

Reimagined in America: What Can the World Teach Us About
Building a Culture of Health?

Episode 14

Building Community Power

WEBINAR TRANSCRIPT

On the November 18, 2022, episode of RWJF's [Reimagined in America: What Can the World Teach Us About Building a Culture of Health](#) webinar series, Gordon Whitman of Faith in Action International and Julia Lerma of True North Organizing Network discussed how U.S. communities can learn from places abroad to build community power and improve health and well-being for all.

A full transcript of the discussion can be found below.

Please note: Transcripts are produced by a third-party transcription service and may contain discrepancies.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Good afternoon, everyone. I wanted to just let you all know that I'm having some technical issues, so I am joining the audio by phone, but the video by Zoom so my words may not match up completely and I apologize for that. But good afternoon everyone. I hope that you all had a chance to take the blue marble quiz that we had up on the screen or that you might spend a few moments taking it after the webinar. It's super fun, with lots of resources and I hope that you'll share it with others. So I'm Karabi Acharya, and I lead the global ideas for US solutions team here at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. I'm your moderator today for our 14th episode of the Reimagined in America webinar series. If you're returning to the series, welcome back, and if you're new to the series, we're really excited to have you. And I'm super excited to give a quick shout out to the New Brunswick Health Sciences Technology High School.

There are quite a few students from that high school joining us today, and we're really happy to have you with us. So before we begin, I wanted to take this opportunity to recognize that RWJF is located on the ancestral lands of the Lenape people, also called Lenni-Lenape who were forcibly removed from their land and relocated west and north. As we begin this event, let's take a moment to honor these ancestral grounds that we're collectively gathered upon and pay respect to the original caretakers of this land, recognizing the histories of land theft, violence, erasure, and oppression that have brought us here.

So before we dive in much further, I want to go over a few reminders. If you want to turn on live closed captioning, just select the live captions button that's at the bottom of your screen. The webinar is being recorded and everyone will receive an email early next week with a link to the recording and any resources that we've mentioned. We also ask that you submit questions. We definitely want your questions for our speakers using the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen, that's much easier for us than through the chat. So please use the Q&A button. And I also wanted to say that our focus today is on exploring models of building community power. We understand that this work often intersects with electoral politics, but that's not the ground we'll cover today. As a philanthropy, you may know we're restricted from engaging in political activity and it's important that our conversation today steers clear of the political space and remains nonpartisan.

So with that, let's get started. While elective officials and other decision-makers might be positioned to advance policies to improve health equity, it's really the powerful voices

and relentless advocacy of people in communities that ultimately transforms communities. As we work to tackle the big issues of our time from climate change to structural racism to gender inequity, we have to remember that so much of the change the world needs must be guided by community voices, particularly voices that have been historically marginalized and excluded from decision making. Because when the most impacted by inequity act together to voice their needs and push for community relevant policies and practices, they have the ability to collectively drive structural change and advance health equity. The global ideas for US solutions team at RWJF works to learn from and with the world about practices to improve health and wellbeing.

And we bring those lessons back home with the hope that those learnings will change our own communities for the better once implemented. Many countries have built up the infrastructure to foster authentic and meaningful social participation and power. So, for example, in Brazil and Chile, residents engage in participatory budgeting, proposing, prioritizing, and choosing the initiatives that they believe need municipal funding. In Taiwan and Iceland cities leverage digital platforms and e-governance to increase participation in crowdsourced policy priorities from residents, imagine. In Rwanda community organizers hold one-to-one conversations to identify major needs in the community and secure improvements from health clinics to electricity to schools. And in South Africa, after the fall of Apartheid, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was used to help heal the country, encourage participation in governance and rebuild public trust. These types of approaches are making it easier for communities to raise their voices, to feel agency, and to shape the policies and practices that determine their opportunities for good health.

In essence, they're building community power. So I'm so grateful to have two wonderful speakers here with us today who've spent their lives in the organizing space in the US and abroad, and they'll share how communities that wield their power can create structural change. But before I introduce you to them, we always like to begin by hearing from you. So we have two questions that you should see on your screen. Take a look, click on the answers. The first question is, in your experience, what's the most important ingredient for community power building? You can check all that apply. And then the second question is, why did you join today's webinar? So I'll give a couple seconds for folks to put in their answers and then we'll see what you have to say. Maybe just another few seconds and see what answers we get.

POLL

In your experience, what's the most important ingredient for community power-building? (Check all that apply)

- Learning from the wisdom and experiences of those who have successfully engaged in grassroots organizing and advocacy
- Relentlessly engaging local decision-makers
- Investing in people's leadership and political development
- Building relationships and trust amongst community members
- Creating a clear structure for local leaders and community members to strategize together and make collective decisions
- If other, drop it in the chat when you finish the poll!

Why did you join today's webinar? (Check all that apply)

- I want to know more about building community power.
- I'm looking for solutions that I can bring to my own community.
- I want to understand what we can learn from other countries.
- I never miss a *Reimagined in America* webinar if I can make it!
- I want to make connections with other people doing this work.

PRODUCER: Kyle McLoughlin, Burness

Yeah, we're at about 65% now, so in just a few seconds I think we'll end the poll.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

All right, let's see the results. Fantastic. So the number one response is learning from the wisdom and experience of those who've successfully engaged in grassroots organizing and advocacy is the most important ingredient for community power building. Oh, I'm sorry, I thought these were, sorry. The number one, not a great surprise but is building relationships and trust among community members. 84% of you thought that was the most important ingredient. And then after that is the one that I just read. And then the third one is creating a clear structure for local leaders and community members to strategize together and make collective decisions. Fantastic. And then why are you here today? The number one response is you want to know more about community power, you are in exactly the right place. And then after that it's, what can we learn from other countries? Fantastic.

Well that's great because that's what we are going to do today. So let me introduce our two terrific speakers who are going to help make all of that happen. Gordon Whitman is a senior advisor with Faith in Action International, a community organizing group

supporting grassroots organizing that enables those who are most vulnerable and exploited to build political and economic power to better their lives and communities. Gordon has worked as a community organizer and social change strategist and coach for the past 25 years. Through his work with Faith and Action, Gordon helped people build multiracial community organizing groups and has led national organizing campaigns on children's health coverage, health reform, and stopping of foreclosures. And also joining us is Julia Lerma. She serves as the director of organizing for the True North Organizing Network, a community-led grassroots organizing effort in Northern California. She's also a consultant on Central America with Faith in Action International and she works to support community organizing in Central America and has brought lessons learned abroad back to US communities. So, welcome to you both and thank you so much for joining us.

So I'm going to kick things off with a few questions of my own, and then we'll turn to audience questions. And please remember, for the audience, you can submit a question at any time by clicking on the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen. So, Gordon, I wanted to start with you. In your work at Faith in Action, you're building a global platform for mutual learning between grassroots organizers, leaders, and faith-based organizations. And you're helping communities at home and abroad build authentic and meaningful community power. So can you tell us a little bit about Faith in Actions work and what you're trying to achieve and tell us what you're learning from your global work and how that may have changed your view of community power in the US.

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

Thanks, Karabi. So as you know, as organizers, we're focused on agency on people's capacity to come together collectively to hash out what they most need, understand and sometimes create windows of opportunity and directly negotiate with decision-makers. So we're really aiming for organizations that people own that feel less like NGOs and more like tools that people can use to transform their own communities and their countries. And that can mean everything from people organizing to bring clean water or health clinics or schools to their own communities campaigning at a national level to create unemployment systems or raising wages and experimentation that we're doing to bring grassroots organizations together from Central America, Mexico, and the US to develop a shared agenda to address the root causes of migration. The challenge is that as you move up to higher level policy issues, how do you maintain that sense of agency and ownership?

And that's a big topic that I know we want to dig into today. We know that building community power is a lot less spontaneous than sometimes presumed and that it takes a lot of practice, experimentation, risk, and that while context really matters, there's a lot that people have learned and can learn from each other across countries. Just as an example, Faith in Action started 50 years ago in Oakland, California, deeply influenced by Latin American popular education liberation theology. It wasn't until about 15 years ago that we began to do any work outside the United States and it happened without a plan, without really a clear vision of how work internationally connected to our work in the US or where we were going about four years ago with a new executive director, Reverend Alvin Herring and pressure from organizers and grassroots leaders in Haiti, central America and Africa that we decided to reimagine faith and action as a global or international movement of people of faith organizing to create change from the bottom up.

And to see ourselves as both a learning and acting together network. We now support grassroots organizing in 12 countries. You see it on the map, and we have that ambition of building as much organizing capacity outside the US as we have inside the US so that we really have a level of foundation for joint learning and joint acting together. To your question of what we're learning, Julia can say more. But when I talk to US organizers, I hear a lot of concern about shortcuts, about more resources, more professional staff, but less grassroots leaders. And we know that the grassroots organizations in the US that are having the biggest impact are investing really heavily in leadership development. But taking on these larger structural issues that you talked about in your introduction without becoming staff centric is not easy. And that you can end up with staff creating sometimes very creative campaigns but then mobilizing people into those campaigns.

And one of the big things we're learning from organizers and other countries is about the practices and organizational structures that make it possible to build national campaigns that are deeply rooted in the local community. So there's a quick story that when I was in El Salvador a year ago, I had a chance to sit in on a meeting of about 70 grassroots leaders from Communities of Faith organized for action, the Faith in Action affiliate in Central America. And they were members of a national steering committee leading a national land rights campaign and the Salvadorian National Assembly had passed legislation in response to their campaign that was deeply flawed. And for about two months they put escalating pressure on Salvadorian president Nayib Bukele to change that legislation. This is a picture that's on the screen of there were at this event a thousand families came to deliver letters to the president asking him to meet and address the issues related to their land rights campaign.

And when we were there, they had just received a response from the president reiterating their critique and assigning his housing minister to meet with them. So what was interesting was to be in a room with 70 grassroots leaders, all of whom were trying to resolve their own land titles as well as those for 350,000 families in the country strategizing together about how they'd approach this meeting and then selecting 10 people to be on a negotiating team to meet with the housing minister. And it was really at that moment when at least I thought this would be a good place to start the learning exchange that we've built with your support, with the foundation support. And last spring we hosted a delegation and wrote a case study focused on their land rights campaign. So that's really the story of what brought us here today.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks so much, Gordon. What a beautiful story. Julia, I want to bring you into this conversation, and you were on that trip to El Salvador. Can you tell us a little bit about what you learned from your visit and how that's informing your work with True North Organizing Network in Northern California?

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

Thank you. Honored to be here. So I'll just say a little bit about True North, I'm the director of organizing. So, True North Organizing Network is a regional organization in the counties of Humboldt and Del Norte and Tribal Lands. We're the first organization and Faith in Action working with tribes. It is one of the last areas in the US that was colonized. In 2015, we held a listening campaign with over 1000 conversations. We identified five core issues, housing, water, and environment, education, police accountability, and immigration. The 2022 international delegation to El Salvador was a powerful experience. Delegates from Haiti, Rwanda, South Africa, Eastern Europe, and the United States, three languages were spoken and we all had common learnings and interest to take back to our perspective countries.

COFOA discipline structure has four levels of organizing and as you can see, the local organizing committees, the department planning which can also be translated into statewide and then the national. And COFOA disciplined organizing helps build that foundation that all organizations that are planning to be organizations for generations. This is the model that, well, that I believe works because I've been in it for about 30 years. So the local organizing issues are identified through one-to-one conversations, house meetings, and issues that are surface like road repair for the elderly so that they can walk safely and resources to build bridges so children will no longer drown and

parents can make it home at night. These local issues develop leaders to step into the public square and find their voice. We met with leaders who fought for their bridge.

Mrs. Lopez stood up and passionately said she never imagined herself pinning the mayor for resources to build the bridge. Lopez learned she can be at the negotiating table when her people are organized. She understood that politicians are people too. And this experience for Mrs. Lopez is that she was shaking the whole time when she was pinning the mayor and her leaders said we couldn't tell but this was a transformative experience for Mrs. Lopez. And I use her as an example because there are hundreds of leaders like her in El Salvador. So it's starting with issues that was her own self-interest and the interest of her people and community. So the local work prepares our leaders to move towards the more complex issues like water and land titles in our organization there's a principle follow the money. So you look from going to bridge from bridges and Streets to Water, you can't fix them at the local level, you need to move up the ladder.

And this is what we've seen at El Salvador and it really reminded us, I mean, all of the delegations that were present that when you begin to organize, you start at that local piece but then it can sometimes get lost when you start moving into the bigger and complex issues. So the international delegation was reminded that shortcuts can weaken the organization's foundation and we were all inspired, we were in groups before we left El Salvador and we all made plans to let's rebuild and strengthen our organization's foundation. And so that's what we learned. It was very exciting and to know that Haiti, South Africa, they're parts of the United States that we all had those, it's very fragile. It can be very fragile if you neglect the local work. So it was a great reminder. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks so much, Julia. So this question is really to both of you. We know that systems that have real community voice in them are the ones that have the most success, as you've both just been saying. Not only in implementing solutions but also removing social and economic obstacles to health, including powerlessness. So Gordon, maybe to start with you, I would love it if you could just at a high level unpack the ways in which health grassroots organizing and community power intersect. And then Julia, I would love to hear you speak about how your network is tackling the intersection of those issues in California. So, Gordon?

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

Great. So we decided to use this story of a national land rights' campaign in El Salvador as a case study because it was a story of national structural change that started with a local organizing that Julia described. So in one community people began to listen to their neighbors and what they heard was people say our priority is titled to our own land. And this was a community like many, many in El Salvador where people had settled after being displaced by the Civil War in the 1980s, they bought plots of land on unregulated developments, no infrastructure right at the edge of cities and towns. So 15, 20 plus years later, they paid off their installments but never received their deeds. And that created a challenge for individuals because they couldn't sell their land, borrow to make improvements, but it also left the whole community in limbo so people could not get paved streets, water, electricity, green spaces, health clinic schools in their communities because they were essentially didn't exist from a legal standpoint.

We talked to a pastor of a small evangelical church who told us the reason he was organizing for land rights was that kidney disease was so high in his community because so many people relied on a polluted river for water because they didn't have direct access. So the health dimension are super strong and we know that there's a strong link directly between that sense of agency and being healthy. And that agency leads to the power to negotiate changes in the social determinants of what of wellbeing. And that from our experience, there's two basic practices that really contribute to agency. One is that you create space for people to build relationships. And we heard it on the poll really strongly that you intentionally create space to build relationships between people so that they can know each other and trust each other before they go into action together.

And then second, that people have opportunity for direct face-to-face interaction negotiation with decision makers. And Julia made that point really well. And we see that big events can be important to show power, but what's really transformative to people's sense of agency and leadership is that opportunity to directly sit with their mayor for the first time or go meet with the housing minister of their country. The thing that usually I'm looking for when I talk to leaders who are involved in Faith in Action, whether in the US or internationally is, and I'm listening for is people who are saying I see myself and the world differently because of my participation and leadership in the organization. Two, that I can point to very concrete ways in which my life is better as a result. So yes, other people are benefiting but I can point to how my family is better off as a result.

And three, my community has more power. El Salvador COFOA now has grassroots organizing teams that meet weekly in 140 communities across the country and they're in the process of building new chapters in Guatemala and Honduras. And you can see the virtuous cycle of development and policy change that comes from creating that kind of

accountability that forces politicians to basically compete for their future based on providing public goods. So we're really trying to create those incentives at the community level non-partisan and those are really critical ingredients for policy change and development around the world. But I think also in the United States and underappreciated in how we think about the issues facing communities in the United States.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, thank you. Such a powerful example. Julia, I want to turn to you and understand a bit how this is playing out in northern California in terms of the intersection between health grassroots organizing and community power.

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

Yes, thank you. Yes, bringing back the lessons learned and it's like a reminder of those of us that have been in the work for a while, for me over 30 years, that going back to the basics is what creates a strong foundation. So Humboldt where my primary work is being threatened by massive displacement and gentrification. We have fires in Eastern Humboldt, and other counties. We have the offshore wind and a Nordic aquaculture fish farm project. And most recently Humboldt University received a \$458 million dollars to become a poly tech. So Cal Poly administration, the president Tom Jackson, and the state who are calling all the shots for students and faculty has created... Excuse me, I'm sorry my internet is giving me a problem. I'm sorry, If you can give me just one moment.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Okay, no problem. And we can hear you just fine.

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

Okay. Oh, good. They are calling all the shots and one of the missing partners are the community, students, and faculty. From the learning experience from El Salvador, we are starting a series of listening campaigns with Cal Poly faculty, students, community members and faith leaders to build a base to find solutions and more importantly to get a seat at the negotiating table.

Recently Cal Poly purchased land underneath a senior housing project development that had been in the works for years. The community was very upset at this issue but we're not at the table. So, faculty, students, and community members want to be a part of this process. So we are starting local work to create a listening process at the university on November 30th. We feel we're starting at the local, we know that the university, the board of trustees of California State University and the governor's office. But it'd be very easy to start a rally or protest at the university. But we know that there will not be a

foundation to continue the work for the long haul because this is not an issue that's going to go away with one rally. So we need to build a foundation that we will have people, our community members, faculty, students that are being impacted.

At this moment, we don't understand exactly because it was overnight that we read in the paper that HSU, Humboldt State University, was now Cal Poly University without any decisions from the community. It was just like an overnight, this is what we are. So now we have to do our research and find out, okay so is the governor, what is the process? There's 453 million dollars, which is a lot of money, and we're hoping that we can have an impact that the housing that they're going to be building for students, that it could be mixed use because it's not only students coming from out of town, but there're students that live in the community and with gentrification happening, their parents and their family homes or rentals, they will not be able to afford to stay in this county. So it's more than that. So we want to be a part of that decision making and it'll be a win-win for the university and the community.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thank you so much. I mean, again, another really powerful example and as you both have said, a reminder to get back to the basics and some of the original tools and tactics of community organizing. I want to shift now to some audience questions that are coming in. And just a reminder, anyone in the audience is very welcome to submit a question, just put it into the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen and we'll try to get to as many as we can. So the first question is, to either of you, Gordon or Julia, do you see any role for academia in your work and what examples could you share? I don't know, who would like to go first to address that question. Academia.

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

I have a fun one. So Professor Paul Speer, who is at Vanderbilt, did some very deep research on the internal organizing process within Faith in Action, collected a ton of data on who comes to meetings, who comes back, who takes on different roles. And it really profoundly shaped how we think about our work. A lot of the insight about the value of one-to-one relationship building, the insight that people might say they come for the issue, but often they come for the relationship, really was documented by that research and these research action meetings where small groups of people go meet with decision makers who Julia is describing. So just people getting into that, how does this system work really turn out to be the best predictor of whether somebody takes on greater leadership and sees their own sense of agency growing. So I really value people like Professor Han and Paul Speer and others who are really invested in helping us understand what works and making it better. So I would say that is one answer.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, thanks. Julia, you just gave a really powerful example of maybe step one is for academia to recognize and understand they are part of a community and to build relationships there, but what would you add to that?

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

Well, we have a relationship with Cal Poly, and so for several years we've had interns that work with us and their interns have worked and have gained some organizing skills and actually we've hired one of our most senior organizers, Evan Morton, that's leading the Cal Poly. He's still a student at Cal Poly, he's getting his masters. But I just think that having those relationships, Evan being a part of our team and doing the internship with us has strengthened our relationship with Cal Poly. I mean they we're working with them not only on this listening process, but we're working with them on creating data for our students in the county, kind of looking at where are students, are they falling through the cracks and how can we prevent them? So a relationship with the university and the academics is really important to the work that we're doing.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, thanks. And I'll just add that, of course, in many other parts of the world, it is the students who are often primary actors in organizing a lot of social movements. It's maybe a little bit less so here in the US but that is certainly true in many other parts of the world. World. All right, so another audience question. So the question is, my organization is working to connect resources from the federal government, the US federal government, focused on land conservation and natural infrastructure investments that directly benefit historically disadvantaged communities meeting their priorities and needs. So you mentioned participatory budgeting as a tool. Are there other concrete tools, guidance and technical assistance that build community power? Who wants to start with that?

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

Go ahead, Gordon.

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

I say Julia, this is what you're doing in Humboldt. So with the tribal areas, for sure.

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

Yeah. So can you repeat part of that question again? I'm sorry I didn't hear it.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, so I think, participatory budgeting is one tool that was mentioned and I think the question is really asking what are other concrete tools, guidance, or technical assistance that help to build community power?

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

So, I mean, an example could be budgeting in the schools. We have some relationships with public advocates, for example, that their lawyers that work on local school budgets and for us what they do is that they make budgeting for schools simple so that parents can understand how the budget works. For me, I've been in a lot of those, the local control meetings for well, in California where you figure out the budget and it's always confusing, but this organization helps parents understand that's what they do. So can't always, organizers don't always know everything, but we find people that do. And so I think partners such as public advocates are really important and the university to help with statistics and data. Cause you want to track what you do and how you do it and what the results are.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks. Gordon, did you want to add anything to that?

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

No. I think within conceptually within an organizing process, the strategic capacity of a group of people who have a direct stake to sit and think together and figure out how to use their existing resources, how much power they need and what opportunities exist. So the windows of opportunity and when they're opening and closing is really important to an organizing process because we can do good base building, we can do good community building, hold big events and try to confront decision makers. But that works when there are windows that open up and when they're closed it's much harder. So people are doing research in the world of where are their opportunities to move resources that a lot of the growth of our work in California happened because organizations saw that tobacco settlement money was coming down the pike and the organization made a decision to focus on expanding children's health and really help lead building the political will to expand health coverage in California and then nationally.

And that was a political opportunity structure. So I think that's where if I were doing that kind of research and connecting, that sounds like the person asking the question, I'd be

trying to figure out how to build really good long standing relationships that help organizations see when those windows of opportunity open.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, thanks. So we've got some other questions coming in. Oh, Gordon, there's a request if you could give the name of the Vanderbilt professor that you mentioned and if you don't have it at the tip of your tongue, we can certainly include that and maybe a link if you have it in our follow up email with the recording.

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

I'll put it in the chat.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Great. Paul Speer, wonderful. And do you happen to remember the name of his book?

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

I keep on telling he needs to write the book, but there's a lot of academic articles, but I can share a good four page summary of the findings as they apply to anyone in the social change business, whether on the foundation or the grassroots side. It's profound and hasn't gotten the attention it probably deserves.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Oh, well, that's great. Yeah, so we will include that in our follow up email to attendees, wonderful. All right, another question. So what advice do each of you have for US communities and local policy makers that are striving to build community power and truly listen and respond to the communities they serve? Big question. I know, but what's your take?

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

And Karabi, we talked a little about this a little bit in our prep for this and I think from a policy-maker standpoint that the key is to really put real decisions on the table and not treat community engagement in a PR lens as much as this is about negotiation. So if I were the Cal Poly people in Julia's story, I think like the seriousness of saying that the sustainability of this project of building a higher education institution and strengthening it in true north California really depends on authentic negotiated relationship with the community. And it's not the first instinct to policy-makers, but it's the best systems thinking. So putting real decision making on the table and participate, budgeting is great, but what are we giving people a say in?

So we talked about this, that New York City is making fundamental zoning and housing policy decisions at shape where people can live in the city. And then at the same time it creates a participatory budgeting process about a fairly small amount of money for recreation activities, then we're not really maximizing or getting the point of community power building. So this is about negotiation and it involves some degree of conflict, but that's how you create systems that really work for a community effectively. So that would be my advice.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

And Julia, I would love for you to respond to this question too. When you were talking earlier, you spoke about the sustainability and how one rally was not going to get the job done. And I'm wondering if you might want to just expand on that a little bit as you think about advice to folks in the US.

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

Well, I think there's an unnecessary fear of community and their employees, like their faculty and professors and students to be at the table. And I think that there's a respect, I know at Faith in Action, we give folks a chance, we give our power people a chance to come to the table and work with us. And we talk about democracy, we talk about the public space and that we're based on participatory democracy, but that's not really the case when it comes down to it. There's power over, power with, and so we work towards power with, and it takes tension to get there. And so I would say take risks and it's going to cause some tension, but really it's the best solution because folks on the ground know what they're experiencing and they can inform the powers that be to work with the community.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

That's awesome. Thanks so much, Julia. All right, another question. Transformation and community power can be thwarted by different forces coming from differing places. The defensiveness of leaders within systems and competition or fighting among change leaders in our communities can undercut the effectiveness. So how have you managed these kinds of challenges as you build coalitions and networks? Who wants to start on that one?

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

Go ahead, Gordon.

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

Yeah, I mean, it's a great question and we sort of talked about the policy-maker side. Clearly as we teach and reteach power building the ecosystem and what it means to help organizations see their role within a larger movement. So division of labor, really organizations being able to describe not only their own vital role, but those of other kinds of organizations. So I think we're really trying faith in action and I think the broader organizing movement to teach and promote systems thinking and collaboration.

And I think the key there is to go back to the original point that we've been talking about today, is to do that in a way that doesn't end up with staff people from different organizations cutting the deals. So this is a big challenge and I think it's especially a big challenge right now in the US social justice sector from an organizing standpoint that you get more collaboration, but if you're not conscious about the local work and leadership development that has to happen, you end up with staff from different organizations figuring out how they're going to work together and it's going to be more than that. So it's a big challenge, but really, and obviously the foundation world has a big world to play in to create incentives for organizations to both collaborate and divide up work based on skills and not try to do everything, every organization do everything, but also to create the expectations that people are bringing new people into these social movements.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Julia, would you like to add something to that?

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

I think Gordon covered it, but I think it's, again, going back to relationships, is developing relationships with all sectors from the grassroots to the treetops as they say. But yeah, and it takes time. I mean, there's no quick fix. So if you're a new organization or an established organization, I think it's going back to those principles of relationship.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, yeah. Thank you. All right, next question. We've been talking about this throughout, but if you want to add more, what policies and practices are critical to building and earning trust in communities?

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

It's funny, I just was with members of the Ugandan parliament and clergy from Uganda who are visiting St. Louis and the Midwest on a leadership exchange. And we were talking about how Faith in Action started to originally work in Africa. And essentially a

Lutheran pastor from Rwanda spent six months interning in Oakland with our Oakland organization and he'd grown up in Tanzania and exile and come back home to help resettle refugees and felt like the organizing process could be a useful tool for moving from relief to rebuilding and started to travel when he got back to Rwanda, to a community, a rural community, about three hours away.

And he described the first couple visits as a lot of skepticism, what resources are you bringing to help us solve our problems? And Pastor John says that he just kept on coming back and he said, I'm not here with resources, I'm here to help you think about what resources you have that you can mobilize to create change. And he says, coming on time, I'm taking the time to listen to people and then coming back. So that's I think some good wisdom based on experience.

And they went on to, basically, they did a listening campaign that resulted in a building, a health clinic, but is now a 38 room, really medical center. But it's incredible the ownership of that community over, it's not the first health center to be built in Rwanda or anywhere, but I don't think you could find the level of ownership of the people in the community over that facility when they show it to you and they think about how it fits into the development in their community. So there are no shortcuts.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, I love that. I love that. Julia, what would you add?

GUEST SPEAKER: Julia Lerma, True North Organizing Network

I don't have anything to add. I mean, I think that's a great example. I love it, thank you.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, I love it too. Well, time has flown. I really appreciate this. Just a fascinating discussion with both of you. But I now actually have a question for the audience and I would love for you to drop your responses into the chat. So reflecting on today's discussion, how might you use your voice in your own community? And just put responses into the chat. Would love to see, how would you use your own voice in your own community? We'll give people a second hopefully. Don't be shy. How will you use your own voice in your own community? This is a quiet group maybe, more time asking for thoughts and suggestions. Attend a community meeting. Awesome. Well, Gordon just gave us some great advice. Show up on time, listen, and come back. Oh, now they're coming in. Great. Remind that we're part of a larger legion of transformative change makers around the world, yes. Trust building, reaching out to community decision-makers. That's a good one. Less time telling communities what we think they want to hear. Creating space for other community voices. Talk with neighbors about joint concerns. Fantastic. Work with others about attending meetings.

Remember that we are all connected and what affects one affects all, absolutely. Building trust, working with decision-makers. Listen and look for interconnections. These are fantastic. Listening to tenants and their demands. Work with faith leaders, yes, of course. Awesome. Well, keep them coming. And I want to offer just a few final comments. First I want to thank everyone for joining us in this incredible conversation and a huge thanks to Gordon and Julia. If you want to learn more about their work, there're some links in the chat, you can see some of the work. Gordon, do you want to just take a minute and say what this is on the screen?

GUEST SPEAKER: Gordon Whitman, Faith in Action International

Yeah, just the main thing is this organizing for power and El Salvador is a case study that we wrote. It's got a one page summary and it's a 20 page case study on the lessons. It covers a lot of the ground we talked about today. And then these are just some examples of trying to create connections between diaspora communities in the US and the places that we're organizing around the world around issues of common concern.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Fantastic. And looks like a webinar series, so fantastic. So we will make the recording available to everyone. You can listen to the conversation again, we hope you'll share it with anyone who you think might be interested. As you sign off, please take a moment to fill out the very short survey that will pop up on your screen. We really do use your feedback in designing this series. I also want to invite you to visit our virtual Blue Marble Gallery. This is a collection of work from our grantees highlighting how they are bringing global learning back to the US. The gallery closes at the end of the month. So please visit soon. And as always, stay safe, be well. And I hope to see you on the next Reimagined in America webinar. Bye-bye.