

Power Building in the Community Change Power in Places Initiative: Framework & Strategies

SUMMARY





In 2017, Innovation Network and Community Change began work on a learning project to understand what it takes to build grassroots power and advance economic justice in impacted communities. This brief summarizes the findings from the evaluation of the Power in Places Initiative at Community Change.

Community Change was founded in 1968 with a vision “to build grassroots leadership, to challenge the government to be a force for good, and to focus on poor people, especially people of color.” Since its founding, Community Change has supported and strengthened community organizing groups and grassroots leaders across the United States. Recognizing that the challenges of racialized poverty and exclusion are deeply entrenched in our nation’s politics and economy, Community Change articulated a new vision for justice as it approached its 50th anniversary in 2018. Community Change’s *Path to Power* charts a single overarching goal: “to dramatically improve the material conditions for

people struggling to make ends meet in the United States, particularly poor people of color.”

Path to Power outlines a bold plan for achieving this goal by 2033 that focuses on building the power of communities most impacted by inequities and racialized poverty. A key element of *Path to Power* is supporting community organizing groups that are building grassroots power to improve material conditions of low-income communities of color. Through the Power in Places Initiative Community Change provides organizations with on-the-ground assistance, communications support, collective learning opportunities, and funding. The Power in Places Initiative is part of Community Change’s Economic Justice program, a larger effort to advance priority issue campaigns at the local, state, and federal levels.

The nine organizations in the Power in Places Initiative are grassroots organizations dedicated to building the power and capacity of their communities to advance change. Each organization uses



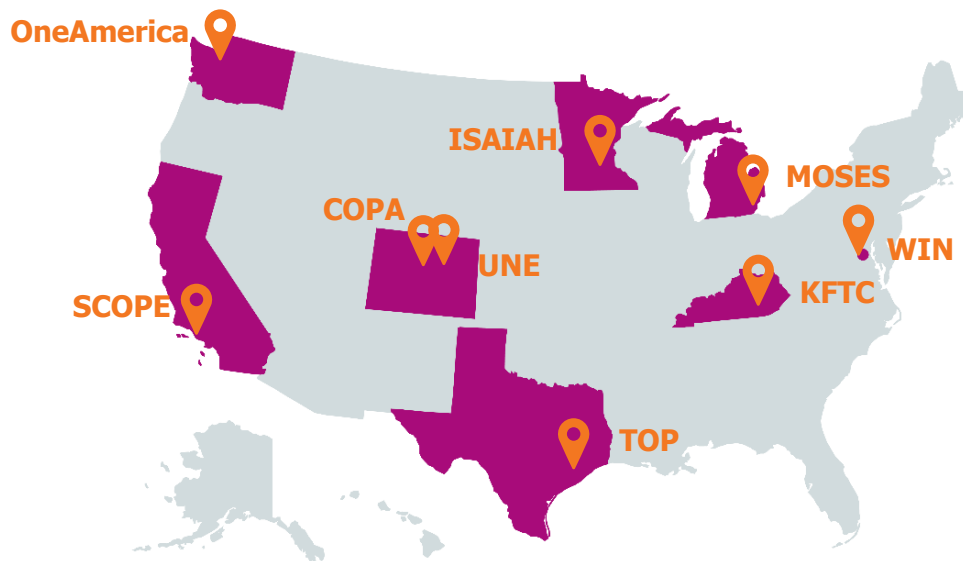
community organizing to build the capacity and agency of their community to improve the material conditions and reduce racial and economic disparities. The nine organizations organize a wide diversity of constituencies in different geographic locations.

Innovation Network has provided evaluation support to Community Change's economic justice staff team since 2012. The findings featured in this research brief highlights our collaborative approach to learning and inquiry rooted in the experiences of community organizers with the intention of providing new

insights about organizing, highlighting day-to-day challenges, and offering recommendations for how to better support the field.

Our research served two purposes:

- 1) To provide a conceptual framework about organizations' power building approaches and
- 2) To describe organizations' strategies for building power.



The nine Power in Places organizations are located in eight states and include: Colorado People's Alliance (COPA), ISAIAH, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES), OneAmerica, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE), Texas Organizing Project (TOP), United for a New Economy (UNE), and Washington Interfaith Network (WIN).



Power in Places Framework and Findings

Together, individual, collective, and governing power support the Power in Places organizations to transform the material, spiritual, and psychological conditions of individuals and communities. These types of power iterate and build on one another.

Through the learning project, Innovation Network and Community Change developed a framework for the initiative that describes the three types of power the community organizations build: Individual People Power, Collective People Power and Governing Power. The findings are based on data collected between January and December 2019 including introductory interviews, one-day site visits with the nine organizations, and document and literature review.

To transform individuals and their communities the nine organizations build three types of power: individual people power, collective people power, and governing power.

Together, individual, collective, and governing power support the Power in Places organizations to transform the material and spiritual conditions of individuals and communities. These types of power iterate and build on one another. Gaining governing power can enhance individual and collective agency,

Power in Places Framework





while having well-organized, committed individuals and community can bolster the capacity for governing. They are identified as unique types of power because they each contribute directly to outcomes that are fundamental to the long-term goal of individual and community transformation.

Individual People Power:

Building power within individuals

Building power within individuals is a common starting point for the Power in Places organizations. Members and leaders come from communities that are impacted by structural oppression and inequities. The nine organizations support individuals to understand the systems and structures that may cause them to feel isolated and powerless. Organizations create spaces and opportunities for individuals to realize their full potential and agency and to act on their self interest in the public arena.



*Leadership development is the **cornerstone** of individual power building.*

Each organization in the Power in Places initiative cultivates individual people power. Organizations foster the ability of individuals to advance their interests by developing their leadership and a deeper sense of personal worth, power, and agency. Leadership development is the cornerstone of individual power building. Some of the leadership development strategies organizations use to build individual power are tried and true organizing strategies, such as creating space for individuals to identify their self-interests and holding individuals accountable to those interests, building individuals' political consciousness and organizing skillsets, and developing opportunities for individuals to engage in public action.

This is an area where organizations are consistently innovating and adapting strategies and tactics to the

specific needs of their base. Some of the newer or more experimental strategies organizations employ to develop leadership include revamping the content and structure of trainings and providing longer-term leadership academies and cohorts, creating opportunities for individuals to take meaningful roles in building the organization, and giving individuals access to resources and spaces for healing.

Collective People Power:

Building power with communities

Building power with communities is at the heart of community organizing. Community organizers create opportunities for individual community members to build their collective strength to realize and act on their common goals and interests. The drive to build power with communities is grounded in the assumption that the committed collective, functioning in solidarity, is a powerful force. Organizations build power with their communities by finding common ground across different constituencies and geographies and building their collective strength to advance shared interests.

To build collective people power, organizations deepen relationships and commitment among members and leaders as well as build the size and scale of the base. Collective people power is based on communities working in mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration toward a common purpose and vision. Discussions about how to build depth and breadth in the grassroots base are common fare in community organizing practice and the strategies organizations use to build collective people power are not new.

*Collective people power is based on communities working in **mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration.***





The nine organizations described five strategies to build the collective power of their grassroots bases:



Building community and relationships in the grassroots base



Leveraging political education to transform how people see each other



Integrating new and traditional base-building tactics



Creating collective vision and agenda



Organizing collective actions

Individual and collective power building culminates with leaders and members entering the public arena and engaging in action that creates change in structures, systems and policies. Engaging powerholders, contesting inequitable systems and policies, and enacting self-interest through collective action serves to deepen the commitment, cohesion, and agency of individuals and the grassroots base. It is through collective action that organizations and communities build their governing power and position themselves as powerful political actors.

Governing Power:

Building power to set agendas and exercise influence

Governing power can change what decisions are made and who makes them. When organizations build governing power, they increase the community's ability to set agendas and influence decision-making. Achieving governing power is not a new goal for community organizers, but its significance has grown as a way for communities to change "structural allocations of power"¹ and have greater influence over governing agendas and

decision-making. Governing power is not just about winning policy or electoral change. It is about having the ability to "successfully enact and carry out progressive structural reforms,"² to "set agendas and exercise influence over governance,"³ and to influence the "rules, resources, and practices that regulate the ways in which forces are massed and decisions are made."⁴ By gaining influence over agenda setting, policy change, and governance, organizations advance concrete reforms and structural changes that shape the material conditions of communities.⁶

Governing power is not just about winning policy...it's about gaining influence.



Building collective and individual people power is an important precursor to governing power. Advancing governing power is also not just about achieving structural reforms and influencing political agendas, but also about giving "historically marginalized and vulnerable populations...voice, influence, and power to shape a progressive governing agenda."⁵ The Power in Places organizations center the interests, values, and voice of the grassroots base as they build governing power at the local, county, and state levels. Governing power positions the organization, its leaders, and community as powerful political actors.

We identified three main strategies that Power in Places organizations use to build governing power:



Building co-governance relationships between grassroots base/organizations and decisionmakers



Developing the grassroots base to take on formal, visible decisionmaking roles inside organizations and within government



Influencing and advancing changes in laws and policies.



Together, these strategies ensure that directly impacted people have the capacity, relationships, and influence to be at the center of power building, policy development, and political change.

EXPLORING FURTHER

It is our hope that these findings can support organizers, funders, and intermediaries to better understand how community organizers build power to narrow racial and economic disparities and improve the material conditions of low-income people of color.

This project documented the power building strategies of the nine Power in Place organizations. The Power in Places organizations facilitate experiences for individuals to awaken to their political selves and realize their capacity for public action. They democratize power by cultivating opportunities in which individuals can understand the systems and structures that have created conditions of inequity and where they can act on their self-interests. Organizations use structures, like campaigns, to support individuals and communities to engage in and contest for power.

The information in this brief is intended to support learning and growth for Community Change, the staff of the Power in Places Initiative, and the cohort organizations. It is also intended to contribute to field-wide conversations about innovations and adaptations in community organizing.

Innovation Network and Community Change will build on these findings through an emergent and participatory evaluation process. We will explore two main areas of inquiry centered on organizations' base-building practices:

- 1. Base-building practices and conditions;** The practices and conditions that enable the Power in Places organizations to sustain, grow, and strengthen their base, including exploring what practices work and for whom, and how organizations can adapt with the support of Community Change.
- 2. Relationship between base building and governing power;** How base building supports Power in Places organizations to build and exercise governing power, and how governing power supports base building.

In partnership with Community Change, this next phase of evaluation and learning is intended to advance organizing practice and nurture the field's understanding of how base building is a central aspect of power building strategies for change.



This publication is the product of research conducted by Innovation Network, founded in Washington, D.C. in 1992. This brief was authored by Katie Fox and Margaret Post (Clark University) with contributions from Alissa Marchant, Anvi Mridul, and Virginia Roncaglione. The research presented herein was conducted in collaboration with Community Change and the grassroots organizations who are part of the Power in Places Initiative. ©2021

-
1. Rahman, K.S. & Russon Gilman, H. (2020). *Civic power: Rebuilding American democracy in an era of crisis*. Cambridge University Press.
 2. Healey, R. (2015). *Organizing for governing power*. Grassroots Policy Project.
 3. Rahman, K.S. & Russon Gilman, H. (2020). *Civic power: Rebuilding American democracy in an era of crisis*. Cambridge University Press.
 4. Fung, A. (2020). *Four levels of power: A conception to enable liberation*. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2(2), 131-157.
 5. Goldman, G., Ito, J., Noden, K., Pastor, M., & Wander, M. (2018). *Power and possibilities: A changing state approach to Arizona, Georgia, and Minnesota*. USC PERE.
 6. Barsoum, G. (2019). *Prosecutorial campaigns: a strategy to mobilize and engage communities of color*. Barsoum Policy Consulting. Atlantic Philanthropies.