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# DEFYING DISPLACEMENT: ORGANIZING FOR A BEAUTIFUL LIFE IN FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA

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## Abstract

This article is a reflection on practice from anthropologists and community organizers working together to affect policy change related to health. In particular, we describe a successful organizing effort to oppose the displacement of low-income residents of a mobile home park. We argue that this victory was in part because of the approach of key members of the organizing coalition, who viewed the work of policy change as a process of leadership development and community collaboration rather than top-down advocacy. Here, we show the ways that an anthropological approach to policy change was built into the work of the coalition, intersecting with community organizing theories and methods. This has led to political change and an ongoing process of coalition-building and leadership development that has the potential to change public discussion and decision making on health-related issues for years to come.

**Key words:** community organizing, policy change, immigrant health

## Introduction

In July 2014, the city council chambers in Flagstaff, Arizona, were packed with people opposing the development of a new, 650-bed student-housing complex. The project would

have displaced 50 low-income families, approximately 90 percent of them undocumented immigrants, from their mobile home neighborhood. An unusually

intense organizing efforts could have played out much differently. It could have been a tussle between mobile home park residents looking for compensation

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After almost a year of organizing, the residents and the coalition celebrated victory.... Before city council had a chance to make the final call, representatives of the development company withdrew their proposal entirely. The residents would be allowed to stay in their homes, at least for now.... We argue that this success occurred in part because of the approach of key members of the organizing coalition, who viewed the work of policy change as a process of leadership development and community collaboration rather than top-down advocacy.”

broad coalition of community groups including a Community Health Center (CHC) outreach project and community organization (both led by practicing anthropologists), neighborhood association, environmental advocacy group, and student activists all backed residents of the threatened neighborhood.

After almost a year of organizing, the residents and the coalition celebrated victory. At that July meeting, the Flagstaff Planning and Zoning Commission voted unanimously NOT to support the zoning change needed for the project to advance. Before city council had a chance to make the final call, representatives of the development company withdrew their proposal entirely. The residents would be allowed to stay in their homes, at least for now.

for displacement and those willing to settle only for rejection of the development. Planning Commissioners could have dismissed opposition as anti-growth environmentalists and student radicals. Spanish-speaking residents could have been represented by English-speaking community members who were unaware of the complexities of the lives of immigrants in Flagstaff. Though these scenarios threatened to surface at various moments, they did not come to pass.

We argue that this success occurred in part because of the approach of key members of the organizing coalition, who viewed the work of policy change as a process of leadership development and community collaboration rather than top-down advocacy. Here, we show the way that this approach

to policy change was built into the work of the coalition, intersecting with community organizing theories and methods, leading to an ongoing process of coalition-building and leadership development that has the potential to change public discussion and decision making for years to come.

grant proposal designed to implement programs, and build local leadership. Anthropologists from NAU provided intensive training to community researchers, who gathered a wealth of rich data. The team developed strategies for organizing residents that addressed anthropological critiques of economic

a healthy community. Participation of neighborhood residents and an anthropological perspective led to a broad focus on health and wellness which was reflected in the project's name, in Spanish, English, and Navajo: *Hermosa Vida—A Beautiful Life—Nizhóní Iiná*. The embedded anthropological perspective began with the research effort led by Hardy and continued with the hiring of Program Coordinator Chelsea Kuiper, who was trained in applied anthropology and organizing.

Community members who were not health care providers discussed fatigue at continued health programming delivered by people who were removed from their community. In response, *Hermosa Vida* leadership prioritized funding a position for a Community Health Worker (CHW) and a Community Organizer (CO). By 2013, when the mobile home park issue arose, *Hermosa Vida* employed a CO, Michelle Thomas, and a CHW, Roxana De Niz. Their activities expanded into additional areas of the city with vulnerable populations, such as La Plaza Vieja neighborhood where this mobile home park was located.

*Hermosa Vida*'s period of peak activity began in 2010 with the collaboration of multiple local partners. The CHW and school staff organized in-school health clinics, fresh produce distribution, Zumba classes, and educational, participatory family nights. Collaboration with Northern Arizona Interfaith Council (NAIC) provided leadership and organizing training for residents. One of the strategies identified through the RARE process was the establishment of a policy coalition. *Hermosa Vida*'s CO established this coalition, drawing participation from social service professionals, less so from neighborhood leaders.

Policy work for *Hermosa Vida* developed as an effort to inspire social change beyond legal or political changes, including changes in community processes. This broad view of policy change guided the development of a tool to guide and measure policy change processes and outcomes called the Policy Coalition Evaluation

“ Cultural anthropology and broad-based organizing have much in common. Methodologically, ethnographic research and organizing often proceed along parallel tracks and perhaps even stand to learn from each other. Anthropologists have long accepted the notion that an interview is more than an objective collection of information about the participant's life; rather, it is a dialogue, often between two individuals of unequal power positions.”

### Framing Health

Several key institutional players were involved in the mobile home battle. At the fore was *Hermosa Vida*, a project originally designed to address childhood health problems and housed at a CHC, North Country HealthCare. The project began with a planning and research phase. During this time, the group conducted a comprehensive community assessment led by Lisa Hardy, a medical anthropologist and faculty member at Northern Arizona University (NAU). The group implemented a RARE (Rapid Assessment, Response, and Evaluation) approach to identify relevant health priorities for neighborhood residents and the social contexts that either supported or deterred health (Social Determinants of Health). These methods also helped the CHC staff ensure the local feasibility and relevance of their work, shape a new

development projects as interfering with existing local efforts for community improvement. Instead, the conceptual groundwork of this project developed through multiple meetings with neighborhood residents, to support existing local leadership. The team collaborated with the Sunnyside Neighborhood Association, for instance, whose members had been working toward change in the area for many years.

Community-engaged work revealed that neighborhood assets included open parks and gardens, locally owned businesses, and strong family and friend relationships. Challenges to health included inability to use public outdoor spaces due to fear or discomfort, economic struggles of underemployment and families working multiple jobs with low pay, and immigration policy. They prioritized safety and mobility, ongoing community projects, and policy change as critical to the maintenance of

Tool (PCET) (Hardy et al. 2013). Use of the PCET helped the Hermosa Vida team identify early on that a few key coalition members were leading too much of the project. This led to a renewed focus on engagement of neighborhood residents.

### Organizing for Policy Change

The successes of Hermosa Vida were connected to the intertwining of anthropological assessment and community organizing, which ebbed and flowed throughout the project. Organizing became a prominent driving force in policy action through NAIC, a broad-based organization affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) comprised of congregations, schools, and nonprofits working for systemic change to improve conditions for families. De Niz served as co-chairperson of NAIC while fulfilling her role as Hermosa Vida CHW. Leah Mundell, also an anthropologist, served as NAIC's director of organizing. NAIC follows a cycle of organizing that flows from one-on-one and small group meetings, to research actions, to public actions and evaluation. This model rests on the premise that organized people can confront traditional power structures by developing relationships of trust that cross lines of race, class, and religion, also known as relational power. Mundell, De Niz, Thomas, and Kuiper were trained in this organizing model and brought these priorities to their work.

Cultural anthropology and broad-based organizing have much in common. Methodologically, ethnographic research and organizing often proceed along parallel tracks and perhaps even stand to learn from each other. Anthropologists have long accepted the notion that an interview is more than an objective collection of information about the participant's life; rather, it is a dialogue, often between two individuals of unequal power positions. Organizers call this interaction a relational meeting. Organizers use these meetings to collect information, build relationships, and agitate one another to act. Should engaged anthropologists more actively

consider how their methods of inquiry agitate their subjects? This is indeed a fruitful area of discussion for activist and advocate anthropologists interrogating traditional fieldwork methods.

Theories of power and social change are in continued dialogue between anthropologists and community organizers. Notable points of agreement across the two "disciplines" include:

- Valuing local experience and understanding the production of "expert knowledge" is a political process.
- Understanding power is central to any cultural or social analysis and change, rather than a source of fear or corruption.
- Understanding the self not as an isolated individual but rather a person enmeshed in a social context. IAF teaches leaders to identify their own and others' self-interest, meaning interests produced through social and institutional relationships.

These theories form an integral part of NAIC's organizing trainings and informed much of De Niz, Kuiper, Thomas, and Mundell's work, just as anthropological methods and theory informed much of the Hermosa Vida grant. Together, these theoretical underpinnings led to the formation of a project that could successfully build leadership for policy change.

### Policy Change through Leadership Development

In the fall of 2013, Hermosa Vida's CHW, De Niz, learned from residents of a mobile home park in La Plaza Vieja neighborhood about the proposed relocation and development of the area. The park housed about 50 low-income families, primarily undocumented Mexican immigrants with United States citizen children but also including several Native American, White, and Mexican-American families. In a neighborhood meeting, a representative from the development company informed residents that their receipt of eviction notices would be imminent. Mobile homes were mostly owner-occupied

on leased land. Arizona law prohibited park owners from accepting trailers built before 1977, preventing most owners from moving homes to another location and nullifying their investment. Residents who paid around \$300/month for their home sites would be forced to pay rates of over \$1,000/per month for a two-bedroom apartment, and many could not submit to a required credit check because they did not have social security cards, which further reduced their housing options.

Hermosa Vida's CO found that rezoning and city council approval would be required before the development company could move ahead. A key environmental advocacy group, the neighborhood association, local Dream Act-ivists, and student organizing groups also joined the efforts to halt the project. Hermosa Vida's efforts became two pronged: while the CO worked to manage the fast-growing coalition of opponents to the development, the CHW supported residents in developing leadership, clarifying demands, and building community solidarity.

De Niz approached her work through her training in broad-based organizing, which focuses on building relational power by tapping into the self-interest of individuals and institutions. Hermosa Vida's community-centered approach to policy change allowed De Niz flexibility to develop local leadership. Hermosa Vida's staff immediately interpreted the displacement as a health issue: the threat of eviction caused widespread anxiety and was of special concern for those with chronic health problems who might be forced to move far from services. Thomas secured support for a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) for the displacement of the mobile home residents. De Niz intensified her leadership development efforts at least once a week for 10 months, working with residents through relational and house meetings, research actions, and public actions to ensure the integration of their stories and concerns in organizing and policy work.

Leaders among the park residents began to emerge. At one residents' meeting several months after the



development plans were announced, a woman announced that she wanted to stay and fight, even though her husband was ready to give up and move out. At city council meetings, two young women became known for their passionate and articulate defense of their right to stay. Speaking in Spanish, with an interpreter first provided by Hermosa Vida and NAIC and then by the city, they became more and more confident orators. Though they had no previous experience with civic processes, residents stood multiple times before city council to share their stories and urge council to reject the proposal. Hermosa Vida's CO and CHW also helped to make an opaque process of public engagement more accessible to those who had not attended meetings before, advising them on where to sit, how to fill out comment cards, and the most successful ways of approaching local political leaders.

The inclusion of Spanish speakers in public engagement was crucial for policy change for the mobile home park as well as the status of Latinos in Arizona. Flagstaff has been a fairly welcoming community to immigrants; however, the passage of omnibus immigration bill SB1070 impacted the state as a whole. In fact, during the initial RARE assessment, Hermosa Vida researchers found that immigration policy restricted mobility for anyone who either was undocumented or had undocumented friends and family members (Hardy et al. 2012). During the same year that the mobile home issue was being discussed, the city council passed a resolution in support of comprehensive immigration reform, and the police chief reaffirmed that immigration enforcement was not a priority for his department, though police were still bound by state laws to adhere to the fallout of SB1070. Most undocumented residents of the mobile home park would not have been eligible for state relocation assistance, but the development company representative promised that they would make up the difference with private funds. Still, increased enforcement of employer sanctions made it more and more difficult for undocumented immigrants to work, and SB1070 created a climate of

fear that kept immigrants out of public spaces.

Yet, the organizing process created an opportunity for immigrants to step into the public sphere. It brought forth individuals as community leaders and changed the neighborhood. As one leader, Gabby Vasquez, explained in an in-depth interview conducted by De Niz in January 2015, "Before this situation, we didn't really know each other as neighbors. Yes, we would say 'Hi' to each other on the street but not until this happened did we actually get to know each other in ways that continue 'til today." Another interviewed leader, Miriam Cuatle Meza, noted, "The biggest impact: I meet with neighbors, the people around me, I know how many kids they have, everyone shares information and resources, going to city council. [I] know my people, my community." This, too, was policy change: neighborhood solidarity that was mobilized and could be activated again when and if the time came.

### Policy Change through Community Collaboration

Meanwhile, Thomas and other local leaders organized a broad spectrum of allies in opposition to the development proposal. Priorities differed: neighborhood preservation, immigrant rights, university responsibility for off-campus student housing, availability of affordable housing, and concerns about the city's planning and zoning trends in general. Diversity strengthened the coalition in numbers, perspective, and connections, and required continual negotiation. Concerns surfaced about representation and the need for resident-guided coalition actions. The language barrier between mobile home park residents and the majority of the coalition members created a hurdle for communication and participation. Time commitment also presented a challenge, as many coalition members convened meetings during "working" hours, while residents who participated did so in addition to their jobs. Finally, there was the challenge of strategy, with continuing questions about

whether the group should oppose the development entirely or push for just compensation for residents who might be forced to move in the long run anyway. Ultimately, the residents themselves resolved this question, assuring coalition members they were willing to take the risk of opposing development, even if it meant they might lose this opportunity to leverage displacement compensation.

### Discussion

Even if we understand policy change in the most traditional sense, the work of this coalition was a success. The proposed development was stopped in its tracks, and the mobile home park residents kept their homes. City council is now considering an ordinance, for which the coalition advocated, that would protect residents, specifically tenants and trailer owners in mobile home parks, in the event of displacement due to future development. Participation of Spanish speakers in the public comment period pushed the council to invest in interpretation equipment and an interpreter.

A localized problem was reframed in terms of broad community concerns about the role of the university in the community, availability of affordable housing, and inclusion of immigrants as civic actors in our community. Once fragmented and conflicted coalition members continued to collaborate, creating a new community-driven plan for the neighborhood, pressuring the city and county to develop a long-term plan for off-campus student housing, and helping to elect city council members who supported organizing efforts. Many community members moved from perceived objects of city/business policy to active participants in policymaking. As Vasquez explained, "We need to believe in our right to live in this community with dignity. We must value ourselves and show others that they should value us too."

Advocates and allies might have been able to stop the proposed development without the participation of community members, though they would

not have built long-term individual leadership and institutional coalitions leading to broader organizing for social justice. An approach to policy change as a process of leadership development and relational power led to short-term victory *and* the possibility of long-term collaboration. This experience points to several key lessons learned for anthropologists, organizers, and public health advocates.

*Moving toward interdisciplinary collaboration:* Anthropologists and organizers are protective of disciplinary boundaries, yet we have shown here the ways that organizing might be understood as engaged ethnographic practice. Overlaps and commonalities deserve to be explored further, to facilitate greater collaboration across research and organizing settings, and to develop new ways of maximizing both approaches toward policy change. For Hermosa Vida, early research efforts were critical in developing a staff and leadership structure that could facilitate organizing efforts.

*Understanding policy change as process:* External funders or boards often use changes in laws and rules as measures of policy change. Anthropologists and organizers can help validate the process of building leadership and collaborations as a measurable element of policy change. In the case of Hermosa Vida, the immediate victory was the defeat of a development company's proposal to destroy an existing neighborhood, while the new partnerships that developed over the issue created long-term change in local policy work.

## Conclusion

The collaboration of anthropologists and organizers has the potential to assist in developing a common understanding of policy and policy change in coalition work, enable coalitions to make midcourse corrections for policy efforts, and engage multi-sectoral partnerships. It is within the work of these collaborations that policy work may expand beyond obscure, closed-door decisions into the light of community negotiations for health equity.

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