

**Community Organising of  
Immigrant Communities  
for Common Good:  
Disorganising the Old and Organising the New**

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*Chicago, July 2014, photo by Zrinka Bralo*

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I also wish to thank Neil Jameson and Jonathan Cox from Citizens UK, and Will Somerville of Unbound Philanthropy, for their support and practical assistance in networking and introductions.

I am grateful to all the hosts and colleagues I met on my journey. The full list of individuals and organisations I visited and had the pleasure of seeing at work is in the Appendix. Here, I would especially like to thank my key enablers: Betsy, Dagan, Artemio, Celina, Kai, Lauren, Adelaide, Diana, Mimi, Noah, Eva and Sonja.

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<sup>1</sup> Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum <http://migrantforum.org.uk>

## Introduction

The aim of my Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travelling Fellowship was to investigate community organising practices in a number of different settings in the US, with a particular emphasis on the organising of immigrant communities and voter registration.

I wanted to learn about leadership development and organising techniques that have led to positive changes in US immigration policy, such as the recent regularization of millions of undocumented migrants<sup>2</sup>, and other improvements in the treatment of immigrants in the US.

The timing of my trip was perfect, as President Obama was about to use his executive power to create major changes in US immigration policy.

In addition to my exploratory trip to Birmingham, Alabama and Atlanta, Georgia in April 2014. I spent July and August visiting organisations in Chicago; Washington, DC; Maryland; Fredericksburg, Virginia; New York; Boston, Massachusetts; Seattle and Walla Walla, Washington.

I had the pleasure of meeting and learning from more than 200 people, who welcomed me into their institutions, and who spoke candidly about the successes and challenges they have experienced in organising their communities in an attempt to live in dignity.

I picked these cities and institutions because I had relationships with leaders and/or organisers who were able and willing to make introductions and accommodate my learning, but more importantly, I chose them because they all have a track record of successfully utilising community organising to enact positive social change.

It is simply impossible to do justice to all powerful stories and actions I have heard and seen. It is equally impossible to convey the complexity and the amount of work that is done on a daily basis in all places I have visited.

I have therefore inserted footnotes with links for organisations, actions and resources that might be useful and provide additional information and context for those who wish to explore more.

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<sup>2</sup> Explanation of President Obama's Executive Action on Immigration, November 2014  
<http://www.vox.com/2014/11/20/7250255/immigration-reform-obama-executive-action>

## The Learning

Wherever I went—from the smallest community group to the largest state-wide coalition—I asked my hosts the same question:

***“If you had a magic wand, what would be the one thing that you would like to see happen?”***

Without fail, every single person I spoke to gave me the exact same answer:

*“I would like to see fair immigration reform take place.”*<sup>3</sup>

According to Pew Hispanic Center<sup>4</sup>, just over 40 million immigrants live in the US (13 percent of the population). More than 18 million are naturalized citizens, 11 million are legal residents, and more than 11 million are in the country without legal permission (3.7 percent of the population in 2010).

Organisations and campaigners I met were all part of the national Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM) a national coalition of grassroots organizations fighting for immigrant rights at the local, state and federal level. The FIRM was set up in 2000, and it advocates for comprehensive immigration reform and the civil rights of immigrants in America.

The key ask is regularization of undocumented migrants combined with reform of immigration control and enforcement that reached its peak during the Obama administration, with 2 million deportations, more than under any other president in US history.

To have such a clear, proactive, national, strategic ask, was, from my perspective, an achievement in itself. This – the movement building for progressive policy reform – was perhaps the greatest lesson I learned, and one that will be the most challenging to replicate in the UK. Challenging, but not impossible.<sup>5</sup>

So, what did I learn? How did community organisers in the US get there? How did they manage to get President Obama to (effectively) regularize nearly 6 million undocumented migrants?

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<sup>3</sup> The Fair Immigration Movement (FIRM) <http://www.fairimmigration.org/about/>

<sup>4</sup> Pew Hispanic Center <http://www.pewhispanic.org>

<sup>5</sup> “Social movements challenge conditions and assumptions about people’s lives. In doing so, they strive to reshape certain core values widely accepted by the mainstream of society. Because these core values influence the distribution of power; movements for social change must, ultimately, seek to change prevailing power dynamics by influencing the public discourse and public policy”. Masters, Barbara and Osborn, Torie (2010) "Social Movements and Philanthropy: How Foundations Can Support Movement Building," The Foundation Review: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 3. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-10-00015> <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol2/iss2/3>

Lessons are many and I could write a lengthy report about each organisation that I visited, as they all did something interesting and exciting, something powerful and inspiring.

However, I will focus on the lessons which have relevance to the UK context and which can be utilized in practical way in the near future, without requiring a huge amount of additional resources.

Those lessons can be classified under two broad headings:

1. *Migrant organisations need to organise internally – community organising must become a way of operating for migrant and refugee organisations and associations that are interested in affecting change.*

Our counterparts in the US have created a strong movement led by immigrant leaders with authority and legitimacy to lead, rooted in organised and power-built organisations, with a clear strategy and a joined-up set of policy asks.

This means that organising in the UK should no longer be just a job of the organisers; it needs to become a way of being and acting for all involved – leaders, community members, staff and volunteers in our communities, which are building blocks of broader organising alliances.

2. *Migrant organisations need to organise externally – the purpose of community organising is to open up avenues for migrant communities to join in democratic civic engagement and affect social change together with the rest of civil society through participation in an organised way.*

Organising is not a one-off campaign or a movement to get a single issue win. It is a way of participating in everyday democratic life, regardless of citizenship status. Although our colleagues in the US utilized the power of their vote, in order to see the implementation of their asks and deliver positive change on immigration, they did not stop organising after the elections. Community organising is an on-going process of holding power accountable, and is essential for democracy. It is an avenue for inclusion of new communities and as such facilitates better integration on local and national level.

It may also be interesting to note that the external catalyst which so powerfully drove the grassroots action in the US for many years in immigrant communities partly came from an unprecedented enforcement policy called ‘Secure Communities (SECOM)’<sup>6</sup>. There was no immigrant family or neighbourhood that was not adversely affected by this aggressive enforcement policy, resistance to which contributed energy to organising, and not only

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<sup>6</sup> Secure Communities and ICE Deportation: A Failed Program? Report by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) is a data gathering, data research and data distribution organization at Syracuse University (2014) <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/349/>

amongst immigrants. As Bill Gates, Warren E Buffet and Sheldon Adelson wrote in NY Times<sup>7</sup>:

*“We believe it borders on insanity to train intelligent and motivated people in our universities — often subsidizing their education — and then to deport them when they graduate.*

*Many of these people, of course, want to return to their home country — and that’s fine. But for those who wish to stay and work in computer science or technology, fields badly in need of their services, let’s roll out the welcome mat.”*

Another important factor in organising of immigrant communities, which was emphasized by many of my colleagues was smart, strategic and proactive investment into organising by philanthropic foundations around the country, and in particular, strategic investment into the organising of immigrant communities by the Four Freedoms Fund<sup>8</sup>.

This organising of communities affected by the issue and organised money for organising was of vital importance. Deployed in an intelligent and sustainable way, it delivered not only one-off policy change, but a completely new culture of working for many organisations, internally and with each other.

I was enormously inspired and energized by voter registration work and growing power of immigrant vote<sup>9</sup> in the US and its ability to deliver change in various settings on a number of different issues. Whilst there are huge differences in demographics and electoral systems between our two countries, some useful parallels are beginning to emerge in the UK context.

The immigrant vote is a *sleeping giant*<sup>10</sup> in the UK and it could prove to be of huge importance in local elections, especially in Mayoral elections in London.

Finally, I realized that we have some learning and educating to do regarding our own history of organising, including the civil rights movement<sup>11</sup> which helped deliver the positive changes that make Britain the great country it is today.

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<sup>7</sup> *Break the Immigration Impasse*, NY Times, July 2014, by [Sheldon G. Adelson](#) is the chairman and chief executive of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation. [Warren E. Buffett](#) is the chairman and chief executive of Berkshire Hathaway. [Bill Gates](#), former chairman and chief executive of Microsoft, is co-chairman of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

<sup>8</sup> Four Freedoms Fund <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/printgroupProfile.asp?grpid=7557>

<sup>9</sup> *New Americans in the Voting Booth: The Growing Electoral Power of Immigrant Communities* by Immigration Policy Center, Washington, 2014 <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/new-americans-voting-booth-growing-electoral-power-immigrant-communities>

<sup>10</sup> *Surge in migrant voters could swing vote in key UK constituencies*, The Guardian, January 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/29/surge-in-voters-born-overseas>

<sup>11</sup> *Why has Britain’s civil rights movement been forgotten?* Blog by Laurence Brown, The University of Manchester, 2014 <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/featured/2014/10/why-has-britains-civil-rights-movement-been-forgotten/>

## Recommendations

The key learning points that I would like to share and that I will take forward in my work are:

### 1. **Organise inside out.**

It is no longer sufficient to bring diverse institutions together into a broad-based organising alliance and then organise for change. Organising should be an internal process and not simply an external add-on. Organising methodology is relational, value-driven and needs-based, but it is also a technique. It requires all institutions to learn and implement an organising practice internally in order to build strong, accountable organisations that reflect the experience and self-interest of their people.

### 2. **Engage in power analysis.**

While it is closely related to action and education, power analysis<sup>12</sup> is also what organising for social change is all about. Organising is about understanding power—its form, context, history, geography, motivation and timing. Most importantly, power analysis is about understanding your own power—and using it to affect change.

### 3. **Develop leaders, and let them lead**

One crucial aspect of organising immigrant communities is to develop leaders from those communities. There are various shopping lists in relation to leadership qualities, such as integrity, confidence, being organised, charismatic, imaginative, relational, caring, and so on. However, leaders who possess some or all of those qualities do not come readymade, and must be nurtured and developed through a variety of methods. In organising, leadership is also about conflict and agitation, and being a leader means being prepared to not be liked, provided that you retain legitimacy. Therefore, leaders who wish to become organised must be prepared to develop skills in agitation and confrontation, and above all, they must become good listeners.

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<sup>12</sup> “And we’re trained to do a **power analysis**... When we look at a problem, an issue of allocation of public resources, we want to know who makes the decision? Who decides? Who benefits? Who takes the paycheck home? Who gets the profit? And...who pays the costs for those benefits? And so we do those kinds of power analyses to try to get at what it is we are trying to do. And we discovered that, many times, forces that we thought would be enemy forces turned out to be allies. And sometimes forces we thought would be allies turned out to be enemies. So, we used the principle: there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies in public life. And that’s been useful...You need allies. You need allies with multi-faith connections. You need allies in business, in politics,...[in] churches and [in] other community organizations. You need allies among Afro-Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, Anglos, men and women, with workers and professionals, with low-income families, the poor, the rich. You need all kinds of allies to make things happen”. *Power, Justice, Faith - Conversations with the IAF* (2000); Center for Religion and Civic Culture University of Southern California; Professor Donald E. Miller, *Research Director* Roger Gustafson, Ph.D., *Editor*, Timothy Sato, *Associate Editor*

#### 4. **Build relational, deep roots institutions.**<sup>13</sup>

Without relationships there is no organising. It is essential that the leaders and other members of the relevant institutions enter into and maintain public relationships with each other through face-to-face meetings (so called 121s). This emotional connection and understanding of what makes us engaged in public life needs to happen amongst individuals inside organisations and within organising alliances. And it is an on-going process. One-to-One meetings are not supposed to be interviews, interrogations, therapy sessions, chit-chats, or surveys. As Ernesto Cortes<sup>14</sup> said at the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)<sup>15</sup> training I attended: *“Really good relational meetings are disruptive and messy, but not manipulative – be upfront about your agenda. Can we act publically about what we care about – can I trust you? Will you be there for me? For relationships to work there has to be a dimension of trust and care.”*<sup>16</sup>

#### 5. **Educate yourself and others.**

For organising to work, learning must be a part of the organising routine; not merely in the sense of training and developing leaders, but in the sense of personal growth. No one who is serious about organising can afford not to be curious, not to grow, or to expand their horizons. This includes learning about the history of your own movement in the context of organising.

#### 6. **Take action.**

In organising, action is not simply a form of protest – it is a transformation that occurs through our relationships with others. The “what” and “how” of action requires power analysis, and the final aim of action is always accountability. That is, who do we need to hold accountable and why? An action in organising can and should be fun and imaginative and it needs to be about building relationships even when it is confrontational. The advantage of proactive, educated action is that it has to be clear not only about what it is against, but what it is for.

#### 7. **Planning and discipline are crucial for organising.**

*“Those who love peace must learn to organize as effectively as those who love war.”* Martin Luther King Jr.

In a number of organisations I visited in the US, I witnessed training and actions delivered with almost military precision and discipline in every aspect: from

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<sup>13</sup> Harry Boyte, *Commonwealth: A Return to Citizen Politics*, Free Press, NY, 1990, quoting IAF leader Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood at an IAF local (East Brooklyn Congregations) rally in Brooklyn: *“We are not a grassroots organization. Grass roots are shallow roots. Grass roots are fragile roots. Our roots are deep roots.”*

<sup>14</sup> Ernesto Cortes [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernesto\\_Cortes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernesto_Cortes)

<sup>15</sup> Industrial Area Foundations (IAF) <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/printgroupProfile.asp?gpid=7493>

<sup>16</sup> *Steps of a One-on-One (1: 1) Relational Meeting* by IAF

<http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/sites/default/files/individual%20meetings.pdf>



logistics, to demand for knowledge and expertise, very precise about outcomes and results. It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of planning, preparation and discipline in organising. It is also a way to exercise internal accountability.

**8. Communication is essential.**

Not only is communication an essential skill for leaders/organisers, but it also ensures that actions have a clear message and that they are disseminated using all available platforms, including social media. A framework of common good must be communicated in order to reach not just one group, but all members of society.

**9. Evaluate, reflect, and then evaluate again.**

Organising is an art, not a science. It is essential that all actors reflect, evaluate and learn after every action. *“If you cannot deal with critique and contradictions, then do not do this,”* said Ernesto Cortes at our Chicago meeting. Institutionally, it is essential to embed evaluation<sup>17</sup> for internal accountability between organisers, leaders and members.

**10. Get Out the Vote (GOTV)**

Organising is for life, but it does not make much difference in a vacuum. Using the power of the ballot box to deliver positive change for generations of new<sup>18</sup> and old citizens is what organising is all about.

## Context: Why Organising?

*“In theory, community organizing provides a way to merge various strategies for neighborhood empowerment. Organizing begins with the premise that*

*(1) the problems facing inner-city communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions;*

*(2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and money around a common vision; and*

*(3) that a viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership—and not one or two charismatic leaders—can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions.”<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> Resources for Evaluating Community Organizing by Alliance for Justice and Bolder Advocacy, Washington, DC <http://bolderadvocacy.org/tools-for-effective-advocacy/overview-of-evaluating-community-organizing/reco>

<sup>18</sup> *Young immigrants who can't vote urge new citizens to go to polls*; The Tennessean, 2014

<http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2014/10/23/youth-vote-urge-new-citizens-go-polls/17783015/>

<sup>19</sup> Barack Obama (1988) <http://illinoisissues.uis.edu/archives/2008/09/whyorg.html>

I start with this 1988 quote from the Organiser in Chief because it reflects my experience of more than 20 years of community work and nearly 10 years of community organising in London.

Obama comes from the same school of organising (Industrial Area Foundation of Saul Alinsky), and has organised in the similar conditions of urban poverty, so it is no surprise that I have found his reflections relevant to my own experiences.

Since 2006, I have been involved with Citizens UK, a broad-based community organising alliance of 350 institutions across the UK, organising on a number of different issues (e.g. Living Wage, Social Care, Sanctuary etc.), through which I participated in successful actions and saw a number of positive changes take place.

However, in my work with minority communities at the Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum (The Forum), something was missing.

I have spent the last 20 years working in community development and the capacity building of community organisations, and yet, after numerous infrastructure investment programmes, we still struggle with exclusion, poverty and inequality. What are we not doing right?

The continuing lack of civic participation and rationalization of the disempowerment experienced by many marginalized groups I had been working with was depressing.

I felt that we needed to do something else, something different, but I was not sure if community organising was the answer. I enrolled in the Postgraduate Certificate in Community Organising at Queen Mary University<sup>20</sup> of London to learn more and to add to my experience from our work as members of the Citizens UK. I heard stories about success in the US, but I needed to experience for myself what this success looked like and whether we could replicate it in the UK.

The economic crisis and cuts in public spending<sup>21</sup> hit the community sector in the UK the hardest. Grassroots infrastructure was disappearing on a daily basis and a number of community organisations were forced to close down due to a lack of funding.

Disappearing along with them was our capacity to have a voice, provide support, advocate and offer a counter-narrative to the xenophobic press<sup>22</sup> and the emerging political parties, whose populist approach further inflamed an already highly negative debate on immigration, adding some dangerous undertones<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Community Organising, Queen Mary University of London <http://www.qmul.ac.uk/postgraduate/coursefinder/courses/121497.html>

<sup>21</sup> *How are public sector spending cuts affecting the voluntary sector?* by The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) <http://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac12/how-are-public-sector-spending-cuts-affecting-the-voluntary-sector/>

<sup>22</sup> *How has press coverage of immigration changed? The way the UK media reported the immigration debate has shifted over time and is becoming increasingly "dehumanised"*, Alex Balch The New Statesman's rolling politics blog, January 2015 <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/how-has-press-coverage-immigration-changed>

<sup>23</sup> *Nigel Farage aide disrupts interview amid racism and expenses claims*, by Patrick Wintour, The Guardian, May 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/may/16/nigel-farage-ukip-car-crash-radio-interview-lbc>

In the US, however, things were developing in a different direction. Community organising was going through a renaissance and, closely related to my own interests, organised immigrants were making huge progress.

Young undocumented migrants<sup>24</sup> organised and won Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) - temporary measure which allowed undocumented under 16 years of age to apply for work permit and live without fear from deportation.

Young immigrants who met these criteria are also known as “DREAMers” because they meet the general requirements of the so-called DREAM Act, which stands for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors<sup>25</sup>. The DREAMers did not stop there. They organised themselves and their families and pushed for another set of demands, this time for the regularization of their families.

I turned to community organising out of desperation, as I was no longer able to provide support or positively affect change for the marginalized and excluded minorities I was supposed to help. I was a reluctant convert. I found organising language and methods, especially the requirements of organising discipline and internal accountability, very unusual and somewhat rigid.

But my frustration with the inability to affect change through my work in capacity building and community development of migrant and refugee communities was such that I was willing to try community organising.

For years I provided training, advocated for better services, consulted with “hard to reach”<sup>26</sup> communities on behalf of public sector, supported migrant and refugee leaders to set up their own self-help groups in order to achieve better quality of life, have a voice and be integrated—all for the common good of the entire British society.

For years I watched how, despite our good work and the efforts of the communities we were supporting, things were not getting much better: immigrants were excluded, unable to access services equally and yet blamed for all the ills of British society<sup>27</sup> and no amount of logic or facts<sup>28</sup> was going to change that.

Immigration was on everyone’s lips and, as a country, we are in a perpetual debate (and, frequently, an argument) about immigration.

When we are talking about British identity and values, the welfare state and Britain’s

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<sup>24</sup> United We Dream <http://unitedwedream.org/about/our-missions-goals/>

<sup>25</sup> *Who and Where the DREAMers are?* Immigration Policy Centre, 2012  
<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/who-and-where-dreamers-are>

<sup>26</sup> In the context of local government, ‘hard to reach’ is a term sometimes used to describe those sections of the community that are difficult to involve in public participation. ISR Working Paper, Nicola Brackertz, *Who is hard to reach and why?*  
<http://www.sisr.net/publications/0701brackertz.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> *Immigration Poll Finds Britons Believe It Is A Bad Thing For The Country, Back 'Go Home' Vans*, Huffington Post, September 2013  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/09/01/immigration-poll\\_n\\_3851299.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/09/01/immigration-poll_n_3851299.html)

<sup>28</sup> *Public attitudes towards immigration*, by Full Fact  
[https://fullfact.org/immigration/public\\_perceptions\\_opinion-36471](https://fullfact.org/immigration/public_perceptions_opinion-36471)

membership of the European Union, we are talking about immigration, but immigrants have no say in that debate. In that silence, the immigrants, become people who eat swans and donkeys<sup>29</sup>, and who steal houses; we become benefit cheats, job thieves, and terrorists.

No amount of community development or capacity building was going to change that discourse. Nor will traditional advocacy and awareness rising.

Many serious and credible efforts<sup>30</sup> were made to debunk some of the negative myths about immigration and immigrants, but the battle for the hearts and minds of the British public has been lost, at least for now.

The *only* significant positive development in relation to the policies affecting the treatment and rights of immigrants in the last five years in the UK was the end of the detention of children for immigration purposes<sup>31</sup>.

This was a shameful and unnecessary practice, which was conducted without judicial oversight and at great cost to children and their families, as well as British taxpayers.

Although many refugee and migrant community and advocacy organisations campaigned against the practice, it was the organising efforts of Citizens UK, in response to their members' concern, that led to a public commitment from all three party leaders at the 2010 pre-election Citizens' assembly that, if elected, they would put an end to this practice.

This pledge became part of the Coalition Manifesto<sup>32</sup> (page 21) and a textbook example of how to achieve change through broad-based community organising.

Citizens UK celebrated the organising victory, but at the same time they were subject to criticism<sup>33</sup> for delivering change outside the familiar matrix of the advocacy sector—they engaged in a conversation with the government, and they were *not the experts*.

They listened to their people, they took action, they negotiated, and they won, but some advocates are uncomfortable with what was negotiated, namely that some children can still be held for 72 hours prior to removal, in a facility that is run by a charity. The majority of children (1,200 per year) are no longer detained with their parents in prison-like conditions for prolonged periods of time. This campaign is of interest for me here because it exposed tension between different modes of working for change between advocacy and community organising.

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<sup>29</sup> *Dead meat? Stories of asylum seekers stealing donkeys - and swans - to eat have turned out to be false. So why have the newspapers not apologised*, by Roy Greenslade, The Guardian, 2003 <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/dec/01/mondaymediasection9>

<sup>30</sup> Migration Observatory <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk>

<sup>31</sup> Citizens UK welcomes the Government's announcement to amend the Immigration Bill to prohibit in law the detention of children for immigration purposes. <http://www.citizensuk.org/2014/01/citizens-uk-welcomes-new-law-to-end-child-detention-for-immigration-purposes/>

<sup>32</sup> The Coalition: our programme for government

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/78977/coalition\\_programme\\_for\\_government.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> *Has the Coalition ended child detention?* Full Fact 2012

<https://fullfact.org/factchecks/has-coalition-ended-child-detention-immigration-centres-28570>

Out of this rather tense context in the UK and Europe, watching and hearing about positive and strategic changes in the US looked and sounded like true dream.

The US organizations seem to be on the same page and working together towards the same goals.

Although the US context is different in terms of their history of immigration, the demographic of their migrant populations, and the size and diversity of the country, it is clear that, even though their success did not come overnight, it has been achieved through a very intelligent and strategic, but also very organised, effort.

And I wanted to learn more about that.

## **A Word About Community Organising**

President Obama, and to an extent the former US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, have brought community organising in vogue. Young Obama spent several years working as an organiser in Chicago, while young Hillary Rodham interviewed Saul Alinsky for her senior thesis<sup>34</sup>, and in return, Alinsky offered her a job.

Organizing for Action (former Organizing for America)<sup>35</sup>, Obama's not-for-profit, has just announced it will train 10,000 organisers. In the UK, Big Society<sup>36</sup> delivered a different kind of community organising scheme run by Locality and the Labour Party is using organising techniques through the Movement for Change<sup>37</sup>. These are just a few forms of organising and there are hundreds of others around the world.

So far, I have only been involved with Citizens UK, and my organising experience has been supplemented with education at Queen Mary's, both of which drew on Saul Alinsky's Industrial Area Foundation (IAF)<sup>38</sup> model of broad-based organising.

In the spirit of Alinsky, who said that

*"All change means disorganization of the old and organization of the new,"*

I am on a quest to disorganise my old ways of doing things and organise anew.

In that process, *"there are no permanent enemies or allies."*

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<sup>34</sup> Hillary Clinton thesis on Saul Alinsky [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillary\\_Rodham\\_senior\\_thesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillary_Rodham_senior_thesis)

<sup>35</sup> *President Obama: "I'm not done"* Organizing for America, December 2014 <https://www.barackobama.com/news/president-obama-im-not-done/>

<sup>36</sup> Locality <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-names-new-partner-to-deliver-community-organisers>

<sup>37</sup> Movement for Change <http://www.movementforchange.org.uk>

<sup>38</sup> *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky <http://infed.org/mobi/saul-alinsky-community-organizing-and-rules-for-radicals/>

## Organising Inside Out

One of the most interesting lessons I learned from the organisations I visited in the US was how internalized organising has become, as a way of operating for organisations I have visited. Indeed, my first week at the Industrial Area Foundation (IAF) conference was about building faith institutions' capacity to organise internally.

Originally, the IAF model that is a foundation of British community organising was very much concerned with bringing together different member institutions within the alliance to act for common good. They would all contribute some money towards salary for organisers who would spend time to connect various institutions and get them into joint actions for positive change.

However, in my experience this was just not sufficient for migrant communities.

For many community leaders as well as our staff, involvement in organising felt like additional work, and we struggled to keep it up, even when the benefits for our communities were obvious.

Those with a vision recognized the strategic importance and clear self-interest of working in an organised way with other civil society organisations, but struggled to keep up with the structural demands of organising method:

- conducting regular face-to-face meetings (so-called "one-to-ones");
- organising smaller house meetings and conducting listening exercises,
- participating in and instigating regular actions in their chapters,
- delivering a turnout for actions,
- attending training and planning meetings, and conducting power analyses

All this can take place only if it is seen as a core way of operating internally, rather than additional work on top of one's day-to-day tasks, usually to do with advocacy and other forms of fire fighting for individuals and community groups.

The key advantage that US colleagues have over their British counterparts is the fact that organising has become part of their working culture, and is considered to be standard practice in the way they do their work and how they support individuals, work with communities and conduct public relationships.

I experienced this at the Four Freedom Fund convening on Voter Registration in Alabama, at a week long training with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR)<sup>39</sup> in Chicago, during actions with The Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition<sup>40</sup> in Boston, and during all other visits.

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<sup>39</sup> Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights <http://icirr.org>

<sup>40</sup> The Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition <http://www.miracoalition.org>

All my interactions started with relational one-to-one meetings<sup>41</sup> and all of my meetings started with the story of self – why we do what we do, what drives us to want to make changes around us.

On many occasions my hosts were only vaguely familiar with Saul Alinsky, IAF and history of organising, even though their practice was reflecting almost all of *The Rules for Radicals*.<sup>42</sup>

However, they were not burdened by models and used what was available to them and what was useful and practical in their context, such as the *Wellstone Action!* approach<sup>43</sup>.

The late senator Wellstone was a community organiser who utilized the power of organised people in politics, but also realized that:

*“in building the organisation, he relied too heavily on organisers, moved too quickly from issue to issue, and failed to focus on developing leaders who would carry the organisation forward over time.”<sup>44</sup>*

I experienced a similar challenge in organising work at The Forum. I constantly needed to negotiate between our roles as a support service and a community development organisation and organising and developing leaders for actions that we wanted to take forward based on our needs.

The Forum is working with Citizens UK organisers who are responsible for a wide range of campaigns and actions, but if we do not put in the time and effort to bring our issues to the alliance, they have no legitimacy to pursue them.

Internally, with regards to organising, we were only scratching the surface, but I also felt that our legitimacy only comes from our engagement with our members and if we were to end the provision of advice, advocacy and other support services, we would no longer stay in touch with our people.

We were constantly labelled as single issue campaign to do with immigration and yet our members experienced, mostly adversely, every single issue imaginable: if employed they were rarely paid a living wage, and often not even the minimum wage; many were exploited in domestic servitude or worked as carers on zero hours contracts; they lived in poor housing; many ended up in debt; they had no access to good quality legal advice; they were subject to harsh immigration rules; they experienced racial discrimination and prejudice.

Our members could and should be part of every organising campaign and action, but they also need advice and support in coping with their immediate predicaments.

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<sup>41</sup> Relational Organizing Resources: The Art of One-on-One Meetings; A Primer by the Montgomery County Education Association, 2013 <http://mceanea.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2014/09/Primer-on-One-on-Ones.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Rules for Radicals, Saul Alinsky [http://www.mynacc.org/Rules\\_for\\_Radicals.pdf](http://www.mynacc.org/Rules_for_Radicals.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Wellstone Action! <http://www.wellstone.org>

<sup>44</sup> Politics the Wellstone Way: How to Elect Progressive Candidates and Win on Issues, by Bill Lofy, University of Minnesota Press (20 Sept. 2005) page 5

What I have seen in the US helped resolve this conundrum. During my visits, I saw that there is no contradiction between organising and support services; in fact, quite the opposite. Building the power of communities in an organised way and providing practical support is an advantage in acting for social change.

We were stuck between four methodologies or models of working with artificial boundaries between organising, capacity building, advocacy and support. Why do we have to choose between those four, if it makes sense for us to do all of them? Make the Road in NY<sup>45</sup> is the perfect example of how organising, capacity building, advice and advocacy work well together.

Broad-based organising differs from social movements, which tend to be focused on a single issue. Jeffery Stout makes this point very well in *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America*.<sup>46</sup>

Organising is not about the issues: “An **issue** is contestable matter of concern on which a group might consider taking action”, states Stout.

Organising is not about identity he adds: “Identity is inherently unstable as a focal point for organising.”

“Organising is not about just winning campaigns; it is about democratic way of life in which democracy is a commitment to freedom as non-domination and avoidance of arbitrary exclusion”.

That is exactly what most of our migrant and refugee members want – they want to be included, in all aspects of their lives. Very few migrant community organisations are only and just concerned with one issue and immigration as an issue is just one hurdle.

Immigrant workers in Seattle needed to learn English and needed to be trained in health and safety in order to avoid injuries. They also did not want to be exploited by unscrupulous employers, so Casa Latina<sup>47</sup> provided training for them in English and health and safety at work, and to prevent exploitation they set up what is effectively labour exchange for sometimes undocumented immigrants. They used organised power of their communities to do this in full sight of and with the blessing of city authorities.

Virginia Organizing<sup>48</sup> chapter in Fredericksburg was organising action on health provision for poor, supporting a protest march by the Mayor of a small town in North Carolina which lost its hospital as a knock on effect of the State’s refusal to support Medicare and Medicaid programmes. This again is an issue that affects many people including immigrants, who are affected by poverty, even if they are documented.

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<sup>45</sup> Make the Road NY <http://www.maketheroad.org>

<sup>46</sup> Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America, By Jeffery Stout, Princeton University Press; 2012 Kindle edition (page 146).

<sup>47</sup> Casa Latina, Seattle WA <http://casa-latina.org>

<sup>48</sup> “Walking Mayor” Brings Rural Hospital Issues to D.C. By Dan Heyman, July 2014 Virginia Organizing <http://www.virginia-organizing.org/walking-mayor-brings-rural-hospital-issues-to-d-c/>



MIRA Coalition in Boston used their organised power to persuade five out of six gubernatorial candidates to support the Safe Driving Bill<sup>49</sup>. By removing immigration status as a precondition to obtaining a driving license, this bill enables all residents to be trained, licensed and insured, making roads safer for all drivers, while also providing undocumented immigrants with a form of identification.

These are immigration issues that affect the quality of life, not only of immigrants and their families, but of all residents. And through the action of organised communities, people in power also saw the wisdom of these proposals, even when it went against the Federal legislation.

Almost all organisations I have visited combined some form of support and advice services with organising actions that delivered change. Indeed, two organisations where community organising was conceived by Saul Alinsky – The Back of the Yards<sup>50</sup> and The Woodlawn Organisation (TWO)<sup>51</sup> in Chicago – are still in existence today and provide all kinds of neighbourhood support services, ranging from legal advice surgeries to English lessons for new immigrants.

This was rather reassuring, as I had concerns that service provision may be disempowering and it may create dependency, but I am confident that if combined with an internal organising approach, rather than organising as an add-on, it will lead to more sustainable empowerment and civic engagement and inclusion of new citizens.

## Get Out the Vote

*“To lose your “identity” as a citizen of democracy is but a step from losing your identity as a person. People react to this frustration by not acting at all. The separation of the people from the routine daily functions of citizenship is heartbreak in a democracy.” Saul Alinsky.<sup>52</sup>*

Due to the timing of my trip, just a few months ahead of the mid-term elections in the US, the majority of my hosts were focusing on voter registration, Get Out the Vote (GOTV) actions and pre-election accountability sessions with their respective candidates.

This was an invaluable experience for me, although it was quite daunting when I thought about using it in my own work. In the UK we are still in the grip of traditional advocacy and awareness rising in our engagement with elected representatives, and we are just discovering the power and importance of non-partisan voter mobilisation, especially when it comes to the immigrant and/or minority vote.

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<sup>49</sup> Safe Driving Coalition <http://www.miracoalition.org/en/campaigns/safedrivingbill>

<sup>50</sup> The Back of the Yards <http://bync.org>

<sup>51</sup> The Woodlawn Organisation (TWO) <http://www.twochicago.org/wcdc.html>

<sup>52</sup> Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals, Saul Alinsky, Vintage, 1989, iBooks edition (Page 22)

As in the UK, community and non-governmental organisations in the US are regulated as not-for profit (charitable) organisations, and their political engagement and voter registration work has to be strictly non-partisan.

As in the UK, in the US they have to guard against party politics, but there are no legal constraints on general advocacy, especially if it brings people's voice into public policy debates. This fits perfectly with organising, as *there are no permanent enemies or allies in organising*.

On my travels, I witnessed how in many places with strong state-wide coalitions (or where people were truly organised), voter registration complements the other on-going engagement work with political representatives on issues relevant to immigrant population, such as the TRUST Act<sup>53</sup> in Chicago which prohibits local police from detaining individuals on behalf of federal immigration authorities<sup>54</sup>, Make the Road win on municipal id's New York<sup>55</sup>, to help migrants in opening a bank account, renting an apartment, filing a police report.

These issue-based campaigns are part of the bigger picture and are subject to accountability actions and long-term engagement that enabled all voters to make up their own mind about their candidates.

I took part in a week-long training for young organisers with ICIRR<sup>56</sup> during my stay in Chicago and experienced the military precision with which they planned their approach—each Organiser had only six months to register 1,000 new voters. They were trained in all aspects of voter registration: how to remain non-partisan, how to stay safe when canvassing, the right day of the week and the right time of the day to engage in door knocking, when to phone people, and so on.

But, they were also trained in organising techniques: one-to-one relational meetings, the story of self, house meetings and listening, power analysis, actions, volunteer management, communication with the media, and messaging, mostly using the Wellstone

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<sup>53</sup> The Chicago City Council decision on The TRUST Act <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/SO2012-4984.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> "The Trust Act is a measure that prohibits local police from detaining individuals on behalf of federal immigration authorities. Dubbed the "Welcoming City Ordinance," the measure makes Chicago the latest jurisdiction to push back against immigration "detainers," the lynchpin of the controversial Secure Communities program. Originally introduced by Mayor Rahm Emmanuel in July, the ordinance prohibits city agencies from detaining individuals solely for civil immigration violations. Subject to certain exceptions—such as for convicted felons and self-admitted gang members—Chicago jails will no longer be able to honor immigration detainers, requests from federal authorities to temporarily detain inmates alleged to be eligible for deportation. Although immigration detainers have been issued for decades, their use has become increasingly prevalent following the expansion of Secure Communities, which gives federal immigration authorities access to fingerprints taken in local jails."

<http://immigrationimpact.com/2012/09/18/as-chicago-passes-anti-detainer-ordinance-trust-act-awaits-signature-in-california/>

<sup>55</sup> "**Why is this important?** Right now, hundreds of thousands of young, elderly, immigrant, LGBTQ, and homeless New Yorkers lack government-issued ID. This bars them from accessing the basic programs and services that many of us take for granted -- things like opening a bank account, renting an apartment, filing a police report, picking their children up from school, or accessing needed services. For our community -- undocumented immigrants in particular -- having government-issued ID will help everyone participate in these fundamental aspects of daily life and will acknowledge our communities' importance and belonging to NYC. **But this isn't just about safety and opportunity for immigrants.** Getting a city ID card will be made easy so that thousands of youth and homeless New Yorkers won't need to fear being detained or arrested for not having ID. And, New Yorkers will get to **choose their gender to be listed on their card.** Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals will no longer have to fear confusion or being shamed when pulling out an ID card that does not accurately represent them." <http://www.maketheroad.org/article.php?ID=3648>

<sup>56</sup> One Nation, One Dream is a non-partisan civic engagement program that seeks to impact the immigrant-related issues that our membership and allies prioritize. <http://icirr.org/content/new-americans-democracy-project>

Action! methodology.

Training also included the history of Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM)<sup>57</sup> and March the 10<sup>th</sup> Movement<sup>58</sup>, and they were able to learn about the history of the movement directly from leaders and organisers who were part of it from the beginning, as well as from local politicians who were on the receiving end of it.

All trainers, all senior organisers, and all young trainee organisers were either first or second generation immigrants from all over the world. They were all supported and supervised on a daily basis by ICIRR staff to make sure that everything was going according to plan.

In Boston, where I visited MIRA, I went to a citizenship ceremony and helped register around 130 new citizens-voters within half an hour. In New York, community group Adhikaar<sup>59</sup> which supports Nepalese speaking immigrants, mostly domestic workers, told me how they have already registered 400 new voters that year.

I also witnessed how voter power was utilized by DRUM<sup>60</sup> – South Asian Organizing Center in NYC, United We Dream<sup>61</sup> and Casa De Maryland actions<sup>62</sup> in protests in front of the White House in Washington DC, in July.

Both actions had a great turnout, told powerful stories, had cross community representation with substantial media coverage, reminded the President what he promised voters and that, if immigration reform was not delivered, there would be price to pay in the mid-term elections.

It seemed that, as with Fair Immigration Reform, everybody is on the same page when it came to voter registration.

Community organising provided the antidote for voter apathy. Unlike in Britain, US voter registration system was full of administrative obstacles<sup>63</sup> preventing many, especially minority voters, from exercising their democratic rights. As a result, organised voter registration efforts in the US have produced a more developed infrastructure to enable voter registration action.

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<sup>57</sup> Fair Immigration Reform Movement time line organising for change since 2000

<http://www.communitychange.org/real-power/immigration-timeline/>

<sup>58</sup> In 2006, millions of people participated in protests in response to proposed legislation known as H.R. 4437, which would raise penalties for illegal immigration and classify undocumented immigrants and anyone who helped them enter or remain in the US as felons. As part of the wider immigration debate, most of the protests not only sought a rejection of this bill, but also a comprehensive reform of the country's immigration laws that included a path to citizenship for all undocumented immigrants.

A major demonstration in Chicago on March 10, 2006 estimated at 100,000 people was the initial impetus for protests throughout the country. The largest single demonstration occurred in Los Angeles on March 25, 2006 with a march of more than 500,000 people. The largest nationwide day of protest occurred on April 10, 2006, in 102 cities across the country.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006\\_United\\_States\\_immigration\\_reform\\_protests](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_United_States_immigration_reform_protests)

<sup>59</sup> Adhikaar, NY <http://www.adhikaar.org>

<sup>60</sup> DRUM, NY <http://www.drumnyc.org/community-speakout-action-policing-anti-black-racism/>

<sup>61</sup> *Immigration Activists Hold Funeral For GOP: It's 'Dead To Our Community*, Huffington Post, July 2014

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/21/republicans-immigration\\_n\\_5606702.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/21/republicans-immigration_n_5606702.html)

<sup>62</sup> *Over 100 Faith Leaders, Immigrant Activists Arrested At White House For Protesting Deportations*, Huffington Post, July 2014

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/31/faith-leaders-protest-deportation\\_n\\_5638223.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/31/faith-leaders-protest-deportation_n_5638223.html)

<sup>63</sup> The Battle to Protect the Ballot: Voter Suppression Measures Passed Since 2013, American Civil Liberties Union

<https://www.aclu.org/maps/battle-protect-ballot-voter-suppression-measures-passed-2013>

Elections are the essential ingredient of community organising, and voter registration will obviously be intensified in the run up to the elections, but there is danger that voter registration becomes a time limited campaign that uses some organising techniques and it ends on election day.

This approach is source of tension between different schools of organising. Those who only pursue it up until election day, without on-going engagement and accountability, miss the opportunity to establish deeper connections in the community and develop leadership, especially amongst younger and minority leaders.

## **The Way Forward**

I have started implementing some of these lessons in my work already.

At the Forum, we have begun the process of reorganizing internally along the lines of a relational, leadership-developing, deep-roots organisation.

Our long-term, strategic aim is to develop ourselves and our members as organising institutions internally, while continuing to provide the support services that our members desperately need.

In addition, we have launched the first community organising voter registration project for immigrants<sup>64</sup>, which combines this long-term support and organising work with civic engagement and the development of migrant and refugee leaders and communities.

In just a few weeks, in the run up to local and EU elections, and during the first few weeks of the project, by working with eleven other community organisations we have registered nearly 5,000 new voters in London.

There are many challenges ahead of us, but reflecting on my trip, I am mostly concerned with two: finding the resources for meaningful organising and long-term national movement building.

## **Funding for Organising**

Alinsky's organising model is based on the idea that organised communities would pay for their organisers through their membership dues. This is an important point, which highlights the need to be independent from external influences. However, apart from two very recent examples in the UK - Nottingham Citizens<sup>65</sup> and Citizens Cymru Wales<sup>66</sup> – all

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<sup>64</sup> Voter Registration Project at the Forum <http://migrantforum.org.uk/projects/community-organising/>

<sup>65</sup> Nottingham Citizens <http://www.citizensuk.org/chapters/nottingham-citizens/nottscitizens/>

<sup>66</sup> Citizens Cymru Wales <http://www.citizenswales.org>

organising that I am aware of, in the US and UK, has always been dependent on grant funding from public and/or philanthropic sources.

This is not a problem in itself, as long as funders support the mission and values of organising, there are clear lines of accountability and an understanding of the theory of change, which seems to be the case with The Four Freedoms Fund<sup>67</sup> and other philanthropic foundations.

Large organisations I visited in the US have annual budgets in the millions. Part of that income is generated through advice and support service delivery, but many have grants just to employ organisers who will support the capacity of leaders in immigrant communities to participate in democracy. This internal capacity building for organising was framed through a lens of *justice* rather than *equality*.

K'ai Smith of *South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)*<sup>68</sup> based in Maryland, made this point as follows:

*"Equality means we are all given the same opportunity and support, but justice means that we recognize that people are different and that, therefore, they require a different kind of support to reach equality."*

SAALT is an organisation that we, in the UK, would classify as a capacity building second-tier organisation—a national coordinating body that also distributes funds to smaller local and regional community groups. However, their strategy and what they ask in return for the grants they are redistributing on behalf of philanthropic foundations are informed through a grassroots listening exercise.

They are very careful not to perpetuate dominant narratives and invest their energy in working on the so-called intersectionality<sup>69</sup> of social justice issues such as gender, race, religion and sexuality.

Progressive funding has influenced this agenda and approach, but it has also allowed communities to face some of these issues on their own terms, helping to avoid a top-down approach.

Because communities were organising inside out, they were no longer able to ignore their own discriminatory practices towards women or LGBTQ members, working through a framework of justice they had to become accountable. Therefore, they had to change in response to the experiences of their own members and not merely because they were

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<sup>67</sup> About Four Freedoms Fund <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/us-programs/grantees/four-freedoms-fund-0>

<sup>68</sup> South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) <http://saalt.org>

<sup>69</sup> Intersectionality is the study of intersections between forms or systems of oppression, domination or discrimination. An example is [black feminism](#), which argues that the experience of being a black woman cannot be understood in terms of being black, and of being a woman, considered independently, but must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce each other... Intersectionality is an interdisciplinary approach that considers (Hancock 2005) two or more intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability as "simultaneous processes" (Holvino 2010) that identify and rank members of society through systems of power and social relations (Jones 2003; McWhorter 2004) and influences "political access, equality and the potential for any form of justice" (Hancock 2005). <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersectionality>

incentivized to do so due to their funding sources.

In the UK, with the success and raised profile of the Citizens UK, a number of charitable trusts have funded their work, including their work on immigration. The government funding went to Locality for their model of organising.

Apart from Unbound Philanthropy, which has brought over valuable experience and learning from the US in a number of different ways, I am not aware of any other charitable foundation specifically funding community organising work of immigrant communities in the UK.

Until we are able to secure resources for the long-term development of organising in a way that will shift the internal culture of community organisations towards the combined model of *support - advocacy - capacity building - organising* for sustainable change, and build organised leadership amongst immigrants, we will not be able to build a movement with legitimacy to hold power accountable or deliver meaningful change.

Instead, only limited, random voices will be emerging in public debate, contextualised as powerful testimony, but in isolation, powerless to affect change.

The investment needs to be strategic and long term in order to enhance democracy in any meaningful way. That is, the investment in the organising of grassroots immigrant communities in the UK itself needs to become *organised*.

## **Grassroots, Deep Roots or No Roots?**

In the UK, we use the term “grassroots” to label community organisations that closely reflect the everyday experiences of their members. In isolation, these experiences are just that—experiences—and they only become powerful when they are organised in some shape of form in order to change an aspect of that everyday life that is unjust or damaging.

As the IAF leader, Reverend Johnny Youngblood, labelled them, grassroots are actually better referred to as “deep roots”<sup>70</sup>:

*“We are not a grass roots organization. Grass roots are shallow roots. Grass roots are fragile roots. Our roots are deep roots. Our roots have fought for existence in the shattered glass of East New York.”*

This way of re-defining perception of communities that are organising for justice sounded very true to me.

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/printgroupProfile.asp?grpId=7493>

Some of what I experienced during my fellowship travels forced me to think more seriously about the gaps in our overall approach to the narrative.

Overwhelmed with challenges of grassroots/deep roots work, which we often refer to as “fire fighting”, we hardly have any sense of the history of our struggle (or movement), or our sense of progress.

Often, we act as if we have no roots.

During my visit to Birmingham in Alabama, in addition to all the practical workshops and the time spent in relational meetings, more than 120 participants were taken to visit the Civil Rights Institute<sup>71</sup>, next to the historic 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptists Church<sup>72</sup>.

This exhibition was very powerful and had a profound effect on me. Although I knew most of the key historical facts about Dr Martin Luther King’s life and struggle, being in that space brought to life the intensity and sheer persistence of the organising that went into building of the movement, and I realised how simplified some of the historic narrative of that struggle has become.

*“The reduction of the movement into simple fables obscures the broad social, institutional and personal sacrifices of the people who engaged in the struggle. The King-and-Parks-centered narrative limits what we teach students about the range of possible political action. Students deserve to learn that individuals, acting collectively, can make powerful institutions change.”<sup>73</sup>*

Although, Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat to a white man was not pre-meditated and the subsequent Montgomery Bus Boycott was not planned, it was far from a spontaneous act of individual civil disobedience. Rosa Parks was a secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP)<sup>74</sup> and a member since 1943. She was a trained activist and organiser before and her political activism continued through the boycott and for the rest of her life.

In Walla Walla, I visited Whitman College<sup>75</sup>, which has teamed up with the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance<sup>76</sup> program and the Walla Walla Public School District to create *Whitman Teaches the Movement*.

The program was established in 2011, in response to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s report on state standards for Civil Rights education<sup>77</sup>, in which 20 states (including Washington) received a failing grade. In this project, Whitman college students are trained in the history of the Civil Rights Movement and sent to local public school classrooms to teach creative, history-specific lessons to students who would otherwise

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<sup>71</sup> Birmingham Civil Rights Institute <http://www.bcri.org/index.html>

<sup>72</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, Birmingham Alabama [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/16th\\_Street\\_Baptist\\_Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/16th_Street_Baptist_Church)

<sup>73</sup> Teaching the Movement 2014: The State of Civil Rights Education in the United States, Southern Poverty Law Center, Montgomery, Alabama (page 12)

<sup>74</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) <http://www.naACP.org>

<sup>75</sup> Teaching the Movement at Whitman College <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/teaching-movement-whitman-college>

<sup>76</sup> Teaching Tolerance, A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Centre <http://www.tolerance.org>

<sup>77</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Centre, Montgomery Alabama <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/teaching-the-movement>

not receive this instruction as part of their standard education.

My journey started in Alabama, with the National Civil Rights Movement; whilst travelling in Virginia and in Washington, DC, I met and saw in action great organisers and leaders of the civil rights organising movement such as Bob Zellner<sup>78</sup> and Rev. William Barber<sup>79</sup>; and I ended my journey by learning about interesting and innovative work on Civil Rights Education at Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington.

This experience made me realize how very little I have in the way of historical context of my work in the UK. The Forum is physically based in the building where Notting Hill Carnival headquarters once were. I knew the local historical context of Windrush<sup>80</sup>, the Notting Hill Riots<sup>81</sup>, and the birth of the Notting Hill Carnival<sup>82</sup> as the neighbourhood's response to violence and discrimination.

But somehow, in the way we work, we have failed to connect the dots, not only between past and present struggles, but also between past successes and the work we do today.

Since my return from the United States, I have been testing my colleagues' knowledge about the history of organising in the UK. While everyone has heard of the Notting Hill Carnival, I am yet to find a colleague who knows who Claudia Jones<sup>83</sup> is, and how and why the Carnival was set up.

Therefore, it is not so much that we have no roots, clearly, we do – we have very deep roots, it is that we don't know about them. And we must find out more about them, not only to learn from them, but also to learn how to tell our story of success to future generations and help them avoid some of our mistakes.

## What's Next?

In addition to internal changes at The Forum, described above (leadership training, organising inside out, relational meetings, voter registration etc.), we have redefined our membership rules.

My colleagues and I will be travelling around the country to share the message of usefulness of organising inside out and to build relationships with community

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<sup>78</sup> Bob Zellner <http://moralheroes.org/bob-zellner>

<sup>79</sup> Rev William Barber <http://www.revwilliambarber.com>

<sup>80</sup> Windrush [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/windrush\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/windrush_01.shtml)

<sup>81</sup> Notting Hill Riots <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/notting-hill-riots-1958>

<sup>82</sup> Notting Hill Carnival [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notting\\_Hill\\_Carnival](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notting_Hill_Carnival)

<sup>83</sup> Claudia Jones, *née* Claudia Vera Cumberbatch was a Trinidad-born journalist. As a child she migrated with her family to the US, where she became a political activist. As a result of her political activities, she was deported from the US and ended up living on the United Kingdom. She founded Britain's first Black newspaper, *The West Indian Gazette*, in 1958. After the violent attacks on immigrants in Notting Hill in 1950s, Jones identified the need to "wash the taste of Notting Hill and Nottingham out of our mouths". It was suggested that the British black community should have a carnival. The first one was held in January 1959 and was televised nationally by the BBC. These early celebrations were epitomised by the slogan: "A people's art is the genesis of their freedom." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claudia\\_Jones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claudia_Jones)



organisations interested in organising and change.

We still need to secure resources, but we are confident that is the right path to take.

We will continue our work with Citizens UK, building on our citizens' *Manifesto*<sup>84</sup> asks in the pre-election assembly with all party leaders in May of 2015.

We have reached out to advocacy and support organisations to build consensus around proactive asks on immigration detention.

We have also drafted the *Birmingham Declaration*<sup>85</sup>, which has been signed by nearly 300 organisations nationwide.

I will be making presentations about my trip and learning to a number of different interested parties, such as our members and partners, Queen Mary University, Citizens UK, the local authorities we work with, charitable funders, and any other stakeholders who may be interested.

I will publish blogs on The Forum's website about major changes instigated by what I've learned from my trip, as these happen.

Finally, we are in discussions with colleagues about organising a historic walk around our neighbourhood in Notting Hill to start educating ourselves, new citizens and visitors about the history of our civil rights movement. In the meantime, we are offering guided tour of Notting Hill Civil Rights Movement to our guests and volunteers.

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<sup>84</sup> Citizens UK Manifesto commitment No 5:

**CITIZENS UK WILL:**

1. Care for the well-being of refugees, welcome them into our communities, encourage them integrate through participation in institutions, and exercise citizenship through our Citizens alliances;
2. Enable the UK to play a bigger role in resettling refugees from UN camps by persuading local authorities to pledge to accommodate a quota in their area, and offer civil society support when refugees arrive.

**WE ASK THE NEXT GOVERNMENT TO:**

1. Increase the number of UN refugees resettled in the UK from 750 to at least 1,500 a year;
2. Bring the income threshold for spousal visas into line with the Living Wage to keep more families together;
3. Put a time limit on adult detention, and end the use of pain-based removal methods.

<http://www.citizensuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Citizens-UK-Manifesto-2015.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> The Sanctuary Summit <https://sanctuarysummit2014.wordpress.com/the-birmingham-declaration/>

## Appendix 1

### Fellowship itinerary

#### 1. 24<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> April 2014 - Civic Participation Convening – Birmingham, Alabama, US

Thank you to Will Somerville from Unbound Philanthropy, London and Henry Der from Four Freedoms Fund for invitation to the event.

In addition to attending sessions at the two day conference on Voter Registration for 120 delegates from across the US also held meetings with:

1. John Miyasato - The Center on Civic Engagement
2. Lauren Billingsley - The Center on Civic Engagement
3. Marvin Randolph - NAACP, Washington
4. Adriana Barboza – Wellstone Action, Washington
5. Francisco Heredia, director of One Arizona, Phoenix
6. K'ai Smith - South Asian Americans Leading Together SAALT
7. Eva Castillo, MIRA New Hampshire
8. Marjorie Fine, Four Freedoms Fund, NY
9. Joy Cushman, PICO National Network, Washington
10. Artemio Arreola, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights; Federation of Michoacán's Clubs in Illinois (FEDECFMI) and Casa Michoacán
11. Visit to [Birmingham Civil Rights Institute](#)

#### 2. 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> July 2014 Industrial Area Foundation (IAF) conference, Mundelain, IL 80

delegates, organisers and leaders from US, UK, Germany and Australia

Thank you to: Neil Jameson and Jonathan Cox from Citizens UK and Julie Rowley of IAF, Chicago. In addition to attending sessions at the five day conference, one to one meetings with:

1. Bishop Douglas Miles - Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) Bishop of Koinonia Baptist Church Baltimore
2. Bishop Joel Martinez - United Methodist Church, the National Board of the Industrial Areas Foundation, San Antonio
3. Amanda Tattersall - Sydney Alliance
4. Ernesto Cortes - West / Southwest IAF, Austin
5. Kristen King - VOICE (Voices Organized In Civic Engagement), Oklahoma
6. Martha Seaman - Valley Interfaith Project, Phoenix
7. Jessica Tate - Voice/Next Church, Washington DC
8. Gabriella Lohan – COPS/Metro, San Antonio
9. Elizabeth Valdez – The Metropolitan Organization, Houston

#### 3. 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> July, New Americans Democracy Project Voter Registration Training,

Illinois Collation for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), Chicago, IL

Thank you to Mimi and Bud Frankel, Artemio Arreola, Celina Villanueva and Vero Castro from ICIRR

During the five day training with 20 young organisers working on voter registration sessions held with:

1. David Orr - Cook County Clerk
2. Mehrdad Azemun - Fair Immigration Reform Movement/Center for Community

Change

3. Adriana Barboza – Wellstone Action, Washington
4. Edward Acevedo - Democratic member of the Illinois House of Representatives, representing the 2nd district of Illinois
5. Gabe Gonzalez – Centre for Community Change, Chicago
6. Alderman Ricardo Munoz - Ward 22, Chicago
7. Ahlam Jbara - Illinois Collation for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), Chicago

#### 4. 21<sup>st</sup> to 31<sup>th</sup> July 2014, Washington DC, Maryland and Virginia

Thank you to: K'ai Smith - SAALT, Lauren Billingsley - The Center on Civic Engagement and Adelaide Alexander, Virginia Organizing Fredericksburg.

1. Action - Casa De Maryland Action against deportations White House
2. Action - "Walking Mayor" Adam O'Neal (R) – Rally in Fredericksburg on 25<sup>th</sup> July with Virginia Organising <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ1M0CkQmPE>
3. Action - Mayor Adam O'Neal Arrives to Washington on the 28<sup>th</sup> July with Rev Barber and Bob Zellner [http://www.saveourhospital.org/rally\\_capitol](http://www.saveourhospital.org/rally_capitol)
4. K'ai Smith – South Asian American Leading Together (SAALT), Maryland
5. Lauren Billingsley - The Center on Civic Engagement
6. Adelaide Alexander, Virginia Organizing Fredericksburg, Organizer
7. Virginia Organizing Immigration Group planning meeting
8. Eric Byler, Documentary Filmmaker, Story of America [http://www.storyofamerica.org/tags/eric\\_byler](http://www.storyofamerica.org/tags/eric_byler)
9. Eunice Haigler, Virginia Organising Fredericksburg, Affordable Healthcare Campaign
10. Patricia Smith, Virginia Organising Fredericksburg, Immigration Justice Campaign
11. Action - United We Dream protest White House

#### 5. 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> August, New York, NY

Thank you to: Dagan Bayliss and Diana Quick. Visits and meetings with

1. Fahd Ahmed - DRUM- South Asian Organizing Center, NY
2. Narbada Chhetri, Adhikaar, Nepalese Speaking Community Organisation, NY
3. Visit to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island
4. Daniel Coates, Make the Road, NY

#### 6. 9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> August 2014 - Boston, Massachusetts

Thank you to: Eva Millona, Carlos Saavedra and Sanja Zdjelar

Visit to The Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition and one to ones with:

1. Eva Millona, Executive Director
2. Cristina Aguilera, Organizing Director
3. Thalita Dias, Field Organizer
4. Sarang Sekhavat, Federal Policy Director
5. Elsa Gomes, Director of Development
6. Action – Voter registration at the Citizenship ceremony in Lowell, MA
7. Action – Gubernatorial debate on immigration <http://www.miracoalition.org/en/mc-releases/500-gubforum2014>
8. José Palma, Lead Organizer, Student Immigrant Movement – SIM, Boston, MA

**7. 16<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2014 - Walla Walla, Washington**

Thank you to: Sonja Zivak, Andrew Trio and Noah Leavitt

1. Youth N' Action Community Organising Meeting St. Patrick's Church, Walla Walla
2. Jennifer Beckmeyer; Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC), Walla Walla
3. Noah Leavitt, Wittman College, Walla Walla
4. Rebecca Sturtevant, Southern Poverty Law Center, Montgomery, Alabama visiting Wittman College for Teaching Tolerance project evaluation day

**8. 23<sup>rd</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> August 2014, Seattle, Washington**

Thank you to Betsy Dillner and Marla Swanson

1. Fernando Mejia-Ledesma – Alliance for Just Society, Seattle
2. Haydee Lavariega - Casa Latina, Seattle
3. Rich Stoltz – OneAmerica, Seattle
4. Maha Jahshan – OneAmerica, Seattle