

# Building Organizations in a Movement Moment

BY BETH ZEMSKY & DAVID MANN

*“A movement organization is not a contradiction in terms, but it is, by definition, in tension. It is always a compromise between the ideals by which it judges itself and the realities of its daily practices...” (Ferree & Martin, 1995, p. 8)*

As progressive groups try to negotiate the compromise that Ferree & Martin (1995) describe, many ask themselves hard questions about who they are, what they do, how they do their work, and with whom they are doing it. Organizations often ask such questions during a strategic planning process. What is different about this moment in history is that many organizations are now asking these questions to intentionally link their work to the development of a broad movement for progressive social change. The story of the faith-based organization ISALAH illustrates a number of these questions and one organization’s attempt to respond.

## ISALAH’s Story

In 2003 ISALAH was a strong faith-based organization with 75 member congregations in the Twin Cities metropolitan region and in St. Cloud, Minnesota. They had a history of developing strong leaders, capacity to hold large public meetings of up to 1,500, and the ability to win significant issue campaigns like gaining \$60 million in public money for cleaning up contaminated sites for job development in the state. They saw that things were changing in the environment, opening up new possibilities for change that could address deeper systemic problems impacting racial and economic justice. As they set their sights towards larger campaigns (larger turnout, bigger legislative issues) they began to realize the need for new structures and strategies to realize the potential power of what they had built.

Like many organizations, ISALAH experienced a



ISALAH’s Faith in Democracy campaign kickoff.

Photo courtesy of Kevin Kidnie

frustrating level of turnover in emerging leadership once specific issue campaigns ended. Outside the strong core, leaders had trouble understanding the whole of the organization and the connections among the different issues the organization worked on. Like many community organizations, ISALAH trained their leaders to build power. But there was a limited vision of what they were building power for – other than to win specific changes on particular issues. And there was a general lack of understanding of the whole of the organization in the larger community.

Over the past five years ISALAH has been repositioning itself as a significant player in a new emerging movement for racial and economic justice. ISALAH’s initial motivation was to address the limitations they were experiencing in their own organizing. But over the years they have come to a new understanding of their role in building this new movement. As a result they have added new movement strategies while retaining the many powerful elements of their history, like their strong leadership development.

The key elements that were added in this evolution



Photo courtesy of ISIAAH

**Northeast caucus meeting of ISIAAH's Renewing the Promise campaign.**

(still underway) are:

- Articulating a set of beliefs, values, and convictions about who they are, what they stand for and what kind of world they are trying to create.
- Developing long-term strategies that are not focused on specific issues but on a broader transformative agenda.
- Incorporating the development of 'critical consciousness' into their leadership development work so that more leaders have a deeper understanding of their organization's vision and strategies.
- Consciously linking the range of issues that emerge from their leaders to this broader worldview.
- Expanding entry points for people who want to be engaged in the organization by moving more of the "action" out of the center of the organization and into decentralized structures.
- Opening leadership structures at the core of the organization to expand the number and diversity of people determining the future of the organization.
- Investing more in issue-related coalitions and forging long-term strategic partnerships with other organizations.

Since 2003, ISIAAH has now grown to nearly 100 congregations. They can turn out 4,000-5,000 people to a public meeting. Their leadership has expanded and has a deep investment in the transformations in society that they are seeking together. Increasingly, the larger community is seeking to partner with them, and public officials respect them for their ability to open up new conversations about what is needed to achieve a just society.

ISIAAH is not unique in its drive to rethink how it does its work. Indeed, the desire to more overtly connect organizational goals and strategies to movement building has become more urgent and amplified for many groups in the past few years as groups and organizers sense, often in unarticulated ways, that we are in the midst of an important historical shift. One of the characteristics of this shift is the potential for a surge of new movement activity.

## **A Movement Moment**

*"We live not just in an age of change, but in a change of ages." (Kelly, 2006)*

We have just completed the 2008 presidential primary season. Every day we heard about record-

breaking turnouts in the primaries and caucuses. There is excitement in the air and a buzz about a sense of possibility. While some might attribute all of this energy to the specific candidates, there is something deeper and broader going on that is not just connected to this election cycle. This level of excitement and grassroots engagement is a reflection of the historical moment we are in. Through all the darkest days of the supremacy of the Right, this is a moment for which many have been hungering and slowly, methodically working towards. Many commentators, both in mainstream and alternative medias, have started using the “m” word (“movement”) to describe what is happening around the country during this election season. However, rather than creating this moment, the candidates caught the early surge of a movement wave, and through their efforts, are amplifying its energy.

Around the country, organizations are questioning the ways they have always done things and are experimenting with new strategies. Reflections of this movement moment can be seen through the activities and transitions among activist groups such as:

- Reframing group identities to intentionally seek the intersections of identities, issues, and goals.
- Forming new coalitions and partnerships to shift from temporary relationships to long lasting partnerships focused on building power.
- Articulating ideological connections among issues previously thought to be disconnected or embedded only in specific identity-based movements.
- Moving to a longer-term focus on systemic changes rather than being limited by specific, often compromised, policy goals.

This blurring of organizational lines in structures, strategies and the actual work were largely inconceivable 10 years ago among grassroots membership organizations. But now there are many stories of organizations beginning this evolution.

A recent example of this occurred in the context of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism. In late 2007, a coalition of over 300 national, state, and local LGBT and allied groups came together to form a coalition called “United ENDA” to work *against* the passage of a federal employment non-discrimination act (ENDA) that would have outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation, but would not have covered transgendered people or gender variants of all sexual orientations. In addition, the bill would have provided other exclusions that would have weakened progressive goals.

The coalition strongly objected to the bill’s narrow focus on a specific, limited policy victory at the expense of core values such as inclusion, equity, and justice. The

coalition was able to successfully impact the conversations in Congress around these issues. Even more significantly, it impacted the dynamics of power in the LGBT community and how such issues are conceptualized and framed.

This shift was palpable a few months later in February 2008 when at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s annual Creating Change conference. Task Force Executive Director Matt Foreman challenged the attendees to utilize the redefined sense of community and power that came out of the formation of United ENDA to build towards a progressive future that

Most existing ways of working and planning are not geared towards taking advantage of such a moment.

advances a vision of a transformed society. Foreman challenged LGBT activists “to think and act beyond the narrow confines of our own LGBT-specific interests and be part and parcel of a transformed America” as he redefined traditional LGBT policy issues to be fundamentally linked with issues of racial and economic justice, peace and demilitarization, universal health care, and immigration reform (Foreman, 2008).

While many others had made these linkages over the past two decades, this analysis and its political implications had not been widely understood and embraced. As he ended his speech, more than 2,000 activists in attendance rose to their feet in affirmation, both for the vision of a transformed society and their commitment to being part of a broader movement working towards this goal. *This was a movement moment.*

While exciting, this moment also presents organizations with a clear challenge. Most existing ways of working and planning are not geared towards taking advantage of such a moment. Despite the palpable sense that this is a moment to build towards a new movement for progressive change, there is a paucity of

models regarding how to conduct organizational strategic planning in a way that intentionally and explicitly contributes to the strategic development of the broader movement.

For reasons explored further below, traditional organizational development and strategic planning methodologies alone are not adequate to respond to these needs. This gap in organizational development

## Social movements tend to cluster temporally in waves.

practice will be addressed in this article by drawing on aspects of traditional organizational development, social movement theory, and experience as organizers and activists. Specifically discussed will be the context in which social movement organizations are currently doing their work, challenges they encounter, and suggestions regarding how to engage in a different kind of strategic development for this moment.

### Social Movement Trends

In order to understand the challenges and opportunities these times present, it is helpful to first explore the nature of social movements and their cycles.

A social movement can be defined as a collection of persons or groups who come together around a common concern. Typically their mission is to bring about some type of societal change relative to their concern. Social movements tend to be characterized by the following elements:

1. *Collective intentional action.* Social movement activities are intentional actions carried out with some degree of coordination among a group of people who share common concerns, identities, core values or goals. The collective action is geared towards bringing about or opposing some kind of significant societal change.
2. *Continuity of sustained interaction:* A level of collective action is maintained over time through some type or degree of organization. The type or degree of organization can vary tremendously from small informal coordinating bodies to large formal organizations.
3. *Outsider status:* Participants tend to be, or perceive themselves to be, outsiders who lack adequate access to traditional means to influence the centers of

power that affect their lives. Therefore, social movement participants tend to utilize tactics outside the regular ways of accessing institutional authority to attempt to achieve their shared mission.

4. *Scope and scale:* Social movements tend to address large-scale issues such as the distribution of social or economic power, transformation of the culture, or demands for structural change (McAdam & Snow, 1997).

5. *Formation of a collective identity:* New social movements promote a shared collective identity that transforms the personal into the political and links people through group values, attitudes, commitments, symbols, and norms for behavior. Collective identity is more than the addition of individual personal identities. It is the shared definition of a group that derives from people's common interests, experiences, and solidarity with each other. The emotional connection to a collective identity enables people to see themselves as part of a broader "we" and to engage in activities that are not bounded by a narrow definition of "self-interest" (Mueller, 1997; Taylor & Whittier 1999).

Social movements tend to cluster temporally in waves. Each wave has its own lifecycle: a beginning, a peak, and a trough (Snow and Benford, 1992). Specific movements within any given historical wave are ripples off the bigger wave. These specific movements tend to share the same way of analyzing and explaining the problems facing their communities. This shared explanation provides a way of interpreting experience and a core narrative that underlies everything the movement does. Social movement theorists call this core interpretative lens the "master frame" for a movement wave (Lakoff, 2005; Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow, et al, 1997).

Framing is "meaning" work; a struggle over the production of values, ideas, symbols, and language that mobilizes some people while dampening the mobilization of others (Gerzon, 1997). It is an active and ongoing process that results in a sense of shared understanding for a group that helps render events that happen in the world or close to home collectively meaningful. By simplifying and condensing aspects of the "world out there," successful organizing frames function to categorize experience and guide action. The more a frame resonates with the daily life of a community, the more mobilization potential it has (Snow, et al, 1997).

Much of progressive activity based in the United States over the past 50 years has been linked to the great movement wave of the Civil Rights Movement. From its earliest inception following the end of World War II through the end of the 20th century, the Civil Rights Movement provided the energy and the master frame of

“rights” that contributed to the growth of many other associated movements such as the Women’s Rights movement (the second wave of feminism), the American Indian Movement, the LGBT movement, Immigrant Rights movement, etc. Indeed, even movements during this period that were not organized around specific identity communities were framed in terms of a rights agenda such as the Animal Rights movement and Environmental Rights (Benford & Snow, 1992; Project South, 2005).

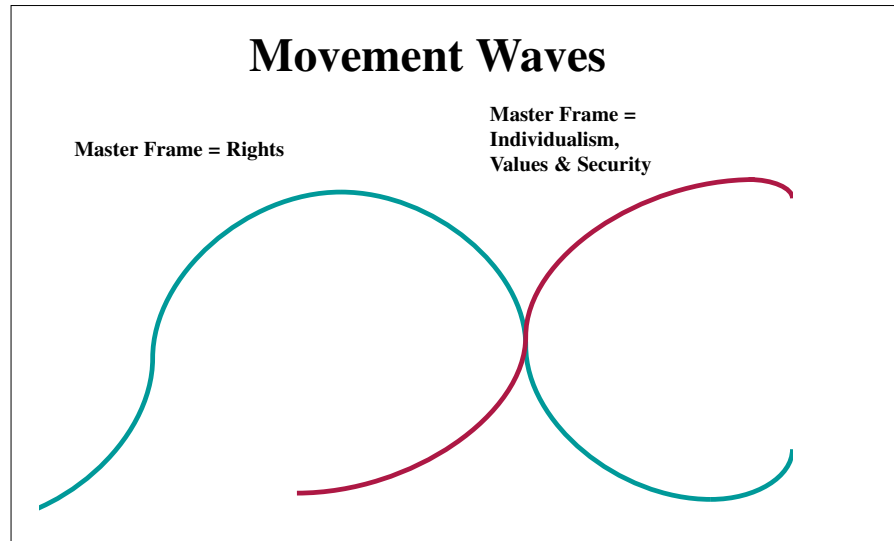
The progressive framing of “rights” in the context of all of these movements created a shared understanding of the problems that the lack of rights created for groups of people in United States and with regards to particular issues. The “rights” frame provided a lens that helped diagnose and understand what was in need of change (i.e., the lack of rights) and who or what to blame for these problems (i.e., government or the courts who needed to grant the rights.) It also helped articulate an alternative set of possibilities and motivated many to believe that their lives and their communities could be different, including changes in laws or policies plus cultural changes leading to transformations in the practices, norms, and values of the dominant culture (such as challenging racism, classism, dominant constructions of gender and sexuality, “family” forms, etc.).

However, as noted, social movements happen in waves. Many historians and sociologists suggest that the peak of the civil rights wave occurred some time during the late 1960s. This shift in the resonant power of the “rights” frame was demonstrated in sharp changes in election exit polls. In 1964, “rights” and “civil rights” polled as the most important issue facing the country. By 1972, it no longer appeared as a prime concern (McAdam, 1997).

Just as waves in the ocean are not solitary phenomenon, nor are social movement waves. Movement waves are also impacted by economic, governmental, and social trends (Project South, 2005). Opposition movements on the conservative Right ride their own waves providing a counter force to the waves of the Left (Klandermans, 1992). Many authors and researchers observed that the momentum of the current wave of New Right activism began its surge in the mid 1960s, stemming in part out of Barry Goldwater’s ill-fated presidential campaign (Armstrong, 2000; Gerzon, 1997; Lakoff, 2005). This wave of conservative Right movement strength was building towards its peak during

much of the slow cresting and falling of the Civil Rights social movement wave. Indeed for much of the time since Ronald Reagan’s presidency in the early 1980s, the force of the New Right’s movement wave has been dominant and provided a significant undertow to the progressive movement.

Given the energy of these social movement waves, a key challenge for many progressive groups over the



past two decades has been to continue to organize and mobilize people, resources, and attention around the “rights” frame that is no longer resonant with the majority of the American people. Progressives continue to talk about “rights,” while the conservative Right talks about values, security, and individual responsibility. It is not that “rights” are not needed or essential to the well-being of communities, or that the progressive agenda is wrong per se. Rather, because we have been on the downward slope of the last progressive movement wave for so long, the way social problems are defined and the solutions that are suggested are simply no longer as meaningful to a majority of people. No matter how well progressives strategize or organize, continuing to utilize a frame that is no longer resonant will not successfully reach and influence a broad public to join the effort to change the direction of communities and the country.

As noted above, there is reason to believe that the last few years marked the bottom of the last progressive social movement wave, and the slow upward flow of a new progressive social movement wave has begun. However, the moment will be missed if progressives fail to understand or respond appropriately. Most critical to this discussion is an understanding of the different roles organizations need to play at different points in the

movement cycle. During the upward part of a social movement wave, different organizing and organizational tasks are necessary. Specifically, organizations need to focus on base building and realigning themselves to strategically develop the movement. This is also a critical time for developing and disseminating a new movement frame.

If progressives catch the wave, it will become our movement moment.

## **Building a Movement Moment**

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In their groundbreaking research of grassroots organizations, Chetkovich and Kunreuther (2006) found that most progressive grassroots organizations did not see themselves as part of a broader movement, despite their desire to work for large-scale change. These organizations did not locate themselves in a larger network of agents of change and were not linked through a shared core sense of vision and values. As one of their interview subjects commented, “We are not in a time of movement. We have movement strategies, but not a movement.” As a result of this finding, Chetkovich and Kunreuther distinguished social change organizations from social movement organizations. They defined social change organizations as “non-profit organizations that aim to address systemic problems in a way that will increase the power of marginalized groups, communities or interests.”

In contrast, social movement organizations function to carry out the five social movement functions outlined above: addressing large-scale issues, providing avenues for access to people outside traditional channels of power, planning and executing collective intentional action, forming a collective identity, and providing continuity of sustained interaction (McAdam & Snow, 1997; Mueller, 1997; Taylor & Whittier 1999). Social movement organizations (SMOs) tend to be focused on the development of a critical consciousness regarding its frame and use organizing strategies and tactics to disseminate this critical consciousness in a way that eventually leads to political and cultural change. Strategies that focus on individual transformation or concrete policy changes may be part of the repertoire of these organizations. However, SMOs typically utilize these activities as strategies to disseminate the broader transformational power of their frame rather than as the organizations’ primary objective.

While these definitions are helpful, they are not rigid distinctions. Rather, they expand thinking about grassroots organizational development and how to be more intentional about utilizing the power of this movement moment to both strengthen organizations

and build a new movement for transformational, societal change.

As progressives ride the surge into a new wave of movement activity, they need to take advantage of this moment to re-conceptualize organizational structures, strategies, and identities. The most essential shift, and perhaps the most difficult one, is shifting from thinking

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about organizations as disconnected social change organizations (each with its own organizational mission, vision, values, strategies, and organizational infrastructures to fund and maintain) into being a social movement organization that is linked through a broadly shared analysis of social conditions, commonly held core principles, and a shared commitment and vision to progressive change (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006). As progressive organizations make this shift, it is also important to shift organizing strategies and organizational strategic plans to account for this changing condition.

## **Building Organizations**

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Most existing social change organizations were built during a different period of movement activity. These organizations’ missions, strategies, and structures likely made sense at the time they were created. The current moment suggests that they need to evolve. As social movement organizations have attempted to negotiate these shifts, they have often sought out organizational development practitioners for assistance. Unfortunately, traditional organizational development theory and practice has not always been helpful for social movement organizations.

Organizational theory is developed from the systematic study of organizations. The goal of organizational theory is to help people understand,

diagnose, and respond to emerging organizational needs and problems. Most of the research regarding organizations has focused on for-profit entities, such as the corporation, or nonprofit organizations involved in service delivery or the arts (Daft, 2001). Given the field's deductive theory building based on observations of these types of organizations, it is not surprising that most organizational theory makes theoretical assumptions about organizations that most SMOs violate. These assumptions are also integrated into traditional strategic planning approaches that limit the effectiveness of these approaches for SMOs.

One key to building an organization that contributes to movement development is reframing the process of strategic planning. Currently, many non-profit social change organizations engage in some type of planning process every one to five years. Sometimes this process is undertaken as part of an internally motivated process of reflection, rejuvenation, and recommitment. At other times, these processes are geared towards gaining donor or funder legitimacy. Sometimes these processes are helpful in moving the future direction of work, and at other times they yield little but another document on the shelf.

There are three key differences between social change organizations and social movement organizations that directly relate to their planning processes. This includes their level of organizational permeability, the use of an environmental scan as part of the planning process, and the planning time frame.

### ORGANIZATIONAL PERMEABILITY

Organizational permeability has to do with how open or closed the organization's boundaries are to the environment in which the organization is situated. Traditional organization development theory suggests that the more permeable the organization is, the more at risk it is to unintended consequences from its interactions with its environment (Brown, 1980; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Mintzberg, 1979). Based on an assumption that effective organizations are systems with limited and controlled exposure to environmental influence, most traditional strategic planning processes look inward in the organization to redesign its internal functioning to maximize achievement of its mission in the organization's current environment.

Social change organizations tend to have semi-permeable boundaries. People who are in the organization know they are internal to it, and people

## Planning Process of Social Change Organizations & Social Movement Organizations

	Social Change Organizations	Social Movement Organizations
Organizational Permeability	Permeability threatens organizational stability and sustainability	Permeability necessary for organizational success
Focus of Environmental Scan	Seeks to understand the current environment so it can determine the best way to function within it	Analyzes the current environment to provide information about how to change it
Planning Horizon	1 to 5 years	10 to 20 years with regular review and updates

who are outside the organization know that they are not part of the organization. These boundaries of inclusion may be demarcated by symbols such as receiving a paycheck or by completing a training program to become a volunteer to participate in organization activities (Albert & Whetten, 1985). These boundaries may be fuzzy in some social change organizations, but at the simplest level, most social change organizations can determine who is internal or external to the organization and the boundaries of where the organization ends and where the organization's environment begins. Even when "stakeholder" interviews are done, traditional strategic planning methodologies bring the information back "inside" the boundaries of the organization to make meaning of the information in its internal planning process. The focus, then, of strategic planning is on building the strength of the organization.

In contrast, most social movement organizations *desire* permeability. This permeability is important to the SMOs in terms of offering a broad palette from which the organization draws its widely held mission and vision. In addition, this openness is vital to who is perceived to originate the strategic work of the organization, who may see themselves as doing this work, and who may align their own identities with the collective identity of the organization. All of these are core elements related to a SMO's ability to build its base. For SMOs, then, the focus of strategic planning intentionally needs to include an external focus on building the strength of a broader movement.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SCANS

Using traditional strategic planning methodologies, social change organizations often conduct environment scans that they utilize to figure out how to function in the current environment while impacting some part of it. In fact, assumptions are often made about the static nature of the environment based on that scan and plans are developed based on those assumptions (Stern, 1999).

Social movement organizations conduct environment scans that often include an explicit environmental power analyses to determine how to significantly alter their current environments. The primary purpose is to affect major change in the environment, so planning must be directed at changing the environment and be flexible enough to adapt as these anticipated and even unplanned changes occur.

## PLANNING TIME HORIZON

Social change organizations, particularly those non-profits that currently operate as charitable institutions (501(c)(3) in the tax-code), tend to focus on shorter-term and relatively smaller scale social change on the individual or community level. Because they plan within the context of the current environment, organizations necessarily focus on a shorter time horizon. Typical planning horizons are from one to three years with a five-year horizon as the exception.

Social movement organizations tend to focus on major systems-change work that by its nature requires a broad understanding of power and a long-term planning arc. Strategies and goals that are developed are necessarily focused on a longer period of time (10-20 years) and are designed to be flexible enough to adapt to the changing environment they hope to bring about. Within the long-term time frame of the arc of a social movement wave, organizations still need to conduct short term planning to maintain their organizational strategic focus and alignment.

## Moving from Strategic Planning to Movement Strategy Development

To move from being a social change organization to being part of a movement requires a fundamental re-conceptualization of the strategic planning process for an organization. Organizations need to reframe strategic planning in the context of promoting a transformational vision and movement development. Providing strategic leadership toward movement development is more like leading a jazz ensemble than leading an orchestra for which the score is written and the conductor is providing direction. A jazz ensemble, on the other hand, is a model of a diverse group coming together sometimes in a “chaotic, turbulent

Providing strategic leadership toward movement development is more like leading a jazz ensemble.

environment; making fast, irreversible decisions; highly interdependent on one another to interpret equivocal information; dedicated to innovation” and the creation of a novel, transformed result (Barrett, 1998).

Essential to the process is a vision of a transformed result that is grounded in relationships with others. Both individuals and organizations need to ground themselves in something that will sustain them over the long haul, through the discordant times, to a time when the underlying melody breaks through and pulls it all together.

As organizations are attempting to link their strategic planning to movement building the following planning questions are helpful:

1. What are the fundamental values, beliefs, assumptions, and convictions (worldview) that shape how your organization sees and understands the world around you? How is your worldview in conflict with what is currently taking place? What about your convictions is being violated?
2. What is your envisioned future for your community, region, and country? What are you trying to transform? How will your worldview be lived out? What is your organization’s role in bringing about this transformation?
3. With whom will you need to be in relationship to achieve this vision? What will be the nature and qualities of these relationships?
4. What kind of power do you need to build? How do you want to change the relationships of power around you?
5. What strategic role does your organization play in these relationships toward actualizing the common vision?
6. What core strategies will your organization deploy to serve your role in working towards the common vision? How do these strategies relate to those



deployed by your strategic partners?

7. What kind of leadership will the organization need to achieve its goals? Who holds and participates in this leadership? How will it be developed?

In addition to the organizational shift that results from centering a planning process on the questions above, planning for movement strategy development also necessitates a shift in skill development. This includes a shift from organizational capacity building that is primarily focused on the development of social change skills such as lobbying, door knocking, fundraising, public speaking, etc., to also include movement building skills. These movement building skills include:

1. The ability to inspire people to conceptualize a transformed future and the construction of organizing strategies that support the development of critical consciousness.

2. The ability to unmask the dominant worldview and articulate and elevate a new worldview that is expressed in a master frame for the new social movement. Skill development focuses on developing the analysis and the ability to contrast the transformational worldview with the dominant worldview and constructing strategies about how the work is talked about.

3. Utilizing the new frame/worldview to construct an overarching transformational agenda.

4. Constructing actions that are consistent with and amplify the transformational worldview. Existing tactics are examined to see how they may be unintentionally reinforcing the dominant worldview and/or letting it stand by not addressing it. Campaigns and actions are infused with strategies for shifting worldview, including who is at the table and with whom alliances are built. (For more information on worldview and building power, see [www.grassrootspolicy.org](http://www.grassrootspolicy.org))

## Closing Thoughts

While this is an exciting historical moment full of potential, the evolution from operating as a social change organization to working as a social movement organization is not an easy task. As with any change or evolution tensions, will arise.

It is important to note that the process outlined above most often is not linear. Rather, it is iterative and involves new learning and innovation as new people are brought into the organization's work, the environment changes, and the movement wave continues.

Due to the limits of our imaginations, or what the Grassroots Policy Project calls the "colonization of consciousness," an organization might make several passes through the above processes in order to pace the

amount of change it makes in terms of forming an actionable transformative agenda. For example, it has taken ISALAH five years of experimentation, hard work, reflection, and learning to get to the point of defining a transformative agenda for themselves. This isn't just an intellectual process. Leaders and staff will find themselves transformed by this work – the work of movement building.

A note of caution: While this historical moment calls for the shift described above, not every social change organization has to become a social movement organization. There is important work that social change organizations do that is needed as a new movement is built. It is important not to lose focus of what works for an organization. No matter what path an organization takes, they can utilize this movement moment to amplify their work towards the development of a new transformational movement for progressive change.

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## END NOTES

Endnotes referenced in this article can be found on page 59.