Feature

Philanthropic Investment in People Power

By Frank Farrow, Hanh Cao Yu & Robert Ross

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The California Endowment is spearheading renewed interest in an approach that supports communities to be the architects of their own equity efforts.

Foundations have invested in improving the health and well-being of low-income communities for decades. Their approaches have ranged from reforming services available to residents to advocating for change in the policies and public systems that affect community life. While these efforts have been modestly successful, few have yielded transformative community change. In the face of widening economic inequality and continued racial injustice, foundation and community leaders alike are searching for more powerful strategies to reshape the conditions necessary for low-income communities to thrive.

One such strategy through which philanthropic investment can catalyze more durable and meaningful change is power building: investments that enable communities to advocate successfully for their needs and priorities and claim seats at the table for policymaking and governance to secure more equitable policy outcomes. Power building can take various forms, from grassroots organizing to build communities' collective agency and develop youth leadership to alliance building to advance policy reform. Underlying these tactics is a long-term capacity-building strategy for leaders, organizations, and networks to increase the power of low-income populations and communities.

Power building is not a new investment approach, but commitment to it has been episodic and, at times, ambivalent. National foundations have invested in community organizing as part of multisite community-change initiatives, but they have rarely made these efforts central to their aims. Rather, they have adopted them as ancillary agenda items prompted by community interest. Only a few foundations—among
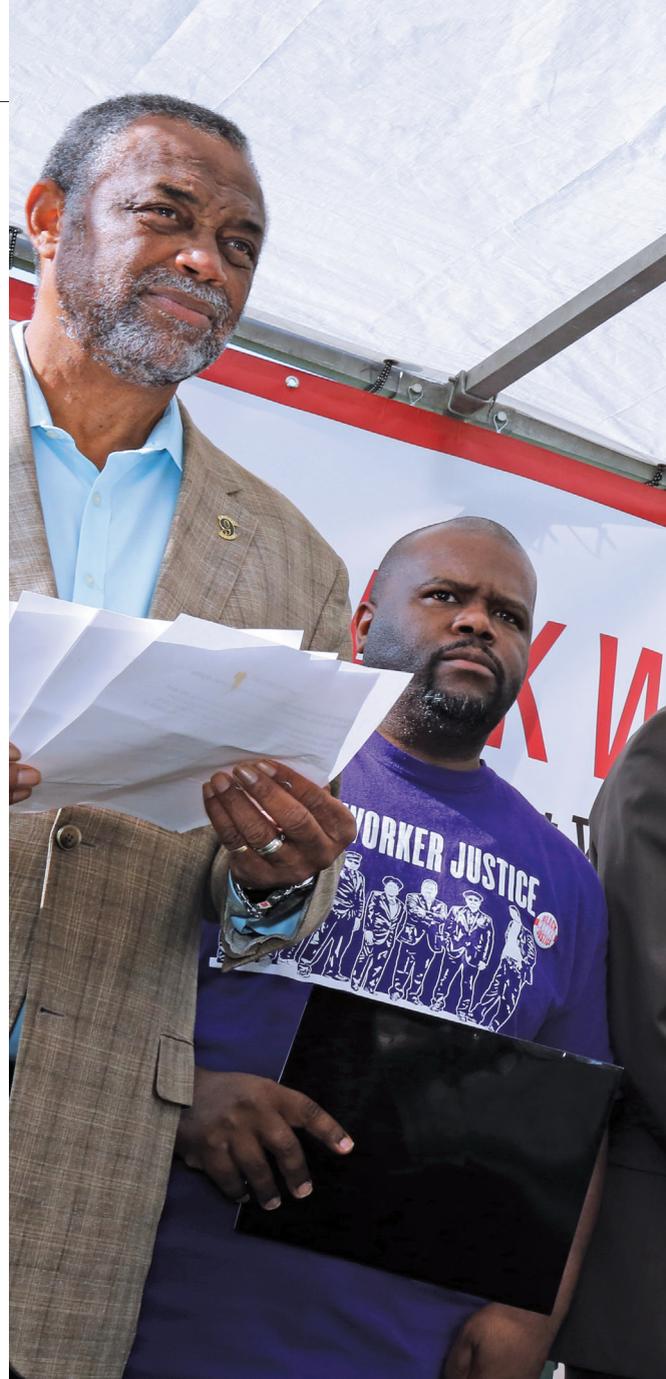
⬆ *TCE has invested in racial justice efforts including workers' rights rallies such as this Black Workers United demonstration in Los Angeles.*

them the Marguerite Casey Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund—have made community power building a centerpiece strategy. Committing to power building requires extending long-term patient capital to grantees, yielding leadership and control to community partners, and being comfortable with strategies that intentionally upset the political and social status quo.

How can power-building strategies figure more centrally in philanthropic investments that seek more equitable public policy and healthier communities? We believe that foundations should take a deeper look at this approach based on promising recent results from power-building efforts in California.

In what follows, we review the evidence generated by a decade-long effort in California that grew up around The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative to advance health and racial equity. Power building was a primary strategy, goal, and outcome of this work, for which we were funders and evaluators. Based on what participants learned during the experience, we suggest a framework for philanthropic investment aimed at supporting power building among communities and populations that historically have been denied political influence and economic power in US society.

People Power

Power-building approaches presuppose that sustainable shifts in the rights, benefits, and opportunities available to low-income and racial minority communities are possible only when those communities

have the power to secure the changes they seek. This power is built within the community and on each community's terms; it is not granted from outside.

Foundations can accelerate a community's expansion of its own power by providing funding to help community leaders and residents organize, connect across jurisdictions, and collaborate with statewide policy campaigns—all with the aim of counteracting decades of disinvestment and supporting a community's collective agency. Residents in a powerful community can better secure for themselves the social goods that build health equity, including education, health care, housing, a healthy environment, and reliable physical infrastructure.

Power-building strategies exist on a continuum of low to high engagement. On one end are ways in which community residents have input into the processes affecting their lives—e.g., being consulted by public agencies on priorities, serving in advisory roles, and having opportunities to express their views to policy makers. While valuable, these input strategies do not in themselves afford residents decision-making authority. At the other end of the continuum are activities that enable community members to build durable agency—e.g., taking intentional action with a high likelihood of achieving targeted results, and exercising political power and public persuasion. These more potent activities include grassroots organizing, constituency building, and policy advocacy. They serve to ensure that community leaders influence and set priorities, secure resources, and have decision-making authority. These latter actions are what build real "people power."

Power-building approaches do not replace other community-change approaches, such as service reform or policy advocacy. Rather, they complement, accelerate, and strengthen them by supporting communities'

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efficacy in achieving their own goals. The different approaches to social change in communities have goals and characteristics that determine the pace and scope of change, as well as the level of impact.

For example, service reform aims to achieve high-quality, more effective services with a gradual pace of change that has limited reach, scale, or impact. Policy advocacy, by contrast, has potential for population-level impact, but this approach, too, is incremental and, depending on its implementation, may not reflect the self-identified needs and priorities of people most affected by policy. Power building, however, focuses on larger, structural changes (e.g., who has influence, representation, and control in decisions). While community power is built gradually, a power-building approach can lead to more decisive, larger-scale changes for individuals, communities, and populations, anchored in their felt needs and priorities.

These approaches benefit from being used together. Power building and policy advocacy can combine in potent ways, resulting in durable policy change that is rooted in communities' needs. Power building deepens policy-advocacy efforts by engaging

⬇ *Residents of Los Angeles rally on the steps of City Hall for The People's Plan to build healthier, more equitable communities.*

hundreds or even thousands of citizens and advancing their priorities in the advocacy process. Communities that weave together grassroots activism with policy expertise and political savvy are primed to take advantage of opportune moments for policy change, often securing significant victories.

A Networked Ecosystem

Power building is attractive in theory, but what does it accomplish in the real world? A movement to help residents of low-income California communities build power to achieve their own aims, supported by The California Endowment (TCE) and other California foundations, provides evidence that power building accelerates policy change and creates an infrastructure through which further structural change can be achieved.

A major catalyst of this movement started in 2010, when TCE launched an initiative to advance health equity and improve the health outcomes of low-income people of color in 14 communities. TCE made its community investments under the mantle of the BHC initiative. During BHC's planned 10-year span, these investments formed the nucleus of a significantly larger effort through which thousands of grassroots and state-level organizations and alliances mobilized to improve the social determinants of health: expanding health-care coverage to more Californians, reducing school suspensions and expulsions, reforming aspects of the criminal- and juvenile-justice systems that produce disparate results for Black and brown communities, promoting environmental health, and advancing related campaigns for social and racial justice.

Power building is rooted in community. In California, TCE's investments in grassroots organizing, youth mobilization and leadership, and coalition building enabled community leaders to organize around their own social-justice priorities—including school reforms, changes in the criminal- and juvenile-justice systems, environmental justice, and more equitable supports for immigrant families, among others. Communities prioritized these issues even when that meant placing them above the foundation's own priorities, which initially focused on more traditionally health-related priorities, such as health access, health-care coverage, and a healthy built environment for all Californians.

While health-related priorities remained important in this work, communities' interests and actions ranged more broadly, resulting in hundreds of local policy victories. In 2018, for example, San Diego County approved funding for two goals of local organizing and advocacy campaigns: $1 million for Youth Bus Passes and $300,000 for restorative justice and restorative-practice training for school police officers. (School-based restorative-justice approaches focus on mediation and restitution to victims, rather than on student punishment.) In the same year, the Long Beach Unified School District agreed to invest approximately $7 million in social, emotional, and academic supports for underserved students when local organizers supported a complaint filed by parents that schools were denying services to which students were entitled. Health-focused policy successes were secured as well: As a result

of local organizing in Sacramento County from 2015 to 2018, the county board voted to provide health care to 4,000 undocumented residents of all ages.

In addition to local organizing, TCE and partners like the Sierra Health Foundation and The California Wellness Foundation funded state-level policy advocacy. They made grants to organizations and advocacy networks that promoted the same reforms statewide as community organizers advanced locally. Foundations supported groups promoting expanded health-care coverage under the Affordable Care Act, coalitions advocating for juvenile-justice reform, and networks of environmental-justice organizations. Over time, and despite bumps along the way, grassroots organizations and policy advocates working on the same issues joined forces, forming coalitions that combined the power of both approaches.

Two forms of organizing—youth organizing and integrated voter engagement—made significant contributions to increasing community power in California.

This synthesis of local organizing and state policy advocacy emerged as a hallmark of change that won significant statewide results. Evaluations by the USC Dornsife Equity Research Institute, the Center for Outcomes Research and Education, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, the Center for Evaluation Innovation, Interactive Impact Labs, and individual evaluators[1] provided important lessons about community and state-level efforts and documented hundreds of policy wins, system changes, and other tangible benefits for communities that resulted from this social movement.[2] More than four million Californians gained health-care coverage through the determined efforts of community organizations and state-policy advocates to enroll people under the federal Affordable Care Act. School suspensions dropped by half over the decade of this work. Youth incarceration rates and arrests similarly dropped sharply, because of local and statewide campaigns to improve school climate, raise awareness about the school-to-prison pipeline, and advance legislation that changed overly punitive school-discipline policies.

Community and state leaders contributed to these policy achievements by working with an ecosystem of networked organizations. Foundations supported development of the power-building ecosystem by funding individual organizations' activities—grassroots organizing, youth mobilization, integrated voter engagement, policy advocacy—as well as recognizing and funding the alliances, coalitions, networks, and high-visibility campaigns through which multiple organizations worked toward commonly held goals.

Creating the ecosystem involved three interrelated strategies:

Building Capacity | Grassroots organizing and strong organizational- and network-capacity building formed the foundation for

long-term power building in California. For more than 10 years, philanthropic investments provided grassroots organizing groups, youth activists, and advocacy networks with multiyear funding that enabled them to expand, weather failures, and build on small-scale successes to achieve large-scale change. TCE alone provided more than 10,000 grants to local and state organizations and invested almost $1.8 billion over 10 years. Organizations used the funding for direct organizing and policy advocacy and expanded the organizational infrastructure not usually supported by foundation grants, such as communications capacity, data and accountability systems, and leadership and partnership development.

As organizations expanded their capacity, they were also more able to form or join coalitions, alliances, and networks that linked community, regional, and statewide interests. Partners in this ecosystem —a combination of local grassroots organizations, local and state policy-advocacy groups, and social-justice alliances and coalitions— used their collective resources to launch and sustain campaigns in policy arenas prioritized by local leaders, chiefly education, juvenile justice, immigration, community development, and environmental justice. Over time, groups working across these areas formed cross-sector alliances that exercised more power than single-issue organizations or networks.

For example, in 2015-'16, a coalition of youth leaders, immigrant rights groups, and LGBTQ advocates in Santa Ana, California, emerged from local organizing efforts to end immigrant detention in their city. Through demonstrations, protest actions, and frequent testimonies at city council meetings, the coalition successfully pressured local officials to stop using the city jail as a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility. The coalition formed through this joint effort then pushed for the enactment, in January 2017, of Santa Ana's Sanctuary City ordinance, which prohibited city agencies from cooperating with ICE actions aimed at identifying, detaining, or prosecuting undocumented immigrants.

Two forms of organizing—youth organizing and leadership development, and integrated voter engagement (IVE)—made significant contributions to increasing community power in California and will continue to shape future efforts to take power building to greater scale. First, young people and the networks and organizations representing them—such as Youth Organize! California's Californians for Justice, and the RYSE Center—became drivers of educational-, juvenile-, and criminal-justice reform. Youth-led efforts contributed to the passage of statewide legislation to outlaw punitive and discriminatory school suspensions. Second, a coordinated campaign of year-round issue education and voter outreach by nonprofits and alliances such as California Calls, the Million Voters Project, and Power California focused on increasing voter registration and informing residents in underresourced communities and communities of color about issues affecting them. This work, supported by a funders coalition that included The California Wellness Foundation, the Irvine Foundation, and the San Francisco Foundation, among others, helped communities to exercise their power at the ballot box.

For example, the efforts of Power California, which is devoted to organizing immigrants, refugees, and youth of color, contributed to a tripling of voter turnout among 18-to-24-year-olds between the 2014 and 2018 elections and registered more than 40,000 young voters.

Transforming Policy | Racist and unjust policies at the local and state levels present structural barriers that limit young people's futures and harm residents' lives. The durable alliances that arose from power building allowed partners to pursue the goal of changing these policies over many years, yielding small-scale successes— and many failures—that cumulatively led to transformative policy shifts in several areas.

For example, in the San Joaquin and Coachella Valleys, rural communities composed of immigrant workers and families had pushed for years for clean water for their homes, schools, and businesses. They fought against the lack of government oversight and water-treatment resources that resulted in their water being tainted by toxic substances. Beginning in 2012, these disparate efforts coalesced into a broad coalition of water-justice organizations. Within the coalition, many organizations continued grassroots organizing, while

Establishing power building as a centerpiece strategy requires transforming foundations' perspectives, timelines, grantmaking philosophy, and leadership philosophy.

others developed greater capacity to advocate for new funding for water treatment and other state and local policy changes. The coalition's growing power and effectiveness were sustained by volunteer-citizen efforts, as well as by continued investment in organizing and nonprofit capacity building by state and regional foundations. In 2019, after a series of local policy victories, the coalition helped secure state legislation that provided $1.3 billion in funding for clean water in California communities over the next decade. Moreover, the steady increase of credibility, capacity, and power of an ecosystem of water-justice organizations and concerned citizens helped ensure that strong advocacy for clean water (and environmental justice more broadly) would continue. Many of the same coalition members are now pushing for state legislation to provide water affordability assistance to low-income residents in the Central Valley and to prohibit new permits to drill groundwater wells.

The efforts to change unjust policies took different forms in different communities, but they shared a similar pattern. Sustained foundation investment in grassroots organizing and nonprofit-capacity and coalition building increased local capacity to address challenges. Local leaders used their new capacity to tackle smaller-scale, winnable issues while looking at the full scale of policy and systems change needed and determining how to influence decision makers over time. Small successes created a track record that secured

organizational partnerships and networks—which in turn produced the combined local- and state-level capacity to respond effectively when larger policy opportunities emerged.

Changing the Narrative | Dominant narratives can impede the pursuit of equity goals because they frame how the public and policy makers understand problems and their causes and thus what solutions they will consider and support. When these narratives reinforce racial- or class-related stereotypes or provide false rationales for systemic discrimination, they need to be challenged and replaced by accurate assessments of the root causes of injustice.

This process of narrative change can occur through the multilevel, widespread mobilization of communication strategies, working across multiple media, and reinforced by grassroots organizing and policy advocacy to promote new narratives. In California, high-visibility communications campaigns, funded by TCE and occasionally other foundations, worked to expose damaging narratives and counteract them.

Take, for example, the narrative that school expulsion and incarceration rates for Black and brown students are warranted by their behaviors and not predicated in systemic racism and racial stereotypes. "Schools Not Prisons" campaigns used billboard images of young people behind bars, as well as steady social media messaging, to publicize the damage of this discrimination and how the incarceration rates for Black and brown students are much higher than those of their white and Asian peers. Simultaneously, the campaigns publicized the benefits of policies designed to keep all young people in school, rather than put them in prison, including lower costs for incarceration, higher rates of high school graduation, and more young people moving into productive careers.

Similarly, the multimedia messages of a "Health4All" campaign refuted the idea that undocumented immigrant families are undeserving of publicly funded health-care coverage. The campaign contextualized its information about the valued roles that undocumented workers perform and emphasized the importance of health care for young immigrant children within its broader message of health care as a right for all Californians. Funded by a partnership of California foundations, including The California Wellness Foundation, the California Health Care Foundation, and the Blue Shield of California Foundation, the campaign paved the way for expansion of Medi-Cal coverage (California's Medicaid program) for low-income children and families, including undocumented young people, helping California move closer to near-universal health-care coverage.

Narrative change remains controversial as a philanthropic approach in part because it raises issues about the boundary between issue education (completely appropriate for foundation support) and activism on behalf of specific legislative solutions (an area in which philanthropic efforts must be severely limited). However, TCE's experience indicates how integral narrative change is to community power building—that is, if the messages advanced are developed with community leaders and rooted in community priorities. TCE's support for narrative change also demonstrates how foundations can inform and shape public perceptions and actions while staying well within the legal and ethical boundaries of the philanthropic role.

For TCE, extending long-term patient capital to grassroots organizations and policy-advocacy campaigns was just one of its many roles in community power building. Other roles included being a *proximal ally*, whereby TCE staff who were embedded in communities built networks of local relationships and helped foster collaborative planning; a narrative driver, who occasionally led communications activities designed to shift public perception about problems and desired policy solutions; and a *strategic partner* able to invest flexibly, quickly, and opportunistically when policy opportunities presented themselves.[3] Over time, TCE came to envision these roles as important ongoing supports for the ecosystem of local and statewide organizations, alliances, and networks leading this work.

Challenges and Changes

Setbacks are inevitable when communities build their own power. For community residents and organizations, each change they seek encounters opposition from leaders and organizations with a strong interest in maintaining the status quo. Exercising community power means trying, falling short, regrouping, engaging more allies, and finally mustering the voices and/or votes needed to secure the desired change in policy or systems.

A pattern of progress mixed with shortfalls attended the hundreds of local changes in policy and systems that community organizers sought and often achieved in the 14 communities over a decade of work.[4] The same is true for statewide change. For example, securing health-care coverage for most undocumented immigrant children in California happened only after state legislation stalled in 2014 and then a revised, more limited bill was passed by the legislature and signed by the governor in 2015. This development led eventually to California's current estimated coverage for 98 percent of all children in the state.[5]

Foundations face their own set of challenges. Establishing power building as a centerpiece strategy requires transforming foundations' perspectives, timelines, grantmaking philosophy, and leadership philosophy. They must also evaluate their own power dynamics.

TCE had to make at least five changes to adopt this new approach, and these transformations are still in progress. First, TCE needed to expand its knowledge of community dynamics, power relationships, priorities, and leadership. From the inception of BHC, TCE program staff were deployed to work with and within specific local communities by becoming part of local teams and, in some cases, living in those communities. The close working relationships from these efforts have lasted for years and enabled the building of trust between community leaders and foundation staff, increased staff knowledge of community power dynamics, and led to more insightful decisions about using foundation resources to support community power building. These close relationships between program staff and community leaders profoundly influenced foundation directions. Frontline program staff advocated powerfully for foundation leadership to follow communities' priorities (rather than the reverse) and adopt community power building as TCE's primary strategy for change.

Second, in part because of the new, deeper relationships with community residents and their priorities, foundation leaders recognized the importance of addressing the fundamental causes of health inequities. The 14 communities that partnered with TCE set the agenda: issues of income disparities, discriminatory and exploitive housing policy, criminal and juvenile justice, and unjust immigration policies, as well as the structural and institutional racism underlying

current policy in each of these areas. In turn, TCE leaders focused their resources on the power vacuums that contributed to these disparities and adopted a more explicit racial-justice perspective and an antiracist orientation for its operations.

Third, the commitment to power building forced TCE to rethink its relationships with grantees and partners. This shift required a less foundation-centric point of view. In the push for more equitable policies, TCE joined partners and coalitions who had been working on these agendas for years, had greater expertise, and wanted far more radical structural change than the foundation initially sought. The foundation had to find new ways to lead with these partners, or—preferably, in many instances—to step back and let partners lead.

Fourth, embracing community power building required the foundation to rethink its grantmaking policies and practices. The timeline for community power building required more multiyear grants. The focus on organizational capacity building meant that core support for grantees had to be increased—they could not rely on project-specific grants alone. TCE's rethinking of grantmaking priorities continues, along with concurrent decisions about the accountability measures, reporting requirements, and decision-making process that accompany it.

Finally, the shift toward power building necessitated a long-term process for enlisting the board's support. This effort involved multiple opportunities for board members to increase their understanding of this work— for example, through visits to communities, regular interactions with community leaders, and learning sessions with leading state and national experts on power building. It also involved frequent reports from respected independent evaluators and analysts of the foundation's work, so that the board's understanding of power building could grow alongside the learning by the foundation's executive leadership. Finally, building board support required transparency and candor about failures along the way. While board members were pleased when they saw documentation that local power building had led to successful policy change, they knew that trial and error were inherent in this approach. They simply wanted assurance that, in endorsing power building, they would have a realistic assessment of its uncertainties and pitfalls.[6]

These challenges for TCE and its partners are ongoing. Power building is cyclical work: Every surge forward is accompanied by periodic retreat and retrenchment. Foundations must accept and embrace this dynamic as constitutive of this work.

An Investment Framework

California's experience with foundation-catalyzed power building is in some ways unique, and many elements are specific to the state's demographics, progressive social politics (at least for the past decade), and philanthropic history. However, the TCE effort offers lessons to other philanthropies incorporating a power-building strategy. As more foundations test power building, they should consider the following recommendations in structuring their investments.[7]

A multigenerational timeline | Adopt a long-term horizon to invest in long-term change. Supporting people and communities who have lacked power requires multidecade funding. The dramatic policy changes that power building makes possible emerge from many years of philanthropic investments in the infrastructure needed to bring about observable shifts in community power.

Within communities, foundations can extend the patient capital supporting grassroots organizations' leadership, growth, and stability over extended periods. Within public systems, foundations can support the long-term processes aimed at understanding the structure, culture, norms, and behavior of those systems. They must first identify precisely how these produce inequitable results and then build the internal awareness and external community accountability that will ensure that systems, cultures, and behaviors change.

Foundations can help networks and alliances gain strength by continually focusing on the needs of the whole ecosystem and how it exerts leadership, even if that means stepping back.

All of this takes time. TCE has committed itself to another 10 years of investing in power building, recognizing that, at the end of that period, continued investment may be necessary.

An ecosystem mindset | Power to change inequitable systems stems from purposeful networks and alliances that accumulate influence over time. To support this power-building ecosystem, foundations need to invest in the infrastructure and capacities that allow networks and alliances collectively to tackle long-standing problems, in addition to supporting individual organizations. Foundations can help networks and alliances gain strength by continually focusing on the needs of the whole ecosystem and how it exerts leadership, even if that means stepping back from some of the foundations' own accustomed leadership roles.

Bedrock priorities | Provide core general operating support for grassroots organizing, youth mobilization and a youth leadership pipeline, and integrated voter engagement. Grassroots and youth organizing are anchors for any social movement to build effective and agile community power. Grassroots organizing creates the "people power" that is the engine of change. Youth activism often sparks the boldest system reforms, but to sustain young people's engagement beyond crisis moments, foundations must pay continual attention to the opportunities and supports that allow young activists to emerge and grow as leaders. Flexible support for integrated voter engagement allows communities to be educated continually about issues; this in turn can lead to greater participation and activism in changing policy and systems.

🔺 *TCE supported the #Health4All campaign in California to change the narrative about health-care coverage for undocumented people.*

Collaborative funding | Invest together to scale change. Financially supporting a power-building ecosystem, with its emphasis on long-term capacity building, requires more resources than any one funder can provide. Significant funding from state, regional, and local California foundations was critical to local and statewide successes. Sustaining power building's continued evolution will require multiyear, well-coordinated, and pooled funding strategies among foundations.

Adaptive learning | Support the ability of all involved to learn from their actions and adapt to shifting contexts and political environments, thereby sustaining and strengthening power building over time. Consistently review past failures and successes, and make sure that the populations most affected are involved. TCE's successes occurred because partners ventured to risk, fail, learn from wins and setbacks, and translate their learning into effective future action. Foundations are the most likely funders for this type of sustained learning, ideally through collaborative, multifoundation support.

Turning Communities into Architects

The case for power building among low-income populations and communities becomes more urgent as economic inequality grows, racial injustice persists, and public policy responses fail to keep pace. Where long-term power-building investments have had a chance to show results over time, as in California, the presence of hundreds of new,

more just, and more equitable local and state policies, due in part to growing community power, demonstrates the value of this approach.

In response, the philanthropic community must build on current lessons and create the field infrastructure—a combination of grassroots organizing, youth mobilization, policy advocacy, narrative change, and adaptive learning—that will encourage citizen activists, grassroots organizations, and policy alliances to sustain and scale their efforts. In doing so, foundations will help communities become not the recipients of charitable assistance, but the design architects for social change. ∎

Notes

1   Individual evaluators in California who contributed important products to the overall body of research about Building Healthy Communities include Audrey Jordan, Tia Martinez, and Shiree Teng.

2   The products of these evaluation efforts are available on The California Endowment's website at www.calendow.org/learning.

3   These roles played by TCE are described in Tom David and Prudence Brown, "Foundation Role and Practice: Building Healthy Communities, 2010-2020," Center for the Study of Social Policy, November 2020.

4   Julia Coffman, Gigi Barsoum, and Albertina Lopez, "Advocacy That Builds Power: Transforming Policies and Systems for Health and Racial Equity," Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2021.

5   The Children's Partnership, "A Golden Opportunity: Lessons from California on Advancing Coverage for All Children," January 2018.

6   David and Brown, "Foundation Role and Practice."

7   Frank Farrow, Cheryl Rodgers, and Jennifer Henderson-Frakes, "Toward Health and Racial Equity: Findings and Lessons from Building Healthy Communities," Center for the Study of Social Policy, December 2020.