

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Philanthropy and Power Supplement
Sponsored by Chorus Foundation

Building Grassroots Political Power By Vivian Yi Huang

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2024

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
www.ssir.org
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BUILDING GRASSROOTS POLITICAL POWER

Our work organizing the Laotian community in Richmond, California, is a case study in power building.

BY VIVIAN YI HUANG

Taking inspiration from the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) formed in 1993 to satisfy a desire and need for an environmental justice organization that was deeply rooted in Asian immigrant and refugee communities.

APEN started the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) and Asian Youth Advocates (AYA) in 1995. Many Laotians had been forced to flee their homelands in the 1970s during the US imperialist wars in southeast Asia and came to Richmond, California, through refugee resettlement programs. Laotian families helped one another navigate life there, including where to buy food and how to get their kids to school. As more Laotian refugees heard about the community in Richmond, they began moving there to be near friends and relatives. Sandy Saeteurn, our Contra Costa County political manager and former AYA youth leader, recently shared how her environment not only was a source of community connection and strength, but also a site of toxins and pollution, where high rates of asthma and cancer proliferated.

“Several girls in AYA lived, like me, in the public housing projects in North Richmond in tight-knit Mien communities,” Saeteurn said. “Sharing meals and planting vegetables together, we were raised with an understanding of mutual care and appreciation for the land. We were also eating and breathing the poison of the oil giant and chemical plant next door.”

At that time, more than 350 other toxic facilities existed in Richmond. People’s homes, schools, and workplaces showed dangerous levels of air pollution, lead, pesticides, and other chemicals. Towering over the city since 1901 was the Chevron Richmond Refinery, which had earned the dishonorable title of being one of the largest polluters in the state.

We at APEN organized the community to fight back against Chevron and protect our health and welfare. Over the last 30 years, and especially in the last decade, with support from Chorus Foundation, our experience has demonstrated that when frontline community members lead and build grassroots political power, we all win with solutions that are essential, effective, and equitable. With its vast resources, philanthropy plays an essential role in long-term funding for organizing and political power building to bring about transformative change.

RICHMOND POWER BUILDING

In 2013, Chevron advanced a proposal to expand their refinery. APEN had contributed to earlier efforts to block a proposal through a legal ruling. The 2013 version, while scaled back, sought to add capacity for the refinery to process greater volumes of dirtier and heavier crude. APEN and Communities for a Better Environment worked with our members and allies to devise a campaign strategy, discuss possible amendments, and assess who we needed to organize.

While our side was smart and strategic in organizing, we fell short of matching the resources that Chevron enjoyed. Overnight, every billboard in the city featured ads touting the alleged merits of the expansion project. Mailboxes were stuffed with flyers and messaging about the economic development need for the project. Weekly neighborhood community barbecues distributed free food, T-shirts, and swag. At hearings, we were outnumbered as Chevron turned out their corporate employees, partner labor union members, and even nonprofit directors who received grant funding from Chevron.

Despite the size of the opposition from Chevron and its partners, our deep roots, courage, and commitment to community helped others understand the negative impact of any expansion of the refinery. We won the city planning commission’s support for amendments. And while we lost the city council vote, our campaigning forced Chevron to pay \$90 million through a community benefit agreement.

As soon as the city council completed its vote on the project, the billboards in town transformed overnight, displaying ads that touted Chevron-backed candidates for city council or attack ads that smeared progressive city council members and candidates. Once again, Chevron poured money out of their overflowing coffers and stuffed mailboxes in a bid to take over the city council. They made a strategic error, however, in failing to develop a ground game. By contrast, we, as volunteers, knocked the community’s doors, organized individuals, phone banked voter lists in Richmond in multiple languages, and talked to reporters. Richmond voters, seeing that Chevron was blatantly trying to buy the election, soundly rejected all three of Chevron’s candidates. Instead, all three progressive candidates were elected, kicking off a legacy of progressive political leadership in the city, largely thanks to partners such as Richmond Progressive Alliance, SEIU, ACCE Action, and APEN’s sister organization, APEN Action.

This remarkable electoral victory, the result of political power organizing, coincided with the start of a 10-year investment from Chorus Foundation. Building on the lessons from that year-long fight, combined with a decade of significant, consistent, and flexible funding from Chorus, we have undertaken a remarkable journey, transforming Richmond into a power-building heavyweight.

BREADTH, DEPTH, AND SCALE

To achieve transformative change for our communities, we have found it critical to build power broadly across our base, deeply within our base, and at scale by collaborating with other sectors and allies.

Power in breadth | We are more powerful when we have more people on the front lines engaged in the fight. Over the last decade, APEN’s base has grown beyond our Laotian elderly refugee community to include Southeast Asian working-age adults, and East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian youth. Our regular civic engagement programs have expanded to connect with voters across Contra Costa County.

To build a strong base, we recognize that organizing is a science *and* an art that requires both a consistent practice of traditional in-person organizing methods, such as one-on-ones, house parties, and classroom presentations, as well as adapting to changing conditions and broadening our reach through integrated voter engagement, digital organizing, and more.

Power in depth | We are more powerful when we have more deeply committed people on the frontlines who can offer leadership in the fight. We provide interpretation and translation for our monolingual members at any event or discussion. We hold an annual APEN Academy, a series of political and skills trainings for our member leaders and provide fellowship/internship opportunities to deepen experience and skills. We also hire from our base, and some of our staff have served as former member leaders.

"In 1989, I hadn't known I could plan meetings, build campaigns, or that I could speak and have city council members respect what I had to say," Sandy Saeteurn recalls. "In my 26 years organizing with APEN, I've learned to knock doors, build coalitions, win campaigns, and empower my community."

Power at scale | Focusing on organizing deeply and broadly with Asian Americans, we have long recognized the importance of building political power collectively with multiracial coalitions and movement ecosystem partners while connecting the local level to the state. This orientation toward building a united front has resulted in new and important formations as organizations across issue areas have joined forces with different constituencies and geographies, all while building with labor.

In 2020, the No Coal in Richmond Coalition brought together teachers, students, parents, local businesses, nurses, environmental justice groups, community residents, and others to win a historic ordinance that both stops the storage and export of coal and petroleum coke and transitions to safer commodities and healthy jobs in a few years.

ROOTED AND STRATEGIC

Over our many years of organizing, we have come to embrace several strategic values:

Ground the vision in our people. | We have fought by drawing on our own lived experience to advance change that is relevant to our people. Seeing our kids with asthma gasp for air, we fight for clean air. Seeing our neighbors forced to move out of Richmond, we fight for renter protections and affordable homes. Seeing climate destruction on the horizon, we fight for climate-resilience centers that are designed for and by us. Seeing Chevron's profiteering while our loved ones suffer from cancer, we fight to transition away from oil and Big Oil.

By rooting our political power building in community members and their families, we have developed a vision that is also rooted in community. As frontline community members, we are closest to the



problem, and it is through our lived experience that we have become experts on solutions. In our vision for a regenerative economy that centers ecological and social well-being for all, it is imperative that our ideas, rather than theoretical positions or academic research, remain relevant to our daily lives.

Keep clarity of destination and coherence of strategies. | I remember developing a platform for an early version of an environmental justice coalition for Richmond. The process was intentional, yielding many agendas that emerged from conversations with our collective organizational bases. But despite a long list of campaigns, we lacked clarity about our final destination: how to arrive there together and how we were going to win. Climate Justice Alliance defines just transition as a vision-led, unifying, and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative one. In 2014, while we battled Chevron on several fronts, Richmond hosted the national Climate Justice Alliance gathering. This event represented an important step in building coherence for our environmental justice movement. We identified our destination, defined what a regenerative economy looks like, and determined how we might get there.

Within APEN, we have sharpened our organizational destinations and our strategies to arrive there. One long-term destination, in partnership with Communities for a Better Environment, is decommissioning the Richmond Chevron refinery. We are currently conducting a series of

community visioning workshops that will shape, guide, and clarify the routes to this outcome that our members wish to see.

Use all the tools in the toolbox. | Through experience, we know that building power requires multiple, sequenced, and integrated tools. Building our local base and leadership development work has been at the heart of APEN's work from the beginning. And yet this is not enough on its own. These efforts must be closely connected to other strategies, such as state-wide organizing and advocacy, electoral organizing, movement building, direct actions, strategic narratives, and using values-aligned resources.

Last year, as the California Air Resources Board (CARB) moved to develop its scoping plan for addressing climate change, APEN, together with our environmental justice allies, demanded a phaseout of oil production and a future beyond oil. In just a few months, we sent 10,000 letters to CARB; mobilized 750 people to participate in marches and rallies in Richmond, Sacramento, and virtually; worked with Richmond members to provide testimony; organized toxic tours in Richmond with decision makers; developed parameters and scoping plan language for an interagency phasedown of oil production; wrote a big-tent advocacy letter with over 80 organizations signing on to oppose the use of carbon capture for fossil fuel infrastructure; devised a paid media campaign including billboards, mailers, radio ads, and TV ads tying the state's push for carbon capture to oil and gas lobbyists; created timely social-media content connecting our scoping plan demands to climate-related news; and generated illustrated op-ed pieces.

Despite an initial unfavorable power analysis, the momentum that accumulated from our strategies led to major wins, such as doubling the state's goals for reducing vehicle miles traveled (requiring scaling up investment in mass transit), stopping the expansion of gas power plants and setting a strong interim target to retire gas plants and bring more clean, renewable energy online, and calling for a multiagency process to phase down oil refining and extraction in line with in-state demand, which is projected to drop 83 percent by 2045.

JOIN US

In Richmond we have shown that frontline organizing works, from voters seeing through Chevron's efforts to buy the election to young people finding power and agency to fight for a different world. Across the country, many communities are winning fights for climate, economic, and racial justice by building grassroots political power in its many forms. Working-class communities are developing visionary demands and resources. Power structures are shifting to advance community governance and agency.

Philanthropy has often focused on shorter-term or new initiatives, but durable, consistent partnerships are what we need. Behind every APEN member testifying at a hearing are the many intentional steps that brought them there: community connection, political education, outreach and recruitment, leadership development, neighborhood meetings, phone banking, organizing the vote, and more. As our experience shows, sustained, long-term grassroots political power building is the key to countering our well-funded opponents who are able to pursue their goals over the course of many years. We need democracy funders, climate funders, and racial justice funders to organize in frontline communities in the long term and at scale to create a just world. □

Vivian Yi Huang is codirector of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

At Kindle Project, we have embraced power-sharing models for more than a decade. Although we have gained many new insights, we continue to maintain that philanthropy must share power with the communities it seeks to uplift.

BY SADAF RASSOUL CAMERON & ARIANNE SHAFFER

In a world where vast inequalities of wealth and opportunity persist, power sharing has emerged as a transformative approach to philanthropy. Power sharing is not a trend but a necessity. But how can more funders and donors share power in lasting ways, and why should they?

At Kindle Project, we have worked for more than a decade to elevate trust-based, people-powered giving models and participatory decision-making. We have seen the impact of this work on communities and donors alike. As one community-based decision maker put it, sharing power "is a way to start knocking down the walls of power imposed on philanthropic relationships to [make way for] one that is more generative, accessible, transparent, and with humanity at the center."

Power sharing centers communities, allowing them to decide for themselves what they need, how much they need, how they need to receive it, and how to define success. Without community self-determination, disrupting the systems we hope to change proves impossible. In the words of Ash-Lee Henderson, coexecutive director of the Highlander Center and a leader in the Movement for Black Lives: "Fund us like you want us to win." Lasting wins are only possible when power is shared.

WHAT IS POWER SHARING?

Power sharing, sometimes referred to as participatory grantmaking, democratizes philanthropy by inviting community members to become decision makers. (They may also be called community-based decision makers, flow funders, or community advisors.) Community members might make grant decisions, choose areas of impact, weigh in on budgets, shape strategy, and hold positions of influence. Power sharing remakes conflict of interest into *confluence* of interest, whereby preexisting, trusting relationships are valued as assets. It raises webs of connection within and among communities (including philanthropy) and enables community-based decision makers to exercise agency over resources in ways that traditional philanthropy does not allow.

Power sharing is lived, learned, and relational. It is not a science, and we cannot algorithm our way through the process. It is about relationships and trust.