

Funding Youth Organizing: Strategies for Building Power and Youth Leadership

An article about a funders' briefing held December 10, 1997, Open Society Institute

On a snowy day in December, over 75 grantmakers met to discuss the power and opportunities youth organizing affords both young people and our communities.

The goals of the briefing were to introduce youth organizing to the foundation community; to explore the challenges and the benefits of this work; and to broaden funders' understanding of the powerful role youth organizing can play in community organizing and in youth and community development.

Leroy Johnson wasn't even in elementary school when his education as an organizer began. Growing up in rural Trouble Grove, Mississippi, his early memories include sitting on his father's lap at meetings of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—SNCC. "In 1963, I was five years old, and my dad decided that it was time, for me—as the oldest child—to be involved in what was going on in my community. I didn't understand everything, but the singing, the energy and the spirit in those meetings was the thing that I took with me."

His childhood role as a "lap activist" was the beginning of a lifetime commitment to community organizing. Today, as the Executive Director of Southern Echo, Johnson integrates young people into all the organizing efforts led by Echo's membership.

Southern Echo is a leadership development, education and training organization working to develop new grassroots leaders and organizers in the African American communities of the Mississippi Delta. According to Johnson, youth involvement in Echo is essential: "Young people are less dependent upon the past, have the least fear of change and the best potential for creating a broad vision for a fair and just society."

A Funders' Briefing on Youth Organizing

Southern Echo was just one of several organizations highlighted at a funders' briefing on December 10th, 1997. More than 75 funders met at the Open Society Institute's new headquarters in Manhattan for a day of discussion and networking with youth organizers. The goals were to introduce youth organizing to the foundation community and to broaden funders' understanding of the powerful role youth organizing plays both in youth and community development.

The briefing brought together a diverse cross-section of funders, including some that fund neither community organizing nor youth work of any kind. Youth organizers attending were a diverse group too, representing four organizations from across the country.

In addition to Leroy Johnson and April Daniels of Southern Echo, a morning panel included Dan Hosang and Lorena Rivera of People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO) in California. PUEBLO has 500 member families across the city of Oakland who work on issues of environmental justice, public health, neighborhood safety and police accountability. Recently, PUEBLO led a successful campaign to pass the "Kids First" ballot initiative

to commit 2.5% of Oakland's budget to support youth development.

Eli Lee, former Director of Youth Action, also participated. Youth Action serves organizations in the Southwest and Southeast, providing training in community organizing and political education for high school activists, placing youth in apprenticeships with social justice organizations, and hosting regional forums to bring together youth and adult organizers to build relationships and share strategies. Everyone on the staff of Youth Action is under the age of 31.

Youth Organizer Ramesh James came from Youth Force in the South Bronx where 95 percent of the staff and board is made up of youth between the ages of 14 and 21. Members are currently engaged in tenant organizing, juvenile justice organizing to reduce the rates of arrest and incarceration of young people, and public policy advocacy on the city and state level.

The morning panel was moderated by Alexie Torres, Founder and Executive Director of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, a Bronx-based youth center that integrates youth leadership and organizing as well as spirituality and the arts into all of its youth development work.

In the afternoon, Robert Sherman from the Surdna Foundation moderated a panel of funders currently supporting youth organizing, including Barbara Tavares from the Edward W. Hazen Foundation; Margaret Fund, Board Member of the New York Foundation; and Ben Rodriguez-Cubeñas from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

What follows are highlights of the day's conversation, the wisdom shared and the questions raised.

Youth Organizing Is... Youth Organizing Is Not...

The goals, strategies and outcomes of youth organizing can look very different, but there are some common elements that define the work:

Organizing draws on the power of young people.

Alexie Torres explained: "Youth organizing assumes that we can honor youth by believing that they have the capacity to create change in their community. **We don't give power to young people but we create the conditions and the state whereby young people can find their power.**" The mission statement of Youth Force states that the organization was "created to school young people to the fact that we are not powerless, we should be seen and heard, and we have the ability and the right to act for change. We are committed to giving ourselves and other young people the skills and opportunities needed to participate in the running of our schools, neighborhood and city."

Organizing recognizes and challenges social inequality.

Eli Lee read the definition of youth organizing developed by Youth Action: "**Youth organizing involves young people in a membership that does direct action on specific issues against defined targets. It seeks to alter power relations, create meaningful institutional change and build leaders.**"

Organizing also recognizes that many of the same mobilizing strategies are used by political conservatives. Lee referred to Sally Covington's work documenting the Right's efforts to "take over a generation of young people." In this context, deciding not to support organizing because it may

be “too political” is equally political in its support for the status quo.

Youth organizing is not done to young people or for youth, but by young people.

“Youth organizing is not in any way, shape or form the reverse—organizing youth,” said Ramesh James. “It’s enabling young people to come up with their own plan of action, their own solutions. It’s not youth being handed down a plan of action to execute, and saying in the end, ‘I did it because I was told to.’ Organizing is—a youth person at Youth Force said it yesterday—a youth oriented democracy, where young people are involved in the implementation, the management, the troubleshooting, the direction and the evaluation of an action plan. Youth organizing is taking the issues that most affect us in the community and creating social change.”

Organizing is a defined process.

Dan Hosang recounted his experience as the son of a mother who is a social worker and a father who is a public health worker. “Growing up, my orientation was definitely around service work. When I went away to school, I was able to attend a national organizers’ training program for people of color sponsored by the Center for Third World Organizing. It introduced me to the craft of organizing, and it was there that I had this realizing that **organizing isn’t something you make up as you go along, or figure out in a dorm room or on the steps of City Hall. In fact it’s a systematic process.**

That’s important because that base of experience enabled us to build a somewhat powerful youth and community organizing in Oakland.

“We did a video this summer on students’ rights. Just doing that video

would not be organizing, although making a video could be part of an organizing campaign. We had discussions about what it means to have a safe community. Having those discussions was important, but having those discussions alone would not be organizing. Finally, there’s a whole set of leadership development skills—working with the media, doing recruitment, doing research—all those are critical to building the sophisticated campaign to compete with a school district that pays a lot of money to get their points across—but those activities alone are not organizing.”

Organizers must have faith in the ability of people to know what’s best for them and their peers.

Youth organizers must believe that *young people* bring different, but not less important perspectives to the table, and that young people have a key role in shaping the world around them. Leroy explained how difficult this is for many adults to accept. He pointed out that most people are raised from childhood to believe that young people aren’t mature enough to lead, and once we reach adulthood, we are reluctant to give up what—for many of us—is the only power we’ve ever had.

Youth and adults who engage in youth organizing must be committed to democracy.

When he was 17, one Youth Force member made a statement that continues to inspire the organization four years later: “If you had a problem in the Black community, and you brought together a group of white people to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. In fact, there’d probably be a public outcry. It would be the same thing for women’s issues or gay issues. Can you imagine a bunch of men sitting

on the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Women? But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever asking us."

People cannot engage in organizing to challenge inequality and oppression without recognizing where those imbalances of power exist within themselves and their own organization. It is the role of the organizer to help young people gather the knowledge—including research and information, as well as the ideas and experiences of other youth—needed to make *informed* decisions. And it means preparing young people and other grassroots leaders to come *confidently* to the table with people that have more power, but not necessarily more to offer, than they do.

Youth Organizing emphasizes that individual progress cannot be separated from the progress of a community.

"As a young person growing up in the community," began Alexie, "a paradigm that I had to overcome was the idea that my personal success would be measured by the extent I was able to escape the realities of my community as opposed to remaining there and helping to affect and create change. I learned that my success as a youth worker would not be measured by the one young person who goes to Harvard—although it's a wonderful thing—but by the progress of the collective."

"Youth Organizing Is Something I Must Do"

Youth organizers are drawn to the work for various reasons. The reasons they stay with it are often similar.

With youth organizing, you gain pride and self-esteem.

For young people who feel alienated from community, organizing connects them to others. For young people who feel unneeded or unimportant, organizing enables them to see how much they have to give. For young people who feel unheard, organizing gives their voice a platform. April Daniels said, "In the Indianola Math Games (Mississippi), there are no age limits. The youngest person we have is in second grade. The oldest is in twelfth grade. I'm on the Board of Advisors which has six children and two adults. The children really run things. The reason we have adults is for supervision. It gives us an opportunity to be in charge and to be part of a group."

Lorena Rivera added, "I'm Native American and Mexican, and I take great pride in my culture. Youth organizing has also given me a place to express that."

Organizers are often motivated by frustrations with social service institutions.

Organizing enables both the organizer and the mobilized community to address root causes and change the conditions that cause suffering. If service feels like a band-aid, organizing feels more like a cure. As Eli Lee explained, "Our mission is to get more young people involved in youth organizing because we believe it's one of the best ways to develop a new

generation of leaders, but also because it's one of the best ways to change the institutions in our society that need changing. Since the early 1980s, there's been an explosion in youth programs that focus on leadership development, community service and volunteerism. But in 1997, many of our cities and towns are still crumbling. In addition, with devolution, the strain on foundations which are already maxed out has become even more fierce. It's a good time to begin looking at community organizing—and youth organizing as a subset of that—as a complementary strategy to community service, volunteerism and leadership.”

Youth organizing is often about personal survival.

Ramesh James used organizing to help himself and other youth challenge the inhumane conditions in detention and incarceration. Locked up for more than half of his teenage years, Ramesh feels he represents the youth community that is incarcerated, on probation and parole. “I met Youth Force in 1992 as an inmate in Spofford Detention Center. I was one of the original members of Ujima—a leadership and organizing training program that Youth Force offers to Spofford’s residents. Coming out of prison, I found myself in minimum wage jobs—I was excluded from other opportunities because of my record. But organizing had focused my mind. Everywhere I worked, I ended up being the shop steward, the union rep. I came out of a system that gave me no services or support except organizing, and now I am using that training and experience I got to defeat the system. Youth organizing definitely gives us that ground to stand on.”

What Are the Victories?

When looking at its contribution to communities, organizing may be one of the few areas of youth work with such a long and undisputed history of success. Nearly all the social movements for civil rights, peace, health and environmental justice had young people both on the front lines and in positions of leadership.

Panelists measured victory by their ability to bring about change. And, despite limited resources, discrimination, and a climate that is intolerant of progressive movements, each of the young people could account for several important victories.

April Daniels’ group has successfully led a campaign to establish after school math enrichment programs, science labs and advanced level science courses in schools that are among the poorest in the nation. Lorena Rivera’s group not only led the “Kids First” campaign to institutionalize city funding for youth programs, but they now have young people sitting on the Kids First grantmaking board. In fact, on youth-led projects, they are the sole decision-making authority over 20% of the \$5.2 million fund.

Through organizing within Spofford, Ramesh has seen detainees win major improvements in the school curriculum and teaching quality, religious services other than Christian, legal education and court support, a library, improved case management services, a community justice center and youth court, and, most recently, the closing of Spofford (based on a campaign youth initiated after the Commissioner announced she would keep it open to double the number of detention beds in the city).

Where Youth Organizing Intersects With Youth Development

While the field of youth organizing can celebrate its ability to effect social change, it can also claim victories in its ability to inspire and support individual youth to meet the benchmarks of youth development.

Organizing teaches skills in ways that are exciting, hands on and relevant to youth's concerns.

For example, Lorena Rivera described gaining video production and photography skills, writing and editing a magazine, developing public policy proposals, public speaking, and surveying other youth to develop a needs assessment. April Daniels described her experiences setting up and running an after school math program that improved math skills not only for the participants but for the organizers. She also runs sports tournaments, orders all program supplies, and sits on the Board of Directors for Southern Echo. Ramesh James learned about local politics, as well as the politics of running an organization, program management, grantwriting, coalition building, negotiation, solving conflicts, developing and managing budgets and computer literacy. "People will say to youth, you don't have your education. But you can go to school and still not know this work. Organizing teaches things most schools don't. You have to see 14-year-olds master the computer because they need to get a flyer out for their tenants. This is how school should be taught."

Alexie Torres pointed out that at Youth Ministries, "the outcomes of youth organizing are not different from the outcomes expected in youth

development. Youth learn reading, writing, critical thinking, assessing, planning. We organize through the arts, education and literacy."

Organizing is especially successful as a strategy for reaching youth who are most disconnected from traditional youth programs.

Youth who excel as leaders among their peers, in street organizations or street economies, or youth who are seen by adults as troublemakers, often respond to youth organizing even as they remain skeptical of more traditional programs. Youth organizing capitalizes on their street smarts, entrepreneurial spirit, their questioning of authority, and legitimate frustration with things the way they are. For example, at Youth Force, organizers working with young offenders have seen them turn their lives around. In a community where one in ten youth go to college, and one in four young men go to prison, the recidivism rate for juvenile offenders is over 60%. Youth Force members have experienced three reconstructions, but 80% have gone to college.

Organizing changes the way adults perceive youth, and the respect young people are accorded.

In some cases, youth find themselves gaining resources and power that adults need access to. Since Lorena now sits on Oakland's youth development funding board, Dan Hosang must appeal to her for funding.

In other cases, adults' attitudes about youth change as they see what young people are able to accomplish. At Youth Force, youth who entered buildings to organize tenants at first couldn't get doors to open. Tenants were both afraid of the young people and had little faith in their ability to organize. Young people have now

created five tenants' associations, and much of the mistrust and stereotypes that separate generations have been broken down.

Should Youth Organizing Have Its Own Space or Occur in Partnership with Adult Organizing Efforts?

Youth organizing is sometimes considered anti-adult. Critics say it discounts the experience and wisdom of adults. However, each of the organizations on the panel rely on the guidance of adult staff, and look to the lessons of past movements. Emphasis is placed on transferring knowledge from more experienced to newer organizers through training, skills development and apprenticeships.

Still, adults outside this process often feel disrespected when young people claim their efforts are "youth-led." And young people, anxious to prove their worth and dispel stereotypes, become more adamant in their position.

But in other organizing movements, such tensions between new and old leaders don't always surface. For example, a good labor organizer knows that she has accomplished her goals when the workers begin to take responsibility for the movement, look less to her for guidance, and begin making decisions that are sound, well thought-out and democratic. The workers are not accused of being disrespectful of the organizer. In fact, when the organizer walks away or moves on to another campaign, the people will have both the skills and the confidence to continue.

Whether young people need their own space to organize is harder to answer. At PUEBLO and Youth Force,

young people do lead most of their efforts separate from adults. Adults act as facilitators, advisors, organizers, even supervisors—but their role in setting policy or direction and making decisions is limited. While the organizations value older youth and adults, they also recognize that youth need opportunities to practice leadership skills.

Madeline Lee, Executive Director of the New York Foundation, raised this issue when she asked, "How do youth organizing efforts address the problem of leadership growing up and leaving?" In the past, Youth Force found that young people also hesitated to share power and information once they had acquired it. The membership grew concerned, because the strength of organizing depends in part on the group's ability to foster new leadership. Youth Force addressed the problem with policies that promote the inclusion of younger members in active roles. The group is governed as a collective, rather than as a hierarchy, with no officers, and rotating chairs at meetings. Youth under the age of 18 are involved as decision-makers at all levels, including as members of the management team and board of directors.

When youth organizers have joined adult coalitions without first defining their agenda or building their base, they—and their issues—have often been marginalized. PUEBLO, for example, has faced these challenges, and has not found a way to integrate young people's campaigns with adult efforts—although they often serve as allies for each other.

In contrast, Southern Echo successfully integrates young people with adults in their organizing efforts. Training and orientation sessions often have a mix

of people from the ages of two to eighty-two. This has been accomplished because the leadership consciously encouraged adults to share power and space with young people. Groups that aren't willing to work with youth in this way aren't eligible for technical assistance, training and other resources from the organization. Leroy explained, "So often, young people are negotiating from a sense of powerlessness—there's no give and take; nothing for them to bargain with. The conflict resolution, negotiation and problem solving skills that youth learn in organizing help them to make changes in their relationships with adults in their personal life."

With either strategy, youth participation cannot be token. This means ensuring that young people gain the training, orientation, access to information, and mentoring necessary to enable them to partner with adults. This means scheduling meetings at times that young people can attend. In the afternoon panel, a funder noted that they had tried to include young people on their board, but the young people hadn't followed through. Several people pointed out that many adult board members are unreliable, but we still call on other adults to lead our organizations.

How Can Foundations Support Youth Organizing and What Does the Field Need?

Throughout the day, both organizers and funders offered several suggestions to foundations interested in funding youth organizing.

1. "Fund youth organizing efforts at a level that enables us to compete with the institutions that we're facing," said Eli Lee.

Ask yourselves, "Of all of the groups who we currently fund to do organizing, how many of them have 20 organizers?"

2. **Fund creatively**, establishing the relationships and the systems to support local groups directly rather than going through intermediary groups. Historically, national organizations have had more access to foundations than local groups. Foundations should build the capacity to meet with groups where they're at.
3. **Consider the conflicts youth development organizations face in organizing.** Many groups receive funds from the very institutions that need to be targeted for change. "Youth development organizations can definitely play a role in resourcing youth organizing—whether that means meeting space, vans, telephones, etc.," said Eli Lee. "The organizing programs provide a vehicle for young people to put their passion into action. But there is also an imperative to have organizing. If you look at the institutions that are out there affecting young people, you have development organizations that are non-political, non-ideological because of their funding restrictions, and you have very successful advocacy efforts undertaken on behalf of youth but without a youth voice. Youth organizing as far as I know is the primary vehicle that allows young people to engage in activities on their own behalf, moving forward a political agenda." Later in the day, Eli added, "If you're going to resource an organization to develop 100 young leaders, is it better to develop 100 unaffiliated youth, or is it better to have 100 young

leaders who are accountable to an organization and a community?"

4. **In response to a question regarding the difficulties youth organizers have in approaching foundations,** Dan offered, "Organizers understand that there are some funders that understand our work and support, it, but we know that with most of the other folks—when we feature our work, we focus only on the developmental aspect of it, for fear that talking about engaging young people in political activities would send all the wrong messages. I think foundations can think about how this work could resonate with their Boards and others in the foundation community. On our side, we can point to specific outcome objectives, if that's what you need. We can quantify numbers of people involved and the objectives they meet. if you challenge organizers to meet those needs, we can respond. To say that funding organizing is a roll of the dice, I can't imagine what kind of funding effort wouldn't be a risk."

An example of foundation support is the Surdna Foundation's "Effective Citizenry" fund which is three years old. Through the initiative, **Surdna has funded service learning and leadership development, but has also been able to support many organizing efforts using the argument that organizing best prepares young people to participate in a democracy.** Surdna also found—**for-better or worse—that youth organizing wasn't considered as threatening as adult organizing.**

Leroy Johnson closed the discussion. "Too often, folks at the foundation world say, 'Don't get into that political stuff. It'll cause problems for my boards.' If we believe in our progressiveness, if we really believe that things have to change—that institutions have to change—well, then you [foundations] have to start from within."

5. **Address the inequities in funding youth organizing.** One funder noted that adult organizing efforts usually receive greater support than youth organizing, even though youth organizations are expected to accomplish the same outcomes.
6. **Funding community organizing can generate youth organizing.** Several funders raised that a lot of good youth organizing work is emerging from the base of good community organizing efforts. They didn't want to imply that funders overlook good organizing when it comes from youth groups. However, they urged that nurturing youth organizing will mean putting much more support into community organizing.
7. **Do planning for successful funding of youth programs.** The Hazen Foundation, for example, organized structured discussions around community organizing as it relates to community development and political action. They involved their board in creating a definition of empowerment. They made site visits to see organizing efforts, grantee/trustee breakfasts, and made assessments of the roles different organizations could play. The foundation has also moved to provide multi-year grants to allow for the development of an organizational base.

8. **General support funds are critical.** The New York Foundation stressed the need to provide general support grants to enable organizations to build their capacity to do the work. It offers grantees free workshops throughout the year, smaller discretionary grants to cover additional costs, and development grants to cover the costs of conferences or trainings.
9. **Hazen suggests asking particular questions** of applicants when they apply for funding, including: How are youth engaged in decision-making? How were they involved in the development of the proposed project?
10. **Give young people a place at the table.** Anna Maria Nieves Bryant from Do Something encouraged other foundations to include young people on their boards. Youth on Board in Boston is available to provide technical assistance. The Boston Foundation reported that it has used youth interns to assist in their grantmaking efforts. However, Madeline Lee also warned that organizers would much rather have funders concentrate their energy on supporting their work than on developing their own internal processes.

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