commons

Guaranteed Benefits

The Great Resignation

EQUITABLE ENTERPRISE
Re-Working the Future

Cooperative Law Upgrades

Civic Underpinnings

MBA Alternatives

Adversarial Interoperability

Distributed Ledgers

COMMUNITY
A redesign of main street

Cooperative Conversions

LEARNING
Cultivating foundational knowledge for democratic economies

Cooperative Literacy

CODE
Programmable Equity

Open Source Intelligence

Community Wealth

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LABOR

Forging new worker identities

lesson from the past

signals from the future

regulate
Borderless Benefits

opt out
The Great Resignation

cooperate
Worker Monopsonies

ZONE OF POSSIBILITY
LABOR

Forging new worker identities

Worker identity is fundamental to worker equity: management vs. labor; employee vs. contractor; low-wage vs. high-wage; documented vs. undocumented; local vs. remote. These dichotomous ways of thinking about workers have set pay scales, delineated tracks for advancement, and reinforced the advantages of one class over another. They have defined entire geographies of promise and despair, often laying the bricks for what a workable community is and what a failed region looks like.

Today, however, these identities are up for grabs. As the global digital economy intersects a pandemic and cuts a disruptive path through many occupations, new classes of workers seek fresh opportunities and need adaptive protections. Frontline workers, for example, have emerged as a new category with a shared identity that might empower themselves and their trades in new ways. Yet even as these new worker identities emerge, many question the very premise that work should define a person's life.

Experiments that seek to build more equitable enterprise will thus start with these new ideas about work and workers and the pathways to forging them in innovative and more equitable ways.

regulate

Guaranteed Benefits

Benefits, a necessary part of the social safety network, matter in workers' lives. Access to benefits like healthcare and disability protections that are not provided through an employer gives workers more power in the workplace and more freedom to choose their career paths. Today, the system of employer-sponsored benefits, coupled with a migratory and gig-dependent workforce, makes it even more difficult to assure worker equity. Forward-looking experiments like universal basic income (UBI) and universal benefits seek to decouple worker protections from the borders and boundaries of their work identities—with the surprising result that their workforce participation actually improves.

opt out

The Great Resignation

Post-pandemic American workers have been resigning from their jobs in record numbers in what some have called a general strike. But this Great Resignation may be part of a bigger worldwide movement to de-legitimize the productivity-driven middle-class work ethic of "work to the point of self-harm." Consider the tang ping (or "lie flat") movement among Asian millennials or projects like the Nap Ministry that recasts rest as reparations for centuries of sleep deprivation in Black communities. Meanwhile, so-called neopeasants echo the "Back to the Land" movement of the 1970s, rejecting a "culture of excess" in favor of self-sustaining lifestyles in cities and suburbs.

cooperate

Worker Monopsonies

America is no stranger to company or union towns. But recent experiments combine traditional unions with worker-owned cooperatives to test the potential of local worker monopsonies—where worker-owned organizations become the employer of record for local trade union members. These latter-day guilds then supply their workers to local industries, displacing generic gig platforms as a staffing agency and securing worker benefits. For example, the NursesCan platform cooperative is an employee-owned organization of SEIU-UHW-licensed vocational nurses in Southern California that partners with local clinics to improve community health care.

lessons from the past

Writer's Guild of America-West (WGA)

Most screenwriters work under contracts with media corporations that are members of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). In 2007, the WGA-West went on strike against the AMPTP with what proved to be very forward-looking demands for royalties on streaming media. They were supported by other guilds and unions, including the Writer's Guild of America-East, the UK Writer's Guild, SEIU, Teamsters, and well-known performers. After 100 days, during which the strike resulted in substantial economic, advertising, and viewership impacts on the industry, the Guild won its internet media demands and a 3 to 3.4% pay raise. In this case, the Guild functioned as a trade monopsony and defined the changing boundaries of the trade.
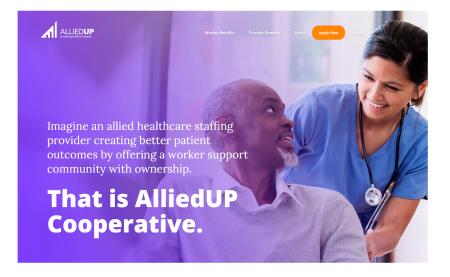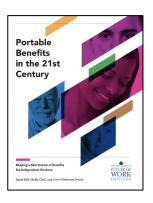
signals for the future

AlliedUp

Incubated in Service Employees International Union (SEIU), AlliedUp is a worker-owned platform for healthcare staffing headquartered in Southern California and serves the state's five largest metro areas. With growing on-demand employment in the healthcare industry, AlliedUp offers the advantages of permanent employment in a union-organized, worker-owned cooperative with democratic governance. Unlike many gig platforms, it promises its members training in career pathways, economic mobility, long-term wealth building, and a support community that ultimately aims to improve health care and health outcomes. Once-a-month worker-owner training provides a path to board leadership—with a particular emphasis on diversity.

ALLIEDUP
creating positive futures

Worker Benefits   Provider Benefits   About   Apply Now   Log In

Imagine an allied healthcare staffing provider creating better patient outcomes by offering a worker support community with ownership.

That is AlliedUP Cooperative.

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Aspen Roadmap for Portable Benefits decouples the safety net from corporations, platforms, and places.
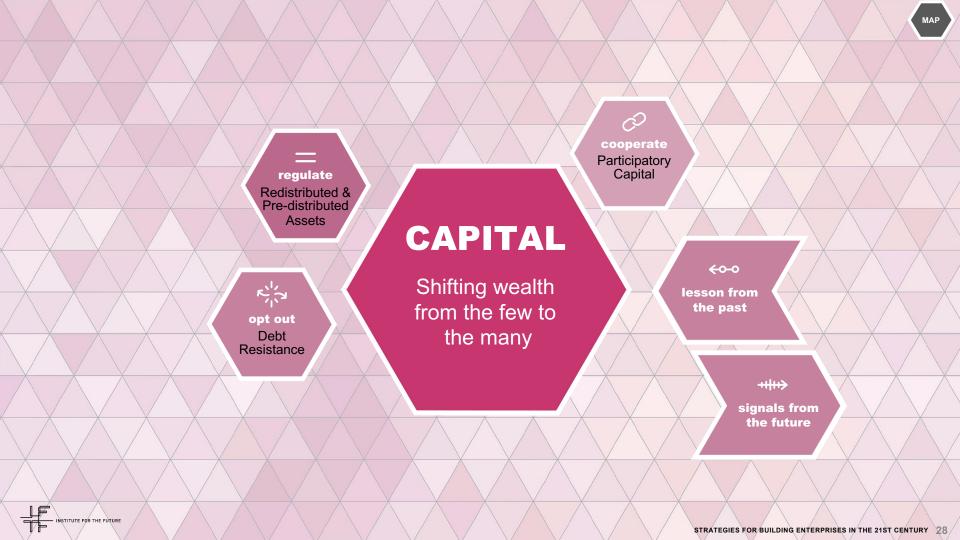
Black Power Naps redresses historical sleep deprivation of enslaved workers—and the persistent "sleep gap" in Black communities.

NursesCan Cooperative partners with trade unions to become a worker-owned platform for LVN "gigs" in health clinics.

regulate
Redistributed &
Pre-distributed
Assets

cooperate
Participatory
Capital

CAPITAL

Shifting wealth
from the few to
the many

opt out
Debt
Resistance

**lesson from
the past**

**signals from
the future**

ZONE OF POSSIBILITY
CAPITAL

Shifting wealth from the few to the many

Capital is essential for building wealth or starting a business, but Americans have vastly different opportunities to access and control capital. Various policies have allowed the wealthiest Americans to hoard and accumulate great stores of assets while making it difficult for most Americans to hold any meaningful assets at all. Since 1964 (and accelerating since 1982), the top marginal tax rate has fallen precipitously in the U.S., from a high of 91% in 1963 to 37% today. In addition, compensatory norms that award corporate executives exorbitant stock incentives compound the economic inequality we see today. From 1978 to 2020, CEO compensation rose 970%, while average worker pay increased by 18% in the same period. For most Americans, work is no longer a path to economic security, wealth building, and asset accumulation that can benefit future generations.

These inequalities of capital are even starker for Black Americans, who have been excluded from wealth-building opportunities for centuries. Denied many of the benefits provided by New Deal legislation and the GI bill and subject to decades of redlining, the median Black family today has one-tenth the amount of wealth as the median white family. The obstacles that BIPOC communities face in accessing capital and wealth-building opportunities persist today; as the social safety net continues to shrink, these individuals continue to be overrepresented in low-wage jobs, subject to predatory and discriminatory lending practices and overburdened by debt. It is also harder for BIPOC and female entrepreneurs to secure venture capital funding. In 2020, women-founded companies received only 2.3% of all venture money, while only 2.4% of funding was allocated to Black and Latinx founders between 2015 and 2020.

MAP

CAPITAL

regulate

opt out

cooperate

Redistributed & Pre-distributed Assets

Economic inequality can't be solved by better wages alone. Broad access to capital and other assets is essential. Proposals to redistribute wealth are on the table, including reparations for historically excluded communities. Evanston, Illinois has approved a policy granting Black residents $25,000 to cover home down payments. Unlike redistribution, pre-distribution prevents unequal outcomes from occurring, and includes universal or sovereign funds for all and individual development accounts, to give access to assets independent of work status.

Debt Resistance

The statistics: 77% of US households have consumer debt, and 40% use credit cards to cover basic needs like food, clothing, heat, and water. Medical debt afflicts 62% of households, while student debt stands at $1.8 trillion. Given a discriminatory justice system, bail bonds inflict disproportionate debt on people of color. Remedies range from legislation to cancel federal student loan debt to efforts like the Rolling Jubilee to buy portfolios of debt and simply erase that debt, to the creation of debtors' unions, like the Debt Collective that is fighting to cancel debts, change the debt economy, and protect the interests of debtors.

Participatory Capital

Extreme wealth imbalances have spurred a wide range of innovations in the way people participate in capital funds and the institutions that manage them. The proposed donor-based Universal Fund, assures that everyone has a baseline investment at age 18. GrowFund allows individuals to grow their charitable funds in the marketplace and directing grants to causes they care about. Meanwhile, public banks provide a community-owned alternative to traditional banks. They offer familiar banking services and credit at cost while using dividends to invest in community infrastructure and services.

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lessons from the past

CMA People's Credit Union

In 1927, a People's Credit Union was established as part of a larger program of the Colored Merchants Association, which built a financial and advertising infrastructure for independent Black community grocers. At the time, the credit union was the only Black financial institution chartered in New York City. During the early years of the depression, it continued to provide year-over-year growth—with dividends of 6% in 1932—to its 250 members. In 1930, the more extensive CMA network included 253 member stores with chapters in Manhattan, Tulsa, Winston-Salem, Montgomery, and Omaha, with a CMA-label warehouse in New York.

OFFICERS OF THE NATIONAL NEGRO BUSINESS LEAGUE, AT INDIANAPOLIS IN 1904.

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signals for the future

Public Banking Institute

The Public Banking Institute works to expand public banking at all levels of government. Public banks are community-owned, with a mission to serve the public interest rather than the interests of bank executives, owners, and shareholders. They can offer banking services and credit at cost, for example, with a California proposal for a CalAccount program to provide zero-fee accounts for the unbanked. With lower interest rates and dividends paid back to the community, public banks enable governments to invest more in community infrastructure and services, building strong local economies.
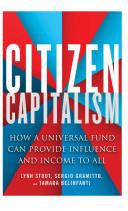
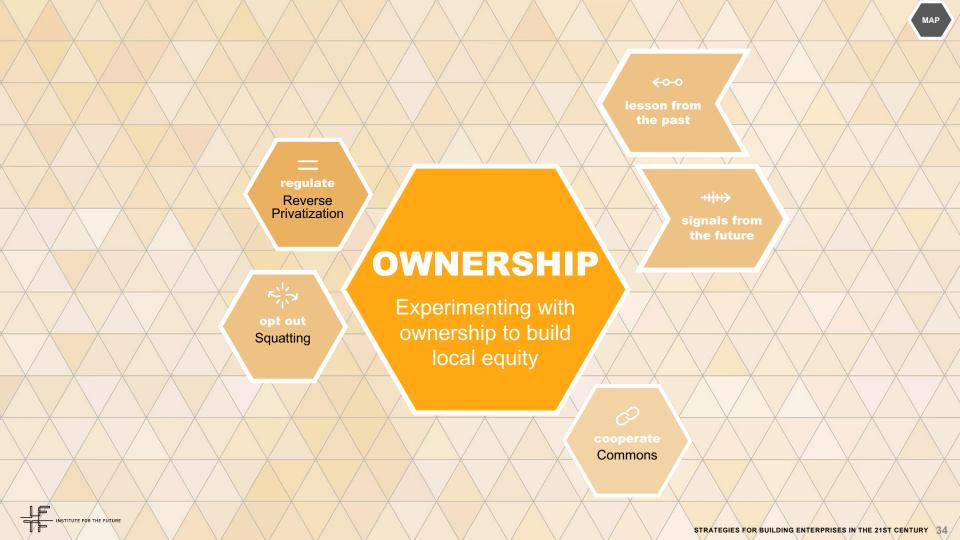Ban Billionaires questions the ethics of personal monopolies of capital.

Debt Collective is a debtors union fighting to cancel debt at scale.

A Universal Fund is a proposal for a national mutual fund for everyone over 18.

OWNERSHIP

Experimenting with ownership to build local equity

regulate
Reverse Privatization

opt out
Squatting

lesson from the past

signals from the future

cooperate
Commons

MAP

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

ZONE OF POSSIBILITY

OWNERSHIP

Experimenting with
ownership to build
local equity

Inequality seems irrevocably linked to asset ownership, and debates about the best arrangements for ownership often focus on two choices: private vs. public. Should forests, infrastructure, or even housing be privately owned or managed as a public resource? Certainly, the trend in the past fifty years in the US has been increasing privatization of all kinds of assets—natural, digital, and social. This privatization increases inequalities in everything from income and wealth to health and freedom.

Yet a third path is often neglected in this debate: the path of cooperative or shared ownership. This path can be formalized, with rules of cooperative ownership and management, or informal, as in the case of squatting and informal commons.

Today's most exciting ownership experiments often start from a sense of place. Whether it's cooperative housing or public kitchens or proposals for public maker libraries with equipment and resources for artisan work, these experiments call people together in the places that matter most to them—and give them tools for rethinking ways to share those spaces.

Like work, ownership can shape people's subjectivities and social identities. Ownership also brings up important questions, such as "Who, as an owner, has a rightful claim to a resource?" and "Who has a voice in governing it?"

regulate

opt out

cooperate

Reverse Privatization

While privatized systems for managed health care, education, prisons, and utilities grew worldwide since the 1980s, the past decade shows signs of reversal. In 2011, Indianapolis transferred its water and waste systems to Citizens Energy Group, a non-profit trust initially founded in 1887 as the Consumers Gas Trust. Over the past decade, citizens from Austin to Boulder to Sacramento have repurchased their electric grids to re-communalize utilities and make them more sustainable. De-privatization is emerging as a municipal strategy to respond to widespread climate effects, environmental degradation, and social justice issues.

Squatting

We define squatting as communities or individuals making productive use of idle or under-utilized assets. Squatting has been described as the "oldest mode of tenure." It may be voluntary—as in the case of some street cultures—or involuntary, as people are forced out of homes by disasters, development, or poverty. Squats may also be political. The 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement and the 2020 "Autonomous Zone" in Seattle are examples of temporary squats that blend more egalitarian forms of ownership and governance. Some squats are self-managed social centers, like the [freespace] network, using appropriated spaces or paying a nominal fee for an unmarketable space.

Commons

Historically, commons were resources shared and managed in common by a local community. As many natural commons have been enclosed by private or state ownership, land trusts, land banks, and other protections have emerged to preserve them. At the same time, new commons have also emerged: digital commons (such as Wikipedia), urban commons, and industrial commons. Even though these commons often cross familiar borders, they can also benefit specific geographies, as in the Mondragon federation of Spain or the Emilia Romagna region of Italy, where co-ops produce one-third of its GDP. Ultimately, the entire planet can be seen as a commons that urgently needs collective stewardship.

lessons from the past

Urban Homesteading Assistance

Urban Homesteading Assistance Board—UHAB—was founded in New York City in 1974 as a nonprofit organization, partnering with squatters and low-income tenants to turn abandoned or foreclosed properties into cooperatives, recognizing them as legitimate owners. UHAB continues to oversee the rehabilitation of cooperatively owned buildings and the resale policies, including a profit cap and income restrictions for buyers. UHAB also negotiated a 40-year property tax break for the squatters.

signals for the future

Metropoliz

Metropoliz is a squatter-occupied complex in a former salami factory in Rome. It was initially squatted by housing activists and the Romani rights organization known as Popica. It is currently home to about 200 squatters of diverse nationalities and a free art gallery known as the Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere (MAAM). It is now working with COMMONStudio on a project known as the Metropoliz Future Forest, an experiment in "accelerating the role of novel ecosystems" in the urban landscape.

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

The Delco county jail in Pennsylvania canceled its contract with the Florida-based GEO Group to deprivatize the facility.
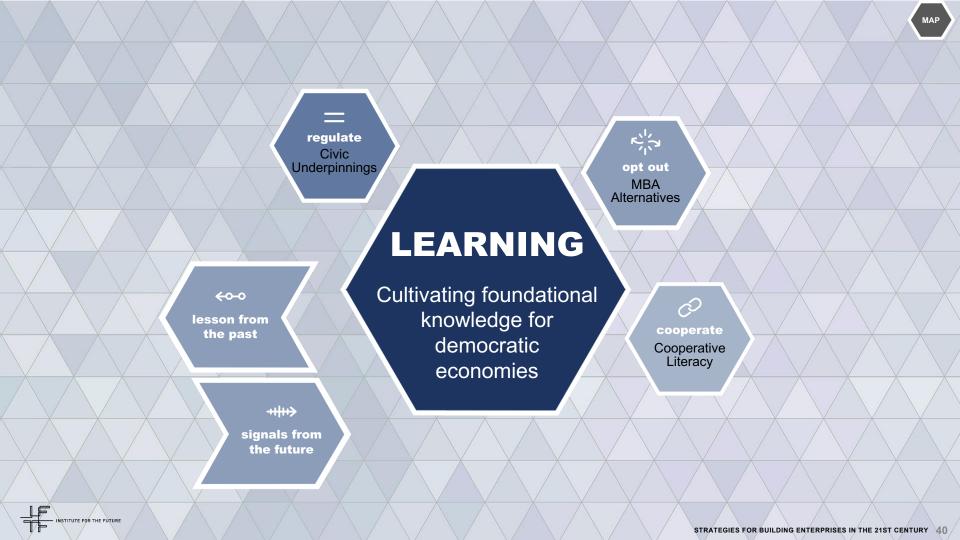

The Corcoran Five Group of five migrant families in Minneapolis won a tenant lawsuit with funds to create a tenant-run co-op.

The Industrial Commons scales social enterprises and industrial cooperatives to build a geographical commons in North Carolina.

regulate
Civic Underpinnings

opt out
MBA Alternatives

LEARNING

Cultivating foundational knowledge for democratic economies

lesson from the past

cooperate
Cooperative Literacy

signals from the future

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

ZONE OF POSSIBILITY

LEARNING

Cultivating foundational knowledge for democratic economies

For decades, policymakers and business leaders have called on educational institutions to produce graduates with skills and knowledge suited to today's industrial needs. Upskilling and training are seen as pathways to greater socio-economic mobility, particularly for BIPOC people—a way to overcome income and wealth inequalities. However, while education is valuable for many reasons, from better health and more tolerant and cohesive communities to higher levels of trust, historical data shows that these efforts have not done much to improve economic well-being in communities of color. Furthermore, upskilling the workforce offers little promise when the number of "good jobs" is declining and many graduates end up in contingent, insecure, asset-poor jobs. This is the situation many find themselves in today.

At the same time, there is a dearth of programs that teach students the fundamentals of building more equitable economies and equitable enterprises, such as co-ops, community trusts, and limited-profit companies. The fix? Shift the focus of business and other professional education programs from trade skills to learning the tools and practices of cooperative, democratic enterprise. These lessons might even be present in economics or civics courses from high school through college. Communities, in turn, could create platforms for their members to test, debate, and hone the democratic and political processes that can underwrite them.

Experiments in learning may ultimately change how enterprises work because they won't be driven by competition and profit. In addition, they may offer alternatives that promote equitable rules of engagement and community wealth creation.

MAP

LEARNING

regulate

opt out

cooperate

Civic Underpinnings

Democratic processes drive equitable enterprise and worker empowerment. California's Department of Education recently commissioned a task force on K-12 Civic Learning. It concluded that "Civic learning done right helps teach children skills they need for the 21st-century workplace, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, initiative, and entrepreneurism." Done right means building participatory skills and experiential learning, possibly through so-called municipalist platforms for participatory budgeting and deliberative democracy.

MBA Alternatives

One way to change the toxic terroir of enterprise is to opt out of today's "MBA industry" of about 13,000 business schools worldwide. Business schools teach people how to make profits. As such, they foster short-termism and stoke an individualist consumer culture that deprives communities of shared civic and cultural resources and now, arguably, threatens the future of humans on the planet. Indeed, there is even evidence that the appointment of managers with a business degree reduce their employees' wages. Alternative curricula might include ways to explicitly design for equitable enterprise—for example, using design thinking to redesign the food industry for equity, as taught by Michigan Ross School of Business professor Jerry Davis.

Cooperative Literacy

The history of the African American cooperative movements shows that deep investments in learning—from study groups to tours of co-ops to hands-on experiences—are essential to building successful co-ops and larger democratic economies. And this learning starts early, in the K-12 grades. An example: Crenshaw High School's Food from the 'Hood co-op in Los Angeles. This cooperative grew from a school garden to a student-owned produce co-op and ultimately a salad dressing business. The cooperative donated at least 50% of its profits to a college scholarship program, granting more than $180,000 to 77 students over ten years.

lessons from the past

Young Negroes Cooperative League

In 1930, the Young Negroes Cooperative League launched a five-year plan to study cooperative economics. The plan included reading lists, conferences, and a national tour to study local economic problems and solutions in different communities and share the experiences of Black cooperatives. They created YNCL councils in these communities, with weekly meetings to encourage discussion of consumer cooperatives in particular.

Ella Baker, National Director

George Schuyler, President
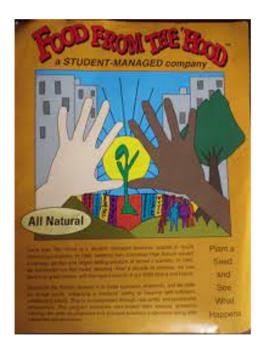
signals for the future

Food from the 'Hood

Numerous school-based cooperative businesses have demonstrated the impact of cooperative entrepreneurship on individual student learning and the economic health of their communities. A prime example is the Food from the 'Hood cooperative developed at Crenshaw High School in South Central Los Angeles. The project began after the Watts rebellion as a school garden. The students then began selling their produce in a farmers' market, eventually developing a business plan for manufacturing and selling salad dressing made from that produce. They donated at least 50% of their profits to college scholarships, investing more than $180,000 in 77 students over ten years.

California Task Force on Civic Learning advocates K-12 skill-building in critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, initiative, and entrepreneurism.
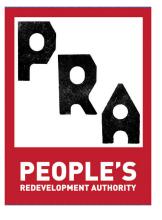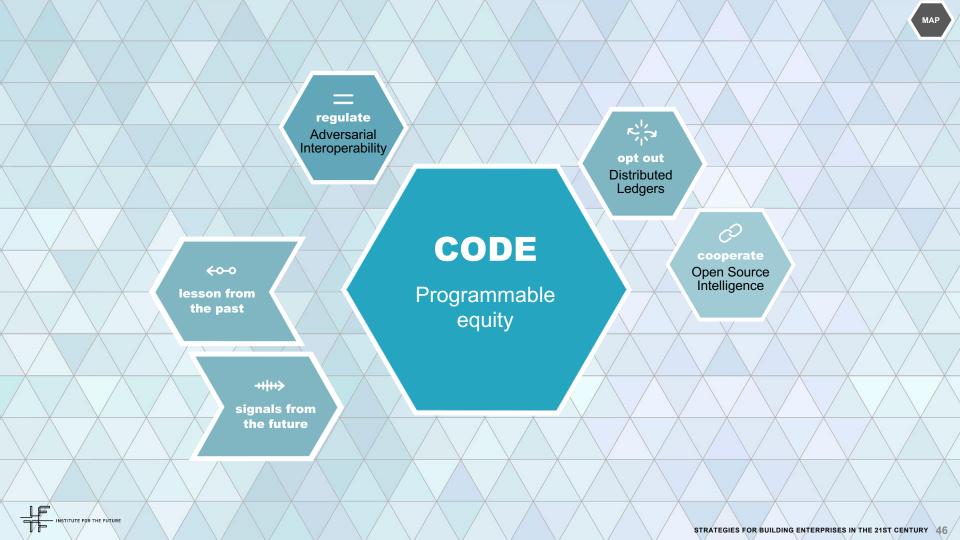

+IMPACT STUDIO: Designing for Equitable Enterprise uses design thinking to imagine an equitable food industry.

DS4SI People's Redevelopment Authority is a collaborative learning space to build public knowledge of grassroots urban development at scale.

regulate
Adversarial Interoperability

opt out
Distributed Ledgers

CODE

Programmable equity

lesson from the past

cooperate
Open Source Intelligence

signals from the future

ZONE OF POSSIBILITY

CODE

Programmable equity

Computing has become the universal infrastructure—a foundation of data, networks, and platforms that enables nearly every aspect of human enterprise. That foundation can be coded for the benefit of the many or the advantage of a few. Today, a few elites have gained power and enormous economic rewards as a result of three fallacies: 1) that key functions (such as search and user surveillance) are inseparable; 2) that high switching costs make tech monopolies inevitable; and 3) that due to the obscurity of code, those who control it are indomitable.

The fast pace of tech development has allowed big tech players to normalize these fallacies, code them into systems, and then legislate them into realities—for example, through IP laws, contracts, and terms of service. This first-mover advantage, along with the regulations that support it, leads to what author and tech activist Cory Doctorow has termed peak indifference—when people who have denied an urgent problem begin to self-radicalize, not because of activists or public education, but because the problem has caught up with them, personally.

The battle for equity thus has to be fought on two fronts: experiments with the code itself to build equity into our foundational systems and, at the same time, legal support for these experiments to gain traction in the face of rapid monopolization of computing innovations.

MAP

CODE

regulate

opt out

cooperate

Adversarial Interoperability

The success of the global network depends on the interoperability of a large number of programs and the data they employ. Although early network services and technologies championed open systems, commercialization has led today's tech leaders to favor systems that are licensed (usually for a fee). Enter adversarial interoperability: products and services that work with other systems without the permission of the owners. Adversarial interoperability lowers switching costs, and promotes competition, innovation, diversity, and local fit but has been restricted by legislation that favors big tech companies. What's needed? Technical and legal innovations that undercut these restrictions.

Distributed Ledgers

Distributed ledgers underpin cryptocurrencies, NFTs (non-fungible tokens), and a host of experiments in distributed organizations, direct and liquid democracy, and voting. The technology has led cities like Miami to experiment with crypto investment funds to fund city projects. Cryptocurrency-based foundations attract investors with pro-social funds. Distributed ledgers can also create distributed autonomous coops—these strategies opt-out of traditional fiat currencies to find new ways to decentralize power and wealth. But cryptocurrencies have also created a new class of wealth holders who can "capture governments" for their own interests. As with other technologies, regulation is trailing innovation—with potentially dangerous social outcomes.

Open Source Intelligence

Most intelligence agencies and criminal justice organizations are limited by jurisdictional boundaries while crime and corruption are not. Open-source intelligence and independent investigative journalism take on investigations that state agencies can't or won't—sometimes because they themselves are corrupt. Open-source intelligence uses platforms that leverage the wisdom of crowds: search engines, transparency platforms, identity graphs, and other AI-enabled analytical tools. These tools empower collaborative global investigations through network organizations such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and Bellingcat.

lessons from the past

Internet Archive

In 1995, the Internet Archive was founded as a digital library with universal access to "all knowledge." According to Wikipedia, IA's digital vault now holds over 34 million books, 7.4 million movies, videos, TV shows, 797,000 software programs, 13,999,923 audio files, 4.1 million images, and 640 billion web pages collected by its web crawler, the Wayback Machine. IA faces the fundamental challenge of how copyright law created for one technology applies to another—and whether or not IA has the right to "lend" copied content, one copy at a time, as most libraries do.

INTERNET ARCHIVE

WayBack Machine

signals for the future

OCCRP ALEPH

The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project is a collaborative of 150 journalists working in 30 countries. As co-founder Paul Radu explains, "We realized that this was the time to experiment, to take investigative journalism to a cross-border level where the latest technologies would help reporters match both the creativity and almost unlimited resources of organized crime and corrupt leaders." To this end, OCCRP created the open-source data platform ALEPH to track white-collar crime by "following the money." The technology has helped investigators in such explosive investigations as the Panama Papers and Pandora Papers that seek to unmask global criminal enterprise.

The ACCESS Act (HR-3849) proposes data portability and interoperable interfaces to reduce switching costs for social media users.

The DisCO Manifesto envisions a future of distributed cooperative organizations using distributed ledger technologies.

The SWARM Project uses a cloud-sourcing model + AI to develop different "takes" and avoid bias in group investigations.

lesson from
the past

signals from
the future

COMMUNITY

A redesign of
main street

regulate
Cooperative
Law Upgrades

opt out
Cooperative
Conversions

cooperate
Community
Wealth

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

ZONE OF POSSIBILITY

COMMUNITY

A redesign of
main street

When we think about communities, we often visualize Main Street—the bustling center of human commerce, lined with mom-and-pop shops, restaurants, cafés, and possibly a movie theater. These commercial enterprises ensure the flows of money, goods, services, and relationships that are often thought to define a "good community."

Such images of Main Street quickly become distant memories as smaller local establishments are squeezed out by competition from large national and global enterprises, leveraging scale to deliver cheaper products and services. Often, local officials who are desperate for much-needed investments woo larger investors with various tax breaks and subsidies. However, research shows that in most cases, when large multinational companies move into a community, the better-paying jobs usually don't go to locals but to those who move there with the company. Furthermore, these local enterprises are vanishing—or have already vanished—from many communities. Main streets have been boarded up in many towns. What appears as economically expedient is, in reality, neither economically nor socially beneficial to the community in the long run.

The solution isn't simply to resurrect the old enterprise version of Main Street. Instead, it is to re-think scale and the economic policies communities pursue instead of "scaling up"—pursuing growth of a few large enterprises—they are "scaling deep" by repurposing and recombining resources that are already in the community, building rich relationships with local partners, and addressing urgent, local problems. Scaling deep creates robust economic, civic, and social anchors while leaning into cooperative enterprises that grow equitable flows of wealth and well-being.

Cooperative Law Upgrades

regulate

Communities can improve ordinances to promote worker-owned cooperatives (WOCs), which often benefit local economies more than other types of business. Upgrades include automatic certifications of cooperatives providing WOCs preferential status for public contracts and tax incentives. Municipalities can also establish coop loan funds and economic recovery initiatives like the WORC Coalition, to transition local economies to cooperative economies. Cities can also actively regulate their evolving sharing economies (including housing, food, and transportation) to create truly equitable and community-friendly ecosystems.

Cooperative Conversions

opt out

Nearly half of privately owned US businesses with employees are owned by baby boomers. As these small business owners retire, they typically close their firms or sell them, often to investors outside the community. In either case, the local community loses. However, advocates of worker-owned co-ops, like Project Equity, are now mobilizing these older owners to convert their businesses to worker co-ops—effectively serving as a 'business incubator' where worker-owners are constantly building their ownership skill sets. It's a win-win for communities and their workers.

Community Wealth

cooperate

Community wealth is built on an integrated ecosystem of cooperatives and anchor institutions—such as hospitals and universities—with democratic ownership as a strategy for confronting social, racial, and environmental inequality. The Healthcare Anchor Network uses hiring, purchasing, and investment in local solutions to address social and climate justice issues. It's a spinoff of the Democracy Collaborative, which advocates for democratically run community holding companies for cooperatives that give the entire community a voice. This whole-system approach can also extend to community-based public safety focused on violence prevention and community wellness.

lessons from the past

Black Panther Party

The Black Panther Party emerged in Oakland in1966 as an enterprising community engaged in economic survival programs. The party built a shoe factory to provide free shoes to the community. It developed communal enterprises to distribute clothing, food, health care, plumbing repair, pest control, and transportation services. It fostered cooperative housing, cooperative bakeries, and free breakfast programs for children, alongside training in African heritage. The movement reached its peak in 1977 with thousands of members in 68 cities across the US. Plagued by controversy and vilified in the press, it began to lose membership and was co-opted in the late 1980s by a self-proclaimed New Black Panther Party, sometimes characterized as a black separatist hate group.

Project Equity

Project Equity lays out a roadmap for keeping small-business wealth in a community by converting firms to cooperative, employee-owned enterprises. The roadmap starts from realizing that retirement-ready boomers currently own 2.3 million businesses in the US, employing 24 million workers with revenues of $5 trillion. Much is at stake in this moment of transition—from incomes for individual workers to community resources and services. The proposal? As small-business owners retire, they can transition their enterprises to employee ownership, keeping an income stream for themselves, securing income for their new employee-owners, and assuring a thriving local economy as part of a growing ecosystem of cooperative enterprise.

Sustainable Economies Law Center pioneers legal innovation and services for the sharing economy.

The Democracy Collaborative works to build community wealth in a more democratic economy.

Transform Finance fosters grassroots, community-engaged investment approaches to racial and other social injustices.

Acknowledgment to Our Advisors

This map's strategies, signals, and concepts come from ongoing research and collaborative reflection by a team of academics, thought leaders, and activists who have generously shared their insights with IFTF's Equitable Enterprise Initiative. These include:

Kenneth Bailey, Co-founder, Design Studio for Social Intervention

Josh Berson, Visiting Scholar, IFTF

Johan Chu, Visiting Assistant Professor, Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management and Assistant Professor, MIT Sloan School of Management

Ra Criscitiello, Deputy Director of Research, SEIU UHW

Theodore DeWitt, Assistant Professor, College of Management at the University of Massachusetts Boston

Gerald Davis, Professor of Business Administration and Sociology, University of Michigan's Ross School of Business and Department of Sociology

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Jessica Gordon Nembhard, Professor of Community Justice and Social Economic Development, Department of Africana Studies at John Jay College, CUNY

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About IFTF

Institute for the Future (IFTF) is the world's leading futures-thinking organization. For more than 50 years, businesses, governments, and social impact organizations have depended upon IFTF global forecasts, custom research, and foresight training to navigate complex change and develop world-ready strategies. IFTF methodologies and toolsets yield uncommonly coherent views of transformative possibilities across all sectors that together support a more sustainable future.

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About the Equitable Enterprises Initiative

This initiative serves as a hub for research, scenario building, public engagement, and policy innovations aimed at promoting the establishment and growth of more equitable enterprises. It will also build a framework for a more extensive network of leaders to collaboratively compile and interpret a body of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, about equitable forms of enterprise and their impacts on society, including research reports and toolkits to support equitable enterprise leaders and advocates. With initial support from Conrad N. Hilton, John Irvine, Robert Wood Johnson and W. K. Kellogg Foundations, it includes convening a team of academics, researchers, activists, and futurists to map diverse pathways for a broad national transition to a more equitable and worker friendly economy.

For more information or to sign up for the newsletter, visit www.equitablefutures.iftf.org