

# ***Building Movement***

**Inspiring Activism in the Nonprofit Community**

## **Building Movement vs. Building Organization: Summary of Regional Discussions**

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# **Building Movement vs. Building Organization**

## **Summary of Regional Discussions**

### **I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **Summary of Findings**

##### *Organizations Working Towards Progressive Social Change*

- Those working in social change nonprofits are not only overburdened by program activities and goals that often far exceed the actually reach of the organization, but also with the isolation that results from building an organization. Groups rarely have the time and energy to get together outside of targeted coalitions to discuss larger issues of strategies for social change, organizational forms that work for social change organizations, and/or other information relevant to their work. The desire exists, but not the forum to develop a common understanding/framework. Few places provide a space where those running or working in progressive nonprofits can meet, seek out information or contribute to the development of knowledge for change across organizations. In addition, the opportunity to reflect with others was often mentioned as an antidote to burnout and the culture of constant work on program activities.

##### *Vision*

- Social change organizations need assistance with and support to develop a larger analysis and vision of social change and how their organization and its activities will contribute to that vision. To do this, staff and constituents should be encouraged to allot time to reflect so they can create a theory or model for change that is based not only on their desires and experiences, but one that is grounded in an understanding of the work and history of others seeking the same goals. The resulting analysis and vision is something that the group constantly revisits and discusses as a tool to assess the effectiveness of strategies and activities. Ideally this analysis should be done both within and across organizations.

##### *Structure*

- The creation of a nonprofit organization -- from incorporation as a 501(c)(3) through the development of operations -- does not necessarily facilitate the work of movement building organizations. Professionalization of nonprofits combined with the lack of attention to the unique organizational development needs of social change groups has exacerbated this problem. Social change organizations, like other nonprofit groups, contend with issues such as competition/turf, effective leadership, and organizational skills that need to be addressed. However, social change groups face different decisions and dilemmas with how to build creative and flexible organizations, develop strategies within and among groups, and maintain a staff who are able and willing to work with others interested in creating movements for change. Current capacity building programs rarely address these needs.

##### *Nonprofit Sector and Social Change*

- Those working in social change organizations have an ambivalent relationship to the nonprofit sector. A nonprofit organization that is focused on social change operates under the rules of incorporation and is accountable to funders. This causes a surprising amount of conflict for social change groups that challenge existing forms of state power and the distribution of wealth that benefits the same people and institutions that give the organization needed resources. Some groups addressed this conflict by developing an explicit analysis of the impact of incorporation and funding sources on their work, as well as the organization's role in the larger arena for change.
- Those involved in organizations interested in social change and movement building are more likely to pay particular attention to the role of constituents in their organizations. Building constituency-driven social change organizations is challenging, especially at a time when constituency involvement is equated with customer satisfaction. Technical assistance groups are rarely versed in ways to involve constituents, and there are few venues where groups share their experiences of involving and mobilizing constituents in and across organizations.

#### *Movement Building*

- Older people often describe their work in social change organizations as sustaining social movement activity from the 1960s and 1970s, whereas younger people are trying to create new movements for change. People across generations noted that they currently did not feel a part of "a social movement." The measure of movement building activity is dominated by aging leadership that refers to their own (or imagined) experience of movements in the 1960s and 1970s. New movements will evolve by learning from the movements of the past, and developing room for the creation of new ideas/forms of movements for the future.
- Social change groups must be both aware of and challenge the effects of dominant culture and its replication on their organizations. These issues are played out foremost over race and the critical impact race/racism has on US society. There are also issues of class, gender, immigration status, ability, sexual identification and orientation, among others that call for an analysis of how organizations integrate these issues into their work. The creation and understanding of identities for those outside of the structures of power is crucial in the work of social change organizations. Most assistance in this area is geared to majority culture groups who look for training on diversity. The need to develop a deeper understanding of these issues in social change groups is critical in developing movements that can relate across issue areas.

#### *Future Funding*

- Funding of progressive social change groups has been a huge challenge. Some claim that movement activity cannot be accountable if it is funded from outside its constituency group, but most social change groups with paid staff are not membership or constituency supported. Instead, they rely on funds from outside their base. Groups struggle over whether they are accountable to their constituents or to their funders.

Social change groups will have to assess, especially in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> environment, the crisis in funding including the amount of funds available to groups, the role of constituency funding, and the survival of groups that may not receive the funds they counted on in a pre-recession and pre-‘war on terrorism’ world.

### **Summary of Recommendations for Next Steps**

#### *A Place for Progressive Social Change Groups*

Those leading and working in progressive social change organizations need a place there they can discuss how to develop internally and externally to become movement building organizations including political education, analysis, strategies, and constituency involvement. An important next step will be to begin the development of a center for progressive social change organizations where groups can find information, meet to discuss issues, and give voice and weight to their activities and vision.

A center for progressive social change groups could provide the following:

#### *Advocacy for Movement Building Organizations*

- Movement building organizations have moved from a central place in the nonprofit sector during the 1960s and 1970s to a marginalized position since the 1980s. The need to infuse the sector with values that are promoted by progressive social change groups would be a welcome relief from the relentless emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness based on business principles. Advocacy by progressive groups is needed to move national nonprofit umbrella groups and local coalitions to address critical issues facing constituents.

#### *Developing Organizations for Social Change*

- There continues to be a need to identify and understand the type of organizational development that benefits groups interested in social change. Capacity building is aimed at constructing sustainable independent organizations in a competitive market. It is not a model that is necessarily useful toward creating a vision and analysis for making deeper systemic change.

Organizations should have access to strategies and methods to build movement capacity through organizations. This means the emphasis of capacity building changes from focusing on the individual organization’s unique contribution to looking at the role of the organization and other groups in a larger movement for change. Capacity building in this light emphasizes cross-organizational work, education about the issues, constituency involvement and leadership, and the values and principles which form the basis for the structure and operations of organizations. Capacity building for movement reinforces the fabric that needs to be woven within and between organizations rather than the establishment and institutionalization of individual organizations.

#### *Political Education and Analysis*

Nonprofits are inundated with tools on how to strengthen their organizations, but there is little emphasis or development of tools that help groups think through their

vision and analysis for making systemic change. Those working in progressive nonprofits are anxious for time and guidance on how to educate themselves and their larger constituency about the assumptions behind their work, and to talk about their strategies based on these assumptions.

Integrated in this process is an understanding of how race, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation and identity, ability and other issues that are defined by those in the ‘norm’ impact on the work of the organization – both internally and externally. To do this work, groups need guides and assistance for how organizations can build political education and ongoing learning into their operations. This process informs both the vision and the operations of the organization. It also helps organizations understand the need for and role of other groups in building momentum towards social change.

### *Emerging Issues Groups*

- Convening people over a period of time on a variety of issues is one essential element in building a progressive movement. Several people in our meetings – both regionally and with individuals – talked about the importance of bringing together people for a longer term focused look at strategy and change. The ideas ranged from how to infuse movement building into social services agencies to a discussion among those working on different progressive policy campaigns to talk about overlapping and congruent strategies.

### *Research*

- Those working in social change organizations readily identify the many challenges in collecting the type of information they desire to help them with their work. Few have access to the resources or connections that would provide them with this information. At the same time, there appears to be a revived interest on the part of scholars and researchers to be of assistance to progressive social change organizations working on the ‘front lines’. Finding ways to create and enhance these relationships would be extremely valuable to those interested in building movement towards change.

### *Dialogues with Funders*

- Social change groups are constantly experiencing the strains of being under-resourced. At the same time, they are suspicious of the demands and motives of funders. There needs to be an ongoing forum for funders and those working in social change organizations to discuss the need and impact of funding on the broader work of movement building and to develop strategies for how to address some of the issues that are raised. Building a set of dialogues between funders and social change groups would address not only issues of funding but also the limitations of social change organizations working on their own to address systemic change.

### *Work Across Generations*

- The aging leadership in many social change groups creates anxiety about the future. Many older leaders have trouble thinking about leaving their organizations. Some are worried about who will carry on their work. Others are not prepared – financially

and/or emotionally – exit out of their organizations. Still others are unsure about the best way to mentor and train a new generation of leadership.

The transfer of power and responsibility from older to younger leaders in social change work is rapidly approaching. There needs to be open discussion and advice on how to prepare for this change, and ongoing support as these transitions occur.

### *Preparation for the Future*

- In this new millennium we have already witnessed the changing landscape in the United States. The destruction of the World Trade Centers has made those interested in systemic change even more aware of both our commitment to democracy and the challenges we face in ensuring that commitment. Recent events have made it clear that our work here in the US is intricately tied to what is happening in the rest of the world.

Concretely, shrinking funds and restrictions placed on their work will challenge social change organizations and those that work in them. There is no question that there will be a dramatic financial impact on the nonprofit sector as a whole and on social change groups in particular.

It is important that there is a place for those running social change organizations to think strategically about their ability to effectively continue their work with fewer resources. Building operational alliances with other organizations may be one solution, fighting for funds to stay afloat another, and ceasing operations a third. However, the changes that organizations will be facing needs to be viewed in terms of the larger goal of continuing to support and build movements for change.

## II. INTRODUCTION

The Building Movement In(to) the Nonprofit Sector project held seven regional meetings in the spring and fall, 2001 to explore the intersection between building movement towards social change and building social change organizations. These discussions -- which took place in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Knoxville, New York, and Oakland -- were designed to deepen our understanding of how to enhance and support the vision and mission of progressive social change organizations, those interested in changing the distribution of resources and power for disenfranchised groups. We were especially interested in the relationship between the *strategies and practices* of organizations and their *form and structure*. Our question is *how do organizations develop strategies and structures to facilitate the process of building momentum towards social change, and when do strategies and structures hurt this momentum?*

A member of the Building Movement Steering Committee facilitated each meeting. Participants came from a range of organizations including organizing, advocacy, services, funding, and technical assistance. They also represented a wide variety of issue areas such as arts and culture, environmental justice, prisoners' rights, and different identity-

based groups. The common thread between participants was their commitment to social justice and social change.<sup>1</sup>

Participants were asked to discuss four major questions.

- What are the links between your strategy and/or vision of social change, and the structure and/or form of your organization?
- What are the challenges you experience in keeping your organization going and in addressing the mission/vision of your organization?
- What organizational structures have you found facilitate working towards building larger momentum towards change?
- Are there challenges you face in your organization that you would like this project to address?

Our goal in these discussions was to gain insight on the connection between the vision and mission of progressive social change organizations, and the tools and support they have for implementing their vision. We also wanted to amplify the concerns and ideas of those working in social change organizations. Finally, we were interested in how to recognize and address the constraints of the current external environment and its influence on organizations building movement for social, economic and racial justice.

### **III. INTERNAL OPERATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT MOVEMENT BUILDING**

At all of our meetings, participants discussed the ways nonprofit organizations do or do not support building movement towards social change. Participants talked both about the vision and values of organizations, and how those are reflected in their structure and practices. At all of the meetings there were questions raised about the structure of social change nonprofits. Many people expressed their desire to find models for different ways to build and operate social change organizations. This included questions about the role of boards, involvement of constituents and the ways in which organizations mirrored the systems participants wanted to change. Participants in some of the regions talked about the problems of replicating the assumptions of dominant culture in their organizations, especially race and racism, but also class, gender, immigration status, ability, sexual identification and orientation among others.

#### **Vision**

The social change organizations represented at these meetings were asked about their vision for social change. At the meetings, it was clear that there was a distinction between the vision that the organization developed and held, and the mission statement.

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<sup>1</sup> Participants were invited by the facilitator of each meeting with help from others involved in the project, based on criteria set by the project team. In Atlanta and Knoxville, partners were identified who invited the participants.

The vision turns out to be the larger analysis of the need for systemic change and the theory and/or analysis of the best way to create that change.<sup>2</sup>

One New York participant described talked about the development of her organization, For us, we created a founders team, ... myself and young people from the community. So, it was five of us meeting in the attic of my apartment on a weekly basis...It was a lot of storytelling and reflection on our own experiences as young people, what worked for us in terms of the organizations we had been a part of and what didn't, who we knew we were and what was important to us, and doing some reading, a lot of reading together and studying together about past social movements and... beginning to do some writing.

She goes on to say,

The vision, a lot of it came out of that particular experience and knowing that we wanted to create a space where there was a developmental process for young people. But the big question, 'for the sake of what' was for us answered in 'for the sake of developing a community'...re-establishing links and connections to community, bring back or stemming the tide of what's been called the 'brain drain' in communities of color, keeping young people there, and then creating movement but also very deliberately creating institution.

It was clear to those who spoke about the development of a vision, that education and analysis for change were important components. In Atlanta a participant described the process in her organization,

The visioning and all of that comes from the grassroots. But at the same time it recognizes, and the people doing this work recognize, that there is a need to figure out ways to do political education, which has not been a part of the nonprofit framework... So it is absolutely necessary, while we build the power of the grassroots, to develop ways to do political education and address those things that are burdens on communities or because of historical oppressions.

In Boston, one of the participants pointed out how developing a vision without an analysis has had a negative impact on some of the groups she has been assisting.

So their vision has been we need to get community members involved and there needs to be a grassroots movement to change health access. And interestingly, I think now seven years afterwards...they developed some strong groups. The question now is decision-making. Who makes the decisions? ... So they have a vision of wanting community participation, but really what does that mean? ... I think a number of groups are really struggling with that.

A Denver participant expressed his concern about the need to develop a vision with people outside of his own organization,

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<sup>2</sup> Participants in the meetings did not have a common definition of 'vision'. However, there were clearly similarities that are discussed in this section. We are concept of vision needs to be developed, both its meaning and its conceptualization.

I never see any of us in a room having discussions like this... I 'm in the grind every day trying to get to that next foundation proposal I need to write or trying to get my supervision time in for people... And I try to rationalize it by saying, 'by building this organization, I'm contributing to the building of a broader, more dynamic movement.' But the reality is, I don't step back and I don't have vision a lot of times. I'm kind of stuck in the forest.

### **Structure of Social Change Organizations and the 501(c)(3) Question**

#### *Alternative Structures*

In every regional meeting, some participants expressed their concern about how best to structure social change organizations. Not all groups followed a hierarchical model. Some of the smaller groups were collectives, other larger groups had autonomous units, and some organizations had a co-director team. A participant in Knoxville struggled with the impact of the organizational structure on the type of work. He noted,

If we're talking about social justice organizations, I think it's incumbent on us to really live the values that we are preaching and that's very hard to do, because I don't think we have a really effective concept of democracy. We don't have a good model to go on...and so, what I see organizations doing a lot is choosing efficiency over democracy. And sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn't.

Another participant in Chicago described the struggle facing an organization that she helped found that has question whether it should remain a collective.

I think intellectually everyone understands it. And intellectually everybody appreciates it. But to practice it on a day to day – especially people who work in there everyday -- it becomes really hard. ...So, we're looking at alternative models of how do we deviate from that.

One New York participant warned,

How do you create alternative management structures in the context of a very limited 501(c)(3) environment and a very limited set of expectations around funders...Many of the organizations that I've seen over the years that have really tried to push alternative management structures have ultimately ended up failing in doing so in the context of all those issues.

In Oakland, one of the participants worried,

When you create organizations that are too rigid in their structure and where roles are assigned in too rigid a fashion, then you inhibit yourself from being able to be responsive and in connection with people...we basically become too enamored with our own organizations and forget what purpose are we serving.

One of the participants had been looking to other groups that were, "starting to develop a model of how their organizational structure fits with their model of social change."

Structure could either include or exclude participants. A Denver participant noted that lack of structure allowed for more constituency involvement. Another Boston-based attendee talked about how their constituents rejected a membership model fearing cumbersome decision-making, lack of flexibility, and slowed responses to urgent issues.

However, another person observed that an informal structure had actually excluded constituents who had no formal mechanism for getting involved

Current structures were supported by a host of technical assistance (TA) providers. A New York participant talked about how a progressive TA group helped them by offering boilerplate policies. The problem was most of these policies ignored their organization's desire to be structured and to operate in different ways. An Oakland participant concurred, telling how she had been offered TA by a funder, but finding it did not address their needs. For social change groups she remarked, "it's about political leadership and mentorship, and the thing around building a movement."

Another Oakland participant talked about starting a new progressive group with little experience in how to set up a nonprofit. She noted how their group needed help in understanding the issues ranging from incorporation to responding to funders. She wondered how younger people entering the field could learn more from the experience of others.

Overall, few organizations were satisfied with the organizational structures they operated in whether it was a hierarchical structure or a small collective. They were anxious to learn and try something new, but few knew where to begin. A Boston participant put it this way,

I don't lie to myself. We have been around for twenty years now. We have been part of the system. We've been incorporated. We have bylaws. We're United Way affiliated. We've got a board of directors. We are an arthritic organization. You become arthritic after a awhile...you are not flexible anymore; it hurts the joints.

A Knoxville participant expressed a similar sentiment,

Our vision is maybe clearer than it's ever been...but the structures that we have in place, which were created fifteen years ago, are suddenly not relevant to the work we have to do. And there are a lot of people wedded to the old structures whose power is in the old structures... I think this is true of a lot of community organizing groups, that they're stuck in a time when you do things a certain way, but you don't necessarily look for the bigger vision. You look for the next step.

### *Organizational Leadership and Staff*

Another major and related theme was the role and tenure of leadership in social change organizations. Some of the participants questioned how long leaders should stay in organizations. One Oakland participant believed that leaders who stay too long become obstacles for other people's growth. An Atlanta participant asked how progressive nonprofits were investing in new leadership. And in Boston, a participant challenged the motives of leaders who claimed they believe in community empowerment but who stayed fifteen to twenty years in their jobs without sharing leadership, and were unwilling or unable to leave. Another person talked about the spectrum of leaders in movement organizations, ranging from the charismatic leader without whom no movement exists, to the managed bureaucratic organization that can't move because of its structure and lack

of visionary leadership. A Denver participant noted that there were few places that leaders could reflect and receive support to become more visionary.

### *Staff*

In every meeting, participants discussed issues related to staff including professionalization and its impact, attracting and retaining people, and making needed changes in structure and salary. The group in Oakland voiced the most concern noting the impact of the enormous rise in the cost of living, which made it impossible people to afford to live in the Bay Area and to hold jobs in social change organizations. Collectives and less hierarchical organizations were especially concerned and were trying to make accommodations based on staff needs. One person suggested regional market surveys of social change organizations to learn more about the cost of living in the region and the range of salaries for different staff positions. A Denver participant who was raising funds to hire additional organizers, found few people interested in the job. In a different vein, a Boston participant suggested social change organizations develop a study of where and how the staff spends their time. She worried that the jobs in social change organizations had more and more to do with meetings and less to do with contacts with constituents. The impact of professionalization was also discussed, especially for those providing services.

### *Why Incorporate?*

In each of the regional meetings, there was at least one comment or story – and often more than one – about the negative consequences of a group deciding to become a 501(c)(3) organization. Participants who questioned the benefits of becoming a 501(c)(3) were concerned with the constraints of forming a corporation, registering with the state, and being accountable to the government. Others identified the problem as the direct (and negative) impact on the vitality of the organization.

An Atlanta participant commented, “I never heard of a 501(c)(3) until 1986... when we built [our organization], we built it on dues. You know, we paid for our own movement.” And another participant in Atlanta noted,

I think that most of us who have nonprofit status and are really about movement building...have to realize that a 501(c)(3) will allow you to do certain limited things...so I think we need to come to the table understanding what a 501(c)(3) organization is capable of doing.

In Denver, one participant observed that her most powerful movement experience was in a volunteer organization where one hundred fifty women and men ‘showed up’ each month. When the organization decided to become a nonprofit, everything changed.

The more structure that was placed on the group, the more people fell away because there was no place for them to engage in the direction or the meaning of the organization. No place for them to give of their talent and their passion.

One person at the Oakland meeting wondered if the 501(c)(3) dilemma was a self-fulfilling prophecy. She had been involved in an organization for thirteen years that recently incorporated, and she became a member of the board. Now, she explained, some

of the staff and long-time volunteers seem to feel, “okay, now that we have a board and they are going to raise the money and we’re going to sit back.” She worried that the group was going to lose its spirit.

A New York City participant talked about the impact of incorporation on a constituency-led organizing group.

We found our best, most militant, most politically aware, most mission-oriented leaders, when they moved to the board, and we became a 501(c)(3), then became involved in the intricacies of running a corporation. So one of the things we found was that the people who were leading the movement...were now involved in developing personnel policies, developing by-laws, looking at financial statements, transferring funds to a CD ... and were not involved in any kind of the fun, action, political pieces.

It was noted that some of the most powerful social change groups were not currently and had no plans to become nonprofit organizations. One person whose organization deliberately decided against incorporating explained they had considered becoming a 501(c)(3) to gain resources, “but we decided that no, that’s a barrier in itself...with that your hands are tied. You have this substructure within that just to get some work done and your time is taken by doing that and not doing the work.”

Others were less skeptical of incorporation as a nonprofit or warned of the hazards of getting caught in finding the ‘right’ organizational form. One participant argued the benefits of 501(c)(3) status, pointing out that in theory incorporation includes constituent accountability, offers different ways of capturing resources, and provides resources to ‘the movement.’ One participant noted that a 501(c)(3) was a contradiction for social change groups, but added that until we had the power to develop our own new structures, “one of the big organizational challenges is always how do you keep that consciousness around what it is and put it in some place but then don’t get sucked into it because it’s a huge distraction.”

## **The Role and Impact of the Boards of Directors and of Constituents**

### *Boards of Directors*

Participants in all regions valued and focused their work to include and be accountable to their constituents. This was achieved in different ways. As noted above, the process of incorporating and developing the organization often left the involvement of constituents ambiguous.

Many participants were in organizations where constituency involvement, power and leadership was through the Board of Directors or some similar leadership group. In Denver, one participant explained their board structure,

One of the ways that we’ve tried to make our structure reflect our goals and our mission is by having a board that is made up of people who are directly impacted by the issues that we work on. Not so much a fund raising board, or a board of people with a lot of name recognition.... And then we also really try to focus a lot on leadership development so that those are the people who are taking the lead.

But there is also a tension because leadership development can be a long term process.

A Boston participant had a similar experience,

We've actually done a lot of work on board stuff... Our membership is primarily low-income. Many folks have never been on a board and so being on a board is new to them. Understanding group dynamics as well as decision-making, responsibility of the board, takes time.

Many of those who worked in organizations with constituent boards noted the importance in having a staff committed to support this type of board structure. One of the Chicago participants worked in an organization that had been led by constituents for years. She worried that as the organization grew, the board knew less about the internal operations of the work. She wondered if the board would continue to transmit and insist on the current structure if there were a new executive director.

Most groups did not have boards that were primarily based in their constituents.

However, some had develop innovative models. An Oakland participant reported,

The Board of Directors structure doesn't quite fit our organization. We actually have a members' board...So in our effort to really empower the membership in the organization, we are trying to run as much as possible with the membership board operating as the leadership body. But, legally ...we have [three people who serve as] more hands off kind of board members ...who have been strategically and politically very helpful for our organization.

Boards were often sites of contention for people. In one organization in Knoxville, the Board would only wade into controversial issues when they were accepted by the mainstream. They often ignored instructions from their national parent organization.

When asked about whether the board members were constituents, this participant answered,

If you ask the board, they see themselves as the constituents. If you ask me, I see people who are, and it goes along with their mission, people who because of their race, because of their ethnicity or because of their color or because of their religion are not part of making America a better place for all of us.

Still, the staff person was committed to trying to turn the organization around to really stand for the values of social justice.

Another Knoxville participant talked about the need for better development of their board. He explained that the board had developed an anti-racist position, but would not deal with issues of sexism and homophobia because it would 'dilute' the issue of race. This participant thought the board was afraid of wading into these other issues because they made people uncomfortable. "The knee jerk reaction is to back away from the areas of conflict."

In Denver, one participant talked at length about how the board is a conservative force, often fearful of taking risks. Another participant in Denver admitted that he never

consulted his board, finding it easier and more effective to operate on his own. A Chicago participant admitted,

I'm the one making ninety percent of the decisions. And I don't want a board or a structure that's going to sit there and all of the sudden impose things. We basically feed our board, 'this is what we do, aren't we great, aren't we wonderful?' And they're like 'yeah, you are, and go out and do some more.'

### *Constituents*

Many participants noted different layers of constituent involvement such as leadership councils, hiring paid staff who either were constituents and/or who were part of 'the community, and involvement in different projects.

Frequently, the participants told stories both about the importance of constituency involvement and the difficulties organizations have in keeping reaching and including constituents. In Atlanta, one participant described why it was important to involve, rather than speak for, constituents.

What happens in small, southern counties, and I can speak from that perspective, is that very often people do not feel that they have adequate skills, knowledge or ability to confront the everyday wrongs that they see. It's not that they don't see them and it's not that they're not angry about them, but they are too intimidated to say, 'maybe I can do something about this.' Because they know in a small county, you're going to be bombarded by the powers that be... We try to make sure that the average person in the community could go to a Board of Education meeting and say anything I can say... They don't have to be [organization] members; they don't have to be board members.

A Chicago participant talked about how constituents in his organization were involved in all aspects of the work ranging from the board, to organizing, to writing the grants that funded the organization. He commented,

Our focus is on capacity building. We want to have an informed constituency, an educated, trained constituency ... [who] run effective campaigns, analyze issues critically, do the research effectively and know what the steps of organizing... Really involving youth in all levels of your organization is something hard to find, and it's also very hard to achieve. It's not like you have to get a perfect 'A' on it every time. You're always struggling with it.

In Knoxville, a participant described how organizations change when constituents become involved. His example was a white middle class environmental group that was mobilized by one its organizers when an incinerator was being placed in an African-American community. He explains,

Well, nobody wanted the incinerator, but the group didn't have a way to form alliances in the African-American community, and the African-American community was not organized around environmental issues... He [the organizer] made the leaders go out and talk to members of the African-American community. He pushed them into uncomfortable situations, and the group became

incredibly dynamic...as a result of that in terms of its vision and the evolution of their political understanding, and the types of issues they were willing to take on.

### **Race and Other Issues of Dominant Culture.**

In many of the meetings, race and racism became an important focus both in terms of building credible movements and understanding movements. People also described the negative impact of other 'majority culture' issues about gender, immigrant status, sexual identity and orientation, among others. In Denver, one African-American participant described how her community questioned her as a token [race representative]. She responded that all organizations are racist, and she chose this work because she saw the need for creating overall systemic change. Another Denver participant described the painful and productive process of redefining their majority white organization as anti-racist. A similar and less optimistic story was told in the Boston meeting where a participant relayed how the commitment to diversity in a majority white organization eventually tore it apart.

It was in the Knoxville and Atlanta meetings that race and its nuances were taken on more explicitly. For example, one participant in Knoxville reflected on the problems of movement building,

On the question of why the movement didn't get built, I think that the movement in this particular context, it was race, that the relationship shattered on the shoals of racism, that people did not want to recognize that they had racial privilege... I think in the South, if you don't face race, you don't build movement. And that's why it didn't happen and why it will never happen in this region if race isn't confronted and owned.

An Atlanta participant warned that progressive organizations were going to lose credibility with their communities because they try to diffuse real complaints, especially in communities of color.

You talk about the nature of terrorism. For people of color, acts of domestic terrorism occur every day; and they are being perpetrated by the government. They're perpetrated by the police department... [and if we don't call it like it is], I think at some point in time we're going to find ourselves on the outside of the movement... And if we, as movement-building organizations lose that foothold, then the individuals who act out are going to act out in the only way that they see as being likely to achieve results.

## **IV. General Observations on Movement and Organizations**

Participants in the regional meetings all worked in or with progressive social change organizations. Some identified their work as 'movement building.' Others referred less to 'the movement' but still defined their work as leading to greater systemic change. Several participants discussed movements in general and how organizations stimulate, support, or hinder movements. Questions were raised about the role of nonprofit groups

as movement organizations of the future. Participants also talked about their work with other organizations in efforts to create larger momentum for change.

### **Elements of a Movement**

There were participants in every meetings that referred to ‘the movement,’ of the 1960s and ‘70s, starting with the civil rights movement and extending in some cases to the anti-war, feminist, Chicano rights, black power, and gay liberation movements. Younger people referred to movement activity they were involved in such as AIDS activism or the anti-apartheid and divestment campaigns. However, these later efforts were not considered the same sort of touchstone for movement activity.

In most of the regional meetings – but not all -- the elements of movement building were discussed and sometimes contested. In Atlanta, one participant talked about movement building,

There was a period, I think, immediately after some wins happened in the ‘60s and ‘70s that there was a relaxing period in the activist community. I think that people really thought that we had won a significant piece, not realizing that you don’t rest when you win. You have to work even harder to keep it. And then being able to analyze whether or not the win that we thought we won was what we needed to win.... I really do think we can do that [expand our base] and that’s what building a movement in my mind, is about. It’s broadening that base, being more inclusive.

A Boston participant noted that his organization had a constituency/staff study group that considered the question of how to define a movement. They had decided that a movement was like water; it flowed and could go into all different directions, and was not centrally coordinated. A similar sentiment was expressed by a New York participant who explained movements as having disorganized, chaotic elements. Both of these participants as well as others emphasized the distinction between a movement and the organizations that support movement activity. Movements exist and extend beyond the bounds of the organizations designed to support them.

Most participants assumed or stated that right now there is not a progressive movement in this country. One younger participant commented that though he was trying to build a movement, “I don’t know what a movement looks like.” An activist from the 1960/70s described the current situation by claiming, “We are not moving forward or backward, we are vibrating in place.” Another person observed, “We are not in a time of movement. We have movement strategies but not a movement.”

Ironically, it was in the one meeting held after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, that one of the participant differed from the prevailing view in other meetings,

I see movement building as a process, and I think that at this moment where we are in the building of a movement ... I talk to a lot of people, and there’s just a lot of stuff going on in this country. I mean there’s more stuff than I could have imagined would be happening five years ago. And there’s a lot of pockets of

groups around the country talking about what it's going to take to build this movement.

In several of the meetings, there were discussions about what it would take to make 'a movement' or 'the movement' happen. Participants talked about the need for analysis and strategies. As one New York participant put it,

It seems important to have a notion about how change happens and an analysis....if you have an analysis, which may be right or may be wrong, at least then you can see how the pieces fit together and you can ask the question, 'is your organization advancing some piece of that strategy for change?' If you don't have an analysis that you share and agree upon, it seems to me the discussion becomes incoherent.

Several people brought up the importance of "one big issue to rally around," or more unity among different groups. One participant observed that the growing numbers of progressive organizations and an increase in funding organizing efforts had not produced the *feeling* of a movement among and between groups. Several people commented on the lack of connection between local, national and global efforts to create change, or between different issues.

A participant in New York expressed frustration that successful local organizing efforts lost momentum when there were no larger groups to link with on either a citywide, state or national level. Another hoped that a local movement building effort sponsored by IAF would be successful, but indicated they had a long way to go to really involve constituents. This concern was echoed in a discussion of basing movements in communities among constituents, rather than larger non-community based struggles such as the protests in Seattle. Still another participant talked about the enormous complexity of current issues making it harder to galvanize people. He posited, "We don't have this sort of injustice frame...that is broad scaled, that really goes across a number of social issues. I think that's part of what's lacking right now, the sort of contextual consciousness of society as a whole and where we are right now."

## **Challenges of Movement Building through Nonprofit Organizations**

### *Organizations*

There were varying views about the role of social change organizations in maintaining movement towards social and economic justice. Older participants were more likely to talk about social change nonprofits as groups that were built to help sustain movement building activities of the 1960s and 1970s. In Denver, one participant explained,

I think that we can't just put this analysis together without realizing that there were some very strong issues that united progressive movement during that initial stage: the war in Vietnam, the consciousness movements. There were really very strong things that unified a larger sector, and unless I'm completely out of the loop, that ain't happening.... So in lieu of that we have organizations that kind of tide us over to the next step and build what we lacked, what I would say as a veteran of the Chicano movement is, what we lacked was an infrastructure.

A Boston participant expressed a similar sentiment noting that movements happen because there are strong organizations. Another Boston participant agreed, pointing out that we need organizations with a strong base to move people. In New York, a participant stressed that organizations were a tool, a vehicle to do our work. This was echoed by an Oakland participant who observing that nonprofits are a tactic said, “right now it is useful to get us to another place. We need to be more conscious that it [nonprofit form] is not an end, it is a means.”

This was driven home by an observation in Knoxville,

One of the problems I think we’re dealing with in the South is that the civic, what was called the civil life, civic institutions a few years ago, what you’re talking about, involvement in public life, there are a lot of communities where it’s gone. It is dead. We have community groups that are doing service and organizing and advocacy and everything else because they are civic institutions in the community... And that is really a crisis in some counties...where there is no infrastructure...Right now, the nonprofit organizations are the stopgap organizations. If they fail, the community fails.

### *The Role of Nonprofits*

Questions about the role of organizations, especially nonprofits, were raised at many of the meetings, especially from younger people. They wondered if social change nonprofits were actually hindering movement activity. These participants were concerned with the problems that can ensue when nonprofits define themselves as *the* movement.

A New York based participant observed that the growth of the nonprofit sector over the past four decades is the result of the 1960s/70s movements. As time progressed, these organizations lost their edge. This observation also was made about AIDS activism where, one participant noted, the groups that developed out of the movement lost their movement building qualities.

An Oakland participant argued talked about her own experience.

When I first started doing this work, the emphasis in the early ‘90s ..., organizational building was the imperative. I mean it was like the main thing. You need to build strong organizations, all right? So when we talk about community organizing, it was always with the sight of you need to build strong organizations. And I think that started to unravel for me. So it was like well, organizations are really important but what are we actually building organizations for? So I know that organizers in other organizations have really started thinking about what would it take to have more transformative organizing?

In Knoxville, a participant put it this way,

For years and years I thought of 501(c)(3) corporations as the backbone of the movement, as the skeleton on which the movement was built. And just over the last few years, it’s totally turned around. It’s like 501(c)(3) organizations, we put them at the center, and they need to be placed in their particular, appropriate location in each community. And nowhere have I seen that’s the central location.

Many of those who attended the meetings outlined the structural issues with building and sustaining nonprofits which can divert those interested in social change from concentrating on building towards social and economic justice.

There was a question posed in New York, “whether or not the fact that we have all these nonprofit organizations can be leveraged in some strategic way to create either more active or new social movements?” One person responded, “I don’t want to use the nonprofit sector to leverage movement. I mean, I think there’s ways in which we should try and get as many of our nonprofits to think about themselves as a component of a movement and think about the ways in which we operate to actually help support movements. But the idea of getting this ‘sector’, which is an industry in my mind, to actually become a movement ... is partially false and I think it’s dangerous.”

### **Collaboration and Movement Building**

Participants in all of the meetings wondered if it was possible for social and economic justice organizations to work together in a more sustained way. Although some people thought there needed to be a common goal among different groups to build an social change movement, others simply stressed the need for more cross organization support and communication.

In Knoxville a participant commented on ,

I think what you can do is find like minds who are saying, there’s a whole group of people there who are African-American, who are Latino talking about, ‘we want to look at the commonality of issues and are there strategies we can use together because it looks like some of the issues are affecting our communities similarly.’ You know, that would be an initiative. It’s not a problem. And they don’t have to deal with the people who don’t think that’s a priority or don’t have the analysis or whatever.

A Boston participant described the first successful coalition effort she was involved in noting the three important components were (1) a common goal despite the wide variety of groups, (2) an understanding that it would be a long-term struggle but the process was one of building power, and (3) the lack of funding or formal structure prevented one organization owning the coalition. A different view was expressed by a New York City veteran of the 1960s. She noted that there was no consensus or formal collaboration between groups in the 1960s movements, but there was an ability to hold their beliefs in way that moved ‘the middle’ toward a more progressive stance. A participant from Boston observed, “I think also the other reason movements don’t exist as much today is because we’ve all been forced to replace movement with the word ‘collaboration’.

### **V. Funding**

Participants had several observations about funding, including those attending the Boston discussion who decided not to talk about funding or funders because they thought it would detract from the positive energy of the group. In general, participants talked about who was (and was not) funded and their issues with the funding community. In addition,

there were several comments about how organizations could be resourced by their constituents.

### **Funding Strategies**

The issue most commonly raised about funding was the lack of fit between social change organizations and funding sources. People obviously had found ways to adjust. One Chicago participant observed that funding was basically about understanding the rules of engagement. Another concurred, adding that social change groups had to learn how to fit into the funder's portfolio. He also pointed out how easy it was to obtain funds if you had the right connections politically. In a similar vein, a Denver attendee who had a less sanguine analysis found that funding in his community was basically "a hustle" where the process looks open but is really fixed in a way that those not in the know will not receive funds. He lamented that the result was very few truly constituency-based groups received support.

In New York, it was pointed out that nonprofits do a lot of work that is not funded. This prompted others to talk about the risk of losing funding for making strategic decisions that funders did not approve. Several people talked about having funding pulled based on actions or positions they had taken. One group lost its major funding source when it made a decision to keep to its vision and analysis and to engage in a director action which the funder disapproved. Another participant talked about the detrimental impact of funding on coalitions and collaborations, how the lure of money, "tears people apart." This point was viewed from a different perspective when a participant explained how difficult it is to build a real coalition at the same time your organization claims the credit in order to meet the requirements of funding sources. Other participants noted how movement organizations that receive larger amounts of funds – either from foundations or government -- substantially lose their edge as they become worried about maintaining resources.

Another view was offered by a Chicago participant, who explained how their organization operated on the belief that if they did something that was good, the money would follow. They had often turned down funds on principle but had also had unsolicited offers of funding. A Denver attendee reflected on the history and vision of his organization as it related to funding sources. He noted that the funding allowed people in the community to be paid for their work with other constituents. However, he pointed out, "we existed for seventeen years without any grants....We need to be willing to give it up for principle. This is an important value, to always be ready to go back, to be illegal, to rejuvenate. We built it and we can lose it...we don't have anything if we can't risk losing it."

In Chicago, a participant tried to summarize the 'weird' relationship between social change organizations and funders. She noted that wealthy people often gave funds or established foundations to alleviate social problems and *maintain* the status quo. Social

change groups want this same funding to challenge those with wealth and to *change* the status quo.

### **Constituency Funding**

From our discussions, it appeared that everyone who participated, even those in membership organizations, received funding outside of their constituency base. Several people raised the issue of self-sufficiency.

An Atlanta participant reflected on the impact funding needs have had on the organization,

[We] operated for several years totally on our own funding independently. We all had full-time jobs. We funded everything: attorney's fees, copying, office, all of that stuff. And we have . . . to go back and reflect and look at capacity building. We have looked very hard at how the nature of work has changed and the expenditure of our time and our efforts [have changed] once we began to seek outside funding. And raise the issue, are we less aggressive now than we were when we totally financially controlled and supported our own agenda? . . . And are there things that [we] would have done before that we won't do now because viewed by the funding world it may be a little over the top...The answer for us is that . . . we have to do, what we have to do. . . . And it's like being between a very big rock and a very hard place, because we can do the work a little easier because we're not having to kill ourselves. But the capacity to do the work, the level of work that we're doing is not what it used to be because so much of it goes into the fundraising piece.

One member of the Oakland discussion believed,

you have to foster the practice that honors the principle that you have to raise your financial resources from the people that you work with. I'm not suggesting that you don't take foundation money or government money, but you need to keep it in a healthy context – one that does not drive or determine what you are doing.

A Denver participant put it this way,

Fundraising can also be a way of organizing if we get our minds out of the grants. The more people that are buying into your organization, even if the person is giving \$1, it's another person who has the information and can show up when you need them to.

An attendee in Chicago challenged the concept of constituent resourced organizations, pointing out that, “we will never be self-sufficient just as our communities will never be self-sufficient.” In her organization, member organizations provide funds, but funding also comes from other large grants.

## **VI. Summary**

Did the conversations we had with social change organizations tell us anything new? The answer is yes and no. On the one hand, those working in progressive nonprofits will see these conversations as remarkably familiar. On the other, there are many areas that have been left unexamined, and still need to be addressed. And there is clearly a lack of in depth research and analysis on many of these issues. The question is what is important for us to pursue?

The participants noted their preferences for next steps. One person suggested the project go deeply into one issue. Others talked about the project continuing to convene groups to network, support each other, and reflect on their work. Another participant suggested bringing people together over a period of time to talk about strategy.

There were several suggestions that we offer alternative organizational structures either through profiling new models of movement building organizations, surveying groups about their structure, or developing new ideas through study groups or similar ongoing meetings.

Finally, participants requested access to results in a form that was easy to digest and that they could learn from. Written reports, though necessary, were less helpful to participants than other forms of learning including web-based information, presentations, conversations, and summary documents.