



EDWARD W. HAZEN FOUNDATION

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## Summary

Teleconference on  
Youth Organizing  
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# TELECONFERENCE ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

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## The Relationship Between Youth Development and Youth Organizing

Youth organizing is a form of civic engagement; therefore some civic engagement actually needs to be focusing on organizing. The challenge for advocates of organizing as a tool for youth development and social change, is to be able to articulate both the relationship and the impact areas around civic engagement and youth development. I created a chart awhile back that clarifies the distinction between youth development and youth organizing as focusing on individual change or structural change. On one end of the continuum, youth development is not focused on social or structural changes, where at the other end of the continuum, youth organizing is very focused on structural and social change, but those two things are not mutually exclusive. In the field of youth organizing, you can't achieve either youth development or effective youth organizing without developing young people. Therefore, youth organizing is an important and critical ingredient in youth development and youth development is an important ingredient for youth organizing. Those two things have to be bridged because the anecdotal evidence suggests that these organizing groups

have young people coming to the organizing meeting, but don't go to school. Or they come to the organizing meeting but their families are facing eviction, or they can't come to the organizing meeting because they have to work. These are the fundamental youth development issues that are critically important and the organizing field must really pay attention to the social trauma that exist in young people's lives that actually prevent them from being effective organizers, and I think the same can be said vice versa. In youth development, we have to understand the capacity and agency of young people to act in their communities, and for people who have felt powerlessness, it is a critically important aspect of the developmental process. Particularly for young people of color, you cannot achieve healthy youth development without young people actually engaging in forms of activism and to think of youth development outside of this context really diminishes the capacity and the agency for young people to enact change.

In primarily urban communities of color, the issues that young people are dealing with are much more toxic, essentially meaning that structural racism,

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educational failure, and marginalization are not simply structural barriers, but barriers that also block opportunity. We know that structural barriers block opportunity, but we need to look at the ways in which that those things are internalized in our communities. So, there are two levels of challenges when we talk about structural racism and educational marginalization -- they block opportunities, but they have an internal impact that erodes away the capacity for young people to act and change.

Analyzing the relationship between youth development and activism is really looking at, and being able to articulate, how organizations are paying attention to not simply development, but the impact of structural barriers on the internal lives, psyche and interpersonal dimensions that young people are forced to deal with. There are a couple of organizations that have been doing really interesting work around that. Youth Ministries For Justice in New York has done some really interesting work and continues to pay attention to the *soft side* of revolution, which is building hope and imagination, as well as dealing with internalized oppression and the consequences of toxic structural barriers on young people's lives. Brotherhood/Sister Soul, in Harlem, does interesting work around that and then there's a number of organizations on the West Coast that are starting to pay attention to those types of things.

In order to hold communities accountable and in order to make effective structural changes, people need to be well and effective. That means that we have to acknowledge and reconcile what's going

on inside people's lives as it relates to the impact of these toxic environments. It's really important for organizations to be explicit, not only with young people, but also with adults, about ways in which those systems have shaped the internal reality of our lives. In order to boldly confront these structural conditions, people need to have greater capacity, and that greater capacity is more than a set of skills. It is actually fostering a sense of purpose and well being, hope and imagination. As an example, if black folks and Africans who were enslaved never dreamed and hoped, they might still be enslaved. It was the capacity for us to see freedom that allowed Harry Tubman to lead people out of the South and so it is an important piece of social justice and movement activity that needs to be paid attention to. The intensified levels of racism, homophobia, classism and poverty have really begin to erode that aspect of our communities that have historically enabled us to resist.

Most of what we know about young people in the trajectory of the youth organizing field emerges out of psychology and as a result, the underpinnings of the questions we ask are very individual. One may try to make conclusions about a collective body, they are still based upon very individual ways of understanding things. We can, however, look in the social movement literature where there are really interesting and useful theories about collective development and the ways in which people's consciousness are supported when they're in broader bodies of collective thinking and the ways that collective engagement compels people to act in certain ways around resistance.

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## Emerging Youth Organizing Infrastructure & Priorities

We are in an amazing moment where the general public has some consciousness of the term “organizing,” because the Obama era has raised the notion of organizing as something important, or something we should pay attention to. However, if we don't capitalize on that moment, we're really missing an opportunity. One of the things that we have in the field is that there are people that are doing organizing around the Country, but it is very siloed. And in terms of infrastructure, there isn't really an organized attempt to bring people together to share ideas, to think about best practices, or to even work on issues across sectors. For example, I think BLOC has played a really important role in that it brought people together. When BLOC went away, we didn't have that same kind of opportunity. In terms of building a field and in building an infrastructure, it is critically important to think about how to bring people together, how to share information, how to share best practices, how to understand how people won and how people lost a campaign across sectors, if we're really talking about field building and about trying to get traction with youth organizing around the Country.

There are some movements and some efforts to support regional intermediaries and capacity building groups that are linked to regional clusters. But aside from looking at specific intermediaries, if we don't react and actually provide some support and strategic thinking behind what that infrastructure looks like, then we're really missing the boat. The infrastructure issues are around things; convening, evaluation and leadership pipeline. Convening, which is bringing people together and best practice

sharing, is also about information dissemination, so that there is constant communication between local groups. There are hundreds of ways to think about that communication aspect and we're at a point where we could actually begin to use the information to shape and inform some form of policy.

The community organizing field would progress if we were able to put together a convening of community-based organizations once a year to share ideas; set up a website where people are actually subscribed to; and have dialogue and communications via blogs or websites. For example, perhaps there are a couple groups in New York, in Texas and in California that are all working around educational reform, or all are working around racial profiling issues. That can then become a way in which those groups can work together and think about how to influence policy work with local policymakers, or to find out the ways in which people are making traction in various sectors

The Funders Collaborative is thinking about this issue around leadership pipeline, which is, “how do we intentionally train and support the next generation, of folks who are going to be doing organizing,” and that is a really important idea as well. They are considering everything from offering certificated programs to getting people into community colleges. There is another organization actually working with community colleges to provide training on organizing and get a two-year degree on that issue. That's really solid infrastructure building because it's sustainable and it's providing people the skills to then take back to their community.

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Currently, the field of organizing doesn't understand enough about the sectors in which youth organizing is actually making headway. We know that people are organizing around education, juvenile justice issues, immigration issues, human sexuality issues. We know that there are sectors around the Country that people are organizing, but we don't know, for example, if there is greater movement in educational organizing and less in immigration? Do we see greater wins in justice issues that young people are organizing and less wins in school reform? We need to be able to say where we're seeing inroads and traction in terms of youth organizing, or what is the role that youth organizing actually plays in the broader scope of social change movements. Maybe we begin looking at the ways in which young people partner with adult organizations, or adult efforts, or vice versa, but we're at a place where we need to be able to very clearly articulate which sectors we see movement in among youth organizing.

In terms of supporting local work and then really focusing on field building work, it's not an either/or strategy. Field building work asks the question, "what comes first, the chicken or the egg?" If you don't support local work, there is no field. If you don't support the broader field building work, you begin to see a waning or an erosion of the quality of work in the local level. I think that those are two strategies to think about as a field, and what sort of impact can you make that produces information and data. That is an important piece of the field that other sectors have been able to make traction on. I think the field is lacking the sort of convening infrastructure that brings people together. There are

a number of ways to restructure and to think about the field building work that will have a longer-term impact at the local level.

## New Forms of Youth Organizing

I don't know if it's a new form, but it's one I'm certainly starting to pay attention. I had a conversation with Taj James a couple of days ago about this movement around the relationship between well-being and social justice. One of the issues, particularly on the West Coast, in the Bay Area in particular but can be applied to other communities as well, is that there's such a morbid sort of culture around activism. That is, you work and you burn yourself out for the cause. We know that that's not a sustainable lifestyle. The movement and the work is not sustainable if people are not well. I think there's a movement around looking at the relationship between well-being, health activism and social justice. There is some interesting research that has made the argument that you really can't achieve social justice without well-being and that well-being and social justice are actually the split side of the same coin. So, I think that focusing on this notion of healing and hope and imagination and well-being, are intimately connected to forms of youth organizing and justice, but we haven't paid enough attention to it. One of the ways in which community groups are actually changing their infrastructure is in building long-term wellness and personal development into their daily practices. There is a group of funders that Taj told mentioned called Deep Change, where people are meeting around these issues and trying to figure out what this means for their own organizational work. In the long-term,

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paying attention to these strategies is going to have, a really profound benefit to the field.

People have also become proficient in using technology to organize. Everything from cell phones to blogs to online social networking are new tools that people are using to organize. Paying some attention to that is also really important. There have been a number of emerging studies that have begun to look at things like cell phones and blogs and texting and instant messaging as civic tools, but not necessarily organizing tools. I think that's one area that we don't really understand enough about, but yet we still see an enormous movement. We could point to two or three examples like the Jena Six that was all Internet-based organizing, and also the immigrants right organizing, which all brought young people together using text messages and instant messages and so forth.

### Shifts in Organizing Focus

In the early '90s and late '80s, we saw youth organizing coalescing around identity based work and to a certain extent we still see that. But, over the past few years, there has a shift to more issue-based work and the immigrant rights in the Southwest and in the West Coast really culminated around issue-based work. Focusing on educational reform, we see these groups that are focusing more on issue-based, rather than identity-based work. Not to say that folks are not paying attention to identity, but we're starting to see the more issue-based work coalesce in ways that we hadn't seen before.

There's a perception on the part of community-based organizations and foundations that youth organizing is some way of rebel-rousing, or creating trouble or social disruption, where it has a negative connotation. It is a really important public relations problem to pay attention to, particularly in this moment. In the past, it was clear that folks really had this perception of organizing and for a foundation board to consider it, it was thought of as risky, where in comparison, conventional youth development was considered a safe thing. Now there is a rupture in that because of Obama's presidency and the opportunity is really around public relations. In what ways can people work together to actually use this opportunity to shift the perception of organizing so that it actually articulates the civic value, the Democratic value of engaging marginalized people, young people into social change activities? That's a really ripe and low hanging fruit that if we don't pay attention to, could revert back to the old trope which is that organizing is basically troublemaking.

If you compare youth organizing to youth development work and even the youth civic engagement work, one of the things that the youth development sector has brought to the forefront is data. In the youth development field and in the youth civic engagement field folks can say that their practices actually produced victories and impact with young people and can identify indicators and outcomes. Youth development is able to provide evidence at the individual level, to some extent at the community level. The youth development field hasn't really been able to talk about impact at the social level yet, but they're ready and able to document and

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talk about the role that civic engagement, youth civic engagement, and youth development play in young people's lives as a way of impacting young people's lives. The youth organizing field hasn't yet made that case. We've made some movement in that direction, but we really haven't been able to articulate what youth organizing actually provides young people as a developmental tool. Because it's organizing, we've been more interested in issues and social change, and we're able to talk in general, what organizing means for a community and what it means for a neighborhood. We need to begin to link the relationship between individual development, neighborhood and community development and its relationship to the broader democratic engagement and/or to social development. We haven't made that case very well yet, so I think that's one of the challenges that we're facing.