



## ***The Work of Love and the Love of Work: Resilience-Based Organizing as a Path Forward***

We are hard upon the seas of transition, constantly bombarded with waves of terror churned up by apocalyptic narratives of economic collapse and climate catastrophism. It often seems that the only thing we can wrap our heads around is a fear of the worst. And while it is all true – the dominant economy is collapsing (as it must) and Mother Earth will continue to change in all the ways needed to rid herself of the very economy that pesters her – fear of the worst isn't enough to turn things around.

Why so much catastrophism?

Why is it, as Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network has said, “So much easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism?” The fear of the worst, it turns out, constantly reinforces a powerful, unstated lie burrowed deep in our consciousness – even among progressives: that There Is No Alternative. As it turns out, there are many alternatives and they are here, now, weaving a better way forward for us all. These are not simply a laundry list of “projects” occupying the fringes of the economy that we can point at to feel less bad about the severity of the transition upon us. They are true exemplars of an actual remaking of economy that's contesting and upending concentration of power – and creating an economy that decentralizes, democratizes and diversifies power while reducing and redistributing resources. And one doesn't have to look far to find them.

Pointing to a distant ridge in Black Mesa, on the Navajo Reservation, Roberto Nutlouis, an organizer with Black Mesa Water Coalition says, “That used to be an agricultural field, but without our traditional ways, there is a real problem of soil and cultural erosion.” Roberto leads Black Mesa Water Coalition's work in building a new, green economy based on the traditional lifeways of the Navajo people. Despite forced assimilation, an economic stranglehold by Peabody Coal and over 40 years of federal policy barring their traditional pastoral ways, there is a growing movement to assert their traditions as the new economy. “We are a keystone species of this ecosystem,” insists Roberto, with soft-spoken certainty. “Our ancestors practiced dry-land farming and depended only on the precipitation during the winter and the monsoon season. Our traditional ecological knowledge is about where we strategically place our fields to slow down the water and increase the nutrients in the soil,” he explains. “That method requires a lot of people to participate, so that strengthened the family and kinship systems and reinforced the social structures.”

“Then, with the introduction of boarding schools, kids were taken away from home for years and that would break down our families. And then the wage economy would break down our traditional economy. Then the fields stopped being used, but when you remove the indigenous people from the land, the land suffers. The water came through, but nobody was there to manage and slow it down, and the land eroded and eroded. The erosion problem has gotten so severe that invasive species are coming in, such as

Russian Olives and tumbleweeds. So, in the area that gets very little rain, these invasives out-compete native plants. This is parallel with the cultural erosion; many of our people have taken on more and more of the American way of life.”

For Roberto, healing the land by strengthening traditional lifeways is the only path for real economic development. Bringing together young people with the wisdom of their elders, BMWC is reasserting the traditional food system to increase health and economic benefits in the community – returning their labor to the land to restore it.

As indigenous people, the Navajo have co-evolved with the land. For them, when they talk about economy and sustainability, they are talking about time-tested knowledge that allows them to restore the land while they cultivate it to feed their people. Their approach has been to engage local youth, elders, farmers and ranchers directly to find a way through the maze of federal land-use policy. “Nobody is going to do it for us, we know that now. Any change that comes is going to come from the people. We have to become self-reliant. This is our vision of green economy.”

The struggle of the Black Mesa Water Coalition and their visionary path out of economic depression and towards a local, living, loving economy illustrates how ecological restoration and community resilience are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Their work is truly inspiring.

And however inspiring one example can be, it is nowhere near enough. Luckily, there are too many to mention. There are the milk farmers in Maine asserting their democratic right (in many places through hand vote in their town halls) to directly sell raw milk in their communities, despite state and federal laws prioritizing corporate agriculture over community needs. There are the organizers in the West and East sides of the San Francisco Bay Area taking over vacant foreclosed homes and underutilized lands to meet the real needs of real people through food and housing, asserting the inextricable relationship between healthy communities and healthy ecosystems – all the while finding new and creative ways to expose the banks, contest the titles and create new commons. And there is the inspiring, “Disaster Collectivism,” as writer, activist Naomi Klein calls it, of Occupy Sandy and Communities Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAHV) in NY, boldly going where FEMA and the Red Cross – and even the NYPD – refused to go – into the most vulnerable communities, providing direct, real relief contextualized by a politic that asserts that Sandy was not a natural disaster, but the reasonably predictable consequence of an economy based entirely on exploitation of the natural world, beginning with humans. As Helena Wong of CAAHV, a grassroots organization in Chinatown and throughout NYC, told us, “We were providing relief services that nobody was doing. At the same time that the police were telling us we had to leave, at the police station they had flyers up directing people to us.”

What all these inspiring stories of direct action resilience have in common is a shared recipe for change – one that draws deeply from our diverse ancestral and experiential wisdom of how to live well together (*buen vivir*) and combines it with the strategies needed to upend the power-structure of the dominant political-economy and usher in

the next economy based on a new, single bottom line: balanced, life-affirming relationships in the places we call home.

## **Recipe for Resilience**

This recipe for resilience combines the right ingredients - in a new way - to cook up effective change. In traditional campaign-based organizing, communities identify a problem/issue and then target a political figure with decision-making power to change rules or implement regulations in order to alleviate that problem. This is still absolutely valuable and needed work – the work of winning the incremental changes that improve conditions. However, a different strategic approach (new for many today) is emerging among organizers across the country and the world. **Resilience-Based Organizing (RBO)** is emerging among communities that are steeped in an ecological consciousness and who recognize that one way to make transformative social change requires that we organize communities into a collective effort to meet the needs at hand through **direct democratic decision-making and physical implementation by those who are being impacted by the problem**. These actions are taken with the knowledge, and, ideally, the *intention*, of butting up against legal or political barriers that force the questions of whether we have the right to self-govern and take right action in our own interests. The approach is to lead with the vision; live that vision; and live it in a way that reorients power to be more local and democratic; rather than simply trying to win concessions from corporations, or the structures of government that serve them.

The concessions that are often obtained through traditional campaign-based organizing are tempting – and at times needed just to get by; especially when we are all so hungry for change. But concessions are like fast food: convenient, even tasty sometimes; but in the end, leaves you unhealthy and, more often than not, unsatisfied. And while it is much harder to grow, harvest, cook and share our own food, in the end we all know how much better it really is. It is power. Just like healthy food, resilient communities are not meted out on a tray, served up hot, anonymous and uniform. Resilient communities can weather the inevitable changes set in motion by a death-dependent economy, built entirely on exploitation. They are grounded in reflective, responsive and deeply reverential relationships.

There are three core ingredients that make Resilience-Based Organizing effective:

**Building a Transformative Narrative: People will not go someplace we have not first traveled to in our minds.** “Here at the Center for Story-based Strategy we always remind organizers of that,” asserted Christine Cordero, of CSS. And so we must first craft together and paint for others an irresistible vision of the future. A vision that is not built on a fear of the worst, but of knowing that everything can be better. A vision that recognizes that social inequity is a form of ecological imbalance, and the solution to millions just “getting by,” is not in “getting ahead,” but in “getting together.” What has anchored so much transformative organizing is a willingness to articulate a bold vision worth working for.

**Restoring our labor: What the hands do, the heart learns.** While there is no way forward without vision, vision is not enough. We must apply our own labor to build that vision now, regardless of how “un-realistic” or “impractical” we are told it is. If we put our work only into opposing what we don’t want, we build not love for our vision, but only longing. The first rule of ecological restoration is the restoration of our own labor. Human labor is the precious natural resource, concentrated, controlled and exploited, that has been wielded like a chainsaw against the rest of the natural world. Because of this, we must take it back from the chains of the market and restore it to the web of life. This should be the basis of our organizing at every scale, from the school to the workplace; from grassroots organizing to trans-local movement building. Through models of Transformative Justice, for example, people self-organize to directly address harm in their community without relying on policing and prisons. Organizations such as Creative Interventions, based in Oakland, CA, are working with victims of violence to create their own solutions.

**Contesting for Power: If it’s the right thing to do, we have every right to do it.** Ultimately, the struggle at the heart of Resilience-Based Organizing is one of democracy. In order to remake the very shape of governance, from one that centers power in the illegitimate authority of corporations, military states and global financial elites to one that centers power in the hands of the people, we must organize in our communities to take the visionary right action that directly asserts our right to self-govern. If it is the right thing to do, we have every right to do it. This is how we expose and depose the corporate oligarchy that is the barrier to the collective liberation of our communities and ecosystems.

And that is just what the community of Black Mesa is doing. In addition to restoring ancestral agricultural fields, BMWC is strengthening another pillar of their traditional lifeways: sheep herding and the wool economy. They are creating new infrastructure to support families in getting more value for their wool by eliminating middle-men and sharing resources including sheering, cleaning and hosting wool-buys on the reservation. What makes this effort so unique and powerful that it is happening even though these activities – in fact, almost all economic activity from keeping livestock to repairing houses – have been banned from an area of the reservation larger than the state of Delaware that covers most of the Black Mesa, since 1966. A land dispute between the Hopi and Navajo in the mid-sixties, that many assert is due to Peabody Coal’s interest in mining concessions, resulted in a federal executive order known as “The Bennett Freeze,” in which no development activity could happen in the freeze zone while the dispute continued. Thousands of Navajo had their livestock and grazing permits revoked, which were never re-issued despite the repeal of the freeze in 2009. To this day, almost no resources have gone to address the four decades of what amounted to economic sanctions by the US – concentrating power in the extractive economy.

Despite the ‘lack of papers,’ Navajo have continued to maintain their traditional wool economy, which has suffered from rampant skimming by middlemen and hustling by buyers. For many Navajo, after driving their wool hours off the reservation to sell it, they

are unable to recover even the gas money. Yet, instead of seeking conventional “job growth” as the solution to their dilemma, the Navajo are seeking restoration of the land and culture through cooperative activity that cuts out the middlemen and engages youth and elders alike *while actively asserting their positive right to maintain their lifeways despite the law.*

All this cultural and ecological restoration requires a strategy to break the stranglehold of Peabody Energy and the Navajo Generating Station on the economy and their land. After leading the fight that led to the closure of the Black Mesa Mine and the Mojave Generating Station, BMWC is setting its sights on an even more ambitious and visionary project. “We have to figure out how to not just shut things down, but build what is appropriate for our communities’ health and stability,” says Wahleah Johns, referring to their campaign to transition the Navajo Generating Station from a coal fired power-plant fueled by the Kayenta mine, to a solar powered plant fueled by Black Mesa Solar. It would be a community owned and controlled solar facility using reclaimed mine lands. “These lands can never be restored for growing food or grazing sheep, so we should use them for the next best thing, clean energy owned by our community.” The Navajo Generating Station, in addition to providing electricity to Los Angeles, Nevada, and parts of Arizona, also pushes water up over the mesa from the Colorado River to the desert cities of Phoenix, Scottsdale and Tuscon. This vision of a transition from coal to solar that can be owned by the Navajo people is part and parcel of making the great transition to a community-controlled economy based on deep held ancestral wisdom. “Our stories and traditions tell us that we should not be digging up the coal, which is the liver of the Black Mesa; or polluting our sacred waters. But we have been forced to ignore this wisdom and that is why our people are suffering from poverty, poor health and the climate is changing,” says Wahleah.

What is particularly powerful and unique about all the communities mentioned here is that, while grounded in lessons from past movements, there is a central commitment to principles of ecology – that we must organize our economic activity towards ecological restoration, beginning with our relationships.

Occupy the Farm (OTF), which Movement Generation has been a part of, was born out of Occupy Oakland & the Food Justice movement and inspired by the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (the MST, or Landless Workers Movement of Brazil)*. OTF is another example of Resilience-Based Organizing in an urban context. On Earth Day 2012, OTF took control of a gated 7-acre piece of public land administered by the University of California-Berkeley (UC) in the city of Albany. The land, known as the Gill Tract, is some of the last, best prime farmland in the urbanized East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area. Edward Gill sold the original 104 acres of agricultural land to the University of California, a land-grant institution established for the study and practice of agriculture, in 1928. “Since 1928, the UC has chopped up and developed on the vast majority of the agriculture land, leaving only a little over a dozen acres today with half of it intended for immediate commercial development, including a chain grocery store,” explains Effie Rawlings, an organizer with OTF. Over the last couple of decades, the 7 acres of remaining prime ag land has mostly been used for plant genetics research. The

research, like most of what is now happening in our public universities, primarily serves corporate interests, from Big-Pharma to Big-Oil. The three-week continuous direct action farming of the Gill Tract was family friendly and publicly accessible. It was followed by repeated direct action harvests along with local organizing in Albany and the greater East Bay, alliance building, and campaigning at the city council and university levels. All of this was undertaken to demand the permanent protection of the remaining Gill Tract for the practice and promotion of sustainable urban agro-ecology needed to support the food sovereignty of the greater East Bay. Occupy the Farm uses dignified work as direct action to asserts the peoples' right to redefine the food system to meet our needs (food sovereignty). "We rejected arbitrary political borders (the City of Albany and the University of California) and instead embraced flexible, permeable, social and ecological boundaries by insisting that The Farm serve the needs of the greater Bay Area and be governed as a commons rather than through either the City of Albany or the UC," asserts Rawlings. While there have been over 15 years of efforts to open the Gill Tract for public access and, more recently, a couple years of opposition to commercial development there, Occupy the Farm represents a fundamental turning point. By combining direct action, resilience, and dignified work, the movement realized a vision, forcing the University into a double bind.

We were fully aware that we would be challenged by the UC on the legality of our actions, and we were prepared to do so in order to publicly spark the debate around the proper use and tenure of this precious resource. Using simple, positive messaging such as, "Farmland is for Farming," and "If it is the right thing to do, we have every right to do it," and by having our efforts be radically inclusive of people from all walks of life (including encouraging opposing views at the community meetings), our activities were unimpeachable," explained OTF activist and Movement Generation Collective Member, Gopal Dayaneni. When asked by people from other parts of the US and the world how they can support our efforts, we begin with, "Take more land. Decentralize and diversify, it is our best defense."

Occupy the Farm is part of an evolution of Occupy, moving away from occupying public parks and setting up temporary settlements, and moving towards "occupying at scale," to directly and democratically meet our needs. This work includes everything from actions that turn abandoned buildings into libraries and public schools slated for closure into peoples' schools, to converting vacant lots and empty houses into community gardens and peoples' housing.

## **ROOTED IN TRADITION**

There are past movements that have paved the way for this approach, such as the Black Panther Party. Although the legacy of the Panthers is usually associated with its militant street patrolling (which was itself a form of Resilience-Based Organizing for a community under constant, direct attack by the police state), the Panthers also had at least 65 other community programs designed for the Black community and its allies to meet their needs at a time when Black people were under attack by every arm of the government. These included teen and senior support programs, health clinics and medical research committees, community schools including a GED program, free

transportation and support for families of incarcerated people, counseling services, free clothing, dental and furniture programs, and of course the well-known free breakfast program for school children. The Black Panthers protected their community with arms despite it being illegal because it was the right thing to do. They built the infrastructure to provide their own services, and did it all in a very public way, thus shining the light on this radical and honorable way of reclaiming power and building resiliency.

Internationally, we look to mass-based movements such as the MST of Brazil and the international network *La Via Campesina*, among many others. The MST, over the past 30+ years has built 30,000 communities of landless workers/peasants totaling 2 million people living on land that was taken through direct action. Using a model of occupying underutilized land of the wealthy large landholders, and immediately making them more productive by working the land, the MST then uses their productivity to contest for the title to land using land-reform laws in Brazil. **Take back, make productive, contest the title.** More than just driving land reform, the MST communities are organized from the family level on up in communities that work collectively. *The land reform is not the conversion of land from a few large landowners to many small landowners, but from a few large land owners into many collectively organized landed communities.*

Of course, there are always challenges, complexities and contradictions to navigate, but the vision of directly meeting needs through collective actions *begins to liberate our labor from the chains of the market and restore our labor to the web of life.* This is at the heart of ecological restoration and community resilience in the face of ecological disruption and economic collapse.

We see these examples as prototypes of Resilience-Based Organizing and as a strong point of departure for building out an organizing approach that can be shared and adapted for today's political moment, and that can meet the needs of our communities today.