What Happens When Communities Organize?

Last year we set out to demonstrate something our experience has shown to be true: that when people come together around issues of common concern, good and important things happen.
What Happens When Communities Organize?

As a long time supporter of the city’s vibrant community organizing and advocacy groups, often in their earliest stages, we wanted to illustrate how these organizations—large and small—are often the connective tissue between community members and campaigns to win significant public policy change. We wanted to capture the rich complexity of our grantees’ experiences and suspected that the most interesting, compelling parts of what we knew to be true couldn’t be easily explained by turning them into data sets.

Determined to draw a fuller picture of what happens when community members come together around common concerns, we decided to ask our grantees directly:

What policy wins and accomplishments over the past 3 years are you most proud of?
How would you categorize the types of policy wins and accomplishments?
What strategies were used to accomplish those wins?
How were community members who participated changed by their involvement in this work?

Findings

1 Wins and accomplishments fell across a wide spectrum.

Foundations talk a great deal about large-scale policy wins and game-changing victories. But, when we asked them directly, what mattered most to our grantees were not the accomplishments that had received the most public attention. Many groups chose wins that may seem modest by some measures but are significant to community members.

City or state policy wins often involved efforts of multiple groups. Newer organizations valued meeting milestones along the way toward larger accomplishments. Groups also valued the development of new leaders and shifting power dynamics as accomplishments.

2 Groups used multiple, sophisticated strategies to achieve policy wins and accomplishments.

There was no linear pattern or set formula to successful campaigns—and groups employed a wide variety of strategies. Most groups reported periods of trial and error, and the need to adjust strategies and adapt to evolving political or policy landscapes.

3 Each win or accomplishment had its own distinctive and instructive story with a strong human element.

New Yorkers from neighborhoods across the city—parents, students, immigrants, people who were formerly incarcerated, LGBTQ youth, public housing residents, shelter residents, former drug users, sex workers, workers in restaurant, retail, and food production—acted as leaders and were personally changed by their experiences.

Notes on Methodology

We sought the advice and expertise of the Community Development Project’s Research Institute at the Urban Justice Center. They developed a set of interview questions, guided our interview process, and helped interpret the information we collected.

We developed a list of New York Foundation grants from 2009 to 2014 to organizations that use community organizing as a core approach.

We used a broad definition for community organizing and considered organizations that engage in leadership development, issue campaign development, membership base building, direct action tactics, and that play a leading role in collaborations, alliances, and coalitions to change public policy. We also considered organizations that are engaging in community building activities such as creating opportunities for broad community participation, pushing racial equity strategies, as well as organizations that integrate community development, advocacy, and human services to establish trust and build community with residents.

Grantees were grouped in two categories: “established” organizations that had been in operation more than 5 years and “start-up” organizations that have recently been added to New York Foundation docket.

Two interview guides were created, one for established organizations and one for start-up organizations. While the questions were generally the same, we asked established organizations to identify a “win” or campaign victory whereas start-up organizations were asked to focus on an organizing campaign “accomplishment.” This was based on the assumption that organizations that had only been in operation a few years may not yet have a significant win but would be able to identify accomplishments that will move them closer to campaign victories. All respondents were able to self-define “win” or “accomplishment.”

In total, 38 interviews were conducted: 25 with established organizations and 13 with start-ups. The data was entered into survey monkey. Qualitative and quantitative data was analyzed and summarized by the Community Development Project and this data was used by designer Manuel Miranda.
Key to Icons

**Wins**

- **Win by an Established Organization**
- **Win by a Start-up Organization**

**Win Categories**

- **Democratic Participation**
  Increased public and citizen participation or democracy in an issue or government body.

- **Neighborhood Change**
  Concrete improvement to a neighborhood.

- **Enforcement**
  The enforcement or implementation of laws that already exist on the books but may not be implemented in practice.

- **Oversight**
  Monitoring and oversight over a particular issue, agency or program from either governmental or citizen committees or individuals.

- **Legislative**
  Involves changing existing laws or introducing new laws. These laws can be local laws, state laws, or federal laws.

- **Budgetary**
  Funding changes, such as increased or decreased funding for a particular program or community or opposition to budget cuts.

**Strategies**

- **Advocacy**
- **Base Building**
- **Coalition Building**
- **Community Lawyering**

- **Direct Action**
- **Leadership Development**
- **Strategic Communication**
- **Participatory Planning & Design**

- **Participatory Action Research**
- **Popular Education**
## Overview of Wins

### Democratic Participation

**Start-Up Organizations**
- Built Leadership of Local Public School Parents
- Mobilized Local Campaign to Address Violence Against Black Women
- Brought Visibility to Struggles of Food Production Workers
- Led Campaign to Reform Brooklyn Housing Court

**Established Organizations**
- Defeated Proposal for Curfew in Domino Sugar Rezoning
- Created a Teen Health Initiative Led by Youth
- Forced City to Replace Toxic Light Fixtures in NYC Public Schools
- Passed the Community Safety Act
- Mobilized Community for Mass Demonstration in DC Calling for Comprehensive Immigration Reform
- Improved School Food in Browneville

### Neighborhood Change

**Start-Up Organizations**
- Built Leadership of Local Public School Parents
- Mobilized Youth in Participatory Budgeting Process
- Won Campaign to Win Permanent Affordable Housing for Hunt’s Point
- Led Campaign to Win Rebuild by Far Rockaway
- Passed NYC Law for Paid Sick Leave

**Established Organizations**
- Passed the Community Safety Act
- Defeated Proposal for Curfew in Hudson River Park
- Defeated Proposal for Curfew in Outer Boroughs
- Passed NYC Law Requiring Paid Sick Days
- Won NYC Law Requiring Paid Sick Days

### Enforcement

**Start-Up Organizations**
- Sourced Meeting Between Speaker and Day Laborers at Workers’ Center Site
- Passed NYC Law for Paid Sick Leave
- Led Campaign to Reform Brooklyn Housing Court
- Won NYC Law for Paid Sick Leave
- Led Campaign to Reform Brooklyn Housing Court

**Established Organizations**
- Passed the Community Safety Act
- Defeated Proposal for Curfew in Hudson River Park
- Passed NYC Law for Paid Sick Leave
- Won Visas for Trafficked Seekers
- Forced City to Replace Toxic Light Fixtures in NYC Public Schools

- Defeated Proposal for Curfew in Outer Boroughs
- Passed NYC Law for Paid Sick Leave
- Won Visas and Settlements for Trafficked Workers
- Won NYC Law Requiring Paid Sick Days
- Forced City to Replace Toxic Light Fixtures in NYC Public Schools

- Passed NYC Law for Paid Sick Days
- Won NYC Law Requiring Paid Sick Days
- Passed NYC Law for Paid Sick Days
- Won NYC Law Requiring Paid Sick Days
Wins and accomplishments fell across a wide spectrum.

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### Oversight

**Start-Up Organizations**
- Mobilized retail workers for campaign to win fair minimum wages
- Mobilized youth in participatory budgeting process

**Established Organizations**
- Forced rent guidelines board to hold hearings in outer boroughs
- Led anti-bullying campaign that engaged Sikh youth
- Mobilized Dominican New Yorkers to win historically low increases
- Won permanent affordable housing in Seward Park site
- Built leadership of local public school parents

### Legislative

**Start-Up Organizations**
- Mobilized for Rickshaw Youth in participatory budgeting process
- Mobilized retail workers for campaign to win fair minimum wages
- Won visas and settlements for trafficked workers
- Passed NYC law for paid sick leave
- Passed the Community Safety Act

**Established Organizations**
- Won campaign for a 30% rent cap for people living with HIV/AIDS
- Won visas and settlements for trafficked workers
- Led anti-bullying campaign that engaged Sikh youth
- Mobilized Dominican New Yorkers to win historically low increases
- Passed the Community Safety Act

### Budgetary

**Start-Up Organizations**
- Mobilized for Rickshaw Youth in participatory budgeting process
- Built leadership of local public school parents
- Forced Franklin Lane High School to reopen its campus library
- Won permanent affordable housing in Seward Park site
- Forced City to replace toxic light fixtures in NYC public schools

**Established Organizations**
- Expended participatory budgeting in NYC from 4 to 24 council districts
- Forced city to replace toxic light fixtures in NYC public schools
- Passed NYC law requiring paid sick days
- Mobilized community for mass demonstration in DC calling for comprehensive immigration reform
- Passed the Community Safety Act

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**Oversight**

**Legislative**

**Budgetary**

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**What Happens When Communities Organize?**
What Strategies Were Used Most Often?

Groups used multiple strategies to achieve policy wins and accomplishments.

**Strategies**

- Advocacy
- Base Building
- Coalition Building
- Community lawyering
- Direct Action
- Leadership Development
- Strategic Communications
- Participatory Planning & Design
- Participatory Action Research
- Popular Education

**Start-Up Organizations**

- Educated Community Members About Rezoning of Domino Sugar Factory Site
- Mobilized Subway and Bus Riders to Oppose Cuts to State Transit Budget
- Passed NYC Law for Paid Sick Leave
- Built Local Campaign to Address Violence Against Black Women
- Brought the Voices of African Immigrants to the Debate Over Immigration Reform
- Mobilized Retail Workers for Campaign to Win Fair Hours and Wages
What Happens When Communities Organize?

- Brought visibility to struggles of food production workers
- Built leadership of local public school parents
- Mobilized Far Rockaway Youth in participatory budgeting process
- Fought to end the use of condoms as evidence of criminal activity
- Led campaign to reform Brooklyn Housing Court
- Passed the Community Safety Act
- Won Rebuild by Design competition for Hunt's Point
- Won visas and settlements for trafficked workers
- Forced city to replace toxic light fixtures in NYC public schools
- Won campaign to stop illegal lockout of tenants
- Moved the NYS Assembly to protect job seekers
- Won campaign for a 30% rent cap for people living with HIV/AIDS

Established Organizations
What Strategies Were Used Most Often?

- Led Anti-Bullying Campaign that Engaged Sikh Youth
- Stopped Police Raids in NYC Shelters
- Mobilized Dominican New Yorkers to Win Historically Low Increases
- Defeated Proposal for Curfew in Hudson River Park
- Shaped the Proposal to Reduce Size of Sheridan Expressway
- Passed NYC Law Requiring Paid Sick Days
- Won Permanent Affordable Housing in Seward Park
- Mobilized Community for Mass Demonstrations to Demand Comprehensive Immigration Reform
- Expanded Participatory Budgeting in NYC from 4 to 24 Council Districts
- Forced Rent Guidelines Board to Hold Hearings in Outer Boroughs
- Improved Address Signage at Red Hook Houses
- Forced Franklin Lewis High School to Reopen Its Campus Library
- Created A Teen Health Initiative Led By Youth
- Improved School Food in Brownsville

New York Foundation
Consistent Support Matters

Years of support by New York Foundation since inception.

Start-Up Organizations

Established Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement</td>
<td>1888</td>
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<td>Queens Community House</td>
<td>1975</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES)</td>
<td>1977</td>
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<td>Neighbors Together</td>
<td>1982</td>
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<td>Cypress Hills LDC</td>
<td>1983</td>
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<td>Justice Committee</td>
<td>1984</td>
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<td>NY Communities for Change</td>
<td>1985</td>
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<td>CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities</td>
<td>1986</td>
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<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
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<td>Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice</td>
<td>1994</td>
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<td>Child Welfare Organizing Project</td>
<td>1994</td>
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<td>Community Voices Heard</td>
<td>1994</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Point CDC</td>
<td>1994</td>
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<tr>
<td>CASA 2005 (A project of New Settlement Apartments)</td>
<td>1994</td>
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<td>Mary Mitchell Family &amp; Youth Center</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<td>Picture the Homeless</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE)</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desis Rising Up &amp; Moving (DRUM)</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>FIERCE</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>Mirabal Sisters Cultural and Community Center</td>
<td>2001</td>
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<td>Restaurant Opportunities Center for New York</td>
<td>2001</td>
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<td>Sikh Coalition</td>
<td>2001</td>
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<td>Damayan</td>
<td>2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red Hook Initiative</td>
<td>2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brooklyn Food Coalition</td>
<td>2009</td>
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The Stories Behind the Wins

Democratic Participation

Our reason for existence at the end of the day is not a new law or discrete improvement, but for members to create an organization of their own that they can use to exert pressure and voice for years to come. It’s not only about increasing enforcement of the law but about developing ties and solidarity with allies — this is what matters to us. Members value improvements in their jobs but they also value feeling empowered and acquiring new skills — personal development is valued at the same level of not being screamed at.

— BRANDWORKERS

Base Building

Neighborhood Change

Participatory Action Research

Community residents conducted participatory based research and engaged in planning. They were effective. It is a core strategy now and a game changer. We do direct service, community organizing, but now we also say we do community-based participatory research.

— GOOD OLD LOWER EAST SIDE

Popular Education

The Rent Guidelines Board (RGB) process is confusing to people. It is confusing how the government is involved in the decision, or why the process has worked the way it has.

— COMMUNITY ACTION FOR SAFE APARTMENTS

Leadership Development

Core members involved in participatory budgeting in District 8 have seen their leadership skills advanced through participation in the process and taking on new roles and responsibilities for carrying out a process in their districts.

— COMMUNITY VOICES HEARD
Each win had its own instructive story with a strong human element.

**Enforcement**

Collaboration helped us achieve our labor trafficking win. Safe Horizon and the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center used community lawyering to win wages owed to our members from diplomats.

—DAMAYAN

As soon as we learned that the NYPD was conducting middle of the night shelter raids at Freedom House on the Upper West Side, our organizer and members began doing outreach there to gather information.

—PICTURE THE HOMELESS

It was critical to bring together a combination of parents, teachers, custodial staff directly affected by PBV exposure with legal back-up and cross-party elected official support.

—NY COMMUNITIES FOR CHANGE

**Oversight**

Many of our members live in three-quarter houses, where they are subject to the very common practice of illegal evictions, or threat of illegal evictions. When they call 911 for help, NYPD officers frequently and improperly take the landlords’ side and do not follow their own Patrol Guide procedures on unlawful evictions. We worked with the NYPD to create a message that dispelled many of the misconceptions about three-quarter houses and unlawful evictions. It was read in all NYPD precincts for ten consecutive roll calls. Our coalition worked hard to ensure that three-quarter house tenants are made aware of the message and its use at a tool they can use to prevent illegal evictions.

—NEIGHBORS TOGETHER

**Community Lawyering**

**Direct Action**

**Strategic Communications**

**Advocacy**
**Legislative**

**Leadership Development**
Members were instrumental in raising the profile of these issues. They were extremely effective at rallies, told their stories to city council members, and they engaged consumers. They conducted community dialogue sessions where workers, consumers and employers sat over a meal. This was really possible because of the leadership development of members.

—ROC-NY

**Advocacy**
When City Council Speaker Viverito heard an employer advocating on behalf of the workers, everything changed for her. It’s important that we get key stakeholders speaking with key political officials.

—WORKERS JUSTICE PROJECT

**Popular Education**
How do you keep people excited and energized when they are discouraged? Popular education and storytelling build resilience and help members feel empowered. We are not waiting to be validated by elected officials or the New York Times.

—RED UMBRELLA PROJECT

**Base Building**
A decade of work in the police accountability movement was at the forefront of the work to pass the Community Safety Act.

—CAAAV

**Budgetary**

**Coalition Building**
A big fight, like trying to push an issue in the state budget, requires a lot of strength — enough to make the elected officials concerned about their constituent members. A coalition has to have enough capacity to produce all of the basic elements of a budget campaign: special events, communications with elected officials, communications with news media, and so on. The coalition was essential to pushing our issue — particularly because in the state budget, it was valuable to work with organizations that have relationships outside the five boroughs.

—RIDER’S ALLIANCE

**Participatory Action Research**
Lack of interest in attending college was an issue that came up in surveys and, in particular, the lack of college access services. Youth zeroed in on the local high school’s library as an issue. They visited other libraries, met with librarians, examined Department of Education budget, and met with principals to examine barriers to providing library services.

—CYPRESS HILLS LDC

**Advocacy**
The campaign victory involved both a statutory change and a significant, ongoing budget commitment by New York City and State. In addition, with regard to oversight, one of the tactics we used was monitoring to spotlight unstable housing among their clients, and the disproportionate impact it had on low-income communities of color, which we used to further build support for the campaign.

—VOCAL
The Leaders Behind the Wins

Youth and community members were able to advocate and create proposals for improvements they would like to see in their communities. Many times, youth have no say in the decisions that are made for them regarding school, afterschool, community centers and recreation.

—ROCKAWAY YOUTH TASK FORCE

Members are asked, “Do you believe in a solution and are you willing to risk and struggle?”

—BRANDWORKERS
One of our leaders had been in housing court for over six months battling an eviction when this bill was passed and signed into law, which gave her a reprieve. In the future, she won’t have to choose between paying her rent and traveling to the doctor, covering healthcare co-pays, buying groceries, or other essential needs.

—VOCAL

They are seeing the power of their investigative work, the power of coming together and brainstorming solutions, and agencies having to reform their ways because they know that they are being watched.

—NICE
These wins have an immediate impact on our members — they obtain quicker translation; are better able to physically get to the courtrooms on time; are more fully informed about what their proposed stipulations mean, and are more likely to have their repairs addressed as part of their cases.

— FLATBUSH TENANT COALITION

Many of our members are in shelters and subject to police raids. If not arrested themselves, they are woken up because a shelter resident near them is being awakened and arrested, loudly, lights on. Some members described being terrorized by this, or feeling humiliated. Members were proud that we mobilized and organized and turned this policy around.

— PICTURE THE HOMELESS
A special thanks to the following groups for responding to our survey:

African Communities Together
Black Women’s Blueprint
Brandworkers
Brooklyn Food Coalition
Brooklyn Movement Center
CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities
Center for Frontline Retail
Churches United for Fair Housing
Community Action for Safe Apartments/New Settlement Apartments
Child Welfare Organizing Project
Community Voices Heard
Cypress Hills LDC
Damayan
Desis Rising Up & Moving
FIERCE
Flatbush Tenant Coalition
Good Old Lower East Side
Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement
Justice Committee

Laundry Workers Center
Mary Mitchell Family & Youth Center
Mekong
Mirabal Sisters Culture and Community Center
Neighbors Together
New Immigrant Community Empowerment
New York Communities for Change
Picture the Homeless
The Point CDC
Red Hook Initiative
Red Umbrella Project
Restaurant Opportunities Center for New York
Riders Alliance
Rockway Youth Task Force
Queens Community House
Sikh Coalition
VOCAL-NY
Worker’s Justice Project
Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice

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