

**OSI U.S. PROGRAMS
STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FUND
FRAMEWORK & STRATEGIC PLAN 2009-2010**

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Strategic Opportunities Fund Staff

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I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The Strategic Opportunities Fund (SOF)) is responsive to timely opportunities to impact issues that are relevant to the mission of U.S. Programs. The Fund sets a horizon for its priorities which address unanticipated issues or new ideas that are not already incorporated or prioritized in U.S. Programs’ funds and campaigns. Though not dedicated to particular ongoing issues, the Fund serves three distinct functions:

- Rapid Response**
- Research and Development (R & D)**
- Special Initiatives**

The nature of the fund requires that we operate within a defined framework, preserving its flexibility and relevance by evaluating priorities each year. In general, the fund will aim to develop initiatives that have a built-in time frame and that are consistent with the purpose of the fund. In setting priorities, SOF is informed by outcomes of the U.S. Programs’ planning discussions and by opportunities that arise during the course of the year that are referred to SOF for review. The rapid response capability enables us to respond to unforeseen crises or open society challenges that are time sensitive and would benefit from strategic and timely support. The R & D function ensures the facility to take on new ideas or explorations that are not already a prominent part of existing portfolios. In addition, SOF selectively supports Special Initiatives which may address unfunded directives or grow out of rapid response grantmaking.

This document aims to provide a brief history and context for SOF, a description of its functions and priorities, and an explanation of how goal setting will be determined.

From the start of U.S. Programs in 1996, rapid response capability was a hallmark of our grantmaking even though there was not, at the time, a segregated general fund for that

purpose. Rather, funds were designated at those moments when changes in policy created significant threats and challenges to open society ideals. The first such moment was with the implementation of the **1996 Welfare Reform Act** which repealed the social safety net that had existed in the United States for 60 years. Amongst its provisions was the denial of cash benefits, food stamps and Supplementary Security Income to legal immigrants who did not have citizenship. The \$50 million **Emma Lazarus Fund (ELF)** was created as a rapid response to this policy. The ELF fund had dedicated staff that was hired to develop grantmaking strategies aimed at accelerating the legalization of legal immigrants. The fund was a bold gesture (exemplifying OSI's ideals) that ultimately achieved the partial restoration of benefits to legal immigrants while also assisting thousands of immigrants with the legalization process. The ELF fund laid the foundation for the extensive immigration reform efforts that are now a core priority of the **Equality and Opportunity Fund**.

At another significant moment in the history of U.S. Programs, the policies introduced post 9/11 that legitimized racial profiling particularly of Arab and Muslim immigrants, led to unnecessary detentions and a backlash of increased hate crimes. It was clear that 9/11 developments directly threatened OSI's goals, and a series of grants were made to organizations that were addressing the impact of September 11th on immigration policy and immigrant communities; racial profiling of Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, South Asians or anyone perceived as Middle Eastern; other forms of backlash, including discrimination and hate crimes directed at people perceived as Middle Eastern; and the policies that threatened civil liberties and human rights. This seed funding paved the way for a much more significant investment in these issues through the **National Security and Human Rights Campaign**.

During 2002-2005, the need for U.S. Programs to have ongoing flexible funds remained evident, particularly as U.S. Programs was closing many of its programs during this period. In 2003 and 2004 U.S. Programs was provided with **Special Opportunities** funding so that priorities could be framed around a number of national debates that George Soros, the board and OSI staff identified as open society threats. Staff with expertise in the areas we prioritized took the lead in recommending strategic grants.

In subsequent years SOF became a stand-alone fund that was framed along thematic lines with coherent guidelines, while preserving its original intent to ensure open ended and opportunistic funding capabilities. In this phase SOF operated as a hybrid fund that supported two functions:

- a) the protection of key independent sectors (media policy reform, minimizing the politicization of science, preservation of academic freedom, bolstering the philanthropic and non-profit sector);
- b) flexible/opportunistic responses (legacy grantmaking, rapid response, director's discretionary grants, and technical assistance to existing grantees).

With new leadership, the setting of new directions for U.S. Programs in 2007, and the launch of new funds and campaigns in 2008, SOF has been rearticulated to maintain its

original rapid response function and in addition, to serve as a laboratory to explore new ideas, themes and/or strategies that may ultimately become incorporated into, or inform, the ongoing work of U.S. Programs. In this current iteration, SOF serves these specific functions and for the first time has the requisite full time staffing capacity.

II. GUIDING PRINCIPLES & PRACTICE

The Strategic Opportunities Fund enters a new juncture with a more coherent structure, purpose and staffing, and flexibility as a cornerstone of the Fund's function. Our aim has been to define the parameters that will govern its operation and grantmaking, and in that regard the following principles will guide our actions:

- Maintaining a transparent process for review and decision making on issues/ideas that are referred for SOF consideration.
- Ensuring openness to U.S. Programs' staff's identification of issues/themes that are ripe for Research & Development, Rapid Response and Special Initiative status by maintaining close communication with fund and campaign staff.
- Ensuring an 'ear-to-the-ground' externally to bring attention to issues/themes not on our radar screen that are ripe for SOF consideration.
- Drawing on in-house expertise through the SOF Review Committee to inform strategies and annual review of priorities
- Providing timely grantmaking responses that do not compromise due diligence.

Preserving a coherent structure will be critical to the fund's ability to serve a distinct role in U.S. Programs and will therefore require that our practice incorporates:

- Forecasting of rapid response needs one or two years ahead.
- Preserving the fund's facility to remain flexible and responsive to new opportunities without becoming too amorphous.
- Maintaining capability for in-depth research and development while ensuring staff can operate nimbly.
- Ensuring lessons learned are captured, disseminated and inform ongoing grantmaking.
- Avoiding the diluting of resources.

A. Rapid Response

SOF staff will continue to determine the circumstances that merit rapid response with input from the SOF Review Committee (which currently includes representatives from the following funds: **Transparency and Integrity, Democracy and Power, Criminal Justice** and **OSI-Baltimore**). The committee membership will rotate each year to maximize staff participation.

The mechanism for SOF staff to surface potential rapid response opportunities will be through a formal referral process. SOF is issuing guidelines that USP staff can use to identify rapid response opportunities. These guidelines help to differentiate rapid

response needs that advance cross-program goals from those that are outside the core goals of all the funds and campaigns.

Criteria for Determining Rapid Response

The criteria to identify rapid response grants will include:

- Unanticipated developments that threaten OSI's core goals.
- Need for action.
- Window of opportunity to affect change of some significance.
- Evidence of need for infusion of timely funding.
- Opportunity for public mobilization.
- High impact prospects for one-time or time limited grants.
- Understanding of risk factors.
- Expectations and outcomes can be assessed.
- Intervention represents a priority for the field or set of issues.

B. Research and Development (R & D)

R & D is an important element of strategy development to impact a defined problem that ultimately influences public policy. SOF will provide a discrete R & D capability that will prioritize strategy development in select areas that OSI determines are ripe for new ideas and approaches and that are not already part of our core interest areas or programs. Projects may remain in an R & D phase for several months or longer and the duration should be anticipated at the outset. Some projects may be recommended for time limited initiatives while others may inform and enrich the work of US Program's core funds and campaigns.

Criteria for Selecting R & D Initiatives

The selection of new exploratory areas will in part be determined by:

- Clear articulation of cross-cutting themes, emerging issues and their relevance to U.S. Program's mission.
- Indicators that support the need for new frameworks and models that will inform advocacy and/or public policy.
- Rationale for how R & D will identify and support opportunities that will inform longer term OSI investments by translating the connections between research, policy and practice.
- Assessment of the operational and research aspects of the proposed R & D project.
- Identifiable benchmarks that will enable evaluation of the initiative.
- Articulation of expected next steps following the R & D phase.

C. Special Initiatives

On occasion, SOF will incorporate **Special Initiatives** that advance innovative and bold ideas or new approaches that are likely to have a significant impact on U.S. Programs'

core issues. These initiatives may emerge from rapid response and R & D initiatives. In undertaking special initiatives, SOF will continue to preserve the facility to operate nimbly and flexibly, incorporating the capacity to undertake shorter-term initiatives, to take up a problem, respond generously, and pull back, without creating a program that must either live on or be dismantled. It should be noted however, that not all special initiatives will be housed within the SOF fund.

III. GOALS AND STRATEGIES

The following are SOF's 2009-2010 goals:

- To build and develop an outstanding SOF team that is equipped to contribute to the development of strategy and to execute that strategy efficiently and effectively.
- To develop and formalize a methodology for conducting R & D initiatives that are responsive to the need.
- To identify effective strategies to implement rapid response and/or short-term initiatives that are of high impact.
- To develop benchmarks for evaluating SOF's impact in performing each of its functions.
- To collaborate with other U.S. Programs to articulate shared goals and strategies for New Orleans/Gulf Region, and where appropriate initiate new initiatives over the next 3 years.
- To conduct research and development on the role that arts and culture play in advancing advocacy in order to inform programming.
- To collaborate with the Democracy and Power Fund in the design of a discrete grantmaking initiative that supports an accurate census count.
- To partner with Grantmaking Operations in designing strategies that are responsive to the new economic reality that grantees are facing.
- To partner with cross-fund staff in the design of a discrete advocacy strategy relating to the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind.

SOF operates as a flexible fund that does not duplicate the focus and priorities of other funds but rather complements and connects to the issues being addressed by them. While recognizing the importance of establishing long term goals, the nature of the fund requires that we preserve its flexibility and relevance by evaluating priorities each year. As a general rule, the fund will aim to develop initiatives that have a built-in time frame and will serve the following goals and strategies:

GOAL 1

To build and develop an outstanding SOF team that is equipped to contribute to the development of strategy and to execute that strategy efficiently and effectively

SOF recently completed the hiring process for a full time program officer and program associate. During the next several months training and professional development activities will focus on preparing the staff team for their role in strategy development and

execution. We will take advantage of training opportunities offered within OSI as well as by several affinity groups including Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, Philanthropy New York and the Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy. The SOF team will develop a work plan that provides a road map for the execution of fund priorities and strategies.

GOAL 2

To develop and formalize a methodology for conducting R & D initiatives that is responsive to the need

SOF will provide a discrete R & D capability that will prioritize strategy development in select areas that OSI determines are suited for new ideas and approaches and that are not already part of our core interest areas or programs. Projects may remain in an R & D phase for several months or longer and the duration should be anticipated at the outset. Some projects may be recommended for time limited initiatives while others may inform and enrich the work of U.S. Programs' core funds and campaigns. An example that illustrates this trajectory was the R & D conceptualization phase of a discrete initiative that would focus on black males (2006-7) which led to the launch of the three year **Campaign for Black Male Achievement in 2008** and the initiative's move from SOF to the Equality and Opportunity Fund. While the concept for this initiative was headed by the lead staff of the former Racial Justice Initiative, a working group informed the development of the concept and SOF provided oversight and coordination of this process.

GOAL 3

To identify effective strategies to implement rapid response and/or short-term initiatives of high impact

These strategies will be developed and fine tuned as we design, implement and evaluate SOF activities. SOF's methodology will include:

- Setting clear goals for initiatives at the outset.
- Outlining the number and type of key activities that will form the SOF response.
- Determining a time line for each activity.
- Evaluating and dedicating appropriate resources.
- Determining SOF's role and whether it will lead strategy development or partner with other funds.

GOAL 4

To develop benchmarks for evaluating SOF's impact in performing each of its functions

These will be informed and determined by the following:

- Using past activities as benchmarks for historic review and future planning.

- Review of current strategies for their success to date.
- Determining benchmarks at the start of SOF activities to help us evaluate our strategies.
- Collaborating with other funds, campaigns and the **Grantmaking Operations** division so that we can incorporate best practices.

It should be noted that SOF will be assigned OSI board advisors once new board advisors are selected. Similar to the other USP funds, they will inform our goal setting and strategic plans.

GOAL 5

To collaborate with other US Programs to articulate shared goals and strategies for New Orleans/Gulf Region and initiate, where appropriate, discrete initiatives over the next 3 years

We have already identified Place-based Philanthropy in New Orleans/Louisiana with the potential to extend to other Gulf States as an R & D priority. OSI has made significant post-Katrina investments in New Orleans and has launched exploratory funding to support local activists and advocates in their efforts to design coordinated transparency and accountability initiatives that will create more transparent government. **SOF** and the **Transparency and Integrity Fund** have worked collaboratively on this front. SOF will continue to promote the interconnectedness of OSI's issues and potential for collaborative funding with other funds and campaigns where it may not already exist. We are also interested in leveraging the lessons learned from OSI's experience in Baltimore and will be assessing how that might be translated to work in areas like New Orleans and Louisiana by drawing on the expertise of **OSI-Baltimore** staff. Other funders that we are partnering with or that we will foster closer partnerships with are the **Greater New Orleans Foundation; Ford, Surdna, Twenty First Century, Hazen, Kellogg and Pew Foundations.**

SOF is projecting a **three year timeline** (2009 – 2011) for SOF's engagement in this region because of the compelling need to build and strengthen citizen engagement and advocacy infrastructures.

GOAL 6

To conduct research and development on the role that arts and culture plays in advancing advocacy in order to inform programming

SOF is prioritizing an R & D enterprise that examines the **role of arts and cultural expression in advancing advocacy goals.** An internal working group will inform the identification of arts and culture strategies that aim to advance advocacy in US Programs priority areas, as well as the development of a longer term strategy for institutionalizing this approach. The working group includes representatives from the **Democracy and Power Fund**, the **Documentary Photography Project**, and the **Transparency and Integrity Fund**. SOF is also collaborating with the **Democracy and Power Fund** to ensure coordination in our respective efforts. D & P has prioritized the role of social

networking and the use of arts, culture and technology in movement building. We are coordinating our efforts to avoid duplication and to ensure we inform each other's endeavors.

The initial R & D phase comprises the following components:

- Support for a national mapping of the intersection and use of arts and culture in order to enhance understanding of the growing spectrum of arts activity that fosters civic engagement and social change; the expanding circle of artists and arts organizations actively pursuing this work; and the funders who support it.
- Commissioning of a local mapping project in New Orleans where the role of arts and culture has long been recognized as inseparable from activism and struggles for justice in order to better understand this landscape and the models that are working effectively.
- Exploratory grantmaking that raises the visibility of innovative arts and culture models that advance US Program's issues in an effort to determine ways in which their impact can be maximized.

Documentation of the R & D strategy, process and funding outcomes will provide baseline information that will be useful in framing a methodology.

SOF is working collaboratively with funders that have similar interests in this work – amongst which are the **Cross Currents, Nathan Cummings and Ford Foundations.**

GOAL 7

To collaborate with the Democracy and Power Fund in the design of a discrete grantmaking initiative that supports an accurate census count

Concerns about the undercounting of hard to reach populations (such as immigrants, displaced Gulf Region residents as well as those affected by the unstable housing market) in the upcoming 2010 census may present opportunities for timely grantmaking. Census undercounting directly impacts the drawing of districts and the apportioning of political representation as well as the allocation of federal dollars. SOF and the **Democracy and Power Fund** are working collaboratively to determine discrete opportunities for OSI intervention that will address our concerns. It is expected that funding will be required in 2009 and 2010 for initiatives that will monitor census activities and help mobilize low-income communities, particularly in states and regions that have a disproportionate share of groups that are historically under-counted in the Census, including African-Americans, new immigrants, low-income residents, the incarcerated, and military families. OSI is working collaboratively with the **Funders Collaborative on Civic Participation** in this regard and will be informed by their efforts as well as our own data gathering already underway that is helping to shape the development of state and/or regionally based strategies.

GOAL 8

To partner with Grantmaking Operations in designing strategies that are responsive to the new economic reality that grantees are facing

The JEHT Emergency Fund (JEF), set up at the beginning of 2009, provided up to \$10 million for US Program's and the President's Office, to develop OSI's rapid response to the demise of the JEHT Foundation and the crisis it created in fields that overlapped with U.S. Programs' priorities. The **Criminal Justice Fund**, the **National Security and Human Rights Campaign**, the **President's Office**, and the **Transparency and Integrity Fund** were most closely associated with JEHT's fields of interest and had significant numbers of overlapping grantees. SOF served as the coordinator and liaison for U.S. Programs JEF fund grantmaking. The JEF fund was intended to be a one-time response for emergency grants to former JEHT grantees in 2009 only so this particular funding will not continue in 2010. However, evident from that experience, as well as grantee feedback about the impact of the economic downturn on their organizations, is the need for grantmaking strategies and technical assistance to be shaped in ways that incorporate a new economic reality. The changed economic landscape creates an opportunity for a **Research and Development** analysis that will inform the opportunities and strategies that OSI should consider. SOF is collaborating with the new **Grantmaking Operations** division to ensure we structure coherent and informed strategies that maximize OSI resources which may include:

- Supporting a menu of technical assistance and capacity building options for grantees to utilize;
- Creating a learning community that will capture and disseminate lessons learned;
- Developing training sessions to inform and guide program staff in their work with grantees.

GOAL 9

To partner with cross-fund staff in the design of a discrete advocacy strategy relating to the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind

U.S. Programs is exploring funding advocacy that builds public will for certain reforms to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which is up for reauthorization in 2010. NCLB over-relies on standardized test scores as the sole indicator for assessing student learning levels. Exclusive use of standardized test scores both distorts student learning and forces schools to narrow their curricula so that many children are not taught the skills and content needed to prepare them to participate fully and effectively as citizens. In addition, to bolster NCLB-required reports of graduation rates, schools push out underachieving students in lower grades and then neglect to report those students in the graduate rate. Without reform, NCLB will continue to exacerbate rather than help to improve low graduation rates. A cross-fund group of program directors met with OSI trustee, Leon Botstein on May 26, 2009 to discuss potential discrete areas that U.S. Programs might consider. It is likely that OSI-Baltimore, with its extensive expertise in local education advocacy will lead the development of a national strategy that is informed

by a cross-fund working group. SOF will be a key partner in that effort providing staff expertise for discrete grantmaking that complements targeted engagement on these issues through the *Seize the Day Fund*.

IV. STATEMENT OF IMPACT

SOF will approach the examination of impact in several ways. First and foremost, we will annually assess whether SOF achieved its stated goals; examine those strategies that were effective and those that were not; and identify how we can improve our practice. Secondly, we will ensure that documentation of our activities captures key information that will help us assess impact of our activities and identifiable outcomes. Our approach will be informed by the broader US Programs attempts to identify effective measures for evaluating its programs and strategies. We will also seek opportunities outside of OSI to collaborate with other funder colleagues in ways that will inform our practice.