

## CENTERING COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC HEALTH

# Measuring the Impact of Building Community Power for Health Justice: What? Why? And How?

### BACKGROUND

For Praxis and our basebuilding community partners, we recognize that public health achievements are not reaching all communities equally. While having positive impacts on the population as a whole, traditional public health interventions often **do not improve the health**<sup>1</sup> in our nation's most marginalized communities and in some cases might even contribute to reproduce assumptions and practices that perpetuate marginalization and inequality. Basebuilding community organizers' work complements and transforms traditional public health approaches as it focuses on priorities that are determined by neighborhoods, cities, and communities, designed with those who are most impacted, and in the best cases, involve community members in the implementation of solutions, building community infrastructure, capacity, and power.

**Building community power** is increasingly recognized as a valuable and necessary strategy to improve health justice and racial equity, with both immediate and long-term results. However, there is limited research or documentation of authentic discussions on the definitions, nuances, and front-line measurement of building power. In the fall of 2017, The Praxis Project hosted five learning circles with some of the nation's most impactful basebuilding community organizers to engage in deep reflection and discussion about building and measuring power.<sup>2</sup> This brief provides a summary of our discussions and recommendations to measure the impact of building power as a strategy to improve health justice and racial equity.

**POWER SOUNDS LIKE "CHANTS, PROTESTS, AND SPIRITUAL SONGS. IT SOUNDS LIKE THE STORIES OF OUR ANCESTORS BEING TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN; LIKE CHILDREN PLAYING; LIKE DRUM BEATS IN A PARK, OR AT A NEIGHBORHOOD PLACE OF GATHERING, LIKE COMMUNICATING IN OUR OWN LANGUAGES WITHOUT FEAR."**

<sup>1</sup> American Public Health Association (APHA). (2018). Health Departments Placing Stronger Emphasis on Equity: Achieving Social Justice in Public Health. *The Nation's Health* July 2018, 48 (5) 1-15. <http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/48/5/1.3>

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see "The Power of Community Wisdom in Advancing Health Justice & Racial Equity" in The Praxis Project's Learning Circle Brief Series

# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO INCORPORATE BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER INTO INITIATIVES ADDRESSING HEALTH JUSTICE AND RACIAL EQUITY?

**Design:** Interventions will be better aligned with community-defined health priorities.

**Implementation:** Community-informed policies, organizational practices, and environments that authentically incorporate residents' culture and value systems, and are contextualized to the local political and economic conditions will be more meaningful and actionable.

**Build Agency and Capacity:** Communities that can see themselves in the health solutions (policies, practices, systems and environmental change), will defend those solutions against threats, repeals, or attempts to preempt their work for better health. The implementation of programming will be more appropriate when community members are part of the service delivery team. Community members also have the trust of their neighbors, which leads to deeper engagement and better programmatic outcomes.

**Build Sustainability:** When interventions include support for infrastructure or capacity that extends beyond the initial financial support, solutions serve as a meaningful community investment.

**Build Legitimacy for Public Health Institutions:** By establishing a relationship with community based organizations based on respect for their experience and expertise, public health professionals create the conditions for long term and effective collaboration.

## PROCESS

Using a modified focus group process incorporating **Freirean methods of popular education**, Praxis hosted 101 base building organizers from 50 community organizations from across the country in five learning circles to engage in a series of discussions about practices and concepts related to community power. Our goal was to integrate voices from those who work to authentically build power in communities into the broader discussion on equity and justice, and to help disseminate this valuable perspective to a broader audience who seeks to support this important work.

Looking to deeply explore community power and community organizing, we facilitated conversations through the following six topics:

- 1.) When I say “Community Power” I mean...
- 2.) What does “Community Power” look, feel, smell and taste like?
- 3.) Why do we need to build “Community Power?”
- 4.) What resources do we need to build “Community Power?”
- 5.) What are the barriers to building “Community Power?”
- 6.) How do we want our work to build “Community Power” to be measured?

## FINDINGS

The following are the highlights for each discussion topic.

### WHEN I SAY “COMMUNITY POWER” I MEAN...

It is necessary to have a shared definition of “power.” Community organizers defined “power” as:

- **Power is Agency:** The dominant theme that emerged was agency—*“the ability to influence and control our own health, our environmental conditions, and our lives.”* “Power means freedom, liberation, and control.”



Roots & Remedies in Detroit, MI, 2014

- **Power is Solidarity:** Participants identified power as solidarity with others who share their concerns, conditions, and struggles. *“Oppression is not dismantled by individuals; it is defeated by collectives working in infinite spaces with the shared vision of a more equitable world.”*
- **Power is Grounded:** A deep rootedness in culture and identity is both the motivation and keel for our work. *“The stronger the grounding, the more power is felt, the more meaningful the work.”*
- **Power is Multi-generational:** Recognizing that sharing wisdom and experience across generations is necessary. *“Young persons learning from elders and elders learning new ways from young folks. The work to build power is not a recent phenomenon, but has its roots in the struggles of our ancestors—those still with us, and many who have passed on. This knowledge is powerful.”*
- **Power is Resourced:** Power requires time and space for people to come together, and for processes to develop. Power means commanding the resources needed to thrive, to work, to help our communities. *“Resources can include economic and financial resources as well as access to information, skills and expertise, creativity, and ganas” (Spanish: willful enthusiasm).*
- **Power is Accountable:** Power is accountable to the base that enables power. *“Power is accountable to the community. Power is accountable to the past, and to the future.”*
- **Power is not coercion.**

## WHAT DOES “COMMUNITY POWER” LOOK, FEEL, SMELL AND TASTE LIKE?

Power manifests in diverse forms. Power is deeply rooted within community values, driven by community members, and grounded in historic memories and struggles.

- **Power looks like** *“happy families, singing, and smiling faces. It looks like authentic representation in our jobs, communities, schools, and government.”*
- **Power sounds like** *“chants, protests, and spiritual songs. It sounds like the stories of our ancestors being told to our children; like children playing; like drum beats in a park, or at a neighborhood place of gathering, like communicating in our own languages without fear.”*



- **Power feels like** *“addressing the wills and needs of the community. It is self-reflective and critical of our histories. “Power feels like my voice is being heard. It feels like motivation. It is our voices being heard and integrated;” it feels like the security of access to capital and resources that help community members to create change and build influence; it feels like influence and control over resources, laws, and positive change; it feels like agency through the acquisition of skills and knowledge needed to make change; it feels like equity in access to essential services i.e. healthcare, housing, education open spaces; it feels like the warmth generated by of fond memories of families and friends; respect, support and accountability.”*
- **Power smells like** *“fried chicken, BBQs, roasting green chile, and lavender.”*
- **Power tastes like** *“meals produced and consumed with friends and families; like pastel de tres leches. It tastes like fresh water. It tastes like organically grown food used to feed and nourish the young. ”*
- **Power does not feel like** abuse, corruption, or unaccountability.

## POWER IS AGENCY.

[POWER IS] “THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE AND CONTROL OUR OWN HEALTH, OUR ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS, AND OUR LIVES.”

“POWER MEANS FREEDOM, LIBERATION, AND CONTROL.”

## WHY DO WE NEED TO BUILD “COMMUNITY POWER?”

The motivations to build power in communities generated common themes: To heal, to have opportunities for good health and wellness, to have agency, to tell our own stories, to tell the full story. Overwhelming evidence indicates that communities with power have strength, and that strong communities experience better health and social outcomes. Communities with power can successfully apply policies and systems that foster equity, support their implementation, and hold their governing structures accountable. As one participant shared, *“We build power for freedom, for liberation, for health, for life.”*

- **Healing:** We build power to heal our communities and ourselves through a multi-generational lens. Healing can be seen as a form of recovering power and control. *“We need power to redress the past, to heal the struggles and wounds that our communities and ancestors have confronted in their path towards justice and equity.”* *“We build power to create spaces where our stories, culture, music, and wisdom can be expressed.”* *“We build power to honor our ancestors who fought and sacrificed for our birth.”* *“We build power to leave a legacy for our children filled with opportunity to thrive and success.”* *“[By building power], we can create a future where our children no longer live in fear, live equitably, thrive, and succeed.”*
- **Sovereignty:** We build power to break through walls of oppression and systems that are in place that take away wellness, opportunity, and excellence. *“We build power to remember histories that have been denied to us, that have been minimized, ignored or invalidated.”* *“We build power to dismantle oppressive systems and to regain sovereignty for ourselves and for future generations.”* *“We build power to protect our communities” from policies and systems that make us sick,” and to “connect our ancestors to our children.”*
- **Equity:** We build power to create a society where equity abounds, and to regain control and agency. In today’s world where *“systemic bias abounds, we need power so we can be taken seriously by those with power, those who seek to silence our voices, to diminish our agency.”* *“We build power to create a more equal society where social injustice, violence, racism, bias, are eradicated and relegated to the past.”* *“We build power to counter colonization and its lingering impact on today’s justice.”* *“We build power to create a space for hope, purpose and belonging.”*
- **Voice:** We build power to have a voice so we can narrate our own stories. Collectively we form a voice that is not easily ignored. *“We want to be the narrators of our own stories—to shape how we are seen, our potential, our histories.”*



## WHAT RESOURCES DO WE NEED TO BUILD “COMMUNITY POWER?”

For many who are working to build community power to improve health, the first answer to this question is “*the finances to do our work.*” Other identified supports include: physical space, knowledge, skills, capacities, allies, coalitions and networks, leadership, memories of past experiences and struggles, healing, and a time frame that respect the complexity of these factors. A thread that ran through the responses is the central need of a perspective or intervention model that recognizes and incorporates local experience as a form of legitimate expertise and knowledge in the whole process; and not only at the end, to be mobilized around it or to provide feedback.

- **Resources:** We need physical and financial security to do our work. This means safe and positive spaces for creativity and financial support for operations, programs, and during emergencies.
- **Skills, Knowledge and Capacity:** Community leadership development builds collective knowledge and the capacity to lead or participate in the broad change process, instead of having a few individuals make decisions on our behalf. We need to grow fundraising, leadership, and strategic communication skills, and gain more content expertise in the issues we work on.
- **Relationships and Connections:** Alliances, coalitions and networks--connections with others doing like work – is key. We need “*trust and respect in one another,*” “*a community united in struggle towards a common goal,*” and “*respect for different priorities and approaches to work toward vision.*” We need networks that let us share information and learn from those doing the work, and a “*deep understanding of our common humanity.*”
- **Healing and Grounding through Hope and Efficacy:** We seek deep connections to the past and hope, faith, and spirit. With “*self-identity and self-reflection grounded in the trauma, oppression, and resistance that our ancestors faced,*” humility and “*recognition that we all heal differently,*” we know that “*dialoguing and recalling our ancestors’ struggles can inform our work today*” and inspire grit for today’s work. “*Connections to our faith and lands awaken power we already have among ourselves,*” as does connection to culture, music, arts, and space.
- **Increased Equity through Access to Appropriate Services/Knowledge:** This includes ethnic studies in K-12 schools and colleges/universities, cultural programs, alternative education, and community focused policing models.
- **Vision:** Vision asks “What are we working towards?” In order to have a collective vision of a more equitable and just future, clear community agendas are crucial. Vision constantly explores the balance of two key questions community organizers ask: What are we trying to win? What are we trying to build?

**“WE WANT TO BE THE NARRATORS OF OUR OWN STORIES—TO SHAPE HOW WE ARE SEEN, OUR POTENTIAL, OUR HISTORIES.”**

## WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO BUILDING “COMMUNITY POWER?”

Building power comes with its own set of challenges, including approaches focusing on individuals over communities and processes that are not conducive to community engagement, which leads to disconnectedness and lack of unity. Trauma and fear, ingrained from past experiences and struggles and replicated by current structures, policies and narratives, leave many in our communities unwilling to fight for social change. We can't create any real change if we don't have the basic necessities to carry out our daily functions and long-term goals, including funding, technology, and affordable transportation; in other words, our “theory of change” is dependent of our theory and practice of survival. In order to create change, we need to tear down the old failing structures and ideologies that strive to keep our communities and children from thriving and reaching social and economic equity and justice. Funders, nonprofits, and government agencies that support building community power must be willing to yield full power and control over processes and resources, set goals and make decisions with community members, and offer accountability to them.

- **Resources:** Power building is limited not only by lack of “*financial support for our organizations and time to meet deliverables and complete reporting requirements,*” but by the lack of basic needs like food, jobs, education, technology, childcare, transportation, organizational structure, space, and research—the scaffolding required to be able to engage. Lack of funding causes unhealthy competition among us.
- **Individualism and Apathy:** A lack of collective understanding produces fragmentation, and a lack of trust.
- **Past Traumas:** Many of our elders have experienced direct trauma, which has intergenerational effects. Past trauma can cause fear of change, feelings of powerlessness, and lack of efficacy and agency.
- **Institutional and Systemic Bias:** Existing structures and ideologies that work against equity—including bias and prejudices against people of color (Anti-Blackness, white supremacy, anti-immigration dogma), cis-patriarchy (sexism, homophobia, and transphobia), elitism, ableism, capitalism, structural violence, and stigmas surrounding mental health and substance abuse. The school to prison pipeline and education systems that do not provide safety for our children to learn all histories, not just the colonial narrative.
- **Lack of Community-Led Vision:** Not intentionally engaging each given community's unique input in solution-making that reflects collective leadership impairs building power.
- **Media:** Lack of exposure for our work, or worse, a limited framing that does not generate community support. Other people telling our stories becomes disempowering.
- **Institutional and Systemic Bias:** Existing structures and ideologies that work against equity—including bias and prejudices against people of color (anti-Blackness, white supremacy, anti-immigration dogma), cis-patriarchy (sexism, homophobia, and transphobia), elitism, and stigmas surrounding mental health and substance abuse. The school to prison pipeline and education systems that do not provide safety for our children to learn all histories, not just the colonial narrative.
- **Institutions Which Retain Power/Control Over Communities:** Police brutality, lack of access to legislators, and inequities in the legal, financial, transportation, immigration, and education systems are major barriers to community power. Community members crave alternatives to these institutions, and for inclusive agenda setting that encourages them to take part in making necessary changes.

### POWER IS RESOURCED.

POWER MEANS COMMANDING THE RESOURCES NEEDED TO THRIVE, TO WORK, TO HELP OUR COMMUNITIES.

“RESOURCES CAN INCLUDE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES AS WELL AS ACCESS TO INFORMATION, SKILLS AND EXPERTISE, CREATIVITY, AND GANAS”

*(Ganas: willful enthusiasm in Spanish)*





## HOW DO WE WANT OUR WORK TO BUILD “COMMUNITY POWER” TO BE MEASURED?

Traditional evaluation methods partially advance us towards understanding the impact of building community power to improve health through healing, sovereignty, equity, and voice. However, participants agreed that traditional quantitative measures do not tell a complete story which funders and evaluators could better understand through more on-site and in-person engagement and observation. Further, the organizers felt that process measures should be prioritized over outcome measures as the material manifestations of building community power is more akin to a marathon than a sprint. Lastly, the work of building power is the work of capacity, relationships, trust, and shifting from oppressive policies and practices toward more inclusive ones that reflect the knowledge, wisdom, practice, aspirations, and cultures of all residents. Capacity, skill building, and relationship cultivation require a different set of evaluation methods. Some starting points for how to measure organizers’ work to build community power include:

- **Respect of Community Knowledge and Expertise to Uplift Healing:** We need evaluation that recognizes existing, shared, and increased community knowledge. “Healing centered” initiatives are the others side of “trauma informed” efforts at improving health equity.<sup>3</sup>
- **Leadership Development:** We must understand the leadership development process for community members to become stronger advocates. We need to measure the magnitude of young people who move into leadership roles at home, in the community and at school.
- **Both Quantitative AND Qualitative Methods:** Surveys, stories, focus groups, testimonials, and interviews are powerful data that complement numbers. They offer necessary context at the outset that enables us to create more effective policies, programs, and institutions. They capture changes to human experience. We can train and support local organizers to help determine and collect the information and data needed to measure and show impact.
- **Measure the Social Infrastructure that is built to Expand Communities’ Voices:** The relationships being fostered and the collective power being constructed are within the community, which is multigenerational, participatory, and collective. Changes in influence and decision-making power could serve as indicators, as could participation in a local policy process, starting with parents attending school board meetings or council meetings and electing community leaders to school boards and city council. Quantifiers could include the number of community partners and events, participant retention, and how much the work is amplified in media and through social networks.
- **Participatory Evaluation with Data Sovereignty by Organizers and Communities:** Evaluation takes community members’ time and resources; we prioritize evaluation quality over quantity. We encourage the co-development of evaluation methods and protocols with community members. The stories of health victories should be defined by the community members who are organizing to build power.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see “Moving from Trauma-Informed Interventions to Healing-Centered Community Practices” in The Praxis Project’s Learning Circle Brief Series



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, ALLIED PROFESSIONS, AND PHILANTHROPY:

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- Building community power through organizing is an indispensable component to affect health justice and racial equity, and should be integrated into all public health interventions whose goals ostensibly include improving health equity.
- The process of building community power is not linear, and needs to be adaptable depending on political climate, resources, and existing infrastructure.
- Evaluation of efforts to build community power to improve health equity needs to be more expansive, including the intermediate steps toward longer-term equity goals.
- Evaluation should consider the development of community infrastructure, resilience, and capacity.
- Evaluation should go beyond measuring just the determinant of health outcomes to also measure the harnessing of community power to dismantle the structures, policies, systems, practices and environments that lead to inequitable conditions.
- Authentic engagement with communities that have power needs to be equitable; a good guide is the Praxis Principles for Health Justice and Racial Equity.
- Building community power for health equity is both a means and an end. It is by definition a transformative process, for all actors involved and for the communities and institutions in which it is taking place.

**“WE BUILD POWER FOR FREEDOM, FOR LIBERATION, FOR HEALTH, FOR LIFE.”**

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Praxis staff and participating organizations:

4-Directions Development	La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE)
Asian American Organizing Project	Little Village Environmental Justice Organization
AYPAL: Building API Community Power	Living Hope Wheelchair Association
Baltimore Algebra Project	Love Not Blood Campaign
Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network (PLAN)	Menikanaehkem (Community Builders)
Black Food Justice Collaborative	Miami Children’s Initiative
Black Organizing Project	Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project
Black Women for Wellness	Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander Consultant
Boston Youth Organizing Project	Native Star
Brown Girl Recover	American Association of Indian Farmers
Causa Justa::Just Cause	New Jim Crow Movement/ Parable of the Sower
Chinese Progressive Association	Intentional Community Coop
Datule’ Artist Collective	Nollie Jenkins Family Center
Detroit Women of Color, Incorporated	Organization for Human Rights & Democracy
Dine Community Advocacy Alliance	Padres & Jovenes Unidos
Empower DC	Pan-African Community Development Initiative
Fe y Justicia Worker Center	Philadelphia Student Union
Freedom Inc	Providence Youth Student Movement
Fuerza Del Valle	REDCO Community Food Sovereignty Initiative
Gwinnett SToPP	RYSE
Inner-City Struggle	Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI)
Khmer Girls in Action	Southern Echo
Koreatown Youth and Community Center	Southwest Organizing Project
La Plazita Institute	US Federation of Worker Cooperatives





The Praxis Project is a values-driven, national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve justice and equity through partnerships to build community power. Praxis believes strongly that organized communities are critical partners in the struggle to create just and equitable communities.

**Our mission** is to build healthy communities by transforming the power relationships and structures that affect our lives and communities.

#### **LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR WORK**

Visit our website, [www.thepraxisproject.org](http://www.thepraxisproject.org), to learn more about our initiatives and explore our multimedia resources.



#### **CONTACT US**


**Email:** [info@thepraxisproject.org](mailto:info@thepraxisproject.org)


**Phone:** (510) 652-5250

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