Power-Building Ecosystem Framework

Certain populations have been—explicitly and implicitly—marginalized and excluded from democratic processes and decision-making that affect their lives, thus achieving justice and inclusion for all requires intentional strategies to address that imbalance. To support such efforts, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) has developed a Power-Building Ecosystem Framework (see figure on the right) and a corresponding dataset of (primarily non-profit) organizations that comprise the diverse and dynamic power-building ecosystem in California.
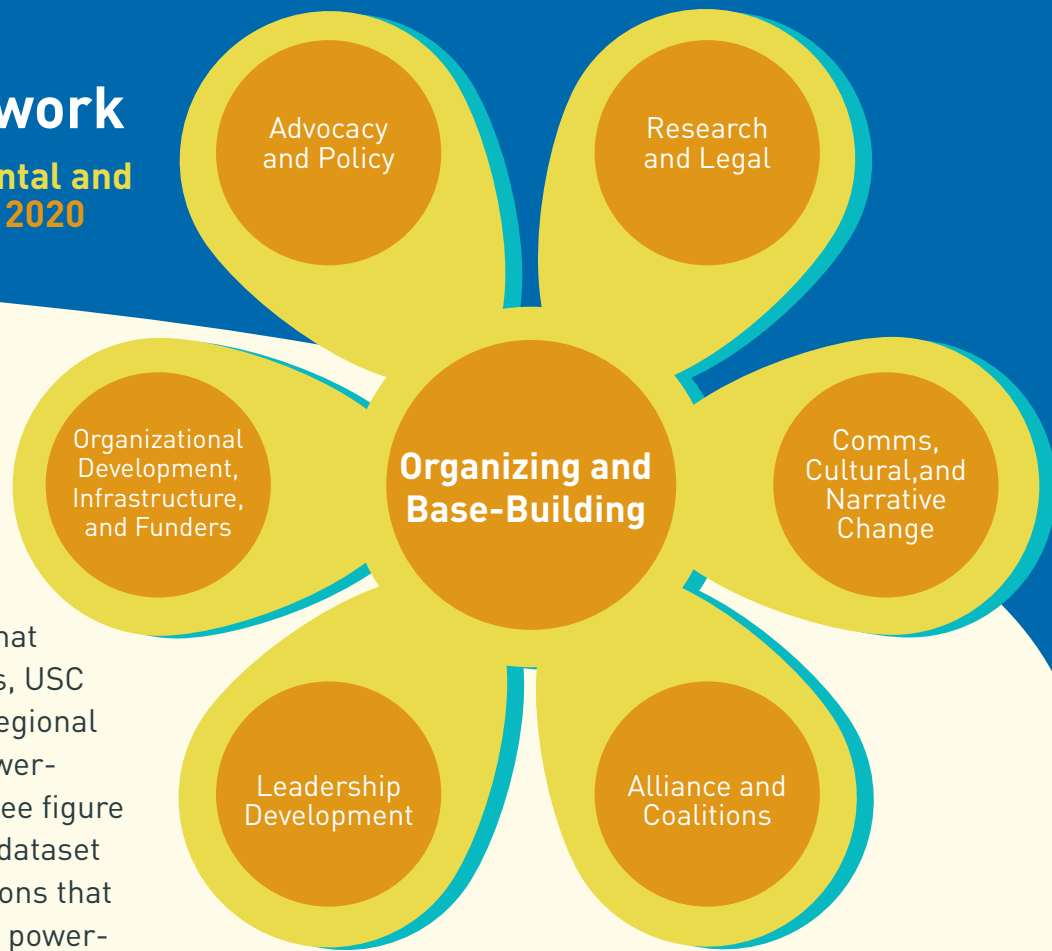
Central to the ecosystem are **organizing and base-building groups.** These organizations are developing an active and aligned base of leaders and members that can engage decision-makers and keep them accountable. It includes the on-going work that starts with the development of grassroots leaders so that they can find their voice and develop their skills not only to speak before decision-makers but also being engaged from the start in identify policy solutions, fighting for their adoption, and finally seeing through its implementation.

Yet an organized base alone is insufficient to challenging the systems and structures that produce inequities. Complementary organizations within the power-building ecosystem include those that focus on **leadership development** (e.g., political education, personal transformation and healing, trainings); r**esearch and legal support; advocacy and policy expertise; communications, messaging, and polling; and arts, culture shifting, and narrative change.** There are also individuals, organizations, and programs that **support the core operations and sustainability of organizations:** organizational development, technology, technical assistance, capacity-building, and funders.

This framework is intended to support inquiry, dialogue, and understanding about the relationships specifically between organizing and other organizations within the ecosystem and how their collective efforts build lasting capacity to continue the work of building the power to wage change in historically excluded communities. It is intended to rebalance relationships so that policy and systems change efforts are accountable to those communities directly affected. In other words, strategies for justice and inclusion not only need to address structural barriers to opportunities—but the strategies themselves need to build capacities for change rooted in historically marginalized and vulnerable communities. In short, what is won is just as important as how it is won.

Power-Building Strategies

Organizations in the power-building ecosystem deploy multiple strategies in building and wielding power. Below is a list of commonly-used strategies:

Organizing: Involving people in efforts to change their circumstances by altering the underlying structures, decision-making processes, policies, and priorities that produce inequities.

Advocacy and grassroots lobbying: Targeting public officials either by directly speaking to them or mobilizing constituents to influence legislative or executive policy decisions.

Alliance and coalition building: Building collaboration among groups with shared values and interest.

Arts and culture: Nurturing the multiple skills of an individual through the arts and encouraging connection through shared experiences ultimately to create solidarity.

Campaigns: Employing a series of organized actions that address a specific purpose, policy, or change.

Communications: Messaging that resonate with communities, connect them to an issue, and inspire them to take action.

Healing: Addressing personal and community trauma and how they connect to larger social and economic inequalities.

Inside-outside strategies: Coordinating support from organizations on the "outside" with a team of like-minded lawmakers on the "inside" to achieve common goals.

Integrated voter engagement: Connecting organizing and voter engagement strategies to build a strong base over multiple election cycles.

Leadership development: Equipping grassroots leaders with the skills, knowledge, and experiences to play a greater role within their movement.

Litigation: Leveraging legal resources to reach outcomes that further long-term goals.

Movement building: Scaling up from single organizations and issues to long-term initiatives, perspectives, and narratives that seek systems change.

Narrative change: Harnessing arts and expression to replace dominant assumptions about a community or issue with dignified narratives and values.

Research and policy analysis: Gathering and analyzing data to create credibility and inform a movement's efforts.

Social services: Providing services that reach clients and also highlight and incorporate their priorities and needs in internal practices.

For more information:
Ito, Jennifer, Madeline Wander, Cynthia Moreno. 2019. California Health and Justice for All Power-Building Landscape: Defining the Ecosystem. Los Angeles, CA: USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity.