

ReGeneration:

Youth Leadership in Environmental Justice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By Julie Quiroz-Martinez, Diana Pei Wu and Kristen Zimmerman

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Letter To The Field

In September 2005, during the creation of this report, the U.S. experienced one of the most devastating events in the history of environmental racism. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, it laid bare the reality of U.S. racism and global environmental destruction. These two dynamics are intimately co-created, and their impacts are most visible in the bodies, spirits and physical environments of poor people of color. For decades, the environmental justice movement has been developing holistic ways to understand and solve these global issues.

Years before Hurricane Katrina, the forces of environmental racism were well underway. In New Orleans, African Americans were segregated in impoverished wards at the lowest sea levels, where engineers knew the levees would break in a high magnitude hurricane. As forecasters warned that 2005 would be the most powerful hurricane season on record, no government agency planned how to evacuate people without cars, money, credit cards or safe places to go. The days following the hurricane have now become history – almost a thousand dead, thousands stranded in a poisonous nightmare, families torn apart, communities decimated while the federal response continues to be one of neglect and abuse rather than “relief.”

When Hurricane Rita hit the same region and Hurricane Wilma struck Miami, we saw similarly disastrous consequences for low-income communities and communities of color. This year alone, human health and environmental disasters struck El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, India, Pakistan and other nations. These catastrophes illustrate the real implications of climate change and environmental injustice. The decades to come will tell the even bigger story. How can we rebuild to insure that future disasters do not repeat the same patterns of privilege and oppression?

Environmental justice organizations have the holistic analysis and tools to address the root social causes that exacerbate these catastrophes. They are working intergenerationally, innovating new approaches and honoring the work of both youth and elders. They are making connections across issue areas and communities, and advancing a vision of a healthy movement that is sustainable for the long haul. Strong grassroots organizational networks led prominently by young people are among those anchoring communities in times of crisis.

Whether you are a racial justice organizer, environmental conservation advocate, or youth development funder, the youth environmental justice movement contains models and insight to reinvigorate every sector of the national progressive movement. The groups in this report offer hopeful solutions for dismantling racism and healing environmental devastation. By supporting these organizations we can work together to create a future that honors our communities and the earth.

*In Partnership,
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Movement Strategy Center
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Introduction



“The Environmental Justice movement is evolving like any movement or person. We are in a moment of self-reflection: Where have we been? Where are we at? Where do we want to be?”

— Southwest Network
for Environmental
and Economic
Justice

Growing Pains and ReGeneration

In October 2002, hundreds of activists converged in Washington, D.C. for the largest and most diverse gathering of environmental justice leaders ever in the United States: The Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, or Summit II. Coming from all over the country and the world, these activists gathered to build on the victories and strengthen the roots of their movement. On the second morning of the gathering, the Summit Planning Committee took the stage for the day’s opening plenary with an audience of more than 1400 people.

Just as the session was about to start, a group of mostly young people streamed into the room, wielding signs and chanting “No Justice, No Peace!” They were greeted by applause from the entire audience, including those onstage. Seconds later, the protesters themselves took the stage and surrounded the plenary table, making it clear that the Planning Committee was the target of their protest. While some committee members recognized what was coming, others were surprised to be the target of this mobilization.

A large number of the youth attending the Summit had organized to present carefully crafted demands to the Planning Committee, which was mostly (but not entirely) adult led. The protesters were partly insisting on more equitable inclusion and support of youth in the environmental justice movement. However, like much youth organizing, the demands were not limited to youth-specific issues; they addressed much broader concerns, such as the tension between professional/academic and community-based leaders in the movement.

Despite some interpretation of this moment as a sign of weakness in the movement, this strategic confrontation demonstrated the success of base-building and leadership development taken on by the environmental justice movement after the first Summit in 1991. A key goal from Summit I was to strengthen and diversify the base of the movement as a whole, in large part by increasing the leadership of youth, immigrant communities and grassroots activists. With this new diversity also came new complexities, challenges and opportunities. While many elders questioned the young organizers' methods, the protest became an opportunity for authentic intergenerational dialogue on questions shared by organizers of all ages.

Of course, this story represents only one moment in time, not the history and many layers of an entire movement. But it shows the promise of constituencies coming together across time to create stronger alliances for social change. It also creates a vibrant space for posing the crucial questions that this report attempts to address: What does a strong intergenerational, multiracial movement look like? How do youth and adults see environmental justice and organizing differently? What place does youth-led work have in this movement? How can we create leadership development structures created that support youth and elders to grow in local organizations and across a national movement? What is the role of culture and healing in organizing? How does a movement regenerate itself over many generations? In short, it raises questions that are crucial not only for the continuation of youth organizing in environmental justice, but for the future of the entire progressive movement.

As we settle into the new millennium, most social justice movements in the United States are struggling through a painful period of self-reflection. Still in the shadows of the civil rights and liberation movements of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, we are shining new light on our assumptions and practices and scrutinizing their effectiveness in achieving long-term social change. While calls for new ideas and leadership echo from every corner, young people often take the lead on identifying issues as well as creating the space for dialogue and action. Looking back across historic and contemporary movements, the struggles of multigenerational movement building stand out as complex, often painful, and nearly universal. Those engaged in these movements have few opportunities for collective reflection and may even view their experience as "dirty laundry" that should not be aired. But it is only through honest reflection and recounting, accompanied by thoughtful listening, that we can reinvigorate movements for social change.

With deep admiration for those building youth leadership in environmental justice, and for their honesty and candor in discussing it, the authors of this report have documented how organizations across the country are thoughtfully and ambitiously addressing multigenerational movement building. In doing so, we hope to spark opportunities for growth that will generate a broader, stronger social justice movement.

About the Report

Movement Strategy Center (MSC) served as the home for the research process that culminated in this summary and the report. MSC provides organizational capacity building, power mapping, collective visioning tools, field research and alliance building facilitation for groups and individual leaders. The organization is committed to advancing the next generation of leaders for a sustainable progressive movement. As a movement-building intermediary, the organization has developed strong relationships, deep insights, useful documents and resources in the area of youth organizing. MSC has also played a vital role in identifying, exploring and clarifying the relationship between youth organizing and larger movement building. The Ford Foundation approached MSC to document the role of youth in the environmental justice movement, partly with the goal of bringing new funders to this important work. We saw the opportunity to inform the funding strategy of a major philanthropic institution, and also to provide information, analysis and reflection to people and organizations involved in the day-to-day work of organizing disenfranchised communities for social change.

As the first step in this process, MSC assembled a team of three diverse individuals who could bring both an environmental justice and a youth organizing perspective to the effort, as well as experience in developing useful reports for both community groups and funders. The authors conducted interviews and site visits with 40 people in 27 organizations and 15 states, from Alaska to New York to New Mexico. The writers looked for groups that represent a broad range of racial and ethnic communities, as well as groups doing multiracial and multiethnic work. Unfortunately, we were not able to reach all of the groups we tried to contact. Additionally, the authors interviewed 10 individuals in foundations that provide funding to environmental justice, environmental or youth programs, and sought input and advice from several other individuals who hold important knowledge in the environmental justice movement.

The report is not a comprehensive survey of all groups involved with youth environmental justice work; rather, it is a scan that captures a diversity of experiences and stories within the field. We focused primarily on new organizing strategies and processes rather than campaign goals, outcomes and impacts. However, it is important to note that through these processes, groups are able to achieve outcomes that they could not achieve any other way.

The authors focused on the following questions:

1. How and why are environmental justice groups integrating youth leadership and intergenerational alliances into their work?
2. How are they expanding leadership and supporting individual and organizational transitions?
3. How are youth environmental justice organizers using new strategies that expand and connect issue areas and communities?
4. How is the environmental justice movement finding new ways to regenerate and sustain itself?
5. How do young grassroots leaders and relevant funders think this intersection would best be resourced and supported?

In this summary, we offer condensed Findings from the Field and Findings about Funding, followed by a set of Recommendations for Funders and Conclusions. Finally, we have included information about a new funding initiative to support youth environmental justice work. Whatever your area of social change work, we believe that youth organizing in environmental justice has vital and hopeful insights to offer. The amazing contributions of young people in this field are just one example of where a movement's "growing pains" can ultimately lead.

Executive Summary of Findings



I. Findings from the Field

1. Youth organizing in the environmental justice movement is transforming strategies of organizing and leadership.

Youth organizing and leadership development are bringing new life and possibility to the environmental justice movement, reshaping the ways people organize and building new forms of facilitative leadership. Youth organizers can often employ different organizing strategies more effectively, such as: using more direct tactics, reaching out to disenfranchised communities, making connections between issues, and shifting the culture within their organizations to be fun, learning-based and sustainable. Young people and their allies are also building new forms of leadership that are more sustainable and empower all members of their organizations and communities.

2. Environmental justice organizations forge definitions of “youth” that reflect their communities and organizing strategies.

Who comprises the category of “youth”? Within youth environmental justice organizations, the definition of youth is dynamic, often changing depending on the situation and community. Organizers may define youth as under eighteen, under twenty-one, or under thirty-five. Some organizations define youth according to individual members’ self-identification. Others are more focused on developing “new” leaders of all ages in their communities. As Tammy Bang Luu of the Bus Riders Union stated: “Our ‘next generation’ is multigenerational.”

3. Youth environmental justice work can take an intergenerational form and youth-led form – and both are important and complementary.

Most of the groups featured in the report are doing both intergenerational and youth-led organizing. Intergenerational organizing links youth, adults and elders in a common cause. It prioritizes the empowerment of all community members, including young people. Teresa Almaguer of Poder, CA explained: “The trend is not just about youth. It’s about how we develop the skills of *all* our people.” For some groups, intergenerational organizing may naturally emerge from deeper community values; other groups transition to this form because it offers many advantages. For example, intergenerational organizing has the potential to heal rifts between youth and adults, and to support sustainability of the movement over time.

Youth-led organizing is driven by young people’s decision making at all levels. There are many reasons for choosing a youth-led approach, including providing opportunities for youth to lead and mentor each other, building a more flexible organization that reflects current issues and cultures, providing youth-specific space in under-resourced communities, and creating a non-adultist organization that prioritizes young people’s agency. As with intergenerational organizations, groups may be founded as youth led or may transition to this form through crisis and/or opportunity.

4. Youth environmental justice work is deeply grounded in political education.

Youth environmental justice groups identified political education as a key strategy to help young people become leaders and organizers. Political education is used in developing young people’s critical thinking and other skills, campaign development and research, base building and outreach, capacity building, and strengthening traditional ways of life. In many cases, organizations are filling in for the inadequacies of public schools. Groups are using diverse strategies for political education, such as power mapping (analyzing where power is held within and over communities), peer exchanges and site visits, training institutes and conferences, toxic tours of communities, and presenting community histories and workshops in schools. Many organizations also train youth members to be trainers and facilitators for other young people. Ultimately, political education gives young people tools to understand, navigate and begin to change their world.

5. Innovative cultural work is a strong feature of youth environmental justice organizing.

Across organizations and regions, youth organizing and leadership development groups are using the power of arts and culture to engage youth in the movement, to reach the hearts of community members, to inspire dialogue around divisive topics, and to build community. This cultural work is a central strategy for environmental justice and falls into five categories: media arts, performing arts and music, spiritual work, storytelling, and community-building projects.

6. Youth environmental justice organizations blend organizing with long-term youth development and support.

As much or more than winning a specific campaign, most youth organizing environmental justice groups prioritize developing young people as leaders as a long-term goal. This means supporting young people not only to become organizers but to navigate the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual challenges of living in toxic environments. For example, some organizations combine youth-led campaign work, skills training, leadership development and mentoring with academic support, career counseling, job readiness training and other supports. This holistic approach to youth leadership development is creating more sustainable models for organizing and community building. Most groups identified

youth-led campaign development as their primary strategy of youth development, as it supports young people to shift their self-concept, then grasp their ability to act for change, and finally to mobilize and organize other youth. The key challenges to this approach are the lack of additional resources and capacity within organizations and a need for greater information sharing between organizations.

7. Environmental justice organizations and networks are struggling to support generational transitions.

Formal youth leadership development programs are still fairly new in the environmental justice movement. As the first few generations of highly skilled young leaders emerge, organizations must figure out how to involve them as they age out of the “youth” category, however defined. Organizers identified several key needs: program structures and curriculum to help young people plan their futures, support for young people who are making the transition into new schools or employment, resources to support entry-level positions in grassroots organizations, and stronger network-based programs to train young people for positions in the movement and other fields. Efforts to facilitate generational transitions are grounded in a deep concern for the sustainability of both the environmental justice movement and the social justice movement in general. This approach includes support not just for youth, but also for elders and adults to make healthy transitions and create a strong, intergenerational movement.

8. Youth environmental justice organizations maintain a connection to movement building through networks and training institutes.

Community-based youth environmental justice groups are participating in movement building through environmental justice networks. Most of the organizers we spoke with emphasized the importance of meeting other youth organizers face-to-face. Networks and peer exchanges help young people break a sense of isolation, share resources, expand their worldview and develop connections to broader movements. Youth organizers from community-based organizations are participating in networks, gatherings, institutes and conferences, especially when there are opportunities for peer-led trainings and workshops.

9. Youth leadership development is evolving within a larger focus on movement sustainability.

When groups invest in youth leadership development, it is often part of an intentional shift toward healing and more holistic, transformational organizing. This shift comes out of a critique of past generations’ models of organizing, as well as an analysis of how to build movement sustainability. Many youth organizers are engaged in practices of evaluation and reflection that can create healing on individual, interpersonal and institutional levels. In fact, young people often possess a hopefulness and flexibility that allows them to be leaders in any community healing process.

The young organizers interviewed for this report envision a movement that is courageous enough to look at the hard issues, and strong enough to work through differences with love and forgiveness. Many people expressed that in order to realize this vision, we need to create more room for everyone in the movement – from youth to elders – to transition and grow as leaders.

II. Findings about Funding

1. Youth organizing in environmental justice intersects funding categories.

The structure of the funding world means that youth organizing and leadership development in environmental justice can end up falling through the cracks. Funders focused on “youth organizing” may overlook youth work taking place in multigenerational environmental justice organizations. Similarly, funders focused on “environmental justice” may not have exposure to environmental justice work taking place in multi-issue youth-led organizations. Ultimately however, most funders interviewed believed that a healthy intersection between environmental justice and youth organizing funding would emerge to support the intersections and synergy taking place at the grassroots level.

2. Supporting leadership expansion strengthens youth environmental justice work.

There is a clear opportunity for funders to support healing, dialogue and greater movement sustainability by supporting expanded leadership. Funders have an important role to play in specifically strengthening youth leadership in environmental justice. At the same time, many people expressed the hope that the needs of young adult and older leaders would not be set aside. One funder said: “We need to have old and new talk together about transitions in organizing and movement building.” Another voiced a similar hope that discussions of youth leadership would broaden to larger questions of “new” leadership by organizers of all ages.



We asked both funders and practitioners about how to develop a national funding strategy to support youth in environmental justice. The table below summarizes the “dos and don’ts” that emerged.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring in funders who have not yet supported environmental justice • Look at existing models like the Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing • Allocate the bulk of funding resources to grassroots groups directly for their organizing work, capacity building and convenings/network development • Allow grassroots organizations to help direct additional resources to intermediaries • Recognize the distinct aspects of youth leadership development and overall leadership expansion • Recognize the interconnectedness of youth leadership development and overall leadership expansion • Engage local funders to establish local funding opportunities • Fund collective efforts such as gatherings, trainings, networks, etc. • Consider creative ways to support individuals in transition • Establish realistic expectations of community-based organizations that do not over- or underestimate their capacity • Document learnings • Ensure ongoing ways for organizations in the field to provide suggestions and feedback on the process, structure, and work of the fund or foundation • Let community-based organizations define their own work and the movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrow the focus of existing environmental justice funding • Look at youth in isolation from the larger context of leadership development, movement building and leadership expansion • Take a cookie-cutter approach to defining youth leadership development • Focus solely or primarily on establishing a leadership training program • Create structures that exclude organizers from decision making and administration

Recommendations for Funders

Funding youth organizing in environmental justice provides an opportunity to connect the powerful leadership of young people to the broader goals of environmental and social change. The intergenerational models being developed offer a bold vision and strategies to unify and strengthen the environmental movement as a whole. The following recommendations provide insight on how to best support these efforts. Based on our interviews about funding, we have compiled a set of recommendations specifically for funders on how to best support youth leadership in environmental justice organizing.

1. Support new, intersectional funding strategies.

Both funders and leaders in organizations described the difficulty of fitting youth environmental justice into rigid funding categories. Youth environmental justice work has direct implications for work related to youth and the environment, and it also intersects with a broad range of organizing areas across the larger social change movement (such as educational, racial, economic, and gender justice). There is a critical need for funders to support intersectional work, although the methods of support may not yet be obvious, smooth or easy. Possibilities include developing funding strategies that cut across different funding portfolios, and creating opportunities for convenings and dialogue across sectors.

2. Distinguish youth without dividing the movement.

In all our interviews, a loud and clear message emerged about the need for funders to support the specific needs and opportunities of young people. However, interviewees also expressed the hope that these funding processes would not isolate youth leadership development and transition from other leadership expansion and movement sustainability issues. Similarly, funders can acknowledge youth as current leaders in making change, while recognizing the field of youth organizing as a vital source of future leadership for a broad range of sectors.

3. Embrace the natural and necessary transitions of organizations and individuals.

This report underscores the fluidity of individuals and organizations in movement building. Funders have an opportunity to greatly strengthen the environmental justice movement by supporting these transitions in new ways. For example, funders could provide network and training opportunities to young people and emerging leaders who are transitioning to greater leadership roles within their organization or the movement. Other possibilities include providing expanded general support grants to organizations in the process of leadership transition and expansion, or supporting organizations to access organizational development consultants or specialized training. Another avenue is to support the documentation of lessons learned from past and present organizational transitions.

4. Commit to listening to and learning from diverse voices in the field.

The breadth and depth of youth leadership in environmental justice is enormous, complex and always evolving. Funders can honor the knowledge of people creating change in their own communities by committing to an ongoing process of listening to and learning from a range of different organizations and individuals. Through this process, funders can help ensure that their strategies and support are most effective for strengthening social change work.

CONCLUSIONS



1. Youth organizing in environmental justice is innovating new strategies for social change.

Both environmental justice and youth organizing groups are developing the kind of multi-issue political vision that progressive movements currently seek. They are also grounded in solid experience, putting big ideas like sustainability and leadership expansion into practice. Moreover, each operates from a distinctive lens; together these ways of seeing illuminate new perspectives and opportunities for change.

2. Youth-led work and intergenerational work can and should coexist.

Youth-led and intergenerational work both serve important purposes in community empowerment and movement sustainability. Youth leadership development prepares younger generations to participate and play leadership roles in communities and movements. Intergenerational collaboration ensures that generations are working with, and not against, each other. Youth organizing in the environmental justice movement models the strength of this combination in exciting and powerful ways.

3. Youth leadership development represents a shift toward sustainable movements and holistic organizations.

The youth leadership development work we examined was evolving in response to questions about sustainability and organization. While the answers to these questions are works-in-progress, it is clear that youth environmental justice work provides a rich set of experiences that inform our understanding of social change processes.

4. The necessary paths within and across organizations do not yet exist to support transitions across the movement.

The process of leadership expansion is challenging and time-consuming, and takes many different paths and forms. Leadership expansion issues have deep implications for people of all ages. While

organic and informal efforts are clearly taking place, there is a need for intentional and well-resourced structures that can better support individuals as they move into different roles in movement work.

5. Supporting youth environmental justice work requires new funding approaches.

Vibrant conversations are taking place across the field of environmental justice and youth leadership development. Funders are finding new ways of understanding and supporting organizing that intersects issue areas. These emerging funding strategies have the potential to support leadership expansion and greater movement sustainability as a whole.

ReGenerations: A New Funding Initiative

One of the goals of this report was to attract new funders to the exciting work being done in the field of youth environmental justice. To that end, we are pleased that this report has contributed to the creation of a new funding initiative that will strategically respond to youth leadership development needs within the environmental justice movement. In early 2006, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing will begin looking for funding partners to join with the Ford Foundation in launching a new initiative called **ReGenerations: Youth Leadership in Environmental Justice**.

This multi-year funding initiative will support community-based environmental justice groups that have demonstrated a commitment to developing young people's leadership in the context of community building and organizing for environmental justice. Specifically, it will support environmental justice organizations' increased effectiveness in youth leadership development, provide opportunities for strategy and model sharing between organizations, and document effective models of multigenerational community organizing. Through funding, networking and documentation, the ReGenerations initiative will contribute to the sustainability of effective leadership in the environmental justice movement.

Funders interested in joining this initiative can find out more by contacting:

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Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing
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Groups Interviewed

Organization Name	Location
Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, program of the National Wildlife Federation	Anchorage, AK
Appalshop	Whitesburg, KY
Ayudame a Realizar Mis Sueños, program of Tri-County Community Health Center	Newton Grove, NC
Black Mesa Water Coalition	Flagstaff, AZ
Bus Riders Union, project of Labor Community Strategy Center	Los Angeles, CA
Communities for a Better Environment	Oakland and Huntington Park, CA
Community Coalition for Environmental Justice	Seattle, WA
Explorer's Club	San Diego, CA
Grayson Neighborhood Council	Stanislaus, CA
Indigenous Environmental Network	National
Lakota Action Network	Pine Ridge, SD
Laotian Organizing Project, project of Asian Pacific Environmental Network	Richmond, CA
Little Village Environmental Justice Organization	Chicago, IL
Pacoima Beautiful	Los Angeles, CA
PODER (People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights)	San Francisco, CA
PODER (People Organized in the Defense of Earth and her Resources)	Austin, TX
River Ambassador Program	Lowell, MA
Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project, program of Alternatives for Community and Environment	Roxbury, MA
Southern Echo	Jackson, MS
Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice	Albuquerque, NM
UPROSE (United Puerto Rican Organization of Sunset Park)	Brooklyn, NY
Young Native Scholars, program of BRIDGE (Indian Training Trust Fund)	Imperial, CA
Youth United For Community Action (YUCA)	East Palo Alto, CA

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