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Transforming Action-Based Research Through Equitable Partnerships for Justice



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When I joined the Tishman Environment and Design Center in August 2022 as a senior researcher, I knew I was in a unique position to practice action-based, community-centered research for the environmental and climate justice movement. Through my newly acquired Ph.D. in public and urban policy and my dissertation research on environmental justice and participatory grantmaking, I already understood the value of community involvement in decision-making.

Much of my understanding was based on the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing; however, in preparing for this position, I also began reading more about research as a participatory pedagogy (Wallerstein et al., 2017). This approach emphasizes the active involvement and collaboration of researchers, educators, students, and community members in the

research process from a study's inception to the dissemination of its findings. It is grounded in the belief that research and learning are most effective when learners are directly engaged in creating and applying knowledge rather than passively receiving information (Flewitt et al., 2018). It emphasizes the co-construction and co-production of knowledge centered on community voices, not just what academic researchers deem most important.

Research as a participatory pedagogy is not an easy or independent process. It requires the researcher to engage in continual reflective learning, democratize decisions about the research process, and challenge the traditional hierarchies of knowledge production built into academic institutions. Central to this concept is the recognition that marginalized individuals' lived experiences and perspectives are the primary "data" elements necessary for formulating and understanding research questions.

As a woman of color, born and raised in an environmental justice community in the South Bronx, this is perhaps easier for me than for others; I've spent a lifetime learning from those around me, folks whom some would deem lesser in their lack of formal education. Yet the knowledge they imparted has shaped, guided, and led me here.

~~THESE IDEAS AND CONCEPTS ARE JUST --~~

essential as the ones I've learned in a university setting.

Even still, research as a participatory pedagogy is not without its challenges. It requires leaving the comforts of campus and building trust and deep engagement with community members and groups. It requires shifting power and centering community voices over all others—even the brilliant scholars and academic mentors we admire the most. It is an iterative collaboration process, meaning a research timeline and plan can take longer than usual (though not interminably so) and change at a moment's notice. In other words, it doesn't work on a typical research grant schedule or within the confines of an academic year. However, the rewards are innumerable for researchers aiming to co-produce relevant analyses of social issues and foster meaningful change.

In the past year, as part of a greater strategy to move more funding and resources to environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ) organizations, I have been working with the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) to understand how EJ and CJ groups articulate the impact and scale of their programs and activities. Our initial intention in this co-partnered research project was to demonstrate to climate funders how grassroots groups lead

diverse and innovative climate solutions and have shovel-ready projects worthy of investment. In addition, we were curious to see if grassroots organizations were interested in or currently evaluating their impact in terms of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions or other commonly used metrics that funders ask for. We quickly realized how myopic that evaluative framing was as we talked to and gathered data from dozens of CJA member groups. Funders continue to advance climate solutions through the same neoliberal lens of extraction and market-based mechanisms that got us to our current climate crisis and thus influence how alternative solutions are framed (Betsill et al., 2022). Researchers can easily fall into that same trap.

However, grassroots leaders told us repeatedly that the strategies behind their programs and activities were multidimensional in scope and based on both being responsive to community needs and creating a path forward for community members in an ever-evolving world where the systems of extraction have thus far not worked for them. Grassroots groups will not change those strategies in response to climate funders focused solely on reducing carbon emissions (although a case can be made that their programs also reduce emissions) but will

remain aimed at communities

transformation. EJ and CJ groups are focused on developing local, sustainable, restorative economies that empower and impact community residents ecologically, politically, socially, and culturally.

Thus, in our continual process of discovery, we have evolved how we think about framing impact and scale, too. In doing so, our preliminary research findings show how grassroots organizations report multi-scalar impact, including how grassroots are scaling up, out, deep, and across sectors—a far more exciting story that cannot be told within the confines of GHG emissions or other carbon indices.

As we hope to discuss at our [upcoming Centering Justice symposium](#), it is more important than ever for researchers within academia to learn from and amplify frontline voices and communities—not just because we should be investing in communities that have suffered from disinvestment and oppression for so long but also because frontline communities are the true catalyst for social change, climate justice, and [just transitions](#). Social movements begin and build on the front lines and by the grassroots—not in the suburbs, in the D.C. offices of lobbyists and policymakers, not at academic centers, and certainly not in the “think tanks” funded by

ExxonMobil, Shell, Eni, and ConocoPhillips. Frontline communities represent what's possible in the face of extractive systems of oppression and destruction. These communities are the temperature check on our collective humanity, the clarion call for all who wish to build a new and just society. As researchers, we are responsible for engaging, supporting, and illuminating this work wherever and however we can.

End Notes

Michele M. Betsill et al., "Philanthropic Foundations as Agents of Environmental Governance: A Research Agenda," *Environmental Politics* 31, no. 4 (June 7, 2022): 684–705, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1955494>.

Rosie Flewitt et al., "I Enjoyed It Because ... You Could Do Whatever You Wanted and Be Creative: Three Principles for Participatory Research and Pedagogy," *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 41, no. 4 (2018): 372–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2017.1405928>.

Nina Wallerstein et al., "Shared Participatory Research Principles and Methodologies: Perspectives from the USA and Brazil—45 Years After Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'" *Societies* 7, no. 2

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