

BEA: Grassroots Caucus Report
August 8–10, 2017 | Brooklyn, NY



Title: BEA and UPROSE Host Inaugural Grassroots Convening

To the Afro-Caribbean beats of Dr. Drum and Bomba Yo, Building Equity and Alignment for Impact (BEA) kicked off our first Grassroots Caucus convening in New York City. Co-hosted by UPROSE, Brooklyn’s oldest Latinx community organization, the first evening of the convening witnessed old friends in the struggle reuniting, a memorable Puerto Rican dinner, and a powerful discussion about longstanding and current struggles against displacement in Brooklyn.

Following the Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing, BEA grassroots participants from across the country listened to stories from Sunset Park community members in order to be grounded in place and acknowledge local grassroots leadership. We listened as Antoinette and Saul – life long residents of Brooklyn – shared the impact of UPROSE in the community due to its core belief that “change has to come with community, with the people.” Marcela, a community organizer with Protect Our Working Waterfront Alliance (POWWA) then educated us

on the threats posed by plans for the BQX electric trolley and the difficulty of organizing as many immigrant families are living in fear of deportation.



We concluded our evening session with thoughts by UPROSE’s Executive Director Elizabeth Yeampierre and Eddie Bautista of the New York City EJ Alliance. Elizabeth shared the inspirational power that young leaders demonstrated at UPROSE’s recent Climate Justice Youth Summit and their collective commitment to “make acts of resistance tangible.” We also learned from Elizabeth about the intersections between climate justice and displacement, and listened as she described the Puerto Rican community’s resistance to corporate efforts to control the NYC Puerto Rican parade. Finally, Eddie reminded everyone that ultimately we are united by very personal experiences of environmental injustices – lived experiences of harm and struggle that indelibly shape our everyday work and commitment to frontline communities.

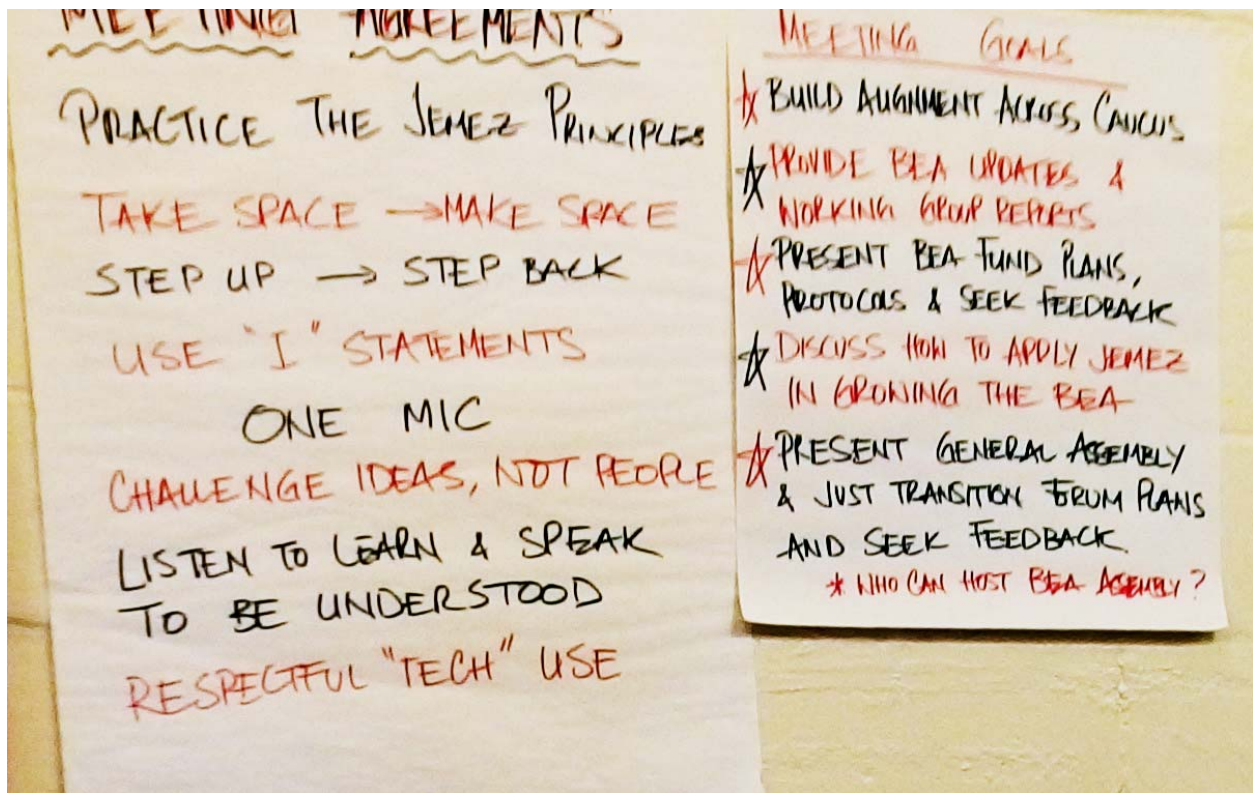
Moved by the resistive sounds of Bomba Yo and firmly grounded in the history of UPROSE and Brooklyn, BEA grassroots participants adjourned for the evening ready to engage one another with the Jemez Principles as our guide, and love for our communities at the forefront of our thoughts.

Upcoming BEA Forums and Working Group Updates

Facilitated by Ananda Lee Tan, the BEA Grassroots Caucus provided an opportunity for grassroots leaders to shape the strategy and upcoming plans of BEA as we work to support communities of color that are increasingly under assault at this political juncture. After presentations on the background history of the BEA and the centrality of the Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing, BEA Weaver Co-Chairs Molly Greenberg and Jose Bravo discussed upcoming plans to hold a Just Transition Forum in early 2018 and a BEA General Assembly later this year. The first day of the convening also saw BEA working group leaders deliver presentations to update grassroots participants on advancements made over the past year.

The Communications Working Group shared its efforts to increase the BEA's profile and power and impact, amplify the grassroots as leading the climate and environmental movement, utilize media strategies to influence philanthropy to move more resources to the grassroots, and tell the story of alignment collaboration and impact. Grassroots participants were asked to consider what type of capacity building workshop the Communications Working Group should consider developing for the BEA General Assembly. The Participant Engagement Working Group also presented and provided an important overview of the complexity of participating in the BEA and the challenges of tracking BEA participants due to organizational changes. Grassroots participants learned of the continued efforts of the Participant Engagement Working Group to have an accurate sense of BEA participation including participants that may fall into a "fourth sector" category.

Drawing a distinction between exploitative research practices and decolonial research, the Research Working Group presented on the progress of existing case study projects on the Chevron campaign in Richmond California, the impact of the Environmental Justice Health Alliance, and EJ leadership to influence the Clean Power Plan. Grassroots participants expressed a continued interest in seeing the BEA Research Working Group develop a grassroots landscape assessment that captures the multilayered power and reach of the grassroots sector.



The BEA Fund: "Let's get it right!"

The highlight of the first full day of meetings was an update on the progress of the BEA Fund by the Funder Engagement Working Group. After many months of engaging allies in philanthropy and receiving input from grassroots participants, we learned that the BEA Fund is at an advanced stage where resources could begin to flow to grassroots organizations in 2018. Grassroots participants discussed the three areas of grantmaking that the BEA Fund will focus on which include: Start-up Funding, Coalitions/Alliances, and Capacity Building.

To share more about the development and roll-out of the BEA Fund, Sara Merasha of Grassroots International (GRI) joined the convening and presented on GRI's commitment to support the fund. With many years of experience in social justice grantmaking in the U.S. and globally, GRI is aligned with the BEA's mission and purpose. The unique partnership between BEA and GRI is committed to building a sustainable BEA Fund and also ensuring that U.S.-based grassroots movements are deeply connected to social movements in the Global South.



Funder Engagement and Networking

After a full day of working group updates and robust discussion of the BEA Fund, we left UPROSE for a dinner discussion with allies in the philanthropic sector. Joined by colleagues from the Overbrook, Ford, Mertz Gilmore and Surdna Foundations, Dr. Cecilia Martinez from the Center of Earth, Energy, and Democracy led a dinner program that featured short presentations and questions and answers. Aligned on the power and impact of the grassroots sector, the conversation centered on ways to amplify how grassroots organizations are catalysts of change. Funders also shared their perspective of the philanthropic landscape and changes in their foundations to support the grassroots sector. All agreed upon the limitations of conventional diversity, equity, and inclusion approaches to racial, economic and environmental justice and committed to meeting again for future dialogues.



Grassroots Unity and Alignment in the Trump Era

The final day of the BEA Grassroots convening provided opportunities for open discussions on the current political landscape, strategies to deepen alignment with mainstream environmental organizations, and input for BEA working groups. Grassroots leaders discussed the ratcheting up of assaults on their communities including cuts to social programs, attacks on immigrant communities, police violence, environmental racism, and voter suppression, among other threats. Considering what the BEA can do to support the grassroots sector in this intensifying political context, BEA grassroots leaders spoke of maintaining a strong unity and resisting the appropriation of the EJ movement.

Given that Trump has pulled out of the Paris Climate Accord and is putting political and economic power behind the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure, BEA grassroots leaders were in consensus that the perspectives of frontline communities are needed now more than ever. Major questions that were discussed and debated included: How can the BEA and grassroots organizations work together to ensure that movement alignment is advanced and environmental allies are accountable to grassroots communities? How can BEA grassroots leaders share their perspectives of Just Transition with others who may approach Just Transition differently, and what steps should be taken to ensure that false solutions and carbon reduction myths are not a part of mainstream Just Transition strategies? Now that local and municipal political arenas are vital, what strategies can be used to ensure that problematic environmentalism and greenwashing narratives are not normalized by politicians and power brokers seeking to distance themselves from Trump?

Although these powerful questions were not fully resolved, BEA grassroots leaders committed to taking the conversations back to their organizations and to continuing to support one another with increased vigilance.



Toward the BEA General Assembly

Following a Liberation Cafe interactive session intended to sharpen grassroots input to BEA Working Groups, we settled into a final discussion of the upcoming BEA General Assembly. As this will be the third BEA General Assembly following the inaugural Wingspread meeting and second assembly at Bishop's Lodge, BEA grassroots leaders provided considerable input on the goals of the third General Assembly, nominated potential locations, and agreed upon the need for an orientation session to provide clarity to new members on the mission and purpose of BEA. Finally, a committee that included BEA grassroots participants was nominated to carry forward the planning of the General Assembly.

After completing a jam-packed agenda spanning three days, and advancing many important conversations, the BEA Grassroots Caucus closed out with a reflection circle and expressions of gratitude to UPROSE for hosting the meeting. For the BEA, the grassroots convening served to firmly ground our ongoing efforts in the grassroots organizing sector and exhibited the tangible strengths of the Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing.