

# A MATTER OF SURVIVAL



**ORGANIZING TO MEET  
UNMET NEEDS AND BUILD  
POWER IN TIMES OF CRISIS**



## DEDICATION

The title of this report is a reference to a quote from Johnnie Tillmon, one of the courageous women who formed and led the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s. This report is dedicated to the generations of brilliant poor people, welfare moms, caregivers, organizers and miracle makers who worked tirelessly for a society where we can all thrive, not just barely survive, and to all those who carry their legacies forward today, tomorrow and until we win.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has been nearly five years since the coronavirus pandemic started wreaking its havoc, revealing and exacerbating long-standing fissures in our society. Despite significant federal investments and expansions of public assistance, systemic inequities prevented millions of people from receiving adequate care and protection from the virus' tragic path, leading to disproportionate and continuing harms across income, race, ethnicity, gender, ability and geography. Collectively, we still have not grappled with the extraordinary consequences of this societal failure: over 1.2 million people have died from COVID-19 in the US, more than any other country, while millions more labored dangerously on the frontlines of the pandemic.

In response to these failures, thousands of communities stepped in to provide critical material and emotional care for their families, friends and neighbors. While these networks were not new, their scale and scope during the pandemic was. On the one hand, these survival activities were an inspiring reminder that people in crisis will always find ways to take care of each other. On the other hand, the extent to which these activities were necessary laid bare the widespread and punishing reality of American poverty and inequality.

This need persists today, at a time when more than 40 percent of the population — or nearly 140 million people — live below the poverty line or precariously above it, just one emergency away from economic ruin. Further, the pandemic is far from over, between long-COVID, ongoing spread of the virus, higher disability rates and other permanent changes to how we live, learn, worship and work. In fact, the community-based networks that burst to the fore during the early years of pandemic are still providing support to millions of people every day, responding to multiple ongoing crises around housing, hunger, health care and climate breakdown, as well as attacks on immigrant communities, reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ youth and households.

And yet, this extensive survival organizing remains on the margins of the social justice movement landscape. Little attention is paid by national organizations, foundations, policymakers and others to the networks of care that hold together thousands of communities. Even less attention is paid to the possibility of leveraging these emerging “projects of survival” into footholds to anchor a broad-based movement of poor and dispossessed people that can turn these activities into political demands of our government and society at large.

This report, *A Matter of Survival: Organizing to Meet Unmet Needs and Build Power in Times of Crisis*, demonstrates the importance of this sphere of activity and emphasizes its political potential for social justice organizing. Drawing on experiences since the onset of the pandemic, it gathers lessons and insights from more than 40 leaders of 35 community-based organizations, social institutions, congregations and cultural groups that jumped in to fill housing and hunger gaps, assist in harm reduction, provide benefits enrollment and/or vaccine administration, lead cultural organizing, protests and more.

**More than a review of what was accomplished through these “survival strategies,” this report is an appeal to organizers, clergy, cultural workers and other community leaders to engage in these activities more deliberately and strategically, turning collective acts of survival into organized programs of protest, resistance and power-building. It is also an**



**instruction manual for those communities on the frontlines of the attacks coming from an authoritarian movement that has seized even greater power in the 2024 election cycle and a road map for what it will take to provide for marginalized communities through these crises to create a society where everybody can thrive, not merely survive.**

In the past, politicized “projects of survival” have served as essential cornerstones of transformative social movements - from the burial traditions of the poor in the Roman Empire to the Underground Railroad and the mutual aid networks of the Black Freedom Struggles. Today, amid threats of worsening political repression, widening inequality and militarized violence, these projects have the potential to play a similar role in building a mass movement that is organized to meet the unmet needs of millions of people, while pushing back on rising political extremism.

Indeed, there is a heightened need for survival organizing as extremist forces take over our churches, schools, community institutions and every level of government, unabashedly advancing a divisive, anti-democratic agenda through the use of state violence, policy, religion, media, disaster relief and other projects of survival. With a level of coordination, funding and reach that far outmatches movements for economic, racial, gender and environmental justice, Christian nationalists and aligned authoritarian actors are aggressively developing new leaders and growing their networks for the long-term. They do not care about majority rule and have the resources to experiment widely, using our communities as laboratories for their dangerous political goals. In their playbook, there is no place too small or unimportant to be considered for full scale takeover.

As Aaron Scott, Staff Officer for Gender Justice in the office of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church noted, “I was giving a presentation on Christian Nationalism in rural Oregon in the summer of 2023, and what local LGBTQ+ organizers there shared with me was that they had absolutely no capacity — neither in terms of people power, nor funding — to contend with the far right out-of-state networks that were now pumping millions of dollars in local school board elections, in tiny towns the rest of the country has never even heard of.”

Although the social justice eco-system is not yet equipped to adequately contest on this terrain, there may be untapped potential to push back, reclaim lost ground and establish newfound power through a vast network of “projects of survival.” Not only could this network provide an effective counter to these reactionary political forces, it could give new meaning to what a democratic society can and should look like today.

**Although the social justice eco-system is not yet equipped to adequately contest on this terrain, there may be untapped potential to push back, reclaim lost ground and establish newfound power through a vast network of “projects of survival.”**

## AN ORGANIZING MODEL FOR PROJECTS OF SURVIVAL

The most critical element of projects of survival is the regular work of meeting unmet needs. However, material support alone is insufficient to anchor an organized social movement. Instead, this activity must be politicized, coordinated and developed at scale, with its participants trained and willing to exert political leadership and direction for the whole of society.

To this end, the model offered in this report has two parts: the first focuses on the concrete activity of meeting unmet needs; and the second develops a process of political formation connected to that activity.

- 1. Meeting material, unmet needs on a regular basis:** This is the foundation upon which a sense of community and belonging can be established and political consciousness can be raised, especially among poor and dispossessed people.

Defining characteristics of this activity include the following:

- The need is met consistently, for free, and with little or no bureaucratic process.
- Everyone interested in the activity has a role to play — and there are always new opportunities to incorporate and involve more people.
- The activity is anchored in community building beyond service delivery.
- The community engaged in the activity experiences a political awakening that activates their sense of agency to change the conditions they are confronting.
- If this work is effective, the community and/or activity often becomes the target of attack by reactionary sectors of society.

- 2. Politicizing survival activity to turn networks of care into networks of resistance and power-building:** Through this second dimension of the model, participants and community members develop their understanding of living within a system that is antagonistic to their needs. They also begin to claim a sense of responsibility to change that system, both for themselves and others.

Core principles to guide political formation include:

- Contextualizing projects of survival within a framework of abundance, asserting that all of our needs can be fully met.
- Centering the leadership of the poor and those most impacted by systemic injustice.
- Prioritizing political education with dedicated staff, time and resources.
- Believing in human decency and goodness.
- Using art and culture strategically to build community and counter-hegemonic power.

To transform survival activities into projects of survival, the two dimensions of this model must be intimately connected, one informing the other. When survival activity becomes untethered from the process of political formation, its power to change how we understand society and our role within it is diminished. Instead, the activity remains at the level of triaged direct service. Likewise, political formation disconnected from a community that is addressing material needs is rarely able to establish a permanent base and influence broader sectors of society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TIMES AHEAD

Drawing on the experiences of survival organizing during the pandemic, this report offers several recommendations to popularize and promote this model of projects of survival:

### 1. **Recognize the importance of connecting the activity of meeting material needs to political organizing and building community power.**

Whether through mutual aid, ministry or community organizing, meeting material needs is an act of resistance in a society that punishes the poor for their poverty. It is a protest against unjust systems and structures that cheapen and shorten our lives through budget cuts, mass incarceration, militarization and the devastation of our communities, histories and people. Rather than accepting narratives that diminish our humanity, projects of survival affirm that we deserve a society that is organized to meet all of our needs.

In other words, the work of meeting material needs is inherently political and should be more deeply integrated into our political organizing.

The pandemic experiences of Desis Rising up and Moving (DRUM) is instructive on this point. DRUM has been organizing working-class South Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities in New York for more than 20 years. For most of this time, the organization did not directly engage in survival organizing. This changed during the pandemic. As its Director, Fahd Ahmed, explained, “[DRUM] has historically tried to stay away from meeting [the] material needs of our people, because that was what the neoliberal order was stripping away, the responsibility of [the government] to provide for us, and privatizing that responsibility through nonprofits or charities, or just abandoning them.... We didn’t want to take on that work, because that would reinforce the neoliberal logic... but at the beginning of the pandemic, what we saw was the wide scale abandonment of society as a whole and our communities in particular.”

This reality prompted DRUM to develop a phone-based campaign — Power and Safety Through Solidarity (PASS) — to assess their communities’ needs and meet them when possible. With the PASS campaign, their entire organization was able to “level up,” grow their base and expand their activity, while bringing in dozens of members into new forms of leadership. According to Ahmed, “Some of them had been members before — the kinds that would just come to the meeting and nod along. Our assessment had been, ‘that person’s not going to be a leader.’ But in this moment, they proved us wrong, reminding us that there are different ways to lead... and **the way we assess leadership can’t just be who’s ‘politically sharp,’ but also who’s well**

**connected, who's able to hustle, who doesn't care about the politics, but is willing to do the work and deliver food to as many people as you need me to.** We can't be narrow in our understanding of what is a person's commitment and what the qualities of leadership are... if we create the space, people will step into their leadership, if we are open to the different kinds of strengths that different people bring."

As DRUM's experience demonstrates, projects of survival can offer a pathway to overcome the significant capacity and resource challenges present across the social justice landscape. Another interviewee, Rev. Pat DuPont from the Outreach Center at Asbury Church in Rochester, New York, explained, "A movement that hinges on healing for the sick will catch fire among the sick. A movement that hinges on food for the hungry will catch fire among the hungry. A movement that hinges on oppression being cast out will catch fire among the oppressed." In a society where 140 million people are poor or one emergency away, a movement organized around meeting their material needs has the potential to catch fire.

## **2. Start engaging in activities to identify and meet unmet needs (for community-based organizations that are not currently doing so).**

For some organizations, this may begin by choice or by meeting the needs of your existing membership. For other organizations, especially those working with constituencies experiencing greater antagonism, threats and violence under the second Trump Administration, this may occur out of necessity. In either case, organizations should find ways for this activity to grow their capacity, rather than diminish it, for instance through new collaborations and partnerships.

As Catalina Adorno from Cosecha described of their work during the pandemic, "The scale of mutual aid we did for our members was new for us. We experienced so viscerally that we were disposable. Undocumented workers were supposed to keep our heads down, while keeping the economic apparatus of the country afloat, without any support. Our members were very angry. **Nobody was coming to help us. We decided that we're going to take care of each other... it was a huge shift for us...** in the future, [Cosecha] will be depending on projects of survival even more."

## **3. "Rethink church" in these times.**

Use the resources that faith organizations and congregations have at hand — from physical space, means of transportation, staff and volunteers — as well as their institution's legal status and social legitimacy, to encourage creative forms of building religious community, including ministerial activities to provide for unmet needs. Complement church leadership with lay and community leadership that is more intimately connected to needs on the ground. Consider sermons and Bible studies as opportunities for political education around confronting unjust systems, structures and theological beliefs. Develop collaborative efforts within and across congregations, denominations and community-based organizations as a way to collectivize power.

For example, during the early months of the pandemic, the People's Church in East Harlem collaborated with four other churches to operate as a single church with five sites. As Rev. Dorlimar Lebrón Malavé described, "Because



we were only preaching once every five weeks, we were able to focus on community programs and mutual aid at the church... All the community fridges throughout the boroughs were picking up food from us. We fed mosques, Pentecostal churches, everyone... it was a testament to what was possible when churches aren't bogged down with the day-to-day practice of religious ritual... we had an opportunity to rethink how we do church. **The pandemic ripped the [institutional structure of the] church apart. In that space, there was a creativity that was allowed to blossom and flourish."**

#### **4. Build relationships with networks that can multiply a single organization's impact.**

No organization can play every role in developing projects of survival. Rather, collaborative efforts across organizations and communities are essential to developing resilient networks that can hold these efforts together and allow them to flourish. In particular, churches and community schools can help anchor survival-based activity, integrate new relationships and offer expanded capacity and infrastructure.

As Shane Halladay, former vice principal at Massena Community High School in upstate New York, commented, **"We saw others scrambling [in the early weeks of the pandemic], but we had a structure in place to respond to people's needs already. It gave a place for all these people who were looking to help, but didn't know where to go."** Likewise, First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, worked in partnership with non-profits and government agencies to support feeding programs, housing programs, immigration justice work and more. For community-based organizations like Open Table Nashville, these collaborations allowed them to target their time and attention to the specific needs of the unhoused community they were connected to, with each node of their network playing a designated and necessary role.

#### **5. Recognize cultural creation as both a project of survival and a way to support and build other projects of survival in community.**

A central element of projects of survival is reclaiming the fullness of our humanity. This includes our identity as artists and cultural creators. Indeed, cultural creation and expression are projects of survival because they ensure that our voices, stories and lives are not erased.

According to Anu Yadav, a Los Angeles-based artist and cultural organizer with the We Cry Justice Arts Collective, "As poor and dispossessed people, we've been denied the right to be human, because what we do is not seen as art and who we are not artists... but we can reclaim our rightful place to be at the center of our creative production, to see ourselves as creative and as artists. This is a political project. It's a survival project. And it's a cultural project." As Charon Hribar, Director of Cultural Strategies at the Kairos Center, elaborated, "Culture can make sure our individual struggles aren't dismissed as being marginal or isolated experiences of a few people. When we bring our stories together — through music, visual art, poetry, ritual and storytelling — we reveal the contradictions of a broader system at work, while also tapping into the possibility of seeing ourselves as part of the 140 million people who are poor and dispossessed, living just one crisis away from disaster."

Further, when applied to organizing, “Cultural strategy must translate individual experiences into collective power. It isn’t about the best singers being the performers or the trained artists creating the coolest looking thing. **The way we create culture in organizing must build political collectivity and leadership through art, song and ritual,**” said Ciara Taylor, a cultural organizer with the Kairos Center.

During the pandemic, COVID memorials used visual art, song and prayer to celebrate and remember lives lost, while decrying systemic failures to keep communities safe. Community dinners began with storytelling, welcoming participants to share in small joys from the week. Virtual healing circles allowed individual pain and trauma to be healed collectively through song and poetry. Online choirs empowered disabled artists and songwriters to join new communities of care and resistance. This was all possible because, as Rachel Schragis, co-lead at the cultural strategy team of Look Loud noted, **“In almost any disaster condition, [cultural organizing] is positioned to pivot.”** Creative tactics also expanded both presence and possibility in protests against police violence, climate crisis and pandemic conditions. As Schragis’ co-lead, Josh Yoder, concluded, “when we expand the rally to include the living room, when we bring in the people watching us in isolation, we become large enough to win.”

**6. Finally, for funders and philanthropy, support base-building, cultural organizing, political education and social justice ministry that is connected to meeting material needs for the long haul.**

Developing trust and strong community networks are critical to effective crisis response and projects of survival, but often take years to develop. As Leonardo Vilchis, a founder of Union de Vecinos and the Los Angeles Tenants Union, said, **“Prior organization, prior construction of community, prior relationships allowed us to adapt to [crisis] in the moment. Other organizations were just imagining what was going to happen, while we were fully looking at it and moving in response.”**

One of the strengths of the anti-democratic, extremist forces we are confronting today is the extensive financial support they receive from foundations, charities, religious organizations and other wealthy institutions and individuals. This support provides them the ability to not only mobilize in response to crisis, be it hunger or hurricanes, but also establish a long-term presence in isolated, frontline communities.

**To adequately confront the rising tide of political extremism, and turn the crises at hand into organizing opportunities, considerable investments must be made for base-building, community organizing, disaster relief and social justice ministry, as well as cultural creation and political education connected to these activities.**

We need abundant resources to move in this direction immediately and for the long haul to establish networks of permanently organized communities and essential needs infrastructure that stitches together frontline, poor and low-income communities across the country. These funds should be made available for new ideas and experimentation, as well as for supporting grassroots (not just grass-tops) leaders engaged in projects of survival, especially in areas that have been conceded by progressive organizations. Importantly, resources in these areas must not only be directed towards

voter turnout or specific legislative priorities, but for scaling and building up the power of the people from below.

• • •

The Kairos Center draws its name from the Greek term, *kairos*, which describes a break in time that is defined by both crisis and opportunity. During a *kairos* moment, existing systems and structures fall apart, leaving havoc and misery in their wake, while also creating the possibility for a new kind of leadership to emerge, one that can move society in a different direction.

We are living in a *kairos* moment today. Our economic, political and social institutions are unable to adequately respond to the crises of our times, relying instead on fear, force and violence to maintain social control. In doing so, they have emboldened a regressive political movement that is gaining influence and power. However, since the start of the pandemic, we have seen another way to respond to these crises, one grounded in the extraordinary commitment of those taking on the ordinary responsibilities of meeting our unmet needs.

**Within these everyday actions of millions of people lies the hope for a new society to be born. With the right kind of attention and political direction, these “projects of survival” could provide the foundation of a broad-based social justice movement and a new generation of grassroots and moral leaders committed to a society where we can all thrive.**

**May it be so.**

*"If you surround yourself with the people,  
you will know what to do."*  
Leonardo Vilchis, Union de Vecinos

