

Documenting Our Lives:

A Guide to Designing Your Research Project



 **DataCenter**
RESEARCH FOR JUSTICE

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About the DataCenter

Founded in 1977, **DataCenter** unlocks the power of knowledge for social change. We support grassroots organizing for justice and sustainability through strategic research, training and collaborations. We use research to help move the knowledge and solutions of communities of color and the poor from the margins to the center of decision-making.

This toolkit was created by Miho Kim and Saba Waheed. Thanks to Nicholas Cragoe for the design and editing support.

For more information about our programs, please visit our website at www.datacenter.org

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“Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. Its becomes a goal of social justice, which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples.”
 ---Linda Tuhawai

DataCenter’s Research Justice agenda began with a single question: Who defines and controls the legitimacy of information? A community voice may get dismissed by a policy maker because it is a community voice. Or, an institutional report will never reach the community because it is hidden in institutional, inaccessible language.

We believe that when harnessed and wielded by people who have first-hand experience with issues they seek to address, information is power for community-led social change. Community organizations and low-income communities of color build political power when they: have unfettered access to information, to research and to analysis of issues affecting their well-being; are able to effectively challenge structural barriers to information; engage influential institutions to redefine the legitimacy of community-generated evidence in public policymaking; and legitimize community knowledge and research methods so they are considered on par with mainstream approaches to research.

Community-based and -led Research

Community-led participatory research is a method of reclaiming research. Designed by third world communities in the struggles against colonization, participatory research and its process:

In the U.S., community-based participatory research has been used in the civil rights, women’s, anti-war and environmental justice movements.

- ◆ Synthesizes the collection and use of knowledge – research and action
- ◆ Breaks down the artificially imposed wall between researcher and researched
- ◆ Restructures power relations in the research process
- ◆ Ensures that knowledge gained through research roots personal experiences in the context of the political and social structures that shape them
- ◆ Honors the knowledge and strengths within our communities
- ◆ Furthers our struggles for justice

Participatory Research is about...	What Participatory Research proactively challenges/rejects...
...communities doing our own research for our own ends	...being researched by institutions outside our communities
...creating our own liberatory system of knowledge	... researchers from outside controlling and defining what is knowledge, and what knowledge our community possesses

The idea of participatory research isn't "data assessment," but the conversations that the research produces.

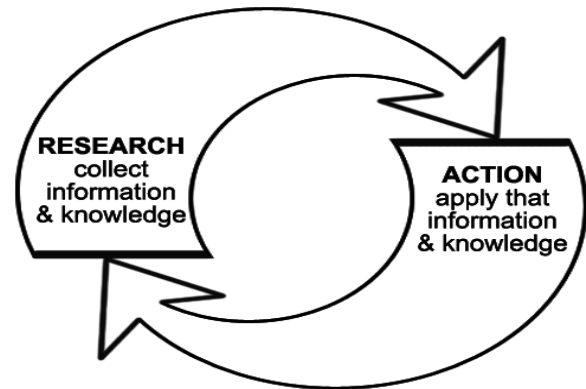
The participatory research process synthesizes the collection and use of knowledge – research and action.

What community research skills do you have in your toolbox?

- Have you talked with an elder about their life story or community knowledge?
- Have you been stopped or detained by immigration officials or the police?
- Have you talked with friends about an injustice in your community?
- Have you read local, Native or ethnic newspapers?

Each of these experiences speaks to a type of knowledge or a way of getting information that comes from our lives and guides our struggles for justice.

When we think about decolonizing research, this is what we mean – honoring our experience, our diverse ways of understanding the world we live in, knowledge of self, and our ways of expanding our knowledge, particularly the knowledge and experience of those of us who have been most impacted by the destructive forces of colonization. We experience injustice firsthand, and *that* knowledge is the basis for the best solutions for our communities.



When the community designs, implements, assesses and releases its research project, the community engages in actions that will transform its situation. When we gather our stories together, we promote dialogue, encourage action, and inform policy. It speaks to creating a world together, grounded in shared experiences and collective action.

What's DataCenter's role in all of this?

We at DataCenter are committed to research that builds community leadership, local capacity for change, and self-determination. We seek to develop the skills and experience necessary within groups we collaborate with, so that self-sustaining community-based research is used in future organizing work.

We see our role as facilitating – not leading – research projects, to support research and provide tools for groups to utilize. When we collaborate with community groups in a participatory research process, members are involved in every step of the planning and implementation of the research project.

The research helps in all components of organizing work by ensuring that each step of the research project plays an integral role in the organizing work of the community.



Research leads to

- ❖ **Base-building**
- ❖ **Leadership Development**
- ❖ **Campaign Strategizing**
- ❖ **Organizing Strategizing**

Research can

- ❖ **Inform the group's long term strategies**
- ❖ **Reach out to the community and build membership**
- ❖ **Inform policy recommendations or need for media work, and so on**

The research informs the action and the action informs the research.

Introduction – Four Stages of Planning Research

Thinking about the role of research in your organizing agenda can be overwhelming. In the process of doing a research project, setting it up is probably the most challenging moment in the entire process. Remember –

TIP 1: Spend as much time as necessary at the front-end designing your research project.

You don't want to put time and resources into information that doesn't get used. Therefore, think about the research in the following four stages. Each stage informs another and ultimately helps determine the best research project suited to your needs and circumstances. And each stage should work alongside, if not complementary to the agenda that is already being pursued by your current organizing work.



There are four key stages of designing a research project.

Stages One and Four – The GOALS & OUTCOMES of the research project should be intricately linked to your goals and outcomes for the campaign. Keep in mind that the process of research will not just support the outcomes, but also drive it and often shift it to a new place.

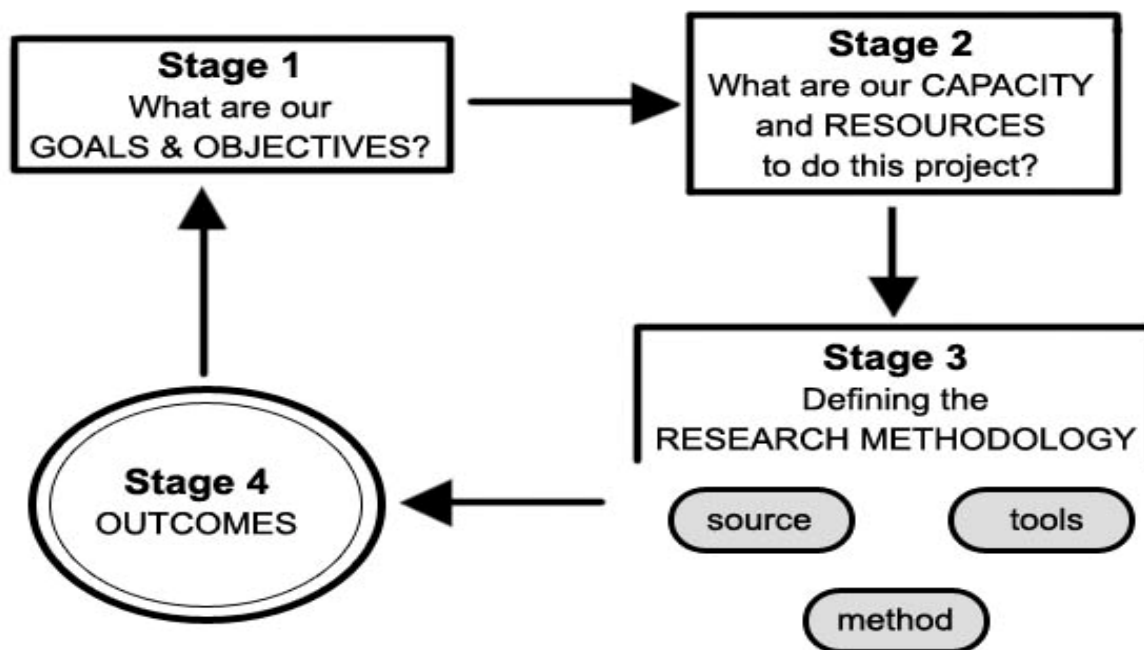
TIP 2: Ask yourself: Where do I expect my campaign to be six months from today?

Stage Two and Three – Once you know where you expect to be in six months, you can now consider, what's the information I need and how do I get it. ASSESSING OUR CAPACITY and CHOOSING OUR METHODOLOGY are what you do to achieve the goal – the pathway from the goals to the outcomes. The chance of the outcome turning out the way you intended and hoped for is significantly shaped by what METHOD, TOOLS, and SOURCES you choose.

TIP 3: The ability to carry out the chosen methods is based on the capacity within your organization to do it.

All four stages are linked and should be carefully considered when starting a research project.

Four Stages of Building a Research Project



In organizing, both mainstream and community types of information serve as key data to inform your strategies and build community power. That is why...

KNOWING THE TYPE OF INFO & KNOWLEDGE CAN IMPROVE EFFECTIVENESS OF RESEARCH & STRATEGY!

Effective RESEARCH:

Knowing the type of information that you *want* can help you *research* effectively:
Who's your best bet, the Washington Post or your community's elder?

Effective STRATEGY:

Knowing the type of information that you *have* can help you *strategize* effectively:
Which audience can I convince effectively with each information source?

Research

~

Let's GO!!!



Stage 1 – Articulate the goals and objectives of our project

Example:

Our campaign goal is to pass a health rights bill.

Therefore, we need to do a research project that would deliver the following outcome:

We produce compelling evidence of how severe the impact of lack of health insurance is on the lives of our community members.

The goal of the research project then is to gather information about impacts. Since this information isn't captured in government data, the very people that experience it every day serve as important and unique source of this information.

Once you have your findings from the research, you can tailor that information to fit how your target audience can relate and understand.



A Research Project Goal...

...should be articulated in one or two sentences that outline the longer-term effort (project, campaign, etc.) and role of this participatory research exercise within it. What is the shorter-term concrete objective that this exercise is aiming to achieve? How would that advance the longer-term goals of the organizing project or campaign, as well as build the base, develop leadership and capacity, etc.?

Expected Outcomes of Research Project...

...is what the outcome of the research looks like in concrete, tangible or visible ways. If you develop a 'deliverable' as a result of the project, how do you envision utilizing that deliverable in order to further push your agenda (who will use it, how, when, with whom, with what resources, for what goal, etc.) to generate what impact exactly? what change would come as a result of achieving research goals and outcome?

Stage 2 – What’s Our Capacity To Do This? What Things Do We Need To Consider?

Resources

Get a handle on your resources – by this we mean everything from time, people power, money, to things like printing paper or designing a report. Let this assessment give you a sense of what parameters and scope of the research project will be realistic and feasible.



Strategic Considerations

Taking into account extraneous circumstances, anticipated timelines/deadlines that are relevant, funding schedules as well as calendar ‘hooks’ would help shape and imbed the research project into the larger organizing agenda much more seamlessly.

Who will do the Research?

Members can drive/meaningfully participate in the process to develop, implement, analyze the research project agenda, and review the findings so as to determine the most suitable application of those findings towards a specific action. The process is a wonderful opportunity to build leadership and increase capacity in your organization.

But we know, capacity can be limited, so some parts may be done solely by membership while other parts may be done in partnership with allies and supporters; some processes would be facilitated while others undertaken internally. But the roles of non-members would be specific and limited, guided by and accountable to the overall agenda embraced by the membership.

Who’s your Audience?

Who is the targeted audience for the information? In other words, WHOM are you trying to convince? Why are you targeting that audience? How will the information and findings move them?

- ▶ If your audience is a key decision-maker, consider tapping into mainstream sources of information (in addition to grassroots/community knowledge, e.g., testimonies, etc.) such as reports from government agencies or university research bodies or mainstream newspaper articles. If you’re trying to shape their opinion about an issue with findings of your research project, for example, you may want to tap into sources *they* trust in your research project. The fact is, institutional decision-makers, i.e.,



KNOW THY ENEMY: Public officials or executives that represent private corporate interests often reject community knowledge as valid information, but tend not to refute data generated/endorsed by Big Brother and Big Money institutions.

lawmakers and policymakers, tend to embrace arguments coming from mainstream sources of information, and dismiss community voices as scientifically valid or sound enough to support their policy/legislative positions. Or you may consider "packaging" community voices in social science methodologies that are accepted, mainstream methods.

► But if your audience is other community members, you may want to incorporate community sources of information that people feel close to, can relate to, and therefore are inclined to hear with more heart.

► Consider the necessary/appropriate size of the pool of information (e.g., in case of surveys, arguments based on 500+ responses lend credibility in the mainstream as opposed to conclusions drawn from only 20.)

See Page 11, "How to Build Legitimacy of Your Voice"

Translation

What language(s) will the project be conducted in?
Who will do translation?

Time Period/Duration

Over what time period will data & information be collected? What will the time period for pilot (if any) be? Are there campaign or other considerations that need to be taken into account for determining timelines and deadlines?

Data Analysis

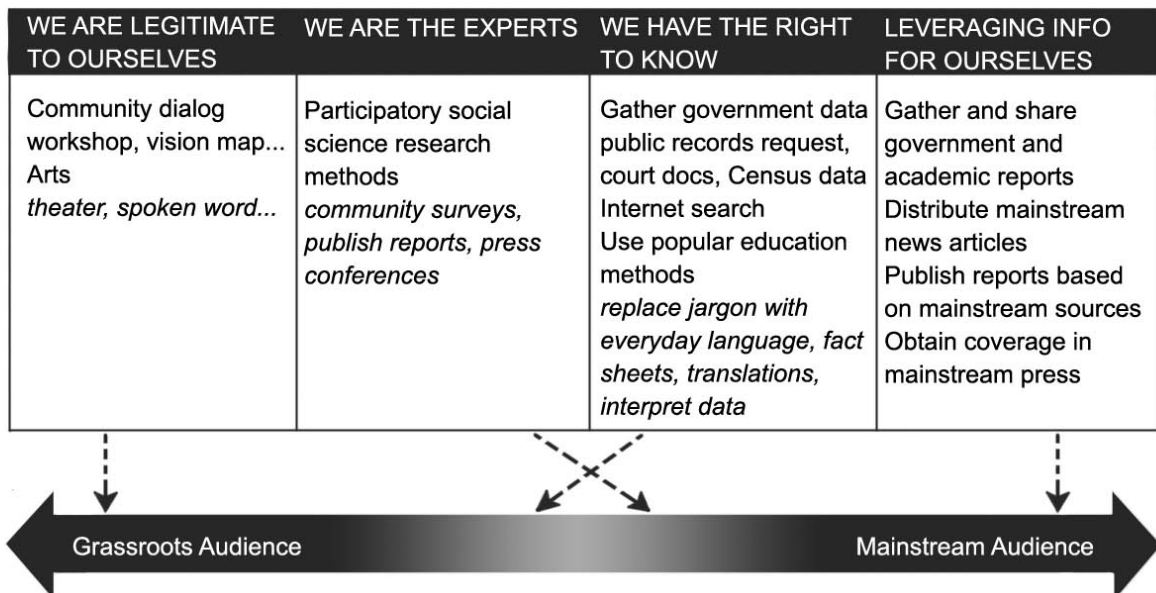
Where will they be stored and analyzed? Who will have access to databases and data? Who will be allowed to use data? How will you conduct data analysis, and who will participate/facilitate? How many rounds of analysis would you want?



HOW TO BUILD LEGITIMACY BEHIND YOUR VOICE



HOW WILL YOU COLLECT AND USE THE INFORMATION



CHECKLIST OF QUESTIONS

<p><i>Who will do the data-gathering and knowledge-collecting process?</i></p>	<p>Members, interns and volunteers, staff, contracting out to other research entities, etc. An online literature review or government data collection may take a few days or a few weeks depending on the scope. Surveys and other social science methods needs people power but also can be amazing base building and outreach tools. Who has the time and the expertise. These are opportunities to build skills as well.</p>
<p><i>How will researchers/info collectors & gatherers be trained and coordinated?</i></p>	<p>Ensure the project is set up with necessary training and oversight needed. The process of doing research is a great space to build leadership within your membership. Previous collectors can become coordinators and trainers. Those interviewed or surveyed can become collectors. Plan out a process for each level.</p>
<p><i>Do we need to get support and assistance of any one outside of the community?</i></p>	<p>Identify outside research allies (research institutes, universities, etc.) Be clear on their role ahead of time both internally and when talking to them. Or you may need 'mainstream experts' already familiar enough with sources and able to get data needed.</p>
<p><i>Where will the data be stored, who will analyze it, and how?</i></p>	<p>This is often the most overlooked part and yet, can completely derail the project. If you're collecting data, have a database plan ready and someone who can analyze the data. There are many ways to convert the information into popular trainings so that you can share data with community members and have them participate in analysis.</p>
<p><i>How will the analyzed information and final points made with that information be disseminated?</i></p>	<p>Who are we trying to convince with this research project's conclusions, and why? Once we know whom we're targeting as audience, then we can develop concrete strategies of how best to reach them/ A fancy report may be needed for a policy maker but an accessible fact sheet may be more suitable for community members.</p>
<p><i>How/where/when/will members be doing the hands-on tasks (directly involved) in the project?</i></p>	<p>Since the process involves a multitude of players and roles, it is important to outline and communicate them clearly to every one and keep the information up-to-date throughout the life of the project. Be clear who will take on parts of the mapping project development, collecting surveys, data entry, analysis, design/formatting of final work, etc., when, and how.</p>

Use the Research Planning Worksheet on Page 18 to develop your research plan.

Stage 3 – The THREE Research Project Elements: Choosing Your Source, Your Tools, and the Method

Picking each and any of these elements of research requires considering your organization's resources, honing in on what information will strengthen your campaign and get you to your goal, and considering your audience.

And remember – there are many sources, many ways and many tools to get at that information, so add onto the list. We're just putting a few out there for starters!!

Methods is a Pot of Soup



Think of the SOURCE as soup in the crock pot. It could be a vegetable dumpling soup or perhaps miso. What type of tool do you need to get your source, I mean, soup out. A spoon, a ladle, perhaps for those dumplings, you need chopsticks. The TOOL is what you will use to extract your information. Are you going to scoop out slowly or quickly? Have it cool down or flaming hot. That's your METHOD – it guides the Tool. And just as you scoop out the soup because you're hungry, be clear why you're extracting the information and what you're going to do with it. Who are you going to serve it to? Is it family style or a formal executive dinner. The serving dish will look very different based on the intended audience.



Source

The source is the 'place' that the targeted information lives in. Sometimes you will note that you've access to more than just one source to get the information that you need. Is it easier to turn to a scientific expert, or conduct an online search? Which source offers more opportunity for community researchers to engage in methodology & use tools that A) develop leadership/research skills, B) reaffirm & tap into their abilities, C) provide sense of people power in the process, while having fun?

The *Source* is the **POT** of information you're looking for – it can be:

- *Compilation of working conditions in an industry*
- *Times Article on your constituency*
- *Information about a corporation*
- *Census data*
- *Photo exhibit*
- *Familial stories*
- *Public documents*

The *Tool* is the extractor and can be:

- *Surveys*
- *Observations/Interviews*
- *Pen and Paper*
- *Internet Searches*
- *Journal*
- *Community Mapping*
- *Intake Form*



Tools

What tools are best to help us get the info we're looking for? Multiple tools can be used at same or different times of the project. Even in a survey project there are other tools – interviews, focus groups, background literature review, etc. Likewise, in a community mapping project, tools can vary – and be multiple – from census data analysis, combined with testimonies gained from interviews, questionnaires, facility information from the EPA, etc.



Method

The Method lays out 'the Way' for your research. It's the set of procedures that will get you the information you're after. If your source is your elder and your tool is an interview, then you should determine when you'll meet, how many times, etc., in advance. But aside from the logistics, you should develop a concrete outline of your questions...and which ones you want her/him to go in-depth, which ones not, and so on. Your research methodology is about spelling out all this stuff based on what information you're looking for, and what you want to accomplish with that information.

- Conduct unstructured interviews with 50 elders
- Submit a Freedom of Information Act request on corporation's financial holdings
- Door-knock in your neighborhood and map out who lives there
- Conduct 100 surveys with nannies using street theatre in the park



Additional TIPS for Surveys, Interviews, and Focus Groups

Define the target group that will be inclined in the study

This can be as broad or as narrow as you need it to be – but 1-2 sentences about whom we are including to be surveyed. How does surveying this group support campaign & project goals? i.e., will we survey the Southeast and South Asian undocumented community in Queens because...

You may want to identify certain groups that you want to include in the surveys – based on what you know best represents the community – i.e., 35 percent of those we survey should be women. If you have access to certain census data or demographics, it can give you a sense (but of course census can only give you some general things and we know, often miss certain communities). Or you may have documentation of your own that can guide you in picking your sample. This doesn't need to feel like a quota, but to say that you will aim to include these groups.

Here are some possible variables, but you all know best who should be included in the surveying: *age, immigration status, class, gender, ethnicity/race, country of birth, family member of deportee, etc.*

Define method of getting your sample (it can be a mix of these)

How are you going to reach these particular communities, once identified? This should be based on information you already know about accessing the community and what method would work best.

Availability – surveying those that are available – i.e., in your neighborhood, coming out to a particular event, advertised through ethnic paper, etc.

Snowball – affected community members that participated in the project or are interested in the project refer you to other affected community members that can participate. This is especially useful in getting to hard to reach communities.

Quota – you define beforehand gender, age, ethnicity, and create a quota. You may still use snowball or availability to find particular community members but the idea here is that the categories will be defined ahead of time based on certain principles – they are representative of the group as a whole – and will be targeted. This ensures that we get a certain range in the data (so to make sure we have gender, age, etc. diversity in the pool, or places of comparison).

Convenience – this will most likely be used in the pilot. But you choose those that are accessible to you.

Define strategies for getting at your sample

What are specific strategies? How will you get the word out? i.e., word-of-mouth, on the street, door-knocking, e-mail, media publicity, attendance at gatherings, through collaborative partner organizations, etc.

Stage 4 – Outcomes

Your outcomes should lead you back to your goals for the campaign. Of course through the process, goals may have changed (remember research informs action and action informs research).

You have your goals and now you have the research and data you need. In addition, you probably have increased capacity, more member leaders, and increased membership because you door-knocked and surveyed in your neighborhood and you have some concrete materials that you can now use as you see fit. But what are those ways??

Needs Assessment – You found out something more about your community or your organization – take it back to them and let's have a dialogue.

Policy/Legislation Change – The data will be used to show your city officials what's going on in your community.

Media Blitz – You need public support, and media love data – show it to them and spin it!

Give the Data Back to the People – We always encourage bringing those that were surveyed or participated in the research to see the results and be a part of a strategy of what to do with the data.

At this stage, package your data in the most appropriate way that fits your audience and launch it! Your dissemination strategy is key. You don't want your report to go straight to shelf. Data launches work best when integrated into campaign and organizing strategies. They play a role in pushing forward a larger agenda and are strategic tools to get your message across. You now have the data that backs what you've been saying and proves that change is needed.



Starting Your Research Project

Part 1. The Big Picture	
<p>What campaigns or organizational goals will the research support? Or what is the headline you want to see? <i>Workers are facing abuses, or Understand better what conditions workers are facing, or Organize workers to advocate for change</i></p>	
<p>How will research support your goals? <i>Help you convince decision-makers? Inform campaign priorities? Get media attention on issue? Involve or educate members? Reframe the issue to the public?</i></p>	
<p>What information are you looking for? <i>Demographics of workers, working conditions, health issues, gentrification in your neighborhood</i></p>	
<p>Who is/are the audience(s) for this information? <i>Who are you trying to move with the information so that you can achieve your goals? Media that will inform the general public that will put pressure on a government official? Your community members that need to be made aware of the issue so that they will organize? A campaign target like a corporate head?</i></p>	
Part 2. Getting your ‘Methodology’ Down!	
<p>What’s your Source(s) - the information you are looking for? <i>It can be a newspaper article that describes your issue, it can live in your community through their day-to-day experiences of an oppression, or in public records compiled by government entities that describe your community.</i></p>	
<p>What Tool(s) will you use to extract your source? <i>An interview or survey can pull out experiences of your community; literature reviews will pull out existing writings, search an online database or submit a FOIA.</i></p>	
<p>What is your Method – the plan for using your tool(s) to get your source(s) <i>You can conduct a face-to-face survey with 500 residents, search through the EPA, census and HUD databases, go to the public record offices in your city.</i></p>	
<p>By when, should this happen? <i>When do you need the research to be complete, but include benchmarks along the way on when parts of the research can be completed; consider press moments or political dates. when the research will be more powerful</i></p>	

What role can members/community play in the research process? <i>Are there places in the process that member input or involvement can happen – guiding the research, participating in the analysis, creating tools, doing outreach.</i>	
What are your materials internally? <i>Does the information need to be formatted, summarized, translated into other languages or into user friendly language. This is throughout the research process, not just the end.</i>	
What are your materials externally? <i>A shiny report, a summary of findings, a fact sheet. Consider your audience and what they will listen to. A fancy report for a policy maker versus a user friendly comic book for a community member.</i>	
Part 3. Check your Resources	
Who will coordinate the project? <i>Oversee the projects, check the timeline, guide the process including making necessary changes, liaison if multiple people or organizations are involved?</i>	
Who will collect the information? <i>Volunteers, members, ally organizations, students? How much staff time will it take?</i>	
Will you need to do trainings to conduct research? <i>Who will conduct the training? How long will the training be? Who will design it? How many trainings does someone need to go through to be able to conduct the research?</i>	
Who will develop Dissemination materials? <i>Plan, write, review, edit, design, print, distribute? Will the materials need to be translated?</i>	
Will you involve ally or outside institutions orgs? <i>Who? What roles will they play?</i>	
How's the money looking? <i>Do you have funds to pay for printing and design of report? Do data entry? Do you need to do fundraising?</i>	
Part 4. Timeline	
When will it be done? <i>Fill in steps of the projects: gather data, create database, data entry, create user friendly materials, release report, etc.</i>	Fill in date(s)
a)	
b)	
c)	
d)	
e)	
f)	

Case Study: Participatory research in action – winning a domestic workers bill of rights



Graphic design by John Won

Since the abolition of institutionalized slavery, domestic workers have been invisible, exploited and left out of labor protections and the labor movement. Their labor has rarely been recognized by lawmakers or society at large as “real work.” However, in New York City, like other command centers for the global economy, the domestic workforce is expanding, providing childcare, home and elder care while their employers go to work. Today, the New York City economy is maintained by one of the largest domestic worker labor forces in the country. Still, working conditions have improved little since the 1860s. Once a field for predominantly African American women, the domestic work industry is now predominantly immigrant women of color fleeing destruction and devastation left by imperialist wars and global economic “restructuring” in the Third World. Domestic workers, especially live-in workers, work long hours, have little job security, and no control over living or working conditions or punitive immigration policies. Domestic workers are isolated in their workplace, positioned as a social underclass/subordinate, forced to negotiate conditions one-on-one with employers – creating a situation conducive for abuse and poverty wages. There are no clear standards for domestic employment and the few protections that exist are rarely enforced.

Because the domestic work industry is fragmented, informal, and underground, it is impossible to rely on Census or labor data to analyze industry-wide trends. Working towards filling that gap, **Domestic Workers United (DWU)**, an alliance of domestic workers and domestic worker organizations working to build power among domestic workers, raise the level of respect for domestic work, and establish fair labor standards in the domestic work industry of New York City, and DataCenter collaborated on a community documentation project to gather the first ever data on practices and issues within the industry. Using a participatory, community-based research model, the project engaged domestic workers in all aspects of the research and analysis.

The report, *Home is Where the Work Is*, based on a survey of over 500 workers, was used in a six year campaign to end the exclusions of domestic workers in existing labor laws. On September 1, 2010, the governor of New York signed the first ever domestic worker bill that guarantees overtime pay, a minimum of one day off every seven days, three days of paid leave per year, and protections against sexual harassment and racial discrimination. It lays the groundwork for future protections including the unionization, paid sick days and severance pay.

For further information on DWU: www.domesticworkersunited.org.

To view the report, visit the DataCenter Publications Page: www.datacenter.org