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## Community Organizing Methods: Effectively Selecting Community Organizing Methods to Achieve Intended Outcomes for Emerging Grassroots Leaders

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# Community Organizing Methods Effectively Selecting Community Organizing Methods to Achieve Intended Outcomes for Emerging Grassroots Leaders

## Abstract

Based on the need of our community partner, the New England Grassroots Environment Fund (NEGEF) and their pursuit of aiding community leaders to inspire community building and action, an in-depth literature review analyzing different styles of community organizing was conducted. The review focuses on diverse organizing methods and philosophies, and the role of power, risk, and effectiveness of intended outcome. A survey determined a parallel between academic literature and current grassroots action. The in-depth analyses of the results substantiate recommendations that may be beneficial to grassroots leaders.

## Introduction

The New England Grassroots Environment Fund (NEGEF) is dedicated to inspiring, connecting, and supporting community-based environmental projects throughout New England. Their mission is to nurture civic engagement through local initiatives that support a just, safe, and environmentally whole community (NEGEF, 2014). This includes small, local, and new-

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establishing volunteer groups and non-profit organizations within the areas of local energy, health, food, land and water, and living. NEGEF's primary role in these communities is funding projects to establish organizations and encouraging action for community change. In addition to funding projects, NEGEF offers skill-building opportunities through their rootSkills Program. NEGEF is seeking to develop their workshops, examining various organizing strategies in the process, to aid new community organizers undertaking projects in their community

## **Literature Review**

Community organizing is defined as building a community of people for a common cause (Miller, 2010). The kind of organizing discussed in this paper is rooted in democratic values and social justice teachings, and includes electoral and nonelectoral strategies. The distinction between community organizing from other approaches to social change is its relation to power, on the foundation that injustices are the result of power imbalance. Issues arise not because of incompetence of people in positions of power, but rather, due to the institutional resistance based largely on self-interest (Miller, 2010). The focus, therefore, is on building communities and changing power relations rather than the presumed pushing for a specific issue change.

The different community organizing methods defined by the literature include Alinsky, Faith-Based Community Organizing (FBCO), Asset-Based Community Development, Civil Disobedience, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Conscious-Raising, Spiritual Activism, Emergent Change, Social Entrepreneurship, Highlander School, and the Midwest Academy (Lundquist, L., Tulpule, G., Vang, P., & Pi, C., 2012). These methods are drawn largely from research conducted at the University of Minnesota, which includes approaches that have historical implications as well as those emerging in recent years.

In reviewing the literature, we believe the methods as they stand, create an unequal representation of their significance. While most methods are named for their salient ideologies, others are named after individuals or places. We believe this inconsistency provides inaccurate representation of the different methods' significance, and in fact, shifts power away from the methods themselves, emphasizing instead on individuals or places that they are named after; as such, the methods will henceforth be described as People-Based Revolutionary Organizing (PBRO), formerly, Alinsky; Faith-Based Community Organizing (FBCO); Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD); Civil Disobedience; Pedagogy of the Oppressed; Conscious-Raising; Spiritual Activism; Emergent Change; Social Entrepreneurship; Civil Education and Engagement (CEE), formerly the Highlander School; and Civic and Democratic Participation (CDP), formerly the Midwest Academy.

**Community Organizing Methods**

The People-Based Revolutionary Organizing (PBRO), derived from organizer and activist, Saul Alinsky, provides relevance for local or national power structures who wish to engage disparate communities (Lundquist et. al., 2012). Rooted in the democratic system, the PBRO model is confrontational and seeks radical revolution as the ultimate objective of societal change (Miller & Bowes, 2003). It depends on recruiting and training ordinary citizens to take lead in their communities against immediate threats, as a way to empowering the disenfranchised through disrupting established power. These organizers provoke conflict in order to draw people into action together. For PBRO, cooperative effort and relationship building is key to organizing (Goldblatt, 2005). Today's organizers, largely radical groups, are still heavily drawing from this model. It has been criticized for being utopian and unachievable.

Faith-Based Community Organizing (FBCO) is rooted in the PBRO model as it also highlights action and relationship. This approach is distinctive in that, faith-based values are integrated into organizing. This model seeks alliance between faith groups as a way to build a coalition (Lundquist et. al., 2012). FBCO is an approach widely used today by interfaith organizers; however, it has been criticized for not including a wider spectrum of faith-based groups.

The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model also follows principles from Alinsky's ideology, through focusing on communities' assets, rather than needs. By highlighting the existence of community assets, ABCD looks to build on these strengths and utilize external partners to mobilize (Lundquist et. al., 2012). Focusing on local attributes, this model assumes positive perspective in identifying communities to already holding power. This model is widely used today among organizers in youth populations.

The Civil Disobedience model, defined by political philosopher, John Rawls, aims to engage in nonviolent, highly public, symbolic, and oftentimes, creative methods to spotlight the failures of a governing body, individuals, or groups. Public demonstrations such as strikes, sit-ins, and walkouts are often used to embarrass and confront governing bodies as a way to shift power dynamics (Lundquist et. al., 2012). This non-violent direct action strategy has historically been implemented to fight social injustices with mass audience. The Boston Tea Party, Civil Rights Movement, Women's Suffragette Movement, and the Arab Spring are all examples of movements effectively utilizing Civil Disobedience. A criticism of this tactic is that because of its disruptive nature, it can trigger violence, undermining its core philosophy of being nonviolent.

Paulo Freire's model of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed looks at education as a gateway to build an "ethic of democracy." Literacy and the development of critical consciousness is how this model seeks to impact societal change as not only community action, but also self-reflection (Goldblatt, 2005). "The pedagogy of the oppressed [is] a pedagogy which must be forged with, not

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for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity” (Freier, 1970). Because Friere’s model recognizes oppression as societal and psychological, it calls for community action as well as self-reflection. Although it has the intention to be applied within diverse issues, Pedagogy of the Oppressed is largely used in education settings.

The Consciousness Raising model of organizing, derived from labor movement organizer, Anne Forer, looks at enhancing personal and collective awareness and understanding of an issue through individuals’ personal experiences (Lundquist et. al., 2012). This approach looks at the root of an issue with a long-term perspective, noting that oppression stems from a greater societal issue. Consciousness Raising aims to harness individual experiences in order to build collective power. A critique of this method is that, without action, Consciousness Raising remains an ideology.

Spiritual Activism is a model derived from Eastern philosophers like the Dalai Lama and Mahatma Gandhi (Lundquist et. al., 2012). It draws from other organizing methods like Consciousness Raising. It is not affiliated with FBCO, as it aims to reach society outside of a mobilized congregation. Spiritual Activism emphasizes social change through individuals who feel a “deep calling” to a cause and are also balanced, supported, and hopeful.

The Emergent Change, a newer model, assumes that heightened awareness and more meaningful group processes can arise through collaboration, relationships, and collective wisdom. Although Emergent Change recognizes the importance of trained experts in other disciplines, it primarily draws from communities and grassroots leaders to be at the forefront (Lundquist et. al., 2012). As such, these leaders are not problem solving but rather, incorporating participation to identify alternatives. Although the Emergent Change model is effective in that it incorporates a strong relationship and leadership of the community, it may not be utilized in immediate risk issues due the length of time it requires for development.

Social Entrepreneurship discounts charity and fundraising, and instead, focuses on making change through profit and innovation that can be reinvested via solutions. Power exists within individual creativity; therefore, social change derives from the entrepreneurial individual (Lundquist et. al., 2012). Nobel Peace Prize winner, Muhammad Yunus for instance, exemplifies Social Entrepreneurship, spurring an explosion of microfinance globally.

The Highlander School model, renamed as Civil Education and Engagement (CEE), was founded by Myles Horton. This approach combines education with community organizing and seeks to engage the disadvantaged in the democratic process as active agents through education, empowering, cultivating, and highlighting responsibility of citizens (Lundquist et. al., 2012). Community development and democratic participation is the heart of this model, as individuals empower themselves to take on leadership roles as agents of change. Although institutions and the political system are not directly challenged through this model, CEE aims to raise civic awareness and sense of responsibility of citizens.

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The Midwest Academy, renamed, Civic and Democratic Participation (CDP), was founded by Heather Booth. The approach shares the organizing principles to that of the PBRO model; however, it favors working with the democratic system to create progressive change, oftentimes, putting pressure on elected officials to bring change (Lundquist et. al., 2012). Its primary goal is to redistribute economic and political power to the disadvantaged by getting these populations represented as elected officials. Targeting and embarrassing specific holders of power is a way in which this model seeks to bring change. Unlike PBRO, however, Booth’s model forfeits revolutionary tactics to appeal to the greater progressive audience. A criticism of this model is that change can take time to occur.

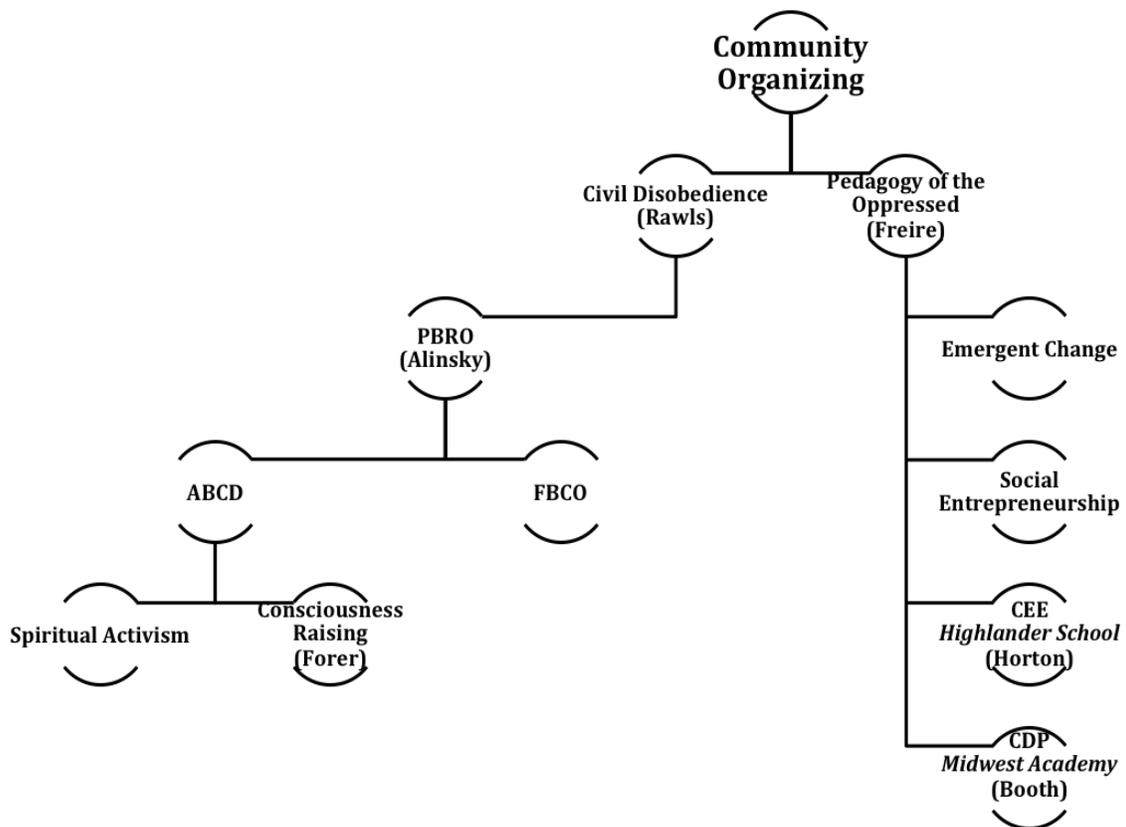


Figure 1. Community Organizing Methods Diagram  
Source: Dewey and Zafar, 2014

The community organizing methods range from being combative and action oriented, to more philosophically and educationally driven. The differences in the ideologies are relevant to the construction of the methods (Olson et. al., 2011). Some of the existing methods already pull from previous approaches. As shown in Figure 1, FBCO and ABCD both draw from PBRO,

incorporating Civil Disobedience as a tactic to push for change. Similarly, Spiritual Activism and Consciousness Raising are derived from ABCD, both highlighting common philosophies to enact change within a system. Along the same line, Emergent Change, Social Entrepreneurship, CEE, and CDP all emphasize education, and as a result, can be seen as an extraction of Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Although Figure 1 is not a hierarchy of the community organizing methods, it does provide a visual representation of how the methods depend on each other to exist.

### **Power in Community Organizing**

When mobilizing a community around an issue, taking stock of a community's power in relation to others' is a crucial first step. Without understanding the role of power dynamics, mobilization can become futile regardless of the organizing strategy being utilized. According to the National Community Development Institute's "The Art of Facilitation: A Facilitator's Guide," there are twelve principle sources of power that stem from institutional and social norms (National Community Development Institute, 2006).

1. *Positional Power*: established through structured authority or position
2. *Referred Power*: comes from connections to others
3. *Expert Power*: facilitated through wisdom, knowledge, experience, and skills
4. *Ideological Power*: begins from an idea, vision, or analysis
5. *Obstructive Power*: stems from the ability to coerce or block
6. *Personal Power*: arises through an individual's energy, vision, ability to communicate, capacity to influence, emotional intelligence, psychological savvy etc.
7. *Co-Powering*: the responsibility of leaders to mindfully work towards supporting the personal power of others through modeling, validating, and feedback
8. *Collaborative Power*: the ability to join energies in partnership with others
9. *Institutional Power*: the economic, legal, and political power directly used by institutions
10. *Cultural Power*: based on the perspective of the dominant culture including cultural norms, conditioning, and privilege regarding race/class/gender/age
11. *Structural Power*: covertly or implicitly exercised through dominant institutions
12. *Transcendent Power*: created from a connection to a higher power such as spiritual, natural, and/or historical imperative

The community organizing methods each examine different sources of power to ensure community success. As the People-Based Revolutionary Organizing (PBRO) method aims to spur institutional change, the examination of Structural and Institutional Power is very important. Community organizers gain "power for the people through aligning interest of the community," (Lundquist et. al., 2012). Because a goal of PBRO is to mobilize the underrepresented, Positional Power would be crucial to examine, as organizational authority may not accurately

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represent the disenfranchised. Collaborative Power is also central to mobilization and emphasizes the joining of energies.

Faith-Based Community Organizing (FBCO) may focus primarily on Transcendent Power due to communities joining under the common message of faith. The importance of relationships is crucial in FBCO, lending itself to harnessing Referred Power. This also relies on the mobilization of respected leaders, which can be achieved by the utilization of Positional Power. These leaders are generally well respected, which could be an acknowledgement of Expert Power. Because these leaders yield such a crucial role in organizing, the use of Co-Powering could be very beneficial in mobilizing younger, or less practiced communities, generating Collaborative Power between communities.

Civil Disobedience employs Obstructive Power, and may be resisting Positional, Institutional, Cultural, and/or Structural Power. Because this method views power imbalance due to institutional regimes that enforce order, disorder becomes a form of resistance. Civil Disobedience, therefore, aims to shift power away from the state and towards the community. Examples of this method have also used Structural Power to their advantage, incorporating the media as a tool to spread awareness and raise consciousness of different issues. Civil Disobedience is most effective when power, through collaboration, is used to create action.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) weights the asset mobilization of communities as their strongest sources of power. This may take the form of Expert Power, utilizing the expertise and resources of communities. In this method, communities do not need to be empowered, but already have the “power they need to be vibrant and healthy,” as long as these assets are used (Lundquist et. al., 2012). It also wields personal and collective strength, utilizing Personal and Collaborative Power dynamics, which may be aided by Co-Powering.

Spiritual Activism relies on Transcendent Power to influence both individual and societal transformation. Spiritual Activism “encourages healing the brokenness and isolation caused by attempts of individuals to [assert] power over each other,” (Lundquist et. al., 2012). Unlike many other organizing methods, this method relies on Personal and Collaborative Power to specifically generate healing.

Social Entrepreneurship works within the confines of establishments to attain change via Institutional Power. This method also uses Structural Power, as it incorporates established theories and ideologies to attain positive societal transformation. Although Social Entrepreneurship steers away from charity and fundraising, it still draws from these sources of power to establish change through profit and reinvested.

Power is decentralized in Civil Education and Engagement (CEE). This method raises Personal Power within the Institutional Power dimension, specifically engaging with the democratic system. Co-Powering is also utilized through leaders who guide communities to think critically, learn, and become active citizens.

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Civic and Democratic Participation (CDP) focuses on economic and political equality, and is similar to PBRO. Changing Positional Power in order to create economic and political equality, along with democratic participation and policy change is a primary goal in this method. The Collective Power of the community is applied to move Institutional Power towards equality.

**Critique of Literature**

The different community organizing methods described by Lundquist et. al present diverse tactics, encompassing a wide array of methods: from a legislative and policy-making strategy, to a more inclusive approach that engages the disadvantaged, to an educational and self-reflexive ideology, to a more combative approach challenging power holders. Although the methods summarized present their own advantages to enact social change, they each present challenges as they stand. For instance, the PBRO model fails to acknowledge the success of a society after revolution, and is too abstract in its views (Goldblatt, 2005). Due to the overlook of relationship building in this model, it may not be a sustainable approach for neighborhood organizing where individuals are less empowered (Stall et. al., 1998). Similarly, Civil Disobedience encourages action, but fails to highlight action as a final call of defiance; if this distinction is not made clear, organizers may turn to action for action's sake, rather than as a tool for enacting change. On the other hand, if Consciousness Raising does not simultaneously include action, it fails as it stands as a strategy. In a similar vein, Social Entrepreneurship speaks of innovation and aims to follow a business model; however, it struggles to cover a large spectrum of what a business model is, which can prove overwhelming and ineffective.

Managing power within community organizing can be a difficult task because strong leadership is necessary to mobilize, while balancing community empowerment and participation. With a better understanding of sources of power and how to harness power, different community organizing methods and strategies can become more effective and sustainable (Wolff, 2007). Because empowerment is a manifestation of social power at individual, organizational, and community levels, it is important to diversify the perspectives in which power is examined, due to the various individuals and stakeholders involved in community organizing projects (Speer et. al., 1995). In fact, individuals who hold Expert Power write most of the literature on power; it would, therefore be valuable to examine power dynamics through the perspective of a community member feeling disempowered. For example, issues of power are not typically examined in scientific public health literature, and as a result, the disempowerment of individuals has been identified as "an overarching disease risk factor" (Wallerstein, 1999). When attempting to reduce disease risk factors, finding the root causes of negative power and control dynamics may be very advantageous. If the researcher is not willing to recognize that there are power dynamics between themselves and their community, positive change in reducing disease risk factors may be out of reach.

**Methods**

Our research partnership with NEGEF has included a series of meetings and email communications to conduct a literature review of various community organizing methods. We supplemented initial literature provide by NEGEF with academic peer-reviewed journals pertaining to organizing strategies found through a variety of University of Vermont's library databases: Academic Search Premier, Social Sciences Full Text, Google Scholar, and Wiley Online Library. A survey was then conducted to determine if the literature on the community organizing methods reflect on-the-ground action currently implemented by grassroots organizers.

In constructing the survey, we traced key terms outlined by Lundquist et. al. for each method, describing its fundamental significance in concise phrases. For example, the terms we selected for PBRO were: radical, revolutionary, public action, institutional change, and mobilization of the underrepresented. After selecting these key terms, we individually listed 49 terms describing the eleven organizing methods. The surveyees were asked to select terms for three questions: terms that resonated with groups' mission/purpose, terms that groups had engaged with, and terms they would like to engage with in the future. They were asked to pick a minimum of five and maximum of fifteen terms for each of the three questions. Using our recommendations, NEGEF set up the survey using SurveyMonkey. It was then emailed to grant applicants from the last two years, totaling 360 contacts; it was also sent to those registered for their eNews bulletin, including community organizers, funders, and colleagues, totaling 515 contacts. This totaled a delivery to approximately 875 contacts.

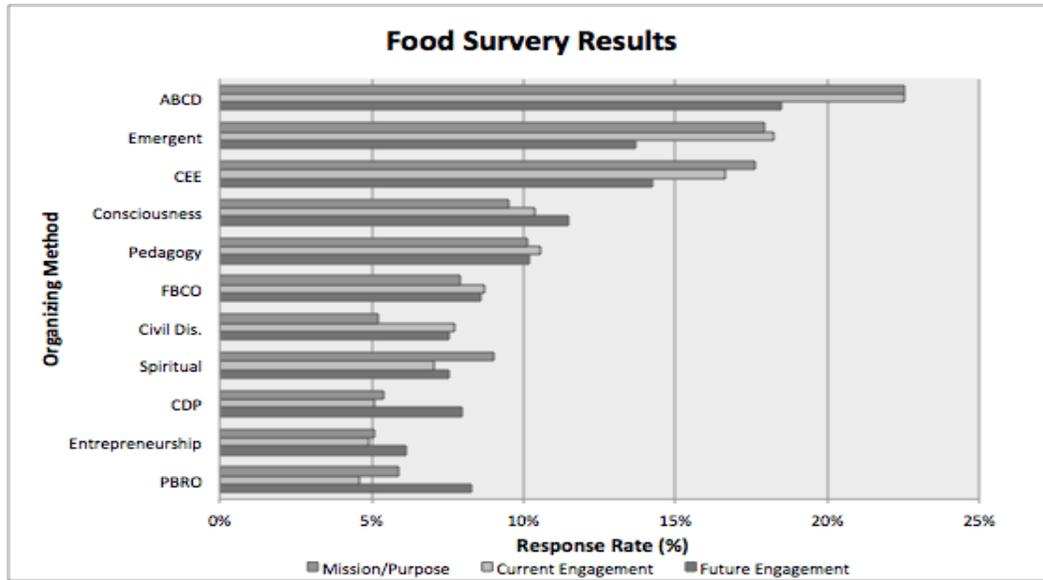
**Results**

The number of responses to each term for each question were monitored and categorized into their respective organizing method within each issue area: Food, Land & Water, Living, Energy, and Health. These numbers were divided by the total number of responses for each respective question, and compared within each issue area. This enabled the calculation of the percentages of respondents and aligned them with the appropriate community organizing method. Graphs 1-5 showcase the five issue area survey results, outlining each of the three questions: terms that resonated with groups' mission/purpose, terms that groups had engaged with, and terms they would like to engage with in the future. In all five issue areas, ABCD is currently being utilized most by respondents. Social Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, had the least percentage of respondents.

The survey showed similar results in the Food, Land & Water, Living, Energy, and Health issue areas. Across these areas, respondents selected ABCD, Emergent Change, CEE, and Consciousness Raising as their highest organizing tactics that they have or are currently engaged

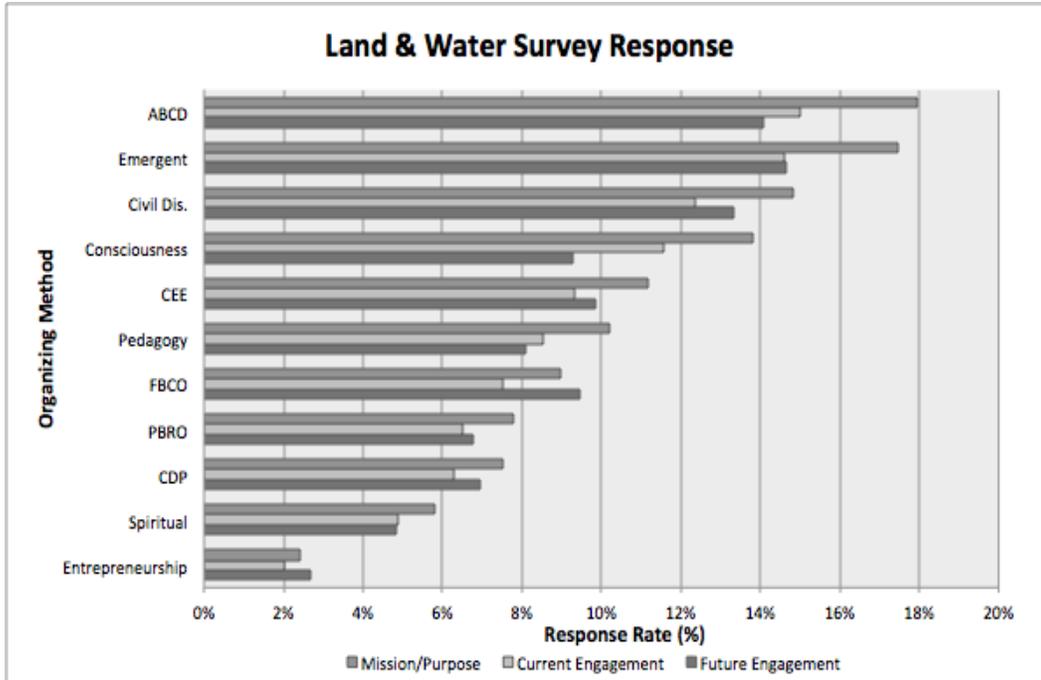
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with, each above 10% response rate. On the other hand, Social Entrepreneurship and Spiritual Activism were methods the respondents utilized least in all issue areas, rates as low as 1% (Graphs 1-5). This indicates that organizers are interested in the ideologies of ABCD, Emergent

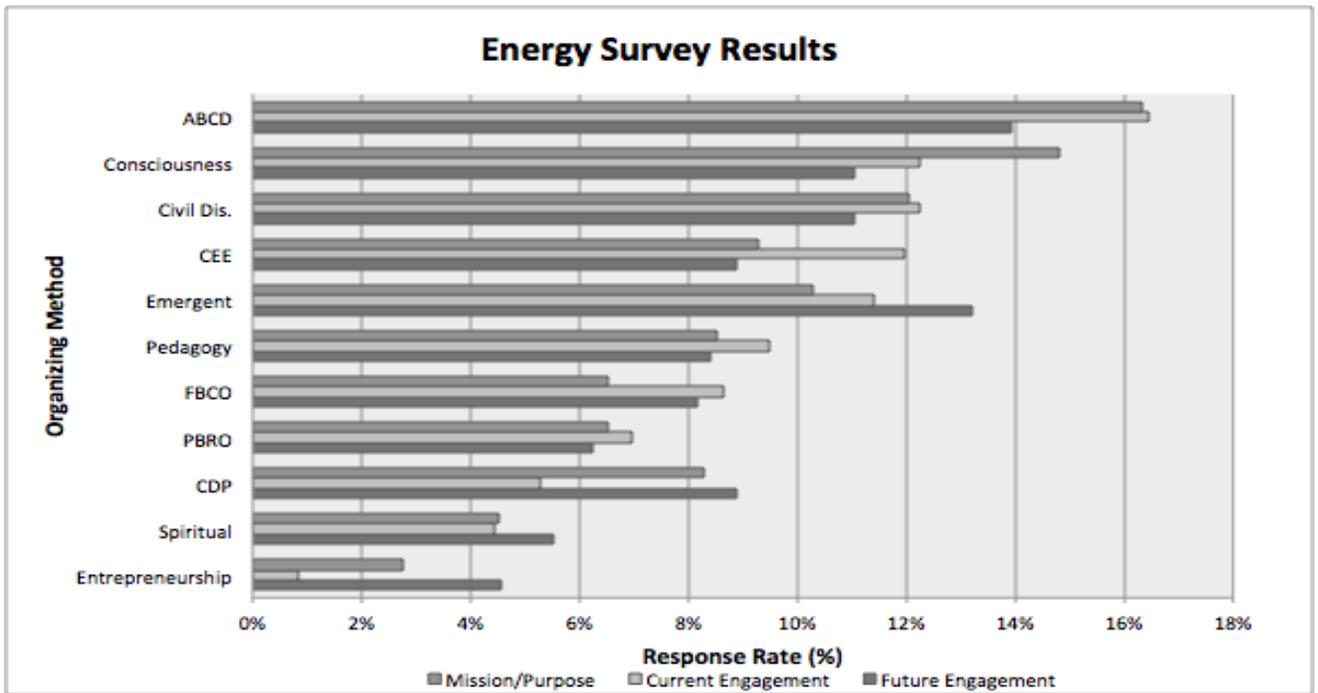


Change, CEE, and Consciousness Raising, but have a more difficult time employing Social Entrepreneurship and Spiritual Activism.

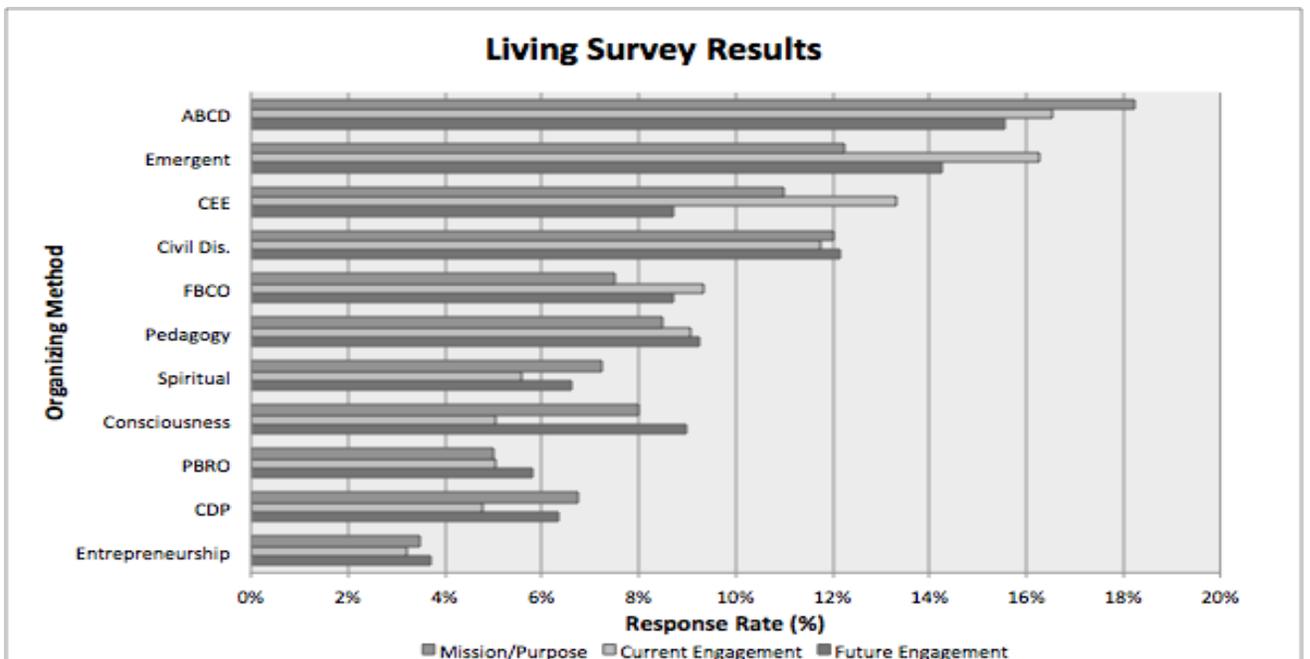
Graph 1. Food Survey Results



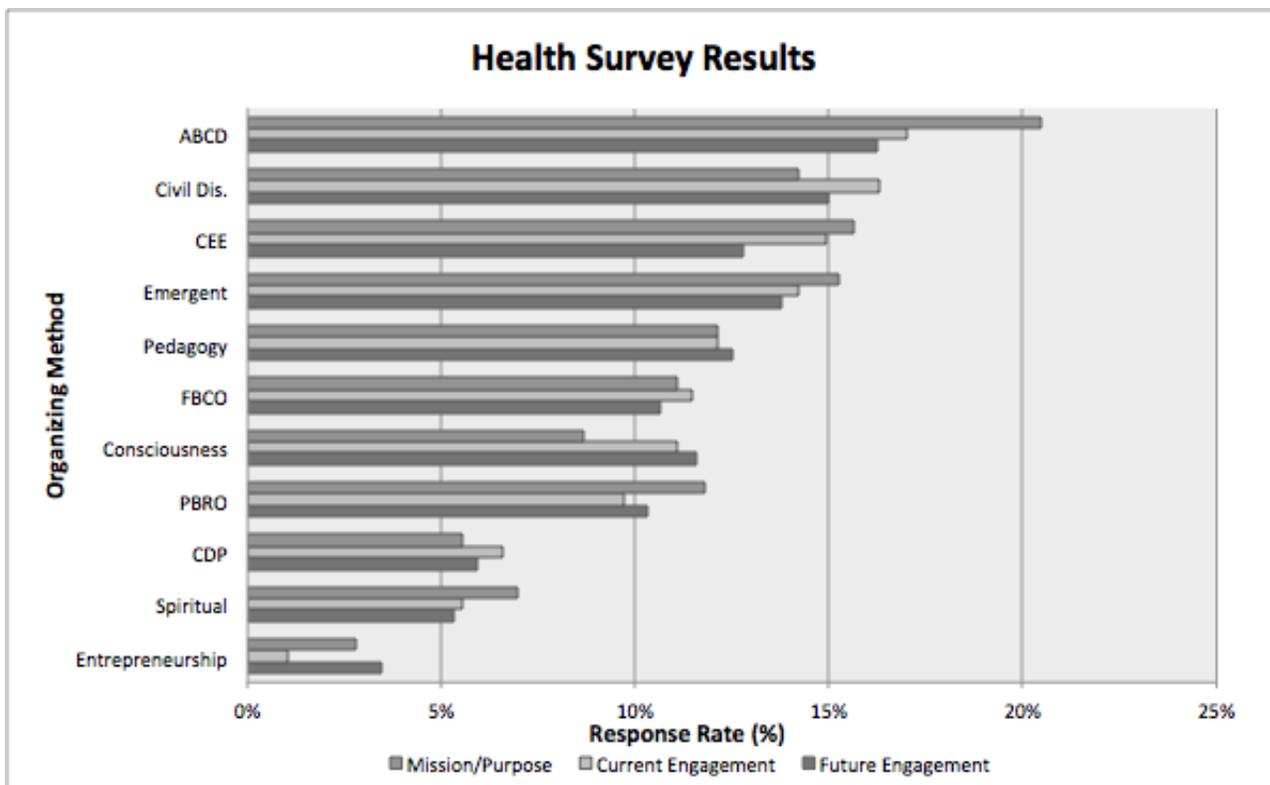
Graph 2. Land & Water Survey Results



Graph 3. Energy Survey Results



Graph 4. Living Survey Results



Graph 5. Health Survey Results

## Impact & Conclusion

This literature review of the community organizing methods and related components such as power, along with the survey engaging NEGEF's constituents may be used for upcoming rootSkills Workshops. Using the graphs and data from the survey, organizers attending rootSkills Workshops will begin to grasp what other organizers in their issue areas are currently engaged in to successfully organize in their communities. The knowledge NEGEF gains from this literature review as well as a confined synopsis can feasibly ensure NEGEF more funding. Certain methods may be more advantageous for the goals of one organization than another, and the way power is used by organizers varies depending on desired goals and outcomes. There are wide ranges of variables that can be used to evaluate effectiveness in community organizing including community engagement, quality of engagement, awareness of issue, mass mobility, and policy change (Walker & McCarthy, 2012). We recommend that organizers first analyze the kind of outcome they are aiming for – process change, policy change, societal change – as well as the level of risk they are organizing for or against before determining which methods to engage with. We suggest that an integrative approach of several community organizing methods, depending on intended impact, is the most effective way to create change. As shown in Figure 1, the

community organizing methods are not hierarchical, but rather, each is based on foundation of another model. The methods are co-dependent and organizers must be mindful when selecting organizing tactics. We have also identified gaps within current organizers' engagement of methods, and strongly recommend they reevaluate the importance of Social Entrepreneurship and allow room for future engagement of this method.

### **Further Examination**

Further research on power, risk, and effectiveness of community organizing work is necessary to better evaluate effective organizing strategies. Determining the intended outcome of an organization is instrumental in evaluating which organizing method can be deemed most effective. Upon examining various organizing methods, power also emerged as a necessary component to analyze. While preliminary research examining power was conducted, it would be helpful in the future to create a tool that could aid organizers in determining the power they yield, where it comes from, and what sources of power their organizing is combatting. In clearly defining these power components, organizers could more accurately determine which organizing methods to use. The development of a decision tree that could aid organizers in determining which methods to integrate is the next step in the process of helping organizers achieve better results and become more effective in selecting community organizing strategies. This could be developed for rootSkills Workshops. Suggestions for constructing a decision tree for organizers would be to develop questions that analyze the risk, effectiveness, intended outcome, size of constituency, and purpose in order to determine the best methods of community organizing to integrate. NEGEF can utilize the information obtained by the survey as well as the literature review to help initiate the establishment of this decision tree.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Survey Question Key Phrases for Community Organizing Methods

#### **PBRO**

Mobilization of the underrepresented  
Radical  
Revolutionary  
Public Action  
Institutional Change

#### **FBCO**

Faith-Based  
Relationships  
Mobilization of respected leaders  
Public Action  
Religious tradition

#### **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

Education  
Societal change  
Self-reflection  
Examination of power  
Examination of privilege

#### **Civil Disobedience**

Public awareness  
Media exposure  
Nonviolence  
Policy change

#### **Consciousness Raising**

Systematic Change  
Long-term perspective  
Collective Awareness  
Personal Awareness  
Emphasis on Truth

#### **ABCD**

Bottom-up approach  
Community Development  
Asset Mobilization  
Local

Personal Strength  
Collective Strength

#### **Spiritual Activism**

Spirituality  
Individual transformation  
Societal transformation  
Healing  
Balance

#### **Social Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship  
Innovation  
Profit  
Reinvestment

#### **Emergent Change**

Collaboration  
Relationship  
Collective wisdom  
Participatory  
Multidisciplinary

#### **CEE**

Decentralization  
Personal empowerment  
Education  
Engaging the underrepresented  
Democratic participation

#### **CDP**

Economic equality  
Political equality  
Democratic participation  
Policy change  
Civic Duty