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# **Bridging the Gap Between Environmental and Social Justice**

**COURSE**

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**PALS**

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Partnership for  
Action Learning  
in Sustainability



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## **ABOUT PALS**

The Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability (PALS) is administered by the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD). It is a campus-wide initiative that harnesses the expertise of UMD faculty and the energy and ingenuity of UMD students to help Maryland communities become more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. PALS is designed to provide innovative, low-cost assistance to local governments while creating real-world problem-solving experiences for University of Maryland graduate and undergraduate students.

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# Executive Summary

Defensores de la Cuenca, a Latin@-led environmental justice nonprofit, works to empower Latino youth in the environmental job sector, create new green space through tree planting initiatives, and inform the community about the efforts to preserve the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Despite their work, social issues and determinants such as poverty, trash, and built environment have impeded the success of their long-term organizational goals. To combat these issues, Defensores wants to enter the realm of social justice while remaining an environmental justice organization centered on Latino advocacy.

This paper aims to aid that entrance by exploring three key themes: the intersection of environmental and social justice, how social justice can engage Latin@s, and how environmental and social justice can converge to serve Latin@s.

Using a literature review as well as case studies, the research made four key analytical findings: intersections of social and environmental justice, interorganizational movements, identifying issues that matter, and mobilizing Latin@s. From these findings, six recommendations were created for Defensores de la Cuenca: find a specific area of interest, connect current environmental and

social priorities, understand the values of the Latin@ community, identify specific ways the Latin@ community is affected by the chosen issues, find alliances with like-minded organizations, and make initial goals small. By following these recommendations, Defensores de la Cuenca will be better equipped in their venture into social justice work paired with their environmental justice work.

# INTRODUCTION

Defensores de la Cuenca, a Latin@-led environmental justice nonprofit, has become an important organization for their community. Unlike many environmental organizations, Defensores has carved out an identity as an organization focused on engaging the Latin@ community, which is overlooked within the environmental organizing space. They provide opportunities to Latin@ youth to explore environmental jobs, educate volunteers about issues facing the Chesapeake Bay watershed, and create tree planting projects. Most importantly, they create a sense of community and friendliness to the people they serve.

The non-profit finds itself in a difficult situation – similar to that facing other similar organizations. While their environmental work successfully serves their community, they also find many conditions that impact that success. Crime, homelessness, poverty, and neglect all happen outside the Defensores' control, and blunt many of their effort's long-term effects. Given this, Defensores wants to move into the realm of social justice, pursuing the social determinants of the problems currently outside their scope.

This is no small undertaking; involving new problem areas within an already existing focus has drawbacks. Additionally, any new focus needs to be targeted to Latin@s who, as previously stated, are already underserved by mainstream organizations. This expanded effort will be more difficult than just finding the issues that speak to and are covered by mainstream social and environmental organizations, because those groups cater overwhelmingly to a white audience. Finding specific examples of Latin@ engagement will help inform the actions Defensores can take as they enter a new form of activism.

To better understand how to make this transition, this paper's research works with three focuses in mind: what is the intersection between social and environmental justice, how can social justice effectively involve Latin@s, and how can social and environmental justice collaborate effectively serve and engage the Latin@ community?

# METHODOLOGY

This paper works through several key elements to address the issues facing Defensores de la Cuenca. First, a literature review into the three tenets identified: the intersection between social and environmental justice, how social justice movements can effectively involve Latin@s, and how social and environmental justice collaborate effectively to serve and engage the Latin@ community. Literature reviews of academic sources scan the breadth of literature on the topic; it will also show what is less obvious in the literature that will have to

be analyzed in later sections. These sources include studies, academic research, historical narratives, and theory discussions.

Second is a case study analysis of two different social movements led by Latin@ organizations. This is useful to see the strategies and causes have been successful in drawing Latin@ support, and it can support a direct analysis of information from the literature into specific examples, taking the academic research into actionable social activism strategies. The report compiles sources that tell of the story of examined social movements.

Third is an analysis of the key points identified in the literature review and case studies to determine commonalities that can lead to recommendations for Defensores to both consider and act on when exploring opportunities for moving into the social justice realm while remaining an environmental justice organization.

Finally, the report includes an informal needs assessment of the elements needed for a successful venture into social justice. This is key, because while this report cannot detail all the actions that Defensores can take, it will lead to an easier discussion about what they should do and expect.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## **PURPOSE OF LITERATURE REVIEW**

Defensores' long-term goal to become a social justice-minded organization is admirable. However, before we can interrogate the ways they can

enter the realm of social activism, we must first understand three critical questions that will shape that new goal.

First, how do environmental and social activism intersect? While the fields have common goals to improve the world around us, they also involve different stakeholders, policy goals, and challenges. Discovering those differences and commonalities, and melding their objectives, can create an effective plan for Defensores.

Second, we need to examine what social activism within Latin@ communities looks like. As Defensores is a Latin@ run and staffed organization, simply looking at the broad strokes of environmental and social activism isn't enough. A generalized approach would skew overwhelmingly to a white audience, who don't share the same interests or challenges as the Latin@s served by Defensores. We need to understand the policies most likely to engage Defensores' base, what strategies will empower their volunteers, and which challenges are unique within the history of Latin@ activism. It is important because most nonprofit action doesn't center the voices of Latin@ Americans.

After we understand these aspects, the third factor, intersecting environmental and social activism in the Latin@ community, comes into full view. Using the research into how social and environmental activism can come together to serve Latino Americans, but also how it can engage them to pursue the ideals Defensores hopes to exemplify. With all three factors of this literature review in place, we will be positioned to look more deeply into the topic.

## **HOW DO ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM INTERSECT?**

### **“The critical intersection of environmental and social justice: a commentary”**

In this commentary by Leslie Solomonian and Erica Di Ruggerio, environmental and social activism intertwine due to the degradation of the environment and the oppression of minoritized groups working hand-in-hand. The authors understand this phenomenon within the frame of global concentration of wealth and privilege into the hands of a few at the expense of the majority; yet those holding concentrated wealth and privilege deem their exploits as rational because those who are harmed are viewed as “lesser” (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021).

This is necessary in the framework of “progress” for western society: about 20-30% of the global population has experienced an increase in health and quality of life in the twentieth century to the detriment of others, commonly known

as the “global south” (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021). We’ve seen what this looks like in terms of ecological disasters: famine, drought, and man-made disasters are happening at an increased rate as pollution and environmental exploitation.

These ecological disasters tend to happen more often in countries and regions with few social resources. The lack of social resources is compounded by civil wars, genocides, and marginalization faced by those communities (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021). This is mostly the experience in Africa, Asia, and South America, yet even within the “global north” systemic failures of safety and resources remain for those outside of the dominant group of mainly white, capital owners (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021).

These conditions have continued in the twenty-first century, with the further exploitation and commodification of resources and people with a history of being oppressed continuing in the name of maintaining global progress (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021). The few benefit in part due to the subjugation of the masses.

Solomonian and Di Ruggerio point out that it would be wrong to assume we’ve reached critical mass and can’t hope to create a new paradigm. Past efforts at change have been commodified into the interests of capital-owners, but one reason this has happened is the lack of recognition that environmental and social justice are one and the same.

The authors use an example of the failure to maximize the good within a policy action: increasing the efficiency of farming at the expense of the local ecosystem and farm workers is just as bad as a system that fails to improve farming at all (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021).

Another challenge to systemic change is that it requires those with privilege who benefit from the system to commit to the change movement. But those with privilege have little reason to change the dominant models, so environmental and social justice must be put in place together. As the authors state, creating change requires changing the existing narrative that social marginalization and the dissolving environment are necessary to continue the progress society has made in the “global north” (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021).

These systems of oppression can’t be decoupled, and we must recognize that without focusing on both justice issues, society will consistently fail to alleviate either problem. The marginalized must be given the reins, and those with privilege must give up those reins because failing to do so will lead to further

failures. By accepting the necessity of both environmental and social justice, all stakeholders can be brought to the table, not just human ones (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021). The narratives and values that drive the world economy and its social actions must be rethought; without that reimagining, humanity will further degrade its life expectancy.

### **“Justice Discourses in the Mainstream Environmental Movement, 30 Years After the Southwest Organizing Project Letter”**

While the previous commentary focuses on the implications of associating environmental and social justice, this paper discusses how environmental activism must center the marginalized voices it claims to protect and empower. In essence, social justice is necessary for the health of environmental justice’s end goals.

Framing their position in the aftermath of the 2020’s Black Lives Matter Movement, the authors note that environmental nonprofit organizations (ENGOS) were called on to reckon with the past injustices they perpetuated (Sullivan et al., 2024). This call is similar to one made in the 1990s by the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), which wrote that the 10 major environmental nonprofits in the United States had built their projects on the backs of people of color despite lacking organizational diversity. They supported policies that further marginalized and failed to work with communities of color and worked closely with the polluters they nominally stand against (Sullivan et al., 2024).

This call is necessary because the prevailing whiteness in 10 ENGOS is a direct obstacle to environmental justice: the people who have the most to lose from environmental degradation are people of color, and the organizations representing them need to ensure that their voices are staffing and leading progressive movements (Sullivan et al., 2024). Despite a push within organizations like the Sierra Club, U.S. Climate Action Network, and Equitable and Just National Climate Platform, 2014 studies showed little improvement in leadership diversity and mentoring (Sullivan et al., 2024).

The authors examine how the group of 10 ENGOS describe themselves as it pertains to social and environmental justice in the wake of the 2020s social justice movements; do they see environmental and social justice as bonded goals, or are they simply color-blind? The research discovered four common narratives these organizations claim to uphold. The first narrative was solidarity: ENGOS verbally supported people of color in their efforts against racial

discrimination yet failed to make a substantive push in empowering them, other than calling for general changes and providing educational resources.

The second narrative was heroism: ENGOs viewed themselves as leaders against racism and protectors of people of color. Many ENGOs even took the opportunity to describe their efforts as being in their own organization's tradition (Sullivan et al., 2024).

The third narrative was internal reform: ENGOs described the current social inequities as being perpetuated by their own work, mainly through failing to promote, mentor, and hire people of color and overwhelmingly staffing with white people (Sullivan et al., 2024).

The fourth narrative was redress of problematic legacies: ENGOs noted that they were themselves part of structural racism by venerating past racist leaders and practices. These organizations wanted to change the narratives and values they had built to create space for people of color, rather than allow for the current moment to slip away.

While all four narratives provide varying levels of commitment to integrating social justice into environmental justice and disassembling the racist structures within ENGOs, the authors note that three decades after the SWOP letter, these ENGOs have failed to give adequate thought to ending support of policies that threaten marginalized communities and to ending association with big polluters (Sullivan et al., 2024).

These are two important pain points because, despite ENGOs holding themselves as protectors of marginalized communities, they fail to listen to the policy knowledge of local marginalized communities, such as removing their agency over land use in favor of a national environmental framework (Sullivan et al., 2024).

The continued partnerships of ENGOs with polluter companies further undermines their promises of protection, as their work becomes irrevocably tied to the interests of those polluters due to the ebb and flow of funding (Sullivan et al., 2024). Due to the overemphasis on donor priorities, ENGOs that do pursue restructuring are left unfunded because racial and social justice are not valorized by polluters hoping to create a greener image (Sullivan et al., 2024). This is, the authors believe, the crux of the current stagnation within ENGOs: they have become beholden to the donor class and so have become one of the structural obstacles to social and environmental justice (Sullivan et al., 2024).

## **“The Intersection of Race, Immigration Status, and Environmental Justice”**

The final article homes in on two of social justice’s direct crossovers with environmental justice: racism and immigrant status. Specifically, it analyzes how communities of low-income people, immigrants, people of color, and indigenous people are likely to bear the brunt of environmental hazards such as toxic waste dumps, climate disasters, and food deserts (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). Immigrant and non-English speaking communities especially face this risk, with Latin@ Americans facing a significantly higher rate of living next to hazardous waste facilities compared to white Americans (Pellow and Vazin, 2019).

These communities also suffer “linguistic isolation” , a phenomenon where the community’s governing body doesn’t engage with the community’s common language, cutting off residents from understanding government decision-making when building hazardous sites near their communities (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). This problem is so intense in immigrant and non-English speaking communities that the authors posit that traditional government-based policy can’t be effective in devising a solution (Pellow and Vazin, 2019).

In addition to hazardous living conditions, Latin@ communities experience high rates of cancer and respiratory issues on the job and at home (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). None of this is new in the United States; immigrants have always been funneled into lower-paying jobs with increased levels of exposure to hazardous conditions. The authors see exposure to environmental hazards by immigrants and racial minorities as a factor of social control enacted by the state, as it’s harder to speak out when your living situation is unstable (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). Beyond negligence, these state actions exist as a form of ideological control and a remnant of settler colonialism that prioritizes whiteness (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). The paper further proposes that the prison system specifically affects immigrants and racial minorities. Prisons are much more likely to be near environmentally hazardous areas, leading to greater health issues for the populations most likely to be imprisoned: people of color.

How does environmental justice intersect with social justice in prisons? While environmental justice has fought to recognize “environment” as the general conditions one lives in, prison is a realm often overlooked in this analysis, not addressing a significant population (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). But there is a duty to make the carceral system livable. This is an especially important consideration for immigrants; ICE detention facilities have terrible conditions and a position that often lacks human rights recognition. Environmental justice issues in US prisons

are numerous: contaminated spaces, substandard medical care, unhealthy food, and inhumane building conditions (Pellow and Vazin, 2019).

Contaminated spaces include areas with high amounts of toxin in the air and water, which has a variety of health effects. Medical care is generally low quality and inmates face being incorrectly treated or medicated. Unhealthy food has low nutritional value and is low quality (expired, moldy, raw). Inhumane building conditions are dirty, unsafe, and crowded spaces. And these issues are compounding factors, when one exists it's easy for others to appear.

These factors are important to consider in environmental justice. Prison reform is a classic social justice paradigm, but environmental justice is as important to improving prison conditions (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). Environmental justice includes the environment inside of prison, because the combination of social and environmental activism can work together to create change.

## **SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN THE LATIN@ COMMUNITY**

### **“Politicizing the Family: How Grassroots Organizations Mobilize Latinos for Political Action in Colorado”**

Analyzing the 2006 Latin@ protest movement against HR 4437, the author discusses how, in Colorado, framing movement through the lens of family values empowered the protest turnout.

HR 4437 would have made undocumented status a federal crime in the US as well as criminalize any aid to undocumented immigrants within the US (Martinez, 2010). While millions of protesters across the US turned out to protest the bill, general sentiment treated the movement as a reaction to HR 4437, rather than a tangible show of force in Latin@ organizing (Martinez, 2010). In Denver specifically, over 75,000 protestors took to the streets regardless of immigration status, leading many scholars to question the underlying reasons for the turnout. While several theories were based in more classical views—intellectual outreach and organizational social ties—the author found that culturally relevant framing was just as important (Martinez, 2010).

Culturally relevant framing uses values, symbols, and references so individuals “render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action” (Martinez, 2010). These frames don't need to remain static; they are context specific to better fit the values of the target audience (Martinez, 2010). In Denver, organizers focused on a family-oriented framing: HR 4437 would devastate families. This framing not only inspired those who would face deportation and separation under the new bill, but

also it inspired those with no connection to the issue to be moved to action (Martinez, 2010).

Latin@ organizers specifically homed in on the framing of “familism”—a culturally specific affinity for close and extended family—due to its historic place within Latin@ and immigrant communities (Martinez, 2010). Familism has three paradigms: a disposition toward family welfare, everyday behavior based on family wellbeing, and the structure of family ties (Martinez, 2010). Familism is an effective framework given that Latin@ activism is often centralized around how policy affects families because the personal costs are high; for example, English-only legislation that bars constituents from understanding policies. (Martinez, 2010). Familism is also important because it creates a type of “social insurance,” which will incentivize helping members of the group (Martinez, 2010).

None of this is a given strategy, however. Colorado, and Denver specifically, have local histories that help organizers push their messaging within a familism framework. Colorado has had a growing Latino community for some time, now over 20 percent of the population, giving them a larger say in state politics. The state’s moderate to conservative leaning politics makes traditionally conservative rhetoric like family values effective. The messaging itself was tailored to be more conservative to avoid projecting liberal values that recruits might see as oppositional to their own values (Martinez, 2010). Denver is the founding city of La Crusada Para Justicia, a bedrock organization of the Chicano movement, which strengthens the family ties of Chicanos living in Denver (Martinez, 2010). None of this can be taken for granted, especially as more homogenous rhetoric like “tomorrow we vote” was less effective than specific family-oriented rhetoric (Martinez, 2010). According to protest organizers, even rhetoric targeted to HR 4437 like “know your rights” was found to be less effective because it lacked the impact of motivating based on protecting family members. Maternal family members especially, were a way for entire families to get involved.

### **“Political Mobilization and Activism Among Latinos/as in the United States”**

This paper breaks down and analyzes factors leading to the growth of Latin@ protest politics in five sections: historical perspective, different Latin@ protest subgroups, the role of Latinas in grassroots organizing, the role of the Catholic Church in Latin@ social movements, and the contemporary movement for immigrant rights (Zolniski, 2008). This analysis seeks to move beyond understanding activism as traditional organizational analysis. Historically, Latin@ organizing has happened within the frame of community politics, engaging with

state and local issues, yet even this understanding is underdeveloped due to a lack of scholarship and research around Latin@ theories of organization (Zlolniski, 2008).

Generally, Latin@ protest history in the US can be broken into five eras: movements against Anglo conquest of Hispanic territory in the late 1800s, labor activism among Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Ricans resulting in the creation of mutual aid societies in the early 1900s, political activism among Latin@ veterans for equality post-World War II, creation of the NFWA under Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez preceding mass strikes, student movements, and racial justice protests during the Civil Rights era, and the formation of pan-ethnic Latin@ movements relying on street protests against growing anti-immigrant sentiment from the 1980s to the modern day (Zlolniski, 2008).

Despite the formation of a pan-ethnic movement, the ethnic subgroups each have their own histories. Mexican Americans created community organizations like the Industrial Areas Foundation, which created frameworks for leadership development, outreach, and goal setting while expanding membership through Catholic priests and parishes (Zlolniski, 2008). Puerto Ricans have a long history of supporting decolonial independence movements for Puerto Rico in California, the Midwest and Northwest (Zlolniski, 2008). The 1970s saw many Puerto Ricans adopt the Latino label along with Mexican Americans while advocating for economic reform and bilingual education (Zlolniski, 2008). Dominican activists united around issues affecting both their communities in the United States and the Dominican Republic with a specific focus on migration and local issues. Central American groups (Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Nicaraguan) have been especially active in labor movements to improve the treatment of Central American immigrants along with a focus on union and labor organizing in California and the Southwest (Zlolniski, 2008).

Feminist Latinas in the 1990s pushed back against the idea that they were discouraged from electoral activism due to the “triple oppression” of race, gender, and patriarchy, by showing that those forces often push Latinas into community activism in protest. These women incorporate activism into their household and wage-work, framing it as an additional duty coming from their civic responsibility as mothers (Zlolniski, 2008). This activism builds their social capital and networks, which leads to them becoming excellent recruiters and leaders, resulting in organizations like Mothers of East Los Angeles, which focus on addressing issues for local families (Zlolniski, 2008). While their work is critical, it is hindered by in-community sexism. This doesn’t show a lack of Latina involvement, but rather an obstacle that they’ve overcome by building

communities through social connections and crediting their work as in the family interest (Zlolniski, 2008).

The Catholic Church became important in activism by fostering “cultural religion” in “cursillo” forums, which featured priests holding discussions with working class Latin@s, creating a specific and personal community experience with religion (Zlolniski, 2008). These discussions built community relationships leading members to feel solidarity with the Chicano movement, connecting otherwise uninvolved members to organize (Zlolniski, 2008). As church-based organizations grew, they became more effective and stable than overtly political organizations in retaining members and sustaining activism in local issues, even during the 1980s when Protestantism became more popular than Catholicism (Zlolniski, 2008). These groups excel especially in motivating those who would otherwise be put off by political messaging (Zlolniski, 2008).

The current focus on immigrant rights has been building since the rise of white nativism in the US, which turned immigration from an issue of economics to an issue of race in the 1990s. Undocumented immigrants face escalating levels of discrimination, with attempts to militarize the US southern border alongside restricting the rights of undocumented immigrants to gain employment, transportation, and social protections (Zlolniski, 2008). This overwhelming anti-immigrant sentiment in the US has created a greater pan-ethnic Latin@ movement, characterized by more transnational immigrant groups, a more decentralized yet inclusive organizing environment, and new media that accommodates Spanish-speaking Latin@s (Zlolniski, 2008).

While these aspects are important to consider, there is still further analysis to be done, specifically in the realm of class polarization, structural barriers to Latin@ involvement in activism, and the connection of politics and religion in Latin@-Protestant activism (Zlolniski, 2008).

### **“Critical Projects of Latino Cultural Citizenship: Literacy And Immigrant Activism”**

This paper analyzes strategies for Latin@ immigrant youth to better develop themselves within the educational system. Despite their increasing presence in the K-12 education system, Latin@ immigrant youth are underserved by that system, sometimes being relegated to specific classes that leave them isolated from the greater school community (Honeyford, 2013). This isolation leads to worse educational outcomes and a feeling of hopelessness in their ability to develop as members of the community, which is ironic given movements to increase inclusivity in the classroom (Honeyford, 2013).

It's necessary to reinforce the theory of cultural citizenship. Latin@ cultural citizenship involves embracing, rather than abandoning, cultural identities within the realm of citizenship to better situate oneself among naturalized citizens (Honeyford, 2013). In this way, one's everyday civic and social engagement can change the way a person is seen in their community—as a citizen rather than beholden to official citizenship (Honeyford, 2013).

A study was formulated to test how teaching the “assumption that immigrant youth – regardless of their citizenship status – are cultural citizens” would affect their development (Honeyford, 2013). Researchers sought to determine what frameworks and teachings were most effective in inspiring Latin@ youth; they would be empowered to be involved by seeing themselves as citizens within their communities (Honeyford, 2013).

The study found that engaging the students in work that reflected themselves, rather than in work that asked them to detach, more effectively created students who were able to engage in the community as cultural citizens. Specifically, the study found three takeaways: first the importance of designing curriculum around socio-political concerns. Incorporating problems they faced as immigrants in the learning, helped students see how they could affect their community by incorporating knowledge from those experiences (Honeyford, 2013). The second is to create partnerships and audiences that make the students feel like they are making a difference. This is mainly evidenced by students' work reaching audiences outside those in the study and most importantly, those who aren't immigrants (Honeyford, 2013). Not only does this provide students with knowledge of the greater community, but it also helps them better adapt to those outside their community. The third takeaway is the need to develop cultural citizenship skills in a variety of ways (Honeyford, 2013). When the students saw their cultural citizenship reflected, they were better able to understand how their viewpoints could be applied to the real world (Honeyford, 2013).

## **INTERSECTING ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN THE LATIN COMMUNITY**

### **“Connecting Community Voices: Using a Latino/a Critical Race Theory Lens on Environmental Justice Advocacy”**

To better understand how social and environmental sectors can converge, it's important to consider how Latino voices can make themselves heard in a space that skews white, i.e., the environmental organization space. Researchers

focused on how the environmental inequality activist space can be adjusted to meld ecojustice and environmental movement priorities (Anguiano et al, 2012).

In New Mexico, which has a 44.9 percent Hispanic population, there is an issue with a mainstream environmental organization's approach and a Latin@ ecojustice organization's approach to broadcasting their values, which makes it difficult for the groups to work together (Anguiano et al, 2012).

To bridge this gap, the researchers first looked at how Latin@ ecojustice groups have discussed environmental justice in New Mexico. In the wake of the civil rights movement, many environmental organizations were born, but they seldom incorporated disenfranchised voices (Anguiano et al, 2012). In contrast, the environmental justice movements were grassroots and relied on strong cultural connections, which attracted cultural activists within the Latin@ community. While Latin@ ecojustice groups used a community focused approach, environmental organizations made recommendations that caused friction with the interests of local groups focused on preserving land and job opportunities (Anguiano et al, 2012).

Researchers also considered how Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) can be used to create a better analytical framework between environmental organizations and Latin@-led ones. While LatCrit follows tenets similar to Critical Race Theory, it focuses on how Latin@'s internal diversity situates them within the larger social activism space, especially when it comes to the intersections of nationality, ethnicity, and language (Anguiano et al, 2012). This is important to consider when discussing the value differences of ecojustice and mainstream environmental organizations (Anguiano et al, 2012).

Finally, researchers used collaboration examples to show how Latin@ environmental viewpoints can be brought forward. After failing to engage Hispanic voters, New Mexican politicians discounted the advocacy of mainstream environmental organizations because they couldn't show support from the Latin@ community (Anguiano et al, 2012). Five organizations, "(a) Conservation Voters of New Mexico (CVNM); (b) The Wilderness Society (TWS); (c) the cultural advocacy group Arts de Aztlan; (d) University of New Mexico's (UNM) Resource Center for Raza Planning (RCRP); and (e) a research team in UNM's Communication Department," all with ties to the New Mexican Hispanic community, joined in a dialogue to work through issues (Anguiano et al, 2012). The main point of contention was the meaning of "environmentalism."

Mainstream groups took a “wilderness” perspective, while Hispanic groups were describing the interactions between humans and the environment around them (Anguiano et al, 2012). Disconnecting from the environment as an outsider didn’t work with their way of thinking. Similarly, Hispanic participants noted that environmental issues are tied to jobs; abolishing practices like mining wasn’t practical for many in their community (Anguiano et al, 2012). At the same time, their communities face the brunt of the environmental hazards caused by mining (Anguiano et al, 2012). Both aspects are lost on mainstream organizations.

From these discussions, it’s clear that different organizations will have differing views, but it’s important to consider how varying definitions need to be interrogated rather than holding a dominant view. Incorporating Latin@ environmental justice framing is key for informational reasons, and because failing to recognize those frames hampers the work of environmentalists who don’t recognize that activism must be culture and context specific (Anguiano et al, 2012).

### **“The Vida Verde Women’s Co-Op: Brazilian Immigrants Organizing to Promote Environmental and Social Justice”**

The Brazilian Women’s Group (BWG) of Massachusetts exemplifies the intersection of social and environmental activism (Gute et al, 2009). Founded in 1995, BWG aims to support and empower Brazilian immigrant women as they develop their careers (Gute et al, 2009). Within Massachusetts, the most common occupation of Brazilian women is house cleaning, which is problematic for several reasons (Gute et al, 2009). Immigrants already face a disproportionate risk for work-related diseases, and they face language and health insurance barriers (Gute et al, 2009). For house cleaners especially, there is a high risk of coming into contact with toxic chemicals, which increase the likelihood of on-the-job accidents and injuries as well as generally creating a hostile workplace (Gute et al, 2009).

To combat this, the BWG created the Vida Verde Women’s Co-op to address many of the issues facing Brazilian house cleaners. They provided “greener” cleaning supplies to address the health issues, but they also focused on improving their members’ general working conditions (Gute et al, 2009). Many of the housecleaners who joined the co-op were contracted by agencies that gave them little agency over schedules; Vida Verde worked to rectify that (Gute et al, 2009). These environmental and social concerns were tied together through community building, with Vida Verde seeking to create a sense of connection in an industry that is isolating. (Gute et al, 2009). While Vida Verde provides

resources, it also provides members with training, from guides to using newer cleaning materials to workshops on improving English proficiency, computer skills, and business tips (Gute et al, 2009).

After the launch of Vida Verde, Co-op members reported their chemical-based ailments disappeared and they felt a greater sense of belonging in the industry (Gute et al, 2009). There were 11 inaugural members when Vida Verde launched in 2006 (Gute et al, 2009). Despite its small size, all the cleaners except one remain with it, citing community, health, and greater control over their profession (Gute et al, 2009).

Importantly, Vida Verde garnered start up support through connections in academia; the University of Massachusetts and Tufts University conducted research projects that allowed Vida Verde to more effectively begin (Gute et al, 2009). The University of Massachusetts ran a program that allowed Vida Verde to train over 350 cleaners and a grant from Tufts allowed them to increase outreach and develop training programs for Co-op members (Gute et al, 2009). Along with academic support, Vida Verde was able to effectively outreach to Brazilian cleaners through connections with BWG and religious organizations (Gute et al, 2009).

### **“Latinos and Environmental Justice: Examining the Link between Degenerative Policy, Political Representation, and Environmental Policy Implementation”**

Within social activism, it is important to consider the forces of social construction and degenerative policy (Liang, 2017). Social construction is the popular conceptions of groups affected by policy outcomes, while degenerative policy is the exploitation of derogatory social constructions within policy (Liang, 2017).

These concepts are important when examining policy effects on Latin@ populations; they affect how vigorously government agencies will implement and maintain social and environmental policies based on perceptions within those institutions (Liang, 2017). This study examines how conceptions of immigration and welfare affect the influence of immigrants and Latin@s on environmental policy. Immigrant and Latin@ stereotypes within those policy areas draw heavily on the idea of their “deservingness” being lesser (Liang, 2017). This focus is especially important as Latin@ and African American outcomes are distinct in key ways despite the communities being considered together in many studies (Liang, 2017).

Institutional bias can play out in how institutional agents choose to serve different groups: they can control increased or decreased resources for groups depending on how they view deservingness (Liang, 2017). This is troubling for Latin@s as rhetoric in the US since the 1990s has increasingly portrayed them and their immigrant communities as gaming the social system (Liang, 2017). Immigrants' status as noncitizens makes them targets of social construction rhetoric—they've gamed the system—and creates degenerative policy designs that erode immigrants' power (Liang, 2017). For example, if a government official views immigrants as an undeserving group, they may divert taxpayer dollars from communities with large immigrant and Latin@ populations regardless of need in those communities. This is evident in how environmental regulations are enforced in different communities, with the lower levels of regulatory inspection in majority Black counties and in states that are more punitive in distributing welfare benefits (Liang, 2017).

The study found several factors to consider in policy effects on Latin@ and immigrant communities. First, there is a strong correlation between states with anti-immigrant policies and high Latin@ representation and lower levels of environmental regulatory activity in Latin@ communities (Liang, 2017). In those states, immigrants' low social status makes it easier for regulators to ignore community needs; regulators may consider immigrants undeserving of the environmental safety that other groups enjoy (Liang, 2017). Second, in states with anti-immigrant policies, Latin@ representation within the government doesn't meaningfully offset the degenerative policy effect (Liang, 2017). Specifically, this is because politicians are more likely to sway toward the policy status quo; a lack of legislative commitment to environmental regulation means issues aren't emphasized (Liang, 2017). Additionally, citizenship status—naturalized or second and third generation—leads Latin@ policy makers to be less pro-immigrant, compounding the already negative perception of immigrants and deemphasizing their issues (Liang, 2017).

# CASE STUDIES

## **PURPOSE OF CASE STUDIES**

Using case studies allows a close examination of organizations and leads to better insights into how historical movements play out. The following two case studies focus on a few particulars. First, how did organizers bring together people to work on issues? Knowing the specific strategies used to mobilize Latin@s will allow a better understanding of how geography, context, and scale affect the effectiveness of a social movement. Second, what obstacles did these movements face? While replicating success can be difficult, avoiding obstacles faced by other organizations is key to creating recommendations, as well as analysis that cuts through to the characterizations that other research has found. Finally, how can a movement's success spread into other areas? This report seeks to identify crossover between environmental and social justice and recognizing the crossovers in these case studies will allow for better analysis and recommendations.

## **NATIONAL FARM WORKERS ASSOCIATION AND THE DELANO FARM STRIKES (1965-1970)**

The Delano Farm strikes exemplify how an issue limited to underserved and underprivileged people can be extrapolated into a larger movement. The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was founded by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, members of the Chicano movement in the Southwest and Western United States. Both worked with the Community Service Organization

(CSO), which was a Latin@ social activist organization founded in the 1940s to pursue social justice goals for Mexican Americans, addressing immigration, education, and voting reform.

Huerta and Chavez hoped to expand the focus of the CSO to farm workers in the Southwest who were facing terrible conditions, but the CSO leadership disagreed (National Park Service, N.D.). In 1962, Huerta and Chavez, who both came from farm working families, left the CSO to form a new organization, the NFWA, to help organize California farmers (United Farm Workers, N.D.).

The NFWA was crucial due to the demographics of farm workers in the Southwest in the 1960s. Two groups made up most farm workers contracted in the fields: Filipino Americans and Mexican Americans, and the groups faced segregated working environments (United Farm Workers, N.D.). The conditions for farm workers in Delano, California were harsh: grape pickers were paid around ninety cents an hour for grueling, all-day labor (United Farm Workers, N.D.). Labor standards weren't enforced, and workers were "chained" to the land they worked on. Public services were basically nonexistent, and workers had to rely on the contracting companies for everything. Food and drink were scarce and unhealthy, and disease and illness were commonplace among workers (United Farm Workers, N.D.). Farm workers had few housing options and relied on company housing run by the farms that was dirty, overcrowded, and expensive. Workers would pay as much as two dollars a night for shared housing—a good portion of a day's wage (United Farm Workers, N.D.). The work itself was scarce and the contracting process corrupt (United Farm Workers, N.D.).

These conditions prompted Huerta and Chavez to form the NFWA. By 1965, the group had already won wage increases for Mexican American and Filipino American farm workers. But another organization triggered one of NFWA's biggest battles. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), representing Filipino American workers, began a strike on nine Delano farms during peak picking season (United Farm Workers, N.D.). The farms tried to hire Mexican Americans as scab workers, which prompted the AWOC to approach the NFWA to strike with them (United Farm Workers, N.D.).

Despite being a relatively young organization, the NFWA joined the strike for multiple reasons. First, Mexican Americans were facing the same conditions as Filipino American grape pickers; any improvements or concessions the strike extracted from the farms would benefit the Latin@ farm workers. Second, the NFWA had a long-term goal of creating a union respected by the farms; joining the mass strike supported that goal. Third, NFWA members saw an opportunity for solidarity with other workers; despite the differences between Filipino and Mexican Americans, they both wanted to live in a country that respected their work and contributions (National Park Service, N.D.). Perhaps most importantly, the NFWA had greater social justice aspirations; the Civil Rights movement among Black Americans inspired NFWA members to seek their own civil rights measures (United Farm Workers, N.D.).

The NFWA voted overwhelmingly to strike, changing the movement from majority Filipino American to majority Mexican American (National Park Service, N.D.). The strike was followed by a boycott of products produced on Delano farms (National Park Service, N.D.).

The strike itself faced many difficulties. There were more farms than the striking workers could cover, which left many farms without enough strikers (United Farm Workers, N.D.). To combat this, the NFWA organized groups of strikers and targeted farms on an unpredictable schedule to throw off farm owners (United Farm Workers, N.D.). Farms hired scabs from across the country to break the strike and the strikers' wills. However, most strikers were Mexican Americans who convinced many Mexican American scabs to join the strike, taking the opportunity to better their own lives (United Farm Workers, N.D.).

This best exemplifies how representation within movements is important: workers that were otherwise unmotivated or unaware of the strike and its goals were motivated by seeing workers in a similar situation advocating for better conditions.

Other unions were also an obstacle, such as the majority white International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Despite the NFWA's and AWOC's efforts to gain legitimacy as a union force, the Teamsters stepped in against them, claiming that the striking workers should be represented by them (United Farm Workers, N.D.). For the NFWA, the strike and push for recognition of their union was a way to legitimize and protect the Mexican American and Filipino American

farm workers' jobs and from further exploitation, as well as a way to push for greater recognition of those workers as equal members of society (United Farm Workers, N.D.). For the Teamsters, the battle over unionization lacked that nuance; it was a way to increase Teamster membership in different sectors. They ignored solidarity in favor of a zero-sum game approach to labor organizing (United Farm Workers, N.D.).

While this was a setback, the Teamsters' actions also catalyzed many workers. Seeing how the NFWA and AWOC had stood up especially for the Latin@ and Filipino American farm workers, the voting members protested the election and refused to vote, which forced a new election (United Farm Workers, N.D.). The NFWA had proven its loyalty to the workers.

Despite these difficulties, the NFWA also was able to garner tremendous success through its connections in Latin@ communities. As the strike continued, the NFWA called for a boycott (National Park Service, N.D.) and to expand the boycott's success, the NFWA committed to several strategies. Organizers and workers spread the word in their own communities to gain popular support so that farms would concede to their demands. Upon learning how their families, friends, and neighbors had been treated and what was needed to make change, the community turned out (United Farm Workers, N.D.). Community organizations, businesses, and members spread word of the boycott starting within Latin@ and Filipino communities and gradually to the wider public (United Farm Workers, N.D.). Religious figures spoke to their congregations about the workers' mission and urged them to boycott and join the movement (United Farm Workers, N.D.). In one of the largest showings of solidarity, the NFWA organized a march from Delano to Sacramento, California, gathering more of the community along the way. About 10,000 people reached the state capital, an incredible feat that would not have happened without community support (United Farm Workers, N.D.). This event led more people outside the community to boycott the farms' products (United Farm Workers, N.D.).

The 1960s Civil Rights movement also bolstered the cause. As Black Americans pushed for their own civil rights, Americans who had been ignorant of that movement's struggles came to support the cause as they saw the abuse the protesters faced. The NFWA seized on these events, drawing a comparison between the racial justice movement by Latin@ and Filipino Americans in the

fields to the work by Black Americans in the streets for Civil Rights. Making this comparison even more explicit, the NFWA invited the Congress of Racial Equality to the fields, which brought more attention to the boycott (National Park Service, N.D.). In a speech to Congress, Cesar Chavez stated that “The whole system of occupational discrimination must be killed just like the discrimination against people of color is being challenged in Washington,” making a direct line among the issues faced by people of color across the US (National Park Service, N.D.). The role of the NFWA as a farm workers organization made its social and racial justice mission more understandable to its supporters and potential supporters (United Farm Workers, N.D.).

Overall, the Delano farm strikes were an overwhelmingly successful moment for Latin@ organizing. Between 1965 and 1970, the NFWA merged with the AWOC into the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), (Library, 2024). By the time strikes wound down in the 1970s, they had unionized over 150 farms: the most in California agricultural union history (Library, 2024). With this success, the UFWOC was able to spread its influence to workers’ rights movements across the country, serving as a beacon of justice within the organizing world.

### **ASSOCIATION OF LATIN AMERICAN GARDENERS OF LOS ANGELES AND THE LEAF BLOWER PROTEST MOVEMENT (1996-1998)**

The Los Angeles Leaf Blower Protests are a key example of how justice movements can cross boundaries, bringing in people who would have otherwise been opposed to the movement’s goals, by reframing issues to create popular support (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Contract gardening in California was first popularized by Japanese immigrants, who would do house and yard work for wealthy white Californian homeowners (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Over time, these Japanese gardeners created small landscaping enterprises that hired other immigrants, especially after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Huerta and Morales, 2014). This paved the way for other immigrants in California to take up the profession, and Latin@ immigrants came to dominate the field in Los Angeles by the 1980s. (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Latin@ immigrant gardeners mainly worked as independent contractors and employees for these informal businesses as landscapers cleaning and maintaining lawns for private citizens (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

Due to the informal nature of their work, these gardeners rely on extensive networking and aggressive marketing, accepting low pay compared to larger landscaping companies with more resources and reach (Huerta and Morales, 2014). These companies, however, would take more of a gardener's wage and required formal training and certifications before hiring, which meant that contract gardening gave Latin@ gardeners more autonomy and a lower barrier to entry (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Additionally, the style of contract gardening meant that if a gardener was savvy, they could eke out a living regardless of their professional experience or language ability, thereby gaining a modicum of social and economic mobility (Huerta and Morales, 2014). This phenomenon of immigrant economies is known as “blocked mobility” (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

Despite these successes, Latin@ immigrant gardeners faced growing issues. At the height of transition to a majority Latin@ population in the 1980s, gardeners would typically earn \$75 to \$100 a month per home (Huerta and Morales, 2014). By the mid-1990s, however, most gardeners earned about \$50 a day due to competition (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

There was also the issue of leaf blowers. Leaf blowers were popularized by Japanese gardeners in the 1970s, spurred by a drought across California (99 Percent, 2024). Gardeners stopped hosing off lawns and yards to remove leaves and dirt and shifted to gas-powered leaf blowers (99 Percent, 2024). Quick and effective, leaf blowers allowed gardeners to do more lawns each day, crucial for a profession that relied on participants being as available as possible (99 Percent, 2024). However, blowers were loud, a major disruptor in “quiet” affluent neighborhoods and environmental activists identified leaf blowers as a visible source of pollution (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

Leaf blowers became a major point of contention in Los Angeles, when a 1985 proposal to ban them was defeated by the Japanese immigrant-founded Southern California Gardeners Federation (Huerta and Morales, 2014). However, as the contract gardening industry transitioned to mostly employing Latin@ immigrants, a group with less social and political capital, movements in the 1990s to ban the blowers came closer to success (Huerta and Morales, 2014). These bans were not universal; they targeted contract gardeners and exempted commercial properties and Los Angeles city employees (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

The ban was driven by affluent citizens and environmentalists, who seemed to be wholly ignorant and dismissive of the importance of leaf blowers to gardeners' work that created a cleaner environment in Los Angeles (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Additionally, the wealthy homeowners who used inexpensive Latin@ immigrant labor didn't seem to realize how the bans would affect the people they employed, showing the racism and classism baked into the movement (Huerta and Morales, 2014). The movement came to a head on May 14, 1996. The Los Angeles City Council passed a preliminary vote to ban the use of gas-powered leaf blowers within 500 feet of any residential areas, with the final vote planned for December (99 Percent, 2024). The ban would charge violators fines up to \$1,000 dollars and it could also lead to a jail sentence of up to six months (99 Percent, 2024).

In the wake of this vote, Jaime Aleman, a Mexican American owner of a contract gardening business, was driven to action after realizing how the ban would affect his business (99 Percent, 2024). Although he was unaccustomed to political action, he used his wife's contacts in the Chicano/a activist movement at UCLA to connect with student activist and immigrant Adrian Alvarez, among others (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Aleman and Alvarez agreed on the social, class, and economic issues, but they faced the challenge of creating a rapport between the working-class gardeners and the Chicano/a students, as the gardeners themselves had little time to take part in activist movements (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

To build that rapport, the student activists met the gardeners where they were, going door-to-door, apartment-to-apartment, holding meetings in different apartment complexes, parks, and public places for small groups of migrant gardeners, informing them of the ban's repercussions and how they could work to stop it (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

Even after the ban passed on December 3, 1996, with a planned implementation on July 1, 1997, the group had recruited over 200 members by 1997 and had become an officially recognized nonprofit in November: the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles (ALAGLA) (Huerta and Morales, 2014). The recruiting continued and they reached more than 1,000 members by 1998.

While Alvarez was elected president by the members due to his organizing experience, the majority of the ALAGLA's staff and positions was made up of Latin@ gardeners, rather than student activists (Huerta and Morales, 2014). This showed the organization as truly a grassroots movement, rather than one that had created an issue at the whim of university students. ALAGLA gave its members a true say; all members were able to debate and vote on proposed actions (Huerta and Morales, 2014). To ensure maximum engagement, regional heads established a network of designated meeting spots across Los Angeles near where its members worked; members could come from work to the meetings, and designated spaces gave them parking and safe areas to store equipment (Huerta and Morales, 2014). ALAGLA also drafted Spanish language flyers and used phone trees—members calling other members—to boost turnout (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

Between 1996 and 1998, the ALAGLA committed to several strategies to boost attention and support for their cause. One strategy was direct political engagement with a hostile City Council, which considered their decision on gas-powered blowers closed to any further debate (Huerta and Morales, 2014). ALAGLA held and attended meetings with various Council members, lobbying them to change their positions through press conferences, lawsuits, and fundraisers (Huerta and Morales, 2014). ALAGLA members spoke on Spanish language media channels about their struggle, which recruited uninvolved Latin@s, especially gardeners who were unaware of the movement (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

They also named and shamed members of the Council, especially two—Mike Hernandez and Richard Alarcon—Latin@s who supported the ban. ALAGLA mounted recalls for both members, which pressured them to walk back their support for the ban. Hernandez eventually became the main advocate for ALAGLA on the Council (Huerta and Morales, 2014). ALAGLA also worked to foster community among the gardeners, holding community events and marches to build solidarity within the movement (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

On the day the ban was set to go into effect—July 1, 1997—more than 500 ALAGLA members held a sit-in in front of city hall demanding a one-year moratorium on the enforcement of the blower ban, but they were met by counter protestors made up of affluent residents who believed that ALAGLA was a psyop

(Huerta and Morales, 2014). Residents thought their framing of the issue as environmental preservation was the only way to view the situation. While they accused the ALAGLA members of being a danger to the environment, they also claimed its members were paid by leaf blowing manufacturers due to ALAGLA having newly made uniforms; affluent residents believed there was no way that working-class and low-income Latin@s could afford them (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

To combat this, ALAGLA sent a clear message to any media organization that would listen: they did hard, honest work that was a source for improving the community environment and time spent enforcing the leaf blower ban would take away from police addressing real community dangers (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Newspapers like the Los Angeles Times heavily covered their efforts (Huerta and Morales, 2014). The ALAGLA also emphasized that it was the manufacturers, not the gardeners, who should be responsible for pollution and noise concerns (Huerta and Morales, 2014). They pressured the city council to incentivize manufacturers to create better options and lobbied manufacturers to make more eco-conscious equipment (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Some ALAGLA members chose to circumvent the ban by adopting methanol blowers, which are identical to gas-powered but didn't fall under the ordinance's language (99 Percent, 2024).

In response, the council imposed a six-month moratorium beginning on July 17, 1997 – only a few weeks after the ban was implemented. Nevertheless, ALAGLA continued once the council said the ban would return (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Eleven of ALAGLA's leaders began a hunger-strike that lasted from January 3, 1998, to January 9, 1998, drawing critical media attention against both the city and the Council (99 Percent, 2024). Due to the life-and-death nature of this action, the city quickly relented, with commitments from mayor and city council to help look for gas-powered blower alternatives and reducing the \$1,000 fine to \$271 and removing jail time (Gold and Newton, 1998). While the ban wasn't fully overturned, ALAGLA had succeeded in making it practically unfeasible to enforce and raising awareness of the importance of immigrant Latin@ labor (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

In the end, ALAGLA wasn't able to overturn the ban, but it was able to make it too politically toxic for anyone to support it. ALAGLA is an example of

how reframing an issue can create a movement: a group of politically disenfranchised workers showed the community how important their jobs are, rather than being the source of a problem (Huerta and Morales, 2014). The hostility between ALAGLA and the city council was symbolized when Día del Jardinero (Day of the Gardener) was declared on March 19, 1999, leading to the gardeners to celebrate the finale of a movement that lasted more than three years (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

# ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter sorts the research and case study findings into four sections: intersections of social and environmental justice, interorganizational movements, identifying issues that matter, and mobilizing Latin@s. The six recommendations that follow are for moving into social activism from an environmental justice space with a focus on engaging a Latin@ base.

### Intersections of Social and Environmental Justice

When considering the intersection of social and environmental justice, it's important to understand that they are inextricably linked through framing, focus,

and goals. Environmental justice addresses issues that are commonly left out when discussing the impacts of environmental policy decisions: race, class, and history. This is particularly important to consider when many large environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) such as the Sierra Club and Climate Action Network focus on the broader strokes of environmentalism (pollution, green infrastructure, inefficient planning), neglecting how their generalized goals ignore the effects on different domestic and international populations (Sullivan et al., 2024).

This way of thinking seems inclusive on its face, asking “everyone” to do their part in preventing environmental disaster. However, it is deeply exclusionary to think that everyone is equally to blame for climate disaster. The “global south” countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and South America face disproportionately more climate disasters with a lack of resources, while “global north” countries in North America and Europe are the sources of pollution (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021). This disparity is clear even within “global north” countries, with worse environmental living conditions for Black, Latin@, and Asian populations compared to white populations (Solomonian and Di Ruggerio, 2021).

Social justice isn’t so different from these considerations of environmental justice. Environmental justice considers underprivileged peoples in environmental policies and those same concerns permeate social justice. For example, the Southwest Organizing Project’s (SWOP) 1990s letter to the ten largest ENGOS in the US claimed that these organizations had suppressed and ignored concerns of people of color within their leadership, which led the organizations to focus and promote issues through a distinctly white lens (Sullivan et al., 2024). If white people were most of the leaders and decision makers, people of color’s environmental justice issues would be ignored (Sullivan et al., 2024).

This example illustrates why environmental and social justice are interlinked. One might think that a diverse leadership is a social justice issue, but the lack of diverse leadership stopped the ENGOS’ recognition of how environmental issues were impacting people of color differently from white people. Environmental justice couldn’t be effective because the social dynamics within these organizations didn’t reflect the environmental visions they

maintained. They couldn't stand for environmentalism if they were blind to the ways all people are affected.

Understanding the links between environmental and social justice is useful when considering a single issue. For example, Latin@ immigrants are more likely to be employed in lower-wage jobs, live near toxic waste dumps, and suffer debilitating illnesses due to their surroundings (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). Under environmental justice, one could pursue a policy to alleviate these conditions that disproportionately affect Latin@ immigrants. But when combined with social justice, these outcomes can also be viewed as end goals of social policies devised by US governments (Pellow and Vazin, 2019).

Because prisons are often located in areas with immigrant populations, they affect immigrants acutely as well (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). While prisons are generally terrible facilities, ICE detention facilities are especially hazardous because the immigrants housed there are seen as “lesser” than citizen prisoners (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). The social justice implications here are obvious—immigrants shouldn't be subjected to worse treatment due to their immigration status. Environmental justice enters the frame in considering that the lived environment inside a prison is just as important as the lived environment outside. If environmental justice only includes those outside the carceral system, a large group of people is locked out of consideration.

Social and environmental justice are intertwined because they overlap in ways that can be used to make a better overall argument. Working to address an issue's social and environmental implications is a stronger statement than working on either alone.

## **Interorganizational Movements**

Recognizing the importance of interorganizational movements in social justice is important because addressing multiple areas is often a balance between groups with knowledge and resources and groups with on-the-ground experience. For example, when the Brazilian Women's Group (BWG) wanted to start a housecleaning co-op—Vida Verde—they faced huge start-up costs to build an organization from the ground up (Gute et al, 2009). Also, their knowledge of the injustices that Brazilian female house cleaners faced due to

lack of autonomy over their work, particularly the hazardous chemicals that made house cleaning dangerous, was very niche (Gute et al, 2009). Without the BWG the issue would most likely have gone completely unnoticed.

This knowledge is juxtaposed with two large universities, Tufts and the University of Massachusetts. Both universities can fund large research projects, but they lack the BWG's proximity to the issues (Gute et al, 2009). Collaborating with BWG and Vida Verde allowed the organizations to fulfill their goals. Vida Verde expanded training and trial runs to the hundreds of house cleaners and further developed their training regime (Gute et al, 2009). At the same time, the universities were able to pursue the required research for their departments and empower local organizations.

A similar pattern is seen in the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles (ALAGLA). When Los Angeles announced a plan to ban electric leaf blowers, Jaime Aleman, an immigrant gardener business owner, wanted to find a way to stop the ban (Huerta and Morales, 2014). However, he had no political or social activism experience, making it hard to bring together a disconnected group of Latin@ immigrant gardeners (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Aleman had knowledge how the ban would affect the overlooked gardeners; he knew the specifics of the issue. The Chicano/a student activists he contacted had organizational experience, but lacked the personal connection that Aleman had with the workers and the knowledge of how the ban would affect them. (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Aleman was able to get the activists up to speed on the issue, while the activists were able to fast track the growth and development of the ALAGLA, making it into a strong and vocal movement against the proposed leaf blower bans.

Interorganizational collaboration is also important because it empowers and increases the likelihood of success for organizations working separately toward the same goals. In the Delano Farm strikes, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) had shared goals: the empowerment and betterment of California farm workers in a variety of sectors. The AWOC served mainly Filipino American farm workers, while the NFWA served Mexican American farm workers (United Farm Workers, N.D). When the AWOC struck, farms pulled in Mexican American farm workers, many of whom NFWA were members (United Farm Workers, N.D).

These groups could have continued seeking justice separately. However, the AWOC reached out to the NFWA, realizing that the struggle for equal rights and farm workers protections was a joint cause (United Farm Workers, N.D). Why struggle separately when working together is more effective? Even though Mexican American farm workers could have benefited from working as scabs, the NFWA voted to strike with the AWOC. They eventually united under the single banner of United Farm Workers (United Farm Workers, N.D). In the end, working together made their movement more successful.

Interorganizational movements also show that failing to recognize a joint interest will hobble advocacy. In New Mexico, which has a Latin@ population of 44.9 percent, large ENGOs found that the state government gave little attention to the policy issues they presented (Anguiano et al, 2012). This was largely because those organizations had little involvement from New Mexican Latin@s, which the government took as a sign that voters had little interest in environmental issues (Anguiano et al, 2012). However, the ENGOs learned from Latin@-run organizations like The Wilderness Society that their advocacy didn't reach Latin@ New Mexicans because they didn't use the frames that reached Latin@ populations (Anguiano et al, 2012). To be effective, the ENGOs needed to accept their blind spots and collaborate with people outside of organizations to remove their biases, thereby bringing traditional outsiders into their framework (Anguiano et al, 2012).

## **Identifying Issues that Matter**

When small organizations are identifying issues that can incorporate social and environmental justice, they must focus specifically on groups and issue areas. One way to start is to focus on a current event that already has publicity, which can catalyze people to join. Affluent Los Angeles communities and environmentalists were vocal about the pollution and noise caused by gas powered leaf blowers, issues that had built resentment for decades throughout LA (Huerta and Morales, 2014). The majority Latin@ immigrant gardeners who used the blowers lacked the power or the organization to fight against that sentiment. However, the Los Angeles City Council's preliminary ban, with a planned later vote, was a catalyzing moment for Latin@ gardeners like Jaime Aleman (Huerta and Morales, 2014). Rather than try to build popular support

when there were no policies around blowers, gardeners organized into the ALAGLA under the threat of a ban because they could point to a concrete policy that would affect their livelihoods (Huerta and Morales, 2014). To non-gardeners, the ALAGLA would seem pointless if the city wasn't pursuing a ban, but the ban connected ALAGLA advocacy with people who saw how the ban would create economic disenfranchisement (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

The protest movement around HR 4437 also used current events to advance social and environmental justice. HR 4437, the Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, was passed in the U.S. House of Representatives and would make undocumented status a federal crime as well as make it illegal for undocumented immigrants to access many public and private services (Martinez, 2010).

The issues of undocumented immigrants—disenfranchisement and generally worse outcomes—make their cause a worthy fight. But after the passage of HR 4437, millions of people across the country protested the bill despite previous low engagement in the issue (Martinez, 2010). This changed because immigrant and Latin@ rights organizations seized the moment to show the value of immigrants in the US, holding the Day Without Immigrants protest to show the reliance of American society on immigrant involvement (Martinez, 2010). Immigrants had put themselves at the mercy of a system that wanted to remove them and people unconnected to immigrants felt it was necessary to protest (Martinez, 2010). Effective timing for identifying an issue contributed to the movement's success.

Identifying an issue can also mean being more specific about individuals or groups. The Vida Verde Women's Co-op planned to serve a niche group and cause: the health and community needs of female Brazilian house cleaners in Massachusetts (Gute et al, 2009). However, house cleaning is the most common job for Brazilian women in Massachusetts, which means that there is a widespread need among a relatively small profession (Gute et al, 2009). Since their focus was so exact, Vida Verde was able to connect with many Brazilian women within the cleaning profession in ways that a broad "house cleaning coalition" could not. Vida Verde saw house cleaners struggling with the use of toxic chemicals, so they addressed that need (Gute et al, 2009). Membership was appealing because it provided better tools and gave Brazilian female

immigrants a sense of community (Gute et al, 2009). The specificity of the needs of Brazilian house cleaners in Massachusetts made Vida Verde successful.

The NFWA's movement for farm workers is another example of identifying a specific problem. The NFWA had already organized thousands of Mexican American farmworkers, but the AWOC's actions on farms in Delano pushed them to action (United Farm Workers, N.D). Mexican American farm workers were being brought in as scabs against the AWOC's strikers, forcing the NFWA to decide whether to get involved (United Farm Workers, N.D). Deciding to get involved was crucial and identified two key focus areas. First, many of the farm workers were Mexican American, and while the NFWA (United Farm Workers, N.D) wasn't exclusionary, bringing their demographic group to the strike could make the movement more personal for the group's members (United Farm Workers, N.D). Additionally, the Delano strikes meant they could focus efforts more precisely, rather than across all of California (United Farm Workers, N.D). A general strike would have failed; there would have been no way for the NFWA or the AWOC to protest at more farms beyond Delano (United Farm Workers, N.D).

### **Mobilizing Latin@s**

Knowing the best ways to mobilize within social justice movements is important because any demographic group has framing and strategies that are uniquely appealing. These strategies are context-specific, based in both history and contemporary community values. Gender and religion are especially useful frames. Within environmental and social movements, there's a misconception that men naturally take leading roles; this is no different in Latin@ organizations (Zlolniski, 2008). However, Latina mothers are often moved to take part in social movements, pushing back on the idea that they should focus their time solely on the home and child rearing (Zlolniski, 2008). These women frame their activism as integral to keeping their families strong by working on community issues. Mothers are often the gateway for family members to get involved. This creates a family of participants who become networks for activist movements (Zlolniski, 2008).

Similarly, the church is a vital network for involvement given its historic and cultural ties with many Latin@s (Zlolniski, 2008). Churches, especially the Catholic Church, have served as centers of discussion and outreach among

Latin@s (Zlolniski, 2008). Crucially, the church is distinct from the political and the personal, and what is said by priests and pastors can significantly influence congregants who would otherwise be put off by political language (Zlolniski, 2008). Additionally, the church can champion issues an organization is addressing, as evidenced by the involvement of religious newspapers during the Delano farm strikes (Jacobs, 2013). These newspapers wrote not only about the NFWA actions, but also about the necessity of religious organizations supporting the strikers (Jacobs, 2013).

A variety of messages were used to prompt protestors to action against HR 4437, including appeals to “familism” (Martinez, 2010). Familism, a specific cultural emphasis on nuclear and extended family, embeds family matters within personal beliefs and decision making (Martinez, 2010). During the 2006 protests, this manifested in rhetoric that HR 4437 would separate families, with protestors carrying signs that said, “Keep families together” and “4437 destroys families” (Martinez, 2010).

Additionally, many Latin@ protestors saw the importance of the movement, and the importance of being in the movement with their families and children; they were marching to maintain what they had built personally rather than for an abstract loyalty (Martinez, 2010). In Denver, familism framing was especially important. Colorado’s Latin@ population is over 20 percent, an especially large group of people who would have been affected by the bill (Martinez, 2010). However, Colorado leans toward moderate to conservative politics, and more liberal immigration rhetoric would be less popular (Martinez, 2010). The familism framing allowed Denver organizers to mobilize large numbers of Latin@ families while still appealing to moderate voters (Martinez, 2010).

Another useful mobilization framework is “cultural citizenship,” which emphasizes the values of being an active citizen while maintaining cultural heritage (Honeyford, 2013). Many immigrant Latin@s, especially youth, face isolation from the greater community due to language and citizenship barriers that impede their engagement in school and local politics (Honeyford, 2013). Citizenship in the US relies heavily on assimilation. Immigrants are expected to replace cultural values from their home countries with US-centric ones (Honeyford, 2013).

Cultural citizenship doesn't ask immigrants to discard their values, instead cultural citizens use their experiences to inform how they interact with issues in the US. Cultural citizens can connect issues they've faced outside the US with issues they are currently experiencing, allowing them to engage more readily with these newer issues (Honeyford, 2013). This approach disenfranchises people who feel they have no reason to engage as non-citizens and turn them into active community participants when they see how their actions can have an effect (Honeyford, 2013).

While mobilization can move community members to action, strategies must also consider factors that will impede that movement. Policy contexts can and will affect Latin@ mobilization through institutional stereotypes shaping how policies are formed and fulfilled (Liang, 2017). "Degenerative policy" describes how a group's perceived deservingness within a system will impact their treatment within that system (Liang, 2017). Immigrants are perceived to have low deservingness due to the popular perception that they are "taking" resources from legal citizens who are more deserving (Liang, 2017). These stereotypes lead to lower levels of assistance for immigrant communities, which can be devastating.

"Undeserving" communities are more likely to face environmental hazards created by institutional bias that considers regulating those hazards to be less important (Liang, 2017). This is especially prevalent in states and localities with high anti-immigrant sentiment, as those areas have already marked immigrants as a less deserving population (Liang, 2017). In fact, this effect is so strong that even greater Latin@ representation in governance doesn't negate the issue (Liang, 2017). This matters because many Latin@ activists are immigrants or are tied to immigrant communities, so they need to contend with these forces when considering how to mobilize their communities. Despite the effects of degenerative policy, strong community connections and a strong political base can help offset these issues, limiting the impact of biased government regulators and officials who won't be able to quietly ignore those communities (Liang, 2017).

## **RECOMMENDATION 1: FIND A SPECIFIC AREA OF INTEREST**

To start adopting aspects of social activism, it's necessary to determine the social justice issues Defensores de la Cuenca wants to affect. Specificity is important because volunteers will be more engaged in the work when they can personally connect with it. Pursuing broad areas of interest will be much less successful; recall the gap between mainstream ENGOS and Latin@-run

nonprofits. Larger groups use their size to maintain generalized goals, such as “reducing pollution” or “protecting the wilderness,” which are abstract and lack a personal connection to a specific group. While this is useful for large organizations with plentiful resources, for a smaller group such as Defensores, keying in on issues affecting local communities is more impactful because volunteers can point to how they are directly impacted. Large ENGOs can bring in more affluent activists because their general rhetoric doesn't rely on people who are suffering to take action; they can rely on those who are disconnected from the issues at hand.

By identifying a specific issue, Defensores will be prepared two ways. First, because it knows the terms of the issue; rather than large ideas like “solving litter” or “preventing homelessness,” they will be better able to address smaller areas of need that can make obvious physical changes. Second, Defensores can better assess the needs of the community affected by that issue. This means looking within the communities Defensores works with and deciding what social determinants or issues they face; perhaps a lack of trash cans or access to public restrooms. Determining a community's specific needs will help Defensores foster a partnership with the community instead of imposing their positions. Focusing on specific community issues will allow for more accurate and concise planning the implementation steps of the recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2: CONNECT YOUR CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL PRIORITIES TO YOUR SOCIAL PRIORITIES**

Connecting environmental and social priorities will allow Defensores to maintain its current work toward environmental justice while justifying the foray into social justice. One way to achieve this connection is by reframing issues to convince people who may be off put by an issue's social or environmental justice aspects. For example, prison reform is often considered a social justice topic: how prisons treat the incarcerated and the conditions of the facilities are usual areas of focus for social activists (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). Accordingly, prison reform may be viewed as a dog whistle that will decrease neighborhood safety in areas affected by crime. However, the cause has an environmental justice aspect: prisons are as much a part of the neighborhood environment as homes and landscape. Prisons are often placed in neighborhoods with residents who are predominantly people of color. The prisons bring a host of issues, such as

hazardous waste dumps, lower community health, and over policing neighborhoods (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). These are all aspects of the lived environment that should be considered as social and environmental justice. Prison conditions are matters of environmental justice as well: prisons themselves are residential environments with implications for the community environment (Pellow and Vazin, 2019). Reframing the prison issues as environmental can lend credence to moving into a traditionally social justice area, and vice versa.

Reframing issues through an environmental or social justice lens is useful for maintaining Defensores' focus on environmental issues while entering more classically defined social issues. Making a connection between social and environmental issues can be important to identifying the best ways to engage with a specific community.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: UNDERSTAND THE VALUES LATIN@ MEMBERS OF YOUR COMMUNITY KEEP**

Every issue Defensores engages with will be shaped by explicit and implicit values; these values determine the level of community engagement in an issue's resolution. Various Latin@ communities will derive different meanings from their values, which can spell success or failure for any new initiatives. Some values will make communities welcome advocacy, while others will make them hostile. For example, many Latin@ communities are religious, and may be more open to reasoning that intersects with their religion. Mobilization to help impoverished community members, which may even include themselves, will be more effective when presented in the rhetoric held within churches. Understanding community values can help in deciding what framework to use when advocating to a community and will allow Defensores to connect over shared values with the people they are advocating for. For example, a framework that doesn't account for religious values might be seen as excluding religious community members from the movement, rather than being a point of connection. Building messaging on these values can effectively motivate those who might consider an issue less important without the religious framing (Liang, 2017).

The political affiliations of Latin@ communities and the values that come with them also need to be accounted for. The more conservative or liberal a

community is, the more likely it is to accept or reject certain framing. A more conservative community might be less inclined to accept liberal framing around helping the homeless, while a more liberal community might reject conservative rhetoric on the need for public safety (Liang, 2017). In fact, mentions of explicit political leanings beyond the stated issues can create division with moderate volunteers (Liang, 2017). Interrogating the values of the people you want to serve will help devise a more effective outreach strategy.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4: IDENTIFY THE SPECIFIC WAYS YOUR CHOSEN ISSUE AFFECTS LATIN@ COMMUNITIES**

Once an issue is chosen, it is necessary to consider how it is specific to the chosen community. As discussed, a specific issue will allow Defensores to advocate more clearly, not by engaging with conceptual ideas but with goals that will have a physical, visible effect on the community. However, an issue's specificity must reflect community needs. Larger ENGOs often focus on mustering volunteers without direct connections to the issue (Sullivan et al., 2024). For example, a large ENGO could mobilize volunteers for a park cleanup outside volunteers' communities, because they often attract higher income participants who can travel easily (Sullivan et al., 2024). While this method can still accomplish goals, it lacks the engagement of community members who regularly use the park.

This is where Defensores can step up: it can go directly to the communities that have needs but may lack the resources to act on their issues. Consider the case of ALAGLA, which involved a disparate group of Latin@ gardeners (Huerta and Morales, 2014). They needed to stop the leaf blower ban but were too busy and too competitive to organize naturally (Huerta and Morales, 2014). In opposition was a larger coalition of Los Angeles residents who had rallied around goals of pollution and noise reduction and who had institutional support (Huerta and Morales, 2014). However, once student activists were recruited, the gardeners were able to effectively combat the ban. The gardeners, unlike the larger coalition, had a stronger connection to the issue; a failure to mobilize would affect their lives much more than the larger coalition's (Huerta and Morales, 2014).

Defensores should consider this when advocating within a community: does the community lack tools to address the issues or they are unaware of the

needs? If the community has a close connection to the issue, using that connection will spark greater community interest. Lower-income Latin@ communities may have low participation because residents must focus their time and energy on jobs and family. By showing the direct connection between the community and the issue, residents are more likely to become involved, seeing the issue as necessary as their jobs and families (Martinez, 2010). In the end, residents will be more willing to participate in advocacy work.

## **RECOMMENDATION 5: FIND ALLIES IN LIKE-MINDED ORGANIZATIONS**

Issue advocacy is difficult, because every issue has many aspects that need to be addressed by advocacy groups. There are already different groups working in the same field and issues, whether it's environmental or social justice. Rather than viewing these different groups as obstacles to success, they should be seen as opportunities for collaboration. For example, the NFWA originally focused on Mexican American farmworkers, and were keenly aware of the issues facing that group (United Farm Workers, N.D). In some ways, the AWOC strike, which served primarily Filipino American farmworkers, might have been seen as an opportunity for the NFWA as Mexican American farmworkers were being hired as scabs (United Farm Workers, N.D). However, NFWA saw that working with the AWOC would lead to greater success for farmworker rights in general, a gambit that paid off (United Farm Workers, N.D).

Defensores can pursue opportunities for collaboration with like-minded organizations. Ideally, it would be best to collaborate with an organization holding a similar viewpoint, one that is aware of the community's needs. A larger organization gives up specificity for reach, a smaller organization will be accustomed to working as Defensores does. In addition to working with similarly minded organizations, it is key to collaborate with organizations already present in the community. These organizations have clout within the targeted community, so their acceptance of Defensores' goals gives the mission legitimacy and will attract community members. Collaboration may not always be an option, perhaps due to a lack of similar minded organizations or because of organizational differences, but there is no mistaking the power of interorganizational collaboration.

## **RECOMMENDATION 6: MAKE YOUR INITIAL GOALS SMALL**

Social and environmental justice are lofty, multifaceted goals and it is sometimes difficult to measure whether organizational efforts have been effective. To combat this, small initial goals for any new collaborative project are easier to measure. For example, Vida Verde wanted to alleviate the social isolation of Brazilian house cleaners and introduce greener cleaning supplies that would expose them to fewer harmful chemicals (Gute et al, 2009). Vida Verde started out small with workshops and informational sessions about its services and mission (Gute et al, 2009). A collaboration with local universities helped them reach hundreds of potential members (Gute et al, 2009). Out of that process, they only accepted ten members, which may seem like the organization was faltering (Gute et al, 2009). However, that inaugural group reported satisfaction with Vida Verde's regime, finding the new cleaning supplies less irritating (Gute et al, 2009). Because those ten participants found the co-op to be successful, Vida Verde expanded its operations and now has over 1,000 members (Gute et al, 2009).

Vida Verde shows the importance of starting with small goals and scaling up. Smaller goals also means that the community can see the results and successes of your efforts, making them keener to get involved.

Take the issue of potholes: they are common on city streets across the US. If you tell a community with a lot of potholes that your organization is working to fix potholes across the city, they are unlikely to be enthused because they have no assurance that the work will reach their community, especially if they've already been overlooked by public works. If you tell them you're working to fix a pothole on their street, they will be mobilized, because they can see direct success. That success will encourage community members to work with you to fill more neighborhood potholes, and maybe even get involved beyond their community's needs.

By starting with smaller, actionable goals, people can see an organization's success more directly, allowing it to scale up the original goal. Actionable, smaller goals are also better for morale. If the pursued "success" requires multiple years of planning and execution, obstacles to that success will make the goal seem further and further away. Smaller goals leading up to a

larger overall goal allows community members and the organization to celebrate success, rather than anticipation.

# NEEDS ASSESSMENT

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS NEEDS ASSESSMENT

This assessment identifies a process for Defensores de la Cuenca to decide on a starting point for social justice advocacy. Rather than a completed assessment, it is a baseline for discussion of what Defensores should accomplish in the brainstorming process. The suggested assessment is in five steps: identifying team needs, measuring and allocating resources, collecting internal information, gathering external information, and getting feedback. Through these steps, Defensores will be able to conduct a more formal needs assessment for the chosen issue.

## 1. IDENTIFYING TEAM NEEDS

### Assign a Project Leader

Assigning a lead is crucial, as the assessment will need team members to collaborate to reach a shared goal. The project manager will be responsible for determining the project deliverables and for ensuring the team is on track to meet them. In this phase, the manager will also assemble the team to work on the project, determining a preliminary events timetable and assigning deadlines.

## **Identify Areas the Team Needs to Work On**

The team should determine what will be needed for the project to work. This means breaking down the steps of the needs assessment. Based on the identified issue, what are the parts necessary for completion, including determining project scope, the project's timeline, amount of data collection, identifying key stakeholders, etc? This is useful in the planning stage and will allow greater focus in the project's later stages.

## **Determine Data Collection Priorities**

Setting priorities for data collection helps the team better understand the most important areas for capturing project information. Planning should consider data within and outside the organization. Collecting information on all project aspects will allow for a greater exploration of the problem. Collected data should include recent policy developments, severity of need within different communities, expected amount of resource expenditures, and community sentiment around the issue.

## **2. MEASURING AND ALLOCATING RESOURCES**

### **Decide on Issue Areas**

Deciding on issue areas determines aspects of the issue to explore. Essentially, it is to determine three to five different focus areas for the project's outcome and consider the obstacles to solutions. For example, if the goal is to help a community get potholes paved, the possible issue areas are getting the local government to acknowledge the potholes, getting them filled, and decreasing the number of new potholes. From these areas, the team can decide on the best organization for research. Another important issue area is determining the urgency of need. If the need is urgent, issue areas and the timeline should reflect that urgency.

### **Decide on Indicators for Success and Failure**

Indicators should determine if the collected data supports or disagrees with chosen issue areas. Indicators will be validated through further data

collection, as they will show what is and isn't showing up in the issue assessment. These indicators allow for synthesis of the data collected in later assessment stages. For example, one aspect of fixing potholes is knowing how many there are in an area. Another useful indicator might be how many accidents happen on potholed streets. The greater the number of accidents, the more likely those potholes are an actual issue that needs to be addressed.

### **3. COLLECTING INTERNAL INFORMATION**

#### **Determine Organizational Readiness**

Organizational readiness describes an organization's overall fitness, based on other projects underway and how those projects might impede the organization's ability to address and work on new issues and projects. In this step, the organization must gauge whether it can launch a new project alongside ongoing ones. For example, how many projects is the organization currently involved in, and what are their timelines? Can these projects continue alongside the new issue project, or do they need to be scaled back to work in tandem? These are important factors to consider, because the organization will continue its advocacy whether the new project seems feasible or not. Any new advocacy should be assessed for its importance to continuing the organization's stated goals. Finding intersections between old and new projects is useful because it may reveal ways to reframe older projects in relation to newly identified problems.

#### **Research Current Knowledge Gaps**

Finding knowledge gaps can be extended by tapping into external research. Gaps arise in the form of policy issues surrounding the specific issue areas chosen. Entering a new form of advocacy means that some gaps will occur naturally due to lack of information on how to best undertake that new advocacy, but gaps may also arise due to members' lack of experience with an issue. Assessing these gaps involves asking several questions. What do members know about the issue? What are the most important factors that haven't been researched by the organization? Is it crucial to bridge the information gaps upfront or can they be learned in the field? Determining knowledge gaps before

the project begins will allow for a smoother transition because they won't come as a surprise.

## **4. GATHERING EXTERNAL INFORMATION**

### **Determine Community Needs**

This step determines the needs of the target community. This is crucial, because the project goal is to benefit the target community. To that end, the target community must be described. What is its geographic location? How and where is the issue affecting the residents? What is the community's awareness of the issue? What additional information connects the residents who are affected? Where does the community stand relative to the organization's desired end outcome? This step allows for the interrogation of community concerns regarding an issue's past, present, and future.

### **Determine What Is Already Being Done on the Issue**

To avoid redundancy, research should also be collected on efforts already underway. Look at government action: has the government responded to the issue? When was the last time it did so? Does it plan to do anything in the future to address community concerns? The same questions should be asked of community organizations. This gives a greater understanding of what has and hasn't worked to solve the issue, and can open opportunities for future collaboration with groups that have experience with the community's politics.

## **5. GETTING FEEDBACK**

### **Gather Stakeholder Feedback**

Stakeholder feedback allows groups inside and outside the organization to give their opinions on everything done so far. While the research up to this point is crucial, it can blind the researcher to outside opinions. Feedback sessions should be open forums centered around three questions: what areas of need were successfully identified, what aspects are we missing from the assessment, and how can we better collaborate with the community to achieve the project outcomes. These feedback sessions will inform the team of progress made and

will provide information for the community attendees. Community members can ask questions about the project's scope and scale, why it's important to the organization, and how their opinions will be considered. Community feedback gives a window into how the targeted community will interact with the project as it is underway and allow for course corrections as necessary.

# CONCLUSION

Defensores de la Cuenca faces a challenge: how to add social justice goals into its advocacy while remaining an environmental justice organization? This is especially challenging due to Defensores' focus on the Latin@ community, which is already underserved in the social justice space. The community is also underserved in terms of research. Much of the research doesn't target Latin@s, taking the position that a more egalitarian research approach is more accurate. This assumption is wholly incorrect, as the field of Latin@ social justice organizing is rich and varied, with plenty of under researched evidence in the field.

Social and environmental conditions are inextricably linked, with both their goals and successes relying on one another to work. Whether it's a co-op providing safer supplies to Brazilian house cleaners in Massachusetts or a Latin@ gardener's movement working to preserve their livelihoods from a leaf blower ban, the connections exist as long as there are organizers determined to make them.

The important step is to identify a concrete, actionable goal. Few organizations are created with the knowledge of where they will eventually end up, but having a solid foundation of what you want to achieve will allow for better advocacy. Rather than pursuing a generalized goal, making an issue specific to the community identifies problem areas, and gives that community something to rally around. When people see an organization make a positive impact in their community, they notice. When that same organization makes multiple positive impacts, it creates new volunteers who will go beyond their community to serve the organization.

Defensores de la Cuenca already has an advantage in issue identification; they've been advocating for Latin@s in Maryland for years. Expanding their advocacy to social justice has a greater chance of success because Defensores has built a reputation for working with Latin@ issues. They have become important to the community with tireless work to improve the natural environment in Latin@ communities. Expanding their work is made easier because Defensores has proven its value.

Moving into social justice will come with challenges. Defensores must evaluate the values and issues held by different Latin@ community members to craft better advocacy strategies. But Defensores' past work brings benefits. It has created a sense of community among its volunteers, making it easier for volunteers to adopt the new goals. There are challenges in creating a new social justice agenda, but they are different for established organizations and newly created ones. Defensores de la Cuenca have already faced these challenges.

The key issue will be finding a workable, specific social justice goal that fits Defensores. Whatever that issue may be, Defensores de la Cuenca has the experience to make a successful transition into social justice.

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