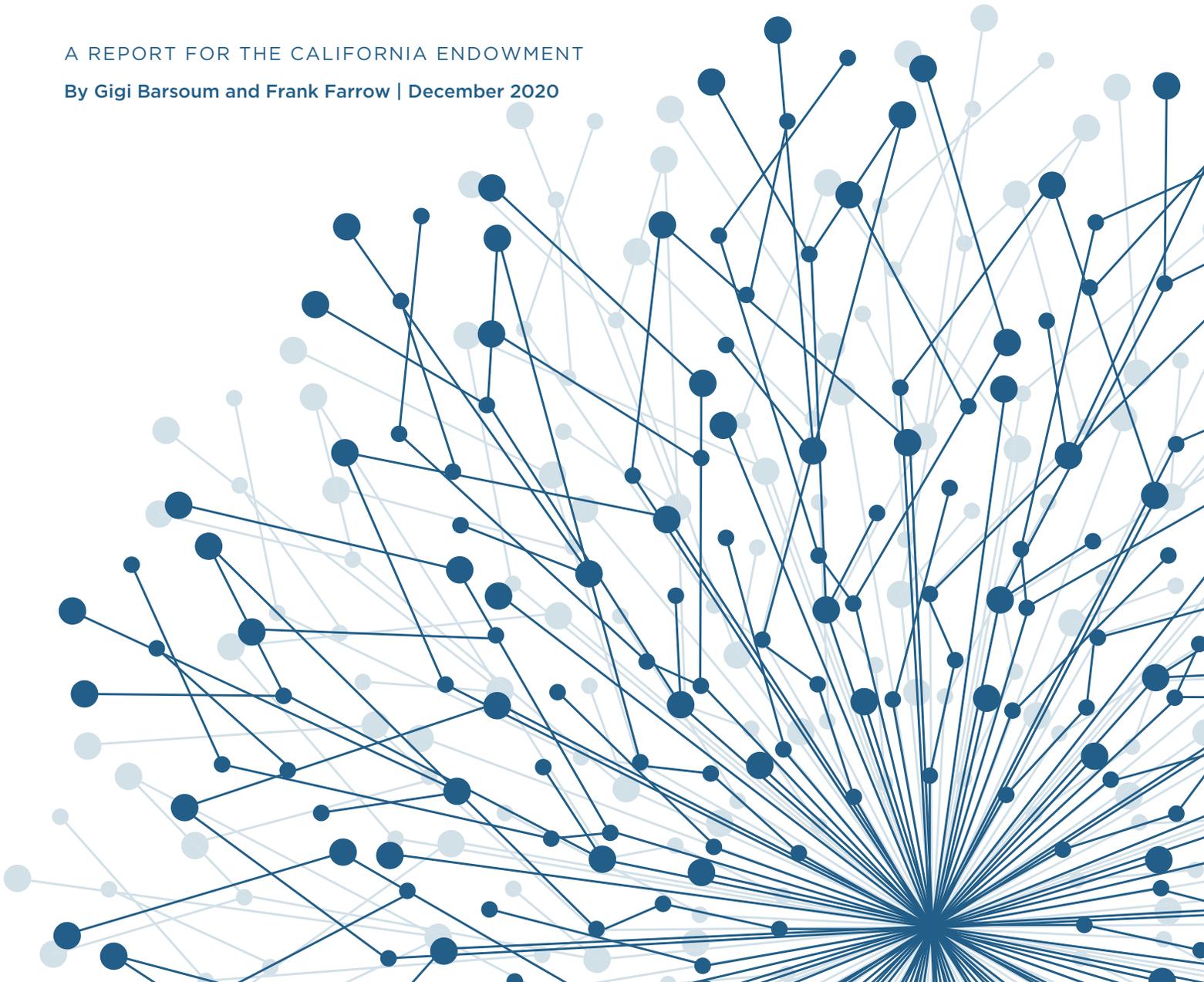


# AN ECOSYSTEM TO BUILD POWER AND ADVANCE HEALTH AND RACIAL EQUITY

## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

A REPORT FOR THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: AN ECOSYSTEM TO BUILD POWER AND ADVANCE HEALTH EQUITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE

Since its inception in 1996, The California Endowment (TCE) has sought ever greater impact in improving the health and lives of all Californians, with an intense focus on the state's populations and communities of color experiencing low income. The foundation's approach has evolved from supporting programmatic efforts to a focus on communities, policy change, and systems reform, to now an expanded focus on power-building as a central strategy to advance health equity and racial justice. This evolution reflects the foundation's increased understanding of the inextricable link between health and justice. And, this understanding informs the current moment in the foundation's history, which builds upon the decade of experience with Building Healthy Communities (BHC).

Over the course of BHC, local leaders in 14 communities along with regional and state-level partners achieved hundreds of policy and systems changes as well as other tangible benefits for communities. Understanding the ecosystem of people and organizations that achieved those “wins,” and the many strategies that contributed to eventual successes as well as losses along the way, is critically important as the foundation moves forward with plans to advance health equity and racial justice through building grassroots power.

The *power ecosystem* is the focus of this evaluation report—the network of organizations, relationships, and infrastructure necessary to ensure that people who have been historically marginalized have voice and agency to create an inclusive democracy and close health equity gaps.

The evaluation uses a conceptual framework focused on power-building and a multi-case design that documented the collaborative work of community members and a range of local, state, and national organizations to achieve policy changes, system improvements, or electoral goals.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS: THE THEORY UNDERLYING THE POWER ECOSYSTEM

This report focuses on the power ecosystem and how it operates and builds power through six ecosystem elements:

1. **Community and grassroots organizing centered.** The centering of people most affected by inequities through grassroots organizing.
2. **Shared values and analysis.** The shared beliefs and principles, grounded in equity and racial justice, that help individuals and organizations in the ecosystem to coalesce and take action, and that inform the underlying analysis of root causes and structural inequities.
3. **Relationships.** The network of individual and organizational “social ties” that make up the ecosystem. These relationships vary in purpose, intensity, strength, and formality. They evolve with time, collaboration, and trust to move from information sharing to alignment on shared interests and opportunities, to collective action on shared goals.
4. **Infrastructure.** The forums, coalitions, alliances, and communications channels that facilitate information sharing, collaboration, and joint action.



- 5. Composition.** The organizational and population makeup and diversity of the power ecosystem (e.g., grassroots organizing groups, policy advocates, legal advocates, research and communications organizations, foundations, and others).
- 6. Capacities.** The skills, knowledge, and resources needed in the power ecosystem to develop and implement electoral, legislative, and systems change strategies, and ultimately, to build power. The seven capacities are: 1) organizing, 2) advocacy, 3) civic engagement and electoral work, 4) governing, 5) narrative, 6) adaptation, and 7) development and support.

## FINDINGS

The evaluation answers three primary questions about the power ecosystem:

### 1. How do organizations in the ecosystem come together and what sustains the relationships that are formed?

*Shared values and analysis* often brought organizations together, aligning them around a shared purpose and creating a shared identity. These values were grounded broadly in equity and justice, allowing for a range of perspectives and solutions. A shared analysis of problems facilitated the articulation of root causes of structural inequities as well as common points of oppression, allowing ecosystem partners to expand their coalitions to reflect the various impacted populations.

Functionally, organizations came together through the *infrastructure in the ecosystem*, e.g., alliances, intermediary organizations, coalitions, tables, and local BHC initiatives. These forums provided opportunities to share information, connect, collaborate, and coordinate action, strategies and campaigns.

Organizations also aligned on *community priorities*. Long-standing community issues were the focal point of collaboration across many of the cases. The engagement and expertise of community leaders and grassroots organizing groups in these campaigns centered organizing in the advocacy and helped mitigate tensions and power dynamics among other partners.

Collaboration was catalyzed or expedited because of *political conditions, tactical needs, and windows of opportunity*, as organizations came together to protect and defend impacted communities in a hostile political environment and, conversely, to advance the goals and interests of those communities when a window of opportunity opened.

There are a range of *relationships* in the power ecosystem that reflect varying degrees of alignment, trust, and purpose. Many collaborative efforts are based on short term partnerships and are *transactional* in nature, limited to an exchange of resources or information. *Transformational* relationships were also observed, and these helped to sustain and strengthen the ecosystem. Transformational relationships are deeper, mutually beneficial alliances, formed around shared interests and aligned purpose and built through collaboration and trust.



## 2. What role do grassroots organizing groups play in the power ecosystem and how are they centered?

The structural and relational centering of impacted communities and organizing groups in the power ecosystem institutionalizes their primacy in addressing structural inequities and building power relative to other organizations. However, this centering does not happen magically. The cases examined for this evaluation demonstrate that organizing groups were centered within the ecosystem for philosophical and values-based reasons, as well as for functional and strategic reasons.

Grassroots organizing groups have multiple and critical characteristics that made them vital and central assets in the ecosystem. They were *hubs with rich community-based networks*. Because of the nature of their work, grassroots organizing groups tended to be *multi-issue and multi-racial*, based on the communities in which they were organizing. Some organizing groups also *extended across regions*, thereby expanding and connecting the communities that were organized. Unlike base building organizations, organizing groups *develop leaders and activists*, which power the ecosystem in the long term.

Organizing groups are central to the power ecosystem because they build power through leadership development and organizing of impacted communities. Organizing groups bring unique depth to policy and systems change work, as the people most impacted are the most informed advocates on systems of oppression. In the documented cases, many organizing groups were also sophisticated multi-strategy organizations that engaged in legislative advocacy on the city, county, and state levels, and were deeply involved in systems change.

## 3. How does the ecosystem use its capacities to harness wins and losses to build power?

Many of the cases focused on legislative changes on the local and state levels. The wins were significant, but the ability of the ecosystem to translate wins and losses towards further progress required specific electoral, governing, and adaptive capacities. Electoral capacity provides muscle to advocacy and teeth to accountability work.<sup>1</sup>

Governing capacity institutionalizes the role of communities in the governing process and builds community power within the system to implement policies, reform the system, and set the agenda.

Additionally, adaptive capacity—the ecosystem’s ability to anticipate, absorb, and respond to external conditions and exogenous shocks—was critical to its ability to leverage and build on losses. All these capacities emerged as critical to the ecosystem’s ability to build power.

<sup>1</sup> The California Endowment did not provide resources for partisan electoral activities. Foundation resources used for civic engagement were limited to 501(c)(3) non-partisan voter education and get out the vote.



## TCE'S ROLE AS AN ECOSYSTEM PARTNER

TCE is an integral part of the ecosystem's web of people, organizations, coalitions, alliances, and networks. It is one partner among many, with unusual and unique resources and influence. The foundation does not stand apart from the ecosystem, nor does it "shape" or somehow "manage" it. To build power, the foundation works in support of affected communities and the grassroots groups that organize them.

The foundation's role varied across the cases, based on political context, ecosystem capacity and readiness, the history of advocacy around the issue, and "where" the policy issue was on TCE's agenda, TCE showed up in the ecosystem in different ways, reflecting a continuum of "directiveness" ranging from playing a visible, highly strategic leadership role to being a supportive partner responding to organizations' needs. The nature of TCE's role often changed over time in response to evolving conditions.

TCE helped create important infrastructure in the ecosystem, often through the convening power of local BHC initiatives as well as by supporting coalitions and alliances. The foundation also played a vital role in creating conditions that support leadership development, particularly youth leadership.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE SUPPORT OF THE POWER ECOSYSTEM

Going forward, the foundation must come to terms with the impact of its resources, and the process for distributing those resources, on the ecosystem. How the foundation supports various actors within the ecosystem has implications for alignment among organizations, mitigating power dynamics, and centering grassroots organizing groups. The evaluation's findings suggest several ways that TCE can best support the power ecosystem in the future.

**1. Act as an ecosystem partner.** It is important for TCE to view itself as an ecosystem partner rather than in a role separate or apart from the ecosystem. A core part of that work will be continuing to acknowledge TCE's outsized power relative to other ecosystem partners and using that power in service to the communities directly experiencing inequities who are centered in the ecosystem. By prioritizing and supporting grassroots organizing, the foundation can help center those organizations and the impacted communities they organize.

As TCE considers how best to support the ecosystem, it will be essential to collaborate with other foundations and funders. TCE's leadership in organizing multi-year, multi-foundation funding for the ecosystem is an important way for the ecosystem to act on the scale needed to advance ambitious shared goals for health equity and racial justice.

**2. Use an ecosystem approach to break down issue silos and address root causes of inequities.**

Communities of color are and have historically been impacted by multiple interacting racial, environmental, social, political, and economic assaults. This is the intersectional experience and "complexity of compoundedness" that Kimberlé Crenshaw describes.<sup>1</sup> Because the power ecosystem is a multi-issue, multi-region, multi-constituency, and multi-racial network, a grantmaking approach grounded in understanding the ecosystem can move beyond siloed issues to support the organizations that are working at the intersections of multiple inequities and addressing their root causes.

**3. Champion grassroots power.** TCE and partners have been successful in the past decade in giving grassroots power-building more visibility, influence, and credibility.<sup>2</sup> However, if the power ecosystem is to grow and have greater impact, TCE and other funders will have to maintain this commitment—and supercharge it. Two steps seem critical.

First, greater investment in organizing will be needed. Organizing groups are not funded at the same levels as advocacy organizations—yet many organizing groups are now involved in developing and advocating for policy and systems changes in addition to organizing and base building. They should be equitably funded for this role. Second, within the commitment to grassroots organizing, special attention must be given to the pipeline of youth organizing and leadership development. Statewide and regional alliances and networks of youth organizers are capable intermediaries, poised to support the growth of this field.

**4. Build long-term capacity.** An important lesson from BHC and the foundation’s long history in funding policy advocacy is that this work requires long-term investment in capacity. The cases analyzed for this report amplify this message: each policy advocacy “arc” took several years in the best case; in one instance, the arc took a decade. Long-term, multi-year support enables organizations to be nimble, adaptable, and ready to take advantage of windows of opportunity when they arise.

However, the power ecosystem’s capacity varies by region and by issue. The foundation’s investments in surveys and network mapping provide useful tools to inform its understanding of what the power ecosystem’s capacity strengths and gaps are based on geography and issue. Further, the power ecosystem elements described in this report include a description of the seven capacities the ecosystem needs to engage in policy, systems change, electoral and governing work, and ultimately to build power. This categorization can guide TCE’s approach to capacity building on an ecosystem rather than an organizational level, and a strategic rather than a tactical level.

**5. Accelerate learning for strategy.** TCE is well-positioned to contribute applied knowledge about power-building and, specifically, the characteristics, functions, and impact of the power ecosystem. Designing TCE’s future learning agenda to benefit the power ecosystem would make it doubly valuable, i.e., helping ecosystem partners inform strategy while simultaneously building the philanthropic field’s knowledge. Specifically, many organizing groups use power mapping to collect and apply information and data to develop strategy. The foundation could develop a learning agenda in collaboration with members of the power ecosystem so that evaluation is an additional learning and strategy tool for the ecosystem, as well as the foundation.



# A COMPANION REPORT BY THE CENTER FOR EVALUATION INNOVATION (CEI)

## ADVOCACY THAT BUILDS POWER: TRANSFORMING POLICIES AND SYSTEMS FOR HEALTH AND RACIAL EQUITY

The research for this report was conducted in close coordination with research by the Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI). The resulting reports are companion pieces, and readers are urged to review and learn from both.

The CSSP and CEI reports base their analysis on a common power building framework; they draw on the same case documentation (summarized in Appendix A); and the two reports have complementary findings.

This report focuses on the development, capacities, and methods of operation of the power building ecosystem—in effect, how power is built and exercised. The CEI report focuses on advocacy that builds power and what distinguishes it from advocacy that is focused only on a policy win. The CEI report utilizes the power building framework to describe how power grew or expanded across the cases and then describes the characteristics of advocacy that supported expansion of power:

- Advocacy that builds power centers impacted communities through grassroots organizing. Organizers may not always lead the strategy but organizing is centered in the strategy. This frame “flips the script” on commonly held perceptions about the relationship between organizing and advocacy.
- Advocacy that builds power is grounded in the problems and solutions that are identified by communities who experience them firsthand. When communities and impacted people are centered, problem definition is more likely to link back to root causes, and transformational goals to achieve structural change are more likely to be prioritized.
- Advocacy that builds power is cyclical and builds on and leverages incremental gains towards transformational goals.
- Advocacy that builds power, particularly across multiple advocacy cycles, pays attention to the deeper narratives that stories help to illustrate. Grassroots organizing groups grounded narratives in the experiences of those impacted making them relatable and accessible while challenging dominant frames.

The CEI report concludes that, for advocacy that centers communities and is grounded in equity and an organizing strategy, success has to be measured by whether power has been built.

