

# Organizing a transnational solidarity for social change through participatory practices: The case of People Powered–Global Hub for Participatory Democracy

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## Abstract

In the context of global democratic crises and pervasive neoliberal policies, civil society organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in promoting democratic processes and advancing social change on local, national, and transnational scales. However, such organizations also (need to) grapple with how they themselves put social justice and democratic principles into practice, and resist coloniality within. This article examines these questions in the case of People Powered–Global Hub for Participatory Democracy, a recently found transnational CSO that advocates globally for participatory democracy as a mechanism for social change and employs these principles in its own governance and operations. The analysis focusses on the creation of People Powered and its first year of practice. Drawing upon decolonial frameworks—and based on our own experiences as founding members of People Powered and our reading of interviews and documents—we identify concrete practices through which the organization seeks to enact epistemic justice, shift power, and emphasize relationality. We argue that People Powered's decolonial roots, collectively articulated values and commitments, radical transparency, and its consistent employment of meaningful participation and reflexivity have built and are likely to sustain this transnational solidarity for social change. At the same time and perhaps critical for fostering solidarity and social change in the long term, People Powered embraces, rather than evades, tensions and contradictions that emerge in these efforts.

## KEYWORDS

civil society organizations, decolonial practices, decolonial theory, epistemic justice, participatory democracy, transnational solidarities

## INTRODUCTION

In Rosario, Argentina, giving residents the right to allocate public spending—through a process called participatory budgeting (PB)—dramatically increased local spending on childcare, job training for women, and workshops on addressing domestic violence (Allegretti & Falanga, 2016). In New Taipei City, Taiwan, local officials were caught off guard when half of all local citizens with disabilities enthusiastically engaged in a local PB process and, rather than asking for more benefits, developed innovative job

training programs (Wan, 2018). In the United States, the Seattle City Council responded to Black Lives Matter protests by divesting \$23 million from the police department's budget (Kaur, 2021). When elected officials suggested that police divestments immediately be put into support services such as those aiding homeless persons, activists resisted readymade, technocratic solutions. Instead, they fought to determine the new investments in a participatory way. In all three locales, civil society organizations (CSOs) worked with government, residents, and researchers not solely to achieve women's rights, disabilities

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rights, or prison abolition per se, but also to engage in democratic experiments, changing how public policies are made in the first place. What links these democratic experiments is also a new, quickly developing transnational CSO called People Powered—Global Hub for Participatory Democracy. People Powered brings together a global community of participatory democracy practitioners and researchers to collectively advocate for and support participatory democratic processes around the world ([www.peoplepowered.org](http://www.peoplepowered.org)). To work effectively, People Powered must help everyday and especially historically marginalized citizens to be taken seriously by authorities and formally anointed “experts,” and they must do so at multiple scales simultaneously as follows: (1) within the organization itself; (2) locally, adapting to histories and politics of each community; and (3) transnationally, so that activists can compare experiences, build power as social movements, and collectively tackle transnational policy problems with local consequences.

Like People Powered, many transnational CSOs advocate for empowerment and justice at multiple levels simultaneously. However, these organizations also operate with their own deep-seated power asymmetries, language and cultural barriers, logistical difficulties, and scarce resources. How these organizations enact social justice and resist the reproduction of inequalities and colonial hierarchies internally therefore remains a critical question. Given deeply uneven terrains of struggle, what might attempts to facilitate transnational solidarities look like?

We address these questions using the example of People Powered. Drawing upon decolonial frameworks that helped to inspire participatory democratic initiatives around the world (de Sousa Santos, 2005), we reflect on possibilities and tensions in decolonial practices within a formal CSO that seeks to build transnational solidarity for social change. Specifically, this article leverages a unique opportunity to examine the creation and early beginnings of such a setting (Sarason, 1972). As People Powered was founded only in 2020, our analysis captures members' recent and contemporaneous experiences and reflections on the formation of the organization and their participation in new processes and practices within the organization in its first year. We draw on our own diverse experiences as founding members and active researchers and practitioners on People Powered' boards, and on interviews with others members and on organizational documents. Focussing on decolonial practices in the creation and building of a formal CSO for social change, this article extends a growing, cross-disciplinary literature on decolonial practice, which so far has been especially concerned with possibilities of decolonial scholarship and pedagogy within generally established academic settings.

### **Democratic crisis, participatory practices, and the growing role of civil society**

Representative democratic systems have for some time experienced a crisis of legitimacy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019).

Increasingly, the supposed basic minimums of liberal democracy, such as periodic elections, are under attack. Further, such minimums are insufficient for just outcomes, as shown by evidence that average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little to no influence on policies in the United States (Gilens & Page, 2014). Unfulfilled promises of democracy stir frustrations, loss of trust, and anti-democratic actions, as social inequalities become more visible (Peschard, 2017). In response, experimentations with citizen participation in political decision-making have proliferated around the world; however, these have generally been more successful at promoting values of democratic effectiveness and transparency than social justice (Fung, 2015). Even as participatory democratic initiatives have been incorporated into national legislation in countries such as Peru and constitutions such as that of South Africa, critiques of such initiatives as ineffectual or even “technocratically canned” have also proliferated (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. 177; McNulty, 2019).

In the context of democratic crisis, CSOs play an increasing role in shaping global efforts to promote democratic processes to resolve social problems. In recent decades, CSOs have proliferated around the world as a response to declining democratic quality, neoliberal trade agreements, and privatization. Here we define CSOs broadly as entities that self-identify as independent from business or government; this category includes registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including international ones, grassroots movements, local associations, and less formal collectives that lack the state-designated status typically associated with NGOs. Such organizations can help constituents to mobilize participants, weave stories about shared struggles, and grapple with tensions in coalition building (Su, 2010). In the current crisis, CSOs must also articulate a viable alternative to the status quo when it appears that, as Margaret Thatcher famously declared, “There is no alternative” (de Sousa Santos, 2018). Thus, CSOs also play a role in defining and shaping what democratic practices may mean across diverse contexts.

In the 1.0 version of recent participatory and decolonial turns, calls for meaningful participation and critiques of neocolonial dynamics in foreign aid and philanthropy, especially, were inspired by the need for constituents throughout the Global South to have a say in the mass-scale dam projects, economic policies, and other governmental (or government binding) decisions being made by elites (de Sousa Santos, 2005). Yet, by the early 2000s, practitioners and scholars had already begun to call “participatory frameworks” the “new tyranny,” a way for funders and institutions to pay lip service to participation, while perpetuating status quo inequalities, benefiting Global North professionals in what might be dubbed a Non-profit Industrial Complex (NPIC), and burdening individuals to assume responsibilities that had traditionally been those of the welfare state (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007). In an analysis on social justice initiatives in South Africa funded by Global North funders, for instance, Bond (2008) criticizes “post-Washington Consensus” advocates—that is,

transnational partnerships among elite institutions that promote multilateral solutions and “sustainable development” to global crisis—for engaging in incremental, reformist reforms (Gorz, 1964), which may be relatively easy to justify to funders but ultimately damage instead of benefit social justice causes, especially when they demobilize constituents. In contrast, Bond (2008) describes non-reformist reforms as practices and actions of and within organizations and campaigns that, even when they are small, consistently and unapologetically further a social justice agenda and lead to more rather than less intense struggles.

In what might be termed a “2.0 version” of recent participatory and decolonial turns, CSOs, including established international and transnational ones, have begun to look inwards, to grapple with deeply rooted colonial assumptions, the composition of their membership, Eurocentric ways of knowledge and practices, and their often hierarchical relationships between Global North and South partners. Some are rethinking not only how to become more inclusive and diverse but how to fundamentally change their work. However, within organizations, too, participatory decision-making and equity cannot be achieved in tokenistic or top-down ways (Bess et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2020). As CSOs seek to counteract the NPIC and “post-Washington Consensus” strategies, they need participatory mechanisms that foster nonreformist reforms, both outside and within the organization. However, just what bottom-up participation and nonreformist reforms might look like—especially at the meso- and microlevels—remains understudied.

### **Towards transnational solidarities and new ecologies of knowledge and productivities**

We understand transnational solidarity as recognizing common crises in diverse localities and as working together for social change that is both local and global. Challenges are understood to be particular for diverse localities but connected by global conditions and structures. Desired solutions arise from the knowledges, practices, and needs of local contexts, but with global resonance (Sonn, 2016). Transnational solidarities thus face the challenge to develop a common understanding of basic truths about the issue around which they form, while allowing disparate versions of these truths to coexist.

Transnational solidarities are especially pivotal when local movements are weak. Examples include Spanish, French, and Belgian Renault workers who protested a factory closing at the European Union level and indigenous leaders who took hard-won international norms from the United Nations and used them in “domestic” contestations (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). However, these models, emphasizing “boomerang effects” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998)—whereby domestic CSOs do not directly engage local governments, but instead appeal to allies through

transnational networks to pressure their own governments or institutions to pressure the offending regime for social change—have also come under scrutiny as being vulnerable to colonialities. Puar (2013, p. 337), for instance, writes that transnational movements for queer/lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex communities sometimes “produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to citizenship ... at the expense of the delimitation... of other [s].” Critical perspectives on transnational solidarities remain direly needed (Waites, 2019).

Our reflections are informed by an understanding of the decolonization process as the emancipation from a dominant, Eurocentric way to see the world and as an opportunity to engage with a pluriverse of knowledges and knowledge production (de Sousa Santos, 2009). We are interested in how CSOs that build transnational solidarities resist colonialism within and instead create opportunities for decolonial justice. In their praxis, these CSOs need to build what de Sousa Santos (2009) called an ecology of knowledges and an ecology of productivities. In an ecology of knowledges, a Eurocentric, technocratic kind of knowledge is removed from hegemonic status, instead dialoguing with knowledges that are otherwise marginalized (de Sousa Santos, 2009). There is a “plurality of ways of knowing, doing, and being in the service of promoting social emancipation” (Sonn, 2016, p. 312). This ecology shares authority to construct what is considered legitimate and valid knowledge. As such, it enacts the notion of Fricker (2007) and others' notion of epistemic justice, whereby different forms of knowledge production are actively valued and hegemonic understandings of rationality and expertise are challenged (Anderson, 2012). In practice, this means that groups must remain critically aware of differences in agency in knowledge production. They need to remain conscious of who gets to speak, contribute, decide, and to counteract processes that undermine participation of all in the production of valid knowledges and truth (Dutta, 2016).

With the ecology of productivities, de Sousa Santos (2009) describes values and systems that rely on relationality, collective care, and cooperation, including the solidarity economy. This space defends these productivities against monocultural spaces of capitalist productivism, where relationships, learning, and solidarity do not count towards success (Grosfoguel, 2011). In practice, this means that a product or an activity is valued in terms of its usefulness in enhancing people's support networks, community wellbeing, attention to community histories, and access to resources without having to prove worth or deservingness. In both the ecology of knowledges and the ecology of productivities, a critical examination of hierarchies cannot be overstated. Challenging hierarchies and instead building horizontal relations is connected to practices of epistemic justice. This article seeks to understand what it means for a transnational CSO to strive for an ecology of knowledges and an ecology of productivities.

## PEOPLE POWERED—GLOBAL HUB FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

### Background

People Powered is a transnational nonprofit organization that seeks to strengthen the power of people around the world to make government decisions that affect their lives and address their needs ([www.peoplepowered.org](http://www.peoplepowered.org)). It supports individuals, organizations, and governments that engage in participatory democratic processes through training and mentoring, and advocacy for participatory policies. The organization's work is guided by the values of inclusion, equity, learning, problem-solving, and collaboration. It was founded in July 2020 and incorporated as a nonprofit organization in the United States. As of May 2021, it has four full-time staff (in the process of hiring three more), 53-member organizations, and a board of directors. Its main programmatic area, PB, is supported by a PB practitioner and a PB research board.

Several aspects of People Powered make it a rich case for a study of transnational solidarities for social change. First, People Powered is itself transnational and works transnationally. Its staff and members represent nearly 40 countries and its collaborative work connects people and member organizations across national boundaries. Second, People Powered is shaped by decolonial intentionality and works towards transformative social change. By promoting PB, a political instrument from the Global South, it seeks to make governments around the world more responsive to the needs of residents, especially those that political processes often exclude. Third, People Powered seeks to practice solidarity. It identifies itself as “a global union for participatory democracy workers” ([www.peoplepowered.org](http://www.peoplepowered.org)). Its website states its commitment to partner with national and regional member organizations for every project, to support and amplify their members' work, to allocate at least half of funds to member organizations, at least half to people from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, or Latin America, and at least half to women. Fourth, People Powered consistently implements participatory practices in its own decision-making and distribution of funds. Fifth, the organization operates within an established yet increasingly self-critical North American philanthropic landscape. Finally, the organization's recent formation and quick expansion provide an opportunity to examine how a social justice orientation might be realized in the creation of a new organizational setting.

In what follows, we present our analysis and reflections on People Powered as a formally organized transnational solidarity for social change. We focus on the roots of the organization, the processes through which it was found and build out, and on the establishment of new, not yet institutionalized operations. Our work is guided by three questions as follows: (1) How does People Powered enact decolonial intentionality in its everyday organizing practices? (2) How do the organization's processes and practices foster solidarity? (3) What tensions and contradictions

occur in this study and how are they addressed? We seek to offer insights from this case for other CSOs that foster transnational solidarities for social change.

### A note on methodology

We engaged in this analysis as members of different boards in People Powered and guided by principles of participatory action and community-based research (Fine, 2015; Sandwick et al., 2018). We met remotely from our desks located in four different cities and countries (Berlin, New York, Mexico City, and Porto Alegre) to interrogate contrasts and throughlines in our perspectives and interpretations of relevant theories, experiences, and observations, as well as data that we collected for the purpose of this article. The latter included organizational documents (planning documents, meeting protocols, application, and evaluation forms), especially those pertaining to two of People Powered's most prominent activities in 2020: the Rising Stars Mentorship program and the organization's participatory planning and budgeting for 2021, and seven semistructured interviews with purposefully selected members of the organization. Four interviews focused on members' entry to the organization, collaborations with other members, and their participation in either Rising Stars or the planning process for 2021. These interviewees were located in Africa, Asia, Eastern, and Western Europe. They represented the practitioner and research boards, and a member organization. Two were women. We also interviewed three full-time staff about their experiences implementing participatory decision-making, supporting work groups, and the organization's relationship with its funders.

We are, in North American terms, of Asian descent, Latinx, and White, native-born and immigrant in the countries where we now reside. Three of us identify as female, one as male. We have all worked as practitioners with nonprofits, grassroots movements, government agencies, and conducted research as academics. We have all been involved with PB processes for a decade or longer as researchers, practitioners, and participants. We are all founding members of People Powered and continue to be active members in one of the organization's boards. In 2021, the first author cochaired the research board and the fourth author cochaired the practitioners' board. All members of People Powered's researcher and practitioner boards were contacted by the first author to collaborate on a publication for this special issue. The three coauthors expressed interest and we collectively designed and executed the work. Our different perspectives acted as a *de facto* triangulation, as we repeatedly questioned whether a “fact” about People Powered that held true in one coauthor's experience held true for the others. In this article, we emphasize themes and reflections that emerged from our discussions and from our readings of the data as possible answers to this article's guiding questions and goals.

## Decolonial roots and intentionality

In this section, we argue that People Powered's roots in South American PB provide a critical foundation for the organizing of this transnational solidarity. They help to stabilize among members a common understanding and commitment to inclusion, equity, transparency, collaboration, and meaningful participation. We also identify decolonial intentionality in the founding of the organization and the processes by which it invites and selects members, which in turn can build members' faith in the organization and willingness to engage. However, contradictions emerge as the organization applies imperfect demographic categories and selection criteria. In addition, tensions remain as People Powered is inclusive of diverse experiences with PB, including those that are not primarily informed by a social justice orientation.

## PB and its global spread

PB is a democratic political process by which ordinary residents decide how to spend parts of a public budget. The process typically involves a number of phases in which residents learn about the process, brainstorm priorities and project ideas, and work together with government representatives to develop project ideas further. In the final stage, a public vote decides how the funds get distributed among community-developed options. Residents are ideally also involved in monitoring the process and the implementation of projects. PB began in Brazil in the early 1990s, postmilitary dictatorship; the Workers Party initiated it to change government priorities towards the needs of the poor and to foster socially equitable public spending and citizen engagement. The social justice orientation of Brazilian PB led to meaningful improvements in health service delivery, strengthening of CSOs, and critical well-being outcomes (Gonçalves, 2014; Touchton & Wampler, 2014). Since its inception in Brazil, PB has spread to every continent. According to recent estimates by People Powered, nearly 7000 PB experiences are taking place in the world.

The rapid spread of PB marks a decolonial shift in the dissemination of public policies. Whereas such practices typically flow from the Global North to the Global South, practices and knowledge regarding PB instead spread from South America to other regions in the world (Núñez, 2018). However, divergent interests facilitated this spread. On one hand, social movements and political parties on the left advocated for PB as an instrument of radical democratization and social change. On the other hand, the democratic promise of PB caught the attention of researchers, municipal governments, and international multilateral institutions. The latter promoted PB as a tool to increase transparency and efficiency in public financing (Cabannes & Lipietz, 2018).

People Powered can be linked back to the global justice movements that emerged at the turn of the century,

especially the World Social Forum (WSF), which was founded as an antidote to the World Economic Forum by a global network of CSOs. Early on, several WSFs took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, which had become known for its stance against neoliberalism (Whitaker, 2004). PB was the single most important democratic experience that took place in Porto Alegre at that time. This convergence facilitated the spread of a social justice-oriented PB to the United States. US-based activists and academics met at the WSF, including Josh Lerner, Gianpaolo Baiocchi, and Michael Menser, who later joined forces to found the PB Project (PBP), a US-based nonprofit that supports and advocates for PB in the United States. Josh Lerner headed and coheaded PBP for 10 years before he transitioned out of this position in 2020 to form a global hub for PB, which was quickly built out to become People Powered.

## From the Global PB Hub to People Powered

In 2017, the Omidyar Network and Hewlett Foundation began to support the global growth of PB. They commissioned a codesign process and PB Exchange that included dozens of governments, PB practitioners, and researchers from around the world. Participants identified the need for an organized global hub where practitioners and researchers would routinely support each other in efforts to improve and grow PB practices. The Hewlett Foundation funded a Global PB Hub, hosted by PBP, to start this study. The grant proposal entailed the plan to build the hub out to an independent organization.

The Global PB Hub (Hub)—now part of People Powered—consists of a practitioner and a research board, which initially comprised 35 members from nearly as many countries. Here, practitioners refer to representatives of civil society or governments that implement PB and researchers refer to social scientists working in academia or other formal research institutions. From the start, the Hub has sought to center practitioners' knowledge. The role of research is to focus on practitioners' research needs and making research more accessible and useful for practice. The Hub thus challenges hegemonic academic research practices (e.g., publishing in peer-reviewed journals and presenting at high-cost academic conferences) in explicit ways and instead promotes practices that are much less rewarded in most academic systems in and inspired by North America. Already the first in-person board meetings in 2019 were scheduled to take place in the same cities and alongside conferences of allied practice-focused organizations, so that Hub members not only focused on their own work but engaged with allied practitioners at the same time.

In 2020, members of the Hub and supporting organizations (58 individuals from 28 countries) engaged in an elaborate participatory planning process to build out the Hub into a new, broader organization. A small team of staff led the process. Informed by principles of equity and transparency-focused PB, it included several meetings

(online) for Hub members and allies to learn about the opportunities for creating this new organization and to deliberate over its mission, vision, values, commitments, work priorities, and name. Hub members and allies finally voted on these central organizational building blocks, hence cocreating the foundations of their own organization. Interviewees asserted that the process of building People Powered solidified their faith in the Hub's leadership to create an organization that values all members' contributions and seeks to practice what it preaches to decision-makers around the globe.

## Diversity and epistemic plurality

People Powered seeks to be inclusive to a wide range of experiences and to shift power to members from traditionally marginalized groups and regions. People Powered must thus find ways to identify members by demographic and social categories without falling into the traps of diversity checklist and tokenism. The application and selection process to the Global PB Hub's boards exemplifies how the organization has grappled with this tension—always conscious of the limits of any such approach.

The selection committee for the original PB boards included the later executive director (ED), the later program manager for People Powered, and three people who had been active in the PB Exchange but did not seek membership in the Hub boards. The selection process was guided by the criteria of gender and geographic balance, where the latter means at least half of the board members represent the Global South. The selection committee made the pragmatic decision to define the Global South regionally as Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America, rather than by specific countries. Applicants needed to speak English at a professional level and show that they valued equity, inclusion, collaboration, and participation in their work.

Calls for application were shared through listservs, newsletters, social media, and personal networks with the request for broad dissemination. Special efforts were made to recruit members from the Global South. Established people in the field received the call but no additional requests if they chose not to apply. No one was placed on the boards outside of the application process. Applicants who fit the criteria but were not ultimately selected received emails to explain the process and stating that the organization hoped to work with them as allies. The ED does not recall negative repercussions from this process but knows that some people were surprised when junior-level people joined the boards, while more senior applicants were not selected.

The application form included questions on country of origin, gender identification, and the applicant's motivation to join the board. The form also asked whether applicants wished to convey anything else that the team might consider and whether they are members of any groups that

face discrimination where they live. Our interviewees valued that it included open-ended invitations to self-identify in complex ways. To one interviewee, the process signified that the new Hub (later People Powered) from the beginning thought critically about how to include and center local identities and experiences of marginalization. Interviewees felt encouraged when, once they learned who else joined the boards with them, they recognized gender balance and geographic diversity on the boards.

People Powered's explicit but open-ended approach to naming, discussing, and amplifying demographic backgrounds and cultural identities in transnational spaces defies both norms of neoliberal colorblindness and checklist definitions of diversity. It ensures some important quantitative forms of inclusivity. At the same time, this approach does not assume that members of any marginalized group are monolithic, necessarily hold certain interests, or wish to speak to that aspect of their identities as the most salient ones. Rather, this approach embraces the complexity of gender, ethnic, regional, professional, and other social identities and attempts to create room for critical analysis and contested subjectivities.

There are some factors, however, that are likely to have limited plurality of knowledge of the boards of People Powered, although much less in its membership. First, the possibility of developing such an organization in a relatively short period likely rests on the fact that the network could draw on an already existing international environment of people who professionally worked with PB. In the last two decades, PB's global spread and support from large funders and intergovernmental institutions have prompted a number of international and national conferences focused on participatory democracy. This, in turn, generated the international set of specialists and activists that the Hub could bring together. In addition, limiting the boards to people who are PB researchers or practitioners was a strategic decision that helps to focus the work but also limits the range of experiences and profiles on the boards, most notably the perspective of regular citizens or activists who are not professionally linked to civil society. It is possible that in the future People Powered will include a citizens board, as the organization's strategic plans get regularly re-evaluated in processes that again encourage participation from all members.

Second, the criteria of English proficiency constitutes a significant exclusion mechanism for the boards. All our interviewees discussed it as a limitation for diversity and epistemic plurality. Staff and leadership acknowledge this limitation and work actively on ways to increase linguistic diversity. In fact, organizational membership and participation in certain programs do not require English language proficiency. Webinars and resources are consistently offered in Spanish, Portuguese, and French. Web content is translated into simplified Chinese and Russian. Meetings notes and emails are increasingly shared in Spanish and Portuguese.

Finally, People Powered's commitment to diversity extends to bringing together diverse experiences and

motivations regarding PB. As PB spread very differently around the globe, partly shedding its emancipatory principles along the way (Fung, 2015), members do not necessarily share the same perspective on participatory principles and goals. For instance, at convenings, practitioners, especially those from authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, notably debated and sometimes disagreed on whether principles of PB were achieved in local processes. By inviting diverse views to join its ecologies of knowledges and productivities, People Powered recognizes that participatory democracy is tied to diverse historical, political, and economic contexts. In fact, the ED explains that People Powered's goals are best pursued when all actors who share a commitment to some form of PB have the opportunity to learn from, inspire, and support each other. In practice, discussion about possible projects or directions of ongoing work may thus take longer than they would in more homogenous groups. Members may disengage from projects that are not benefiting their interests or they may engage in projects that emphasize a social justice orientation more than they personally would, because these projects benefit their interests in other ways. Importantly, People Powered's decolonial values, social justice orientation, and focus on collaboration and learning constitute nonnegotiables, and the use of some demographic categories, evaluation metrics, and rules for participation help to monitor these nonnegotiables across processes and projects. The ED hopes that some members will adopt a stronger social justice orientation through their participation in People Powered.

### **Destabilizing traditional hierarchies of knowledge and sharing power**

Examining two prominent activities of People Powered, we reflect on how the organization attempts to enact epistemic justice and operationalizes an ecology of knowledge. We discuss how these activities challenge hegemonic notions of authority and destabilize traditional hierarchies of knowledge, especially by valuing practitioners' local knowledge and sharing power in decision-making. We also point to tensions in these efforts, particularly the reliance on a majority vote in the organization's participatory planning and budgeting process.

### **Mentorship program**

The Rising Stars Mentorship program was perhaps People Powered's most prominent outward-facing activity in 2020 and it continues to expand in 2021. The program connects rising PB leaders anywhere in the world to seasoned implementers. The idea for the program was developed at the first meeting of the PB practitioner board. Through a vote of all practitioner board members, it became the organization's top priority for 2020. A team of three volunteer board members (including one of this

article's authors) developed the program's details, and advised and assisted central staff on its implementation. Key components of the program include an application and selection process, matching mentors and mentees, facilitating mentor–mentee relationship building, and evaluations. Here we reflect on the project's team composition, its decision-making, and the development and use of selection and matching criteria in this process.

The project development team consisted of five individuals, including three members of the practitioner board and two staff members. One board member delegated her responsibilities in the team to a junior member of her office staff. The team then consisted of majority women and people of color. Two team members identify their perspectives as situated in the Global South. All three of the North American team members identify as persons of color with immigrant backgrounds. The team designed and implemented the selection and matching process. Over time, three categories of selection criteria for mentors emerged out of the team's deliberations. The first was informed by People Powered's explicit diversity criteria, namely gender and geographic balance. (Although different gender identities are welcome at People Powered, none of the applicants to the Rising Stars program identified as nonbinary or transgendered.) The second revolved around adequate matching between mentors and mentees, especially regarding the following: (1) work sector and organizational type (e.g., government, NGO, business); (2) regional focus, especially if mentees expressed the need for guidance in navigating certain political economic contexts; (3) languages spoken for ease of communication; and (4) stated preferences for one-on-one or group modalities. As a third category, the team considered experience in community-based PB and whether applications reflected thoughtful approaches to engaging others in democratic initiatives. Still, team members also actively questioned specific selection criteria, for example, whether they could possibly score applicants on demonstrated interest and how to look for signs of reflexivity in applicants' work experiences.

The team intentionally avoided matching mentees from the Global South with mentors from the Global North, even when language needs would have made such a match an obvious choice. The program in its first year saw high interest in mentorship from francophone Africa. However, comparatively few mentors from the same local context could be recruited. A deliberately decolonial mindset prioritized more active searches for mentors from the same local context as mentees, rather than matching, say, a mentee from Cameroon with a mentor from France. A staff member explained that the same logic is applied when resources for People Powered's online resource center are selected. Answering requests for assistance with local expertise, especially in the countries of the Global South, is a priority.

The project team's focus on diversity, local expertise, and community-based experience as mentorship criteria—in contrast to more traditional criteria, such as prestige of institutional affiliations, academic pedigree, and seniority—is both a

reflection of the team's commitment to epistemic justice and the overall strength of the applicant pool. In fact, deliberations over the use of limited program stipend funds reflected the overt countervailing of more traditional selection criteria. Consistently, male applicants tended to occupy very senior- or executive-level positions in their places of employment and indicated on the application form that they did not need a stipend to participate. By contrast, a majority of female candidates, especially those from the Global South, stated that they did require stipends to participate. This is one concrete way in which People Powered's focus on equity, rather than equality, in decision-making helped to destabilize who participated as official, anointed experts in Rising Stars. At the same time, relying on self-reported needs as a means to distribute limited funds in equitable ways puts applicants in a position of having to ask for support, which in turn may increase applicants' discomfort with the application process.

### Participatory planning and budgeting

People Powered engaged in a participatory planning and budgeting process to define and prioritize its work for 2021. This process followed the steps of a PB process. Leadership and staff put forward a timeline and goals that reflected the values and commitment of the organization. A steering committee of volunteers from boards and member organizations formed to deliberate over the rules and goals, and to assist in the process's implementation. Members and allies—that is, anyone globally, who shares the interest and values of People Powered—were invited to submit project ideas. The steering committee and staff grouped these priorities and developed projects to create a ballot. All members were invited to vote on their priority areas and top work projects. The priorities and projects with the most votes became the organization's work and investment priorities for 2021 as communicated publicly on People Powered's website.

This planning and budgeting process enacts principles of inclusion, equity, transparency, and empowerment that are in line with the original conception of PB. By entering the process, members from the Global North commit to the goal of distributing at least half of the funds to members and projects in the Global South. Men commit to allocating at least half of the funds to women. All commit to focusing on projects that benefit more than one country. Moreover, the process recognizes and centers diverse knowledges. By not just consulting with different members, but by opening up the proposal development, ballot composition, and final decision-making, People Powered allows diverse knowledges to have real impacts. The process thus also helps to channel North American funders' investments in People Powered to benefit people directly and indirectly in the Global South. More so, members from the Global South are proposing ideas for how to spend these funds and decide on which ideas should be prioritized.

By encouraging individuals and organizations, who are not (yet) members of People Powered, to submit project

ideas, the organization opens up the processes to a wide range of diverse local knowledges. This practice offsets some of the earlier discussed limitations stemming from a formalized selection process to the boards. It also connects People Powered to allies globally and helps to foster solidarity beyond the organizational membership.

The planning process seeks to challenge traditional hierarchies in two ways. First, it centers practitioners. Proposals, including those related to research and research infrastructure, have to be legitimized by how they benefit practitioners. Second, the process destabilizes structural hierarchies between fulltime staff and members who contribute on a largely unpaid basis. Staff serve as facilitators and organizers. They seek not to interfere with the proposal development, the ballot creation, and the vote. Instead, they defer to the members' expertise. As such, staff communicate that there is no *a priori* understanding of what a best decision or the best project might be, as long as the outcomes reflect the social justice orientation laid down by the rules of the process. Similarly, evaluation documents and interviews showed that committee members and participants shared faith in the process. They inferred that the final decisions must be “the right ones,” because they experienced the processes as inclusive, deliberative and transparent, and as reflective of the organization's values and commitments. One interviewee concluded the final priorities were good ones, because they served practitioners.

At the same time, the planning committee raised the limitations of a majority vote. The reliance on a majority vote—a practice where priorities are decided by the sheer number of votes—can reduce chances for minority projects to be prioritized, as minority perspectives can win votes only by persuasion and advocacy. This imbalance remains, even when deep participation and solidarity-building practices among members committed to a value-driven organization make participants less likely to simply vote on their own interests and despite the fact that People Powered members can object to proposals that they predict would ultimately be harmful or counterproductive. If future iterations of this annual process brought out a more competitive spirit or fell into unchallenged routines—where, for example, self-censorship and abiding by leadership- or administratively defined notions of rationality begin to dominate the process and narrow the scopes of “good projects,” as in some historical PB processes (Foucault, 1991; Su, 2017)—this would seriously challenge People Powered's attempts to both democratize decision-making and redistribute resources to areas of greatest need. Critically aware of these tensions, the planning committee has proposed to experiment with other types of decision-making instruments in the coming years.

### Intentional relationality and fostering peer learning

People Powered makes space for an ecology of productivities by emphasizing practices that recognize members as whole humans and unique persons, and helps



members to relate to each other as collaborators and sources for learning. These practices include forming and supporting work groups around specific tasks, offering opportunities to collectively deliberate about the organization's work and give feedback, and supporting peer-learning workshops that are led by members for members. These moments of productive engagement include a wide range of facilitation tools to increase inclusion, attend to material needs, and help members to relate to each other. For instance, meetings regularly begin with what some might call an intersubjective, relational dimension, building trust, and attending to more humane dimensions of the work. These sorts of ice breakers, such as bringing an object of meaning to share with new members, help participants to grapple with their own subjectivities, situate one another's positionalities (through what they narrate about themselves rather than stereotypes), and establish practices of recognition and relationality, in contrast to extraction, competition, and fetishized productivity. Moreover, facilitators encourage contributions before, during, and after meetings, by sharing all documents in real time and using breakout rooms for small group discussions. Agendas typically state the explicit purpose and goals for each meeting so that members can better understand why they are there. Facilitators are conscious of keeping discussion on time and ending meetings as scheduled. People Powered invests financial resources to support members' engagement, such as travel to and child care at in-person meetings, and paying honoraria for work beyond clearly delineated expectations.

People Powered's peer-learning workshops provide a designated space for relationality and exploration. By focusing, generally speaking, on work-in-progress and exchange, the workshops provide a low threshold opportunity for members to present topics and engage in dialogue. The format responds to members' explicit desire to learn from each other and collaborate. Members voted for peer-learning workshops as one of People Powered's top priorities in 2021. At the same time, these workshops constitute a format that People Powered can measure and count towards its tangible achievements for the year. Peer-learning workshops thus help to address tensions that can arise when seeking to build solidarity in an organizational context that is also evaluated according to traditional standards of productivism.

Our interviewees valued the described efforts of the organization and felt that People Powered largely succeeded in creating spaces of personal connections and meaningful collaboration. They felt valued as humans, not just PB experts, and felt the consistency with which People Powered supported member engagement was unique in their experiences of working with networks or organizations, and it encouraged members to employ similar practices elsewhere in their work. At the same time, People Powered's engagement practices still reach their limits when members live under political contexts that block access to some digital tools for collaborations, when internet connections vary such that some members rarely join with

cameras, when visa procedures are unequally complicated and as long as the dominant language of conversation is English. Our interviewees, including staff and leadership, recognized unevenness in access to deliberative and nurturing spaces in the organization. Possible responses to these tensions are frequent points of discussion in the organization.

### **Doing decolonial work when funded by established global north philanthropy**

People Powered was built and continues to grow at a time when powerful international organizations and funders have begun to more prominently reckon with racial justice and colonial structures, also within their work. Its current main funders—Hewlett Foundation and Ford Foundation—state on their websites their commitments to building more equitable partnerships with grantees and to shift power to traditionally marginalized communities. People Powered's ED evaluates this environment as enabling for the work People Powered members have been doing and advocating for decades, and to hold funders better accountable to these public commitments. Indeed, it is notable that People Power receives operational instead of more typical programmatic grants from these funders. Yet, it is important to reflect on tensions that arise from funders' expectations and on how People Powered resists reformist reforms.

People Powered's deep commitment to participatory decision-making arguably facilitates nonreformist reforms, that is, changes that “support the movement, not the system” (Bond, 2008, p. 16). Members—rather than funder and even leadership prerogatives—determine which programs and projects People Powered's grants should support. And by being tied to established Global North funders, the organization models what bottom-up participation and decolonial intentionality can mean in the internal and external practices of international CSOs and their funders, and can affect change within the system itself. Moreover, it serves People Powered's vision and mission, especially its focus on redistribution and power shifting, to first receive grants from large international funders and to then both allocate these grants to priorities that members define and to partly pass on these resources to member organizations that can execute certain projects.

In addition, People Powered's practices a rare kind of bottom-up accountability and institutional transparency, which should help the organization to stay true to its values over time. Revenues and expenditures—including which foundations are approached and why, and each staff's salary and benefits—are made fully transparent and open to scrutiny. For each project, a guiding charter names who is held responsible, consulted, or merely informed for each decision and outcome, and People Powered explicitly states that funders should only be informed of programming decisions and not actively participate in them.

However, many members of People Powered are themselves CSOs that worry about funding and sustaining their work. Interviewees acknowledged that relationships with funders can be complicated and expressed the need to sometimes adapt goals to meet funders' interests. One practitioner from the Global South stated that local governments in his/her region might benefit from other deliberative initiatives before PB, to create the administrative and democratic conditions necessary for successful PB. However, the interviewee felt that PB is what funders are most excited about right now. This example highlights the risk of avoiding critical consideration of sequencing and contexts in light of perceived funder preferences.

Lastly, with more than half of its board members representing the Global South—many of whom have experienced uneven partnerships with Global North funders—and all members bringing with them experience in meaningful participation, People Powered arguably embodies the capacity to critically reflect on power asymmetries in productive and pragmatic ways. That is, equity is never assumed to be achieved, but a continual work in progress. People Powered can thus both tell funders that it has achieved codesigned and articulated goals, and concurrently embrace feedback, invite scrutiny and encourage reflection and learning.

## DISCUSSION

This article sought to better understand how transnational solidarities can be built within formal CSOs, especially those that seek to challenge hierarchies, shift power and emphasize interdependencies, and collective work elsewhere and within themselves. In contrast to many explicitly decolonial organizations, People Powered does not center stolen land or other issue-specific aims of decolonization in its mission. Rather, it is influenced by the Latin American experience of neoliberal logics such as efficiency and austerity as cornerstones of coloniality and continued extraction (de Sousa Santos, 2005). In keeping with this genealogy, it centers the state and civil society as sites of reform and contestation, attempting to master and incorporate administrative technologies to re-render the state a public entity, rather than be subsumed by technocratic governance. At the same time, People Powered illustrates what it can mean for an organization to apply democratic goals and decolonial principles to itself, especially and importantly in its formation and its early establishment of everyday processes and practices.

### Enacting ecologies of knowledges and productivities

This article builds on de Sousa Santos' (2018) ecologies of knowledge and productivities, examining how a decolonial framework can be operationalized in CSOs that focus on transnational solidarity. We identified People Powered's

decolonial roots and intentionality, and its equity-informed participatory practices and democratic decision-making as perhaps the most critical building blocks for this only recently formalized solidarity. We detailed how People Powered builds ecologies of knowledges and productivities through decolonial practices and meso-level goals—that is, fostering epistemic plurality, challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge, seeking to shift power, building relationships, facilitating peer-learning, and modeling the change the organization wants to see to others, including its funders. Moreover, we argue that Power Powered earned members' trust from the start by enabling members to cowrite the organization's governing rules.

Although our article also describes many constituent, microlevel practices through which People Power seeks to enact ecologies of knowledges and productivities, it remains difficult to articulate how exactly these practices might subvert coloniality and build solidarities in fragile and nuanced ways. It seems important that People Powered engages in collaborative work and participatory decision-making not just for their own sake, but as mechanisms to enact collectively articulated goals, values, and commitments. These processes are deliberately not neutral, but value-driven. The organization thus avoids superficial and exploitative check-listing, tokenism, and meaningless participation, which often characterize the use of similar processes in private and other nonprofit organizations, and which undermine the possibility of power shifts and social change (Cornwall, 2007). Compared with how Global North organizations and states typically talk about democratization—through military interventions, by promoting microfinance and entrepreneurship, through charity, or (in more progressive circles) through trade unionism or another singular form or identity base—People Powered's advocacy for meaningful participation describes a quite humble orientation (Annala et al., 2021). Even when community experiences of structures of oppression can be argued to be objectively similar but experienced differently (e.g., being laid off or made “redundant,” facing precarity and financial insecurity, feeling unsafe walking outside at night, and facing discrimination), People Power does not claim to have large-scale, let alone universal, solutions, rather it advocates that people should have the opportunities and resources to develop solutions to collective problems.

Perhaps most significantly, in People Powered, members decide how programmatic funds are spent. Revenues and expenditures are made radically transparent and open to scrutiny. In combination with relational work, community-building and learning, these practices contribute to an ecology of productivities rather than one in which individual participants all contribute to the organization's “bottom line.” The overarching goal then becomes one of democratic governance rather than capitalist productivism.

### Embracing contradictions and tensions

In seeking to create ecologies of knowledges and productivities, People Powered embraces inevitable contradictions and

tensions. First, we discussed how People Powered's practices and decision-making criteria are imperfect in securing equality in access and voice. We described how the organization acknowledges these shortcomings as requiring continuous reflection and tangible improvements through the allocation of additional resources. Second, we identified tensions that arise from the fact that People Powered invites a diversity of perspectives on PB. We argued that the organization's values and commitments constitute nonnegotiables and a base for collaborations across these perspectives. Third, we discussed possible contradictions arising from People Powered's ties to powerful Global North funders. Being deeply rooted in the ideals of South American, social justice-orientated PB, and committed to decolonial values, it seems that People Powered can—at least so far—purposefully invite into its ecologies powerful institutions, yet as learners and collaborators, not supervisors. Moreover, People Power—at least so far—seems to have been able to combine relational care with traditional (and especially funders') notions of productivity and impacts.

Given these contradictions and tensions, it is of particular interest how the organization is set up to engage in nonreformist instead of reformist reforms (Bond, 2008). Its organizing practices and internal operations are characterized by constant deliberations on which programmatic details can be postponed or compromised (and, by contrast, which actually reflect nonnegotiable values and commitments) and by critical reflection on who benefits from its work and resources, how it shifts power, how it attends to material conditions, how the work can improve, and how leadership can be shared. Without this orientation, People Powered can appear to be just another effective organization adept at current administrative technologies, with a strong culture among participants. With this orientation to nonreformist reforms, however, People Powered emphasizes bottom-up accountability and institutional transparency—thus turning on its head dominant logics of surveillance capitalism, by which organizations collect data on individuals and protect the confidentiality of institutions. With this orientation to nonreformist reforms, People Powered challenges traditional hierarchies but also avoids a “tyranny of structurelessness” and masked domination common in horizontally organized collectives (Freeman, 1972). In addition, it strives to countervail common asymmetries in funder–grantee relationships and to resist decisions that benefit largely Global North professionals and burden constituents from the Global South.

## Implications and conclusion

In considering practical implications from our work, we acknowledge that our analysis provides only a short-term view into People Powered at a specific moment in time. As we write this article, People Powered is less than one year old and the Global PB Hub just two years old. Nearly all communications and work have been conducted online

(due to the COVID-19 crisis). Its short history made it possible to center the organization's founding in our narrative analysis. Interviewees all participated in the process of building People Powered. We discussed the first iterations of key programs. All practices and processes were in a pioneering stage. Members were still finding their roles in the organization. As such, we leveraged a unique moment to capture the early formation of transnational solidarity. Such a focus on the creation of settings is important when trying to understand their possible impacts (Cherniss, 2012; Sarason, 1972). In the case of People Powered, however, we cannot yet know how this solidarity will be sustained and how it will address challenges that may emerge as the organization grows, projects get larger (backed by more funding), processes become institutionalized or perhaps routine, members experience conflicts or disappointments. Another question is how the described practices and processes will translate or interact with in-person meetings. Moreover, much more research is needed on how participatory practices, decolonial intentionalities, and reflexivity become enacted in other CSOs and the tensions that arise in these efforts elsewhere.

Nevertheless, People Powered can serve as a model for new and burgeoning transnational CSOs. To build solidarity, it seems crucial to engage constituents and members from the start in defining the organization's rules and agreeing on its nonnegotiables. It also appears to be critical that members decide how resources are spent—even if the implementation of individual projects may not involve most members directly. These practices may not only be critical for building solidarity within but also for gaining credibility outside and for holding larger institutions accountable. This raises the question whether and how existing CSOs without decolonial roots can substantively engage in decolonial practices and hold larger institutions accountable. Can established organizations rewrite their rules and dismantle power hierarchies within?

Indeed, People Powered trains its members in participatory and decolonial practices, so that they may engage in such practices in other CSOs and institutions, knowing that despite much individual expertise, decolonization cannot be considered achieved in the current landscape. Similar to coloniality, decolonization is not a singular process, but a set of constantly changing practices that must be renewed again and again. Like participatory democracy, it cannot be assigned to others, nor cordoned off for special election days. Justice, equity, cocreation, and solidarity need to be lived, practiced, and re-enacted in day-to-day operations.

At a time when CSOs and transnational solidarities play critical roles in the defense of democratic rights and the empowerment of people against capitalist exploitation, we need to understand how such organizations can operate without reproducing colonial practices and structures within. We discussed an organization whose strengths are its decolonial roots, its collectively articulated commitments, and its consistent employment of social justice-oriented participatory practices. Future research and practice need to evaluate to what extent these are necessary

and sufficient for building ecologies where people connect transnationally, recognize each other as collaborators and sources of learning, and contribute to meaningful social change.

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**How to cite this article:** Hagelskamp, C., Su, C., Valverde Viesca, K., & Núñez, T. (2022). Organizing a transnational solidarity for social change through participatory practices: The case of People Powered–Global Hub for Participatory Democracy. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12593>