

# On engagement and building power

By Carolina Mejías Rivera and Alejandro Silva Díaz

## CAROLINA:

I was raised by a single mother with limited resources and a father who was absent because of drug addiction. I grew up in a poor neighborhood and went to public school. While I had good grades in High School and a fair PAA (SAT equivalent) score, my teachers and high school counselors told me that I should go to a 2-year college, despite wanting to attend the University of Puerto Rico.

My mother didn't have (and to this day has never had) a car, so driving to get counsel from the admissions office was not an option. So one day I hopped on a “*pisicorre*” – a low-cost public van that takes a few passengers between counties in Puerto Rico – and arrived at the University. There I learned how to apply, which is how I eventually got accepted into the UPR.

Once I started college, I learned that my level of education did not compare to others who came from private schools. I had to read and study twice as much as my peers, which limited my time to perform other daily tasks. To make ends meet, I had to work in the work-study program and teach at soccer clinics at multiple clubs in the metropolitan area.

So, it was not surprising that by my last year of college I was on track to graduate to become a frontline employee. While I had always been interested in cooperativism, community organizing and recreation, and I took courses on those topics, I hadn't really had the time to engage in any of those. Most of my peers who have ended up in leadership positions studied and worked hard, but they also joined student club boards, interned at places related to their field of study, and even helped out in political campaigns.



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When people ask me about building power, my first question is always, “Building power for whom?”

## ALEJANDRO:

I had been active as the President of my university's Puerto Rican Student Association, and I had joined a few of my friends to help coordinate their Cuban American Student Association conference. I knew that I wanted to be involved in social causes in Puerto Rico, but I wasn't sure how.

That's when I learned about *Mentes Puertorriqueñas en Acción*, and joined a coordinating committee for our first summer program. About 20 peers would join over the summer to learn about social causes, and how we could engage to advance them. This was more than an exploratory project, though: we quickly learned that we were preparing the future leaders of all of the causes we supported.

Three years in, I met Carolina at the University of Puerto Rico. I invited her to join the group and our summer



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internship program. And while she did, she was different from the rest of the group: her background, her perspective on topics we discussed and priorities were different.

A few years later, Carolina and I went to a convening of organizations that worked with youth. The purpose was to establish strategies for youth to be considered on important issues because they were seen as a disregarded community. Somewhere in the middle of the conversation we brought up an observation: I didn't feel that I was left out and unheard because I was young. Yet, we understood how someone like Carolina had to work three or four times harder than I did to be listened to: as a black woman from a poor neighborhood, certainly I had more influence than she did on power spaces.

This conversation was very important to define our future strategies going forward from that point on. Because even if we were building power for youth, we still bear the important question: who were we building power for?

## AN ASSESSMENT OF POWER BUILDING

Civic engagement in itself is a way to build power. When people volunteer, organize and participate, they are learning, networking and entering circles that will eventually lead them to leadership and decision-making positions.

Most people are interested in participating in social causes, but many don't engage due to lack of information: 49% of Americans say they do not know enough about the issues to get involved in social causes or campaigns, and 42% of youth claim they don't know where to start.

In the process of building the next generation of leaders, structures must be created so that young people from poorly represented backgrounds can join organizing movements in the nonprofit, private and public sectors, unions, and boards of directors, among other spaces.

In this process it's inevitable that people who are on track to occupy leadership positions will do so. They will probably do so without any type of intervention. In such, the end goal is not to replace them, but it's vital to train them to have an understanding of the importance of diversity, and becoming facilitators for the populations who aren't represented in power structures.

Our leadership development funnel has three stages:

- **Insertion:** We insert young people with a high level of social consciousness in projects to channel their aspirations to be change agents.
- **Engagement:** Keeping the community active at events, projects and working groups sharpens their skills and ensures they stay relevant to current important issues.
- **Positioning:** As participants develop into high-impact leaders they begin occupying decision-making

positions, joining boards of directors, publishing new work, and founding social enterprises.

To achieve this, at MPA we have defined three pillars in our change agents training:

- **Awareness:** To foster the ability to have a rational and deep understanding of the problems that afflict communities, as well as the opportunities that exist to solve the challenges faced.
- **Empathy:** Ability to bridge understandings from a human perspective of how social problems are affecting different groups of community stakeholders.
- **Effectiveness:** The leader's ability to carry out the vision of change that they have to transform their cause towards a just, supportive and participatory society.

## WHAT CAN PHILANTHROPY DO?

One big change philanthropy can make right away is organizing a civic engagement philanthropic sector. When a nonprofit organization seeks funding, there are high-level topics like education, environment, and health that are always present. In some cases, "community organizing" and "strengthening democracy" are the closest field of focus available.

Organizing a civic engagement sector will allow for organizations to define strongly around that topic, as well as to build knowledge of where we're at and what we need to advance. Nonprofits and communities will find support to mature their initiatives, and we'll come closer to building a collaborative ecosystem of civic engagement initiatives.

Philanthropy has been moving in the past few years towards becoming more inclusive and embracing diversity. We must say this has made a huge difference, but it's still in diapers. It is

important that funders take into account the systemic challenges social cause leaders face that may not be part of today's evaluation processes. Sometimes the largest corporate nonprofits will write the best proposals, but how can philanthropy support leaders who come from backgrounds of poverty, racial, ethnic and gender diversity, lack of access to education, inaccessibility to quality transportation, and social class stereotypes, among others?

Solving systemic challenges takes time, but we can't do so without investing in leaders who didn't have the privilege of being part of the traditional leaders' development track. This does not mean we should discard one population for another, but philanthropy can balance the diversity gap in leadership positions by entrusting diverse leaders who may not have the complete experience but will ultimately shake the tree and bring change forward.

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