

Documenting Our Lives:

Decolonizing Research Through
Community-based Research Projects

An introductory Community Guide

Revised Edition

DataCenter 2012



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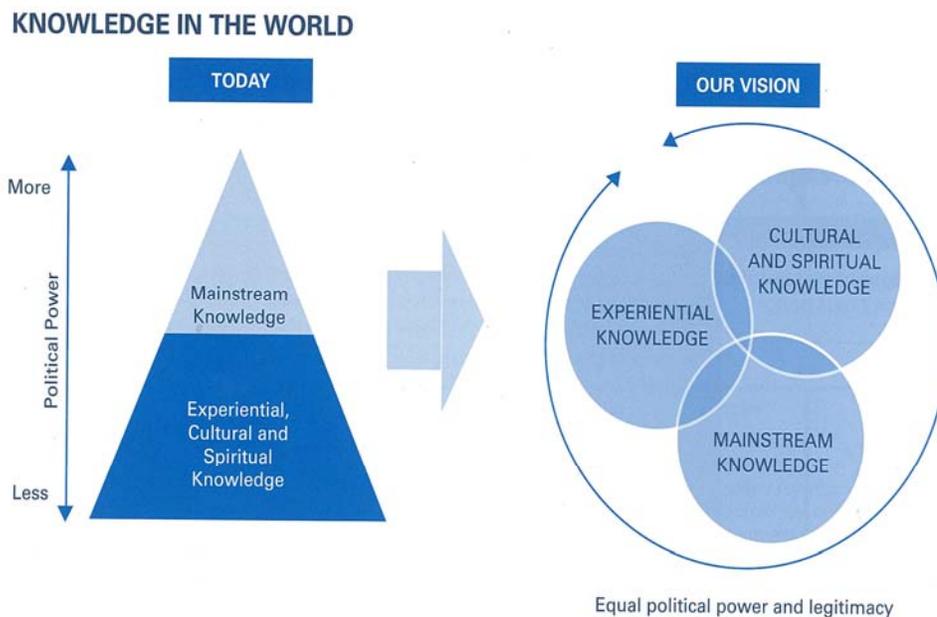
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 Xerox Art graphics: Rini Templeton, riniart.org

“Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It 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 Tuhiwai-Smith

We, community members and organizers, are experts of our own communities. We are at the forefront of what is happening in our workplaces, neighborhoods and homes, and are in the best position to articulate the problems and provide the necessary meaningful solutions. By decolonizing research, we are putting research into our hands and reclaiming community knowledge to build grassroots power, self-determination and liberation.

**We are the
 experts of our
 Community**

What do we mean by ‘Decolonizing Research?’

Community-led participatory research is a method of **decolonizing** 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 |

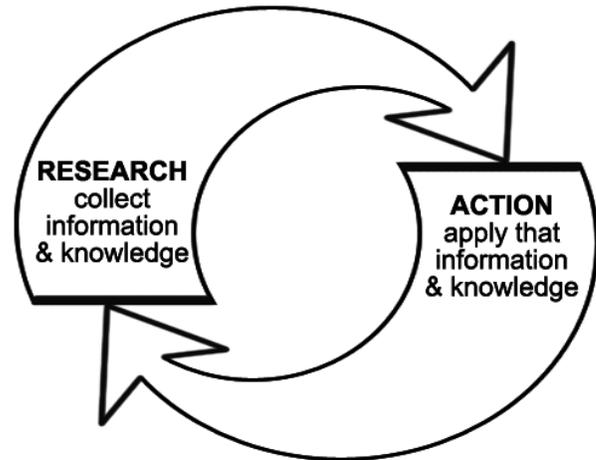
The idea of participatory research isn't "data assessment," but the conversations the research produces.

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?

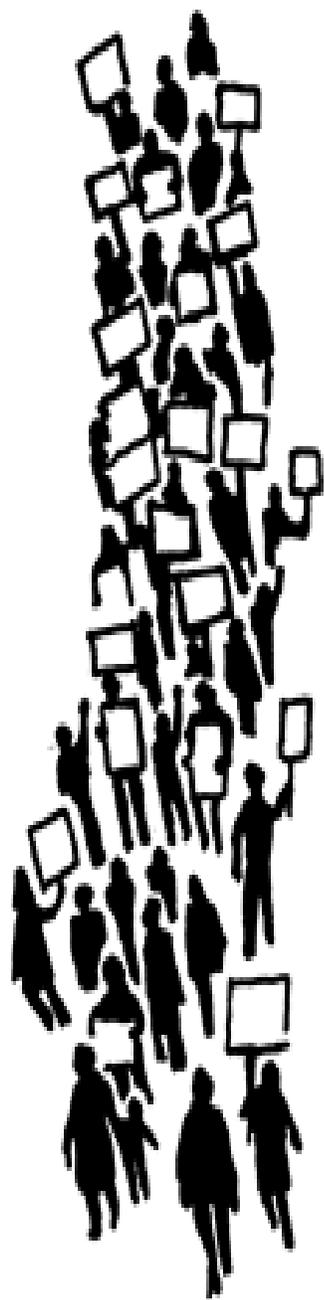
Each of these experiences speaks to a type of knowledge or a way of getting information that comes from our lives and guides our struggles for justice. When we think about decolonizing research, this is what we mean – honoring our experience, our diverse ways of understanding the world we live in, knowledge 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 strategic

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

Research can

- ❖ **Inform the group's long term strategies**
- ❖ **Help 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.

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 this golden rule:

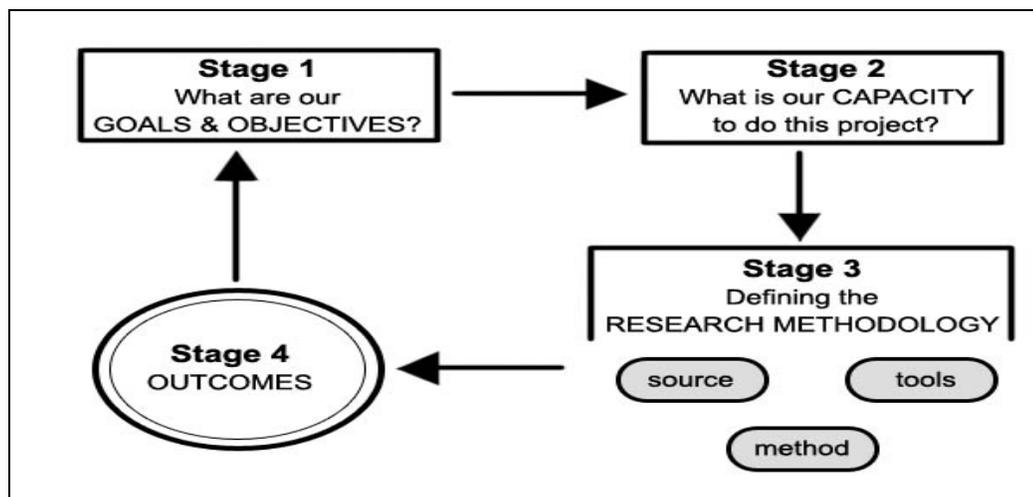
Spend as much time as necessary at the front-end designing your research project.

You don't want to put time and resources into information that doesn't get used.



Introduction – Planning Research in Four Stages

Therefore, think about the research design as broken down into four stages. Each stage informs another and ultimately helps determine the best research project suited to your needs and circumstances. All four stages are linked and should be carefully considered when designing a research project for action.



Research Design

~

Let's GO!!!



Stage 1 – Articulate the Goals and Objectives of Our Research Project

Ask yourself, where I would like my campaign to be six months from today.

Example:

Our campaign goal is to pass a health rights bill.

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

1) We produce compelling evidence of how severe the impact of lack of health insurance is on the lives of our membership. (“We need to prove it’s not just isolated cases or anecdotes - it’s pervasive.”) → We are seen and heard as experts when we say “health rights are being violated” with data to back up the claim. This creates a political tailwind to support bill passage.

2) The goal of the research project then is to document the impacts of health rights violation. Since this information isn’t captured in government data, (or anywhere yet that you know of), the very people that experience it every day serve as important and unique source of this information.

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



A Research Project Goal...

...should be articulated in one or two sentences that outline the longer-term goal (project, campaign, etc.) and role of this participatory research project 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. that may be crucial for the overall success of your organizing effort, not just the external demands of your campaign?

Expected Outcomes of the 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 your hands in order to further push your agenda (who will use it, how, when, with whom, with what resources, for what goal, etc.)? What is the impact you wish to generate with that deliverable, exactly? What change would result as a result of achieving research goals and outcome that brings you one step closer to the campaign victory?

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

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

Stage Two and Three – Once you know where you would like your campaign to be in six months, you can now consider, what’s the information I need, how do I get it, package it, and perhaps, deploy it (if not for internal consumption only, such as campaign development, evaluations, etc.).

ASSESSING OUR CAPACITY and CHOOSING OUR METHODOLOGY are two steps that help articulate the implementation of the research, towards the goal of the research project – in other words, the pathway from the goals you set for the research, to the actual outcomes of that research project. 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, followed by how effectively you package and deploy that information tool for action. You carefully assess your capacity and resource constraints here, to ensure that the methodology is feasible. The most common challenge we observe with community-designed research is that mid-way through the research project, financial or staffing capacity is lost or diminished and is not carried through to the end. The enormous time the project has already taken is not a burden but a powerful investment with huge dividends - *only* if you see the fruits of the labor at the end of the project.



Those of us in community organizations know all too well, that life happens regardless of how much you design a perfect plan, with a budget, staffing and equipment infrastructure. Therefore, it is all the more the reason, to spend as much time as possible assessing the realities of your capacity and resources - not all research projects have to require funding we don’t seem to ever have enough of! Remember, we’re not beholden to the methodology; we’re in control, to determine what methodology will work for our research project.



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 agenda. The process is a wonderful opportunity to build leadership and increase strategizing capacity in your organization.

But we know capacity can be limited, so some parts may be done with the entire membership while other parts may be done solely among lead staff; some processes would be facilitated while others undertaken internally. In many cases, the roles of non-members can be specific and limited, guided by and accountable to the overall agenda embraced by the membership. In any case, it is extremely important that the role and expectations of each and every participant in the research project be clarified and mutually understood in the front end, as well as where the decision-making will lie.

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., 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. 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.)



Not all information is (seen as) equal:
Public officials or executives that represent private corporate interests often reject community knowledge as valid information, but tend not to refute 'scientifically credible' data generated/endorsed by Big Brother and Big Money institutions.

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-related factors that need to be taken into account for determining timelines and deadlines? For example, if you want to launch your research 'findings' at the next City Council hearing, then you'd want to plan the entire research project backwards from that date.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process of inspecting, cleaning, transforming, and modeling data with the goal of highlighting useful information, suggesting conclusions, and supporting decision making. If factory workers collected data on their own working conditions in the factories, for example, outsider researcher who has never worked in a factory and comes from a very different life background can look at the data and come to a totally different observation and conclusion than the factory workers would themselves. This is where perspectives play an enormous role in shaping the answer to this question: "What is the *unique* knowledge we now have from this information?" After all, your community has expertise in issues you're addressing. To be a recognized expert, you are seen as having unique knowledge relevant to solving the issue by a wider audience of stakeholders. It is in this stage your community can shape the knowledge that is theirs out of the research project. There are critical practical questions to be asked of data analysis, so you can design it appropriately. How will you conduct data analysis, and who will participate/facilitate? How many rounds of analysis would you want to do? This is a great opportunity to fully engage community members, and develop their own sense of expertise and confidence, as they can develop ownership of the data as well as the meaning and significance of it.

Data Security

A set of agreed-upon principles and specific practices under which data will be shared without compromising the safety of those to whom the data belongs - ranging from individuals indigenous Tribes who risk the exposure of sensitive information, should it ever be documented or be exposed to outside parties involved in the research project. In conflict zones, women documenting experiences of sexual violence for example must go to great length to anonymize the data collected from surveys and interviews because they could be persecuted as criticizing the regime. Information is not only sacred, it is powerful, which means it can be used for intention of outside parties irrespective of their rights to the information. Data Security and Monitoring Protocol is a tool to help ensure data security. Practical questions include: Who will have access to databases and data? Who will be allowed to use data? Where will it be stored and maintained? Who will pay the storage fees or buy the hard drive?

These are just several considerations to help you get started with planning the research project. If you'd like support in making strategic considerations to design your research project, you can always call DataCenter Impact Research Team for consulting services or research partnership support. If you get stuck - or are uncertain, call your allies or DataCenter. You don't have to shoulder the stress of making the right decision all on your own!

| SAMPLE CHECKLIST OF QUESTIONS (Adapt it, and make it your own!) | |
|---|--|
| <i>Who will do the data-gathering and knowledge-collecting process?</i> | For surveys and other projects, you need people power. This is a great opportunity to engage your membership and community. But often, in addition to members, you may consider bringing in volunteers. |
| <i>Any criteria for those who gather information or data?</i> | “Attend these two trainings, then anyone can collect...” |
| <i>How will researchers/info collectors & gatherers be trained and coordinated?</i> | 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. |
| <i>Do we need to get support and assistance of any one outside of the community?</i> | 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’ familiar enough already with sources & able to get data needed. |
| <i>Where will the data be stored, who will analyze it, and how?</i> | This is a place where you can involve members, but often, may need outside support. |
| <i>How will the analyzed information and final points made with that information be disseminated?</i> | 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 in a way they cannot ignore. |
| <i>How/where/when/will members be doing the hands-on tasks (directly involved) in the project?</i> | 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. |

Stage 3 - The Three Elements of Research: Source, Tools, and Method

Picking the right 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.

Selecting your methodology is a strategically important stage - you are thinking about what is the information, the way it is generated, packaged, and deployed, that carries political traction in the spaces where our target operates and makes decisions?

You want to spend a moment thinking about what TYPE of information tool will appear to be most 'convincing,' 'authoritative,' and 'legitimate' to your target audience. Often, policymakers and bureaucrats tend to find scientific studies more 'legitimate' than testimonies of community people who have firsthand experience with toxics in the fenceline communities. In this instance, community has the information - it's the format of 'talkstory' that gives decision-makers a good excuse to reject, on basis that 'it is not credible enough to factor into an important decision.' If this has been your experience - you may want to consider honing in on the information about living with toxics in your community - but applying 'scientific method' into the processing of that information into the deliverable.

In the Third World social movements, it is often said that participatory community research is "the documentation of the obvious." History shows that merely knowing and speaking the Truth isn't equivalent to carrying the political traction necessary to be heard.

The impact of your research will depend not just on what the research conclusion states, but the format of that information, and how 'legitimate' it is in the eyes of the target audience.



The SOURCE is the crock-pot that contains the juicy soup – er, the info – inside. In the picture, the ladle is being used as the TOOL to scoop out (this is the HOW!) that juicy info. Are you going to scoop out slowly or have little Johnny scoop it out? That's your METHOD – it designates how the Tool will get the info out of Source. And just as you scoop out the soup because you're hungry, be clear why you're extracting the 411 and what you're gonna do with it!

And remember – there are many sources, and many ways and tools to get at the right methodology for YOUR needs. We’re just putting a few out there for starters!!



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 ally, 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*
 - *Census data*
 - *Photo exhibit*
 - *Familial stories*
 - *Police record*

- The *Tool* is the extractor and can be:
- *Surveys*
 - *Recorder*
 - *Pen and Paper*
 - *Computer with internet access*
 - *Journal publication*
 - *Community Mapping Tools*
 - *Intake Form*



Tools

What tools are best to help us get the information 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 aside from survey questionnaires, pen and clipboard... such as background literature, data analysis software program, etc. Likewise, in a community mapping project, tools can vary – and be multiple – from census database, questionnaires, facility information from the EPA, etc.



Method

The method is *how* the survey will be done: will it be face-to-face, self-fill-out, over the phone, mail-in, online, etc. For community-mapping, data gathering may be online/e-mail, whereas testimonies may be collected in person, etc.

- *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*

Notes:



**TIPS for Some of the Popular Social Science Methods:
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 aim to include in the surveys – based on what you know best represents the community – i.e., 35% 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, doesn't account for undocumented community). Or you may have documentation or 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 a particular event, advertised through ethnic paper, etc.

Snowball – affected community members that participate in project or are interested in the project refers 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 really going on in your community

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



Case Study: Participatory Research in Action – Toward 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.

In 2010, Gov. Paterson of NY signed the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights into law - for the first time in US history, we have a state legislation that recognizes their work as real work and extends labor rights protection. Now a similar campaign is under way in California, Colorado and more. The International Labour Organisation also adopted a resolution to call for formal recognition of domestic work as real work in 2011, as a result of the women’s strategic and persistent lobbying as real experts and leaders of the issue.

Domestic Workers United is 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. DWU has initiated a Statewide Bill of Rights Campaign, fighting for an end to the exclusions of domestic workers in existing labor laws, minimum wage of \$14 per hour, paid vacation, sick days and holidays, notice and severance pay.

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. DWU and DataCenter are collaborating on a community documentation project to gather data on practices and issues within the industry. Using a participatory, community-based research model, the project engages domestic workers in all aspects of the research and analysis. The documentation project is being used in organizing, policy, and media work to improve conditions for domestic workers.

For further information, contact **Domestic Workers United**, www.domesticworkersunited.org.

About DataCenter

DataCenter helps build multi-issue social justice movements by providing strategic information and research capacity to organizers, community leaders and members advocating for justice and liberation for their families and future generations.

We support groups to bridge the gap between having a desire to create change, and having the actual power to effectively participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

We believe a just and sustainable future will emerge from community that has control over, access to, and capacity to produce and apply their rich knowledge to protect and advance community interests.

MISSION STATEMENT

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.

CORE APPROACHES:

Our approach involves making information accessible, transferring research skills, supporting community-led documentation, and legitimizing community knowledge in institutional decision-making that impact their lives and communities.

Research, Analysis, & Campaign Strategizing Support

1. We provide customized strategic information support through a process of extensive dialogue that begins with helping groups identify the specific research inquiries necessary to advance their goals.
2. While commodification and commercialization of information continue to mark the era of modern technology, we access proprietary databases to level the playing field between communities and well-financed policymakers and other targets.
3. We synthesize and present intelligence and analysis in a language and format that is accessible to the constituency group.

Training & Consultation

1. We develop research & campaign strategy curricula, facilitate research and strategizing, and publish "how-to" research toolkits, relying on popular education methodology and engaging diverse interests and needs.
2. We invest significant time on development partnerships with those groups interested in skills transfer. This way, we are better able to understand the cultural, political, and social elements that inform what tools to develop, how to deploy training modules, as well as how to assist in application of those tools in the hands of the community.

For more information about our programs, please visit our website at www.datacenter.org or contact us! Jay Donahue, Program Manager, at jay@datacenter.org!