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# REFLECTIONS ON MEASURING COMMUNITY POWER

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## INTRODUCTION

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### BACKGROUND

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Support for this report was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as a part of the Lead Local Project. The actions described were not funded by the Foundation, and the views expressed and articles and references cited here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation. Lead Local was an effort to examine the role of community power in advancing health equity.

The goal of this paper was to reflect on the challenges and opportunities for measuring community power for health equity. This paper is intended to supplement the far more detailed and adept synthesis of research put together by Professor Paul Speer and his team at Vanderbilt University, and build on the excellent report put together by the Equity Research Institute (ERI) at the University of Southern California.

### OVERVIEW

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How can we measure community power?

To answer this question, we have to start by asking why we should be concerned about measurement. The first and foremost reason to consider questions about measurement with respect to community power has to do with the fundamental importance of community power-building in creating conditions for health equity. The magnitude and urgency of problems regarding health equity are clear, and both reports from ERI and Vanderbilt make clear the important relationship that community power-building has to health equity. Unlike other strategies for change, community power-building is focused not on winning one policy or campaign, but instead, on developing, winning, and then governing a broader agenda for health equity. As such, it has the potential to get at the root causes of inequity, and create vehicles through which long-term, large-scale change can be developed, won, and sustained.

Given how important community power is to catalyzing, creating, and sustaining health equity, we must create learning systems to improve our collective ability to invest in it. The goal of measurement, in other words, is fundamentally about shared learning.

The reports from ERI and Vanderbilt lay out a careful analysis of what community power is, what we know and do not know, and where we need to go to better understand how to strengthen our learning and measurement. Alongside those

reports, the key question for this memo is how can we strengthen our ability to measure the kind of community power that catalyzes, creates, and sustains conditions for healthy communities?

## CHALLENGES TO MEASURING POWER

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As highlighted both in the ERI and the Vanderbilt reports, measuring community power and community power building in a way that is authentic to the goals, aspirations, and potential impacts of the work is complex for a variety of reasons. I highlight a few here:

- **Power itself is a multi-dimensional construct:** Scholars and organizers alike have debated various ways to define power (and community power) for years. The nature of the ongoing debate is reflective of many dimensions of power that have to be taken into account in any measurement strategy. As some of the organizers interviewed in the ERI report argue, sometimes the most important work they do is the most invisible. Likewise, sometimes the strongest exercises of power are those that are the least visible. Any effort to measure community power, then, has to account for the way in which it consists of everything from visible exercises of power, to agenda-setting power, to structural power, to narrative power, and so on.
- **The enactment of community power is very place-based, dynamic, and highly contextual:** Power is inherently a dynamic attribute of relationships between individuals, organizations, and institutions. It is not a static trait; instead, the same individual can be powerful in one context but not powerful in another. Thus, understanding power is inherently contextual and based in place. In addition, community power must take the strategic agency of civic and political actors into account. Technical interventions, such as mosquito nets to stop malaria, are distinct from community power-building because when a community begins to use mosquito nets, the mosquitos do not strategically change their behavior to find ways to get around the nets. In community-power building work, however, the context within which the organizations work is very dynamic, in which targets, coalition partners, and so on are all responding agentically to any work the organizers do. So as an organization builds its community power, the environment within which they are working will change in unpredictable ways. Thus, any measure of community power

must be grounded in the unique features of place, that takes into account the unique contexts within which the organizers are working.

- **Community building processes are ends in and of themselves:** As both reports highlight, community power is an end in and of itself. Community power is important not only because it can change conditions for health equity, but it is a valued outcome in its own right because it builds individual and collective capacities within a community that are inherently worthwhile (the Vanderbilt report refers to this as a “dialectic” relationship). The relationship of community power and changing conditions is thus more cyclical and non-linear than common measurement strategies can accommodate.
- **The relationship of inputs to outputs and outputs to outcomes moves through a very complex design space:** Common evaluation techniques implicitly assume a linear relationship from a set of inputs (such as one-on-one meetings, GOTV outreach, or even a protest event or rally) to a set of outputs (such as a growing base of activists or voters, a victorious campaign, or a policy change) to a set of outcomes (such as more equitable housing in a community, reduced racial disparities, or other impacts in people’s lives). In reality, however, when it comes to community power building, the space between inputs and outputs, and outputs and outcomes is an inherently complex and dynamic terrain, in which the “fit” between a proposed intervention and impact of that intervention is highly contingent. In other words, a number of dynamically changing factors will affect the extent to which inputs (community power building strategies such as base-building) lead to outputs (such as community power) and outputs lead to outcomes (such as healthy communities). As a result, measurement strategies have to be able to account for the complexity of the design space.
- **Organizational and ecological learning happens best when agents themselves can co-create the learning processes:** Decades of research have shown that there is often a gap between research-based findings and actual implementation of or impact of those findings in the real world. The translation of findings to impact happens most effectively when the civic and political leaders responsible for implementation are able to co-create the learning processes themselves. The development of measurement strategies are most likely to be effective when they are co-created.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN MEASURING POWER

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Given the complexity of the measurement and research questions at stake here, people may be tempted to examine the list of challenges and throw their hands up at the challenge of measurement. Doing so, however, could stall a much-needed learning agenda that can undergird much needed work in the world. Tractable strategies for research and learning can help advance work on the core questions identified in ERI and Vanderbilt's reports:

- **Develop a taxonomy of community power work:** One of the challenges confronting organizers who lead community power and base-building work is widespread misunderstanding of what things like “organizing,” “base-building,” or “community power” are. People will often use those words in very different ways, such that “organizing” is used to describe everything from the transactional get-out-the-vote work that electoral campaigns do, to the years-long, deep work of creating solidarity that some community-based organizations do. Often, those terms are used interchangeably to refer to any effort that is made to involve people in public life—thus, for many people, the difference between the work that the AARP does to engage seniors may be indistinguishable from the work that organizations profiled in Lead Local do. To organizers, however, they are vastly different. Indeed, decades of research have shown that *not all forms of civic and political engagement are the same*. Research could be done to identify the multiple dimensions that differentiate different forms of community power work—for instance, is the strategy developed by professionals outside the affected communities or by those who are most affected by the work? Does the participation engage an individual participant as a strategist, or as an interchangeable unit in a panoply of participatory acts? How are organizations operating as social and political homes distinct from organizations that do not? And so on. There are multiple theories of change that are distinct from each other on multiple dimensions. Different approaches may be appropriate for different times, and some basic research could be done to unpack the distinction between different approaches to community power building.
- **Map ecosystems of community power in place:** The contextual, dynamic nature of community power necessitates a place-based approach to research. Yet, in most cases, we lack a coherent picture of the ecosystem that makes community power possible. As a result, even those who support community power building work operate in an environment of

partial knowledge—we all see a part of the elephant, but no-one can see the whole elephant. Doing place-based research to map ecosystems of community power in place across multiple communities would allow us to begin to understand what the pieces are that enable community power to be a mechanism for catalyzing conditions for healthy communities.

- ***Differentiate between potential power and the exercise of power:*** As Richard Healey writes, potential power refers to the resources community power groups need to cultivate to be ready to exert power in the world when the moment becomes available. This includes things like the size and quality of your constituency base, the ecosystems they create to work alongside each other, the activities community groups undertake to engage others, and so on. The exercise of power refers to the things community power organizations do to exert power in the world, such as trying to win elections, influence votes, or pass policies. Too often, our measures do not differentiate between these things, and use measures of potential power as proxies for power itself. Measures of the exercise of power, however, such as the extent to which community power organizations influence narratives, shape public debates, set agendas, and so on, are now available and should be differentiated from potential power (see below for more).
- ***Build a pipeline of researchers and organizers equipped to co-create learning processes that allow them to strategically “crawl the design space”:*** For research and learning to be impactful, it must involve the organizers in the design and vice versa. In particular, it should involve them not merely as subjects of research, but as designers of research. [Pritchett, Samji, and Hammer \(2013\)](#) argue that one way to do this is to engage leaders in a strategic learning process, in which they are invited to search for, learn about, and evaluate alternative approaches to doing their work—thus engaging them in an iterative process of learning designed to identify and assess counterfactuals in the same way that traditional research designs do—but with an eye towards improving practice. Doing this work will involve not only building relationships between organizers and researchers but also building the pipeline of people who are able to work in this way.
- ***Develop learning mechanisms that stretch beyond traditional measurement methods—but in doing so, center questions of race and inequity:*** For too long, the work of measurement with respect to community power building has been dominated by evaluation tools

rooted in statistical methodologies that are not well-equipped to studying complex, multi-faceted, non-linear phenomena like community power. Nowadays, however, the along with the advent of big data comes a set of new computational social science tools that are designed precisely to help us understand complex environments with multiple actors. At the same time, copious research has shown the importance of putting these tools in context, working closely with people on the ground to ensure the assumptions in the models do not encode the biases that pervade our society. Centering questions of race and inequity in doing all of this research helps to make explicit choices to try to guard against some of these dangers.

- **Develop measures of power that go beyond visible victories, but focus on all the transformative dimensions of setting, winning, and governing an agenda:** It is tempting to use the most visible indicators of progress as measures of power—such as candidates elected, policies passed, and people engaged. For all the reasons already discussed, however, these are important but not representative of the full spectrum of what it takes to build community power. More work is needed to develop measures that capture the work of setting and governing an agenda as well. Examples of tools that can be used to measure things like narrative power, agenda-setting power, and relational power are available in the book *Prisms of the People: Power and Organizing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America* (by Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa, University of Chicago Press, 2021). Investment in data and learning that is done in partnership with leaders on the ground who think carefully about this work can make this possible.

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## WRAPPING UP

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Developing better ways to measure power can help us strengthen our ability to change conditions for health equity by developing more robust learning systems around community power building work in the field. For the learning and measures to be useful to the field, however, they should be sensitive to the complex dynamics that leaders face and built in partnership with field leaders. When done correctly, however, this work can provide vital insight to the effort to build community power by developing a taxonomy of different forms of civic engagement mapping existing ecosystems of community power work, and developing more complex measures of power that help strengthen learning.