

# Community Organising For All

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This article emerges from the discussions and debates staged between four social action organisations in Europe - [EFA](#), UK, [POKAZ](#), Croatia, [GIOLLI](#), Italy, [Zavod BOB](#), Slovenia - brought together on an Erasmus-funded project [Community Organising For All](#), with a focus on *participatory approaches to organising with migrant communities*.

Aimed at readers *seeking systemic change* - adult educators, theatre and arts practitioners, community activists and organisers - this article is not a roadmap but an elaboration of some key themes we discussed in the first year of working together.

*“Community organising is a method of bringing about social change by coming together as communities,” said Adela, EFA Community Organising lead, “although opinions differ on what constitutes community organising. Some may say that bringing a community together to build stronger relationships and have fun is community organising, some may say that it must include collective action and target decision makers.”*

The four organisations met in London in January 2023 to explore our different conceptions of community organising (CO). We compared and contrasted various modes of activity prevalent within community work and social movements (advocacy, campaigning, community development, trade unionism etc.) to the CO model originating in the United States associated with Saul Alinsky. Each organisation, in consultation with local partners in the field, then [gathered key questions they had regarding community organising](#) (broadly defined); we held a series of monthly COFA practitioner discussion forums focussing on the themes we felt to be the most pressing.

The initial collaboration between the four organisations was informed not by a shared Alinskian interest, however, but by the influence on our practice exerted by the body of work pioneered by Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal; all four organisations value popular and participatory critical educational processes and use methods from Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), and to an extent this shared orientation corresponds to the themes that were emphasised most strongly in our discussions from among the wider collection of concerns and questions:

Community organising vs Community Building; centring care in CO; Participatory problem-solving processes, and considerations around implementation and ongoing organisation; hierarchy in community processes; organising models we critique and admire; organising with migrant communities.

*Doria: “Throughout the second half of the 20th century we did not have a history of resistance to the capitalist system nor of trade union organising “from below”, and that’s for a simple reason: we were part of the Yugoslav socialist system, wherein anti-capitalism was part of the mainstream political discourse and trade unionism was regulated on the*

*level of state policies. That is why we currently do not have such an infrastructure and networks of resistance in place. What we have, speaking from the position of POKAZ, are contacts and interconnections at the level of organisations, institutions and individuals, as well as collectives that function as part of larger structures."*

Within and between our organisations there is a diversity of experience and a plurality of politics. We work within different socio-political landscapes, and each national partner leads at different points over the course of a three-year collaboration. While we don't require ourselves to have a definitive shared analysis, we've valued our exchanges, the process of reflection and evaluation; pooling anecdotes, methods, questions, and approaches.

Some questions will have more resonance than others for each of us. And what follows is necessarily *fragmentary* description, analysis and theory: learning based on our experience and practice and on our understanding of other existing approaches. This article—a work-in-progress as indeed community organising is an evolving praxis—does not promote a model but rather aims at codifying, inspiring, giving insights from specific situations, and inviting the reader to make parallels to situations in their own work and their own communities.

Although it is front-loaded towards the UK context, with London-based English for Action (EFA) leading on this article, the questions we've explored as a European partnership both illuminated the UK context and can hopefully serve as a useful point of comparison for readers in all four countries.

we're developping  
leadership skills  
within our  
communities

Croatia - POKAZ

we give hope to people that they can  
change with decision-makers minds.

we're messing with people's minds-  
people come with certain  
assumptions - about the world, about  
CO etc and we challenge these  
assumptions

--We create spaces where  
people can feel safe to  
express themselves

--We try to involve people  
without ideological bias

-- We strongly push people to  
act instead of only reflecting

Italy - Gioli

TRUTH, TRUTH, LIE

-- We are good in mobilizing  
audience to attend our Theater of  
Oppressed Forum plays

Slovenia - Zavod Bob

-- We are good in  
coordinating network of  
youth organizations in  
Ljubljana doing street-based  
youth work

--We are good at following-up on  
commitments from power  
holders.

UK - EFA

--We are good at bringing a lot  
of people together

--We are good at sustaining  
relationships over time

-- We are good in creative,  
emancipatory and transformative  
approaches in youth work and non-  
formal organizations

## An overview of Community Organising from the US in the UK

“Community Organising” is associated with twentieth-century grassroots movements in the United States seeking to build organisations powerful enough to change institutions and societies. It is framed as a transfer of power, i.e. decision-making and control over resources and systems, from the *Haves to the Have Nots*. Saul Alinsky – based in Chicago, working with immigrant working class communities – is its foremost theorist and practitioner. His book, ‘Rules for Radicals’, published shortly before his death in 1972, is aimed at *organisers*. Community Organising can be seen as a series of practices, outlooks and tactics, with paid professional organisers central to it. Their role is one of developing community leaders and organisational structures based around taking direct action on shared interests against shared enemies.

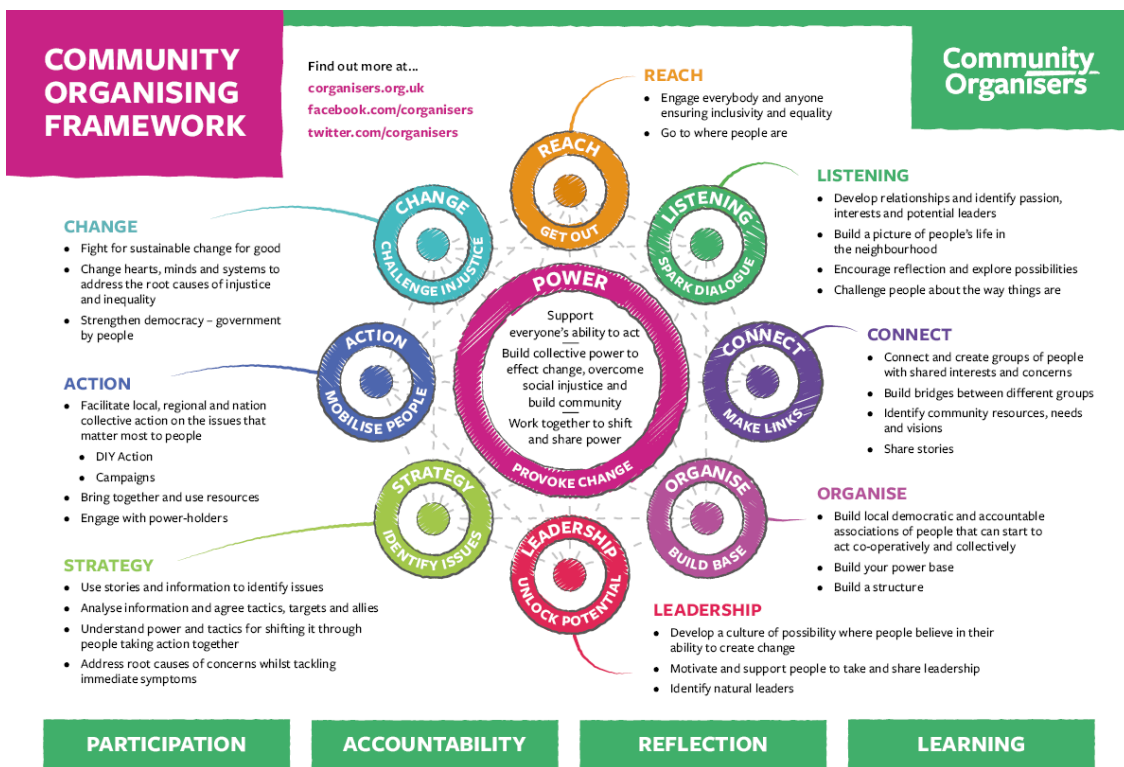
*Adela, EFA: Action can serve simultaneously as a way of demonstrating our power and as a tool to build it. As Saul Alinsky, the father of organising said: ‘Gatherings for meaningful action brings life to communities like oxygen does for the body’, on this basis it is important to develop a habit of action.*

The organisational forms that grow through CO - whether as individual organisations or as coalitions - operate as sometimes competing, sometimes complementary / allied power-brokers on the terrain occupied by the traditional actors seeking to mobilise (and hegemonise) working class community action - namely unions and political parties. [“Broad-based” community organising](#) in the US and the UK - seeking to build permanent forms of citizen power - has arguably been motivated precisely by disillusion with the perceived failures and limitations of trade unions and political parties.

Over the last three decades, many civil society organisations in the UK seeking “systemic change” have adopted the language and practices of Community Organising, each in their own ways, from radical workplace and renters’ unions, campaigning NGOs through to the Labour Party. [Citizens UK \(CUK\)](#) is the major example of CO translating across the Atlantic. Founded in East London in the early 2000s, it started by bringing together a *coalition* of local community *institutions* (churches, mosques, colleges, community associations and union branches) around the issue of low wages, initially complementary to unionising efforts. (English for Action, established in 2006, was set up to support the language development of the migrant workers being organised, and now affiliates as an institution.)

# What does Community Organising entail?

## Identifying issues



*Adela, EFA: "Activism and campaigning are focused on a theme chosen by promoters and action is started by activists, while CO seems to look for internal leaders and focus on process not on a specific content,"*

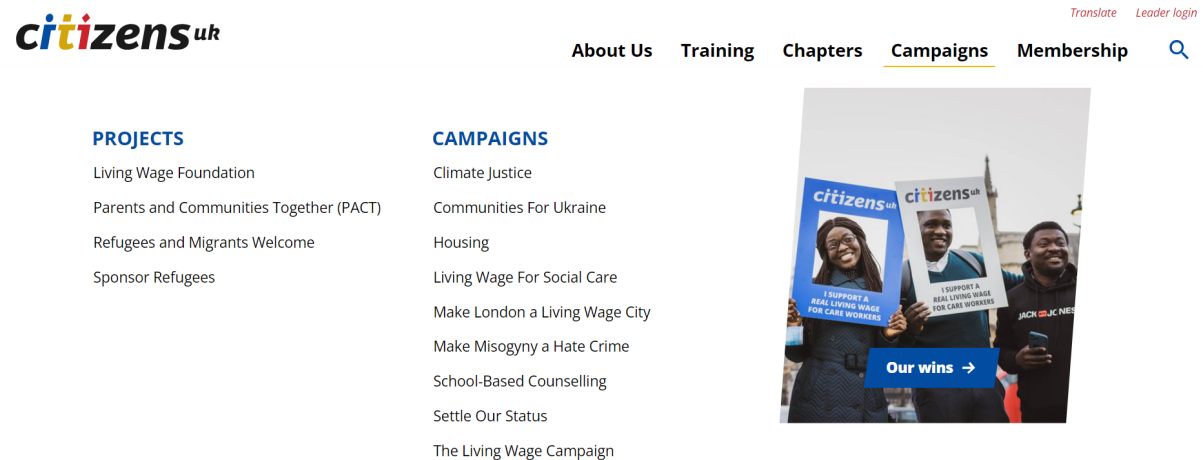
One motto of Community Organising is "People before Programme". The idea here is that organisers should go out into the community, institution, or workplace and first listen extensively to uncover issues – and leaders. With local organising, door-knocking is sometimes favoured over street stalls to stage these conversations. The aim is not for the organiser to become better informed about the issues facing the community, per se: it is for their potential members to have the chance to express their views and ideas, and for the organiser to get a sense of their self-interest and motivation.

These initial conversations establish trust - the organiser shares something of themselves. The dynamic of the conversation is not to offload complaints and hopes onto the organiser but to implicate the person in their own potential capacity and responsibility to effect change through collective action, and to spark an interest in the organisation and its processes.

*"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."*  
Alice Walker

A “programme” or campaign focus will emerge, but the point is that it is not decided in advance; members see that the issue they decide to take action on is their own, and they will have participated in strategic discussions to identify their objectives, based on what is widely felt, deeply felt and winnable. A process of [Power Mapping](#) is crucial in understanding *who has the power to effect the desired change* - and what power a community can draw on and win over to their side.

What is at stake is not only achieving change on a single issue: the CO process is aimed at building strong, confident grassroots organisations, growing leadership capacity, such that the community becomes organised,empowered, and habituated to resolving its problems.



The screenshot shows the citizensuk website. At the top left is the logo 'citizensuk'. To the right are links for 'Translate' and 'Leader login'. Below these are navigation links: 'About Us', 'Training', 'Chapters', 'Campaigns' (underlined), and 'Membership', followed by a search icon. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column is titled 'PROJECTS' and lists: 'Living Wage Foundation', 'Parents and Communities Together (PACT)', 'Refugees and Migrants Welcome', and 'Sponsor Refugees'. The right column is titled 'CAMPAIGNS' and lists: 'Climate Justice', 'Communities For Ukraine', 'Housing', 'Living Wage For Social Care', 'Make London a Living Wage City', 'Make Misogyny a Hate Crime', 'School-Based Counselling', 'Settle Our Status', and 'The Living Wage Campaign'. To the right of these lists is a photograph of three people holding signs that say 'I SUPPORT A REAL LIVING WAGE FOR CARE WORKERS'. A blue button with the text 'Our wins →' is overlaid on the bottom of the photo.

### Which people, which programme?

It should be said, even at this point, that this is the basic theory of how issues are identified (and tackled) but there are other considerations. Hidden agendas can be at play, voices that dominate, or processes that only aspire to scratch the surface of a community’s priorities. Short-term organising commitment and a lack of vision can result in a tendency to routinely work on lowest-common-denominator issues.

Some organisers will routinely find that dog poo and anti-social behaviour are the main issues in the same local area; other organisers may uncover a different (deeper) set of issues – perhaps the cost of living, a lack of amenities, corruption: people enter into these discussions with the organisers in front of them based on their previous experiences of what can be addressed. And the organisers in turn communicate to people in various ways what is permissible and worthwhile talking about, in how they frame the purpose of the organising drive and the prompts they give, their reactions in listening, their gravitas, their sincerity, energy, etc.

It makes sense, towards building the experience and confidence of a community, for a group of people to take on small targets and win something together. [The example of the](#)

[Builders Labourers Federation of New South Wales in Australia](#) is an inspiring story of how an organising process, combined with progressive political leadership, went from winning basic restroom facilities to the union issuing “green bans” in solidarity with community campaigns.

## Targets

The Alinsky-style organising process identifies enemies. The [target is personalised](#)<sup>1</sup>, homing in on whoever is lowest down in the chain that holds the power to effect change and will most readily want to grant a concession when subjected to the pressure of sustained action and creative tactics.

This confrontational mode is not the only mode of community organising. Citizens UK whose constituent member institutions generally affiliate with the permission of its leadership (respectable and accustomed to leading organisations) may take action but they quickly aim to build amicable relationships with power holders.

*By building positive working relationships between communities, elected power-holders and businesses, we make sure everyone is heard and no one is left out. This is how we shift the balance of power, helping people come together across their differences, find common ground and win change. (CUK website)*

## Casework

Many community organisations deal with individual case work, often as their main mode of activity in a community. Organisations seeking to mobilise collective power towards structural change may also set up structures to support individuals with their problems. In community work and in trade unions, this can represent an ongoing tension – between “servicing” members and an “organising agenda”. Of course, undertaking case work can help build a picture to advocate for policy changes, and trade unions can bargain and take action over recurrent issues they meet first as case work.

The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty ([which recently shut down ceding to the ascendancy of Acorn](#)<sup>2</sup>) promoted a tactic known as direct action case work. Casework is often done in a more collective way (as opposed to 1-1), and with a preference for mobilising community power to resolve an issue (rather than legal recourse, letter writing etc). The London Coalition Against Poverty was set up with this approach in mind. [Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth](#)<sup>3</sup>, which EFA partners with, was a founding member of the coalition; one branch of it in East London developed into the London Renters Union. Undertaking case work, apart from being tangible solidarity, helps build an organisation whose members have lived experience of the issues they campaign on, not an activist organisation created out of an often temporary interest.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://actionnetwork.org/letters/end-the-dispute-st-mungos-trustees?source=direct\\_link&](https://actionnetwork.org/letters/end-the-dispute-st-mungos-trustees?source=direct_link&)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/poverty-activist-group-ocap-ceases-operations/article\\_bbec3f41-96a0-549d-bb1f-6364dc3bb1f4.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/poverty-activist-group-ocap-ceases-operations/article_bbec3f41-96a0-549d-bb1f-6364dc3bb1f4.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://housingactionsouthwarkandlambeth.wordpress.com/>

*From the LRU Organiser training: Direct action is our tradition, a union tradition, it comes from an incredible union called the International Workers of the World, the IWW, or 'the Wobblies'. In the late 1910's together with other unions they shut down the entire city of Seattle and brought American capitalism to the negotiating table... Direct action tactics include things like pickets, sit-ins, blockades and noise protests. The Wobblies took direct action to get their demands met, not just to protest. What does that mean for us when we're thinking about actions?*

## The 1-1 meeting

Citizens UK (and EFA as part of it), the LRU and others see 1-1 meetings as the bedrock of *relational* community organising.

*Kasia from EFA<sup>4</sup>: Coined as the most radical tool of organising: the relational meeting or 121 is a 30-40 minute meeting where the intention is to connect meaningfully with another person, to understand who they are, what they care about and what they might be willing to do to act on what they care about.*

It takes experience to not get excited only at the most evidently articulate and qualified leaders. Qualities like loyalty, perseverance, courage, resourcefulness and generosity show over time, and the 1-1 can help form a wider picture of a person.

## Story telling

*Roberto, Giolli: "You create a bridge between my story and the other lives, and people can see the mechanisms that are similar. Even if all the rest is completely different—the context, the characters, the timing, whatever is different—but the mechanisms of oppression are similar."*

Humans are storytellers, and a well-told story is one that is relatable and moves people. Compared to other approaches to building a case for change - fact and statistics, myth-busting, asserting principles and rights etc – a wide variety of community organising processes centre the story, including of course Theatre of the Oppressed.

*From the LRU training: Stories can either tap into emotions and values that inhibit us (fear, apathy, rage, despair) or they can tap into emotions and values that inspire action (hope, directed anger, passion).*

Whether in 1-1s or in testimonials in campaigns and assemblies, people listen to a story differently to an opinion; a perspective seems to be more palatable to people when embedded in a story or anecdote. In EFA classrooms, the beginning of an exploration of an

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<sup>4</sup><https://efalondon.wordpress.com/2022/07/21/the-art-of-community-organising-a-6-day-training-with-citizens-uk/>

issue entails students recounting their experiences so people establish their personal stake in the overall knowledge produced. Theatre of the Oppressed processes likewise amalgamate aspects of the stories that a group shares so that the final story is, rather than the property of one person, a recognisable problematic in which many participants have a stake.

### Public negotiation and accountability

The central show of power in Citizens comes in the form of the accountability assemblies they stage in the run-up to local and national elections.<sup>5</sup> Inverting the traditional form of electoral events where candidates speak about their manifestos and accept questions from the floor, CUK produces its own manifesto based on the priorities that its member institutions have agreed on. Pre-pandemic, their London Mayoral accountability assembly, held in one of the biggest civic assembly spaces in Westminster, brought together 5000 representatives to put pressure on the election candidates to agree to their “asks”.

A feature of the new organising promoted by Jane McAlevey involves mass assemblies of workers in negotiations, and the LRU is adopting a similar approach. In principle more participatory and empowering than protest followed by behind-closed-doors negotiations, the presence of “ordinary” people (depending on how controlled their presence is) can change the power dynamics:

An EFA volunteer describing a meeting with the leader of a local council:

*“All of the organisers had worked with the Councillor before and the speakers stayed quite formal and polite despite their frustrations. The students’ contributions to the meeting broke up a lot of this formality and added both urgency and levity to the discussion. For example, at the close of the meeting, P, a student, addressed the Councillor directly and said, “We are still waiting,” and at one point, a student, M, turned to a classmate and audibly asked for a reminder of the Councillor’s name, and then turned to him and said, “You are nice!”*

### Follow-up and escalation

*“He is listening but his ear is open on the other side.” - An EFA student about the leader of a local council.*

Power holders make promises they don’t fulfil; they generally avoid granting concessions unless they are forced to, so maintaining pressure, keeping up the momentum with escalating action are important parts of CO tactics. [Many of Alinsky’s 13 rules deal exactly with this<sup>6</sup>.](#)

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<sup>5</sup> Citizens UK is formally and ideologically non-partisan with regard to party politics. This is also a legal requirement on all UK registered charities who can also only engage in political issues directly connected with their registered charitable mission.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.openculture.com/2017/02/13-rules-for-radicals.html>



## Power, Leadership and Hierarchy; Care and Sustainability

*From Cyrille's notes: Often juggling between, on one hand, identifying and prioritising issues, conceptualising a short-term and long-term response, mobilising of people and carrying out actions, and on the other hand, navigating effects of the issue itself on themselves and/or other members of the community...burnout, stress, a sense of powerlessness and lack of confidence and energy are not uncommon among community organisers.*

### Insisting on Community Building

In a critique of Alinskyan CO from American feminists Susan Stall and Randy Roecker, community organising is counterposed with *organising community*.

*The authors compare the well-known Alinsky model, which focuses on communities organizing for power, and what they call the women-centered model, which focuses on organizing relationships to build community.*<sup>7</sup>

For EFA, Zavod BOB and POKAZ who invest (where we can) in longer-term programmes which people access, meeting regularly, often with no direct political agenda, community-building can be the foundation that facilitates community organising.

The absence of support networks for migrants in the new country of residence makes many of the projects, events or classes essential as spaces to exchange information and experiences. A recurrent issue identified through listening is *friendship*, and this can be as important as housing and education etc, and indeed a prerequisite to addressing these material issues. Kasia (EFA) says students value:

*"the relational aspect of the class, the friendships that form, the opportunity to share things about your life or about what is going on in London, the opportunity to get information that's not language specific, information from others in the class, 'Where can I access a food bank?', 'There's a volunteering opportunity here.' It becomes a social resource, and then there's the training and possibility for acting collectively."*

POKAZ has a joint project with an art organisation in Zagreb, Živi Atelje Dajht-Kralj or Living Atelier DK. "Živi Atelje DK" is an independent, interdisciplinary, non-governmental and non-profit organisation that uses art for exploration of identity, healing and community-building. Members are able to come and be involved in workshops of the [Women to Women collective](#)<sup>8</sup>, outings, travelling exhibitions, other creative workshops and programs and public engagements.

The community-building aspect has been key in building confidence, skills and the

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<sup>7</sup> Stall, Susan, & Stoecker, Randy. (1997). "Community Organizing or Organizing Community? Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment." COMM-ORG Papers.

<https://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers96/gender2.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://ziviateljje.dk/projects-education/no-borders-program/women-to-women/>

motivation for people to be involved in various ways in whatever project or event was being carried out. The attention to process, and encouragement of care for each other, for the community, and self-care, are part of the ways that they exercise [mutual accompaniment](#)<sup>9</sup>. Having a community facilitates the possibility of working on something together, facilitates community organising *which in turn* strengthens the community.

*“Care should be the essential part of building a community or organising a community,” said Metka of Zavod BOB. “Community taking care of each individual and vice versa should be working hand in hand. This needs to be the essential part,” Metka said. “Because for example, in order to be accepted, not being judged, being able to influence, being involved in the decision-making process, I don't think it's possible if care is not part of the weaving of the community.”*

[Zavod Tri](#)<sup>10</sup> in Slovenia is quite literally weaving solidarity through its intercultural knitting project, combining Slovene language lessons and community knitting *“as a powerful tool in the two-way process of integration and in addressing the challenges of intercultural coexistence”*.

Finally, the 2023 EFA conference, [Classrooms of Sanctuary and Struggle](#)<sup>11</sup>, with its theme of trauma and participation addressed an important question for the network of participatory language practitioners from across the UK who organised and attended it. The opening exploration of the day was *“What does facilitating connection mean to you in your role?”*<sup>12</sup>. For EFA too, then, there isn't necessarily a dichotomy between a process of community-building and community organising.

## Building to Organising

Although some students would prefer a traditional language course that provided a teacher and a coursebook - and steered away from politics - EFA teacher-organisers do navigate a process towards collective action.

*Robin, EFA: “If you are an organiser, you do have a responsibility to agitate, and also a right. I believe it is not enough to just commiserate with each other. Let's take some action on this.”*

Zana, Ambasada Rog (Andreja voice over), speaking in the podcast episode from Slovenia shows how it requires a certain outlook and drive for community activity to be organisation-building:

*I don't know if we call ourselves just the community: I think we call ourselves an organisation. We don't just hang out but we do organise to fight specific issues. We*

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<sup>9</sup> <https://g.co/kgs/bssygV>

<sup>10</sup> <https://zavod-tri.org/en/domov/vkljucujoce-skupnosti/inclusion-of-immigrant-women/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://efalondon.org/efa-conference-2023-read-the-report-capturing-our-learning-and-considerations-from-the-day/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://padlet.com/robin450/what-does-facilitating-connection-mean-to-you-in-your-role-e1vuer5kneudlkqh>

*intentionally decided that we will use the word organisation because organisation demands organising, demands your engagement, demands your effort, your energy - of all the members....I think we build the power by continuity so that when the problem comes, there is already an infrastructure which can support the fight, the power we build through trust, through working together, through actions together.*

## Where there's a will there's a way: organising with asylum seekers

Working with asylum seekers in Croatia, Slovenia and the UK, we understand that people's situations are precarious, struggling with their mental health, dispersals and bureaucracy. Campaigning in Slovenia (by Ambasada Rog mentioned below) ensured that asylum seekers have the right to work after three months; but in the UK, where tens of thousands are [kept destitute for over two years<sup>13</sup>](#), some will have to find black-market jobs despite fearing the repercussions to their case if caught.

Having organised language classes alongside their Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) work to widen access, many community organisers will recognise what POKAZ contended with:

*There were a lot of people who were asylum seekers who started coming to courses and dropped out and then came back a couple of months later. It was always a problem and we followed-up and always asked 'What is going on? Is everything ok? Is there anything we can do?' We changed locations. We changed times. It was always answers like 'I really can't focus on this. I am just too stressed out and too uncertain about what is going to happen with my application. I have psychological problems because of this.'*

In the UK at least, the overwhelming thrust of activity with/for refugees emphasises care, welcome, education, joy, healing *but* with a clear *anti-political line* that is rarely crossed. Generally, when refugee organisations campaign or comment on political matters, refugees are reduced to stories - not agents - appealing to the *humanitarianism* of host populations. And organisational promises to be "led by people with lived experience" are rarely lived up to. It is undeniably the case that many asylum seekers have been made to fear the Home Office, but there are those who do organise petitions, protests and hunger strikes in detention, autonomously. This activity is just not amplified by the larger NGOs and charities.

*Andreja, Zavod Bob: "At the beginning they [refugees] might have different status and would be afraid to participate in certain social actions because of possible sanctions. But later on, with time, if they feel the movement or the group is strong enough with enough power, they might find courage to start to collaborate."*

*An EFA student after speaking at a protest and being interviewed by Al Arabiya TV: "Thank you for giving me the confidence for my language and for fighting for my rights."*

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/lift-the-ban/>

## Leadership processes

A group of EFA students in North London, as part of a teaching-organising process developed over two years, have spoken at accountability assemblies and protested at the local council and at the Home Office on a range of issues. [The most recent - and most brave action - was taken outside their hotel<sup>14</sup>](#) in a week when demonisation of asylum seekers was top of the government media agenda. To arrive at the point of taking this action, the organising process involved weekly classes which featured many debates, games and interactive activities; [social and leisure events<sup>15</sup>](#); [theatre work<sup>16</sup>](#); and [other opportunities to organise together<sup>17</sup>](#).

The small leadership team that formed to organise the protest was mostly based on students with these quite specific analytical and collegiate skills – and to that extent it excluded others – but the wider community-building and organising has valued a wider range of contributions and qualities. That said, the leadership team was self-selecting: they were willing to come to several additional meetings and they recognised their skills in themselves.

Is it too liberal to say that everyone is equally valuable when it comes to the tasks of community building and organising? When we use informal popular and participatory educational practices that try to empower categories of people that are often excluded, do we also need to adjust our lens to see different qualities and expressions of leadership?

The political leaders of a generation can come to sound like each other; staff within sectors adopt each other's mannerisms and intonation. Countercultural circles can also have unconscious models of what a leader looks like, maybe different from power holders, but often just as homogenous. Migrants come with their own experience of what community and political leadership looks like. When we value inclusion, diversity, people and process, it probably requires us to consciously organise the roles and tasks involved in our work to correspond to this.

A project that was current for Giolli during our discussions raised such considerations on leadership, representation and hierarchy. The project initially aimed to bring together tenants, municipality representatives and owners of a housing complex and to help accustom local tenants to the idea of an asylum seeker in the role of community representative.

In their research and discussions with more than 120 tenants, they uncovered a wide array of common problems that transcended people's differences. With that information the

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<sup>14</sup><https://novaramedia.com/2023/08/11/asylum-seekers-in-london-are-protesting-poor-living-conditions-and-long-wait-times/>

<sup>15</sup><https://www.facebook.com/TheUtopiaWorkshop/posts/pfbid0DWFsVxutZUojWFY1ooVGYdiKCpvDvTiQkEbHDNW8SFYjqeC5NS9BUQTEUgrre7cul>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/TheUtopiaWorkshop/videos/958870488461403/>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.facebook.com/TheUtopiaWorkshop/posts/pfbid0cnkShPc2csVEyrshKNp8vYXeKBHQvZ86M8BuXZQepBZDT9axSjRK3T6jWySrouFFI>

focus of their TO performance changed to making housing managers and municipal representatives aware of the problems to start addressing them. Although the initial reason for involving Giolli was partially diverted, the involvement of tenants in identifying problems and offering solutions was an unintended constructive consequence.

*"Our intervention deviated because we discovered that the need was different," Roberto said.*

The municipality proposed to the tenants that they have three community representatives that come to the table to discuss possible solutions. Although some people volunteered, Giolli intervened to speak of the need for legitimation *throughout* the process, lest the volunteers be then accused by other tenants of misappropriating their role.

The first step would be communication with the entire community of tenants, for them to be made aware of the developments—only 20 people had attended the performance—and to have as many people as possible be part of choosing who would represent them. The diversity of the community and tension among some people complicated the process.

*"It's not easy to gather together all these people and make a common decision like in the other processes."*

It entails balancing between faster processes that appear to be more efficient on the surface, and longer ones that risk losing some of the impetus and prolonging inertia and conflict. Roberto recalled a critique from a German activist commenting on a workshop about consensus decision-making, that this type of method is for people with privilege who have time to dedicate to the long process.

*"But for normal people, ordinary people, they are working and busy in their life, maybe a mother with her children, father with a lot of duties and so on, it's difficult to have this long process. The fact that one person participates a lot is not the only criteria to use, otherwise we make a kind of selection between people who have the possibility to participate a lot. And this is also power. To be present all the time is power."*

## Reinforcing Power and Privilege

A concern of great importance to many project members was the relation to power: our own as practitioners and the types of leadership and power structure we are part of creating in the community.

We are aware of power relations not only with regards to those in society with less social capital, financial means or knowledge of how things work at various levels of society but also among those wielding decision-making power. And yet, on numerous occasions, the fear is that we were somehow *not just reflecting but reinforcing hierarchical power relations* that potentially take away a person's agency. In relation to an intervention Giolli made in Palermo, Roberto said:

*"There was fragmentation and now people are coming together and they are creating a hierarchy, a kind of structural power. Our doubt was and still is: how to facilitate the process even if there is a hierarchical process that we don't like? But maybe it's effective for a while. Or to keep the horizontality with the risk that maybe we lose the potential leaders because they don't feel it is as important as it is for us. It's a problematic topic."*

Organisers with a particular vision of distributed community power may be frustrated in their aims, not least because their paid interventions can only last so long and go so deep. Communities may have their own expectations of what a representative does which do not accord with our conception of mobilising participation. In Slovenia, for example, one project within the municipality was to identify, train and employ a cultural mediator, but she is seen by people of her same nationality as the gateway to jobs within the municipality.

On the receiving side of these interventions, people with good will towards an initiative can also face disillusionment. Speaking on the POKAZ podcast episode, Josipa introduces an organiser from the Roma community, noting that *"When external forces drive the impulse for organising, unintended passivisation can occur."*

*"...Most individuals from the Roma community are seen only as passive participants in the projects for social inclusion, or beneficiaries of the initiatives created by stakeholders outside of the community that often don't truly understand their needs. They see participation as sitting in meetings or workshops, participating in activities or doing tasks that were thought of by someone else, and those activities often don't have much to do with our needs...In looking for solutions to these problems, I want allies, not someone that patronisingly taps me on the shoulders and says nice words to me."*

## A participatory approach to leadership

Participatory approaches are employed in different ways and degrees among the COFA partners and their associate organisations. A participatory approach emphasises the involvement and engagement of members in activities related to building and maintaining a community. This method supports a more horizontal type of community, with the intention of empowering individuals with skills that facilitate their participation.

The reality is that not everyone has the time, energy or impetus to *lead* the process as volunteers. Leadership teams, committees etc. that place fixed amounts of responsibility on selected or elected people rely upon an awareness and ability to live up to the levels of responsibility involved. These models have existed for generations in voluntary organisations and movements, but they run the risk of individuals failing in their roles, and also reinforcing hierarchies. Open committees, rotating roles etc have been ways of addressing this ([not without other problems](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tyranny_of_Structurelessness)<sup>18</sup>); valuing the contributions people are making for as long as they are able to may be more motivating and sustainable, striking a balance

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<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Tyranny\\_of\\_Structurelessness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tyranny_of_Structurelessness)

between having expectations and an acceptance and appreciation of what people can offer without associating stress and guilt to their participation.

An important facet of developing participatory cultures, which we also often neglect, is to support new leaders and facilitators to learn about the thinking behind the processes they have experienced as participants, and to reflect critically on them towards, such that they are empowered to design and lead such processes themselves.

Don't bite the hand that feeds you

*The thing is, I'm not an actor, I'm a producer. Our names are linked. Whatever you say on stage, it's as if I were saying it myself. Look here, my dear Thespis, I can't put my money into a play if I'm only going to know the contents on the first night. I'm not being censorious, far from it. Every artist must be free. But before I spend my money, I need to know what I'm spending it on. It's right that you should say what you like, and it's right that I should only pay for what I like. In other words, if you want to keep getting my money, bring me the written script before you start rehearsals, because I don't like nasty surprises, do you hear?*  
- Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*

It's clear enough that "who pays the piper calls the tune," but there are other implications of the political structure created by the overall funding cultures we operate under. Doria from POKAZ says more broadly of civil society politics:

*"The idea of civil society was imported here in the 1990s, and it came with a very high price – the consequences of which we see now, such as high bureaucratization, projectivization and a top-down approach to organizing communities ([including] the hegemony of Western European embassies who came from the west to "explain" to us what it is to be organized."*

This "projectivization" we all recognise – with short-term goals, staffing and planning precarity, and discontinuity – causes fatigue in communities, while claiming to have moved mountains. There is also competition for increasingly limited resources.

*Metka, Zavod Bob: After declaring independence from Yugoslavia, Slovenia transitioned to a capitalist society, which had a significant impact on community organising. In the new economic system, there was a stronger emphasis on market forces and individual initiative, which meant that community organising had to adapt to this new reality.*

*One of the main challenges faced by community organisers in the capitalist society was the lack of financial resources and support. Without state funding, community organisations had to rely on donations, grants, and volunteer work, which limited their ability to carry out long-term projects and initiatives. Furthermore, the competition for funding became more intense, as more and more organisations emerged in the newly liberalised environment.*

The professionalisation of community organising is also an issue worth considering, one which is being debated in the Theatre of the Oppressed world. What is harder to address is the inequality between volunteers and paid organisers. In a collaboration towards

producing a forum piece on the double oppression of women in the Roma community tried *“to provide actors, young Roma men and women, with a fee for acting in a play, because it is important for us to motivate them and show that their involvement is valued in this way as well”*.

Transparency, open discussion of values and constraints, and a sensitivity towards exploitative dynamics and genuine efforts to combat them can help – but quite often we will smile consolingly, shrug and continue.

Trade unions describe their political funds as the cleanest money in politics, sourced from mass membership, not corporate or philanthropic paymasters. Collecting membership *dues* (money) is a key responsibility of Alinsky-inspired organising, not just to fund the organisers but so the organisers are clear who’s paying their salary. This can be in contrast to NGO and charity projects where staff can feel more accountable to funders than to our beneficiaries and our practice.

## Organising with Migrant Communities

The work of *Organising with migrant communities* raises particular questions and issues, and assumptions which are also worth bringing to the surface.

There are practical matters like the practices and methods we use to foster inclusion and participation – language practices most evidently, educational and socialisation processes (the next stages of the COFA project will explore these). But just as important is the questioning of our working philosophies around *integration* and *citizenship*, how our identities are shaped differently by notions of *belonging*<sup>19</sup> and *home*, our different relationship to *place*, when in most cases the charged historical narratives of nations rely on ethnic symbolic ownership of place.

In short, when “we’re” organising “with” migrant communities, or migrant communities are organising themselves in some kind of alliance, we ought to have an awareness of whose priorities are really being negotiated on whose behalf.

The settled/native-versus-migrant dichotomy is a significant political faultline, where not just poor migrants face provisionality, if not outright hostility. Migrants are a socially diverse category in terms of class, race, social status, and immigration status. White and black UK citizens, as migrant residents in Italy, will have different levels of political capital, as will Italians and Slovenians in the UK.

Some of our countries have imperial histories to contend with, whereas the slogans that animate colonial subjectivities in the metropole – “we are here because you were there” – do not apply in the same way to countries without such a legacy<sup>20</sup>. Where nationalism is a

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<sup>19</sup> <https://citizenstout.substack.com/p/what-does-it-mean-to-belong>

<sup>20</sup> Listen to the COFA podcast from Croatia



dirty word among progressives in imperial European countries, it represents self-determination in others.

Under a capitalist system, without social protections, the management of migration from above is part of a strategy to increase competition and undermine social protections in labour, housing and other foundational spheres of material life. Moreover, while social cohesion efforts are essential in countries like the UK, the “steel pans, samosas and saris”<sup>21</sup> strategies are not enough in and of themselves. Even settled immigrants can feel their interests challenged by new migrants.

A solidarity with the economic imperatives that motivate large numbers of migrant workers might help in developing solidaristic responses that fit the reality. Migrant communities do this themselves: investing in technology that allows them to sustain their relationships with home, supplementary schools that attempt to pass on to their children the language that will keep them connected, political diaspora organisations that continue to shape their domestic politics. Conversely, for “host” areas, this can mean populations that are less invested, have less of a sense of stewardship for the commons abroad, and who make their own calculations of benefit and risk of participating in united struggles for rights and conditions. Of course, the denial of enfranchisement compounds this, particularly in Italy.

The responsibility for addressing the transnational causes of forced migration and global inequality is everyone’s.

## Conclusion

It's hard to conclude when there's still more to say; coming together as organisers and organisations from four countries to discuss community organising with migrant communities is not a small task.

It was beyond our scope, even if it was always present, to engage with debates on state and democratic power. Some may want to [“change the world without taking power”](#)<sup>22</sup>, but what that means is rightfully an open question necessitated by what we know it has meant for left-wing movements to capture state machinery . Equally, we can be aware of what it has meant and still means to be living under violent state apparatuses where we reject conventional forms of power.

We admire thinkers like Boal, who engaged reality as he found it. Coming to Europe, he realised that the categories of the Oppressed and Oppressor that animated popular mobilisations in Brazil were more diffuse here, or as he thought, internalised. His son Julian’s new book recognises this challenge: *Political theatre, like any kind of political action, can only be judged in relation to the political moment in which it tries to intervene. Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) was created to fight against dictatorship and an extremely centralized*

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<sup>21</sup> Referring to community events based on steel pan music from the Caribbean, and samosas and saris from the Indian subcontinent, representing music, food and costume of major immigrant communities of a previous generation.

<sup>22</sup> <https://libcom.org/article/change-world-without-taking-power-john-holloway>

*conception of politics. How does it function now, in a time of social media and so-called participatory democracies?*

Through our work preparing this article, we have tried, at least, to be more aware of the element and territory in which we swim.

Trinidadian Marxist CLR James appropriated the phrase "*What do they know of England who only England know?*" from imperialist writer Rudyard Kipling. Migrants, like other people on the margins of a society, may gain perspectives on a society more readily than those who experience it from within. Comparative work between organisers across our countries can similarly help shed light on our blindspots.

The following description from the [Commons Library](#) seems to be a good fit for the overall approach many of our organisers strive towards:

*At the heart of this approach is being: knowing who you are and why you do what you do. This is all about having an awareness of the traditions and values that inform the organiser's approach to organising as well as the communities and histories the organiser is linked to. Being subtly shapes all the other dimensions and brings depth to organising. The actual practice of day-to-day organising, however, really begins with bonding: listening, observing, entering into dialogue and building relationships. Getting alongside people traverses a spectrum from light and fun to serious and deep. Bonding creates conditions that are more conducive for collective action. It is about understanding why people do what they do, why they care enough to want to take action.*

*Organisers will continue to maintain, deepen and expand their relationships throughout their work with particular groups, places, interests, identities and issues. But organisers are not only interested in relationships for their own sake, they are also attuned to the movement to shared public action: banding together, taking collective action.*

*Some community organising, particularly grassroots organising, may not go beyond bonding and banding. But if, for example, the work requires more structure than a local action group that meets around kitchen tables, it will proceed to building: creating more stable forms of organisation that can nurture leaders and widen the circle of civic participation. Bridging is the next step, further increasing the complexity of organising. This is the work of building alliances, coalitions, and local- global partnerships. Community organising rarely proceeds to this level of complexity.*