

BALANCING SHORT-TERM GOALS WITH A LONG-TERM VISION

Multipronged Strategies for Social Change

Organizers shared complex visions for long-term social change. These visions cut across specific social issues to target systemic transformation and necessitated the use of diverse approaches to social change. Participants grounded these visions in addressing the self-identified needs, and sustaining the engagement, of the youth they serve. They saw the complexity of their approaches to social change as presenting challenges to their human and financial resources and called for opportunities for deep conversations between organizing groups, researchers, and funders about how to address these challenges and realize their visions for long-term change.

This section is part of the Developing Youth Power Series, based on a study of youth organizing groups in California that was conducted by the [CU Boulder Research Hub](#) between 2021 and 2024.

What's In This Section

Youth organizers participating in our study during the spring of 2022 indicated that their organizations have visions of long-term social change. Groups are not content with small scale political wins, such as influencing policy at the level of individual schools or school boards. Instead, they are using multiple, complementary strategies to secure long-term change. These include, for example, supporting the development of strong young leaders, organized communities, and intersectional coalitions. They are also working to hold elected representatives accountable, monitor policy implementation, engage voters, and create compelling public narratives. (See also Healey & Hinson, 2013; Terriquez & Milkman, 2021).

Organizers participating in our study in the summer of 2023 expanded on these ideas, describing their visions for long-term change. They indicated that establishing and pursuing long-term organizational visions is about more than just a shift in the temporal scale of their work. It also involves extending their work to a broader range of issues and utilizing an expanded range of social change strategies to address the complex needs of the youth they work and sustain their engagement. This section summarizes participants' discussions of the necessity of long-term visions of social change and of the complex mix of short- and long-term strategies they use to work toward those long-term visions.



Organizing Strategies for Balancing Multiple Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

Holding a Vision for Long-Term Change

Some participants spoke clearly about the importance of a long-term vision for change. For example, one participant said:

“If we’re not thinking ten years in the future, then we’re being reactive to situations. And so, how are we imagining really radicalized and really...deep futures where we’re not just reacting to the current situation? So, I think that that’s why it resonates for me because we’re kind of on the same trajectory. How are we thinking about things 10, 15 years down the line like the opposition is?”

Others focused on visions of systemic change, highlighting the goal of moving from addressing specific, localized challenges within systems to transforming the systems themselves.

“We really want to build youth power. We want them to be able to have a lever to change these conditions; we’re not just being like, “Hey, let’s just do this for a couple of minutes.” We want to create a system where we can get out of that system, you know what I mean?”

Youth organizing leaders saw their long-term visions as being intricately connected to the immediate challenges facing the youth with whom they work. One leader described the relationship between the needs and perspectives of individual youth and a long-term approach to systemic change this way:

“I think most organizing starts with trying to understand the immediate impacts of what you’re feeling, and you just start to peel back more and more layers to get to those root cause issues, and then you realize how deep in there those root cause issues are.”

Leaders we spoke with shared several strategies they use to enact their complex visions of change. These included building multigenerational alliances and organizing across interconnected political issues.

“If we’re not thinking ten years in the future, then we’re being reactive to situations.”

- Youth Organizing Leader

Building Long-Term Power through Multigenerational Alliances

Several participants echoed findings from prior research (e.g., Valladares, et al., 2021) when they noted that building youth power meant moving beyond only organizing youth to embracing multigenerational approaches to social change. One participant, for example, talked about multigenerational approaches as a growing focus for their organization.

“We often only work with young folks or try to get other young folks in our base, but... when you’re doing school stuff, too, some of your allies are teachers and admin and whatnot. And then we’re not really tapping into the parent portal or tapping into the OG grandparents and stuff who went to the same schools, who’ve had the same issues who would be like, ‘No, this is messed up. Why are we still doing this?’”

Participants talked about these multigenerational strategies as both supporting an expanded vision of systemic change and providing a means for long-term engagement of youth. Multigenerational strategies provide an expanded power base, enabling organizations to work across different aspects of an issue and to use diverse strategies in their efforts to secure long-term social change. They also provide a pathway for sustained youth engagement, offering new ways for youth to stay engaged as they move into adulthood. To learn more, see section [Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#).



Recognizing the Interconnections among Social Issues

Other focus group participants noted that long-term change requires expanding beyond the youth-focused issues their organizations have historically pursued to a broader focus on addressing complex, interconnected issues. They talked about making connections between their work around public education and different forms of youth justice to climate justice, housing and food insecurity, health justice, and immigration. In discussing the reasons for this expanded focus, participants centered the needs and perspectives of the youth they worked with. For example, one participant, recalling a focus group they had carried out with newcomer youth, spoke to the range of issues that newcomer youth raised about what would make their lives better:

“They talk about what would make their life better. But we start to see that they identify the systemic issues that would make lives better for their neighbors, their siblings, their parents, the people around them, right. We start to see things relating to homelessness, to rent control, to access. Even most recently to cooling centers, sharing what conditions are like living in somewhere like Los Angeles after migrating from a new country.”

Others noted that because of their strong connections to youth, organizing groups were sometime “called on” to address more systemic problems in the community. One participant, for example, shared that the stresses faced by the families of youth organizers during the COVID-19 pandemic led them to branch out from their historical focus on education and drug prevention to take on challenges in the areas of renter’s rights, mental health, and school attendance/grading policies.

Similarly, seeing families impacted by fires and mudslides led to one group engaging in environmental justice work. A participant who worked for an organization historically focused on education justice summarized the connection succinctly, noting: “[In] Oakland, it’s big housing issues and stuff out here. Folks can’t go to school if they ain’t got no place to rest their head.” Existing research on education organizing indicates that centering the people most impacted by a problem helps with identification of the most urgent problems and development of creative, sustainable solutions (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006).



To meet their long-term visions for social change, organizers embrace multipronged approaches to organizing and use diverse strategies that they describe as being complementary. In discussing the motivation for engaging in diversified strategies, participants highlighted, for example, the ways that combining short-term, locally focused strategies with ongoing efforts for long-term change and providing direct services alongside advocacy and leadership development initiatives allowed them to address the immediate concerns of youth and to sustain their long-term participation.

Organizers we spoke with in the spring of 2022 indicated that their organizations engage in diverse social change strategies that cross the boundaries of different approaches to social change. For example, they pursue:

- Policy campaigns AND youth leadership development
- Radical dreaming AND pragmatic voter engagement
- Centering youth AND forming multigenerational coalitions
- Advancing compelling narratives in the public sphere AND offering political education for youth members

Participants in the summer of 2023 expanded on these findings, sharing examples for the complex and complementary strategies that their groups embrace including:

- Healing from trauma, political education tied into ethnic studies, community organizing, and [artivism](#) (the intersection of art and activism).
- Educating youth about their rights, and advocating for school, state, and federal policy change.
- Engaging in school board hearings alongside state and national level advocacy to address the needs of migrants.
- Advocacy and organizing to reduce the minimum age for voting in school board elections, paired with school-based campaigns for localized changes, like hiring a school crossing guard.



Leaders explained that this multipronged approach allows organizations to address the immediate needs of youth, while also advancing their long-term visions for social change. One participant highlighted the way that a diversified range of social change strategies fits into long-term visions of social change:

“We’re definitely on to do some long-term social change. There was a campaign that we were working on to make it eligible for 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in their school board elections. And so we’re doing that locally, but that’s still something that’s going to be hopefully institutionalized that we can keep going on and building off of in the future. But there’s also school-based campaigns . . . it’s a combination. We want to have the young folks be able to get—achieve a win, things that are essential to them; simple things like access to restrooms all the time.”

This idea was echoed by other participants, who described how local, short-term campaigns in combination with direct service meet youth’s immediate needs and are critical to sustaining youths’ motivation and engagement in long-term change efforts. This framing of the benefits of mixing strategies was echoed in the statements of a leader whose organization was combining provision of direct services with advocacy campaigns.

“Direct services is part of keeping people in the long-term... systemic change work. And so we started advocating for dollars to support food insecurities, housing insecurities, and transportation insecurities that the young people were kind of facing day to day so they—so we can keep them in the work and keep them in community.”



Challenges and Takeaways

Challenges

Participants in our focus groups were clear-eyed and pragmatic in their discussion of their visions for long-term change and using multiple strategies to achieve that change. They identified and spoke movingly to the tensions and challenges in expanding the scope and complexity of their work. For example, one leader highlighted the potential that taking on multiple, interconnected issues could strain their human and financial resource bases.

“We’re going to need to expand in some form or fashion to be able to have young folks to be able to be agents in these fields too. Climate justice is going to be a thing that’s going to be coming up soon or housing, all these issues. . . . But figuring out how we can make the connections to be part of these or bring those concepts... into our organizing work without overloading us and . . . overburdening us, you know?”

Some participants pointed to participation in coalitions and collaboration with other organizations as clear strategies for mitigating overload. Yet, others pointed out tensions and risks, noting that partnerships were sometimes contentious because of underlying differences in strategic approach and organizational values. They spoke of the extra care and resources required to support youth in navigating tensions in collaborative work and to ensure their voices were heard and valued.

These tensions could be more pronounced in multigenerational campaigns; participants noted that youth organizers sometimes faced ageism, sexism, and other disempowering dynamics in these settings. The dynamics around collaboration could also be particularly complicated when organizations simultaneously applied both insider and outsider approaches. To learn more, see section: [Combining Insider and Outsider Strategies.](#)



Takeaways

Participants suggested that the use of diversified strategies in pursuit of expansive goals for long-term, systemic change grew out of attention to the needs and interests of the youth that are at the center of their work. Diverse strategies are required to address the complex systemic inequalities underlying both the immediate and long-term challenges that youth face. These include inequities across multiple systems—including housing, transportation, and food—that shape the life courses of youth and their families.

Participating leaders acknowledged the challenges involved in simultaneously pursuing multiple youth organizing strategies, but they also recognized that there could be no singular strategy to address the multifaceted needs of youth and realize long-term social change. Rather, they called for opportunities to engage in critical ongoing conversations with funders and allies about how to support the long-term, systemic, and multifaceted social change strategies they use.

A sense of opportunity and potential was clear in participants' deep engagement with each other during the focus groups, and in their calls for presentation of research findings in ways that would allow for, and

facilitate, deeper conversations between organizing groups, researchers, and funders. Many highlighted the value of online and in-person gatherings and ongoing learning communities that could provide opportunities to continue the conversation, to advocate for funding and other structural changes to better support their work, and to learn from each other how they might navigate the tensions and realize the opportunities inherent in complex, multifaceted approaches to long-term social change. To learn more, see sections: "[Understanding the California Funding Context](#) and [Support for Youth Organizing in California](#)."

