Cultural Strategies and Maps of the Ethiopian and Mayan Community (2012)

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the institute's study of the Ethiopian and Mayan diasporas in the San Francisco Bay Area, showing the power of a culture[1] to bring a diaspora together to form a community. Many diasporas are spatially disconnected and unfamiliar with one another. But over time, people with a similar background naturally gravitate toward cultural activities and build new friendships. A social goodness sometimes pervades during these cultural activities, which provide immense social health benefits and alleviate vulnerability, confusion, and isolation.

During this period of study, I came to understand more clearly Edward O. Wilson's postulate that humans have evolved an advanced social life. In his book *The Social Conquest of Earth*, Wilson describes eusociality as the quintessential aspect of an advanced level of social organization. He defines eusociality as "group members containing multiple generations and prone to perform altruistic acts as part of their division of labor. . . . [Eusociality is] one of the major innovations in the history of life."[2] The social goodness or altruism that we observe in cultural events in different diasporas is the glue that is connecting community members.

Over the past two years, Wildflowers in partnership with the Ethiopian and Mayan communities has made visible the invisible culture that forms these communities. Our focus is on helping them uncover the aspects of their culture that connect people and help individuals grow and change the world. The knowledge that we have garnered from our work is described in some detail in this report. It includes maps showing the culture and functions of both diasporas. It presents the innate social organization, that is, the inherent ways the diasporas are organized.

The most important achievement in making the maps is helping 25,000 Ethiopians in Santa Clara County rediscover their inherent social organization as the blueprint for forming their community. One of the maps reveals how the community is currently organized in the county, that is, how Ethiopians are forming circles of trust around their own shared interests and how these circles are separated and isolated from one another. But a second map shows an archetypal circle of trust (Mahiber), an informal social support system for men and women. This archetype is a cultural pathway for improving social connectedness. A third map depicts spiritually oriented leaders and business leaders as being the predominate informal leaders, that is, the unofficial leaders who quietly make change in the community. A fourth maps shows a contemporary approach to incubating talent and solving problems. As a result of these maps, long-term rivals from the business sector and the Orthodox Christian Church have begun a dialogue to explore areas of collaboration. One project that they are discussing is the establishment of an informal saving circle for funeral expenses (Idir) for the entire community. The maps have also stimulated the Ethiopian Cultural Institute in San Jose to initiate an annual celebration for Mahibers. The celebration focuses on lessons learned that improve the quality of trust among the members of the circle.

An Ethiopian diaspora arrived in Santa Clara County (1,304 square miles) in the 1990s and is scattered throughout the county. But over the past twenty-two years, Ethiopians have naturally gravitated toward one another around certain activities and at particular locations. Although there is no central Ethiopian neighborhood, we have discovered that a community is emerging. Ethiopians are drawing on their culture and organizing activities and

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[1] "Culture is the combination of traits that distinguishes one group from another," Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012), p. 213.

[2] Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012), p. 16.

institutions with their own resources. Our study of the Ethiopian diaspora reveals that they give most of their time and money to their church or mosque. They prefer Ethiopian comfort foods. They make sure that their American-born children learn Amharic and the traditional culture. These endeavors are strengthening the community culture and establishing a system of friendship, kinship networks, and formal and informal association ties.

We learned from our study that the inherent social organization of the Ethiopians in Santa Clara County is circles of trust formed around shared interests. The Ethiopians have formed religious volunteer groups, soccer clubs, and informal circles for support, business loans, informal insurance, coffee (Bunna) ceremonies, and family gatherings. Each circle elects a leader to provide direction and uses a time-tested process of mediation and conflict resolution that quietly deals with differences without public attention.

When hundreds of Ethiopians engage in cultural, spiritual, and social activities over time, they generate a good deal of networking, information sharing, problem solving, and incubating of ideas and talents. The accumulative effect of participating in community activities results in an informal support system. Such kinds of informal support contribute significantly to the emergence of the community.

In addition, we have been studying the Mayan community. While there are also no U.S. Census demographic data on the Mayan population in the Bay Area, one report from the San Francisco Health Department and San Francisco State University pegged the Mayan population to be between nine thousand and fifteen thousand.[3] Like the Ethiopian community, the Mayan diaspora is scattered throughout the Bay Area, and there is no central Mayan neighborhood. Nevertheless, Mayans and others of Meso-American descent come together around shared interests and activities.

Wildflowers has been holding focus group sessions with four initiated spiritual guides and four organizers of the Mayan diaspora. We have helped them define their leadership structure and social organization. Because this year marks the end of the Mayan calendar, the initiated spiritual guides have spent the entire year holding a different ceremony every twenty days. Beginning next year, the spiritual guides, organizers, and community members will focus on building their social organization.

To carry out studies and make maps of the community, Wildflowers relies on its fellows to serve as guides and co-facilitators of focus group (Model-building) sessions. Our fellows are essential to uncovering the community culture and its functions. Their efforts clarified and deepened their understanding of their community. The institute's illustrators, Kathryn Otoshi and Daniel Jeanette, reviewed the 3-D models and worked closely with our fellows and Wildflowers staff to make maps depicting the way people are coming together to form their community.

Wildflowers Institute is very grateful to Kalliopeia Foundation for its support of this work. We have also received funding from Kalliopeia Foundation, The California Endowment, The Christensen Fund, Howard and Judith Sims Charitable Fund, The Jenifer Altman Foundation, and members of Wildflowers Institute.

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[3] Patricia Erwin, Vickie Quijano, and Buffy Bunting, *The San Francisco Mayan Community: Health Needs, Barriers to Health Care Access, and Community Assets* (San Francisco: San Francisco Health Department and San Francisco State University, fall 2007).

Our Mission. The institute's mission is to strengthen communities through understanding how they work and the challenges they face to sustain themselves. The institute endeavors to leverage and utilize local resources and a community culture as engines for social and economic development. We use a participatory research methodology that involves different focus groups making 3-D models that show how their community is organized. The models reveal the way things really get done in a community. They include the unofficial leaders who quietly make change, the inherent ways people are organized, the coping mechanisms that people rely on in everyday life, and the shared activities organized around art, common endeavors, and the culture that builds relationships. We conduct ongoing and active back-and-forth discussions, reviewing information, sharing points of view, and analyzing the sessions. Wildflowers fellows and staff hold community meetings to further learn from others, beyond the focus groups, and to double-check our findings.[4] We continue to refine our understanding by developing a visual map illustrating the structures and functions of the community. We show the drafts of the visual maps to our fellows and members of different networks, and we invite their comments, feedback, and suggestions. The maps inform interested parties inside and outside the community about how the community is organized to make sustainable change. All along the way, we assess the effectiveness of our processes and tools and improve and refine them.

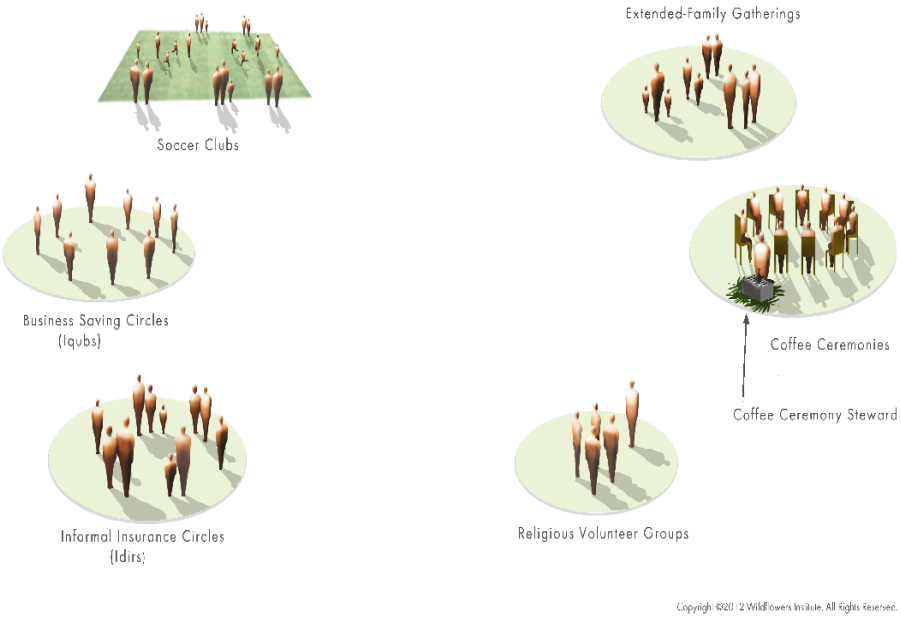
What follows is a summary of the findings from our studies and the maps that we developed to illuminate the infrastructure of the Ethiopian and Mayan communities.

Networking Map: The Ethiopian Community, Santa Clara County

We learned that forming circles of trust and shared interests among friends and extended family is the inherent way that Ethiopians are organized. The most prevailing circles are extended-family gatherings, coffee ceremonies, religious volunteer groups, informal insurance circles, business saving circles, and soccer clubs. These circles function as a transmitter of the community's culture. But the circles are also a social space for connecting with friends, colleagues, and relatives. The circles are invaluable to knowing what is happening in the community, to problem-solving a broad range of issues, and to mediating conflicts. In effect, the circles serve as a networking function in the community. The map on the next page shows different circles of trust in the Ethiopian community. Within each circle are subgroups that are specific to the interests of their members. (For example, the religious volunteer groups consist primarily of Orthodox Tewahedo Christians, Muslims, Protestants, and Seventh-Day Adventists.)

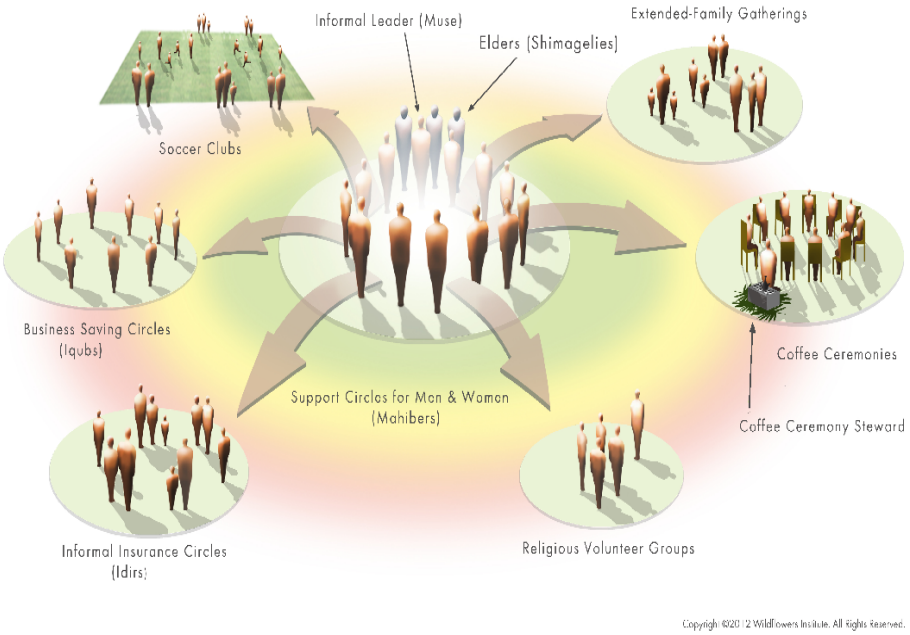
[4] A good example of this is the community-wide meeting that Semunesh Arega, Sewasew Meaza, and Elsa Jacob held to discuss their finding that a particular circle of trust (Mahiber) was the archetypal structure for all the different circles in the Ethiopian community. Over 200 people attended the meeting, and they supported and validated this finding. A summary of the meeting is attached in Appendix One.

NETWORKING MAP, ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITY
SANTA CLARA COUNTY



Community members, young and old, have been concerned about the absence of a core that holds these separate circles together. So during the course of our study, we searched for something in the culture that was familiar to everyone that could be a force to hold the circles together. In one of our focus groups, we learned that some men and women have established a social circle (*Mahiber*) that serves as their informal but primary support system. Later on, the Ethiopian Cultural Institute held a community meeting to further discuss the importance of the Mahiber in today's time. What emerged from this meeting was that the Mahiber is a cultural archetype and a blueprint for the structure of all circles of trust. The Mahiber exemplifies the roles and responsibilities of being a member of the circle. A leader (*Muse*) is selected by the group to provide guidance and direction. Elders (*Shimagelies*) are invited into the circle to quietly mediate differences when serious disputes cannot be reconciled among group members. Circle members engage in time-tested but unconscious behaviors in order to gain the trust of others. The Mahiber defines the standards for building trust. The map of the Ethiopian networks on the next page depicts Mahibers as being generators at the heart of the community's inherent social order. So as far as we know today, the Mahiber is the only commonality among the different circles.

NETWORKING MAP, ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITY
SANTA CLARA COUNTY



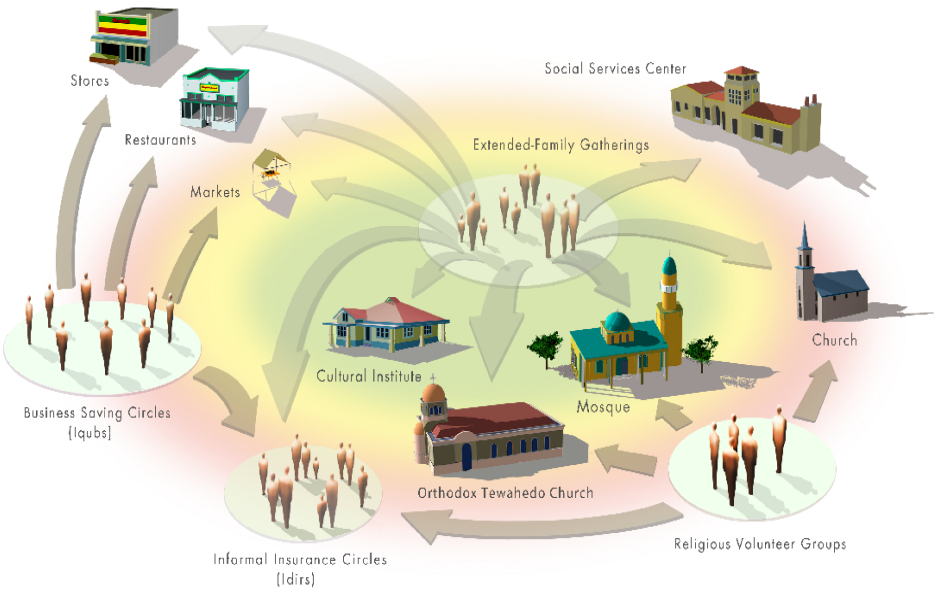
Developing Local Organizations Map: The Ethiopian Community, Santa Clara County

The most important priority among the Ethiopians is their spiritual practice in their church or mosque. We have learned that the religious volunteer groups are the most organized network and have raised significant funds to develop programs and structures in the community. These groups have effectively mobilized their constituency, resulting in commitments of millions of dollars to acquire buildings for religious ceremonies. The second priority is having access to Ethiopian foods and spices. Many Ethiopian food markets, stores, and restaurants are financed by business saving circles. These circles are the means of raising funds primarily among a close network of friends and colleagues. The third priority in the community is having a cultural institute and social services for the most vulnerable. People in the extended-family network want their children to know the Amharic language and Ethiopian traditional culture. More generally, community members are concerned about how to care for their elders and how to assist recent immigrants in adjusting to the United States.

The map on the next page illustrates the leadership of different networks in developing new organizations in the community. The sustainability of new projects and organizations requires the full endorsement and support of one or more organized circles or networks. It requires the trust and confidence from the extended-family network. Community leaders

who can navigate different networks are key to their community's sustainability.

DEVELOPING LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS MAP, ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITY
SANTA CLARA COUNTY



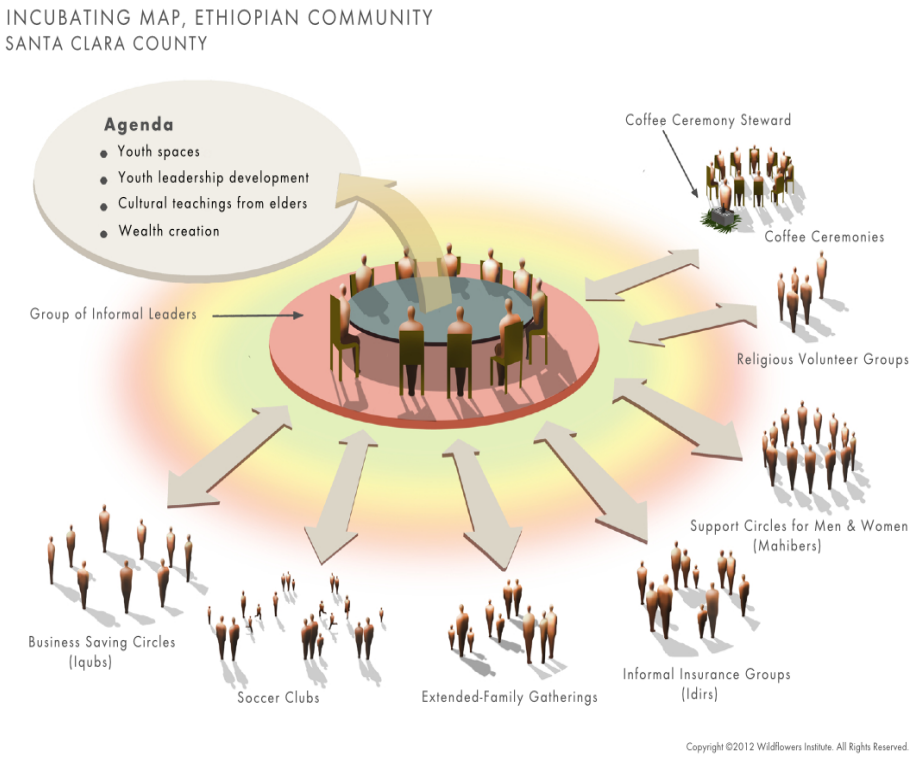
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Incubating Map: The Ethiopian Community, Santa Clara County

Ethiopian parents are worried about their youth. Parents and elders express concern that they have little or no authority over what their teenagers do and what kind of risks their youth are taking. They are concerned about the next generation of young leaders in the community and who will take the baton. They are also worried about their children losing touch with the Ethiopian culture and the lack of contact and communication between children and elders. And they express concern over the lack of employment opportunities because of language and unfamiliarity with mainstream society. They all wish to be involved in a wealth creation endeavor but have little experience in knowing how to go about realizing this aspiration.

These challenges are common in diaspora communities. But the incubating map on the next page shows us the direction that the community is taking to address these challenges. The map reflects the community's values and reveals what is most important to it: developing enterprises, young people growing and developing, teaching children the Amharic language and culture, being with extended families, caring for the vulnerable, honoring elders at life's end, engaging in circles of social trust and support, maintaining spiritual well-being, and holding coffee rituals. The map also depicts the community's intent to develop a participatory decision-making process that brings together leaders of

different networks around a table where everyone has an equal voice.



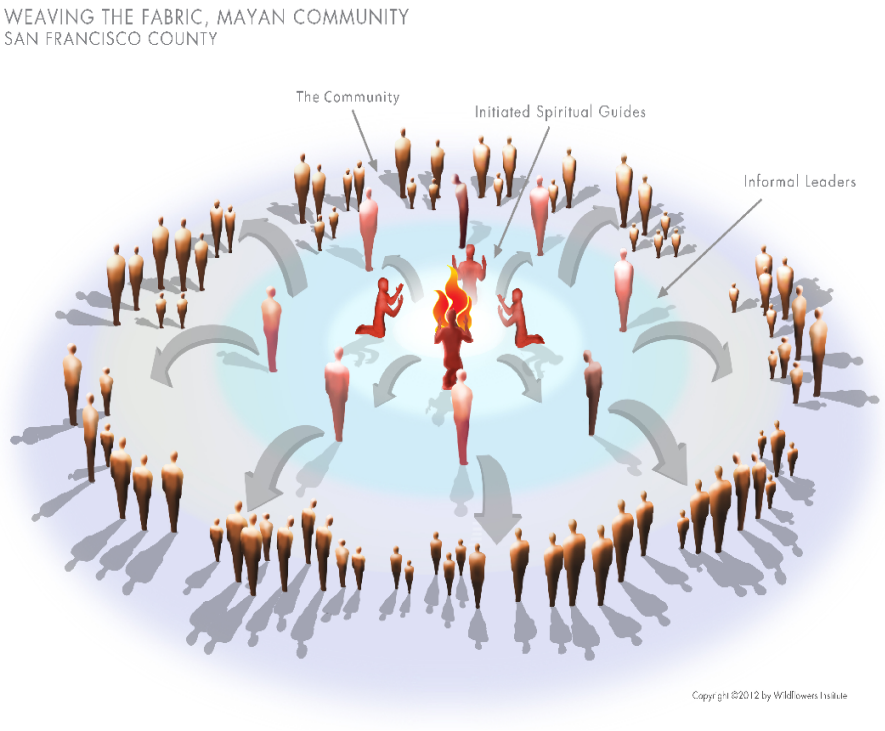
Future Direction. Over time and without strategic intervention, the Ethiopian circles of trust will probably become more isolated and separate from one another. So our strategy is to focus on improving the quality of them. We intend to support the strengthening of the archetypal structure (Mahiber), which in turn would influence the other circles in the emerging community. We will support the Ethiopian Cultural Institute in organizing the second Mahiber Celebration in 2013. Since at least six other emerging Ethiopian communities in the United States (Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Oakland, Seattle, and Washington, DC) are having their own Mahiber experiences, we plan to invite two or three leaders from each community to attend this celebration. At this event, leaders will share best practices for building trust within and among the different community circles. We will document the presentations and discussions and disseminate this information widely within the Bay Area and to the other Ethiopian communities. Finally, we will focus on identifying leaders of Mahibers who are also assuming some leadership in one or more Ethiopian circles, whether extended-family gatherings, soccer clubs, and so on. Such individuals are key to identifying and organizing activities that transcend the interest of any one group. We plan to support their events that bring different circles together around common interests.

Weaving the Fabric Map: The Mayan Community, San Francisco County

We are in the first stage of work in the Mayan community and have been focused on helping a group of leaders develop a plan for building their community. This plan involves making explicit a leadership structure and a blueprint of their social organization. The leader of the community is an initiated spiritual guide from Guatemala, Don Pascual Yaxon. He and three other initiated spiritual guides are working in San Francisco County and at the Hoopa Valley Reservation and the Pine Ridge Reservation. The four spiritual leaders are supported by a group of informal community leaders. They hold frequent ceremonies at

Ocean Beach in San Francisco and move from place to place to support indigenous people, especially those of Meso-American heritage.

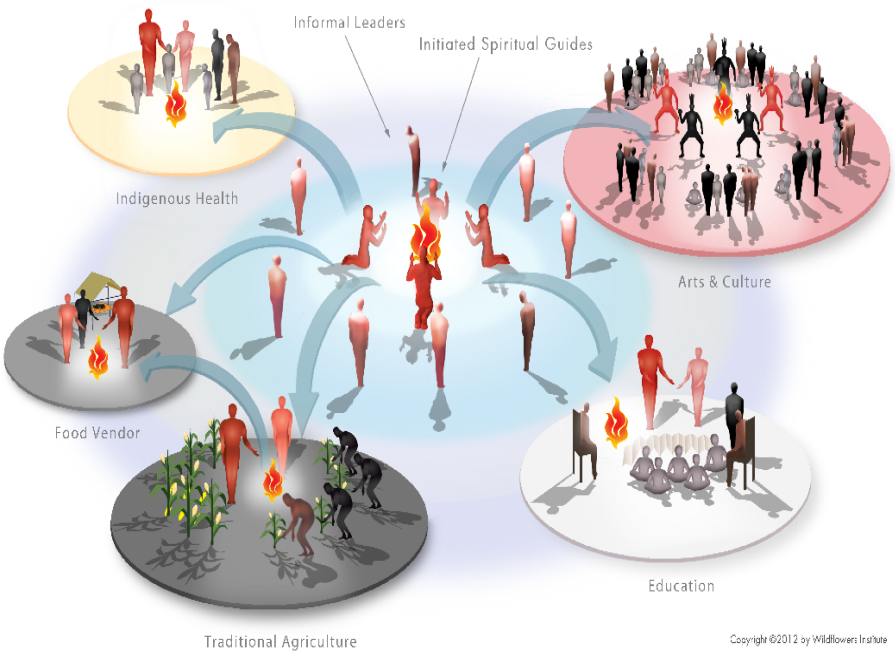
The map below depicts the weaving of the fabric in the Mayan community. At the center of the map are the sacred fire and a circle of four initiated spiritual guides, each kneeling in one of four directions. There is a second circle of eight informal leaders who help the spiritual guide disseminate Mayan teachings and practices. The third circle represents extended-family members who are held in the circle by informal leaders and spiritual guides.



Developing the Social Organization Map: The Mayan Community, San Francisco County

The map on this page shows the Mayan social organization. At the center are the spiritual power and five platforms of activities: traditional agriculture, food vendor, indigenous health, arts and culture, and education. Each platform shows the sacred fire and a spiritual guide with an informal leader providing teaching, guidance, and care to community members.

DEVELOPING THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION MAP, MAYAN COMMUNITY
SAN FRANCISCO COUNTY



Future Direction

Our next step is to work with the Mayan leaders and their community to further develop their social organization depicted in the map. We will help them with their education efforts. We are also introducing the Mayan leaders to children's book publishers (Goosebottom Books and KO Kids Books) and helping them explore the publication of a book on Mayan mythology. Finally, we are in the early stages of determining the feasibility of their developing a community garden in the San Francisco Bay Area.

We plan to help the spiritual guides and organizers with their efforts to convene a one day forum and ceremony at the end of the Mayan calendar. This event is planned for December 15, 2012, and will be held at The Episcopal Church of St. John in the Mission.

Wildflowers Fellowship

At the beginning of this year, we invited the heads of organizations and/or networks in the Ethiopian, Mayan and Latino, Chinese, and African American communities to join the institute as fellows. We have been involved in leadership development for over thirty years and started a community fellowship program in 1999. Over sixty fellows are involved with Wildflowers.

The goal of the fellowship program is to build leadership capacity within communities and among a Bay Area network. The institute offers an organized body of knowledge about the community, cultural experiences in different communities, and a process of dialogue that illuminates the social order within and among communities. During the course of a year,

our fellows make explicit how their community is organized and create community maps. We introduce a nomenclature to deconstruct the innate power of the community. We think a thorough understanding of this power and a capacity to strengthen it are our core strategy. So we talk about what the local resources are and what forms the culture—informal leaders, informal capital, activities of social organizations, social networks, participatory action, the inherent ways people are organized, and the importance of "sacred spaces," among other concepts. This nomenclature is particularly helpful in highlighting how different communities build their "will" and move toward collective action. Our fellows also receive a copy of an essay that we wrote entitled "In Search of the Informal Capital of Community." This essay expands on the notion of an invisible wealth that is not monetarily based but is particularly powerful in making positive, sustainable change in a community.

Using the institute's 3-D Model-building process and tools, Wildflowers fellows and staff carried out focus group sessions involving hundreds of people—youth, parents, grandparents, spiritual leaders, artists, businesspeople, and service providers across the fellows' communities. We heard their stories, we saw how they come together, and we uncovered their power. In every focus group session, we gained important insights into the informal and formal structures that form the community. Participants came to understand more deeply how their community is organically organized. All of us came to see the structures that sustain social change, that is, the informal leaders of different networks, the shared activities that build social relationships, and the inherent ways people come together.

In addition, our fellows organize cultural celebrations and general meetings and invite fellows from other communities to attend. Wildflowers fellows participated in an Ethiopian community meeting on September 9, 2011, the Mahiber Celebration on May 12, 2012, the Ethiopian community meeting on September 8, 2012, the King Pan Festival in the Iu Mien community, the AfroSolo Art Festival at the African American Art & Culture Complex, and the 14th Sacred Fire Mayan Ceremony and breakfast in the Mission with the Mayan community.

On a Friday evening each month, our fellows meet at Wildflowers where they have supper together and reflect on what they are learning about their own community and about their visits to other communities. Having tools such as a common nomenclature and maps of the culture of different communities increases the fellows' effectiveness in finding common ground across differences. We have developed a dialogue process that shines a light on our differences, seeking what is invisible but common to all. During the course of this year, our fellows have come to see similarities in how they experience the power of social and emotional connectedness, of oneness, with their grandparents, parents, and extended-family members. While our fellows come from distinctly different cultures, their traditions have tried-and-true practices of being together as one. They have been reared to know how to be in relationship with others where the social system functions as a whole. Through our get-togethers, they are becoming more emotionally and socially connected to one another.

Earlier this year, the institute held a three-day seminar, *The American Dream: Community, Culture, and Change,* in partnership with the Aspen Institute. The purpose of the seminar was to explore the internal and external values driving community change in America. Twenty fellows and friends participated in the seminar, which was held at Commonweal. Todd Breyfogle, director of seminars, Aspen Institute, and his partner, Allyson Sudborough, led the session using the Aspen Institute's signature approach to a socratic moderated dialogue based on classic and contemporary authors.

Owing to the overwhelming success of the February 2012 seminar, we are planning to hold a second seminar on February 22–25, 2013. (Please see the attached evaluation of the February 2012 Aspen Seminar.) Even though Wildflowers does not have sufficient funding

for the Aspen Institute to partner with Wildflowers on this next seminar, Todd and Allyson have agreed to reduce their fees substantially and to offer their services as a personal commitment to Wildflowers' mission.

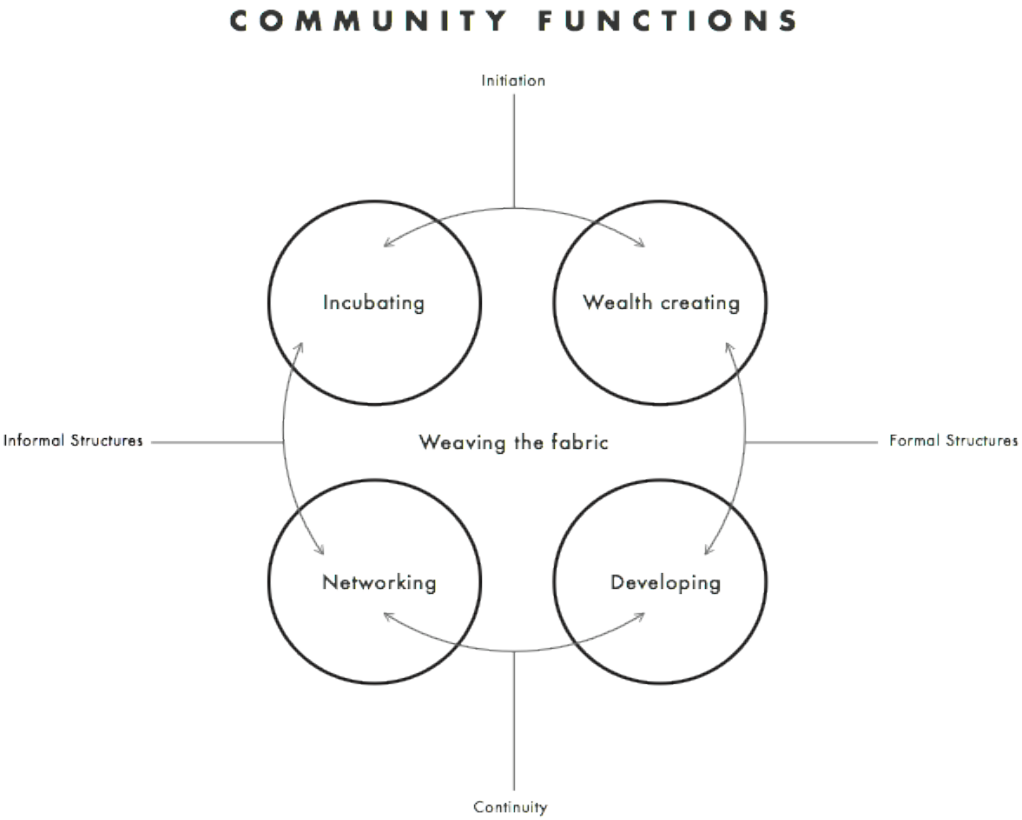
The theme of the upcoming seminar is Reimagining the American Dream. America is often spoken of as the land of opportunity, a place where individuals, through their own efforts, can have the freedom to pursue their dreams. The individualism of the American experience, with all its strengths, finds itself ineffective in weaving the social fabric of American communities. In contrast, indigenous and diaspora cultures have a rich and long history in relating and functioning as a whole social system. Knowing how to create social spaces in communities that deepen the diaspora's social/cultural values and the best of American values is the key to building socially and economically sustainable communities in America. Being mindful of and having the capacity to develop these social spaces is the work of our fellows and friends. The upcoming socratic moderated seminar will illuminate the following: To what extent can individual and communal values be reconciled? How may our dreams for the future be achieved without abandoning the roots of our past? How do we think about our own leadership roles in fostering change within communities? Answers to these and other related questions will guide us in reimagining the American Dream.

Our next steps in building this fellowship network are to further our work in the African American, Chinatown, Ethiopian, Iu Mien, and Latino/Mayan communities. We plan to invite a new cadre of fellows in March of 2013. We will also invite our current fellows to mentor the new fellows. We will look at projects that they are initiating in two or more communities. We think that having shared experiences that result in specific outcomes will inform us as we strengthen the core culture of Wildflowers communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Wildflowers Social Investment Fund

This year, the Wildflowers Board of Directors decided to initiate a new endeavor, a social investment fund to leverage the findings from our studies and strengthen our communities. This fund presents an opportunity for Wildflowers to invest in cultural practices within and among different Wildflowers communities. The goal of the fund is to develop sustainable solutions that are vital to the social health, culture, and well-being of the community. To reach this goal, we have funding from Marion Weber to support a small micro-lending program in communities. We are getting support from prominent leaders in the field to develop an effective structure for the fund. Kat Taylor, chief executive officer, One PacificCoast Bank, is providing Wildflowers back-office support for the loan program. Susan MacCormac, partner at Morrison and Foerster, has assigned lawyers in her firm to provide pro bono services. We have established a four-person Local Advisory Board to vet the applications for our fund. (The members of the Advisory Board are Semunesh Arega, co-director, Ethiopian Cultural Institute; Maaza Essayas, software engineer, Hewlett-Packard Company; Anthony Gilmore, former vice president, Whole Foods; and Thurman White, CEO of Progressive Management Investments.) And we have five financial and accounting advisors whom we call on as needed to help us think through how best to develop the fund.

In keeping with the Wildflowers mission of strengthening communities, the institute has developed a framework to guide its social investments. The investment framework depicted below brings into focus five vital functions of the community.



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These functions are the foundation for sustainable communities in contemporary times.

- The networking function involves groups of people getting together informally, sharing information, and solving problems.
- The developing function is the concerted effort of one or more networks committed to building a new program, a new organization, or a new facility.
- The incubating function involves mentors, coaches, and entrepreneurs committed to developing the next generation of ideas.
- The wealth creating function is the establishment of businesses that benefit more than an individual, a family, or a group of investors.
- The weaving of the fabric function involves individuals and different networks working together across differences and boundaries and deepening their understanding and respect for one another.

Wildflowers offers a low-interest loan program to develop sustainable solutions that are vital to the social health, culture, and well-being of each community. We are tapping into the networks to identify businesses that would normally be ineligible for any form of lending from a traditional bank. We are gathering local intelligence and relying on the assessment of some of the informal community leaders. We plan to take a calculated risk and identify promising business opportunities in this sector of the Ethiopian community. We will make the case that qualitative assessments are as good as, if not better than, assessing the borrower's capacity to pay back a debt in a timely and responsible manner. To those businesses that we invest in, Wildflowers will offer term loans at 6% to 8% interest. Half of

that interest (3% to 4%) will be reinvested back into the community to strengthen the social fabric such as the Mahibers in the community. The other 3% to 4% will go to provide honorariums to community members involved in the program and to cover management fees.

At the end of this year, we plan to invest in one or two small businesses in the Ethiopian community. We are seeking investment opportunities in ethnic food businesses, such as wholesale importing of goods, coffee roasting and coffeehouses, grocery stores, and catering Ethiopian cuisine. We are looking for business opportunities that serve the Ethiopian communities in Santa Clara County and Oakland and other people in the Bay Area.

Another kind of social investment that we are exploring is the development of informal saving circles for covering funeral costs (Idirs). The idea of starting an Idir came up in several Wildflowers focus group sessions. Because the funeral is the most important cultural ritual in an Ethiopian's life, everyone in the community wants to have a proper funeral service, which lasts for several days and involves hundreds of people coming to pay respect. All Ethiopians want to be sure they have sufficient funds for their funeral. In Ethiopia, families come together to form a saving circle (Idir), and each month family members contribute to it. Given that over twenty-five thousand Ethiopians are living in Santa Clara County, the fund has the potential to accumulate considerable financial resources and, if implemented in the right way, could strengthen the community's sustainability. In addition, having an Idir would certainly strengthen trust among community members who contribute to it.

The institute has been researching this investment possibility. We have had several meetings with John-Bernard Duler, executive vice president, Duler & Co./Arthur J. Gallagher & Co.; Kat Taylor, president and CEO, One PacificCoast Bank; Sara Horowitz, founder of Freelancers Union and Insurance Company (NY); Ingrid Mittermaier, partner, Alder and Colvin; and Clare Badaracco and Genevieve Moore, Morrison and Foerster.

Wildflowers has encouraged its fellows in the Ethiopian community to seriously consider the development of an Idir. Our fellows have been meeting monthly with different networks to discuss how community members feel about such an endeavor. By spring of 2103, we should know whether or not the community decides to move ahead with this effort.