

Making Change

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How Social Movements Work - and How to Support Them

Full document



Manuel Pastor
Rhonda Ortiz

Program for
Environmental and
Regional Equity

University of
Southern California

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Front cover photos from top to bottom: Miami Workers Center, Alana Avant, and PICO National Network

Foreword

Social movements are a hidden underpinning of the American story. Using the tools of relationship-building, community mobilization, and symbolic protest, they have helped bring us civil rights, labor protections, and even a healthier environment, sparking people's aspirations, imaginations, and actions for a better nation.

Why then has funding of these movements been difficult to obtain and sustain? Some suggest that funders often want more immediate and measurable outcomes – moving a nation to live up to its promise is important but hard to quantify. And yet in recent years, there has been renewed philanthropic interest and openness to investing in social movements, community organizing and policy change, and an understanding that this will require a new level of patience and a new set of relationships with grantees.

This document seeks to provide a guidepost to both funders and the field by detailing what makes for a successful social movement, what capacities need to be developed, and what funding opportunities might exist.

The document itself comes from a different model of funder-grantee relationships. The paper from which this Executive Summary draws was initially requested by The California Endowment as its leaders were thinking through the connection between place-based comprehensive change and state-level policy in the Golden State. Thinking that the connection between the two might be social movements and community organizing, TCE commissioned us, the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE), to do a series of interviews with leading organizers – and asked us to write something that would make sense to these activists as well as foundation leaders.

It was the sort of audience guaranteed to provoke humility – what could we say that they didn't already know? – but we presented the first draft to both program officers and community activists, both groups felt that the lessons we drew might be useful to erstwhile social movement builders and to other foundations around the country. As a result, we reworked the document away from the specific needs and strategies of The Endowment and towards a more general audience.

That said, the paper and this summary carry the legacy of their origins. For one thing, many of the examples we use are from California. Having both grown up in Los Angeles, we have the typical West Coast belief that being near the Pacific Ocean also means you're on the cutting edge – but we do realize the limits of translation and invite others to add their own examples. Another legacy of the origin may be more positively viewed by Californians and non-Californians alike: because we intended to offer a practical guide, we offer only short attention to the burgeoning academic literature and have attempted to structure this summary in ways that maximize accessibility, utility and (we hope) readability.

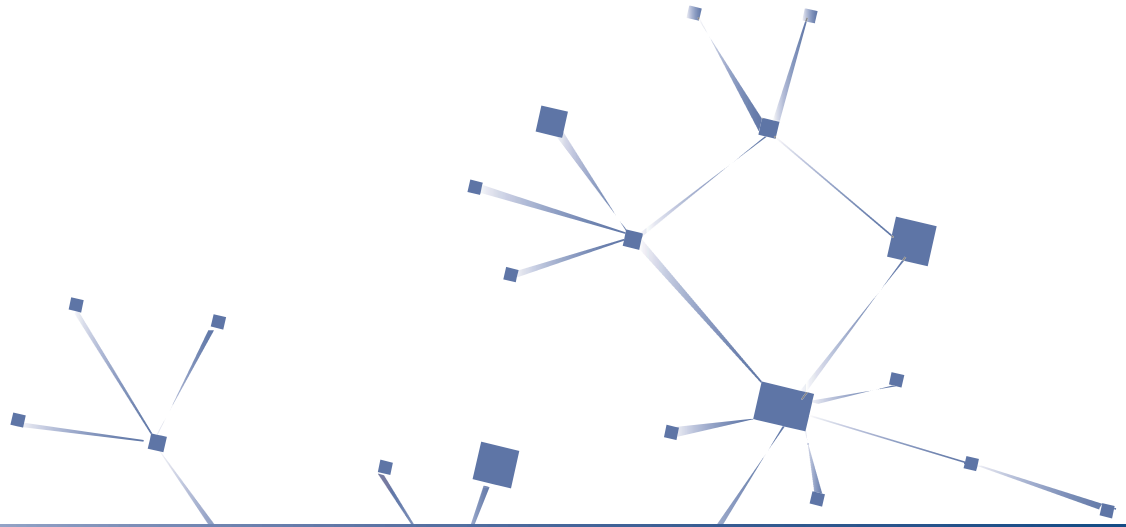
We thank The California Endowment for giving us the opportunity to do this work and we thank the various activists who read and commented on this work. Most important, we thank them for the work they do daily to help this country and its people realize their potential.

-- Manuel Pastor and Rhonda Ortiz

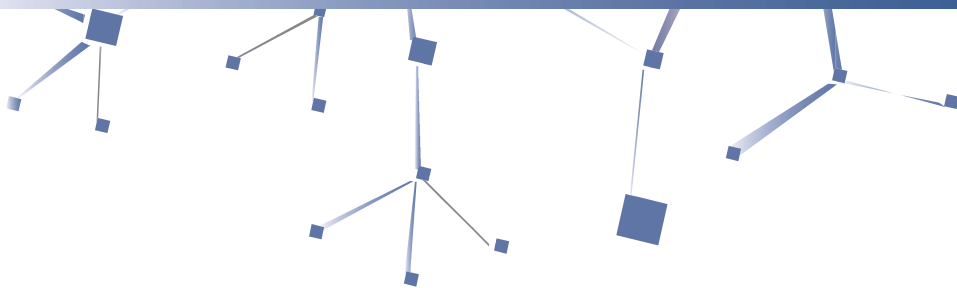
Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE)

University of Southern California (USC)

For the full report, go to: <http://college.usc.edu/geography/ESPE/perepub.html>



The Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) is a new research unit and part of the Center for Sustainable Cities at USC. PERE conducts research and facilitates discussions on issues of environmental justice, regional inclusion and immigrant integration. PERE's work is rooted in the new three R's: rigor, relevance and reach. We conduct high-quality research in our focus areas that is relevant to public policy concerns and that reaches to those directly affected communities that most need to be engaged in the discussion. In general, we seek and support direct collaborations with community-based organizations in research and other activities, trying to forge a new model of how university and community can work together for the common good.



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Photos by Dwayne Marsh

Executive Summary

Social movements are the threads that string together efforts bubbling up across the nation, sparking people's aspirations and imaginations for a better America. Why then has funding of these movements been difficult to obtain and sustain? It is a long-standing question sometimes answered with reference to pressures on funders to demonstrate more immediate, quantitative measurable results. In recent years, there has been a renewed philanthropic interest and openness to investing in social movements and policy change, this document seeks to provide a guidepost to this interest by detailing what makes for a successful social movement, what capacities need to be developed, and what funding opportunities might exist.

Social movements, we suggest, exist between the neighborhood terrain, where significant investments can provide comprehensive change for residents, and the state and/or national level where policy change will ensure an overall context favorable for both community health and justice. Social movement organizations and networks that fundamentally seek to challenge the configurations of power that currently produce inequity. Such organizations and networks can be distinguished from coalitions in several ways: they are sustained, not episodic, multi-sector rather than special interest, wide-ranging rather than single issue, constituency-based rather than intermediary-driven, and focused on transforming people's lives rather than on just changing policy.

Social movements have long been the glue of what's best about modern American history – think of the tremendous advances in opportunity wrought by the civil rights, labor, and women's

movements as well as by many others. In recent years, however, the actual experts at such movement building have resided on the right, with conservative forces combining pro-lifers, tax-cutters, and defense-spenders, cultivating a strong base in evangelical churches and traditional communities, framing an issues agenda around values of family, faith, and liberty, and developing a supportive set of institutions that could facilitate a long march from local school boards to state legislatures to national influence.

Those concerned with the equity side of the equation have recently returned to take social movement building as a central focus of their own activity, with organizations ranging from the Partnership for Working Families to the Gamaliel Foundation to the Right to the City Network and many others, adopting new strategies and establishing new linkages. Both these experiences as well as those of the right and of earlier movements can provide some guidance to organizations seeking to play a supportive role in such movement-building for health and social justice in the future.

We argue here that that there are ten key elements to a successful social movement, five key capacities that allow social movements to sustain themselves, and three key areas where foundations can invest. The ten elements are:

A vision and a frame

Social movements are based on visions, frames, and values rather than policy. The resulting narrative helps to explain the predicament that a group is trying to correct, often in the sort of broad terms that create the

space for allies to find their “best selves” by standing in solidarity. A reliance on frames – conversational constructs that help to set the terms of the debate – allows individuals of multiple ideologies to stay in the game. And a sense of urgency, that is, a notion that we need to correct these problems now, helps to create a vibrancy for moving forward.

An authentic base in key constituencies

Social movements are distinguished by their base of members and adherents. One view of change suggests that “policy entrepreneurs” can write persuasive policy papers, corner interested legislators, and enact reform. While research and lobbying have an important place, the key mark of a social movement is its attention to community, workplace, or congregant organizing, and its focus on generating grassroots leaders. Social movements make sure to directly involve those with “skin in the game” and make sure that the frames and values are derived from them and not from focus groups conducted by distant intermediaries.

A commitment to the long-haul

Social movements have a long-term perspective – they believe that the problems that their members face are due to misalignments in power and they understand that it takes time to right that ship. Such organizations take the time to train leaders and craft relationships, understanding, in the words of Working Partnerships founder Amy Dean, that “you don’t build relationships in the middle of a fight – you have to create deliberate space to understand each others’ interests.” This

continuity allows them to persist even as issues and times change, for example, protecting community residents against both gentrification and bank foreclosure under the banner of community stability.

An underlying and viable economic model

Social movements have an underlying economic model that is viewed as being sensible and viable. This is critical because social movements are essentially about the redistribution of resources; if economic collapse is soon to follow from a group’s policy recommendations, few community members and even fewer decision-makers will be supportive. Conservative forces thus had to explain why reducing the government role would actually expand the overall pie; progressive forces need to stress why living wage laws, community benefits regulations, and expansions in health care will not just share but grow the wealth. Such arguments cannot simply be assertions – they must be made with research backing and with appropriate modesty and qualifications.

A vision of government and governance

Social movements have a vision of what the government ought to do, not simply in terms of issues but in terms of its basic relationship to social forces. Generally, social movements of whatever stripe wave the flag of democracy in terms of governance. Conservative forces argue against state intrusion in the economy but hold that certain moral precepts should be set by majority or democratic rule; progressive forces suggest that democracy requires certain economic and social protections to

level the playing field. Progressives have had a tougher time in the governance arena, partly because of widespread mistrust of government bureaucracy; they have had some success with concepts like “community benefits” (in which subsidies to firms are conditioned on performance standards) but there is a long way to go in terms of crafting a positive vision of government.

A scaffold of solid research

Social movements always have an intellectual side in which problems are identified and strategies are explored. The conservative movement elevated this aspect of movement-building to a new level with a series of think-tanks that provided research, framing, and policy development alongside the organizing and mobilization on the ground. Recent social movement groups in the U.S. have become even more conscious about the power of using research as a scaffold to support and weave together the personal stories generated by base constituencies; they have dealt with this by both building in-house research capacities and forging effective alliances with academics and intermediaries, to wit, the careful studies of the Living Wage or the framework studies about environmental injustice.

A pragmatic policy package

Developing policy is particularly important because Americans are a pragmatic lot: if something is bad but there is no viable solution, it is often accepted that this is “just the way things are.” To convince the public that the poor may not be with us always (at least in their current situation of poverty), one needs a

policy package that looks like it might actually work at alleviating poverty. An old Alinsky axiom is that people are more motivated when they win; while some progressive forces seem to have preferred the moral high ground of frequent defeat, most new social movement organizations are at the ready with practical programs to rework job training, use public bonds to build parks, and/or remake health care to better serve the poor.

A recognition of the need for scale

While there is a tendency to think that small must mean authentic, the scale of the social problems faced – and the extent of power on the other side – often requires a scale of organizational capacity to match. We do not mean to dismiss small groups, many of which are doing excellent work and are critical in the social ecology of change. Rather we agree with the New World Foundation in their emphasis on anchor organizations, those with the scope, sophistication and reach to be able to challenge power and policy. Determining how to select and support large groups that can nonetheless lead with humility is a central challenge for funders.

A strategy for scaling up

Social movements are often seen in retrospect as having arrived on the scene fully formed: Martin Luther King appears on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with 200,000 supporters and an eloquent frame, conservatives show up to the 1980s elections with vibrant national support and a complete ideology. The truth instead involved a geography of power: conservative organizing was built up from local

bases, and most social justice organizations are working hard to move from the local to the regional to the state to the national. Such scaling is the stuff of success and is a new arena for research and investment.

A willingness to network with other movements

No one wins alone. It is critical that social movements that may be focused on particular issues and particular constituencies are able to find their way to potential allies in other movements. Too much diversity can be negative – a cacophony of interest groups produces a laundry list of demands rather than a narrative of commonality – but the success of the right was largely due to welcoming a broader range of interests than many realize. Social movement organizations that are too exclusive or too focused on building their own group may fail to build the movement; the goal is to find those who seem to view their own activities as streams flowing into a raging river of social change.

Of course, presenting ten elements all lined up in a row may make it seem easy; it isn't. Social movements are marked by tensions and tightropes, with organizations trying to strike a balance between scale and base, organizing and advocacy, vision and research. Foundations need to be patient with this balancing act and also accept that the ten elements are not likely to characterize a single organization but may characterize a movement.

Still, if these are ten elements that mark successful social movements, it is important to note the

capacities that will allow groups and networks to put them in place. In our view, there are five:

The ability to organize a base constituency

Organizing is tough, taxing, and time-consuming. Not every organization has the capacity to do this but those that do are able to cultivate new leadership and represent members effectively. While organizing is an art, it can be taught, and building this capacity is crucial. Investments in organizing and leadership training are important.

The capacity to research, frame and communicate

Since research capacity, viable economic strategies, and messaging are key to success, organizations must embody this ability. While there is a tendency to think that this can be provided externally, it is important for groups to have their own capacities. It is also important that the “frame” be derived from grassroots leaders rather than helicoptered in by messaging experts.

The ability to strategically assess power

Power analysis helps organizations assess who is on the other side, who can be moved, and what it will take to win. Since movements are about transforming systems rather than simply changing policy, the capability to take an honest and realistic pulse of the situation is critical. Likewise, organizations and movements need to become comfortable with taking and exercising power, recognizing that this may come in many different forms.

The capacity to manage large and growing organizations

Since scale is important – both the size of the organization and its plans to go up geographic levels to make broader change – organizations must be able to effectively manage their resources and collaborate with others. While some of this is dispositional (can you really play well with others?), some of it is managerial and investments in improving organizational effectiveness, including training of top leaders, is important.

The capability to engage and network with others

Social movements pull together disparate elements under a broad umbrella. The most effective movements are wide-ranging in their constituencies and organizational types, bringing together not simply like groups with common interests but diverse groups with common destinies. Understanding one's role in the broader ecology, and working effectively to support other strands of the movement, is a key capability.

Building social movements is difficult and demanding work. At the same time, movements need to make their visions clear, their values apparent, and their fire visible. To keep the balance, social movements must have a cross-cutting capacity:

The ability to refresh organizational vision and organizational leadership

Since organizations and movements can stagnate or dissipate, it is crucial to bring leadership back to the well of inspiration.

This involves creating time for intellectual and spiritual reflection by leaders as well as a commitment to training a new generation of leadership. A wide variety of programs exist to do this; supporting them could build the capacities to stay the long course.

How then could foundations help? We think it useful to start with three things they should not do: think that they are the movement, shy from confronting power, and let the urgent dictate the agenda.

Foundations may find movements attractive but they should play the role of supporter not partner, partly because they arrive with so much power and partly to retain an objective stance. If they do choose to pursue the social movement route, they need to be aware that they are backing groups likely to pick a fight – it might be a good fight, it might be the right fight, but it is always likely to involve struggle against entrenched interests. Finally, while there is a tendency for the most recent new event or policy fad to dominate interest, it is important to be in this for as long a haul as the movements themselves.

With these admonitions in place, we suggest three basic directions for philanthropic investment, the first of which is crucial to building success, the second to maintaining success, and the third to judging success. In that order, they are:

Provide operational and long-term funding

We have provided a list of elements and capacities above – and the trick is that the priorities of each shift over time. While organizing and communications are always

crucial, organizational and networking needs evolve with each stage. Thus, funders should consider general operating support (particularly for organizing and constituency development), specific investments in leadership training and renewal, and significant resources for research, communications, and advocacy.

Support network building and expansion

The geography of change is important and will be especially so in place-based approaches. Supporting efforts to scale up is important and this will involve both building networks of like organizations and networking networks of seemingly disparate forces. Thus, funders should consider providing resources for network creation and convenings and peer-to-peer learning, and they should be sure to encourage and structure incentives for groups to work together organically.

Develop metrics to judge and publicize movement success

Movement success can be a difficult thing to gauge: the passage of a living wage may benefit few people directly but it can signal a shift in power that soon translates to widespread improvements in living standards. Metrics that focus on process and that take into account stages of development is important for organizations to learn from their work as well as to both justify one foundation's investment and to encourage others to jump in. Thus, funders should consider including evaluation capacity from the beginning, utilizing evaluation strategies that provide immediate

feedback, and basing evaluation on a model that recognizes phases of development.

The country stands at a crossroads: with a financial system in crisis, an economy adrift, and an environment at risk, people are looking for a broader frame and a broader solution than typical politics can offer. Getting to this broader conversation—and making real change—will require groups that are willing to challenge power as well as policy, values as well as legislation. Social movement thinking and doing will be a key element for both strategy and giving.