

ENERGY DEMOCRACY

*HONORING THE PAST AND INVESTING
IN A NEW ENERGY DEMOCRACY*

By Leah Obias and Emi Yoko-Young

COVER IMAGE depicting a tapestry that is woven by diversely colored brown fists rising from the ground up, coming from different angles but rising together and collectively hold the channels of energy that are wind, water flow, and sunlight. These channels of energy come together in a glow that seem to light up the whole scene. Interwoven from the bottom of the page are plants that represent our natural living systems. Dandelion symbolizes resilience and as a flower medicine helps us release rigid and unbending habits and ideas that lead to stress and overwork; it supports a healthy embrace of personal power and their needs and wants as an individual. Yarrow is a plant that staunches bleeding and also has an essence that strengthens boundaries and protection. Both are native plants to the East Bay. In the background, behind the centerpiece of community power, is a horizon with symbols of healthy neighborhoods: ample housing, transit systems, bridges, viaducts, and vibrant green trees.

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Executive Summary

ENERGY DEMOCRACY IS A FRAMEWORK that is grounded in the solutions of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color (BIPOC) to invest in a regenerative economy that sustains our people and our planet. The goal of this report is to elevate the work of our BIPOC community-based partners and to provide specific recommendations for how philanthropic partners can support the movement toward energy democracy. Within this report, we highlight the local strategies organized by our partners and the policy solutions that will move us toward a future powered by clean energy equitably distributed among all people. In our current context, it is important now more than ever to divest from an extractive economy—including the private accumulation of wealth, exploitation of labor, income and race disparities—and to invest in a future that protects the Earth's commons and centers community governance. We stand in solidarity with our communities and with the Earth to find a more just energy system.

Methodology

To learn about the energy democracy context and Race Forward's historical and present role in the field, Race Forward reviewed internally created documents related to energy democracy including ten blog posts and eighteen reports and concept papers. In addition, we interviewed six present and historical partners to learn about their work in energy democracy, their organizational shifts as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, their recommendations to funders, their relationship to Race Forward, and opportunities they see in the energy democracy field (please see Appendix A for the questions). In this report, we will not be using direct quotes from partners, but will highlight the local work moving around the nation and elevate the themes and key messages that surfaced during our conversations.

This report features select partners that Race Forward currently or historically has worked with extensively, rather than an exhaustive overview of the field. It also represents a conversation that Race Forward will continue with additional energy democracy movement leaders around the nation, as we conduct a more extensive field analysis that will guide the next phase of our work to support climate justice and other racial justice movements.

Most of the research and all of the interviews for this report were conducted before the murder of George Floyd. While we were able to include questions that reflected our partner's responses to COVID-19, the content does not reflect the uprising that is taking place in support of grassroots Black-led organizing efforts and the Movement for Black Lives.

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Key Terms and Definitions¹

Climate Justice

CLIMATE JUSTICE focuses on the root causes of climate crisis through an intersectional lens of racism, classism, capitalism, economic injustice, and environmental harm. Climate justice supports a Just Transition for communities and workers away from a fossil fuel economy and focuses on making the necessary systemic changes to address unequal burdens to our communities and to realign our economy with our natural systems. As a form of environmental justice, climate justice means that all species have the right to access and obtain the resources needed to have an equal chance of survival and freedom from discrimination. As a movement, climate justice advocates are working from the grassroots up to create real solutions for climate mitigation and adaptation that ensure the right of all people to live, learn, work, play and pray in safe, healthy, and clean environments.

*Adapted from Alternatives for Community and the Environment
and Indigenous Environmental Network*

Environmental Justice

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE embraces the principle that all people and communities have a right to equal protection and equal enforcement of environmental laws and regulations, including human health. Environmental justice recognizes that, due to racism and class discrimination, communities of color, low-income neighborhoods, and Indigenous nations and communities are the most likely to be disproportionately harmed by toxic chemicals, exposures, economic injustices and negative land uses, and the least likely to benefit from efforts to improve the environment. The environmental justice movement isn't seeking to simply redistribute environmental harms, but to abolish them.²

Dr. Robert Bullard and the Ella Baker Center

Energy Democracy

ENERGY DEMOCRACY frames the international struggle of working people, low-income communities, Asian and Pacific-Islander, Black, Brown and Indigenous nations and their communities to take control of energy resources from the energy establishment and use those resources to empower their communities literally (providing energy), economically, and politically. It means bringing energy resources under public or community ownership and/or governance—a key aspect of the struggle for climate and energy justice, and an essential step toward building a more just, equitable, sustainable, and resilient economy.

*Fairchild, Denise and Weinrub, Al. Energy Democracy:
Advancing Equity in Clean Energy Solutions*

Extractive Economy

An **EXTRACTIVE ECONOMY** is a capitalist system of exploitation and oppression that values consumerism, colonialism, and money over people and the planet. The extractive economy perpetuates the enclosure of wealth and power for a few through predatory financing, expropriation from land and commonly accessed goods/services, and the exploitation of human labor. An extractive economy views natural resources as commodities—expanding the free-market logic into all cycles and functions of the Earth with an oppressor mentality—which places a price on nature and creates new derivative markets that will only increase inequality and expedite the destruction of nature—to dig, burn, and dump with no regard for its impact on communities and utilizes oppressive force to undermine democracy, community, and workers.

*Adapted from Movement Generation, Just Transition Framework informed
by the Just Transition Alliance, Indigenous Environmental Network, and
Climate Justice Alliance.*

Just Recovery

JUST RECOVERY is a framework that resists the status quo solutions of disaster recovery that focuses on aid, extraction, and displacement and moves toward transformative solutions that respond, recover, and rebuild. “Respond” means to activate mutual support networks to support communities on the ground to meet the articulated needs of those most impacted and vulnerable, rather than national emergency response that often marginalizes those most impacted. “Recover” means to provide resources and support so that all people can get back their homes and work, rather than extract cheap

labor and land from impacted communities for exploitation. “Rebuild” means long-term support to communities so they are stronger than prior to disaster and no longer vulnerable, rather than displacing people from their communities. A Just Recovery framework was advanced after Hurricane Harvey (2017) as a way to incorporate and build upon the incredible work of so many people and communities, particularly led by women of color, from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005) to the BP oil disasters.

Adapted from the Just Recovery Framework by Jayeesha Dutta, the leadership of Bryan Parras and T.E.J.A.S., and Another Gulf is Possible. For more visit the [Our Power Puerto Rico: Moving Toward a Just Recovery report by Climate Justice Alliance](#).

Just Transition

JUST TRANSITION is a framework for a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a Regenerative Economy. This means approaching production and consumption cycles holistically and waste free. The transition itself must be just and equitable, redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be. Just Transition describes both where we are going and how we get there. The Just Transition framework focuses on stopping the bad to build the new by divesting from the exploitation of labor and extraction of resources and investing in cooperative labor and regeneration. Just Transition challenges the dominant worldview of colonialism, consumerism, and the concentration of power governed through violent force and advances a worldview of sacredness and care, as well as ecological and social well-being governed through deep democracy.

Climate Justice Alliance based on historical [Just Transition principles](#) developed by the Alliance informed by many members including the principles by the Just Transition Alliance, and the Indigenous Environmental Network and Movement Generation.

Regenerative Economy

REGENERATIVE ECONOMY is based on ecological restoration, community protection, equitable partnerships, justice, and full and fair participatory processes. Rather than extract from the land and each other, this approach is consistent with the Rights of Nature, valuing the health and well-being of Mother Earth by producing, consuming, and redistributing resources in harmony with the planet. A Regenerative Economy values the dignity of work and humanity and prioritizes community governance and ownership of work and resources, instead of oppressive systems that devalue people

and their labor through violent hoarding by a few. Rather than limit peoples' ability to fully shape democracy and decisions that impact our communities, a Regenerative Economy supports collective and inclusive participatory governance. It requires a re-localization and democratization of how we produce and consume goods, and ensures all have full access to healthy food, renewable energy, clean air and water, good jobs, and healthy living environments. A Regenerative Economy requires an explicit anti-racist, anti-poverty, feminist, and living approach that is intersectional and eschews top-down, patriarchal, classist, xenophobic, and racist ideology.

Adapted from Movement Generation, Indigenous Environmental Network, Climate Justice Alliance, People's Action, and Grassroots Global Justice Alliance drawing upon Indigenous leadership and generations of work and vision from Black farming cooperatives and labor movements.

Sacrifice Zones

SACRIFICE ZONES are communities that are poor and working class Black, Brown, multi-racial, white communities, and Indigenous Peoples whose health, wealth, and lives have been sacrificed to advance the profits of corporations that control polluting industries. These specifically include communities impacted by pollution hotspots created by ports, transportation centers, fossil fuel, chemical, manufacturing, mining, and industrial agriculture industries.

People's Action based on the historical struggle of environmental justice and frontline communities fighting against extractive industries.

Introduction

Our Current Context

AS OF THE WRITING OF THIS REPORT in April and May of 2020, communities of color face multiple converging crises: the COVID-19 crisis, approaching the three million case-mark in the U.S. and includes the grinding economic halt and job loss on a scale we haven't seen since the Great Depression; the pandemic of police and white supremacist vigilante violence; the rise of white nationalism and its political expression in the presidency of Donald J. Trump; and the climate crisis, or climate emergency--which some refer to as the sixth mass extinction.³ Structural racism permeates each of these crises, whether their root causes or our society and governmental responses.

Our society's systemic failures in healthcare, housing, and worker protections, as well as the injustices of the prison and detention system, came into sharper focus in March 2020, early during the U.S. outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic brought the brutal realities of structural racism to mainstream consciousness and created the social, economic, and political grounds for the uprising against racist police violence and in defense of protecting Black lives. Black workers, in particular, faced the greatest unemployment rates and were more likely to be 'essential' workers--forcing them to risk their own and their families' health to earn a living. And Black Americans make up 12.5% of the U.S. population but account for 22.4% of COVID-19 deaths.⁴

With soaring unemployment and communities of color struggling to pay for their basic needs, energy burden and the disproportionate effects of energy exploitation on BIPOC communities gained some recognition among many intertwined issues. At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, organizations in the burgeoning energy democracy movement worked alongside housing alliances to call for rent AND utility bill cancellations, to provide immediate relief to families by addressing the threat of electricity and water shutoffs and evictions. These calls challenged the consolidated corporate power of banking and energy companies on the brink of a massive federal bailout. As of this writing, there has yet to be a comprehensive plan addressing the months of debt accrued during the pandemic. In addition to energy burden, communities who live in regions with the highest levels of air pollution, disproportionately communities of color, are at higher risk of falling ill to COVID-19 due to respiratory conditions that increase susceptibility to the virus.

As with any form of exploitation--whether it's labor, sexual, or natural resource--the systems that benefit from that exploitation are able to do so partly because of invisibility. This is true of energy exploitation. Our country's energy system is byzantine, the decision-making non-transparent and undemocratic, the power brokers unknown to the general public. The

entire path of energy from extraction to delivery relies on exploitation of the Earth's natural resources, of workers who toil in the industry, and of BIPOC communities where power plants, pipelines and substations are placed.

Why This Matters: Centering Racial Justice

Before we can even begin addressing the climate and environmental crisis, we need to understand the root cause that is driving these disasters. Environmental racism, a term coined by Reverend Dr. Benjamin Chavis Junior, is the “racial discrimination in environmental policy making and the unequal enforcement of the environmental laws and regulations.”⁵ The placement of toxic waste facilities, the development of highways that cut through neighborhoods, and the proximity to Superfund sites⁶ intentionally targets places where low-income BIPOC communities live and work, demonstrating the value and worth of the people and the land we are polluting and extracting from. **The human sacrifices that we make to build the wealth of corporations, resulting in the concentration of extreme wealth in the hands of white male executives, magnifies the reality of the dehumanization of BIPOC communities. White supremacy culture drives who we see as valuable and who is expendable. As Hop Hopkins, Director of Strategic Partnerships at the Sierra Club, reflects, “The richest people need for white supremacy to remain invisible so they can continue to plunder our planet. They need those sacrifice zones, and the racism that justifies them, or they’ll have nowhere to put their trash and pollution.”**⁷ Louisiana’s Cancer Alley has more than 150 chemical factories and oil refineries over an 85-mile stretch along the Mississippi River⁸ and is home to predominantly Black communities.⁹ Boynton, a predominantly Black neighborhood¹⁰ known for its zip code 48217, is the most polluted place in Michigan.¹¹ The examples could go on, but the fact is that air and water contamination that is caused by coal and natural gas is linked to breathing problems, neurological damage, heart attacks, cancer, and premature deaths.¹² Environmental racism is literally killing BIPOC communities and we need to invest in community-driven solutions and community governance models now.

The effects of pollution and contamination are also destroying the land. The increase of greenhouse gas emissions is contributing to the changes in our climate including extreme weather such as flooding, droughts, sea level rise, and fires. It is disrupting our ecosystem with the increase in warmth and acidity of our ocean. And these factors have resulted in increased health risks including heat stroke and insect-borne diseases, and displacement of our communities of color as we saw with Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy (2012).¹³ But to our communities these facts are not surprising and they are not new. And for decades, they have been organizing to address these systemic challenges and have used energy democracy as one framework that has guided future solutions.

Oftentimes, we see solutions that do not prioritize the voices and solutions of BIPOC communities, and instead further exacerbate the inequities of who is able to benefit from the so-called green economy. For example, renewable energy policies favor homeownership,

a status from which BIPOC communities have been historically excluded through a number of compounding policy decisions over time. Racial justice is the core of the energy democracy framework and BIPOC communities most affected by climate change, environmental pollution, and degrading building standards must have a central role in the solutions to address the climate and environmental crisis. However, like many industries and movements, energy democracy has struggled with operationalizing those beliefs in the power structures within and across organizations and coalitions, between BIPOC communities and philanthropic partners, and between BIPOC communities and local governments. To move racial equity forward in the energy sector, it is necessary to divest power from those who have historically been decision-makers and beneficiaries to BIPOC communities, and to identify where there are opportunities to further racial justice in the narrative, strategies, and climate solutions.

Energy democracy is a critical climate solutions strategy. Using a race-centered approach is a commitment to reframe and to reclaim the climate solutions framework. In a society with an economic model that depends on the flow of energy, energy exploitation is a natural byproduct of an economic crisis caused by the quest for increased accumulation of capital and exploitation of people. Access to energy or renewable energy should not be a privilege. It should be a human right, controlled by our communities who depend on it. When communities have control of energy, they tend to use it to address the environmental, economic, and social crises we are facing: poverty, unemployment, inequality, displacement, deportation, militarization, and sharp cuts in health, education, and other services.

The real solution to these systemic problems is not only about fighting fuel, but also about a new economic model so we can survive and prosper for generations to come.

By reframing the context of consumer energy solutions from a lens that centers home ownership to one that takes into account the complexities of how energy resources are consumed and distributed, as well as the realities of the legacy of disinvestment in Black and Brown communities, we can find solutions that benefit BIPOC communities most affected by the environmental and climate crisis. And if we reclaim the context of the energy democracy movements to be responsive to the needs of BIPOC communities, we will identify a pathway that addresses the root cause of systemic racism.

Although it is important to put race at the forefront of our strategies and solutions, we also know that we cannot talk about race exclusively. Using an intersectional lens accounts for all aspects of diverse, vibrant communities, builds solidarity across movements, and deepens our strategies in addressing intersecting oppressions. The inherent intersectional analysis required for true racial justice-centered work is a net benefit for everyone, regardless of race.

Investing in a New Future

THE ABILITY TO IMAGINE A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE for our planet and people--especially BIPOC communities on the frontlines of the converging crises--is a strategic imperative. Energy, as a human right, is a core part of this future. Pushed by the Black-led uprising we are seeing in the Spring and Summer of 2020, elected officials, local governments and mainstream organizations across sectors are embracing the call to defund the police and invest in health and mental health, education, youth programs, and so on as budgets face shortfalls due to the pandemic. The possibility of investments in a regenerative future already exist. The pandemic has brought to life Nelson Mandela's words, "It always seems impossible until it's done." In this spirit of bold imagining as we move through extraordinary times, we invite you to:

Imagine a future powered by clean energy that is community controlled and equitably distributed among all people. Instead of extracting from our land or our people, we would utilize the rays of the sun and the energy of the wind. Energy decision-making would be distributed by those who have historically suffered from the effects of energy exploitation and communities would no longer suffer the consequences of pollution and contamination because there would be no need for power plants and refineries.

Our communities will become more than just consumers when we achieve energy democracy. Energy democracy paints a vision where communities are planners and decision-makers over how to use and how to generate energy that is local and renewable. It is a framework that moves away from dependence on investor-owned energy companies, which have profited at the expense of their workers and the environment,¹⁴ toward a future of community governance,¹⁵ worker rights, and practices that replenish our Earth. With crisis comes opportunity; these are some of the long-term visions we need to continue to hold as we find concrete pragmatic strategies in unfolding multiple crises.

This pandemic and crisis is highlighting the long-term call for a decentralized energy system that is collectively governed and invests in renewable energy. And while community controlled clean energy that is grounded in racial justice principles may not be a direct solution to this pandemic, it is a solution that will address the historic systemic inequities that have exacerbated the effects of this pandemic.

To transition to a truly just energy system, we also need to transition the economy upon which energy injustice has been built - and this is a daunting task. As Cecilia Martinez has noted in Climate Justice Alliance's Climate Justice and Energy Democracy Platform Vision: "We understand that in the current system, our society cannot reach the goals of a pure clean and renewable energy economy immediately. Our present system consists of an electricity complex comprised of almost 20,000 power plants, half a million miles of high-voltage transmission lines, 1300 coal mines, 410 underground natural gas storage fields, and 125 nuclear waste storage facilities. Additionally, there are hundreds of millions of transformers, distribution points, electric motors, and electric appliances. The transportation system

consists of more than 1000 refineries, almost one million gas stations, almost 9 million miles of paved roads, which must be kept up, almost 60 million automobiles and trucks, and in total the transportation system consumes over 13 million barrels of oil each day.”¹⁶¹

This report is a humble, yet forward-looking contribution to the effort of advancing energy democracy in the United States. It lays out the case for continued investment in local, translocal, and national solutions to energy exploitation, and provides a historical overview of the movement from the perspective of a national racial justice organization that has been working in this field for over 15 years.

How we move forward

To shift away from a culture that has prioritized profits over people and the rise of the fossil fuel industry over the lives of our communities, we need a transformative response. Energy democracy isn't just about getting to 100% renewables and decreasing emissions. **Energy democracy addresses the root causes of an extractive economy, creates a local model for community governance, centers communities of color most impacted by environmental racism as decision-makers of their energy resources, and respects the Earth and our ecosystem.** The Just Transition Alliance offers a set of principles¹⁷ for how to shift toward a clean energy economy that centers health, the Earth, and a pro-worker economy:

- 1 Workers, community residents, and Indigenous Peoples around the world have a fundamental human right to clean air, water, land, and food in their workplaces, homes and environment.
- 2 There is no contradiction among simultaneously creating sustainable development, having a healthy economy and maintaining a clean and safe environment.
- 3 Liberalization of environmental, health and labor laws and corporate globalization --know no borders. Therefore, solutions call for local, regional, national, and global solidarity.
- 4 The development of fair economic, trade, health and safety and environmental policies must include both the frontline workers and fenceline communities most affected by pollution, ecological damage and economic restructuring.
- 5 The costs of achieving sustainable development, a healthy economy and clean environment should not be borne by current or future victims of environmental and economic injustices and unfair free trade policies.
- 6 Workers and community residents have the right to challenge any entity that commits economic and/or environmental injustices. These entities include governments, the military, corporations, international bodies, and mechanisms for securing corporate accountability.

Our context and conditions will continue to shift and change, new crises will bubble up and new organizing will take place, but what's clear is that we need to remain grounded in these principles so that we will continue to move toward our vision of building a new, regenerative economy that puts people and the Earth before profit. We cannot address our community impacts without centering the effects on the Earth and we can't address environmental inequities without thinking about how Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color will most be impacted. COVID-19 has shown us that we cannot go back to the conditions that preceded the pandemic and that we need to organize. We need to stand in solidarity with our communities and with the Earth to find a more just energy system.

In essence, the stories of the collectivity in energy democracy depict a growing kinship and unity between climate justice and other movements for human, civil, worker, immigrant, and democratic rights.

Race Forward's Historical Work

THIS REPORT PROVIDES RACE FORWARD THE OPPORTUNITY to reflect on our 15+ year history in the field of Energy Democracy. Where have we been? And where are we at now? Answering this question can help guide our work as an organization while also providing a pathway for our partners in philanthropy to address the web of structural racism in the context of funding Energy Democracy work.

The inception of energy democracy as a framework begins with Black farmers in Richland, South Carolina, who recognized the necessity for community driven solutions to further prevent the harm placed on their community. Black land loss is a tragic reality understood by many farmers in the South that has been driven by the USDA's intentional denial of loans and services to Black farmers, predatory development practices, and programs and policies that have historically harmed rather than protected the rights of Black landowners.¹⁸ Post-Civil War, Black farmers owned close to 15 million acres of land, but by 2000, Black land ownership fell to 1.5 to 7.8 million acres, a 50% to 90% decrease from the previous generation's land ownership. It's important to note that one of the promises made after the Civil War-- that each Black family would be given "forty acres and a mule"-- never quite came to fruition. Land ownership has always been a racialized issue, with Black Americans continually and systematically denied access to land through state and federal policy exclusions and omissions. Due to the infrequent data collection at the federal level, it's difficult to know the cumulative effects these practices and policies had on Black farmers,¹⁹ but for these reasons, it is important to center the voices of BIPOC communities in identifying solutions that lead to a sustainable future.

In the early 2000's, in its previous iteration before merging with Race Forward in 2017, the Center for Social Inclusion (CSI) ran workshops with leaders in South Carolina to identify strategic interventions to prevent further Black land loss. It was in these conversations that leaders proposed the idea of aggregating land with the purpose of building community level renewables that would create revenue for the collective while maintaining their land. In response to this vision, at the end of 2009, CSI created the Black, Brown, and Green series, that examined the economic opportunities and hurdles facing communities of color looking to develop green business models and strategies for entering the green energy sector. In addition, CSI also assessed tax credit policies, incorporation and land-use policies, and regulatory policies. Within this research, CSI was able to support community groups in thinking about how they should push for changes within land-use policies to better allow for community ownership of infrastructure. Eventually, this work seeded local initiatives and conversations to define what we now know as energy democracy.

While many efforts were made to move energy democracy forward in the South, community partners received pushback on the local level, resulting in the necessity to examine additional opportunities on the federal level. The timing aligned with the start of the then-new Obama Administration, a period when grassroots organizations and racial justice organizations found themselves in the national spotlight and for the first time, were in a position to align with a national policy agenda. There was excitement and momentum surrounding opportunities to incorporate issues like economic development and community revitalization into energy policy, which had traditionally been siloed. CSI quickly found that while many of the policies proposed by the Obama Administration increased renewable energy and decreased carbon emissions, most of these solutions were race silent and did not center BIPOC communities and local efforts. Some are widely understood in the climate justice movement to be “false solutions.”

These race silent approaches were not and are not a unique challenge to the federal government alone, but also a struggle that many environmental, climate, and energy justice organizations still face today. In response, CSI and now in its new formation, Race Forward creates materials to communicate the critical need for policymakers to embrace the principles of racial justice to make decisions regarding energy policy and organizes spaces where local BIPOC organizations can build generative solutions to address our climate challenges. Race Forward believes it is also important to elevate local efforts that demonstrate the power of community control and highlight the necessary and effective pathway of growing federal energy democracy solutions that are rooted in local infrastructure investment. This is our organization's bold vision of merging grassroots activism with government accountability to create new frameworks that can be scaled up from the local to the national level.

Energy Democracy Moving in Local Communities

TO DEMOCRATIZE THE ENERGY SYSTEM ON A NATIONAL LEVEL, it will take a collective of advocates from all sectors, locations, and communities working in solidarity to push for a new energy economy that's grounded in the Just Energy Principles. To build this larger movement and message, it's essential that we learn from local efforts that have been responsive to the conditions of their regions to find a pathway grounded in relationships and that transform our energy future.

While this section highlights local efforts that are moving energy democracy forward, it's important to note that efforts to amplify local work and share strategy on a national scale are already underway, such as the [The Energy Democracy Project](#), a collaboration among more than 30 energy democracy organizations and an outcome of the Strategic Convening on Energy Democracy in summer 2019. Collaborations and alliances of local groups are essential movement-building spaces to build alignment and share resources--and are only as strong as the community-based work driving them.

Introducing a New Vision - Partnership for Southern Equity

The conversation that moves from the challenges around energy burden and the lack of influence in an extractive economy to a discussion that centers utility ratepayers as decision-makers of energy is quickly bubbling up in communities around the world. Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE), an organization working with communities in Atlanta and other areas of Georgia, is introducing energy democracy in their community and working collectively to build a vision for what an energy democracy future could look like. Grounded in values and principles, the PSE way is to center racial justice and equity when talking about the energy system so that communities, organizations, and governmental partners will recognize and understand the community as the owners and decision-makers in our energy future. PSE leads the Just Energy Circle,²⁰ “an inspiring, values-driven collaborative that builds power with communities and encourages participation in developing equity-centered, clean energy solutions that benefit everyone.” In a time when democratic participation and decision-making is not the current paradigm and an alternative reality is necessary, PSE and the Just Energy Circle push for new policies and models that ensure future communities, especially communities of color, have a cleaner environment and an energy system that is affordable.²¹ Knowing that the displacement of communities of color is often sparked by green

solutions and clean energy, PSE works to ensure that their policies and stances are driven by communities of color. Understanding that energy democracy is an important frame to move equity forward across the nation, PSE will continue to elevate and share this work so that it receives traction on the national level.

Centering Race and Black, Indigenous, and other Communities of Color - Puget Sound Sage

Moving toward renewable energy and transitioning from the use of fossil fuels is not a new conversation. However, the analysis and understanding of the impacts on communities of color have largely been left out of the conversation. Puget Sound Sage (Sage), an organization working in King County, Washington, is one of the first organizations to build a collective analysis and understanding of how energy impacts Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. They have worked to develop a shared analysis on how to build out future resources and have done so by centering the voices of communities of color in their work. In 2016 and in collaboration with Got Green, a Seattle grassroots organization, Sage released a report called, [Our People, Our Planet, Our Power](#),²² which captured the stories and solutions of 175 individuals and 30 organizations working in South Seattle and King County to ‘develop grassroots campaigns that grow an intersectional climate justice movement which keeps our communities rooted in place and ushers in a new economy for people and the planet.’

Puget Sound Sage continues to work with community residents and organizations to hear their stories and to collectively develop a community-driven energy agenda that informs policy and program solutions on the city, county, and state levels. In 2019, Sage worked with 11 community organizations and 434 individuals to identify how energy is a challenge in King County communities. Their findings were published in the report [Powering the Transition: Community Priorities for a Renewable and Equitable Future](#).²³ Through these conversations, communities emphasized the necessity of keeping energy prices affordable, but were also able to provide examples of how different local energy systems interact with residents. These conversations with community members continue to inform the direction and work that Sage moves forward which are policies and programs that are being elevated around the country.

The Process to Build a Movement Lays the Foundation for the Outcome - The New York Energy Democracy Alliance

The New York Energy Democracy Alliance (EDA) is a statewide alliance that works to advance a clean energy economy by intervening in the regulatory systems and by promoting equitable solar policy on the state level. When energy service commissions are not democratic institutions it becomes critical to pass legislation to create accountability mechanisms. In 2018, the EDA was successful in passing legislation that would revise New York’s Value of Distributed Energy Resource²⁴ (VDER) policy so that solar energy was possible for low-income communities and also provided “community credit.” Though the EDA has experienced many

successes, even in times where legislation did not pass, the process of collective organizing of both member organizations and constituents, and their flexibility and nimbleness, led to tangible improvements that saved community solar projects across the state.

The collective continues to expand their learning. Whether they're diving deeper into the energy system, evaluating past efforts and legislative priorities, or community organizing, the central core of their learning is to understand what building real power looks like. While other environmental movements understand the necessity of renewables and movement away from carbon, they have missed the opportunity to center community power in changing our energy future. This is why the EDA continues to ask themselves how movement demands would look different if they were always accountable to and incorporating the expertise of the Black and Brown communities these policies will affect. Even if energy policies are passed, if communities of color are not involved in all stages and not mobilizing at the grassroots, the solutions will likely miss the mark. This learning provides hope for how the climate movement can continue to develop and grow and will hopefully lean on the process of moving solutions forward as necessary to getting racially equitable outcomes.

Practicing Energy Democracy: Local Public Control - The Local Clean Energy Alliance

In a place where utility-caused wildfires and power shutoffs are becoming more prevalent and where the state's monopoly utilities are passing the costs of their negligence onto utility ratepayers, California is in desperate need of creating an energy system that addresses the environmental and climate crises, but centers BIPOC communities as energy decision-makers.

The Local Clean Energy Alliance (LCEA) has been fighting to change California's power structure by advocating for and supporting the creation of new institutions governed by local communities, that are guided by the Just Transition framework and can demonstrate the power of energy democracy. One example of a community-controlled renewable energy model is Community Choice energy. Community Choice in California is a "mechanism that allows cities, counties, and a few other government entities to aggregate individual electricity customers within a defined service area for the purpose of providing electricity and related energy services."²⁵ This model allows communities to develop and manage local renewable energy resources, which could result in lower energy costs, economic investment and job creation, and community centered decision-making structures. The LCEA advocates for developing local resources equitably and determined by communities who have been victimized by the fossil fuel economy, most often communities of color.

The LCEA promotes grassroots organizing to establish and engage Community Choice programs, but the organization has also been at the forefront of advancing community control of energy and challenging establishment power structures. In 2014, when a bill was introduced by the monopoly utilities in the state Assembly to eliminate Community Choice in California, LCEA led a coalition of 200 organizations to fight this bill. Nobody believed that

this coalition could take on the power of the utility lobby, but in the end, the bill died in the Senate due to successful community organizing.

Currently the LCEA is incubating the [Reclaim Our Power Utility Justice Campaign](#),²⁶ led by environmental justice organizations, to take over the state's monopoly utilities and to restructure California's energy system to provide a safe, reliable, resilient, sustainable, and equitable energy future for California.

A Model for a New Economy - PUSH Buffalo

What would it look like to create an economy based in community sustainability, that moves towards a Just Transition away from the use of fossil fuels, and values the planet? In 2008, PUSH Buffalo, an organization in Buffalo, New York, founded the Green Development Zone (GDZ), "an area that PUSH is making more environmentally and economically sustainable,"²⁷ in a 30 square block area of Buffalo's West side where many communities of color reside. Understanding that communities can combat gentrification when 30 percent of buildings and neighborhoods remain affordable, PUSH purchased these vacant properties before developers turned them into luxury apartments, equal parts stopping the bad and building the new. They were then able to assemble a community-controlled land bank of properties to be repurposed for affordable housing and worked hand in hand with the community to determine renovations and GDZ priorities that best served all community residents in the area.

Through a community planning process, the GDZ planted the seeds of green, efficient, and affordable housing by transforming vacant land into productive spaces including public parks, rain gardens, and community spaces. Using a community congress model, residents identified priorities and goals which determined the process and strategy to move toward these goals. For example, community residents and PUSH Buffalo organized together and won a campaign to create a public park using community block grant funds. They also recognized how energy costs impact displacement. Understanding that part of the housing burden is the cost of energy, especially during Buffalo's winter seasons, PUSH created a weatherization program as an anti-displacement tactic. The GDZ embodies the core value of community control of resources and is an example of resisting gentrification while leaning into an energy democracy framework.

Recommendations for Foundation Partners

EXAMPLES FROM OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS show that investing in local solutions not only support communities in these regions, but also have ripple effects across the nation. While these are not models to replicate exactly, the process and the principles that ground these community-led solutions are visions to learn from. From the narrative shift of communities who have suffered disproportionately from environmental injustices to becoming decision-makers over their energy to passing policies on the state level, energy democracy provides a framework to address the systemic inequities that are being elevated in this current global pandemic and should receive sustained funding.

We are both facing a global pandemic and a crisis that is stimulating another enormous transfer of wealth²⁸ to billionaires and their shareholders, as Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC)--especially working class People of Color--are once again being excluded and exploited for the benefit of the white and wealthy. Ongoing calls for more racially equitable grantmaking practices are even more critical at this time, as the reality of losing the safety nets that keep communities of color surviving day-to-day is met with the sharpened threat to the vitality of our racial justice movement infrastructure as corporations and billionaires monopolize government handouts and stimulus packages.

In moments of crisis, the context of urgency and stress is more likely to activate institutional and structural racism, implicit bias, and generate more inequity as a result of the decisions we make. Accordingly, we expect to see foundational partners who are decision-makers defaulting to processes that increase and exacerbate racial, gender, class, and other inequities. Because of this, we call on our foundation partners to increase their focus on eliminating institutional and structural racism and infusing a racial equity lens to the activities they are engaged in at this time, whether those be increased payout rates,²⁹ targeted response funds,³⁰ or other efforts.

And while immediate responses to the pandemic are necessary and crucial, the economic impacts of COVID-19 will certainly have lasting effects beyond the end of this global pandemic. **Despite all its challenges, the pandemic has elevated an opportunity to rebuild and restructure our economy in a regenerative way. By uniting, the philanthropic community has the chance to move bold solutions and continue this support in a sustained way.**

Findings from our conversations with our energy democracy partners indicate a few concrete recommendations that we offer to environmental justice funders:

Unite with other funders in bold support for radical organizing happening in Black, Indigenous and People of Color environmental justice communities.

- » Invest in base- and power-building organizations that have a root-cause analysis, that may organize on several fronts and may not explicitly identify as environmental or climate justice organizations, and that may take on corporate power and accountability.
- » Invest in BIPOC climate justice and environmental justice organizations to build their capacity and elevate their leadership and expertise in moving holistic solutions that merge policy, organizing, and technical knowledge in the implementation and the outcome of their work.
- » In order for policy solutions to be effective, they must be rooted in the experience of communities of color including the inception, development, and implementation of policies. When philanthropic partners bifurcate policy inception and implementation, oftentimes white-led environmental organizations or lawyers are left to implement the work initiated and led by BIPOC communities.
- » Directly fund work led by and rooted in Black communities. Now more than ever, philanthropic partners must understand what it means to build a regenerative economy and a future that changes material conditions for Black communities.
- » Take risks on project-based, place-based work that will need to accelerate and scale up.
- » Adequately resource grantees engaged in coalition work and fund local and state-wide alliances and coalitions engaged in campaigns.
- » When considering a coalition-based proposal, ask your grantees if the proposed grant amount accurately reflects the administrative, communications, and operations costs associated with working in coalition with their partners.
- » Acknowledge explicitly that you are doing this because you know that, historically speaking, funders have often “low balled” the costs that grantees incur when engaged in coalition work.
- » Invest in organizations and efforts that are developing the next generation of climate and environmental justice leaders.
- » Divest endowments from fossil fuels and other extractive industries such as prison and detention systems, military and arms manufacturing, etc. and reinvest those dollars directly into BIPOC community-governed funds (such as the Solar Peoples Fund or the CJA Our Power Reinvestment Fund, Full Spectrum Capital).
- » Invest in organizations that are doing narrative, story-telling, and cultural work as an essential element of the climate fight.
- » Fund climate solutions that advance ownership and governance strategies instead of solely carbon-reducing strategies. This has been a critical barrier for leveraging resources to energy democracy efforts.

The adaptability of many funder communities during COVID-19 has been supportive and critical as community-based organizations pivot in response to the multiple crises.

- » Make a commitment to adjust grant reporting deadlines, requirements, and the like for grantees based on their expressed needs and priorities. This is especially important during these converging crises, but we recommend continuing this practice beyond this immediate need.
- » Follow the lead of funders who are automatically renewing grants for current grantees without additional proposals, and/or converting one-year grants into multi-year grants with minimal grant writing burden on the grantee.

Ensure that funder commitments to trust-based philanthropy actually translate into shifts in material conditions for grantee partners and applicants. Energy democracy is multi-issue work that requires an intersectional lens and needs to be rooted in community. By providing flexibility in grant requirements, organizations are able to create interwoven teams and to be responsive to community residents and grassroots movements. Below are suggestions for how to show trust and support to community-based organizations:

- » Make a commitment to convert all current and planned grants into general operating support, and ask grantees to indicate what reporting requirements work for them.
- » Community partners highlighted the challenge in being adaptable to movements and the needs of community partners when grants require meeting specific deliverables.
- » Invest in community wealth building and provide the opportunity for organizations to receive multi-year grants or for there to be a grant auto renewal process. Building a movement takes time and sustained funding. And while a group may successfully win a campaign or will launch a project, the success of the project remains in the implementation and continued collaborative work. Being willing to invest in a whole process and to allocate resources throughout will reduce the risk many community-based organizations have needed to historically absorb.
- » Reduce the fundraising burden for grantees and applicants by organizing with fellow funders around a potential “common application” for grant proposals.
- » Provide feedback loops for grantees to assess and respond to the grantmaking practices you are engaged, and share the data you collect back with them.
- » Given the real power dynamics at play, consider ways to make this feedback process anonymous for the grantees.

Address racial biases that often show up when funders act fast in moments of crisis and sustain these practices in future grantmaking.

- » If you haven’t done so already, provide learning opportunities for staff to learn about race, racism, and racial equity, and “skill up” for racial equity.

- » Integrate racial equity tools into your grantmaking practices, communications, and operations.
- » Be race-explicit in your grantmaking strategies and priorities.
- » Eliminate “first come, first served” response funding efforts that privilege predominantly and historically white nonprofits.
- » Address multiple systems of oppression (racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, ableism) in your grantmaking.

Commit to tracking your grantmaking dollars, collecting data on the racial demographics of the grantees you are funding, and sharing that data with movement leaders.

- » Expect that the racial justice movement will need you to be accountable to whether or not your grantmaking dollars went to frontline, BIPOC-led organizations.
- » Consult with movement leaders on what kind of grantmaking data you should be tracking.
- » Community partners were appreciative of the support the philanthropic community has shown during this time of COVID-19 and encourage similar practices beyond this immediate crisis.

Conclusion

WE ARE IN AN EXTRAORDINARY MOMENT of reimagining a regenerative future and rebuilding the economy. Across sectors, organizations on the ground are building power, challenging corporate power and building liberatory spaces, and pushing for radical policy changes that we know will transform concrete conditions for BIPOC communities for generations to come. Following the leadership of frontline communities in the fight to democratize energy, we know we need to move away from investor-owned utilities; create new democratic institutions; build enough power from the grassroots to keep pressure on decision makers and hold them accountable; build and strengthen alliances at the local, state and national levels; and think strategically and in cross-sectoral ways about labor and jobs, housing, transportation, and every sector of the economy.

As a national intermediary or movement-support organization, Race Forward is in a position to convey to a wide audience the centrality of race in the energy and environmental space. We have historically been a thought partner and thought leader in the emerging field of energy democracy, providing trainers and educational materials on frameworks for understanding structural racism. We have been a convener and coalition-builder. And we have provided support in building a narrative that uplifts solutions and stories of frontline communities.

In this next period, Race Forward is eager to develop an approach to addressing energy exploitation, the climate crisis and the impact on BIPOC communities that centers the leadership of those communities and recognizes the need for cross-movement solidarity. This comes at a time when the impact of structural racism, community resilience in times of crisis, as well as bold demands for a just recovery and transition to a new economy are making themselves more clear. The convergence of so many community needs will require a thoughtful way forward, grounded in relationship and responsive to the leadership of community-based partners.

Appendix A - Partner Interview Questions

Organizational work

- » What have been some of your organization's victories in energy democracy?
- » How have you seen energy democracy move in the past decade?
- » In your local community
- » In the national context
- » What challenges has your organization seen in pushing forward energy democracy work?
- » How has your organization shifted in priorities to support community partners in the wake of COVID-19?
- » How has the pandemic affected your organization?

Recommendations for funders

- » Have funders supported the work that your communities have identified as a need?
- » If yes, how? (Or how can they be better at meeting your needs?)
- » Has your organization had to take on projects outside of your mission to stay financially afloat?
- » As the current situation unfolds, we understand that priorities and strategies may shift over time to channel resources to our communities. How can funders be effective in supporting organizations as they respond to COVID-19?
- » What key message or takeaway would you want funders to have after reading this report?

Relationship with Race Forward

- » In what ways has Race Forward shown up in a supportive way?
- » In what ways can Race Forward be more supportive in the future?
- » Why is it important to be race-explicit when discussing energy democracy?

Opportunities and next steps

- » What are some opportunities looking forward that are presented by the Green New Deal and the current discourse around climate change (innovations in the current energy democracy climate)?
- » Going forward, how do you see your organization's role in the community shifting (or continuing to shift) to adequately respond to COVID-19?

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