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The San Diego Dialogue: Reshaping the San Diego Region

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Reshaping the San Diego Region

Karen Christensen and Jane Rongerude

Assessment of the Collaborative Regional Initiatives Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The San Diego Dialogue (SDD) set out to "promote a renewal of civic discussion, thoughtful research, and consensus building on the future of the San Diego region...and to engage the public at large and elected officials in a program of regional initiatives," and succeeded in doing so. SDD's theory of change used a model of US civic entrepreneurship based on leadership, knowledge, and networks. Through their conversations with one another, elite members identified issues important enough to be addressed in a larger dialogue. If the dialogue led to a fundable project, then strategic research began. The research in turn generated new strategic information. Dialogue members and staff spread this information through elite networks and carefully orchestrated briefings to those who were able to take action. Through this process, the civic discourse changed and the regional agenda was shaped. The Dialogue acted as a catalyst, moving the conversation toward possible solutions before passing the issue to someone else in the community for implementation. Sometimes SDD was in the forefront of regional decision-making, facilitating conversations with other regional players; other times it was behind the scenes, moving information through personal networks.

The Dialogue was formed in 1991 through a unique collaboration of the University of California, San Diego; the San Diego region's emerging high technology business leaders; and business leaders from downtown San Diego's established banking, real estate, and tourism sectors. Members were carefully recruited from among the region's most influential individuals. The Dialogue depended on the late Chuck Nathanson, whose one-on-one political skills made the connections between the ideas and the elite networks that amplified the discourse, generating new civic knowledge and shaping the regional agenda.

SDD was best known for its cross-border work, most specifically for their research which led to the installation of a rapid commuter lane at the California/Mexico border for frequent border crossers. One key finding—96% of border crossings are made by frequent crossers—changed the way the border was perceived and discussed by demonstrating that the region was a bi-national economy. Their research also provided a

framework for talking about other bi-national issues such as water, energy, healthcare, manufacturing, and ports of entry.

The Dialogue was most successful when it was able to identify a critical piece of data that then transformed the regional conversation. For example, a recent Dialogue study found that San Diego's expected population boom will not be the result of immigration, but of the natural birth rates of existing residents. Once this news found its way to the media, advocates reported that smart growth became a widely accepted concept in San Diego. Similarly, SDD's research comparing potential airport sites became a special insert in the Sunday newspaper. Although the report did not result in consensus on the airport issue or a concrete action plan, participants felt it raised the level of discourse and enabled Dialogue members to become important players in the establishment of a regional airport authority almost ten years later.

The San Diego Dialogue:
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INTRODUCTION TO THE SAN DIEGO DIALOGUE

The San Diego Dialogue (SDD) formed in 1991 through a unique collaboration which brought together the University of California, San Diego; the San Diego region's emerging high technology business leaders; and business leaders from downtown San Diego's established banking, real estate, and tourism sectors. SDD organizers wanted to create more than another business interest. They were concerned about the region's future, and were looking to engage community leaders who could affect regional development but who also had a regional focus and a reputation for civic mindedness. Members were carefully selected from among the region's most prominent individuals. What emerged was an elite organization with a unique cross-border perspective and the ability to influence regional agenda-setting.

Because SDD does most of its work outside of the spotlight, it is not very well-known, even within the San Diego region. However, interviews reveal that once the Dialogue takes on a topic for research and discussion, it often finds its way into the larger public debate. Research provided by the Dialogue often reframes how regional topics are perceived, and in turn, what solutions become possible. In this way, the Dialogue has proven its ability to shape the regional agenda. SDD's agenda is not exhaustive. Instead, it is strategic and closely linked to the interests of its members within a general framework of smart growth, education, and cross-border development. While one is unlikely to find publications promoting the Dialogue model for regional governance, Dialogue members describe a strong sense of efficacy in their association with the organization, and SDD has been the inspiration for at least one spin-off organization, *Tijuana Trabaja,* located in Tijuana, Mexico.

The following review of SDD is based on the organization's publications as well as more than thirty in-depth interviews conducted over six months in 2003 with SDD members and other prominent San Diegans familiar with the organization. It covers the period of time when Chuck Nathanson served as the organization's executive director, from 1991 through his death in spring 2003. Of course, this case study provides only a snapshot in time of what is clearly a dynamic organization. SDD has changed over the last year, building a new, more focused agenda. This

case study is not intended to capture that change, but instead to provide documentation of how the organization functioned from its inception through the end of our study. It is our hope that this information will be useful to SDD as the organization decides on its new paths for the future.

THE SAN DIEGO CONTEXT

The goals and values of the San Diego Dialogue reflect its regional context, and the organization's culture and sensibilities are closely tied to those of San Diego itself. First, the San Diego region has distinct physical boundaries which create a manageable and easily identifiable region contained within a single county. Camp Pendleton forms the boundary to the north; mountains form the eastern boundary with Mexico to the south and the Pacific Ocean to the west. Unlike its neighbor to the north, San Diego has a beginning and an ending. Its population is just under 3 million people, and while the region contains 18 cities, many identify as being "from San Diego." San Diego is known for having an almost perfect climate and, as the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation likes to point out, Forbes magazine ranked the region number one on its annual "Best Places" list for 2002.[1] For San Diego's promoters, the region is defined by its quality of life.

While the region is cohesive, it is also a place of contradictions. It is simultaneously a well-defined unit and what one person described as "a loose collection of individual beach towns." It prides itself on its small-town feel but openly embraces growth. It looks to be a player in the global economy, but struggles with its immediate proximity to Mexico. It is a racially diverse community which borders Mexico to the south and houses organized white supremacist groups in the northern reaches of the county. The San Diego region contains the wealthiest community in the country and some of the poorest. In this region where class and power are visible and clearly defined, it is business interests and not government or labor that have provided the vision for shaping the region's growth.

San Diego's Political Climate

San Diego is conservative. Mayors run their races on platforms of decreasing government bureaucracy and improving the local business climate. Taxpayer groups, advocates for minimizing government spending, have a strong foothold in regional politics, and grassroots organizations have almost no presence. Before the 1980s, the region had very little political diversity and no significant liberal tradition. With the

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[1]   http://www.sandiegobusiness.org/aboutsandiego.asp

notable exception of Pete Wilson's mayoral administration in the 1970s, San Diego has never had strong mayors or city government. Instead, most of the region's politics happen within a small group of players that includes the San Diego Chamber of Commerce, other business groupings, and (only in the last three years) labor. Several people we interviewed said that San Diego operates like a small town. Relationships are important, as is the status of belonging.

While San Diego is one of the oldest settlements in California, it is a young metropolis. The majority of San Diegans moved to the region in the last 20 years. As recently as 1996, the economy still was dominated by energy, government, and defense related industries and, even today, the military remains the top employer in the region.[2] Although labor has begun to create a presence in San Diego recently, unions have never been very strong, and the interests of business and homeowners have defined the political arena. Boosters describe San Diego as the city of the future, one that benefits from what it does *not* have: "no vast municipal welfare state, no entrenched urban underclass, no powerful municipal employee unions to skew spending priorities, and no industrial union tradition to make its labor force rigid." As well as what it does have, "a pro-business, small-government political culture, coupled with a political leadership determined to translate those principles into policy." The "San Diego way" emphasizes private-sector involvement and local initiative. It depends on civic-minded business leaders who see the region's interests as their own.[3]

The Organizational Landscape of the San Diego Region

The San Diego Dialogue operates within a field of regional organizations, both public and private. In fact, San Diego seems to have an especially high number of collaborative regional organizations. As one interviewee described this phenomenon, "There must be something in the water." Organizations vary in their influence, longevity, and presence within the wider San Diego community. Examples include groups with an economic focus such as San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and Envision San Diego; groups with a health focus such as Quality of Life San Diego; groups with a sustainability focus such as the Quality of Life Coalition; groups with a leadership focus such as LEAD San Diego; groups with a community organizing focus such as the Consensus Organizing Institute; and government agencies such as the San

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[2]   San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation, http://www.sandiegobusiness.org

[3]   Kotkin, Joel. 1997. "San Diego: A City for the New Millennium," *City Journal.*

Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and the San Diego Regional Transit Development Board.

With this number of regional efforts, one would expect to see a great deal of overlap among groups; however, at least within the groups concerned with economic development, there appears to be an effective, albeit informal, division of labor. For example, at first glance San Diego Dialogue and EDC appear to be very similar organizations. Both consider themselves to be CRIs, both have a membership which consists primarily of local business leaders, both address issues such as economic growth, education, growth management, and the airport. These two organizations work in fairly close contact with one another, but each approaches an issue through its own mission and style of action. Where the EDC brings business leaders into the classroom to aid in workforce education, SDD engages in research to identify the shortcomings in the San Diego City School District. The EDC formed the Housing Action Network to support efforts to build more housing in the San Diego region. SDD facilitated the Quality of Life Coalition as part of an effort to encourage infill and smart growth in San Diego. EDC can lobby and take direct action on behalf of their initiatives, where SDD is limited to research and convening. The two do not always see eye-to-eye, but their work is often complementary. Furthermore, each organization has a formal membership position with the other, making that coordination that much more concrete.

Regional business organizations in San Diego stay connected to the planning work of regional government. For example, in 2003, both SANDAG and the County of San Diego were engaged in regional planning processes. At the same time, San Diego Dialogue, San Diego Region EDC and other non-profit and business groups were also busy talking about growth management. These conversations formally intersected at times through interlocking committee membership. For example, the San Diego Dialogue is represented on SANDAG's Regional Comprehensive Plan Stakeholders Group by an individual who also represents the San Diego County Taxpayers Association and the Nature Conservancy. EDC is also on this committee (See more on regional planning in the Smart Growth activities described below.).

The University of California, San Diego (UCSD) and the Region

Civic and business leaders in San Diego have long provided support for research and development in the region. Initially, those efforts were funded on an individual basis. However, that began to change with the creation of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in 1912. The

Institution's birth is telling of the business community's unique role in the development of twentieth-century San Diego and its research capacities:

> The idea was born of a booster, Fred Baker, who was motivated by the typical booster's self-interest—in this case, his own amateur passion for malacology—as well as a sincere desire to attract favorable attention, investment and prestige to his adopted home town. Baker's fervent promotion of the idea attracted the attention of the town's leading businessmen and philanthropists, most of whom were dedicated boosters in their own right. Their principal organization, the Chamber of Commerce, took up the idea and made it operational, placing it squarely in the midst of a dozen or more pet projects all intended to help pull San Diego out of an economic and demographic depression that had hung on since the late 1880s.[4]

Like Scripps, the creation of both UC Extension (which later became UCSD Extension) and UCSD were championed by San Diego's business community. Extension was running classes by 1920 and promoting the diffusion of knowledge in the community. Classes were popular, but the offerings were insufficient for a growing community with its eye to the future. Soon the business community began a campaign for a UC research institution in San Diego. It took nearly forty years and the efforts of many different parties before the university was open for business, but in 1964, UCSD opened its doors to its first undergraduate class.

Building the university expanded the region geographically, socially, and economically. The federal government provided land to build the university in La Jolla. While this 1,200-acre parcel of coastal woodland is highly desirable property today, it was hinterlands at the time. The influx of university students and professors brought new ideas to San Diego and challenges to the status quo. Prejudicial institutions such as restrictive covenants in La Jolla that prevented Jews from buying homes, became targets for change. These changes were not all enthusiastically received by San Diego residents. In fact, the community saw the university as a stronghold of marginal people and liberals, not as a source of economic innovation or support for local business. Still, UCSD became

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[4] Shragge, Abraham. 2001. "Growing Up Together: The University of California's One Hundred-Year Partnership with the San Diego Region." *The Journal of San Diego History.* 47(4).

an important source of innovation tied to the future of the region's economy.

ORIGINS OF THE SAN DIEGO DIALOGUE

UCSD does not have professional schools such as a business school or a school of planning. In universities that do, such a department often takes on the role of providing technical support to the community. At UCSD, much of this work takes place through the Extension Program. The San Diego Dialogue is housed in the Extension Program, and originated through another Extension program, a high-tech business network called UCSD CONNECT.

UCSD CONNECT

In 1984, unemployment in San Diego was growing and the region was facing a real estate and banking crisis. The old economy (tourism, defense, agriculture, real estate and banking) and the new economy (high technology, science-based technology, biomedical research) existed side-by-side in the region, but neither was in conversation with the other. At the time, it appeared that the old economy was failing and the new economy was not yet developed enough to accommodate the region's growing need for jobs. Mary Walshok, dean of the Extension Program, approached Dick Atkinson, chancellor of UCSD, with an idea for a new form of civic engagement. At the urging of the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation, they brought together a number of downtown stakeholders and a handful of scientists and engineers who were starting small companies near the university to talk about jobs, development, and economic growth. Their goal was to create a new network of leaders and voices in San Diego. In 1985, that informal group became UCSD CONNECT.

Today, CONNECT has become "an incubator without walls." It links high-technology and life science entrepreneurs with industry-specific expertise, university resources and targeted support services for the purpose of accelerating growth in San Diego. The name is deliberate. "Its programs serve as a catalyst for the development and exchange of ideas, a forum to explore new business avenues and partnerships, and an opportunity to network with peers."[5] CONNECT links scientists with entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs with resources, but more importantly, it links new economy leaders with old economy leaders. These individuals

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[5] UCSD CONNECT website, http://www.connect.org.

are interested in economic development, but many are concerned about regional policy issues and leadership as well.

In the early 1990s, a small group of UCSD CONNECT members approached Mary Walshok with yet another challenge. She remembers their request: "You have done such a good job of organizing the interest groups that can affect new directions in the regional economy, why don't you start focusing on some of the leadership and public policy challenges we face in the region?" Technical services were not enough if these business interests were to grow. They needed access to public policy and an avenue for implementing their ideas.

This was a critical time in San Diego, which faced both a recession and a crisis of leadership. The mayor was perceived as ineffective and few people were willing to become city council or school board candidates. Once concentrated downtown, the business power center had become diffused across the region as employment centers continued to grow north of the city near UCSD and south of the city either near or just across the border. Regional concerns such as infrastructure, schools, and housing had to be addressed if San Diego was going to be competitive in the future. Through her connections at the extension school, Mary Walshok knew that a good research university can help a region know itself. What was missing was a forum.

Pressure for change in San Diego was growing from two important and ultimately interconnected sources: the economy and the border. UCSD CONNECT was addressing the pressure from changes in the structure of the regional economy. The border, however, remained an invisible and even unwanted issue. While San Diego was growing slowly, Tijuana was growing rapidly. Tijuana posed a potential rich market for American goods and sources of cheap labor, but also a potential competitor for resources. San Diegans had a notoriously negative relationship with their neighbors in Mexico. Border crossing was difficult and time-consuming. Immigration and Naturalization Services patrolled the highways. Stories of INS violence against Mexican would-be border crossers were wide spread. Many in the region saw San Diego as the cul-de-sac of California, a region with more in common with Los Angeles than Tijuana.

Drawing upon a subgroup of CONNECT members, Mary Walshok, Bill McGill (who had recently left his position as president of Columbia University and returned to San Diego where he had previously served as chancellor of UCSD), and Chuck Nathanson (a former UCSD sociology professor who was working with the San Diego Association of Governments) started to hold regular dinner meetings where the group would be able to talk about challenges facing the region. They widened

the circle to include some non-profit leaders from organizations such as the Urban League and Episcopal Community Services. When they were ready to formalize their discussions into a regular forum, they approached UCSD Chancellor Atkinson with their idea. Atkinson came from Stanford and had a particular idea, based on his experiences there, of how the university can be a partner in regional economic development. He saw the potential in this endeavor and indicated his approval, but on the condition that the new organization be community-centered rather than university-centered. He gave it a name: "Call it the San Diego Dialogue," he said. The Dialogue was born.

Structuring the San Diego Dialogue

San Diego needed new leadership and a new direction. The vision of the organization's founders was that the San Diego Dialogue would fill that need by bringing select leaders together for thoughtful discussions about the region. These sentiments are all captured in the Dialogue's charter:

> When community leadership falters and the public has not yet reached consensus, a group of concerned citizens may usefully step forward with initiatives of its own. This is the case in San Diego. Exceptional challenges and opportunities lie before us as a region, but we have barely begun to address them…. These dramatic changes will affect us deeply. They require a thoughtful response. As citizens who have inherited a magnificent environment and democratic culture, our responsibility is to manage change so as to create a better future for all.

The stated guidelines of the Dialogue are as follows:

1. The purpose of the Dialogue is to promote a renewal of civic discussion, thoughtful research, and consensus-building on the future of the San Diego region.

2. Every effort will be made to recruit distinguished participants from diverse backgrounds with special competence in the issues under discussion and a reputation for broad views and service to the community.

3. To encourage in-depth discussion of new ideas and a full exchange of views, the initial meetings will be private, the size of the group limited, and publicity avoided.

4. Ultimately, however, the Dialogue will seek to engage the public-at-large and elected officials in a program of regional initiatives.

5. UCSD Extension will serve in the role of convener of the Dialogue.

This would be a semi-autonomous, citizen-based, community-wide group which could serve as a knowledge base and as a catalyst for change in the region. Elected officials would be kept out of the membership in order to keep the organization independent of the political process.

Mary Walshok invited interested citizens including scholars, business leaders, media representatives, educators, and cultural and civic leaders to convene in April 1990. She brought in people who had a reputation for caring about the region, including many people who were not identifiable at the time as community leaders. The group included the region's new wealth and new intelligence. To head the effort, Mary hired Chuck Nathanson, a sociologist with an interest in civic dialogue and experience as a journalist. They started with the premise that, through conversation, people learn.

From Business Group to Dialogue

The organization's earliest conversations were organized as dinners with 10–12 carefully selected civic leaders. As they discussed the future of the region, participants began to see San Diego's future more closely linked to Baja than Los Angeles. As one organizer described the transformation, the Tijuana/San Diego region soon became a single region in the minds of the group, and a region with latent capacity that was not well understood. Because those men sat on multiple influential boards, their insight led to a civic shift, which in turn, rippled out to shift the views of other influential people and organizations—mayors, economic development commissions, and tourism and convention bureaus. This insight formed the core of the SDD vision. They created a charter and inaugurated the Dialogue in 1991.

The Dialogue spent more than two years listening, engaging in dialogue, and building relationships with its carefully selected membership. They brought in speakers to address regional issues such as the airport, health and human services, and multi-ethnic cities. Through this process of interactive dialogue, academic knowledge became civic knowledge and changed leaders' thinking about regional options. As their agenda gathered support within the region, individuals, corporations, and foundations started donating money. Irvine first invested in the San Diego Dialogue in 1994. Through their sustainable communities funding group,

Irvine supported the Dialogue's work to build a regional agenda. After that, Irvine funded projects that built organizational capacity.

The Leadership of Mary Walshok

Mary Walshok played key roles in bringing about the San Diego Dialogue and in shaping its particular organizational focus. One early member of both CONNECT and the Dialogue, described her leadership role in this way: "Mary Walshok had a decisive and creative role in both of those organizations. I think that in the area of substantive community outreach, she is the most imaginative, effective leader I have seen around universities." She had not only the background and the positions within the university to bring about these projects, but a critical set of experiences and beliefs that contributed to the final form of these organizations.

First, Walshok is a sociologist trained in area studies. She said that when faced with a new question, she is inclined to go out into the field, to look and to listen. Moreover, she has a deep personal dedication to the power of dialogue and to the idea of civic learning, in particular, to the model of Swedish democratic learning communities. She believes that these types of approaches are effective at helping people to overcome the silos created by their professional associations, to learn to approach problems jointly, and to build community.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The organizational structure of the San Diego Dialogue emphasizes relationships over hierarchy and flexibility over continuity. Members have been hand-picked and the exclusive membership list signifies how the organization places itself in the region and how it goes about doing its work. A flexible structure allows the organization to change as circumstances require and to pick up issues or put them aside as opportunities present themselves. University funding and financial support from members has allowed the Dialogue to stay focused on long term goals rather than short term outcomes. Finally, Nathanson's role as facilitator of the organization is critical. His behind-the-scenes work and one-on-one conversations create a fluid decision-making process and an atmosphere of collegiality where internal consensus can seem almost effortless. It is his political savvy that leverages this network of relationships into an opportunity for regional change.

Building "The List"

SDD is an organization of members. The membership list—or "The List" as it is referred to by staff—has been described, even by SDD

supporters and members, as a list of San Diego's elites. Others choose to be more neutral, describing it as a list of San Diego's leaders. Chuck Nathanson described it in this way: "When you look at the membership list, people say, 'That's a wonderful list, that's a terrific group of people.' Those are the people who built San Diego or built Baja California or built the *maquiladora* industry. They have a civic reputation." One member described her experiences using the list to recruit. "I was telling him that he should be a member. I told him that these are people he should know. They are a generation older. They are all the people who have done things. When they talk about things, it's important. He looked at the list of names and he agreed." The list is a source of pride for the organization. It is important that it has impact.

On this list, one finds representatives from the region's most important educational institutions, the largest social service agencies, both old economy and new economy business leaders, media, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and regional foundations. Both SDD staff and members often point out the diversity of membership in terms of both race and gender. One consistent criticism, however, is a lack of age diversity. The list represents an impressive assortment of expertise and an impressive collection of San Diego's movers and shakers.

As important as the list itself is how it came to be assembled. The original members were hand selected because of their interest and influence in the San Diego region. The membership list expanded from 60 individuals in 1991 to almost 130 in 2003. However, the group has remained invitation-only. Potential members were first nominated by Chuck Nathanson or an existing member and then approved by the Membership Committee. Next, Nathanson informally interviewed each new candidate, considering the individual's reputation, potential to contribute to the organization, and commitment to a regional focus before extending an invitation to join. Nathanson explained, "Our criteria are people who can transcend their special interests and think about the region as an interest and think about the common good. Also people who have a reputation for fairness." Informally, new members had to have something to add to the list, such as special expertise, missing diversity, or influence within the state or region.

Certain categories of people have always been avoided as members: newcomers, leaders of neighborhood-based movements, political officials, and agency representatives. Newcomers have yet to demonstrate a long-term commitment to the region; grassroots leaders are not considered to be regional in focus; and political officials and agency representatives are excluded to maintain the Dialogue's position as a neutral convener. Consistent with the general sentiment in San Diego, the

Dialogue sees elected officials as part of the problem, not an avenue for a future solution. They expect elected officials to serve as the audience for their work, and as a result, exclude them from participation.

Managing a Flexible Structure

On the surface, the Dialogue is a simple organization. It is connected to UCSD through its Division of Extended Studies and Public Programs. The Dialogue's executive director reports to Dean of Extension Mary Walshok. The Dialogue has a small staff of eight which includes the executive director, his chief of staff, a research director, an events director, an office manager, and three support staff. Staff members work in conjunction with the membership, providing organizational support for meetings as well as relevant research for projects and discussions.

Members may serve on either functional or substantive committees, and one person serves as the membership chair. In 2003, this person was Augustine Gallegos, the chancellor of the San Diego Community College District. Functional committees which help with SDD operations include a steering committee which was the structural equivalent to a Board of Directors in other organizations, a membership and nominations committee, and a finance committee. The Dialogue divides its work into three subareas (cross-border issues, smart growth, and K–12 education) and substantive committees include one panel or committee for each of the three issue areas.

These membership committees exist, they meet, and they are referred to in the organization's literature. However, they are less about engaging members in the work of the organization than they are about (1) engaging members' private networks, and (2) sorting members by status. Chuck Nathanson gave this description of how the Dialogue functioned in relation to its membership and committees during its earliest projects:

> You know, at that point, we had a governance board, we had a steering committee, but I don't believe that it was anything… We were very informal. I don't believe that we've ever taken a vote. There is a lot of attitude and discussion. I worked closely with the chair at the time who was the founding chair of the Dialogue, Bill McGill. He was someone who had a lot of good will in the community. My connection with him was the source of my sense of authority to act and also for intelligent review. But there were always a whole host of people that I consulted with.

Fundamentally, the Dialogue is not a structure organization, but a process organization. The Dialogue did not give its members influence by placing them in prestigious roles within the organizational hierarchy. Instead, it sought out influential people and engaged them at the core of its work. Through the dialogue process, members became more engaged in a topic and more knowledgeable. Change occurred through the questions they asked, the conclusions they reached, and who they talked to about what they discovered. Their implicit ability to influence the region through their personal networks became the organization's ability to influence the region.

The importance of member networks was further revealed through the final subgroup within the Dialogue membership: the McGill Circle. This committee did not have any formal mention on the Dialogue website or in their literature, but it was the most influential group of people within the Dialogue. The individuals in this group named for the Dialogue's founding chair, Bill McGill, were significant contributors to SDD, donating at least $5,000 a year for three years. In return for their financial support, McGill Circle members received a special, if informal, status within the Dialogue. All of these members were on other committees within the Dialogue, including the steering committee, which brought each into much closer contact with Chuck Nathanson. Furthermore, the McGill Circle held separate quarterly forums specifically intended to match decision-makers with high-level Dialogue members. While this political access may be enticing, one member described the importance of these meetings in a more personal way. "You get a lot of the elders who do not come out for anything else. They come out for the San Diego Dialogue, especially the members of the McGill Circle." For these select few, the McGill Circle was a way to build a bi-national region through personal relationships. "People know each other now. They go to each other's weddings and bar mitzvahs. It has never been this good."

This organizational structure distinguishes between staff and members, large donors and other members, the functional and substantive work of the organization, and the status of individual members and their networks. Except for the functional action areas and the McGill Circle, the structure kept changing and was not meaningful. Much of the Dialogue's real work occurred in one-on-one or small group power breakfasts, lunches and dinners with Nathanson. At the heart of the Dialogue, relationships mediated through Chuck Nathanson shaped the organization's work. As a result, the organization's agenda was disrupted when he developed serious health problems that eventually led to his death in the summer of 2003.

Decision-Making, Participation, and an Atmosphere of Collegiality

As a result, the Dialogue's decision-making process was embedded not in its formal committee and organizational structure, but in its informal structure based on status and relationships. Again, this process was fluid and mediated through Chuck Nathanson. When discussing a new program or idea, Dialogue staff often described it as "coming from the membership," and decisions were described as having been "handed down from the membership." However, the members themselves often were unable to identify where ideas came from when decisions were made, or even whether the membership engaged in a vote. They described their process as collegial and informal. Ideas came up and were discussed. Because the group generally was of like mind on issues, it reached consensus easily. On the surface, little decision-making appeared necessary.

However, in situations where the possible projects and demands for resources were infinite, the organization needed a way to select projects and prioritize its work. Much of that was done behind the scenes by Chuck Nathanson. When Nathanson became interested in a new issue, he met with members individually and in small groups to discuss it as a possible Dialogue project. He tried different approaches and looked for possible champions for the topic within the membership. Once he knew that he had support for the project, he brought it to the steering committee for further consideration. Nathanson knew the membership well, and he targeted particular members because he knew their interests. Like membership, participation in a new issue was by invitation only. Nathanson framed the question, identified possible solutions, and built momentum for a project all through informal meetings with hand-selected individuals. The steering committee further developed the idea, but they never were required to make a formal decision about whether or not to move forward on a project. By that point, it was already underway.

Individual members had the opportunity to influence the agenda of the organization through a relationship with Nathanson. The closer an individual was to him in the organizational structure, the more likely that individual could make her concern a concern of the organization. Nathanson worked most closely with the McGill Circle and the steering committee. These members were the most privileged in the Dialogue and included many of the region's most influential people. The list included the CEO of Qualcomm, San Diego's number one civilian employer; a well-known San Diego philanthropist; the owner of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* newspaper; the chancellor of the junior college district; a developer who co-founded the *maquiladora* system in Mexico; the CEO

of Sempra energy; and others. These members were involved in all aspects of the Dialogue's work. They participated in projects, attended special presentations, and spread the work of the Dialogue through their own social networks.

The Dialogue had other members, however, who never made it to the Dialogue's elite inner circle. These members reported being unaware of how decisions were made because they wee excluded from decisions. The only meetings they were invited to attend were the quarterly plenary sessions. They were not included in individual consultations with Nathanson. They were not asked to help develop new projects or to serve on the oversight committees of existing projects. These members still reported feeling very dedicated to the work of the Dialogue, but they also expressed concern with who was served by these projects and who was left out. Said one member, "I am always raising my hand and saying, 'But how will this affect people in the region who are not in the business community?' I think they must be getting sick of me by now."

In effect, two organizations existed simultaneously within the Dialogue. Both were organizations of excited, engaged members. However, in one organization, those members were able to engage their colleagues in shaping the direction of the Dialogue. They were consulted before the Dialogue began a new project. They held positions on Dialogue committees. They had influence within the Dialogue and influence within the region. Their agenda was the Dialogue's agenda. The other organization was a collection of observers. These members expanded the Dialogue's membership list. They added influence only through who they represented or the additional body they added to a final count of constituents. One observer-member described a meeting where she became very excited about a new project and asked where she could sign up to participate. No one responded to her question. San Diego Dialogue had only one voice: the voice of the business elite.

The Dialogue does have an opportunity for participation which is available to the general public. Through the Dialogue website, one can sign up to become a "Friend of the San Diego Dialogue." For a contribution of $200 a year, one receives a monthly report and invitations to quarterly plenary sessions. Furthermore, government officials and select experts are invited at times to specific Dialogue sessions when their presence or expertise is helpful to move particular agenda items forward.

Funding the Work

The Dialogue received funding from a variety of sources, including substantial funding from the James Irvine Foundation and other

foundations, the University of California San Diego Extension,[6] and individual donations from members. Thus, it is not dependent on any particular organization and it is free from the type of grant-chasing that can plague non-profit organizations and confuse their missions. Budget materials and exact figures for the Dialogue budget were difficult to obtain from staff, but based on internal documents and staff interviews, the Dialogue operating budget appeared to be more than $1 million per year. The Forum *Fronterizo* alone had an annual budget of $400,000. It is known that Irvine and Hewlett were providing major funding, and that members of the McGill Circle paid $15,000 to participate. Some members may have given even more.

Why were budget documents from the Dialogue so difficult to obtain? It was not because the Dialogue was being secretive, but rather because such documents were largely perceived as unnecessary. Other non-profits would have had much more careful accounts of incoming funds and how they were spent, but the Dialogue operated with a financial freedom far beyond that of a traditional non-profit. This arrangement allowed the organization to take on projects even if they were not "fundable" by foundation standards. It also enabled them to maintain a long-term focus, even when short-term outcomes were absent. However, it also proved to be a managerial nightmare. The Dialogue had almost no budgetary oversight; staff could not produce budgets from years past; and inevitably, finances became hopelessly confused.

Because Chuck Nathanson personally managed most contact with individual members, reports of specific promised donations came through him. Unfortunately, when others attempted to follow-up in his absence, that money was not always forthcoming. Budgeting, like other aspects of Dialogue operations, became a combination of personal relationships and finesse dependent on Nathanson's time and attention. At one time, there was a staff person who took care to ensure that the Dialogue was in the black at the end of each year; however, no one else took up that work after the person left. After Nathanson got sick, the balance of personal relationships and streams of money fell apart. It took a significant sum of money from the Extension Program's budget to cover staff salaries and bring the Dialogue back into solid financial standing.

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[6]   In the early years, UCSD Extension provided approximately 20% of the Dialogue's entire budget in cash, but the Dialogue has increased its funding by more than ten times with self and external funding, and now receives only in-kind contribution from UCSD Extension.

The Leadership of Chuck Nathanson

Unquestionably, Chuck Nathanson led the Dialogue to do important work that would not have been done otherwise. The work on border crossing and recognition of the bi-national region are his particularly important contributions. After his death many, many people pointed to these achievements and indicated that his work must continue.

Furthermore, the Dialogue depended on Chuck Nathanson's leadership. He managed the Dialogue's membership list and decision-making almost entirely through his individual relationships with members, which he maintained through one-on-one and small group breakfast, lunch and dinner meetings. As noted elsewhere, regular meetings were infrequent;[7] some who wished to be included were excluded; minutes were never taken. Information often moved through Nathanson rather than being widely distributed and generally available.

Nathanson was obviously intelligent and politically skilled. He was adroit at developing the Dialogue's modus operandi. The elite nature of the organization and the value of the membership "list" suited Chuck's personal interest in political power and his one-on-one style of building and maintaining relationships. Nathanson's style was only one of several represented within the Dialogue organization, but ultimately, it was the most powerful. It became the Dialogue's public face. As one member stated, "The Dialogue *is* Chuck Nathanson."

The problem is that one man cannot do all things or be all people, and ultimately a tension developed between Nathanson's personal aspirations to develop SDD into a political power in the San Diego region and the political neutrality forced on the organization by its association with UCSD. The last year that Nathanson served as SDD's executive director, he initiated a membership-wide discussion asking whether the Dialogue should expand beyond its traditional role as neutral convener and become an advocacy organization. Members that we interviewed expressed a range of opinions on this question. While some members were tired of coming up with ideas they believed in, only to hand them off to others for implementation, other members were proud of the Dialogue's history of research and neutral convening and wanted to see it continue. This tension was not resolved before Nathanson's death, but it is possible that a radically different SDD would have emerged in the near future.

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[7] McGill Circle meetings were the exception. They took place quarterly.

THE SDD MODEL OF CHANGE

The SDD model of change placed high value on knowledge and the power of civic leadership. The general process was as follows: through their conversations with one another, elite members identified an issue to be taken into a larger dialogue. This issue was often one of regional importance, but one that had little play in the public realm. Once an issue was selected, staff looked for funding. If the project was fundable, strategic research began. The research in turn generated new strategic information. This information spread through elite networks and carefully orchestrated briefings to those who were able to take action. Through this process, the civic discourse was changed and the regional agenda was shaped. This section explores the nuances of this model in more depth, concentrating specifically on how the Dialogue acted as a catalyst for change, some reasons for the political effectiveness of the organization, and its ultimate ability to shape the regional agenda.

SDD: A Catalyst for Change

The Mission of the Dialogue states that "San Diego Dialogue advances solutions to this cross-border region's long-term challenges in economy, environment and equity. The goal of the Dialogue is to improve this region's quality of life through cross-border development, smart growth, and school reform."[8] True to their name, much of the Dialogue's work involved convening the membership for plenary sessions where experts were brought in to share information on a topic that Dialogue members cared about. One of the Dialogue's founders described the importance of these sessions to the organization's mission:

> What the Dialogue has been able to do is to create a context where academic knowledge becomes civic knowledge and then changes leaders' thinking about their options. What I like talking about is knowledge transfer. What the Dialogue has done is create a setting where specialized knowledge engages community knowledge, but in an interactive process. No one is sitting down and listening to a lecture. This is a dialogue where individuals can engage knowledge. So guess what, the community gets smarter!

When a plenary topic generated sufficient interest, the next step was more in-depth research. Research staff, supervised by Dialogue members such as the Dean of UCSD's School of Social Science, further

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[8]   San Diego Dialogue homepage, www.sandiegodialogue.org. 2004.

investigated the issue and prepared relevant reports. Their reports were released first to the membership and then were presented to various constituency groups that might have interest in the information, such as city-council members or the mayor's office. In this way, the Dialogue engaged in both educating its members and educating other influential members of the San Diego region. From there, information moved out to the general public, at times through the Dialogue's connections to local media.

The Dialogue acted as a catalyst in this model: bringing forward issues that needed development, preparing research, initiating discussions, moving the conversation toward possible solutions and then passing the issue to someone else in the community for implementation. What the Dialogue did not do was engage in organizing, direct service, or sponsorship of political candidates. The Dialogue was not an advocacy organization. Any concrete implementation happened through the social networks of Dialogue members and external actors. SDD acted as a neutral convener. It provided information and shaped new ways of approaching topics of regional concern. It created forums where community leaders could share ideas and learn. The organization acted as a catalyst for change, but not as the agent for implementing that change. Once an idea was fully developed and an action plan identified, the Dialogue's work was over. The work was passed to another party.

The Dialogue as a Political Player

For an organization that chose to work outside the purview of government and elected officials, the Dialogue was remarkably politically effective.[9] This is in part because they were careful to pick issues that were a good fit for the organization. One member described good SDD issues as "issues where you can establish a broad, bi-partisan consensus; issues that have certain technical or researchable aspects and where we can educate the public, where most reasonable people, after learning something, could change their minds." In other words, SDD looked for issues where change was possible, and as another member described, issues that had not yet been moved into the public consciousness: "Oh, I think it is good at finding—let me call them intermediate-level issues— and publicizing them. It is not like war or peace where people are out demonstrating or the tax cuts that are always on the front burner. It is good

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[9]   This is not to say that the Dialogue was politically successful on every undertaking. But the general model they used on the border crossing—dialogue, research, compelling finding encapsulated in a phrase, education of those with authority—had a positive effect in other cases, as well.

at finding an issue that was never on any burner or maybe way out on a back burner and moving it into the political consciousness, to getting the political process to start considering it as a problem."

While some observers were critical of the San Diego Dialogue as an organization composed almost exclusively of the region's elite, the similarities in focus and concern within the group made it very effective at accomplishing its tasks and bringing its ideas to the table for larger consideration. After an issue was selected as a Dialogue project, a small subgroup engaged in building a vision for the project, analyzing research and reframing the problem as necessary. The status and connections of these individuals, combined with the reputation of the university, created an effective blend of legitimacy and political savvy as the project moved forward. Their ideas were often channeled through members' influential personal networks. Members' organizational relationships, such as service on other boards, provided a conduit for effectively shifting civic knowledge and changing other leaders' thinking about regional options. Thus, they created the political space for new perceptions and effectively helped to shape the regional agenda.

The elite membership also contributed to the Dialogue's ability to maintain a long, broad view on creating change in the region. First, it meant that the Dialogue did need to be political in the everyday, partisan sense. It could be political by influencing, not directing, the allocation of scarce resources of public and private goods, money, time and energy. Second, other organizations, notably the Chamber of Commerce and the Regional Economic Development Commission, took care of business's narrower interests. Thus, the Dialogue was free to look out for the health of the region as a whole, which it understood as the health of the region's economy.

SDD's political effectiveness was also a product of its members' ability to influence regional decision-making in two other different but related ways. Dialogue members valued their individual relationships and the ability to network with other powerful people. These relationships provided access and influence as well as opportunities to "talk with other smart people." As one member said, "We are seated at many tables, but without an official role. The Dialogue acts as a group that can facilitate. It is viewed as a body that involves the elders of the community. There is a lot of collective wisdom there and that can be a great help." In terms of regional decision-making, there were times when SDD was in the forefront facilitating conversations with other regional players. However, at other times it was behind the scenes, moving information through personal networks.

Shaping the Regional Agenda

Those involved in regional planning in San Diego spoke of how young San Diego is. They had a strong sense that there was still time to "do it right" and spoke frequently of the need to prevent San Diego from becoming Los Angeles. While most considered San Diego to be an eminently livable region, they also worried constantly about the possibility of a decline in quality of life. Advocates for San Diego's high technology sector, such as the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation, saw the region's natural amenities and its quality of life as the source of its competitive edge. Traffic congestion was no longer a nuisance; it was a disincentive for business. School quality was important because these businesses require an educated work force. Air quality, clean oceans and bays, and ample open space were also essential for the lifestyle preferences of today's entrepreneurs.[10]

San Diego Dialogue created a niche for itself within the field of business-oriented or regionally-focused organizations in the area. It was known for its cross border work, most specifically for its research which led to the installation of a rapid commuter lane for frequent border crossers. Its work was decidedly un-political. It chose medium-sized, concrete issues that were important to the well-being of the region, but had yet to attract the attention of the public—issues like researching who crosses the border for commerce, how to finance a new aqueduct or where to place a second regional airport. These projects were physically shaping the region and directing resources in ways that were of critical importance to business, but they rarely surfaced in the public arena.

The Dialogue was most successful when it was able to identify a critical piece of data that then transformed the regional conversation around a topic. For example, a recent Dialogue study found that San Diego's expected population boom will not be the result of immigration, but of the natural birth rates of existing residents. Once this news found its way to the media, smart growth became a widely accepted concept in San Diego. While residents were reluctant to accommodate growth for those they considered outsiders, they deemed it critical once the growth was for their children. Few San Diegans would recognize the name of the San Diego Dialogue, but through a careful process of generating and disseminating research, the Dialogue has been shaping the institutional structures within which public decisions are made.

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[10]   See the Smart Growth section below for further discussion of the Dialogue's role in regional planning.

SAN DIEGO DIALOGUE INITIATIVES

This report has provided an overview of the SDD approach to regional change. Working from this model, SDD has attempted to frame the discourse and shape the regional agenda on topics such as cross-border commerce, educational reform, airport planning, regional smart growth, and water supply infrastructure. This section describes in more detail the Dialogue's work in each of these issue areas.

The Story of the Airport

One of the Dialogue's first projects was a study investigating expansion options for the San Diego airport. Lindbergh Field, San Diego's only airport, is located close to downtown. While the location is very convenient, it also leaves little room for expansion. Because of the small size of the airport, which has less than a dozen gates, many have been concerned that the airport will soon reach capacity and become a hindrance to the region's economic viability. Because the airport was built on harbor lands, it has been under the jurisdiction of the Harbor Authority until very recently.

Members who worked on this project explained that while numerous committees, commissions, and reports over the past fifty years discussed expansion of the region's airport capacity, none ever went beyond discussion. One Dialogue member identified two reasons why these proposals were never able to make headway. First, no proposal ever had a broad base of support, and second, each proposal failed to include research which compared it to other proposals. As a result, each new proposal always begged more questions than it answered.

According to Chuck Nathanson, when the Dialogue entered the conversation, people were saying that Lindbergh was not the region's future airport. Several options were on the table, the most ambitious being to create a giant airport on the border. The problem was that no one was taking the lead to manage either the problem or the search for a solution. One local businessman and Dialogue member proposed a joint powers authority to take over the airport issue. The Dialogue followed his lead with a research survey. They asked San Diegans how they would rate their needs on a dozen different aspects of the airport issues and how they compared eight different potential airport sites. Using this data, the Dialogue created a committee and wrote an objective study of several options, pro and con. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* took this report and made it a special insert in the Sunday paper. Although the report did not result in consensus on the airport issue or a concrete action plan, participants felt it raised the level of discourse

The Dialogue report not only brought the discussion to the general public, but identified key data that changed the final set of options. One of the report authors, an engineer, felt that some people involved in the debate had been making claims about Lindbergh that were not based on technological fact—for example, that Lindbergh could not accommodate the take-off requirements for planes that could fly to London and Tokyo. He made a call to Boeing and put that issue to rest. Old airplanes could not fly out of Lindbergh, but contemporary planes had no problem. The reason San Diego was not having non-stops to London was not runways, but market forces. The SDD authors felt that their report made sure the debate was based on reality.

While the airport issue was not resolved in the short term, the Dialogue was an important cog in the process of getting a regional airport authority established almost ten years later. They raised awareness about the airport as an issue. Others were able to work from their momentum and pushed for a vehicle to take charge of the problem. The first mayor during these conversations, Mayor Golding, would not support a joint power authority. Supporters then went to a local state legislator who proposed legislation at the state level to create a regional airport authority. On January 1, 2003, the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority began its tenure as the owner/operator of San Diego International Airport.

Cross Border Initiatives

The Dialogue's website states that the "San Diego Dialogue is concerned with planning a bi-national metropolitan region." However, before the Dialogue could pursue this bi-national vision, it needed a constituency who believed in the cause. As with its other projects, the Dialogue's cross-border work began with a conversation. At the original Saturday morning meetings with the founding group, all of the speakers talked about how interesting the cross-border region was. It stood out. Members began to understand the Tijuana/San Diego region as one region. Through interactive dialogue, academic knowledge became civic knowledge and changed leaders' thinking about regional options. As their agenda resonated, individuals, corporations, and foundations started donating money. The Dialogue spent more than two years listening, engaging in dialogue and building relationships with its carefully selected membership.

Who Crosses the Border? Because the Dialogue conceptualized the region as bi-national from the very beginning, one of the organization's first projects was to create an advisory committee to

address cross-border affairs.[11] It included key leaders from the Tijuana side of the region, including one man who went on to become the governor of Baja.[12] Local economists and business people at this time were calling for something to be done about wait times at the border, which could be one and a half hours and up. As a first step, the committee's chair proposed a study of who crossed the border. In 1992, SDD worked in cooperation with the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to answer that very question. An economic demographer designed a survey, and college students from Mexico conducted the interviews of people waiting in line to cross. What they discovered was completely unexpected: 96% of the crossings were made by frequent crossers—people who crossed more than once a week. Border crossing then was not about immigration, but about commerce.

A Dialogue member who worked in the US Attorney General's office formed a task force with Congresswoman Shenk from San Diego. Using their key research finding on frequent border crossings,[13] they built a diverse coalition in support of a commuter lane. A pilot project began in 1994 and later a permanent lane, known as SENTRI, was installed. Although still small, the project is considered to be a success.[14] In light of current concerns with border security, the Department of Homeland Security is considering expansion of the program as the best principle for reconciling commerce and security at the border.

Reframing Border Crossings. One piece of data—that 96% of border crossings are made by frequent crossers—changed the way the border was perceived and discussed. Through the strategic application of a very straight-forward piece of research, the border was reframed and effectively transformed into a cross-sector issue. First, the new information supported the Dialogue's claim that the San Diego and Tijuana metropolitan areas were in fact one social, inter-connected, bi-national region. Second, the carefully constructed evidence demonstrated that the region was also a bi-national economy and that border crossing delays interfered with the region's economy. From that beginning, the

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[11] This advisory committee later became the Forum *Fronterizo*.

[12] To comply with the San Diego Dialogue's rule against political and government members, when this business leader became governor, he could no longer be a Dialogue member. He did, however, continue to be a key participant in the Forum *Fronterizo*.

[13] "What we learned became both our Bible and a Pandora's box of future understandings," said the executive director.

[14]   In 2004, only 20,000 of approximately 350,000–400,000 frequent crossers were enrolled in the SENTRI program.

Dialogue became known as the organization with a bi-national vision and data.

The dialogue process provided a radical new view of the San Diego region. Members began to see that rather than harm San Diego, Tijuana expanded the region into "one region with all kinds of latent capacity that no one understood." They recognized that "we were always looking north, always seeing ourselves as the cul-de-sac of California," and that "this change in thinking was a fundamental breakthrough in this community." One of the SDD's founding members, Malin Burnham, attended a Dialogue dinner in Tijuana. It was the first time since he was a teenager, more than thirty years ago, that he had been south of the border. Today, Malin says, "The border is our Berlin Wall. It serves no meaningful purpose. There are better ways to manage immigration." Another member described his own transformation in this way: "If I had thought at that time, when Mary and Bill talked to us about starting this group, that the future of San Diego was linked to the future of Baja, California, I would not have joined this group. Today, I am convinced that I had been looking in the wrong direction for 20 years."

In other words, SDD's approach proved to be effective. By convening like-minded members in a friendly setting and providing them with research they trusted, people were able to learn. They were even able to reconceptualize long-held beliefs about Mexico and the boundaries of the region.

> We were gathering data. Chuck was out there talking to people. We learned things like that Japan Airlines was flying into the Tijuana airport non-stop daily, but not into San Diego. Why? What was going on there? Baker McKenzie, Price Waterhouse, they all had offices in Tijuana that no one in San Diego had been aware of. You have to understand how invisible Tijuana was to this community. Things that today we take for granted—like the presence of global accounting firms and global law firms, the number of *maquiladoras*, the number of border crossers, and the extent of border trade—no one was paying attention. The Dialogue was a cauldron out of which a lot of this information surfaced.

What is remarkable about this transformation is that it took place at a time of immense national fear about Mexican immigration. The existing frame of border crossing was the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) with armed guards and a wall protecting the border between the wealthiest country in the history of the planet and a newly industrializing

country with overwhelming poverty. INS was a visible presence throughout the San Diego region, and stories of thwarted border crossings by would-be immigrants were national news. Still, the Dialogue successfully reframed the meaning of border crossing and thereby generated a shared vision of the bi-national regional economy. They were able to make border crossing easier at a time when the predominant sentiment was to make it more difficult. Their research also provided a framework for talking about other issues that need to be solved at a bi-national level, such as water, energy, healthcare, manufacturing and ports of entry.

Spreading the Word. Cross border commerce between the US and Mexico soon became a topic of national interest. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented in 1994, followed by a cross border boom in every sector. Suddenly everyone was trying to build relationships across the border. They needed information that could justify their interest and the Dialogue was ready to supply it. The Dialogue became an important source of cross border information.

In 1996, the Republican National Convention provided an unprecedented opportunity to spread the SDD's understanding of their bi-national region to a broader audience. In preparation, the Dialogue's community relations staff member, Kevin Cotrell, distilled the Dialogue's research into information that appealed to a variety of interests. He put the cross border work into briefing books, one for media and one for elected officials. Then Dialogue staff and members took the book to Washington to brief the press before the convention came to town. The strategy worked, and many journalists included discussions about the border in their coverage of San Diego and the convention.

By taking on the idea of a bi-national region, San Diego found a niche. Even today, few other entities are truly cross border, although there are other cross border efforts underway in the region. For example, the Chamber of Commerce is building a cross border piece into their agenda; the City of San Diego does some cross border work; and some trade associations do as well. There are also some academic entities such as the Center for US/Mexico Relations at UCSD and the Institute of the Americas. One Dialogue member put it this way: "The Catholic Church crosses the border, academia crosses the border, but chain businesses do not." The Dialogue remains the organization most associated with building a cross border region and the community seems content to defer to the Dialogue in this area. When it comes to the border, the Dialogue remains the acknowledged expert.

Forum *Fronterizo*. When the Dialogue created the Forum *Fronterizo*, it was designed to be a framework where different parties interested in the San Diego Dialogue's cross border work could come together to discuss issues of interest related to regional policy. As with other Dialogue venues for discussion, topics did not end with Forum presentations. Each discussion included a briefing paper which was distributed first at the Forum session and then to other strategic individuals. In this way, learning within the Dialogue was linked to learning in the greater community, and hopefully eventually to action.

The Forum began with a grant from the Irvine Foundation and subsequently was funded by corporate sponsors. The Forum generally provided several public meetings a year as well as small committee meetings. In these smaller meetings, participants were able to help develop topics and to come into contact with elected officials. Participants were influential people who were important. The Dialogue saw its role as providing a discreet and private setting to educate people who were able to make changes.

Tijuana Trabaja. *Tijuana Trabaja* is a deliberate spin-off from the San Diego Dialogue. The idea came out of a private conversation between Chuck Nathanson and some of the Dialogue's Mexican members. Their idea was to create an organization that could take the SDD agenda and focus exclusively on Tijuana. They gathered support from a few other members and then started the organization in 1998 with some seed money regranted from the Dialogue. The organization had several names before becoming the organization it is today. The International Community Foundation, one of the early funders of *Tijuana Trabaja*, described it as "a civic forum to promote dialogue, discussion, and analysis through consensus, and whose purpose is to encourage sustainable development to improve the quality of life in Tijuana, Mexico."

Now the organization is a membership-based formal civic organization. It is entirely self-funded. All of the Dialogue's Mexican members are on the board of *Tijuana Trabaja*. Much like the Dialogue, *Tijuana Trabaja* develops research on issues that benefit Tijuana. If the subject is also relevant to San Diego, they make strategic alliances—for example, their members may serve on SANDAG's cross-border committee, the Chamber of Commerce's international committee, or joint projects with the San Diego Dialogue. They address issues similar to those addressed by the Dialogue, but maintain a Tijuana focus.

The Story of Education

While the Dialogue always had an interest in K–12 education, it was personal relationships that helped to facilitate the Dialogue's entry into this debate. The Dialogue's interest in education dates back to the beginning of the organization. Their charter's "Economic Future" section states that insufficient infrastructure is blocking the region's progress. As an example, it cites the need for a "vastly improved K–12 educational system attuned to the scientific and cultural skills required by our economic growth."

Although concerned with issues of education, the Dialogue had stayed out of San Diego schools. The school bureaucracy was considered to be so opaque and impenetrable that it prevented outsiders from understanding what was happening or what was needed. The Dialogue also had no working relationship with the superintendent and so no one able to connect their ideas to action. Opportunity knocked when San Diego city schools needed a new superintendent and two very important Dialogue members were on the selection committee. The school board citizen committee broke from tradition, and instead of hiring an educator, they decided to look for someone who had a reputation for getting things done and holding people accountable. They turned to Alan Bersin, a lawyer from the US Attorney General's office as well as a close personal friend of Chuck Nathanson. The Dialogue had worked with Bersin before while getting the SENTRI lane passed through Congress. From the Dialogue's point of view, Bersin was a friend with a very important reform agenda, he was running into opposition from the teacher's union, and he needed their help.

This area was a crowded field, and at first, it was difficult for the Dialogue to find a way to make a unique contribution. Then they produced some excellent research focused on inequalities in school outcomes, which identified two important and inter-related problems: teacher turnover and an achievement gap.

The teacher turnover issue began after a study showed that in San Diego Unified, 30%–40% of the teachers at a single school could be new each year. When the Dialogue asked why teachers would leave, they found that it was because they were unable to be teachers. They would end up providing other services, and they had no support systems to help them teach. Chuck Nathanson began looking for integrated solutions. He got the California Endowment interested in a pilot project to create a health and social services program at one of the schools. The Dialogue hoped to take evidence from the project and use it to build an argument for doing this work broadly and systematically.

In order to address the achievement gap, they created the San Diego Achievement Forum and convened "Partners for K–12 School Reform," a group co-chaired by the president of San Diego State University and State Senator Dede Alpert. This group reached beyond Dialogue membership and became a countywide collaboration comprising superintendents, union leaders, school board members, and representatives of the County Office of Education, in addition to civic and business leaders. Their challenge became "How to Close the Achievement Gap for Poor and Minority Children." Staff organized the Learning Curve, a series of free public forums on achievement issues with respected experts. These dialogues brought together a broad range of people (usually 150 to 300) connected to education in San Diego and allowed them to talk to each other, which many had never done. All of this was typical of the Dialogue approach.

However, Nathanson also saw the initiative as a moral issue and a crusade to be adopted by the public at large. He wanted to see the Superintendent's reforms fully embraced in San Diego. Using publications, op-ed pieces, and community forums, the Dialogue began aggressively promoting both its research findings and its views on possible solutions. However, the controversy only grew, eventually spilling over into school board elections. The situation became so politicized that the Dialogue could not continue its work on the project. Despite national recognition for his reforms, Bersin was eventually asked to leave his position as Superintendent.

The executive director of the Taxpayers' Association credited the Dialogue for a two-fold contribution toward improving San Diego's schools. First, there was the Dialogue's research, which exposed the great inequities among schools in achievement and in teacher training and brought significant media attention to the issue. Second, the Dialogue brought all the stakeholders together and had them talk in front of each other (which had never happened before) while linking the problems with schools to the health of the regional economy. Working from the Dialogue's theory of change, the executive director believed that these conversations could lead to new ideas and perhaps to new solutions.

However, with funding difficult and the education field both conflictual and demanding, the Dialogue decided not to continue working directly in education. Furthermore, the results of SDD's first foray into advocacy and local politics were mixed. Nathanson assessed the Dialogue's efforts in this way: "We did a good job. Our report got a lot of play. Still, it didn't change any votes and it didn't change the minds of any teachers."

SDD's Smart Growth Agenda

The Dialogue's role in regional smart growth is both multi-faceted and diffuse. Within its smart growth initiative, SDD has been involved in several different and at times overlapping projects: Choiceworks Dialogues, the Quality of Life Coalition, and habitat conservation planning. In addition, SDD is represented in the SANDAG regional planning process, as discussed earlier. Despite the complexity of their work in this arena, the Dialogue's process follows the same pattern seen in other areas: discussion, formulation, the intervention of strategic information based on research, problem reframing, and implementation through other organizations.

As with many parts of the country, fears about quality of life in San Diego tend to connote worries over traffic congestion, although they also can include housing affordability, downtown redevelopment and infill, air and water quality, and protection of recreational and habitat areas. The Dialogue initiated its smart growth work in response to the interests of members who wanted to focus on the San Diego part of the region (not the border) and to address the quality of life issues they felt were important if the new economy was going to be able to continue to recruit the best and the brightest to the region.

In the early stages of their smart growth work, Dialogue staff generated research on the region's growth and discovered that the significant growth forecasted for San Diego would be coming from natural increases or birth rates rather than from immigration. Thus, planning for growth was actually a matter of planning for the needs of the region's own children and grandchildren. Armed with this insight, the Dialogue embraced a smart growth agenda, in particular, working to reduce traffic congestion and increase the supply of affordable housing.

Choiceworks Dialogues. This project came out of a relationship between Chuck Nathanson and Dan Yankelovich, a noted public opinion theorist who developed the Choiceworks methodology. Over the course of their conversations, they conceived of a project which would combine Yankelovich's expertise and the Dialogue's smart growth research agenda. The project was designed to have three stages. In the first stage, they would hold dialogues that mixed people from around the region and presented regional growth scenarios. In the second stage, each dialogue would be fairly local and scenarios would be specific to participants' neighborhoods. The final step envisioned using a similar format, but working through the media to reach many more people.

Working from this idea, they approached the Public Policy Institute of California to join as a partner in the project and the Hewlett Foundation for funding. They implemented the first step and ran a series of day-long focus group type "dialogues" which asked randomly-selected participants their opinions about different growth scenarios for the region. The surprise outcome was that by the end of the day, most participants were in favor of regional government, even though they did not start out that way. They also implemented the second stage, finding that participants still supported a smart growth agenda, but a little more reluctantly when the increased growth was affecting their own neighborhood. The third stage has yet to be implemented.

The Quality of Life Coalition. The Quality of Life Coalition began as a smart growth effort in Mayor Golding's office spearheaded by her staff person, Karen Scarborough. Karen and the then-executive director of the San Diego County Taxpayers' Association, Scott Barnett, felt that smart growth needed the attention of a diverse body, so they brought different groups together to tackle the issue. When the Mayor's term in office ended in 2000, they had to find a new venue for actively pursuing the coalition. They expanded the membership and formalized the group as the Quality of Life Coalition. Chuck Nathanson became the group's facilitator with the San Diego Dialogue providing logistical support and continuity. The Coalition adopted the Dialogue's format, and SDD keeps the Coalition focused on building consensus and making a solid plan. Participants discuss issues of regional governance and are currently building a common platform for the reauthorization of the region's primary mechanism for transportation finance, Transnet..

Transnet is the San Diego region's short-hand for a voter-approved fund, specifically a 0.05% sales tax, set aside expressly for funding transportation projects and transit. Transnet has become a topic of interest in the region because it will require reauthorization within the next few years. This in itself is challenging considering that new taxes in California require a super majority for approval and that San Diego is a notoriously anti-tax region. However, many progressive entities, including SDD, see Transnet as an opportunity to expand funding for smart growth initiatives. Environmental organizations are hoping to include funding for open space and habitat preservation in the new legislation. Others would like to see funding for other types of infrastructure such as water. Smart growth groups want to see incentives for infill housing, and some business and building interests want the entire tax to go toward freeway expansion. Unless these different interest groups are able to reach consensus on the details of the tax before it goes to voters, it is unlikely that anything will

be passed and the region will find itself without a good portion of its transportation funding.

Staff and Dialogue members involved in the Quality of Life Coalition explained that the goal of the Coalition is to make it clear that transportation is about more than highways and buses. Transportation is about land use, water quality, and infrastructure as well, and in their view, transportation policy has to address them all. Transet is an opportunity to institutionalize this approach and create incentives for developers who conform to their vision. So far, the supermajority requirement has been an effective tool for keeping divergent interests talking.

Habitat Conservation Planning. SDD works with two partners on this project: the Endangered Habitat League (EHL) and Community Organizing Institute (COI). EHL is a grassroots organization working on preserving endangered habitat and COI is a local, equity-focused nonprofit engaged in community organizing in low income communities. The James Irvine Foundation started the project off with a $1 million grant to be divided among the three partners. Their goal was to educate San Diegans, and in particular the residents of low income communities, about regional smart growth and habitat preservation issues as they relate to their communities.

This project has several pieces. One is community education. Another is policy innovation. The Dialogue used the Quality of Life Coalition to bring stakeholder groups together and facilitate conversations that generated new policy solutions for the region's habitat preservation needs. Transnet provided one obvious target for their work and an opportunity to expand habitat conservation beyond traditional planning processes. At this time it is unclear if their efforts with Transnet will be successful.

Water

The question of water has always been an important issue in San Diego, and it entered the public consciousness again in the mid-1990s when authorities announced that the region needed to increase the capacity of its reservoirs. The Dialogue felt that the issue was extremely important to San Diego and that it was not getting the attention that it deserved. The organization held meetings for its members, but also very public meetings that energized discussion on this long-standing issue and raised public consciousness when it needed to be raised.

A proposal was on the table to build a new reservoir that was going to flood a scenic valley. Before the discussion became contentious, SDD

held several meetings to discuss a range of possible options. These dialogues included members, but also technical experts in water issues such as local agency professionals. During one discussion, a fairly low level San Diego County Water Authority engineer pointed out that the Authority could create a lot more storage simply by raising the water level on existing reservoirs. He showed how that approach would avoid the cost and environmental damage of a new reservoir. With his solution, the whole issue evaporated.

Today, San Diego's water problems are not as easily solved. A key Dialogue member explained why SDD no longer works on the issue: "I don't think that anyone knows what in the world more we can do [about our water supply]. At this point, the consciousness is too public. Hardly a week goes by without an article in the *Union-Tribune*. That was not the case when the Dialogue started on this." In terms of the Dialogue's three project areas, water is included in the cross border project area because both Tijuana and San Diego must think about future water supplies. Nathanson, among others, wanted to see those conversations combined. One might expect to see water issues in the smart growth project area; however, questions of future water sources have been taken off the table because the issue is too contentious. Smart growth conversations are limited to water quality.

CONCLUSIONS ON THE SAN DIEGO DIALOGUE AND ITS MODEL OF SHAPING THE REGIONAL AGENDA

The San Diego Dialogue set out to "promote a renewal of civic discussion, thoughtful research, and consensus building on the future of the San Diego region...and to engage the public at large and elected officials in a program of regional initiatives," and succeeded in doing so. Its theory of social action relied on a model of US civic entrepreneurship followed for more than a century from Chicago to New York's Regional Association to Atlanta. As pursued by the Dialogue, the model's success depended on the late Chuck Nathanson, whose story telling, political skills, and one-on-one persuasion made the connections between the ideas and the elite networks that amplified the discourse, generating new civic knowledge and the regional agenda. The following conclusions explore the future of the Dialogue and the wider applicability of the San Diego Dialogue's model.

Future of the San Diego Dialogue

One might conclude that the way to replicate the Dialogue's success is to find another Chuck Nathanson. However, the real key to the

model is not the man so much as the connections among the elite and their focus on an agenda. Clearly the members of the Dialogue and especially the McGill Circle valued their ability to meet each other and sometimes address issues that were not on the Dialogue's agenda. Thus the question is, can they sustain these fruitful connections without Nathanson facilitating the process? We believe the Forum *Fronterizo* will do so because (a) it has been self-sustaining already, (b) the larger San Diego community recognizes the importance of the Dialogue's border work and wants to sustain it, and (c) Mary Walshok, Dialogue founder and dean of the Extension Program, has said that is her priority. Furthermore, the Forum has an articulated agenda.

Applicability of the SDD Model to Other Regions

This model depends on elite networks. Accordingly, it may be difficult to apply it to areas with strong histories and bases of inclusive, democratic politics. However a behind-the-scenes version could work, with strong politicians brokering between the elite civic organization and the region's everyday pluralist and grassroots politics.

Replicating the Dialogue would require a base organization to draw the civic leaders of the region and ensure that they would have exclusive access to one another. Two types of organization might provide that base. One is the elites themselves perhaps organized in a regional business association or perhaps in an exclusive club. Such a club or association could form an off-shoot or subsidiary to take on regional policy issues and form an organization with purposes similar to that of the Dialogue. If the new organization wanted to replicate the Dialogue, it would remain private, exclude government and grassroots organizations, and avoid being overtly political. It could have limited staff to facilitate members' interactions, conduct strategic research, and deal with media and public officials.

An alternative base is a university, which could attract the civic leaders, and may already have them in its elite donor circles. It could invite others and create a McGill Circle type of organization, with a mission similar to the Dialogue's, staffed as described above and drawing on university research as appropriate. Stanford University has worked with the private sector. Other more direct models may be available. The Dialogue model is quite different from the model of university–community partnerships promoted by the US Department of Housing and Community Development (HUD). The HUD model assumes a poor community that the university helps. The Dialogue model assumes a rich

regional economy with business leaders wanting to maintain and enhance the region, with a little collaboration with the university.

APPENDIX A – METHODOLOGY

Armed with fairly extensive background information about the Dialogue and the region, we began conducting interviews in February 2003. In total, we interviewed twenty-seven individuals including the founder of the Dialogue, the executive director, steering committee members, general Dialogue members, and a handful of supporting cast members who had collaborated with the Dialogue on specific projects. We used a semi-structured questionnaire, and the lengths of interviews ranged from one to two hours. Most interviewees had been connected to the Dialogue from the very beginning of the organization, and with the exception of other researchers or project partners that we interviewed, no one had been associated with the Dialogue for less than seven years.

The Dialogue has a stable core of dedicated members who are loyal to the organization. This produced two main challenges during the course of the interviews. First, members were uncomfortable mentioning anything that might be construed as critical of the Dialogue. They would not discuss critics of the Dialogue's work or changes they hoped to see in the organization. In addition, interviewees seemed strangely unaware of how decisions were made within the Dialogue or in some cases, even how they came to have their particular title. While the organizational structure seemed very simple on the surface, the actual details of that structure were deeply embedded in the norms and practices of the group.

As a result of these challenges, interviews with Dialogue staff and participants focused on topics related to why the individual joined the Dialogue, projects they had participated in, decision making and agenda setting within the Dialogue, the Dialogue's strengths, and how the organization fit into the San Diego region. We spent much of the time during interviews trying to break down decisions into concrete steps that would demystify the organization's structure. Most interview subjects were selected because of their title, although we also used limited snowballing. Through the interviews, it eventually became clear that some members were core to the organization and had a very active role in both shaping projects and making decisions. Other members were peripheral, not because of choice, but by design of the organization. Only three of the twenty-seven individuals we interviewed fell into that category, and more interviews with this group might helpful in the future.

Interview Protocol

As mentioned above, interviews were semi-structured. The following list of questions served as a starting place for interviews:

Background

Name?
Title?
Formal Affiliation with SDD?

Association with SDD

How long have you been associated with SDD?
How did you first become aware of SDD?
What interested you about the organization?
What is your current role in working with SDD?
How did you come to have that position?
What does that work involve?

Projects

What is a project that you have been a part of during your time with the Dialogue that has been particularly meaningful for you?
How was that project started?
How did it end?
In your experience, how are projects proposed and selected within the Dialogue?

The Organization

Please describe the overall function of the San Diego Dialogue. What does it do?
What do you see as the role of the SDD in the region?
What does the Dialogue do particularly well? Examples?
What are examples of issues that fall outside of the Dialogue's interests?
What are examples of projects that the Dialogue has chosen not to take on?

SDD and the Region

Who in the region would recognize the name of San Diego Dialogue and be familiar with its work?
How does the Dialogue fit into the region?
Who in the region is concerned with the needs of San Diego's low income communities?

Personal Reflections

What is your personal motivation for being a part of the Dialogue?

List of Interviews

Bollman, Nick. President and CEO, California Center for Regional
Leadership. February 2, 2003.

Booher, David. Research Director, Center for Collaborative Policy.
February 17, 2003.

Briggs, Lisa. Executive Director, San Diego Regional Taxpayers'
Association. August 11, 2003.

Burnham, Malin. Vice-Chair of Development & Finance, San Diego
Dialogue. August 12, 2003.

Cohen, Don. President/Co-founder, Center for Policy Initiatives. August
12, 2003.

Cottrell, Kevin. Former Dialogue staff person and President, LEAD San
Diego. August 12, 2003.

Drake, Paul. Vice-Chair of Academic Affairs, San Diego Dialogue. April
10, 2003.

Fairbanks, Janet. Senior Regional Planner, SANDAG. August 11, 2003.

Gallegos, Augustine. Chair, San Diego Dialogue. March 28, 2003.

Gallegos, Gary L. Steering Committee Member, San Diego Dialogue and
Executive Director, SANDAG. August 13, 2003.

Grimes, Scott. Director of Research and Program Development, San
Diego Dialogue. March 28, 2003 and August 13, 2003.

Hues, Nancy. Executive Director, Consensus Organizing Institute. August
12, 2003.

Killea, Lucy. Member, San Diego Dialogue. April 11, 2003.

Larroque, José. Vice-Chair of Cross Border Affairs, San Diego Dialogue.
April 10, 2003.

Lima-Morris, Martha. Director of Special Projects, San Diego Dialogue.
August 13, 2003.

Lutterhof Camou, Héctor. Member, San Diego Dialogue. April 9, 2003.

McDade, Esq., J. Michael. Vice-Chair of Community Relations, San
Diego Dialogue. April 11, 2003.

Nathanson, Chuck. Executive Director, San Diego Dialogue. February 28,
2003.

Rudee, M. Lea. Vice-Chair of Programs, San Diego Dialogue. February
27, 2003.

Rossel, Steve. President, Viewpoint Learning, Inc. April 4, 2003.

Scarborough, Karen. Member, San Diego Dialogue. April 11, 2003.

Sahba, Lauree. Vice President of Investor Relations and Development, San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation. April 11, 2003.

Spehn, Deanna. Board Member, San Diego Regional Taxpayers' Association. August 11, 2003.

Szekley, Deborah. Member, San Diego Dialogue. April 9, 2003.

Thompson, Sherrie-Lyn. Chief of Staff, San Diego Dialogue. April 10, 2003.

Urtasen, Frank. Vice-Chair of Membership, San Diego Dialogue. March 27, 2003.

Walshok, Mary. Dean, University of California, San Diego Extension. February 28, 2003 and August 11, 2003.