

Transforming Learning Projects to Center Organizers' Ways of Knowing

| Project Background

We are living through a watershed time of crisis and change in the United States as we face the continued threats of a global pandemic and climate change, economic distress and rising poverty, polarized politics, and racial violence and injustice. These challenges require solutions that produce long-term and sustainable change, grounded in the needs and imaginations of directly impacted individuals and communities.

Community organizing has always been at the nexus of crisis and change, bringing together individuals and communities for powerful collective action. Community organizers reweave the fabric of our society by building the leadership and power of communities most impacted by injustice and inequity to become powerful public actors. Community organizing strengthens power-building and grounds solutions and action in the interests, wisdom, and experience of the people who stand the most to gain from structural change.

Learning is a fundamental part of organizing. Organizers are adept learners. They regularly engage in individual and collective reflection to identify what is working, what is not, and how they can shift their strategies to accomplish their goals and adapt to changing conditions and opportunities. Experiential learning, storytelling, and a strong oral tradition are often core to how organizers learn. These practices support organizers to be nimble while remaining grounded in the democratic and relational foundations of organizing.

Organizing has garnered increased attention and investment from funders. Along with that investment has come more funder-initiated learning and evaluation projects motivated by a desire to add value to organizing groups and support organizers' learning.

Organizers' learning practices tend to diverge from the dominant approaches in the evaluation and philanthropic sectors that tend to emphasize objectivity and scientific evidence. The disconnect between foundation and organizer learning practices coupled with the inherent power imbalance between funders and organizers, often forces organizers to adapt to funders' learning and evaluation priorities and practices.

| Project Purpose

This field-building project, hosted by Grassroots Solutions and funded by The California Endowment, seeks to bridge the divide between organizer and funder learning practices and support funders, researchers, and evaluators to better orient their learning partnerships to the interests and practices of organizers. The core objective of the Organizer Learning Project is to facilitate a process that deepens what we know about organizer learning practices and reimagines how funders and evaluators engage with

organizers on learning projects. We are guided by a central learning question: *If funders and evaluators centered the learning practices and interests of community organizers, how would that change their approach to learning projects and partnerships with organizers?*

| Project Phases



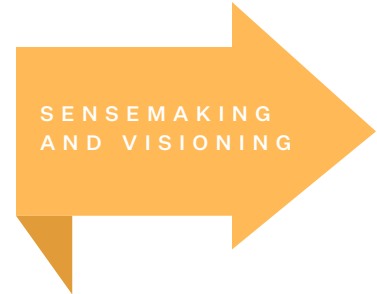
Feb – Apr 2023

Clarify project purpose and develop questions, assumptions, values, beneficiaries, power-holders, and workplan.



Apr – Oct 2023

Gather information about organizers' learning through conversations with small groups of organizers, mapping organizer learning spaces, and reviewing supporting documentation.



Nov 2023 – May 2024

Engage a mix of organizers, funders, and evaluators in half-day virtual sensemaking and visioning workshops to make meaning out of the information we have gathered and discuss the implications for learning partnership and projects with organizers.

| Project Team

The Organizer Learning Project is a project of [Grassroots Solutions](#), an engagement strategy and evaluation consulting firm that is committed to building healthy, just, and equitable communities. We are a diverse team of leaders who come from wide-ranging backgrounds in policy, campaigns, organizing, and philanthropy.



KATIE FOX



GIGI BARSOUM



MARGARET POST

The project is led by three evaluators and researchers: **Katie Fox** of Grassroots Solutions, **Gigi Barsoum** of Barsoum Policy Consulting, and **Margaret Post** of Clark University. We are long-standing collaborators and thought partners on the evaluation of power building and community organizing. We bring a shared commitment to creating a process that is useful, emergent, grounded in relationships, and holds the experience and expertise of organizers at the center.

For more information about the project, please reach out to katie@grassrootssolutions.com.