



ORGANIZING ACROSS BORDERS:

Stories of Community Organizing Campaigns
from Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland



CREDITS

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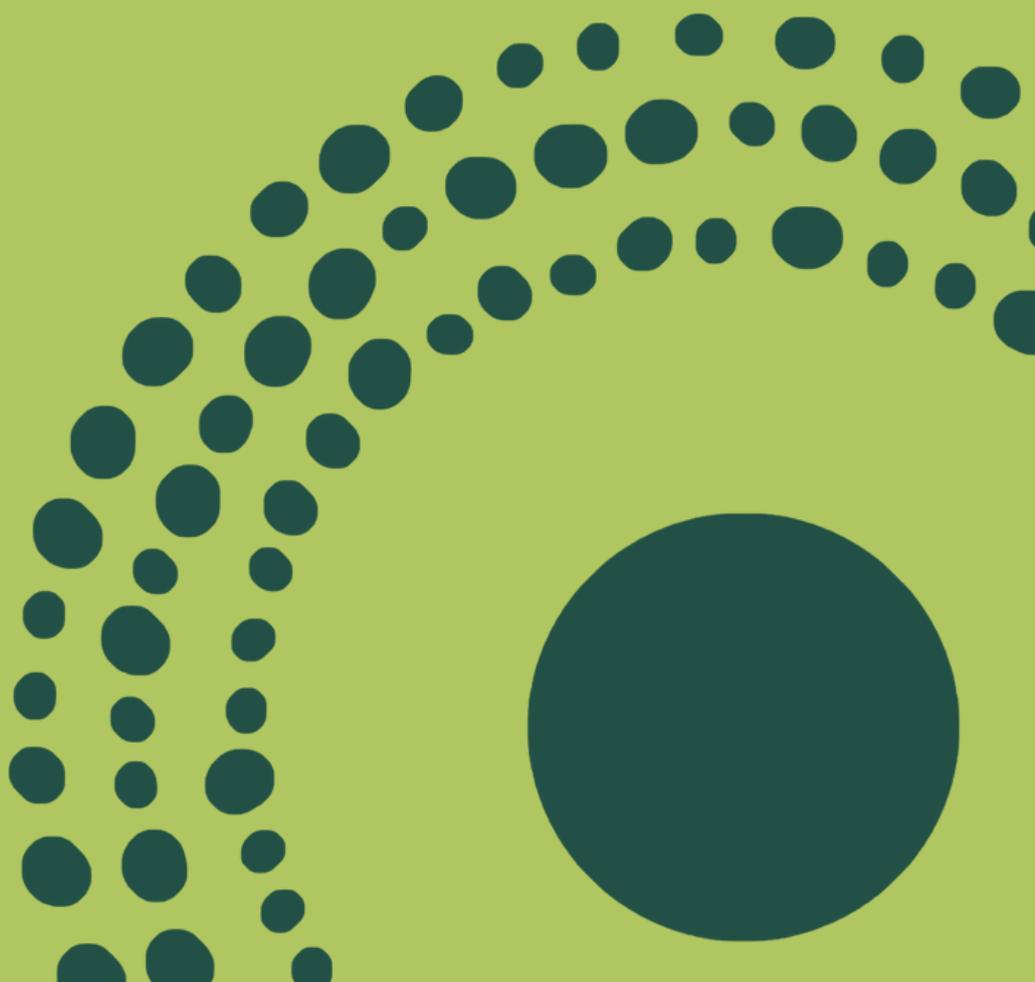
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report gathers the stories, outcomes and lessons from a community organizing project titled “Organizing frontline communities for a Just Transition” coordinated by the European Community Organizing Network (ECON) in partnership with three member organisations in Central and Eastern Europe: Re-set - platform for social-ecological transformation in Czech Republic, the Center for Community Organizing (CKO) in Slovakia and the Common Thing Foundation (CTF) in Poland.

The project sought to test new and transformative ways to organize frontline communities affected by climate change and inequality, enabling them to lead local campaigns and collaborate on an international organizing campaign. Frontline communities are the most affected by the impacts of climate change and systemic injustice yet they are often not seen as the forefront of the climate justice movement and in discourses on what a transition to a sustainable society should look like.

Meanwhile in the political sphere, Central and Eastern decision makers often vote in opposition to European climate policies and will continue to do so without a strong demand from their citizens for a just transition that shares the benefits of a green transition economy throughout society, in particular with those who will lose most

economically. In this project, we organized communities to build bottom-up power locally and internationally.

The project lasted two years and three months and it aimed to increase the democratic participation of frontline communities affected by climate change and inequality, empower local groups to organize locally-rooted, internationally coordinated organizing campaigns; and strengthen ECON’s network, capacity, and infrastructure to coordinate organizing and learning across borders.

We used community organizing as a strategy for bottom-up systemic change by empowering local groups in Czechia, Slovakia and Poland to organize local campaigns, developing the organizing capacity of partner organizations, coordinating international learning and organizing across orders and building networks.

Throughout the project, we engaged in continuous reflection, learning, and documentation of the process, outcomes and lessons learned. This publication is the result of this effort, offering insights and organizing lessons to movement actors, organizers and donors in Europe and beyond.

1. INTRODUCTION



From massive protests led by impacted farmers and coal miners to the war in Ukraine, which disrupted the agricultural supply of grain, the past two years of political and economic turmoil in Europe have cast doubt on the ambitions outlined in the European Green Deal.

Amid ongoing struggles to achieve a socially just transition, far-right parties and Eurosceptic sentiment have surged, filling the political vacuum and making significant gains in the June 2024 EU parliamentary elections.

It is within this challenging context that we share the stories of three local communities working to build their capacity and power to create more dignified social, economic, and environmental futures for themselves.

Why Means Matter: Community Organizing as a Democratic Practice

In a time when Realpolitik dominates, some actors seem drawn to Machiavelli's claim that the ends justify the means. In contrast, community organizing offers a critical counterweight — a practice that insists the means matter just as much as the ends we seek.

If we understand democracy through its Greek roots — demos (people) and kratos (power) — then building people's capacity, leadership, and collective power isn't just a tactic. It is the foundation of a democratic future.

The stories shared in this report illustrate what it takes to embrace this vital, long-term work of cultivating more democratic societies. Each campaign reveals what becomes possible when communities realize they can exert agency over their own lives by engaging directly in public life, building power through relationships, and turning shared hopes and struggles into collective action.

About this Report

In this report, we present the stories of campaigns in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland and the process of international organizing and learning across borders.

Each campaign story begins by situating the campaign within its local context, providing background information to understand the conditions that shaped the work. It then describes the organizing process, including the formation of the local group, and the organizing strategy developed to drive change.

A timeline of actions illustrates how the strategy was implemented, followed by an overview of the campaign's outcomes. These outcomes are examined both in terms of leadership development and local capacity building, as well as the concrete policy changes affecting local communities that were achieved. Finally, each story concludes with the key lessons learned from the campaign experience.



Source: Silar. Europe Farmers' Protest, Czechowice-Dziedzice February 2024. CC BY-SA 4.0.

A similar outline is used to describe the story of the international coordination of learning and campaign efforts across countries. This story highlights coordination efforts to strengthen local organizing capacity, and the collaborative process of strategizing towards an international campaign.

The final chapter of this publication reflects on the campaign's key outcomes, the organizing practices that contributed to the outcomes and the lessons learned. It offers insights on how we nurtured a culture of organizing that will continue to empower local groups in future campaigns and drive systemic change in the years to come.

2.CONTEXT AND PROJECT



Source: Photo by CTF. Educational nature walk organised by the Silesia Blooming coalition, April 2024, Poland.

The geopolitical context of this organizing project is Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), with a focus on communities in Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland. The CEE region as the rest of Europe is currently facing multiple and intersecting crises of increasing inequality, democratic backsliding, and rising racism, radicalisation, extremism and polarisation of the society, which put them at risk of instability. The impacts of the climate crisis are exacerbating these challenges.

The social and political dynamics of this region have been profoundly shaped by

its post-communist history and long-standing tradition of coal mining, which remain crucial to the economy and local employment. The centrality of mining has influenced how citizens and communities perceive the European Green Deal, as well as the broader framework of EU climate policies and just transition funding. In response to domestic constituencies, governments in countries like Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, and Romania have frequently voted against European climate policies, forming a bloc that has resisted more ambitious climate action at the EU level (Ćetković and Buzogany, 2019).

On the other hand the European climate movements, characterized as being led by urban middle class younger people, are fragmented and not always engaging communities at the frontlines of climate and social injustices (Wojewoda, 2023).

Some of the large NGOs advocating for climate action tend to have top-down approaches to international campaigns, with centralizing structures and single-issue focus, which risk losing grassroots energy. In contrast, the grassroots climate groups are deeply connected to impacted communities and often prioritize hyperlocal issues. However, they may lack the power analysis and the wider networks to build lasting movement capacity at scale.

This project attempted to test how community organizing could be a response to these challenges and be used as a strategy for locally rooted and internationally coordinated campaigns that enable bottom-up power building with frontline communities.



The European Community Organizing Network (ECON)

The community organizing sector is relatively small and underdeveloped in Europe. One of the organisations that has been building a European practice of community organizing is the European Community Organizing Network (ECON). ECON is a network of people, groups and organisations across Europe organizing communities for democracy, justice and sustainability.

This project was done in partnership with three member organisations of ECON selected because of the relevance of the countries and regions where they are located, for their relationships with frontline communities and for their different levels of experience with community organizing and climate justice.



Re-set in the Czech Republic

Re-set, is a relatively young organization founded in 2019 in the Czech Republic. Social movements in the country have limited experience with community organising as a strategy, but Re-set is working to change that. The organization actively uses community organizing to engage communities across the country and has dedicated organizers in various regions focused on issues such as climate justice, housing, and energy democracy.

Through this project, Re-set sought to strengthen their organizing efforts at the intersection of climate justice and housing. They aimed to build the organization's capacity by training staff, providing coaching, and exchanging effective organizing practices with organizations in other Eastern European contexts.



CENTRUM
KOMUNITNÉHO
ORGANIZOVANIA

The Center from Community Organizing in Slovakia

In Slovakia, the Center for Community Organizing (CKO) founded in 1999 has been the oldest and most experienced organisation doing community organizing mostly in the Banská Bystrica region on diverse issues responding to community needs and emerging crises in society.

One of their key successes was forming a citizen platform called Not in Our Town, composed of citizens in the city of Banská Bystrica fighting extremism, radicalisation, and anti-democratic forces. Over the years the group has addressed different issues impacting the city and region from corruption, extremism, radicalisation, human rights, discrimination against Roma communities, and local environmental issues.

Through this project, CKO aimed to deepen their organizing experience on climate issues by supporting a new local group called 'Green Bystrica,' which emerged from the Not in Our Town group and focused on climate and social justice. It was also an opportunity to strengthen coordination among various existing organizing initiatives in Banská Bystrica.



Fundacja
Rzecz
Społeczna

Common Thing Foundation in Poland

The Common Thing Foundation (CTF) is a women-led organisation founded by experienced organisers and activists in 2015

In the Silesian region of Poland. It uses community organizing to build the power of citizens and marginalized groups in the region to fight for their rights on issues that affect their lives. Since its establishment, CTF has been organizing around 20 local groups and supporting campaigns on different issues from climate, to gender justice, to enhancing the quality of life of local communities.

They had already been organizing on climate justice in coal communities for a few years through the Silesian Climate Movement and a local group in Ruda Śląska. Through community conversations, they realized that the concept of climate justice was too abstract for community members to meaningfully engage. This insight sparked an interest in exploring new ways to organize communities around climate justice and strengthen coordination among the groups they had been working with at the regional level.

With this project, ECON, Re-set, CKO and CTF collaborated as partners to organize frontline communities in Czechia, Slovakia and Poland. We aimed to develop the organizing capacity of local groups in the three countries, support local campaigns, and organize across counties a locally rooted internationally coordinated campaign.

The communities in each of the countries had their own specificities in terms of socio-political contexts which determined the issues they perceived as most relevant to them. Each of the campaigns will be described in the following chapters.

3. Local organizing stories



Organizing tenants for housing rights in Ostrava, Czech Republic



Organizing tenants for housing rights in Ostrava, Czech Republic

BACKGROUND

The Czech Republic is the third biggest coal producer within the EU. The coal is mostly mined in three regions; Ústí, Moravian-Silesian and Karlovy Vary; where for decades coal has been the base of the local economies and often also a source of pride for its workers and their communities. While the coal industry in these regions has contributed to environmental degradation, the transition to a post-coal economy accelerated such issues as privatization, corruption, social exclusion, unemployment, and impoverishment. The communities in the region have mixed feelings concerning the phase out of the coal industry and transition toward renewable energies. On the one hand it could be an opportunity to address some of those issues, on the other if done without addressing community issues, it may exacerbate them.

Our organizing project focused on Ostrava, a post-coal city in the Moravian-Silesian region of the Czech Republic. This city exemplifies the profound housing challenges stemming from the region's transition to a post-coal and free-market economy during the 1990s and 2000s, which resulted in several issues including a housing crisis.

In the 1990s, the collapse of the state-controlled economy led to widespread

privatization, giving tenants in many parts of the Czech Republic the opportunity to purchase the flats they occupied. However, in the city of Ostrava, tenants experienced something very different. In the 2000s the coal infrastructure and housing units were privatized by Czech oligarch Zdeněk Bakala. In 2004, nearly 43,000 housing units (home to approximately 100,000 tenants) were privatized by Bakala and despite promises, tenants were never given the chance to purchase their flats. Properties passed between ownerships of various multinational corporations until 2020, when the Swedish corporation Heimstaden Bostad acquired them.

The Liščina neighborhood is emblematic of Ostrava's post-coal challenges. Originally built as temporary housing for miners after WWII, the area is now home to aging residents, many of whom invested significant money and labor into maintaining their homes, expecting privatization rights that never materialized. Instead, residents faced rising rents, insecure and unclear tenancy agreements, and inconsistent communication from Heimstaden.

Since 2020, Re-set has been building relationships and organizing in communities from coal regions affected by the transformation of the industry in different ways.

In 2021, we held workshops and interviews with various communities and actors affected by climate change and social injustice and turned the input into political recommendations for a just transition (JT) and presented them to institutions deciding on plans for JT. They campaigned for transparency and participation of the Just Transition processes so that local people could participate in ways that met their main need, such as affordable housing.

In Ostrava, Re-set organized with communities of the local tenants, many of whom are former coal miners, who could see the “just transition” as an opportunity to improve their housing situation. The campaign aimed to organize tenants to demand clear communication, fair housing conditions, and secure, affordable living arrangements. It also addressed broader systemic issues, such as weak tenant protections in Czech law and the risk of ecological gentrification tied to Ostrava’s *transition projects*. Finally, it aimed to establish a stable structure for organizing the housing movement in the region.

ORGANIZING PROCESS

The organizing process with communities in Ostrava was responses to the needs and interests of the local communities, as well as to emerging needs and opportunities.

LOCAL GROUP

Originally, we focused broadly on organizing communities around the just transition as we were organizing around the topic in two other regions including Ústí, Karlovy Vary. In Ostrava, we initially collaborated with local organizer Veronika Cinková, who established

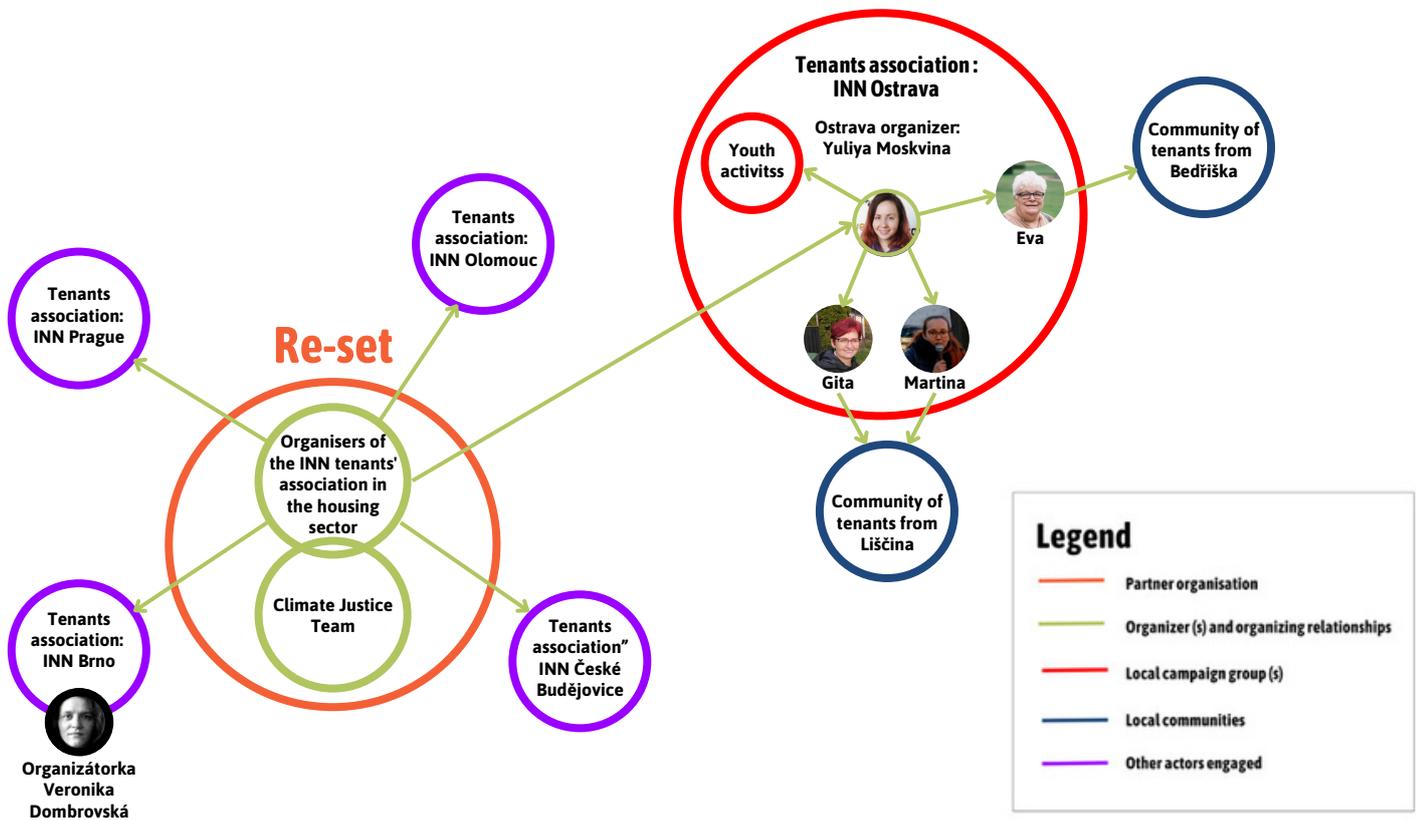
a “Platform for Really Just Transition” and aimed to connect locally engaged citizens from the Ostrava region with our allies from other mining regions around EU funding mechanisms and their implementation. However, through meetings with the local communities, it became clear that housing was the most pressing topic in the region, which had reached a critical juncture as it had become increasingly precarious from the slow end of coal in the 1990s until now.

Meanwhile, another organizer from Re-set, Yuliya Moskvina, started organizing the tenant community of Liščina in Ostrava, composed primarily of older tenants from the neighborhood. Among them were former miners who came to work in the city before the Velvet Revolution in 1989, as well as long-term residents who spent their childhoods there.



Source: Photo by Yuliya Moskvina. Local tenants’ group from Liščina community in Ostrava.

Yuliya was organizing this group as part of a tenants’ union called INN (*Iniciativa nájemníků a nájemnic* or tenants’ initiative) created by the Re-set housing organizing team. INN was coordinated by a core team of organizers and members of Re-set which had local groups in five cities: Prague, Brno, Olomouc, České Budějovice, and Ostrava.



Graph: Snowflake leadership structure for Ostrava, Czech Republic.

The local leadership of of the INN tenant union in Ostrava consisted of Yuliya Moskvina, an organizer from Re-set; Margita (Gita) Moocová, a local leader in her mid-sixties; and Martina Bubová, a social worker who supported the effort as an activist. The group’s primary demands were focused on housing security, either through the purchase of their homes or stable rent agreements. Thanks to the campaign, the Liščina community won some of their demands (more details below), and many of them stopped being motivated to continue organizing. Thus the organizing efforts widened to other tenants’ communities in Ostrava, like the Bedřiška community, a former miners’ colony with mostly Roma tenants facing eviction, and a young activists group frustrated by the limited prospects of affordable and stable housing. As a result, the INN tenant union moved from organizing only one community to forming

a city-wide group composed of members from Liščina, Bedřiška, and young activist groups, addressing the broader housing struggles in Ostrava. The group also collaborated with local allies like the community center *Vzájemné soužití* (Cohabitation) where meetings took place .

STRATEGY

The strategies adopted during the organizing process were diverse and evolved over time.

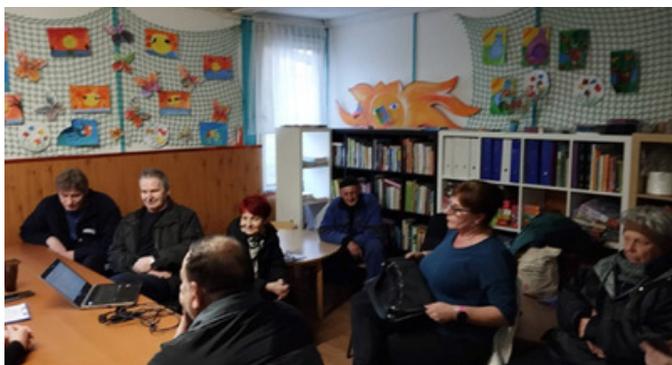
Relationship building

A key element was building relationships with the Liščina tenant community through door-to-door outreach led by local leader Gita. The local tenants were mostly older people and many lacked current information in the housing situation.

By sharing up-to-date information and assisting them with small tasks, such as responding to emails, Gita was able to build relationships and trust with them.

Community meeting

Through one-on-one conversations, the tenants who expressed interest in doing something concrete to address their housing issues, were invited to local community meetings. Community meetings provided a space for people to discuss housing issues collectively (as well as express their emotions about the issues). The atmosphere at these meetings was initially very tense, reflecting how significant and emotionally charged the issue was. Over time the group developed more constructive ways of engaging in dialogue and discussing not only the problem, but also exploring solutions and planning actions.



Source: Photo by Yuliya Moskvina. Local group meeting of tenants from the Liščina community of Ostrava.

Engaging local government

The initial strategy in 2023 aimed for political intervention from local politicians on housing issues. However, in the Czech Republic, housing contracts and landlord-tenant relations are treated as private matters and fall under private law. Therefore, local politicians do not have the power to intervene in housing matters beyond social housing. For this

reason, the campaign shifted its focus from influencing political institutions to putting public pressure directly on the real estate company, Heimstaden, which had the power to decide on the tenants' housing conditions.

Pressure campaign on Heimstaden

Several tactics were used to put direct pressure on Heimstaden, from public letters signed by organizations fighting for housing rights in Europe, to a protest in front of Heimstaden headquarters, to tenant video portraits telling the stories of those living in Heimstaden-owned apartments, to a social media campaigns posting the video portraits together with campaign demands.



Source: Video by INN. Video portrait of local tenant from the Liščina community sharing his story with housing issues.

Building a membership-based organization

Another key strategy as part of the organizing process, was building in Ostrava a branch of the INN tenant union (Iniciativa nájemníků a nájemnic), which provided a structure to unite tenants facing similar housing problems and built collective power to fight on the issues in the long-term. Throughout the organizing process, some of the tenants from Ostrava coming from the Liščina tenant community, the Bedřiška tenant Community and a group of local young activists joined the INN tenant union branch in Ostrava, paid membership fees and participated in regular union meetings.

TIMELINE OF ACTIONS

February-June 2023

Building relationships and organizing community members in Ostrava, connecting local engaged citizens with allies from other mining regions.

Hosting an international organizing training “Climate Justice Movement Academy” in May organized by ECON and the Leading Change Network with a field visit to the local community of the Bedřiška community facing housing issues.

July-December 2023:

Community organizing through door-to-door outreach in the Liščina tenants community, building a database of contacts, and establishing trust, culminating in the establishment of the local branch of the INN Tenants’ Union in Ostrava.



Source: Photo by Yuliya Moskvina. Local leader Gita doing door to door outreach to talk with tenants in the Liščina community of Ostrava.

Local workshop on organizing led by labor union organiser Ester Topolářová attended by local groups focused on housing rights, climate justice, and the queer movement.

Publishing a public letter to Heimstaden asking for negotiations signed by almost 40 organizations fighting for housing rights in Europe.

Gathering tenant stories, shooting and releasing video portraits of local tenants highlighting their housing stories and struggles, and planning collective actions. Tenants and activists organised a protest in front of Heimstaden headquarters with the theme of a sweet and warm home during Christmas .



Source: Photo by Vojtěch Šimša. Tenants’ protest on the right to housing outside Heimstaden headquarters using cookies saying “PF 2024 Affordable housing for all”.

In response to the video portraits of tenants, the Heimstaden country manager for Czechia, Jan Rafaj, called the Liščina campaign leader and invited the local group to a meeting to discuss their demands and negotiate.

January – June 2024:

The Liščina campaign group held talks with Heimstaden’s CEO. While no commitments were made in the first meeting, later negotiations resulted in some concessions including lower purchase prices for certain tenants, and two-year rental agreements for others.

In March, a second round of door-to-door canvassing was conducted to assess progress. While some of Heimstaden’s promises were kept, issues remained, such as unclear plans for the future area development and insufficient long-term housing security for tenants over 65.



Source: Photo by Yuliya Moskvina. Local group meeting of young tenants and activists from Ostrava.

As housing threats lessened for some of Liščina's residents, their motivation to continue organizing faded. The organiser expanded efforts beyond the Liščina to other communities in Ostrava, including younger tenants. New contacts were made, public meetings held, and strategic planning for housing issues with new local groups in Ostrava began.

July-December 2024

INN tenant union supported tenants in the Bedřiška community, who faced eviction through a crowdfunding campaign, creating video portraits of local residents and promoting a petition to the municipal government.

The Ostrava tenants' group grew to 16 people, including older tenants, younger activists and tenants, and community leaders. They continued meeting to advocate

for tenants' rights, participated in a skill-sharing session with the housing activists from tenant groups in Prague and Brno, and attended a training on housing rights. The year concluded with plans for public meetings on housing rights in 2025.

OUTCOMES

Campaign wins for housing justice

The campaign succeeded in winning some of the tenants' demands. Heimstaden agreed to lower purchase prices of some houses by 30% (from €72,000 to €50,000), offer two-year rental agreements for other tenants, and a commitment to a no-evictions. The company however has not followed through on all of the demands, in particular special concessions for the elderly, where it was discussed that agreements and bills would be explain in-person by Heimstanden representatives. Despite this, outcomes demonstrated how Liščina's organized tenants effectively challenged corporate power in the struggle for housing justice.

Tenant Empowerment

Local tenant groups gained a sense of collective agency and power by seeing that their collective actions resulted in achieving some of their demands. The video portraits, strategically shared on social media caught the attention of Heimstaden; they amplified their their stories, and together, their voices helped shift the balance of power with the company Heimstaden. They also learned how to constructively participate in group meetings, and be part of joint campaign actions.

Leadership development

Local leaders in the process of participating and facilitating group meetings, learned a diverse set of organizing practices such as active listening and trust building in one-on-one conversations, facilitating group meetings, creating space for emotions while steering discussions toward actionable outcomes, public speaking skills in the negotiations with Heimstaden. For example, Gita developed her leadership and communication skills, and was able to build trust within the community and learn to manage complex group dynamics.



Source: Photo by Yuliya Moskvina. Local leader Gita and organizer Yulia doing door to door outreach to talk with tenants in the Liščina community of Ostrava.

Growing a membership-based organization

The INN tenants' union grew and established a local branch in Ostrava with 16 members from Liščina community, Bedřiška community, and young activists contributing to the broader housing movement. This growth was possible thanks to increased collaboration and solidarity among local groups of different backgrounds and generations. For example, local groups initiated a solidarity action for the tenants of Bedřiška who were at risk of eviction, an ultimately raised €1,000 in three days for legal support .

LESSONS

Building relationships and collective agency

Building relationships and trust with tenants through door-to-door outreach was instrumental in building a base of community members who got engaged in the campaign and joined local community meetings. Strong facilitation skills were essential to facilitate community meetings with diverse community members, which often resulted in tensions and conflicts related to the issue and to interpersonal relations. Allowed space for acknowledging and addressing emotions before redirecting focus and discussions, created the space for building relationships, mutual understanding and constructive dialogue.

Understanding of power

In a context where bottom-up organizing tradition is not very developed, tenants' understanding of power dynamics was limited and evolved through reflecting on the process.

Many initially believed that their housing issues would be solved with top-down solutions, such as legal or political intervention, and did not believe that their action could make a difference.

Introducing grassroots organizing and building power from below on these premises was challenging. What helped was to include in the planning as part of the strategy, regular moments of reflection and learning with the local group and with local leaders. Reflecting on their actions and analysing what happened, what were the outcomes, how they were able to shift power and what could be learned from it.

For example, the group reflected on their tactic of creating video portraits of different tenants' stories with the same issue. The tactic worked because it built the collective power of the group. It used tenants' personal stories to challenge corporate narratives showing that it was not an individual issue, but a systemic problem and mobilizing public support for the campaign demands.

This succeeded in shifting power by getting a reaction from Heimstaden and influencing them to ask for negotiations with the tenants'.

Other tactics like publishing an open letter signed by 38 housing organizations (*European Action Coalition*), was not as effective in building power and it did not elicit any response from Heimstaden.

This reflection starting from experience, analysing the outcomes of their actions linking it to shifts in power (rather than corporate goodwill) was crucial for building their understanding of how organizing builds power and a sense of collective agency that their action can make a change.

Sustaining engagement

Maintaining the long-term engagement of community members in the tenant initiative was challenging. Some tenants prioritized immediate personal gains over collective long-term goals, disengaging once their immediate concerns were addressed.



Source: Photo by Vojtěch Šimša. Martina Bubova, local activist speaking at tenants' protest on the right to housing outside Heimstaden headquarters.



Source: Photo by Vojtěch Šimša. Tenants' protest on the right to housing outside Heimstaden headquarters.

Furthermore, internal conflicts and tensions arising from mistrust, racism, and poor communication skill in meetings; hindered cohesion and participation. The organizer needed to balance addressing immediate needs with building long-term structures.

Start with what the community cares about

The campaign in Ostrava originally addressed broadly a 'just transition' and after meetings with community members it became clear that housing was the issue that impacted them most directly, so the campaign focused on housing, which reflects the social justice issues of a 'just transition'.

A key lesson here is that in grassroots organizing we need to start where people are at to move them into action. Centering the local issues that frontline communities care about and connecting them to the bigger picture. Only this bottom-up approach will allow the movement to build the social base and the power it actually needs to win and change the politics around climate.

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Organizing citizens for a green and democratic Banská Bystrica, Slovakia



Organizing citizens for a green and democratic Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

BACKGROUND

Slovakia has experienced significant democratic backsliding following the September 2023 elections, which brought the nationalist and populist government of Robert Fico to power. The Fico administration has introduced legislative changes undermining civil liberties, attacking civil society organizations, and politicizing independent institutions. These actions have deepened societal polarization. In late 2023, widespread protests emerged, with Slovaks demanding an end to these regressive policies.

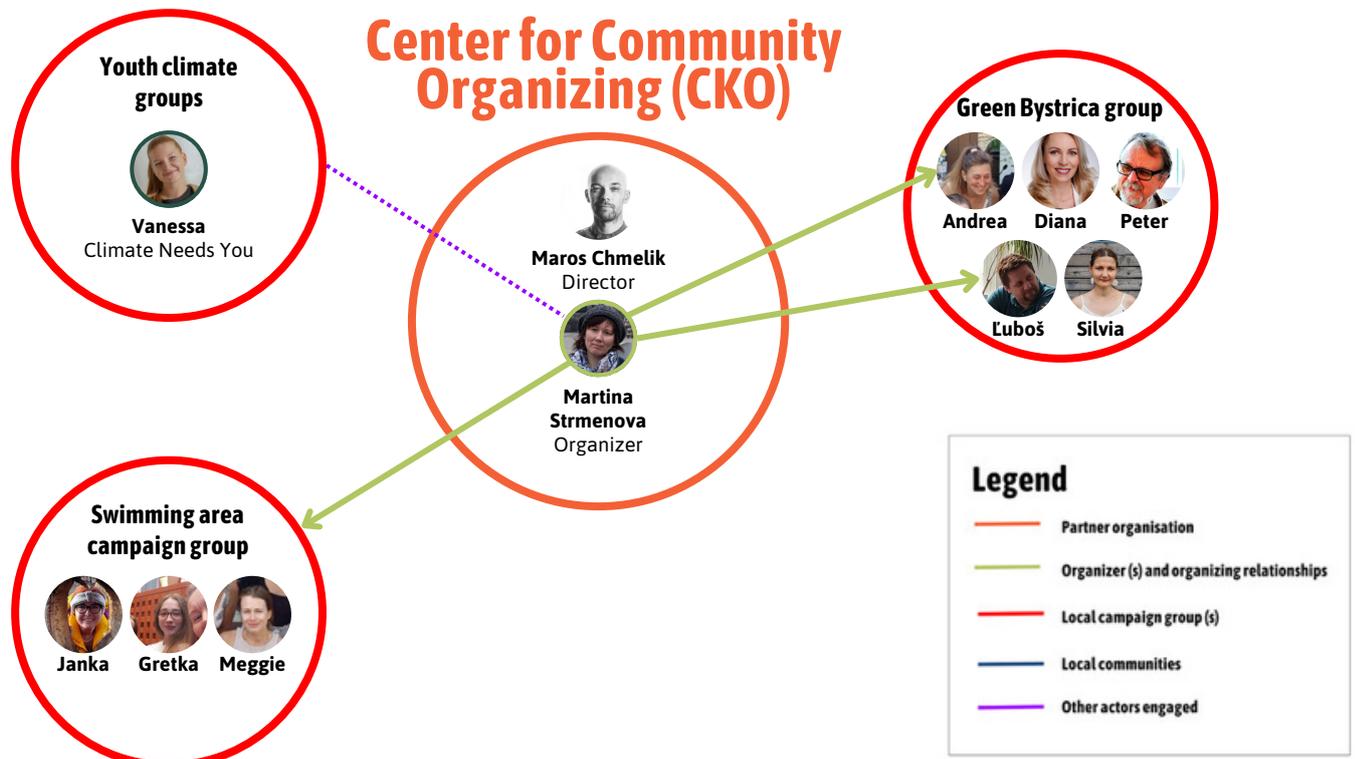
The Center for Community Organizing (CKO), a leading organization with over two decades of experience in community organizing with civic groups, operates extensively in the Banská Bystrica region. This region faces pronounced socio-economic challenges, including the marginalization of Roma communities and pressing climate-related issues. The local government response to those issues has been inadequate and citizens feel excluded and disenfranchised from decision-making processes that impact their lives.

In 2014, The region saw the rise of the radical far-right when Marian Kotleba's party, known for its anti-Roma rhetoric, won the regional elections. Responding to this,

CKO coordinated the establishment of the "Not in Our Town" platform, a civil society movement composed of citizens in the city of Banská Bystrica fighting extremism, radicalisation, and anti-democratic forces. This deradicalization effort significantly contributed to the far-right's defeat in the 2017 elections.

Over the years the group has addressed different issues impacting the city and region from corruption, extremism, radicalisation, human rights, discrimination against Roma communities, and local environmental issues.

In 2023, CKO created the local group Green Bystrica, stemming from the "Not in Our Town" platform, to address the climate and environmental issues in the city to hold the mayor and city government accountable for creating a sustainable, green, and democratic Banská Bystrica. In the past two years they have been running several grassroots campaigns to protect green and recreational spaces, advocate for improved climate adaptation and mitigation policies, and demand greater transparency and accountability from local authorities.



Graph: Snowflake leadership structure for Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

ORGANIZING PROCESS

The organizing process focused on local communities in the city of Banská Bystrica who wanted to participate and make their voice heard in decisions about their city’s development.

Local group

Martina Strmenova, an organizer with CKO, has been coordinating the Not in Our Town movement. In 2023 she formed and organized the Green Bystrica group which has a core group of about 15 dedicated local leaders who coordinate organizing efforts across different initiatives. They are composed of experienced and older activists from the “Not in Our Town” platform who have been part of social justice struggles the city for years, youth leaders in their late teens to early 20s, including students and recent graduates part of climate and environmental movements like “Klíma ťa

potrebuje” (Climate Needs You), Experts in urban planning, environmental science, law, education, and public policy who provide expert insights to campaign strategies, and local residents from various neighborhoods who are directly affected by the campaign. The group also has about 20 active supporters who participate in campaigns, attend meetings, and assist with various activities like organizing events and gathering petition signatures.

The process of identifying and developing new leaders was collaborative and adaptive. It included identifying and engaging people from the community who are not usually engaged, developing capacity and empowering new leaders by valuing the different perspectives they bring and enabling them to assume leadership roles based on their strengths and interests – while being mindful of inclusion and building relationships with existing leaders.



Source: Photo by CKO, Local group of active citizens in Banská Bystrica with members of the Green Green Bystrica group.

STRATEGY

The campaign aimed at organizing and building the power of local communities in the city of Banská Bystrica to hold the mayor and the city council accountable to the needs and demands of the city residents regarding climate, social justice, and democratic participation. This included the following strategic elements:

Relationship building

We built relationships with city residents across different neighborhoods and communities to build collective power and voice. This was done through one-on-one conversations with community members and building collaborations with other civil society groups and organisations that could be allies.

Local group meetings

The Green Bystrica met regularly to build relations among local leaders and members, discuss which issues to focus on, coordinate strategies, and plan collective actions.

Pressuring city council

We used different tactics to influence and hold the city council accountable on environmental issues and enforce compliance with environmental and participatory governance laws. This included reviewing the local climate policies and plans, such as the Adaptation and Mitigation Plan for Climate Change (APMA), providing detailed community feedback and demanding the city council to respond to and take action on the feedback, highlighting instances of negligence and corruption, and engage political candidates to commit to take action on them before the elections.

The group is continuously presenting their demands and solutions to the city council and exploring legal avenues to challenge unjust decisions until meaningful action is taken.

Media engagement

We used stories in the media and social media to inform the wider public of the issues faced by local residents and increase visibility of the administration's shortcomings. Through this strategy and through social media outreach, we engaged community members to join the campaign and put pressure on the city administration.



Source: Screenshot of Slovak Television and Radio (STVR) covering the story of the swimming area campaign in Banská Bystrica,

Alliance building

We built relationships and alliances with other groups and organisations sharing the same vision, like environmental NGOs, community groups, and experts in the Banská Bystrica region and beyond. These collaborations enabled us to expand resources, amplify our demands, and increase our influence.

TIMELINE OF ACTIONS

January – June 2023

In February, the Green Bystrica Group was established to connect fragmented local

groups in working on environmental issues. We engaged in dialogue with the youth climate justice organization “Klíma ťa potrebuje” (Climate Needs You). In May, a member joined the international training on community organizing in Czechia.

July – December 2023:

We conducted local organizing training and launched campaigns to save the Podlavice inner block area and protect trees in the city. We strengthened intergenerational collaboration by engaging with youth climate movements and holding intergroup meetings. Additionally, we analyzed the city's Adaptation and Mitigation Plan for Climate Change (APMA), attending city council presentations to provide feedback to it.



Source: Photo by CKO, Local group meeting for swimming area campaign in Banská Bystrica.

January – June 2024

We provided detailed feedback on APMA but faced dismissive responses from the municipality.

We launched a campaign against the Flora apartments project, organizing public debates, drafting an open letter to the mayor, and presenting demands to the city council.

We planned in collaboration with the climate youth groups, a roundtable meeting in March 2024 and a joint Earth Day climate action.

We created a petition for a “Green Slovakia” ahead of EU elections which garnered limited support.

July – December 2024

We continue to share feedback on city policies and advocate for the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, persistently pressuring officials to act on community demands.

We started campaigning on pressing community issues that would highlight city government negligence. For example, a local campaign to change the bad management of a swimming area that was rented to a businessman through corruption and it was poorly maintained for years. We mobilized widespread community support through a *petition* that demanded the city to ~~terminate the lease~~ with the businessman city to terminate the contract with the tenant of the swimming area responsible for the poor upkeep. The petition gathered 5,800 signatures from online and offline collections, pressuring the city to terminate the lease.

This significant public backing was used to mobilise more people in the city that could be potentially organized. Building on the momentum of the swimming areas campaign, we started a listening campaign to directly engage with residents across city districts. We identified local concerns and involved citizens in shaping the movement’s priorities. This grassroots approach strengthened collective bargaining power

and ensured campaigns reflected genuine community needs.



Source: Photo by CKO. Local leader Meggie Kováč Mergová presenting the case of bad management of a swimming area at the Banska Bystrica city council

Local campaigns had already started building public support towards the need to change local political leadership in the city. We initiated efforts to do electoral organizing in communities to change the local government in future elections. We started identifying potential municipal election candidates aligned with our vision and started organizing communities to support a city leadership that would be more responsive to the community demands.

OUTCOMES

The organizing process and local campaigns resulted in the following outcomes:

Increasing local government accountability

The local campaigns brought public and media attention to contentious issues, pressuring authorities to acknowledge community concerns and justify their actions. This laid the groundwork for more transparent, participatory and accountable governance.

For example, in response to the campaign on the bad management of a swimming area in the city, the mayor of Banská Bystrica, made a *public statement* (Bystricoviny, 2024) saying that the city council filed a complaint against the operator of the swimming area with the Regional Health Inspectorate and the Labour Inspectorate. He explained that they are looking at options to terminate the contract with the current operator. However, as long as the tenant fulfills its obligations under the contract, the city cannot just terminate the contract, or would risk getting into litigation and be exposed to financial penalties. He committed to do his utmost to resolve the problem and take the swimming pool area into the hands of the city and return it to the people of Banská Bystrica

Building a base of empowered citizens

The campaign engaged almost six thousands residents through petitions and other outreach activities, showing strong public concern for environmental issues and local governance. We built a base of local community members motivated to engage in local issues and prepared to sustain advocacy and campaign efforts in the long- term. This fostered a stronger culture of active civic engagement and strengthened long-term community capacity to engage in systemic change.

Shifting Narratives

Environmental and climate justice became central themes in local discussions in civic group spaces, city council meetings, news media, and discussions on Facebook. This was thanks to the effective use of media and social media platforms in the campaign, which ensured visibility of the issues and the campaign's messages as well as increased

public pressure on officials to respond to those issues. The campaign's focus on preserving green spaces and promoting sustainable urban planning influenced public discourse and placed climate issues firmly on the local political agenda also during the elections.

LESSONS

The importance of context and adaptability

The political context heavily influenced the campaign's focus. When local government proved unresponsive, the group shifted strategies to emphasize grassroots organizing and electoral engagement. Flexibility in strategy was essential when facing unresponsive authorities.

Leadership development

Recruiting and developing new leaders requires significant effort, particularly in contexts where individuals have limited time to dedicate to activism. Offering flexible roles and focusing on building leadership capacities incrementally can help mitigate these challenges.

Navigating inter-group dynamics

Organizing across diverse groups, including different generations and professional backgrounds, is inherently challenging. The campaign's intergenerational collaboration between youth and experienced activists revealed tensions but also highlighted the value of mutual learning from diverse approaches to change. It was important to realize that it's okay for groups to pursue different strategies and collaborate where relevant.



Source: Photo by Martina Strmeňová, Intergenerational dialogue between youth climate groups and Green Bystrica local group.

Engaging community members on tangible issues

The campaign's success in mobilizing citizens was most evident when it addressed issues directly affecting their daily lives, such as public green spaces and the swimming area in the city. Addressing climate justice by linking it to tangible local issues is crucial for broadening engagement. Targeting specific, winnable local issues helped build momentum, demonstrate impact, and cultivate trust among community members. Small victories serve as stepping stones for larger systemic change.

Evolving organizing practice for systemic change

Reflecting on the outcomes of local organizing efforts and campaigns, we realised that the impact of citizens' actions to influence the city council would remain limited as long as the political leadership of the city would continue to be unresponsive to people' demands.

So we expanded our organizing strategy to include electoral organizing and started organizing communities to support municipal election candidates aligned with our vision that would be more responsive

to the community demands in future local elections.

This strategic shift reflects a lesson learned that to achieving meaningful improvements to the city management of environmental issues often requires shifts in political leadership.

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Organizing communities for a “Blooming Silesia” in Poland



Organizing communities for a “Blooming Silesia” in Poland



BACKGROUND

The region of Silesia in Poland, is Europe’s largest coal-mining region. As part of the EU goal to reduce CO2 emissions by 2030, the European Green Deal (EGD) includes the closure of coal mines. This transformation has been raising both hopes and fears, and while Silesian communities understand the need for change, they also fear for their future and the future of their region.

The energy transformation of Silesian cities has largely excluded the voices of residents and communities who believe that they cannot influence their future and the conversation about the European Green Deal and a Just Transition, particularly in decisions about land use and urban greenery. Industrial areas and closed coal mines, rather than being returned to serve community needs, have been handed over to investors without proper consideration of local interests. Local authorities often disregard the needs of communities and do not create spaces for genuine dialogue and participation in decision making. This approach reflects a systemic disregard for public input, leaving communities feeling disenfranchised and disempowered. For this energy transition to be just, the decarbonisation process must ensure the rights and livelihoods of the affected workers and communities.

Common Thing Foundation is a women- led organization that has been organizing local communities in Silesia since 2015 supporting 20 civic groups, training around 300 people, developing 100 local leaders, and engaging 5000 people through various actions and programmes. By 2023, they were organizing with the Silesian Climate Movement, and had noticed a disconnect between climate groups and local people. Activists focused on protesting with other activists in their social bubbles rather than having conversations with people who may not share their views.

To address these issues, the Common Thing Foundation decided to organize a coalition of Silesian communities from Chorzów, Ruda Śląska, Siemianowice Śląskie, and Katowice. The coalition campaigned for a “Green Silesia,” demanding that Silesians be part of decisions affecting the future of the region and that political leaders be accountable to them. The short-term objective was to secure commitments from mayoral candidates to include residents in decision-making. The long-term vision was to implement policies prioritizing urban green spaces and sustainability, transforming the region into a model of community-led development.

ORGANIZING PROCESS

Local group

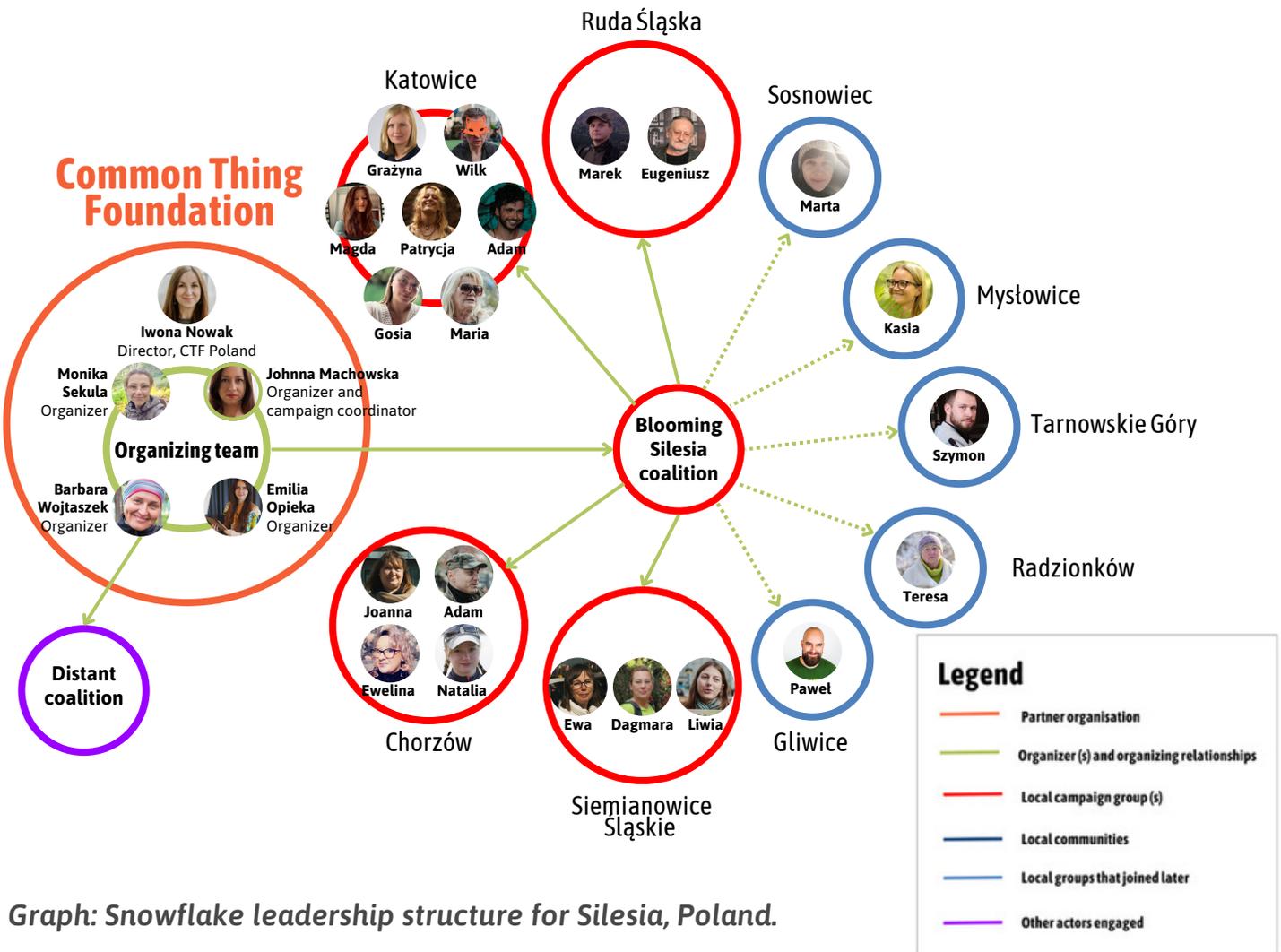
The campaign was driven by a core team of organizers from the Common Thing Foundation: Joanna (Asia) Machowska, Barbara (Basia) Wojtaszek, Emilia Opieka, Monika Sekuła, alongside a local group. The local group was initially composed of two local leaders from each city: Chorzów, Ruda Śląska, Siemianowice Śląskie, and Katowice and it has grown into the Blooming Silesia a coalition representing seven cities and several civil society organisations and groups addressing the issue.

The core coalition group is composed of approximately 20 local leaders. This is also connected to a wider community of supporters who are part of the coalition representing 40 civil society organisations,

informal groups and movements in Silesia.

The coalition was very diverse which has meant that the campaign language and tactics had to be more inclusive for a wider audience. Members were united by a common vision to take care of all inhabitants of Silesia, from people, to animals, to plants.

We developed a leadership structure that fostered local ownership while maintaining cohesion across the coalition. Leadership and organizing training and mentoring sessions further empowered local leaders, particularly women, to take initiative and sustain campaign momentum. The people who were engaged in the campaign actions took part in previous actions and events organized by the Common Thing Foundation.



Graph: Snowflake leadership structure for Silesia, Poland.

Within the coalition different working groups were established with different roles in the campaign: the social media group, the event planning group, and the group that delivered demands to local authorities. The coalition had monthly face-to-face meetings to coordinate the campaign. Notes were kept for each meeting and different online communication channels were used to communicate in between meetings.

STRATEGY

The campaign started with the question: what changes do residents of the Silesian Voivodeship want? The organizing process started from listening to the needs of residents, turning them into collective demands and then building collective power to achieve them.

Relationships building

The campaign was centred around people in Silesia at the frontline of the transition. Organizers invested time and energy in building relationships with them, conducting one-on-one conversations in selected frontline cities in Silesia and listening to the problems residents face in their local realities. From this listening campaign, three main types of needs emerged: urban greenery, democratic participation and engagement with local authorities.

Local group leaders often organized nature walks throughout the year immediately after the campaign launched as a community building tactic to strengthen relationships within the coalition, and grow the visibility of the campaign in the community.



Source: Photo by CTF.Educational nature walk along the Rawa River April 2024.

Coalition building

Building a regional coalition across cities in the Silesia region (Blooming Silesia), was an important part of the campaign structure and strategy. From its inception which started with four cities, it grew to seven cities and built a network of supporters from outside the coalition. Monthly coalition meetings were used to build relationships and trust, coordinate, make decisions and plan actions. The coalition went through a process of developing shared campaign demands (postulates) collaboratively across cities that were at the core of the campaign.

Local group meetings

Local group meetings were a crucial part of the organizing process. While the organizer initiated the group meetings and led them at the beginning, she gradually empowered and supported group members to facilitate and plan them, providing advice on organizing strategy, narrative and communication of the campaign. Democratic decision-making was prioritised in team meetings to address individual and group needs, make collective decisions and assess whether campaign actions were consistent with the coalition's agreements.



Announcement of demands - press conference (Chorzów, March 2024) . Monika Sekuła, Stanisław Bulandra and Joanna Bulandra, Ewa Nowacka, Marek Kawecki, Joanna Machowska, Grażyna Skrzypkowska, Emilia Opieka, Dagmara Kubik, Ewelina Maćkowska, Barbara Wojtaszek Monika Sekuła, Ewa Nowacka, Marek Kawecki, Joanna Machowska, Grażyna Skrzypkowska, Emilia Opieka, Dagmara Kubik, Ewelina Maćkowska, Barbara Wojtaszek

Leadership Development

Leadership development was central to the campaign. Of all the leaders who got involved in the campaign, 50% received additional development opportunities through one-on-one mentoring sessions. Between October and December 2023 CTF held three local workshops in Katowice on organizing one-on-one conversations. Online sessions were held throughout the entire campaign. This not only enhanced the confidence of local leaders but also encouraged collaborative efforts.

Engaging local government

The campaign ran diverse tactics to raise awareness and mobilize public support for the demands and engage government institutions. These included participation in public debates and meetings with city councils and mayors, which provided platforms to present the coalition’s demands. Notably, in Chorzów and Tarnowskie Góry, the campaign’s presence influenced councilors to take action on the issues.

Creative campaigning

The campaign took a creative, positive, inclusive approach to making the voice of Silesians heard in the public sphere with creative actions open to anyone and inspiring a sense of hope and joy. This was a shift away from approaches based on direct confrontation and pressure on decision-makers and prioritised building relationships with people outside of the so-called activist bubble and building a hopeful narrative. This was visible in several creative actions carried out throughout the campaign from traveling with a “transformation van”, to marching in the First Silesian Nature March, dressed up as various species of plants and animals native to the region accompanied by music. The creative campaign approach allowed them to engage a wider diversity of groups and receive significant media coverage.



Source: Photo by CTF. Transformation Van - promotion before First March of Silesian Nature in October 2024 in Chorzów. Joanna Porwolik, Adam Piela.

Stories, social media, and traditional media

Blooming Silesia emphasized the sharing of personal stories of coalition members to build relationships, make visible the challenges of the Silesian Voivodeship residents and their motivation to take action. Some of these stories were documented through four short films and shared on social media.



Source: Photo by CTF. First March of Silesian Nature in Katowice in October 2024

Social media played a crucial role in sharing stories and campaign updates, inspiring supporters, and amplifying key messages. In parallel, local, regional, and digital media were engaged to put pressure on city authorities to take action through media coverage and participation in TV shows and podcasts. The compelling nature of these stories kept media outlets interested, leading them to continue covering the issues and the campaign.

TIMELINE OF ACTIONS

Before 2023 - years 2018–2022

In the years before the campaign CTF's organizers had been laying the groundwork, by organizing and building relationships with the communities in the regions and supporting several local groups on climate justice, gender equity, and democratic participation.

Mar-Jun 2023

The organizers started a listening campaign with communities in the four cities Chorzów, Ruda Śląska, Siemianowice Śląskie, and Katowice, holding one-one-one conversations, identifying possible leaders and starting the process of forming a coalition in April.

Jul-Dec 2023

The coalition was formed in September 2023 and the first organizing training was held in November. The coalition developed five shared demands across cities (or postulates): (1) Greenery in cities prioritized and treated comprehensively, (2) public consultation of residents in decision-making, (3) urban investments in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, (4) supporting neighborhoods and communities to build civil society, and (5) Environmental and health education. They started campaigning to have these demands included in the strategic documents at city and regional level in Silesia.

From October 2023 to the end of January 2024 CTF hosted a series of campaign strategizing workshops with the coalition focused on the campaign narrative, campaign strategizing, tactics and name of the campaign.



Source: Photo by CTF. Flash mob in Katowice to launch the campaign in February 2024.

Jan-Jun 2024

With local elections in April 2024, the coalition carried out research from February to March 2024 showing that “Silesia is not as black as they paint it” surveying 537 Silesians about their views on key local issues and democratic participation. The findings showed that 54% of respondents want more green areas, 82% want local authorities to invest more in the development and maintenance of green areas and 75% want citizens to have more say in the development of local policies. The findings were presented at press conferences, sent to the media, debated among candidates running for mayor in the four cities, and presented directly to the mayor of Katowice. The coalition asked local politicians to listen to the voices of residents with regards to city policies and respond by sharing their position on the demands made by the people of each city.

Jul-Dec 2024

The campaign reached its peak in campaign actions organised by coalition members which engaged hundreds of people. These included press conferences, city council meetings, and the First March of Silesian Nature where 400 people attended.



Source: Photo by CTF. Press conference, before the First March of Silesia Nature in October 2024 in Katowice, October 2024. From left to right: Grażyna Skrzyzkowska, Liwia Troncik, Monika Sekuła, Adam Piel, Maria Czenczek, Szymon Kuś, Emilia Opieka, Joanna Machowska.

OUTCOMES

Local governments addressing campaign demands for a Green Silesia

The mayors of two of the cities with local groups part of the coalition (Ruda Śląska and Chorzów) agreed to address the coalition’s demands after meeting with coalition members. Other city councils and some mayors in the cities involved in the campaign invited local groups to meetings to discuss the coalition’s demands.

A growing regional coalition

The coalition built power and scale by expanding from four to seven cities in the Silesia region and receiving support from 40 civil society organisations, groups and movements.

This was thanks to the effectiveness in facilitating collaboration across different interests and approaches and building agreement around shared campaign demands (or postulates).

Leadership development

Local leaders developed their confidence and skills through campaign actions and meetings. They strengthened their public speaking skills by giving speeches at city council and organizing public actions. For example, Johanna an activist based in Chorzów coordinated the social media campaign, Marek a miner and leader from Ruda Śląska shot drone footage of campaign actions, Adam, a leader from Ruda Śląska organised nature walks for the community, wrote about biodiversity on CTF social media and spoke several times in the media. The fertile social soil we nurture enables people to bloom.



Source: Photo by CTF. Adam Piela speaking to the media about nature protection in the Kochłówka Valley at a press conference, before the First March of Silesia Nature (Katowice, October 2024).

Community and public engagement

Thousands of Silesians engaged in the campaign in different ways, through actions, walks, social media, meetings, conversations and through the March for Silesian Nature where 400 people attended.

As more people started talking about the campaign and its demands, the public discourse pressured city authorities to take action to protect green spaces in Silesia.

Media Coverage and public recognition

Local and regional media covered the campaign actions and local leaders' stories. Visible, colorful actions and personal stories resonated with the media and the public establishing the coalition as a credible advocate for community-led change. Consistent media engagement helped the coalition increase visibility and amplify residents' demands for a "Green Silesia."

LESSONS

Navigating diversity in coalitions

With such a wide and diverse coalition, balancing diverse interests and approaches required clear boundaries and shared priorities. There were cases of individuals who wanted to "use" the coalition for their political gains which would affect the coalition's legitimacy. Maintaining a shared vision for long-term sustainability of the coalition meant making some difficult yet strategic decisions to avoid members having conflicts of interest.

Shifting organizing practices

We had already organized on climate justice in previous years organizing mostly with the Silesian Climate Movement. In this campaign, we shifted strategy and focused on organizing people outside the 'activist bubble'. This required thinking of different ways to engage people from direct and confrontational actions, and developing a campaign narrative that would go beyond the framing of a climate emergency.

This campaign prioritised relationship building with impacted communities; a positive narrative of what Silesians want; and open and creative actions that were accessible for a wider group of people to join. With this approach, many local community members who used to be disillusioned and did not believe that they could make a difference; were inspired by a clear and positive vision for change and became motivated to join campaign actions.

Accountable Leadership

A solid foundation of trust and clear roles and responsibilities is crucial for sustaining coalitions. Early investment in leadership development could have mitigated later challenges. In coalition building, it was important to shift from individual leadership to develop a sense of collective leadership, share power and decision-making.

Scaling with Care

While the rapid growth of the coalition enabled the campaign to build more power, expanding to seven cities with diverse interests and needs, highlighted the importance of investing resources to building and maintaining the structures needed to scale. Future campaigns should prioritize structure and capacity building alongside geographic growth.

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4. Organizing and learning across borders



Organizing and learning across borders

BACKGROUND

The post-communist history and long-standing tradition of coal mining deeply shapes Central and Eastern Europe's social and political dynamics. This is significant given the European Union's role in disrupting the fossil fuel industry through the European Green Deal. Together, these factors create a unique and complex landscape for the region especially at the light of the EU elections that took place in June 2024 and were seen as a referendum on the European Green Deal.

The international coordination of this project consisted in bringing together and organizing the people involved in the local campaigns from Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, namely the organizers and in certain instances local leaders, as well as organizing the partner organisations involved in this project.

Our collaboration which took place through international team meetings and one-on-one campaign coaching, had two key dimensions. First, local organizers critically reflected on their campaigns, comparing strategies for building power and addressing local issues. Second, we explored the potential to coordinate actions as part of a shared campaign.

As the process progressed, we asked

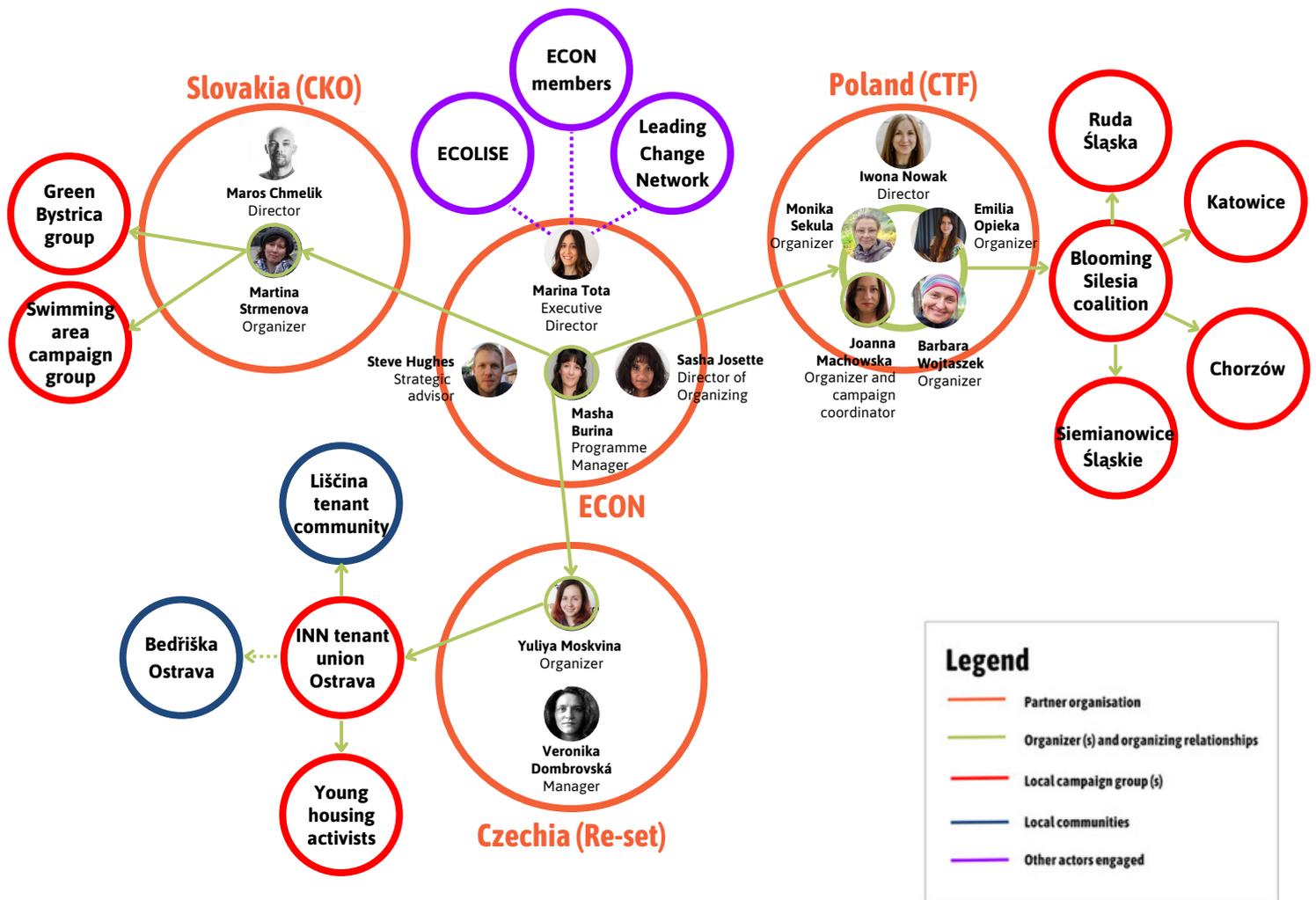
ourselves, how could we weave our work into a locally rooted, internationally coordinated campaign? What variables would need to be considered that could influence the process?

ORGANIZING PROCESS

Our approach to the international coordination of this organizing project placed a strong emphasis on supporting the locally rooted aspect of our "locally rooted, internationally coordinated" campaign. By applying organizing frameworks to real, on-the-ground experiences of the three local campaigns, time devoted to critical reflection within and across campaigns was essential to the development of campaigns. This focus proved crucial, as each community is unique and requires building local organizing capacity that can respond to its specific needs.

ORGANIZING TEAM

The core international organizing team consisted of the three local organizers: Martina Strmeňová from Slovakia's Center for Community Organizing, Asia Machowska from the Polish Common Thing Foundation, and Yuliya Moskvina from Re-set in the Czech Republic, organized by Masha Burina from the European Community Organizing Network (ECON).



Snowflake of international team

Some meetings and parts of the processes were supported by other staff from the ECON team including Marina Tota, Steve Hughes, and Sasha Josette.

ORGANIZING STRATEGY

Our theory of change centered on the idea that bringing together lead organizers from three local campaigns into an internationally coordinated space for learning and exchange could strengthen local efforts and pave the way for an internationally coordinated campaign. Through coaching, training, and international meetings, organizers would share and reflect on campaign challenges, experiment with new organizing frameworks,

and learn from each other’s experiences. This ongoing exchange would not only deepen their organizing practice but also build strong, trust-based relationships. By investing in each other’s growth, organizers would lay the groundwork for meaningful collaboration and the development of a truly collective international campaign.

Over the course of two years we held 17 internationally coordinated team meetings, 75 one-on-ones campaign coaching sessions, and 3 in-person trainings and workshops. The international coordination of this organizing project included the following elements :

COORDINATING LEARNING ACROSS COUNTRIES

One-on-one campaign coaching sessions

ECON's international organiser, Masha held one-on-ones campaign coaching sessions with local organizers, which served to diagnose organizing challenges, explore possible interventions, and commit to next steps. Each session built on the last, following up on previous commitments while examining the relational and structural dynamics shaping the campaign. The process was cyclical, continually returning to the coaching framework to reassess, adapt, and intervene as needed.

In-person international organizing trainings and meetings

Over the course of the project, ECON convened four in-person international convenings with local organizers, leaders, and representatives of partner organisations in Ostrava (Czech Republic), Katowice (Poland), Banska Bystrica (Slovakia) and Bucharest (Romania) at different stages of the process. Each convening strengthened the relationships among the people and organisations involved, built organizing capacity and enabled collective reflection, analysis and learning across countries.

Facilitating reflection and learning across countries

The internationally coordinated team meetings served multiple purposes: they provided a space to share updates, challenges and lessons from local campaigns, apply organizing frameworks to strengthen campaign analysis and commitment to action, strategize around an international campaign, and, just as importantly, build stronger interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships

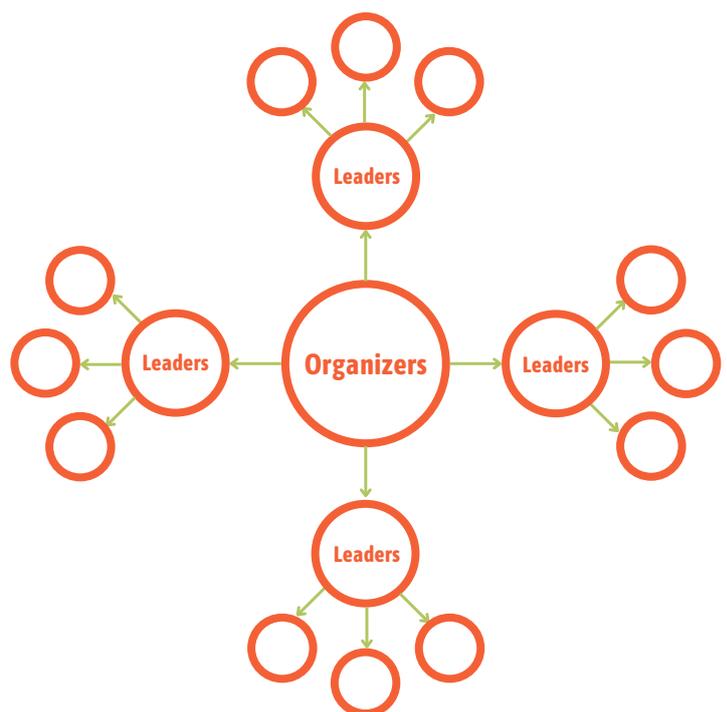


Source: Photo by ECON. Organisers and representatives of project partners during online coordination meeting. From left to right: Masha Burina, Marina Tota, Steve Huges, Iwona Nowak, Marika, Veronika Cinkova, Maros Chmelik, Martina Stmenova, Joanna (Asia) Machowska.

Sharing organizing tools

Throughout the project, we contributed to the development and strengthening organizing practices by introducing organizing frameworks and tools. Here are some of the main ones:

The snowflake model of distributed leadership was used to help organizers structure their local groups and plan for growth, building power by engaging more community members as active owners of campaign activities.



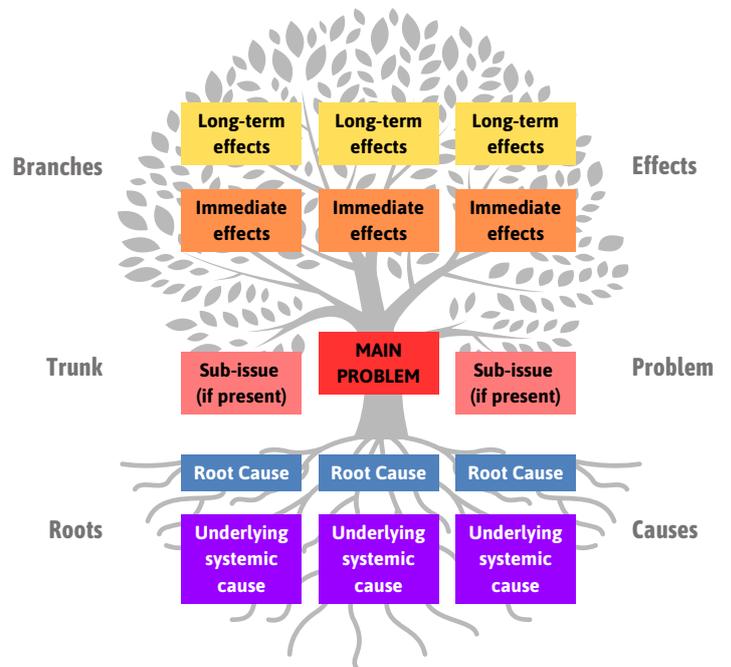
Graph. Snowflake model.

The practice power mapping (similar to this framework) was introduced. This helped visualize the landscape of decision-makers and key actors influencing the issues that communities were facing, clarify their level of support and influence, and their proximity to the primary decision-making target. The map was used to strategize and plan campaign actions that would build and shift power.

A **community mapping tool** helped identify local communities and groups organizers needed to engage, based on geographic locations and key constituencies. This was paired with developing lists of local leaders involved in the campaign, tracking their presence within these communities. The goal was to understand where “our people” were based and identify individuals who could build power within their locales.



Graph. Community mapping



Graph. Problem Tree

Problem tree analysis (similar to this) facilitated a collective understanding of the main issues that were experienced by the communities in the three countries, and identification of the root causes and effects both in the short and long term. This model served to inform the connection between issues and campaign goals and the understanding of root causes and the kind of change required to resolve systemic issues. These are some of the tools that were used to facilitate collective analysis, reflection and planning both of the local organizing campaigns and the international one. Local organizers were invited to use these tools also in meetings with their local groups, and to bring feedback from local groups into the international space.

COORDINATING INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN

Throughout the project, we aimed to test a model for a locally rooted, internationally coordinated organizing campaign.

Our theory of change was that enabling cross-border collaboration among local campaign teams — through developing shared international goals and demands rooted in urgent community issues, a common power analysis, and coordinated strategies — could bridge local struggles with levers of power at the international level. We aimed to empower local communities to build enough collective power to influence narratives, decisions, and policies, including those shaped by EU institutions, in the context of the EU elections .

Coordinating a shared campaign platform

In late 2023 and 2024, we coordinated a process of international campaign strategizing and developing a shared platform of the international campaign

rooted in the local campaigns. This process started with developing a shared analysis of the European political context and interplay with the local political contexts as dynamics shaping the issues impacting local communities don't exist in isolation. For example, the European Green Deal and its Just Transition Fund was analyzed in the context of the countries and regions that could benefit and the challenges with how the funds were being used, the slow coal phase-out, the transition to renewable energy, and the disappointing implementation of the deal.

Organizers and leaders who met in Katowice developed a shared campaign vision of a Just and Healthy Future for the communities we organized, rooted in the local campaign visions.



Source: Photo by Marina Tota. Organizers and local leaders from Czechia, Slovakia and Poland at a Just Transition strategy meeting in Katowice, Poland.

Given that communities in the three countries had different specific issues and demands, they were not able to agree on one shared campaign goal so rather developed six common campaign principles rooted in the demands of the local campaigns. Initially there were five, yet with the increased polarisation in Slovakia in spring 2024 after the assassination attempt of the prime minister, they decided to add a sixth principle which was placed at the top of the list. They were the following:

1. Bring us together, don't push us apart (address polarization)
2. An economy that works for our people
3. Protection and restoration of vital habitats; clean air and water
4. Housing for every person
5. Real, clean energy
6. Policy decisions rooted in deep democracy

To elaborate on the issues and the demands for each of these principles, we developed background papers for Europe, Slovakia, and drafts for Poland, and Czechia and a strategy for campaigning on these issues. All campaign materials and calls to action, both local and international, were hosted on a shared campaign page, which was regularly updated as the campaign progressed. Local teams created contextualized and translated materials tailored to their communities.

For instance, the organizer in Banská Bystrica initiated a Slovak petition focused on six key demands, aiming to show local support and identify potential supporters for future engagement. Meanwhile, the Silesian group launched a Silesian petition in response to spillage of toxic chemicals in a

local river, calling on provincial authorities to establish a healthy and dignified life in a clean environment.

In view of the EU elections, the Silesian group created a video documenting the perceptions of communities in the Silesian region regarding the EU elections and European politics. The video showed mixed feelings and skepticism across the communities that the EU elections would have any meaningful impact on their lives. In the aftermath of the EU elections we held a collective critical reflection on the campaign process and outcomes and on what it means to “meet communities where they are at” in the organizing processes. Ultimately the team decided to let go of pursuing one international campaign that could risk becoming top-down, and shifted our attention to continuing to build power and organizing capacity at the local level, and supporting local campaign efforts.

Engaging other actors in the movement ecosystem

Throughout the process, we built relationships and explored collaborations with several international organizations working on climate justice and just transition, including Solidar, which coordinates a European Alliance for a Just Transition. We collaborated with the Leading Change Network to plan a “Climate Justice Movement Academy”. We became members of ECOLISE, the European network for community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability, which was campaigning on the European Green Deal. Additionally, we exchanged campaign lessons with ECON member organizations at the ECON General Assemblies and online members’ meetings.



Source: Photo by ECON. Organizers and local leaders from across Europe at the international training “Climate Justice Movement Academy” in Ostrava, Czech Republic in May 2023.

In May 2024 we organised a members’ meeting titled “Ecology from Below: Organizing for Social and Environmental Justice”, where organizers from the project spoke alongside other climate and social justice activists from Extinction Rebellion, Kreni-Promeni, Marš Sa Drine, Health Care Without Harm, and the Local Storytelling Exchange. These efforts helped strengthen the ECON network and opened possibilities for alliances to support the campaigns.

TIMELINE

January-June 2023

We started with selecting the countries and organisations to involve as partners in this organizing project, identifying local organizers in each country.

The first in-person gathering in Ostrava, Czechia in May 2023 was organised in

partnership with the Leading Change Network (LCN) and hosted by Re-set. It brought together organizers and activists from across Europe to be trained in community organizing through different frameworks and tools including the 5 practices of the Marshall Ganz organizing framework. Participants also learned about the European Green Deal and ways to engage in it at a policy level.

July-December 2023

Supporting and strengthening local organizing processes, the formation of local groups, training local groups and planning of local campaigns. Facilitating mutual learning across campaigns, shared analysis of the problems and power mapping, and exploring international collaboration.

January-February 2024

In February 2024, the second in-person gathering in Katowice, Poland was hosted by CTF. It gathered organizers and local leaders, to review local campaign progress, strategize the internationally coordinated campaign for a Just Transition.

At the meeting, we collectively analyzed national and EU politics, as well as corporate lobbying efforts to weaken the Green Deal ahead of the June 2024 elections. We conducted a power analysis of key actors at local, national, and European levels, examining how political players influence EU climate policies.

We discussed the EU Parliament elections in June 2024 as a possible organizing moment for the international campaign with the idea to engage Members European Parliament (MEP) candidates to demand action on issues affecting our constituencies.



Source: Photo by Marina Tota. Organizers and local leaders from Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland at the international campaign strategizing meeting in Katowice, Poland in February 2024. From left, Yuliya Moskvina, Andrea Štulajterová, Ľuboš Vrbický, Isa Grauman, Zuzana Sloboda Szaboova, Joanna (Asia) Machowska.

We developed a shared vision, agreed on six guiding principles for a “Just and Healthy Europe,” and drafted a coordinated campaign plan. We shared the campaign plan and insights from our project with

other ECON member organizations at the ECON General Assembly and gathered their feedback.

March-June 2024

We developed a shared campaign platform connecting local campaigns to European politics including a background document with localized versions highlighting key community issues and demands for a Just and Healthy Europe.

During this period, there were significant political events that shaped the views and perceptions of citizens and communities in the countries we were organizing. Across Europe in the spring of 2024, protests by farmworkers against the European Green Deal intensified. In Poland coal miners joined them, blocking streets arguing that environmental regulations, economic pressures, and trade policies were harming their industries and livelihoods. This stirred up public distrust in European institutions as the elections neared. In Slovakia, an assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico on May 15, which he survived, further impacted the political atmosphere - leaving a chilling effect on political discourse.

In response to these events and their societal implications, we updated the shared campaign vision to emphasize the to address polarization.

We shifted the campaign focus from the ‘European Green Deal’ to a ‘Just and Healthy Future’ and realised that in this context mobilizing communities around an international campaign toward the EU elections was no longer feasible.

These dynamics, combined with challenges in aligning on a European-wide strategy, made it difficult to unite communities for a cohesive campaign. The reasons for this are discussed below in the lessons learned

July-December 2024

We facilitated a collective reflection on the EU election results, adjusted plans based on local group feedback, and canceled the trip to the EU Parliament to focus on building local power.

In November 2024, we held a learning review with representatives of partner organizations in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, to reflect on the whole project and document lessons, outcomes, and contributions from local and international organizing, and explored ways to improve and scale up the project.

Jan-Mar 2025

In February 2025 representatives of the organizations involved in this project gathered in Bucharest, Romania at the ECON General Assembly and Central and Eastern Europe Gathering to share the stories and organizing lessons from this project with the wider European organizing movement.

We discussed lessons from organizing communities across borders and how they informed future plans for coordinating organizing efforts across borders with ECON members.

OUTCOMES

The international coordination of learning and campaigning across countries contributed to the following outcomes:



Source: Photo by Marina Tota. Martina Strmeňová, Masha Burina, Joanna (Asia) Machowska at Learning Review meeting in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.

Building organizing capacity

The organizers, local groups and partner organisations in this project developed and strengthened their organizing capacity. The international organizing team was a space of ongoing learning exchange of organizing practices and strategies across countries and campaigns. The international trainings and convenings were spaces to collectively discuss, test, and contextualize organizing models and tools in relation to the local campaigns and to situate local campaigns in a wider international context.

Initiating international alliances

The international coordination of campaign strategizing contributed to building relationships among organizers and exploring alliances across local groups and organisations despite the diversity of contexts and issues. It enabled the development of a shared analysis of the issues, mapping of power and identification of shared campaign vision and demands. It also initiated and built relationships and networks with other international organisations and actors in the Climate Justice Movement ecosystem.

LESSONS

The lessons learned from testing the international coordination of learning and campaigning across countries were:

Build strategic alignment

Campaigns require alignment on a shared problem that affects the constituency's everyday life, and a strategic goal that's clear, measurable and addresses the problem. Developing an international campaign was challenging because from Poland to Slovakia and Czechia

our communities faced different urgent problems, with their own priorities needing unique attention. Developing a shared vision and principles made the group more explicitly identify with having a set of strongly shared values that bind it together. However, this did not provide enough strategic alignment to motivate and mobilize resources, most importantly local communities and potential allies, into collective action in a joint campaign. Effective campaigns require alignment in these two areas.

Adapting to changing dynamics and emerging challenges

The coordination of the international campaign unfolded in a politically dynamic context across Europe, which required timely responses and strategic adaptations. What we initially saw as an organizing opportunity during the EU elections was complicated by growing distrust in European institutions, a strong anti-Green Deal narrative, and widespread street mobilizations—from farmworkers to coal miners—against the Green Deal.

We responded to political changes by adapting our organizing strategy. For example, In Poland, following the local elections of April 2024, activists experienced electoral fatigue, and there was little motivation to mobilize for the EU elections in June, which local communities viewed as irrelevant. So we decided to shift focus away from the EU elections to concentrate on building local power. In Slovakia, an assassination attempt on President Fico deepened political polarization and silenced voices that would typically participate in political dialogue.

In response, we adapted our strategy, adding “address polarization” among our international campaign principles.

We learned that being responsive to changes in the context and embracing an ‘emergent strategy’ (Brown, 2017) enabled us to stay rooted in the realities and priorities of the communities and built their agency and power.

Build the power you need to get the change that you want

To influence decisions at various levels—whether local councils, mayors, ministers, presidents, EU parliamentarians, landlords, or CEOs—it’s essential to first build a local base of leaders and supporters.

We recognized that in order to create meaningful change at the international level, organizers first needed to cultivate a solid base of local leaders and supporters who could influence local targets before escalating to national or international ones. The process of building power and alignment from the bottom-up takes time and must follow the pace and interests of the communities. In the span of two years, the coordination of the international campaign stayed largely in the planning phase. Nevertheless, we were able to build a base in the three communities with the power to campaign on local issues and targets. This was a necessary step before moving to other levels.

Leverage campaign coaching

Campaign coaching proved to be crucial in supporting the leadership development of organizers and their campaigns. By establishing a space dedicated to uncovering

challenges, exploring interventions, and making novel applications of organizing frameworks and tools. For example, the local campaign in Poland used the snowflake model to build a structure for their regional efforts. In other areas, teams developed agendas that more deeply engaged community members and delivered speeches with sharper, more moving calls to action at city council hearings.

Establish and maintaining an international organizing team

We formed an international organizing team composed of local organizers and leaders who would share a common organizing framework and work effectively together. Throughout this process, it became clear that identifying local organizers and leaders from within the constituency — those willing to commit to the entire process and align on a shared timeline that fits team availability and capacity-building goals — was essential.

We faced challenges when team members changed or could not participate in all international activities due to scheduling conflicts with local campaign plans. From this, we recognized the need for clearer criteria for selecting organizers and leaders, setting expectations around time commitment, and planning together a timeline of key activities.

These adjustments would help prevent conflicts between international and local campaigns, allowing local teams to better integrate international plans into their organizing efforts.



Source: Photo by Marina Tota. Organisers and local leaders discussing the lessons learned at learning review in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. Yuliya Moskvina, Johanna (Asia) Machowska, Monika Sekula, Martina Strmeňová, Maggie, Masha Burina.

It also challenged us to build organizing teams and structures that would be resilient to possible changes in people.

Language barriers to organizing across borders

Organizing across borders was mostly done in English, which was not the mother tongue of the organizers and local leaders. Those who could communicate in English, could easily participate in international spaces online or in person. In order to meaningfully engage local leaders who did not speak English in international spaces, it was important to invest resources in translation and interpretation.

This challenge also affects the “mainstream” climate movement which tends to be composed mostly of middle class and educated people, often excluding non-English speaking communities in process.

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5. Lessons learned and conclusion



Lessons learned and conclusion



This organizing project coordinated by the European Organizing Network (ECON) and in partnership with Re-set in the Czech Republic, the Centre for Community Organizing in Slovakia, and the Common Thing Foundation in Poland aimed to pilot a locally rooted, internationally coordinated campaign for a Just Transition. Drawing from the reflections gathered throughout the project, this chapter outlines the key lessons learned from this experience that can inform future organizing efforts.

BUILDING COLLECTIVE POWER IN DIVERSE GROUPS

A key learning was that building the collective power of both the local and international groups meant building relationships across diverse people and groups. This was done through one-on-one conversations, sharing personal stories and experiences, facilitating group meetings, navigating inter group dynamics, learning from each other, and valuing the contributions of each group member. Building and maintaining functioning groups enabled us to build power, agree on shared demands and take collective actions — like marches, protests, negotiations, city council meetings—that kept up pressure on decision-makers and contributed to winning campaign demands.

CENTRING FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES

One of the campaign's most significant lessons was that in order to centre the most impacted communities in bottom-up organizing, we needed to respect their leadership, interests and pace. This meant identifying and developing emerging local leaders in the communities in terms of organizing capacity and confidence. It meant taking the lead from the local groups when it came to deciding on the campaign issue, starting from the issues that the communities cared about. While campaigners may see an issue as pressing, the people most affected by it have their own interests and priorities. To this end, centering what communities identify as their issue and goal, is critical. Pushing for a campaign issue without ensuring deep community engagement risks alienating the very people it aims to empower.

In terms of pace of the organizing process, centering frontline communities means planning the timelines of the organizing process and campaign in ways that respects the local campaign plans. This would help prevent conflicts between international and local campaigns, allowing local teams to better integrate international plans into their local efforts and vice versa.

In order to be responsive to the community's needs, organizing requires a high level of flexibility and room for adjustments. For example, in this project, when planning the international campaign, we initially considered targeting EU and the EU elections. However, through conversations with local groups, we realized that many community members held deep skepticism about EU institutions and their ability to impact their daily lives, and were not motivated to campaign around the EU elections. So, we adjusted the plans and continued supporting the campaigns that they were more motivated to be involved in.

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP THROUGH ACTION AND REFLECTION

Another key lesson was that strong leadership teams are key to winning. Many of the most impactful local leaders in this campaign did not start out as confident speakers or skilled negotiators. They learned by doing—through taking on responsibilities, making mistakes, and receiving guidance from experienced organizers. Action contributed to developing leadership through real-life situations and challenges which provided invaluable lessons.

At the same time, the campaign reinforced that collective leadership must be distributed. A movement is strongest when leadership is not concentrated in a few individuals but spread across a network of people who can take initiative, step into new roles, and mentor others. One of the organizers, for example, realized that being an effective leader sometimes meant stepping back—allowing local activists to lead while offering support only when needed. This shift in mindset, from direct

leadership to facilitation, was a critical evolution in organizing practice.

ORGANIZING SHOULD BE ADAPTIVE TO A CHANGING CONTEXT

This project showed how campaign plans could be disrupted by significant events in the context that change the socio-political atmosphere, shifting power dynamics and the focus of people and communities. For organizing to be responsive and adaptive to changes in the context, it requires a high degree of flexibility and room to re-strategize and adjust plans.

The coordination of the international campaign unfolded in a politically dynamic context across Europe, requiring timely responses and strategic adaptations. What we initially saw as an organizing opportunity during the EU elections was complicated by growing distrust in European institutions, a strong anti-Green Deal narrative, and widespread street mobilizations—from farmworkers to coal miners—against the Green Deal. Responding to these emerging changes in the context required adjusting our organizing plans.

THE POWER OF STORIES AND NARRATIVES IN THE MEDIA

The campaigns in this project included the stories of community members who were directly impacted by the issues. People connect with people, not just policies. Campaigns that featured personal narratives—whether from tenants fighting for their homes or local leaders painting the picture of negligence of treasured public spaces at city council hearings—resonated far more than abstract policy discussions.

It was important for local leaders to effectively communicate the campaign's goals and strengthen campaign credibility. Local groups combined personal stories with powerful narratives about the systemic nature of the issue and fresh perspectives on solutions and demands. The stories were shared through traditional and social media in ways that would increase public support for the campaign, amplifying its reach and impact. This lesson was reinforced time and again: engaging people through real stories of struggle, hope and action made the organizing more powerful.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO DEVELOPING ORGANIZING PRACTICES IN EUROPE

This project contributed to the development of the organizing practice of organizers, local leaders, and community groups.

For community organizers, this meant being more reflective of their own identity (gender, nationality, or background) and how it impacts their practice with community members; improving the capacity to navigate diverse group dynamics, analyse problems and power, and coaching emerging leaders.

For local leaders, this meant gaining more confidence in public speaking, facilitation, media and social media skills, negotiating with decision-makers as well as developing the capacity to organize and structure groups with clear roles and responsibilities.

For campaign groups, this meant becoming better able to collaborate across differences (e.g. intergenerational organizing), adopting creative campaigning strategies and positive narratives that attracted more

people and media attention, forming coalitions and networks with other groups and organisations to build more power; expanding from community organizing to electoral organizing.

What contributed to these developments in organizing practices are a combination of factors, balancing support for local campaigns with international ambitions. For international organizing to be effective, it needs to support rather than overshadow local campaigns. The most successful moments of international collaboration came when local groups were given the space to lead while receiving ongoing strategic support from the coach and the broader network. This balance—between local autonomy and international coordination—was key to organizing across borders.

Creating spaces for regular convenings of organizers and local leaders was crucial to build and deepen relationships and mutual learning among organisers and leaders from diverse contexts working on different issues. We could share our stories and experiences, build relationships, enter in dialogue with each other and find constructive ways to navigate disagreements, make collective decisions and work together.

Spaces for collective analysis of the political contexts, the issues, the power actors, and the strategies used was helpful to make sense of the systems at the root of the issues and how each campaign related to it. While each community had its own priorities, in these spaces we tried to balance honouring local issues while synthesizing them into shared demands.

Building a common campaign platform was a challenge, but it allowed us to overcome the isolation of local fights, and fostered solidarity, connecting local struggles to the bigger picture, and developing a sense of being part of a wider movement struggling for justice.

CONCLUSION

As this organizing project unfolded across the three communities in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, it demonstrated the power and the challenges of organizing both locally and internationally simultaneously.

It became clear that organizing is as much about learning as it is about campaigning. Each stage of the process offered valuable lessons—about communities, leadership, strategy, and the organizing practice itself.

This project showed that while every campaign has its own unique context, issues and challenges, certain principles hold true across contexts—the power of relationships, the importance of respecting communities' interests and agency, investing in local leadership development, the necessity for emergent strategies, and balancing local and international efforts.

The vision of a bottom-up international campaign proved difficult to achieve in two years, yet engaging in the process taught us the importance of building people power at the local level, strategic alignment on shared issues, and responsiveness to evolving political contexts .

This project was not just about achieving campaign wins or mobilizing people for short-term victories—it was about building

a culture of organizing that would last far beyond this project itself.

Shifting from pursuing an international campaign, to doubling down on building power and capacity at the local level and cross-border learning, enabled us to focus on building our base and laying the foundations for long-term collaborations. The relationships, capacity, leadership, and power built in this process have strengthened both the organisations, organizers and local groups involved. Each action, success, and setback provided insights that strengthened the campaigns and the movement.

As we continue our community organizing work with greater confidence and wisdom, the lessons from this project will inform future efforts, ensuring that the power built through this work continues to grow and nurture grassroots movements for climate and social justice.

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