

Building a Movement for Health Justice

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Movement building is fundamentally about building power. That makes it qualitatively different from most other foundation investments. Efforts to encourage “civic participation” (i.e. voting) are part of movement building, but it is not just about political power in the conventional sense of the phrase. Movements transcend electoral politics. They’re about the power of ideas to change the way people think and feel about themselves and their communities. They’re also about mobilizing and sustaining the public will for action. Movements seek to shape the public agenda so that media, government, business and the social sectors will then rush to respond. Witness the recent frenzy among for-profit and non-profit organizations alike to project a “green” image. What would it take to stimulate a similar societal impulse to foster healthy communities as an overriding priority?

Around the world, many contemporary social movements have adopted a human rights framework as a core organizing idea. That approach may have less traction in the U.S. in an era of widespread suspicion of any claims to entitlement. However, the notion of a right to a healthy community might find resonance. It builds on years of work to promote the idea of Healthy Cities in the public health community. The question is how to broaden the base of those activities to promote health justice.

There is no template for movement building. Some have likened it to a catalyzing a “network of networks.” But that almost makes it sound more orderly and rational than it typically plays out in practice. In the U.S. we tend to look back to the movements of the 1960’s as our model, but there are myriad social movements currently active around the world and they elude simple description. There is an inherent element of creative chaos that defies our typical linear theories of change. While leadership and infrastructure are essential, for example, the role of catalytic external events and timing in movement building is critical, and cannot be readily predicted.

Consequently, movement building requires a different kind of investment strategy – and a different mindset -- on the part of a foundation. It requires the courage and patience to put substantial resources on the line for extended periods of time (much more than the typical three or five year grant cycle), even in the absence of readily measurable short-term outcomes. It also demands the ability to move quickly and decisively when opportunities arise. Movements also elude “branding.” The foundation should be comfortable with receiving little public credit for its largesse. Movements belong to the people not their funders.

While there are certainly valuable lessons to be learned from the movements of the past, we should definitely expect that a contemporary social movement is going to look and feel different. Those of us who remember the 60’s tend to equate visual images of mass public demonstrations as evidence of the efficacy of a movement. With the advent of the blogosphere and on-line movement groups like MoveOn.org, however, that is no longer

necessarily the case. When an electronic call to action can result in a half million e-mails in a 24-hour period, we're witnessing the power of a fundamentally different style of organizing

A foundation can't design or lead a movement, but it can provide critically needed support to kindle local sparks of leadership into flames of change. Foundations tend to think and operate in a top-down mode, but movements begin at the grassroots. Most movements around the world have arisen without any support from outside interests like foundations. In fact, they are rightly suspicious of outsiders who might offer their help. They are fueled by volunteer effort and operate on shoestring budgets. But that's not to say that resources can't be critical to movement success, particularly in a U.S. context. The substantial, sustained investment by a small number of foundations in the conservative movement over the past thirty years is an oft-cited case in point.

How might a foundation and its potential partners help to catalyze and build a movement for health justice? A logical first step would be to engage in a series of conversations across the state to field-test the idea and simultaneously to identify existing and potential leaders. Virtually every community in California has individuals and organizations that are already working on aspects of this agenda. In many cases, they are operating well "below the radar" of funders. It will take a different kind of process than an RFP to identify them and to engage them in this conversation.

Those who have already been moved to take local action in the direction of Healthy Communities are those best poised to begin to build a movement. The foundation can bring them together and help them to stay connected by underwriting the infrastructure required to sustain their efforts over the long haul. This will be not just a multi-year project; it will be a generational effort. It will take patience and commitment to build and sustain the momentum of the movement.

Elements of a Grantmaking Strategy

How might such a commitment translate into a grantmaking strategy? Here are a few ideas:

- **Nurture leadership**, both within targeted communities and in other key neighborhoods around the state. Unlike traditional individualistic models of leadership, movement building benefits from advancing collective leadership, including existing neighborhood associations, congregations, fraternal and service organizations, and sports leagues, as well as unaffiliated individuals. To do so will require reaching beyond the usual non-profit partner organizations to engage a broader cross-section of families and individuals in leadership activities.
- **Prioritize young people**. In many neighborhoods, the typical adult leaders tend to marginalize the potential contributions of young people. But vital movements depend on the energy, enthusiasm and idealism of young people of high school and college age. If this is a generational struggle, it makes sense to invest heavily in young people and to provide them with viable ways to serve their communities. They are also most

likely to inspire their peers and those younger than themselves to join in movement activities.

- **Connect networks** among individuals, among organizations and among networks in order to share information and resources, to jointly strategize and plan, to act on those plans, and to learn from each other. Face-to-face gatherings are essential for building relationships and trust across traditional boundaries of race and class. But young people will also show the way to connect via cell phones (www.mobileactive.org), Instant Messaging and Web 2.0 modalities such as FaceBook, YouTube and Twitter.
- **Underwrite sophisticated communications** capabilities, ranging from trainings with groups like The Spin Project and Spitfire Strategies to shared professional communications resources at the community level, as well as grants for paid media campaigns. Intermediaries like Youth Radio can train young people to create their own media messages and podcasts for widespread distribution. Low-frequency and on-line radio stations can provide powerful connections. Unexpected leadership can also be found in mainstream media, such as the role played by Spanish Language radio DJs in mobilizing immigrant rights mobilizations throughout the state.
- **Strengthen organizations.** Most local advocacy organizations could benefit from increased core funding and technical assistance over a multi-period. Community organizing groups are also just beginning to scratch the surface of their potential in California. Service providers need additional support for staff to engage their clients in movement building work. Local efforts also need help with data collection and analysis. Very little funding currently goes toward true participatory action research that builds local capacity to frame and conduct research.
- **Create flexible infrastructure.** While it's essential to support existing organizations, in some cases they will simply not be up to the creative chaos of movement building...or this work will be too far outside their core mission for them to take on this additional work and still be effective. In those cases, it will require the foundation to underwrite the creation and long-term support of new flexible structures (e.g. under the wing of a fiscal intermediary) dedicated to the specific task of movement building. Naturally, care should be taken to ensure a grounded governance structure and accountability to the community, but in many cases this may be the best mechanism to realize the movement's potential on the ground. It can be the source for quick-response mini-grants to support local emerging activities, for example, in a way that a foundation simply couldn't respond.
- **Facilitate learning** by bringing movement participants together with their peers from other communities, other states and other countries. Some powerful lessons can be learned from contemporary movements in places like Brazil, India and South Africa. A foundation can also play a special role in helping everyone to understand the "big picture" by connecting

local and statewide efforts and building bridges to potential allies such as other funders and statewide networks like First 5. A foundation can also ensure that adequate resources are available to capture the learning at each site, provide frequent feedback loops and widely share those lessons in real time.

A Different Approach to Philanthropy

Movement Building calls for a fundamentally different contract between the grantmaking organization and its grantees. Unlike more conventional grantmaking programs, the funder can't control or direct a movement. It may help to establish the initial frame for the discussion, and approve grant objectives, but it can't set the agenda for action. As time goes by, communities may also identify different priorities from those of the funders. The foundation can't easily back out of its funding commitments either, particularly when things get tough.

Coordination is also a challenge. A foundation can't appoint the leaders of a movement, nor can it remove them from power (even if it might cease providing funding). Successful movements comprise multiple networks of organizations and individuals. Networks function quite differently from traditional hierarchical campaign organizations and require a truly adaptive style of leadership. While a foundation can provide training and support for those leaders and create new flexible structures to help them to coordinate their efforts, it can't micromanage those relationships.

It's also one thing to issue a call for those who want to tackle diabetes or predatory financial practices or violence to come together under the banner of a movement. It's quite another thing to try to rally diverse interests around the banner of "health justice" or "healthy communities." While there are some advantages to such a big tent, there are also potential difficulties in coalescing different established interest groups around a broader (supposedly shared) agenda.

All rhetoric aside, a Foundation that wishes to support movement building needs to do some serious soul searching about its core values and operating philosophy. How willing is it to cede control of such a high stakes enterprise to its grantees? When power building is the goal, how will it respond to inevitable confrontations with its presumed (and newly empowered) partners? How transparent and accountable is it willing to be in its decision making? How courageous is it prepared to be in the face of potential partisan political scrutiny and criticism? Foundations are often ignored by corporate and political power players precisely because they do not typically pose a threat to the status quo. A public commitment to movement building invites a different response.

Movement Building is at best a high risk/high reward strategy. It will require a rather different approach to philanthropy than most foundations have practiced in the past. How new approaches to movement building will play out among traditionally disenfranchised populations remains to be seen. But by choosing to commit to a long-term investment in that work, particularly if they focus their energies on young people, foundations have an opportunity to break new ground in struggle for health justice.