

CRISIS

The European Organizing Movement Responds to Crisis

Synthesis of ECON Crisis Strategy Sessions - April 2020

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Over the course of two sessions in early April 2020, the [European Community Organizing Network](#) convened members of its network (plus friends and allies) to discuss a strategic orientation that the organizing movement can take to the set of intersecting crises now emerging in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. This document is an attempt to synthesize those sessions and to further support European organizers thinking about how to move forward in these extraordinary times.

Session 1

Grounding in a new reality

Our first session started by holding space for people to process the emotions and challenges of this moment. Organizers are front line workers in a crisis, but this does not mean we are not affected by a sense of disorientation caused by a profound disruption to the status quo. We shared stories of community-based work that had been put on hold or had to shift to the unaccustomed terrain of video conference calls. In other cases, we shared stories of organizers carrying a deep sense of duty to be there for the communities in which we work. For example, organizers at the Center for Community Organizing in Slovakia shared that their organizers working in various Roma communities around the country were risking personal safety to continue to provide in-person support and information to their leaders. They noted, “if we don’t show up for our people now, we may as well not bother showing up for them ever.”

Crisis as an opening

We then shifted gears to begin analyzing this crisis moment on strategic terms. We listened to a presentation of materials created by the Grassroots Policy Project in which crisis is defined (based on the roots of the word in the Greek language) as a **“decision point.”** Crises are moments when things reach a breaking point. In moments of crisis, society stands at a crossroads, faced with different possible paths forward. Society needs to make a “decision” about the way forward. If our organizations are prepared, we can have a big influence on which path society chooses to take.

We reviewed examples of recent crises in Europe, including the 2008 financial crash, the ongoing migration crisis, climate change, and various political crises that have rocked our countries over the years. We introduced two key terms into our strategic lexicon: a **“material crisis”** (i.e. a crisis that happens in the real world, such as a financial collapse or a natural disaster) and a **“crisis of legitimacy,”** in which the people lose faith in the established system. In the words of the Grassroots Policy Project:

“A crisis of legitimacy is...a time when the people in power and their governing ideas and political frameworks are seen as so ineffective that they begin to be seen as illegitimate. Fractures can open up between elite forces. This tends to happen when many people’s lives are painfully impacted by the material crisis and the response of the established order is seen to be inadequate. In these moments, new political ideologies and projects can gain traction and - in the right circumstances - come to be dominant.”

A material crisis *can* create a crisis of legitimacy for those in power. However -- and this is very important -- there is NOTHING inevitable about that happening. The actions that we (and our opponents) take right now have everything to do with what happens next.

Session 2

How do organizers respond to crisis?

The Grassroots Policy Project presentation ends with a series of **six strategic orientations** that organizers should adopt in order to move effectively in a moment of crisis:

1. Be prepared
2. Be nimble
3. Be bold
4. Make meaning
5. Build power
6. Build a bigger we

The opportunities for organizers to achieve big structural changes to society in moments such as this are real...if we are able to effectively take action. At the same time, there is great danger. Our opponents are demonstrating no hesitation to seize this moment to attack democratic institutions, to “otherize” outsiders and sow a narrative of scarcity and distrust, and to put forward policy proposals that would represent huge steps backward for anyone who seeks a more just, equitable, and environmentally sane society.

Leading in this moment - a synthesis of our response to crisis

Our sessions ended with small group work in which we evaluated our crisis response actions to date, and tried to “look around the corner” for what is coming next. The process was guided by this [worksheet](#) from the Grassroots Policy Project. Below is a synthesis of our group discussions and final feedback session.

(EDITOR’S NOTE: participants in this conversation spanned the spectrum from local organizers to executive directors, from national organizing formations to local and regional initiatives, from projects in Western Europe to the Central and Eastern European region. As a synthesis of several small group conversations, we decided to anonymize comments and edit for clarity.)

QUESTION 1 - MOVING INTO ACTION

*Crises open windows for change, but those windows don't stay open forever. It is important to be able to respond quickly rather than moving slowly or limiting ourselves to plans that we developed before the crisis. **How are you moving your people into action quickly?***

- At first we were very reactive. We observed. We shared on Facebook. The question for us internally was: How should we communicate about the crisis? How should we react to the mayor's position and have a position? What are the steps that can be taken *actively*?
- Our path was to go back to advocacy--to demand changes from the local government. We asked for food supplies for people in need and food for school kids in need. However, things are only moving only as quickly as the local government will move.
- We are reevaluating what can be done other than our original plan. How can we involve elderly people and include them in online discussions? It takes time...Yesterday it was decided that the elections are being held, but through the mail. Questions remain how many people will actually vote in this situation. It's hard to judge, whether this is a good thing or not.
- We have observed that this crisis hit organizations at different moments in their life-span. Being able to "move quickly" depends on a kind of previously existing organizational coherence.
- As someone from Western Europe, I see that people in Eastern Europe seem to be doing more grassroots organizing, what can we learn from them?
- It is our duty to be there for our people in the communities that we work with.

QUESTION 2 - ABSORBING NEW PEOPLE

In moments of crisis, much larger numbers of people tend to become politically active. Without organization, many of these people do not stay engaged after the immediate moment passes.

How is your organization creating spaces to absorb new people who are newly engaged?

- We are using creative tactics to visiblize people who are not visible. We have started a project to leave shoes out in public spaces to represent migrants. We are creating cardboard planes to show we have capacity to evacuate refugee camps -- lots of people can do this. We are also calling for people to put banners out of their windows, which allows a lot of people to do something from home. These tactics allow folks to see activity even in the context of social distancing.
- We are moving existing organizing training online.
- We are creating a local structure for people who need support to connect with people who can help them get it.
- The last crisis helped us solidify our relationship with a bunch of groups on the regional level with whom we were able to work together after the crisis. We believe this is an opportunity to grow our organizing with new groups coming in, coordinating actions among many. A lesson we learned from the last crisis is that without a community organizing orientation, the networks developed in these moments will not last.

QUESTION 3 - BOLD DEMANDS

*In moments of crisis, it is more possible to advance bold demands for structural reform than it is in normal times. In fact, bold demands for often seem to make more sense than incremental reforms in moments of crisis. **What are the bold demands you are advancing?***

- We felt it was really important to push demands quickly when everything is up in the air. We sent an open letter about the situation of renters. We were trying to shift the logic of the government response towards building owners, not tenants, having to prove they need financial support. We are also questioning the idea of “delaying” rent payments toward nullifying rent payments in this time of crisis. We are also trying to figure out how “air campaigns” can be turned into “ground campaigns” to create more pressure.
- We have put out a call for action to close the refugee camps.
- We are putting out demands to stop mortgage payments and not having to pay rent, as well as providing a basic income.

QUESTION 4 - NARRATIVE

*In moments of crisis, people need to be able to make meaning out of their changing reality. **What's the narrative you are telling about this crisis?** How are you using this moment to advance a deeper analysis?*

- We believe it is important for our narrative to put out a social justice vision and to tie together issues in a way that is new in this moment. Our narrative should not be “we have been saying for many years” (i.e. the “I told you so” narrative)
- We have been inserting a narrative of solidarity that we need now, but also pressing that solidarity can benefit all of us *after* the crisis. We believe this is an opportunity for NGOs to show their social significance. Since media narratives mostly promote an ambience of fear, there is an opportunity for our organizations to provide a narrative of assurance and confidence.
- We published a public letter and got some press coverage trying to shift the narrative of who should pay for the crisis. Should tenants have to pay? Should large landlords? Should it be the responsibility of individual tenants to prove their economic hardship to receive support from the government?
- We have seen important narratives being advanced by organizations on Twitter tying together the need for biodiversity and the emergence of pandemics like COVID 19.
- We have been stressing the need to not believe fake news, and also trying to tie the poor crisis response to the corruption at the city and national level.
- We believe there is an opportunity to connect this crisis to previously existing issues like poor educational standards, and health and hygiene.
- We are pointing out the ways that our existing struggles are affected by COVID. For example, in our campaign to organize around climate issues in coal communities, we are pointing out the fact that coal workers are more at threat from COVID due to the health impacts of coal mining. We are creating a new story around that.
- Similarly, other people who have chronic lung conditions are being affected by COVID much more harshly. So binding the discussion about corona to the more broad general social justice questions is important.

- We are trying to visibilize marginalized communities trapped on the border, using symbolic actions that represent “people who are not here.”
- People are in shock, and wondering how to deal with existential needs. Narratives have to be different depending on the position of the people. However, some people can think more politically at the moment.
- We are making the argument that this is exactly the reason we need to be more political!

QUESTION 5 - PREPAREDNESS

*We are only able to move effectively in moments of crisis when we have prepared our organizations in advance. **What preparation have you done to get your organization ready for this moment?***

- We had done no preparation as no one was expecting this crisis.
- Same. We are a climate movement working in a coal region. This is a tough subject to start with. We are wondering how we can still pursue our demands.
- We have started a movement school helping organizers think about how to prepare for the crises that are to come from this moment. We have also set up a slack channel on different areas of movement building practice where people can share their best practices to learn from others. Our attempt is to learn faster and fail better as we are feeling our way through what is to come.
- We have created a virtual war room that we can convene to support organizers in a campaign moment as this crisis unfolds.
- Part of being prepared is taking care of ourselves. We are encouraging people to buddy-up so as to not go crazy being on their own all day. They should check in with each other every day, do yoga together etc.