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OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

Youth and Community Organizing Today

ABOUT THE FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVE ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) is a collective of national, regional, and local foundations, and youth organizing practitioners whose mission is to: substantially increase the philanthropic investment in; and strengthen the organizational capacities of groups engaging young people in community organizing across the country.

The main goals of the FCYO are to:

- Increase the level of funding directed towards youth organizing groups;
- Support youth organizing groups to develop stable and sustainable organizations; and
- Increase the awareness and understanding of youth organizing among funders and community organizations.

For more information about the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, visit the FCYO web site at: <http://www.fcyo.org>.

ABOUT THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Occasional Papers Series was conceived and developed by a Committee of funders, intermediaries, and youth organizing practitioners, in conjunction with the FCYO. The Series is edited and published by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing. Series Committee members included:

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- Movement Strategy Center
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- Surdna Foundation
- Tides Foundation
- Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice

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Youth and Community Organizing Today

BY DANIEL HOSANG

no. 02

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SERIES PREFACE

In 1997, several foundations set out to explore the nascent field of youth organizing, an innovative and effective strategy combining the best practices of youth development with the tactics and strategies of community organizing. In 2000, these foundations and a handful of others launched the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, a formal effort to increase understanding of youth organizing, catalyze support, and strengthen the capacities of youth organizing groups.

This Occasional Papers Series is an important piece of our work. Because the field is relatively young—and because its practitioners may often operate beneath the radar of youth and community development stakeholders—potential allies and supporters have many unanswered questions. What is youth organizing and how does it work? Who leads youth organizing efforts? Can youth organizing really deliver youth development outcomes? Can it create sustainable social change?

These are all fair questions, and we try to tackle them throughout this series. The diversity of youth organizing is one of its chief strengths, and the series overall tries to embody that strength. Rather than trying to argue one approach to understanding youth organizing, the series puts forth multiple perspectives, which as a whole embrace the complexity, diversity, and nuance intrinsic to the field. Capturing this richness, we hope, is the series' principal contribution.

This first installment of the series includes three articles and an annotated bibliography. In "An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing," LISTEN, Inc., a training and support organization, tackles the basics of youth organizing—origins, concepts, models, principles, and practices.

In "Youth and Community Organizing Today," journalist Daniel HoSang traces the historical involvement of youth in social change efforts throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and examines how the current phenomenon of youth organizing shapes community issues and community organizing.

In "Youth Organizing: Expanding Possibilities for Youth Development," scholar-activist Shawn Ginwright looks at the nexus of youth development and youth organizing, tracing how youth organizing yields positive youth development and social change.

Although the papers reflect the different approaches, models, and variety of issues within youth organizing, they also reflect the common belief shared by all youth organizing efforts: that all young people have the inherent capacity to be active, contributing partners in their own individual development as well as in the development of their communities.

There are 60 million young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the United States today. And as we think about the development and role of youth in our society, it is worth remembering that young people grow up in communities, not just community and youth development programs. From this perspective, perhaps the most salient question is this: What would our communities and our society look like if the collective vision, leadership, energy and talents of even a small percentage of all young people were directed toward community transformation?

We hope this series begins to answer that question.

Vera Miao, Project Director
Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing
February 2003

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INTRODUCTION

When 17-year old Sadeelah Muhyee walked into an Oakland radio station for a field trip last fall, a slickly designed brochure promoting new low-cost youth bus passes called out to her from the station's lobby. "Our youth group made that happen," Muhyee told the middle-aged man guiding the station tour as she pointed to the newly printed brochure. "We organized to make them do it." Her skeptical host smiled politely and continued with the tour. "He definitely didn't believe me," Muhyee said later.

But for 33,000 low-income students on the east side of the San Francisco Bay, Muhyee's modest claim is no laughing matter. Muhyee and student leaders at the Oakland-based nonprofit Kids First! led a coalition that organized hundreds of students, parents, and elected officials in a year-long effort to persuade the regional transportation district to provide free bus passes for students who qualify for subsidized lunch programs. The district slashed fares for all other youth in half, and it is now aggressively promoting these reduced price monthly bus passes, which could reach an additional 70,000 students in the two-county area.

Muhyee joined Kids First!, a five-year-old citywide youth organizing and empowerment group, because she wanted to force policy-making adult bodies to take action on youth issues. "Public education is supposed to be free," Muhyee says. But she and many of her Oakland High School classmates were shelling out \$27 a month for a bus pass just to get to class. That's more than \$700 per year for a family with three students, and Muhyee said that by the end of the month, she saw more empty seats in class as families had to choose between groceries and bus fare.

Working from a modest second-story office overlooking the heart of a still struggling downtown Oakland, Kids First! organizers planned the myriad press conferences, petitions, and mobilizations to public meetings that ultimately forced the reluctant hand of transit officials. The final public meeting to decide the issue was scheduled at 10 AM on a school day. Undeterred, the students secured parental permission slips for hundreds of students from across the city, and even got several school

buses from a supportive school board member, to ensure the students would be heard.

Their victory is impressive on many counts. The students won a remarkable \$2 million annual outlay for the program in a period of fiscal belt-tightening. Not only are up to 100,000 students eligible for free or reduced passes in the 400 square-mile area, but the school district itself is anticipating hundreds of thousands of dollars in increased reimbursements from the state as a result of improved attendance. At a time when most school reform measures are focused entirely inside the classroom, the youth organizers made a persuasive argument that poverty recognizes no such boundaries—the pocket book can matter as much as the text book. Finally, the students taught and received an important lesson in collective power and expression. “We knew that they would only listen to us if we had numbers—and that’s what we did,” Muhyee said.

While the activist-friendly Bay Area has become a regional hotbed of youth organizing efforts, every part of the country, from Mississippi to Manhattan, has witnessed a flourishing of high-school age youth leading similar efforts. Their constituencies—immigrant youth, young women, incarcerated youth, church members—are as diverse as their approaches to affecting change. This paper explores the contours of youth organizing today by examining some of the major organizations, themes, and trends in this nascent field.

YOUTH AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE POSTWAR ERA

While the current iteration of youth organizing efforts—residing in formally incorporated nonprofits and supported by paid staff—has grown most dramatically in the last ten years, there is a rich postwar legacy of young people leading direct action social change projects. Four years before Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 March on Washington, civil rights leader Baynard Rustin (himself a product of the Young Communist League) led a youth march for integrated schools in the nation’s capitol. Soon after, teenage college students initiated the first successful challenges to lunch counter segregation. And in 1963, a thousand children as young as six years old emptied the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, singing freedom songs as they were blasted with fire hoses and attacked by police dogs. Hundreds spent the night in Bull Connor’s jail.

The faces of the leading anti-racist formations of the era such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers, Young Lords, and Brown Berets were the faces of youth. All of the notable U.S. social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—anti-war, feminist, gay rights, and free speech—drew their leadership and base from politically committed youth activists. This groundswell of youth protest led Congress to extend the franchise to 18-to-20 year olds in 1971, implicitly acknowledging that youth old enough to be drafted should not be barred from the voting booth.

Yet these formations rarely posed their demands as “youth” concerns per se, perhaps in spite of the era’s mantra to “never trust anyone over 30.” Their identities and issues as people of color, women, gays and lesbians, and war resisters framed their organizing claims. “Youth” as a ubiquitous political identity was still at least a decade away.

TARGETING THE SUPERPREDATOR YOUTH

Generational schisms, especially in the realm of cultural and social attitudes, can be observed across the twentieth century. The establishment of the day treated the ragtime music of the 1920s, rock and roll in the 1950s, and hip hop music more recently, with comparable derision. Yet in earlier years, save for a few local youth curfew ordinances, this latent disdain of an unfamiliar youth culture rarely made its way into public policy. Most youth and their families benefited from the general postwar commitments to public education, the provision of park and recreation services, and the development of a rehabilitation-oriented juvenile justice system, however unevenly these programs may have been implemented. By the early 1970s, child poverty rates stood at an historic low; cultural animus did not breed political exclusion.

But the conservative counterattack unleashed by Reagan's capture of the White House in 1980 would permanently alter this landscape. Homeowner-led tax revolts, originating in California in the late 1970s, eroded tax support for public schools and a host of publicly funded social programs that benefited low-income youth and their families. Most of the themes that sustained these policy shifts—the breakdown of the family, the primacy of personal responsibility over government intervention, the intergenerational “culture of poverty”—almost required an antagonistic stance towards youth raised outside the sanctity of white middle- and upper-class life. From this perspective, “youth” itself became a pejorative identity, emblematic of the failure of family, values, and nation.

Predictably then, while recreation centers and youth jobs programs shut their doors, racially charged stereotypes of “wilding” youth offenders and remorseless teen moms increasingly found their way into political speeches and evening news sound bytes. By the 1990s, any winning political script seemed to require some heavy-handed gesture towards young people—and black and brown youth in particular. Suggesting the offspring of the “failed family” had come home to roost, conservative academics warned that an upswing in the teenage population would spawn a wave of violent youth crime. Curfew laws and anti-gang taskforces proliferated. Clinton's 1994 crime bill allowed more juveniles to be tried as adults, and 41 states followed

suit with their own versions of this policy. A 1996 *Newsweek* headline story titled “Superpredators Arrive” posed the policy question of the day: “Should we cage the new breed of vicious kids?” From 1984 to 1997 the arrests of juveniles nationally jumped 30 percent. By 1998, polls showed that two-thirds of Americans believed youth under the age of 13 accused of murder should be tried as adults.

Meanwhile, nearly every state’s reformed welfare laws placed draconian restrictions on benefits to teen parents while mandating that schools adopt an “abstinence-first” approach to sex education. Parental consent laws limiting abortion access for young women proliferated. California voters attempted to block undocumented immigrant students from public school. Higher education costs soared while earnings for workers with no college degree declined. Liberal and conservative policymakers alike eagerly stripped the affirmative action and anti-discrimination protections that afforded young people of color limited opportunities in education and the marketplace.

Yet the apocalyptic prophecies proved wrong. Demography was not destiny for teen crime. As sociologist and author Mike Males points out, 60,000 fewer youths were arrested for homicide, rape, robbery and assault in 2001 than in 1994, despite a large increase in the teen population. According to the FBI, youths in 2001 accounted for just 5 percent of the nation’s homicides and 12 percent of violent crimes, both historic lows.

But the legacy of two decades of assaults on the opportunities and resources provided to young adults had left its mark. That “Schools Not Jails” and “No War on Youth” had become leading rallying cries at the end of the millennium reveals the depth of political, social, and cultural antagonism experienced by many youth. This hostility, most dramatic in poor urban and rural communities, arguably created the conditions for the emergence of “youth” as a *political identity*, a shared worldview that provided the basis for collective action.

Youth organizing, then, has arisen in many ways in response to the austere days of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton eras, both because of the assault launched against youth “citizenship” and because the federal government itself retreated from encouraging young people to become politically engaged in their communities. The War on Poverty dictum of “maximum feasible participation” of the poor was anathema to programs like Clinton’s AmeriCorps, which largely forbids its cadre of youth leaders from joining community organizing efforts. Like the first President Bush’s “Thousand Points of Light,” these programs promoted a politically indifferent volunteerism, encouraging youth participants to eschew issues like police brutality, toxic pollution, and educational discrimination in favor of community crime watches, neighborhood clean-ups, and after-school tutoring. The latter President Bush’s recent call to direct AmeriCorps members towards “Homeland Security” functions represents an Orwellian extension of the same principles.

YOUTH ORGANIZING TODAY

The rightward shift in the political environment did not altogether extinguish the voices of dissent among youth. Though media representations of Gen Xers depicted a politically apathetic careerist group, a new wave of activists were cutting their teeth on anti-apartheid fights, protests against the 1991 Gulf War, defending affirmative action, and advancing immigrant rights. Many of these organizers were of the first generation to come of age wholly outside of the shadow of the civil rights movement, and they turned their energies towards building youth-led organizing efforts that could stem the tide of attacks against oppressed youth, their families, and their communities. Harmony Goldberg, for example, organized against the University of California's efforts to dismantle affirmative action programs as a Berkeley student in the mid-1990s. While Ward Connerly's UC Regents prevailed in that dispute, Goldberg and her peers went on to develop the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL) to incubate, train, and develop youth organizing efforts across the country. "We wanted to find a way to support this incredible surge we saw in youth activism and leadership," she says.

By the mid-1990s, urban areas including New York City, Philadelphia, the Bay Area, Seattle, and Chicago witnessed the birth of nonprofit organizations or programs dedicated to expanding organizing and activism among youth. Notwithstanding the rich history of youth leadership in social change efforts, a definable "field" of youth organizing has only evolved in the last ten years. That is, only recently have these disparate efforts become formally incorporated as nonprofit entities with independent budgets, dedicated staff, and organizational infrastructures. While the nonprofit sector is by no means the exclusive outlet of youth activism and political participation (it generally excludes, for example, the critical work of thousands of college activists and much of the current anti-globalization organizing, as well as the intergenerational political projects within many Native American communities) the rise in incorporated youth organizing projects suggests a certain stability for this realm of work.

Even in this early stage, clear patterns and contours of the field of youth organizing are beginning to take shape, particularly with regards to **organizing models** and **issue emphasis**.

APPROACHES TO CHANGE: THREE LEADING MODELS

Though the definitions and boundaries of these models are permeable and shifting, most local youth-constituted organizing fall into one of three main categories: (1) **Independent Youth Organizations**, (2) **Independent Multi-Generational Organizations**, and (3) **Network-Affiliated Youth Organizing Projects**.

Independent Youth Organizations

When Eric Braxton founded the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) in 1995, efforts to reform the city's deeply troubled 215,000-student school system were led primarily by teachers, parents, and elected officials. Students themselves had few avenues to shape the policies and practices of the schools they knew intimately well. From its inception, PSU dedicated itself to creating a vehicle for student expression and power rooted in a chapter-based system in public high schools across the city. While PSU's alliances with the local teachers union and several adult-led organizing projects has made it a player in citywide and statewide public education debates, its core leadership comes from high school students who lead the organization's daily work.

PSU's organizing approach exemplifies a model of an independent (that is, unaffiliated with any national organizing network) youth organization, constituted entirely by youth members, and typically staffed by young adult leaders in their 20s or early 30s. Bronx-based Youth Force and Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, Sisters in Action for Power in Portland, the Center for Young Women's Development in San Francisco, and Youth Organizing Communities in Los Angeles typify this model. These organizations tend to focus primarily on issues that directly affect their youth members (i.e., youth bus passes, conditions in juvenile hall, sexual harassment of young women), though others, like Youth Ministries, address broader issues such as neighborhood environmental concerns. Their leadership boards are composed mostly, if not entirely, of youth representatives. While all of the groups work regularly with adult allies both within and outside the organization, their populist commitment towards youth ownership of the group is unmistakable.

Independent Multi-Generational Organizations

In the heart of the Mississippi Delta in an unassuming two-room office off the county's main thoroughfare, middle school and high school students sit side-by-side

with adult activists of all ages to address the grave conditions in the town's deeply segregated public school system. The Indianola Parent Student Group, like many of its sister organizations affiliated with Jackson-based Southern Echo, has built an intergenerational constituency to address issues such as corporal punishment in the classroom and racial disparities in the funding of school districts across the state. While young people play central roles in organizing campaigns to address these issues, parents also participate in the organization's trainings and actions. Meetings intentionally cultivate an intergenerational exchange that allows youth and adults alike to learn from one another's ideas and experiences.

Similarly, in the hardscrabble streets of the north Bronx, Southeast Asian teenage members of CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities organize to demand bilingual interpretation services for the local welfare offices that serve their parents. For organizations based in immigrant communities such as CAAAV, bilingual youth often help their monolingual parents navigate the intricacies of indifferent, and sometimes hostile, public and private institutions. While CAAAV youth may meet separately in planning meetings, or through the organization's leadership development program, their organizing agenda is driven by intergenerational concerns. CAAAV organizers assert that young people, largely outside the demands of the full-time labor market, are well positioned to respond to the issues affecting their broader communities. Oakland-based Asian Immigrant Workers Advocates (AIWA), the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) in Albuquerque, and Farmworkers Self-Help, based in rural South Florida, operate within a similar framework.

A third variation of this model can be witnessed among the teaming maze of homeless shelters and transitional housing programs across Ohio's urban centers. Three years ago, homeless teenagers began meeting in the offices of the state's leading housing advocacy group, the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio (COHHIO). Today COHHIO's Youth Empowerment Program, which boasts chapters in six cities, helped pass the state's first law guaranteeing homeless students access to public education. Like similarly constituted groups, COHHIO youth regularly consults the organization's adult leaders and members but do the bulk of their work within a youth-only setting.

Network-Affiliated Youth Organizing Projects

In 1999, hundreds of Boston students celebrated a long overdue commitment from the Superintendent of Schools to regularly maintain and inspect the dismal bathrooms in many district high schools. Two years later, the students and their adult allies won a \$2 million state commitment towards purchasing new text books in these same schools.

Most established youth groups focus on multiple issues, and a surprising number take up concerns that affect their communities as a whole rather than young people in particular.

At the fore of these efforts was the student-led Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP), a citywide formation affiliated with the church-based Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO). GBIO organizers are trained and supported by the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national network of community organizing projects rooted primarily in faith-based organizations. BYOP can draw on the skills and experience of veteran community organizers while building a youth-led group that is more responsive to student needs.

Other national organizing networks, such as the California-based Pacific Institute for Community Organizations (PICO) and the more loosely affiliated National Training and Information Center (NTIC) in Chicago, have supported similar efforts among their local partners.

Among the fastest growing sectors of youth organizing, these projects have also taken root in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Wichita, Richmond (CA), Des Moines, and the Bronx.

ORGANIZING ISSUES

None of the approaches to social change (and their many variations) described above can be pegged to a particular issue. Most established youth groups focus on multiple issues, and a surprising number take up concerns that affect their communities as a whole rather than young people in particular. Because a comprehensive review of every issue area in this burgeoning field would be unwieldy, this section will discuss three seminal areas: (1) **Public Education**, (2) **Criminal Justice**, and (3) **Environmental Justice**.

Youth groups have fashioned many different frames and emphases within each of these issue areas. For example, a growing number of organizations led by young women advance a gender framework in analyzing issues such as police conduct and juvenile justice. Organizations addressing homophobia and the rights of queer youth take up issues within public education and criminal justice and other areas. Immigrant rights and racial justice organizations work in almost every issue area. Yet at the same time, the political identities of many youth activists are multivalent. That is, a queer immigrant youth activist may be just as concerned about environmental justice or education issues as any other. The categories that follow are only one possible way of describing the many issues that groups ultimately address.

Public Education

While the precarious state of public education in many communities is well documented, the diverse response of youth activists to these conditions is less clearly

understood. In Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, the Mississippi Delta, and many other communities, youth-led organizations are now a permanent fixture within the landscape of school reform, where they have formed formidable alliances with parents and teachers.

Two particular features of education organizing led by students are worth noting. First, in most cities, youth-led education reform campaigns have assumed the most progressive positions against punitive and discriminatory school policies. Youth with the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFE) have addressed racial disparities in South Carolina schools, including punishment and funding issues, through an intergenerational model. The statewide Gay Straight Alliance Network (GSAN) in California recently won landmark anti-gay non-discrimination legislation and created organizing kits to ensure the policies would be enforced in schools across the state. Citizens for Quality Education (CQE) joined other groups across Mississippi in exposing racial bias in the state's education system. Students with the Southwest Youth Collaborative's project, Generation Y, have wrestled with Chicago school administrators to change zero-tolerance suspension policies and encourage the use of peer-based dispute resolution systems. Across California, immigrant student organizers helped lobby for the passage of a groundbreaking bill that will permit undocumented students to pay in-state tuition in the state's public universities.

Second, youth-led education organizing often emphasizes small-scale, school-based reforms that can lay the groundwork for larger institutional change. For example, for years, at Denver's Westside High School, 1,700 students crowded into the school's cafeteria during a single 40-minute lunch period. As a closed campus, Westside prevented students from leaving campus for lunch, triggering a mad rush for the cafeteria's 350 seats. Many harried students simply skipped lunch all-together.

A three-year long organizing campaign led by students—and involving parents, local community-based organizations, and supportive teachers—led to the policy's reversal in the spring of 2002. “The issue was really important to many of the youth and helped us build the organization,” says Soyun Park, co-director of the Colorado Progressive Coalition (CPC), which sponsors the student group. Students 4 Justice now collaborates with other progressive school reform groups on city-wide policy issues.

Successful efforts by Californians for Justice (CFJ) in Long Beach and San Jose to win cleaner bathrooms and get quicker access to transcripts have had a similar effect. Today, CFJ is leading a broad statewide coalition against the state's high school exit exam.

Youth-led education organizing often emphasizes small-scale, school-based reforms that can lay the groundwork for larger institutional change.

“We balance the smaller issues with a focus on the big picture,” says Long Beach organizer Yvonne Paul.

Criminal Justice

If regressive juvenile justice policy became the primary articulation of punitive anti-youth political culture in the 1980s and 1990s, today, progressive youth organizing has become the moral voice urging a radical correction to this system. In the South Bronx, organizers from Youth Force organized inside the Spofford Detention Center to win significant changes in the juvenile center’s operating practices. The Center for Young Women’s Development created the Sistas for Change Organizing Project to provide organizing and leadership training and cultural programs for young women in San Francisco’s juvenile detention centers.

When California voters passed Proposition 21 in 2000, further eroding the juvenile justice system’s focus on rehabilitation in favor of punishment, it unleashed a wave of new youth-based organizing. The anti-Prop 21 coalition in the East Bay quickly regrouped to block the building of a youth “Superjail” in Alameda County. A California statewide Schools Not Jails coalition now draws hundreds of youth to its annual “Upset the Setup” gathering and supports local organizing across the state.

Youth-led organizing around criminal justice is not limited to incarceration issues alone. Youth members of Youth of Oakland United regularly participate in the police accountability actions of its adult-based affiliate, People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO). Sista II Sista, a Brooklyn-based youth organizing collective, has begun addressing violence against young women of color in the Bushwick and Williamsburg neighborhoods, including police harassment. And FIERCE, a recently established organizing project for gay and lesbian youth, has focused on police harassment of queer youth in Manhattan’s West Village.

Environmental Justice

Along the north shore of the San Francisco Bay in Richmond, where low income neighborhoods sit precariously in the shadows of towering oil refineries and at least 350 industrial sites and toxic hazards, a team of young Laotian women helped develop one of the area’s most successful environmental justice organizing campaigns in recent memory. Following a string of explosions and leaks at the refineries, the intergenerational Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) demanded county officials adopt a multi-lingual phone-alert early-warning system to protect the city’s growing Southeast Asian and Latino communities from future refinery debacles. The group, sponsored by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), has also developed

a “toxic tour” to raise the awareness of policymakers, the media, and neighborhood residents about the dangers posed by the refineries. “Youth know their communities as well as anyone else,” says APEN’s Ikuko Sato. “They have a deep sense of place, and are often intensely curious about their own neighborhoods, so environmental justice issues are a natural area of concern.”

Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice in the Bronx, Youth United for Community Action in East Palo Alto, California, Communities for a Better Environment in Los Angeles, Brooklyn-based UPROSE, and Alternatives for Community and Environment’s Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project in Boston have all played key roles in successful community-wide environmental justice organizing efforts. Unlike the ubiquitous environmental clubs typical to many high schools, these organizations address the intersections of race, economics, and geography as they grapple with the siting of waste transfer stations, the routes of diesel trucks, and soaring asthma rates in their communities. Like the rest of the environmental justice movement, they define “environment” broadly—where one lives, works, and plays—so that other concerns, such as the proliferation of liquor stores or dangerous parks or intersections, also become environmental issues.

The maturation of youth-led environmental justice projects was dramatized during the October, 2002 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., when youth activists publicly demanded more meaningful inclusion in setting the field’s agenda. Compared to the low profile of youth at the first Summit in 1991, this gathering revealed that youth environmental justice activists—with a track record of research, analysis, organizing and advocacy of their own—had to be centrally included in future plans and decisions.

TOWARDS A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK

Though disparate in geography, form, constituency—and even vision—there are a set of unifying elements within the field of youth organizing worth exploring. Despite youth organizing’s relatively short tenure as a field, youth organizers are developing a loose set of shared practices and a conceptual vocabulary unique to the field. Three of these common characteristics are explored below.

An Integrated Approach to Social Change

First, many youth organizing groups have developed an integrated approach to social change, often combining issue-based organizing with leadership development programs, service learning activities, cultural enrichment programs, and even academic and personal support components. In comparison to adult-based community organizing

Youth groups have crafted a more holistic approach to social change that addresses the many issues young members face.

groups that typically focus on policy outcomes and the organizing skills of its constituents, youth groups have crafted a more holistic approach to social change that addresses the many issues young members face. At COHHIO, the Youth Empowerment Program's Angela Lariviere explains that for the homeless youth she organizes, community service projects are a natural compliment to the organizing work. "Organizing campaigns can often take a long time to develop and to see tangible results. Not every youth will stay with us long enough to see these accomplishments. The community service work we do provides immediate gratification and positive reinforcement in helping us to sustain our work."

Kids First! organizer Jermaine Ashley helped many of the youth activists who led the successful bus pass campaign produce and record a hip-hop CD. The group rehearses regularly and has started performing at Bay Area political events. Ashley says this project "keeps the youth interested in the organization for the long-run." Adult organizing projects, which face the constant challenge of transitioning activists from a particular campaign into the membership and leadership of the organization as a whole, may find this integrated approach instructive. "The campaign may bring them here," says Ashley, "but the culture of our organization will make them stay."

Youth Organizing Communities (YOC), which has led successful campaigns to expel the Junior ROTC from East Los Angeles public schools and create Ethnic Studies courses, created an Academic Service Coordinator position to develop individual "empowerment plans" that ensure youth leaders maintain their grades and get the support they need. YOC's Luis Sanchez says the emphasis on the development of healthy individuals beyond organizing campaigns benefits youth leaders and the organization alike. Many continue on to college—a route strongly supported by the group—and also assume staff positions with the organization. In regions like the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York City, young activists developed by youth organizing programs are assuming positions with a range of community and labor organizing groups and nonprofits. This pipeline function will undoubtedly continue to expand.

Valuing Political Education

A second common thread within otherwise disparate youth organizing efforts is the primary role often placed on the political education of youth leaders and members. SOUL's Goldberg, who has led dozens of "Capitalism 101" trainings for youth groups around the country, explains that many youth organizations see this work as one of

the central imperatives of the organization. “They want to foster critical and reflective thinking and consciousness. It’s core to their mission.”

Indeed, carefully designed discussions and workshops that develop the analytic acumen of youth leaders are central to the training programs developed by the majority of youth organizing projects. Groups like SOUL, Youth United for Community Action, and others have published detailed curricula replete with role plays, popular theater, and other participant-driven methods to help groups understand issues from neo-colonialism to violence against women.

By contrast, the organizing tradition favored by many community organizing networks in the United States (and often credited to organizer Saul Alinsky) is decidedly non-ideological, preferring to wrestle with the nuances of specific local issues rather than risking potentially divisive engagements with the broader questions of racism, sexism, or homophobia. “We just think defining and addressing structures of racism is fundamental to our work in the public high schools,” says CPC’s Park. “You can’t talk about lousy textbooks or run-down classrooms without talking about racism.”

The Central Role of Staff Organizers

A final shared condition among many youth organizations is an unusually heavy reliance on the talents and commitment of a core group of staff members—many of whom are in their 20s or early 30s—who can successfully balance roles as mentors, political strategists, trainers, and fundraisers. “When you start a project like this,” says Kids First! organizer Julie Iny, “you have to be able to do everything yourself—the bookkeeping, the program design, recruitment, everything. You’re meeting with a funder in the morning, picking up youth from school in the afternoon, and helping to write a press release at night.”

Adult-based labor and community organizing groups benefit from ample cross-fertilization as experienced organizers from one group assume equivalent positions in another. Yet because of the relatively short lifespan of most youth organizing groups, no similar pool of experienced, job-tested youth organizers exists. According to SOUL’s Goldberg, “Many youth organizers have to find solutions to the problems they face on the go. You just have to be willing to learn and be prepared to make your share of mistakes.”

Not surprisingly, the founding leaders of most of the established youth organizing groups still lead these same organizations today. Only a handful has transitioned to a second generation of leadership. One veteran youth organizer who founded her organization five years ago confessed that she is anxious about prospects for finding a replacement. “I’ve really decided that we’re going to have to develop someone from within the organization. There just aren’t enough people out there.”

THE ROAD AHEAD

Fully Integrating Youth Development and Social Change Approaches

Youth organizing projects also face a bevy of political and organizational challenges in the coming years. While most youth organizing groups have developed “hybrid” models that integrate campaign organizing with other programmatic forms (e.g. art and cultural work and skills-based trainings), many still struggle to support their members in coping with life’s day-to-day pressures. Among youth groups that have grown out of service and advocacy organizations, such as Farmworkers Self-Help in South Florida, counseling, academic support, and cultural enrichment for youth members complement organizing efforts. Likewise, the Community Coalition in Los Angeles retains social workers on staff to support the diverse needs of the youth membership of South Central Youth Empowered through Action. But groups like these are the exceptions, and many staff organizers must play an integral role in the support systems of youth members. “That’s half my job,” says the CPC’s Park, who helps her youth leaders navigate through family crisis, health concerns, and classroom challenges.

Yvonne Paul completed her training as a social worker before becoming lead organizer with CFJ in Long Beach. She says the resources from foundations which support counseling and other services in more traditional settings could go a long way in youth organizing groups like hers. “There’s a tremendous need and we can’t do everything,” she says. Paul argues that organizing groups would benefit from funding streams or collaborations that would allow them to offer such support.

Replicable Campaign Models

Because the majority of youth organizing groups are locally based and unaffiliated with any national training or support networks, another challenge they face is a lack of access to replicable campaign models. Adult-based community and labor organizing networks recognize the tremendous costs and resources required to develop effective policy responses to complex political issues. Every local organization may not have the research and policy development capacity or tactical experience necessary to devise

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full-scale campaigns. By intentionally identifying and developing issues and campaigns that can be replicated in communities across the country, these networks prevent each local affiliate or member organization from having to reinvent the wheel on their own. One of the reasons that living wage campaigns have proliferated nationally is the ease with which a local community or labor organizing group can import the initiative with only modest revisions.

Lacking such an infrastructure, youth organizing groups may have to repeatedly craft their own solutions to the same sets of issues that other groups have previously addressed. One funder of youth organizing groups reports that she recently handled grant requests from four organizations in different parts of the country all working on school bus pass issues. Apparently, however, the groups had never communicated with each other.

In this respect, youth organizing intermediaries may play a critical role. These training institutions tend to be regional or national in scope and provide organizing skills training, campaign workshops, and political education. SOUL's Goldberg says that even when her organization provides organizing trainings to youth groups, they may still lack the capacity to launch full-fledged organizing campaigns. "It can be a difficult process filled with unpredictability," she explains. "It's very hard to start everything from scratch." Other national and regional intermediaries such as the Movement Strategy Center, LISTEN, Inc., Highlander Center, Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network, and Youth Action have developed networking and training programs to support youth organizing groups.

Forging Strategic Collaborations

The concrete policy victories secured by youth groups in the last ten years have mostly been limited to small-scale reforms around single issues. Cleaner bathrooms, new textbooks, free bus passes and the like are meaningful and tangible improvements, but most organizers hold these reforms to be short-term measures within a larger process of institutional transformation. "It's one of big challenges facing youth organizing groups," says Jeremy Lahoud of the Southwest Youth Collaborative in Chicago. Lahoud's group attempts to strike a balance between entering such partnerships—which he says can be politically powerful—with "creating a space for youth to develop their own organization, space, staffing and decision-making."

Adult-led community organizing groups have forged strategic collaborations among public policy, media advocacy, labor unions, and progressive legislators to ratchet

up their capacity. For example, new efforts towards immigrant legalization, death penalty moratoria, and the curtailment of predatory lending practices have all drawn on such broad alliances. Notwithstanding the dangers of being overrun in these collaborations, youth organizing groups could clearly stand to gain from the added clout they often yield.

Californians for Justice, for example, is partnering with the Movement Strategy Center and researchers at UCLA's School of Education in its youth-led campaign against high-stakes testing. Alliance building is a central part of this strategy. The Philadelphia Students Union partnership with the local teachers union has helped make the organization a key player in recent efforts to fend off school privatization. Meanwhile, intermediaries like the Oakland-based DataCenter are increasingly putting their sophisticated research capacities at the service of youth organizing groups.

Negotiating Adult Respect

Certainly, one of the most significant challenges facing youth organizing initiatives comes not from adults who populate the decision-making positions within progressive social change organizations and foundations. Psychologists and other social scientists often refer to adolescence as a rehearsal of sorts, a “not quite” transitory period between the unqualified dependency of childhood and the full charge of adulthood. A natural temptation exists to assess youth organizing efforts from this same vantage point—a “not quite” dry run in anticipation of a more bona fide effort to build “real” power as adults. Youth organizing projects are then either uncritically valorized and boosted without serious engagement or all together dismissed as marginal and non-strategic. Adults may feel that youth members add “spirit” and “vitality” to actions and meetings, but do not expect them to do the heavy lifting of lobbying, advocacy, and turnout crucial to sustaining social change projects.

But when 13-year-olds stand before adult courts, when bilingual teenagers must act as surrogate welfare advocates for their parents, and when young women and gay and lesbian students face endemic verbal and physical harassment in their schools and communities, the rehearsal has ended. Youth activists and leaders, like their adult counterparts, do not have all the solutions to the complex forces of oppression they face, and their opinions and experiences are filled with similar contradictions and idiosyncrasies. But many young people are bearing an enormous share of the burdens enacted by the race, class and gender polarizations shaping the present national and global condition. If youth are to shoulder this load, they must be embraced in the struggle to define a new progressive order.

Moreover, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that gave birth to many of the contemporary adult organizing networks have far more in common with youth-

led organizations today than their adult counterparts. Youth are articulating a new vision of feminism within low-income communities of color, redefining queer politics, forging intentional multiracial partnerships, and taking demands for immigrant rights beyond the workplace and into the community. In many of the anti-militarist demonstrations since September 11, youth groups assumed a high profile; no one scanning the legions of protestors would presume a deep apathy existed among young people today. Youth groups typically occupy the most progressive positions on education, criminal justice, environmental justice and the many other issues they confront.

In the next few years, the founders and early leadership of many youth organizing groups will set out for new opportunities and experiences. A resourceful lot, this first generation leadership will surely attend to the myriad hazards that organizations face during such transitions. But the active engagement and support of funders, social change intermediaries, and the broader organizing community will be critical for the field to sustain its current growth. If the last decade has revealed the central role youth can play in the expansion of democracy and justice, the next decade may permanently affix youth-led organizing projects within the landscape of U.S.-based social change.

RESOURCES

For more information about the organizations mentioned in this paper, contact:

Alternatives for Community and Environment

2343 Washington Street, 2nd Fl
Roxbury, MA 02119
617-442-3343
www.ace-ej.org

Asian Immigrant Workers Advocates

310 8th Street #301
Oakland, CA 94607
510-268-0192
www.aiwa.org

Asian Pacific Environmental Network

310 8th Street, Suite 309
Oakland, CA 94607
510-834-8920
www.apen4ej.org

Boston-area Youth Organizing Project

485 Columbus Avenue
Boston, MA 02118
617-262-1895
www.byop.org

CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities

2473 Valentine Avenue
Bronx, NY 10458
718-220-7391
www.caaav.org

Californians for Justice

1611 Telegraph Ave #317
Oakland, CA 94612
510-452-2728
www.caljustice.org

Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment

1 Chick Springs Road, Suite 110B
Greenville, SC 29609
864-235-2926
www.cafesc.org

Center for Young Women's Development

1550 Bryant Street, Suite 700
San Francisco, CA 94103
415-703-8800
www.cywd.org

Citizens for Quality Education

109 Swinney Lane
Lexington, MS 39095
662-834-0080

Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio

35 East Gay Street , Suite 210
Columbus, OH 43215-3138
614-280-1984
www.cohhio.org

Colorado Progressive Coalition

1420 Ogden Street, 1st Floor
Denver, CO 80218
www.progressivecoalition.org

Communities for a Better Environment

1611 Telegraph Avenue, Suite 450
Oakland, CA 94612
510-302-0430
www.cbecal.org

The Community Coalition

8101 S. Vermont Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90044
(323) 750 9087
www.ccsapt.org

DataCenter

1904 Franklin Street, Suite 900
Oakland, CA 94612
510-835-4692

Farmworkers Self-Help

37240 Lock Street
Dade City, FL 33523
352-567-1744

FIERCE

437 West 16th St.
NYC, NY 10011
646-336-6789

Gay Straight Alliance Network

160 14th Street
San Francisco, CA 94103
415-552-4229
www.gsanetwork.org

Highlander Research and Education Center

1959 Highlander Way
New Market, TN 37820
865-933-3443
www.hrec.org

Indianola Parent Student Group

103 Curtis Street
Indianola, MS 38751
662-887-4232

Kids First!

1625 Broadway
Oakland, CA 94612
510-452-2043
www.kidsfirstoakland.org

LISTEN, Inc.

1436 U Street NW, Suite 201
Washington, DC 20009
202-483-4494
www.lisn.org

Movement Strategy Center

1611 Telegraph Avenue, Suite 510
Oakland, CA 94612
510-444-0640
www.movementstrategy.org

National Training and Information Center

810 North Milwaukee Avenue
Chicago, IL 60622
312-243-3035
www.ntic-us.org

People United for a Better Oakland

1920 Park Street
Oakland, CA 94606
510-451-2010
www.pueblounited.org

Philadelphia Students Union

1315 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
215-546-3290
www.phillystudentunion.org

School of Unity and Liberation

1357 5th Street
Oakland, CA 94607
510-451-5466
www.youthec.org

Sista II Sista

89 St. Nicholas Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11237
718-366-2450
www.sistaisista.org

Sisters in Action for Power

1732 NE Alberta
Portland, OR 97211
503-331-1244

Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network

PO Box 240
Durham, NC 27702
919-683-4310
www.rejn.org

Southern Echo

PO Box 2450
Jackson, MS 39225
601-352-1500

Southwest Organizing Project

211 10th Street NW
Albuquerque, NM 87102
505-247-8832
www.swop.net

Southwest Youth Collaborative

6400 S Kedzie
Chicago, IL 60629
773-476-3534
www.swyc.org

UPROSE

166A 22nd Street
Brooklyn, NY 11232
718-492-9307

Youth Action

PO Box 12372
Albuquerque, NM 87195
505-873-3345
www.youthaction.net

Youth Force

320 Jackson Ave.
Bronx, NY 10454
718-665-4268
www.youthforcenyc.org

Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice

1384 Stratford Avenue
Bronx, NY 10472
718-328-5622

Youth Organizing Communities

2811 Whittier Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90023
323-780-7606
www.schoolsnotjails.com

Youth United for Community Action

1836 C Bay Road
East Palo Alto, CA 94303
650-322-9165

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