

FROM SERVICE TO SYSTEMS

A model for hybrid organizations building power



Prepared by **Innovation Network** for the **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**
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BUILDING POWER

Philanthropy is increasingly supporting the work of groups that are building the power of individuals and communities most impacted by injustice. Building power involves the “gain and [redistribution of] power to individuals and communities most impacted by injustice and inequities” (Post & Fox 2021). This allows them to effect the changes they want to see for themselves and their communities.

In advocacy, building community power has been positioned as an alternative end goal to the policy “win”, traditionally seen as the most important marker of success of advocacy work (Coffman & Beer 2015; Coffman 2023). By shifting to a power building lens, funders take a long view of change, measuring how power is built over time, rather than focusing on policy change, which can be more easily overturned or rolled back. The people most affected by inequity are positioned at the center, rather than the policy organizations whose work has historically been more visible when policy change is privileged (Post & Fox 2021). Who is and can be an agent of change also shifts when power building becomes the goal. Rather than professionalized policy shops, organizers and grassroots groups are now at the center of power building efforts, and, largely, these have been the groups that have been highlighted in power building discussions up until now (Coffman 2023).

A note on power

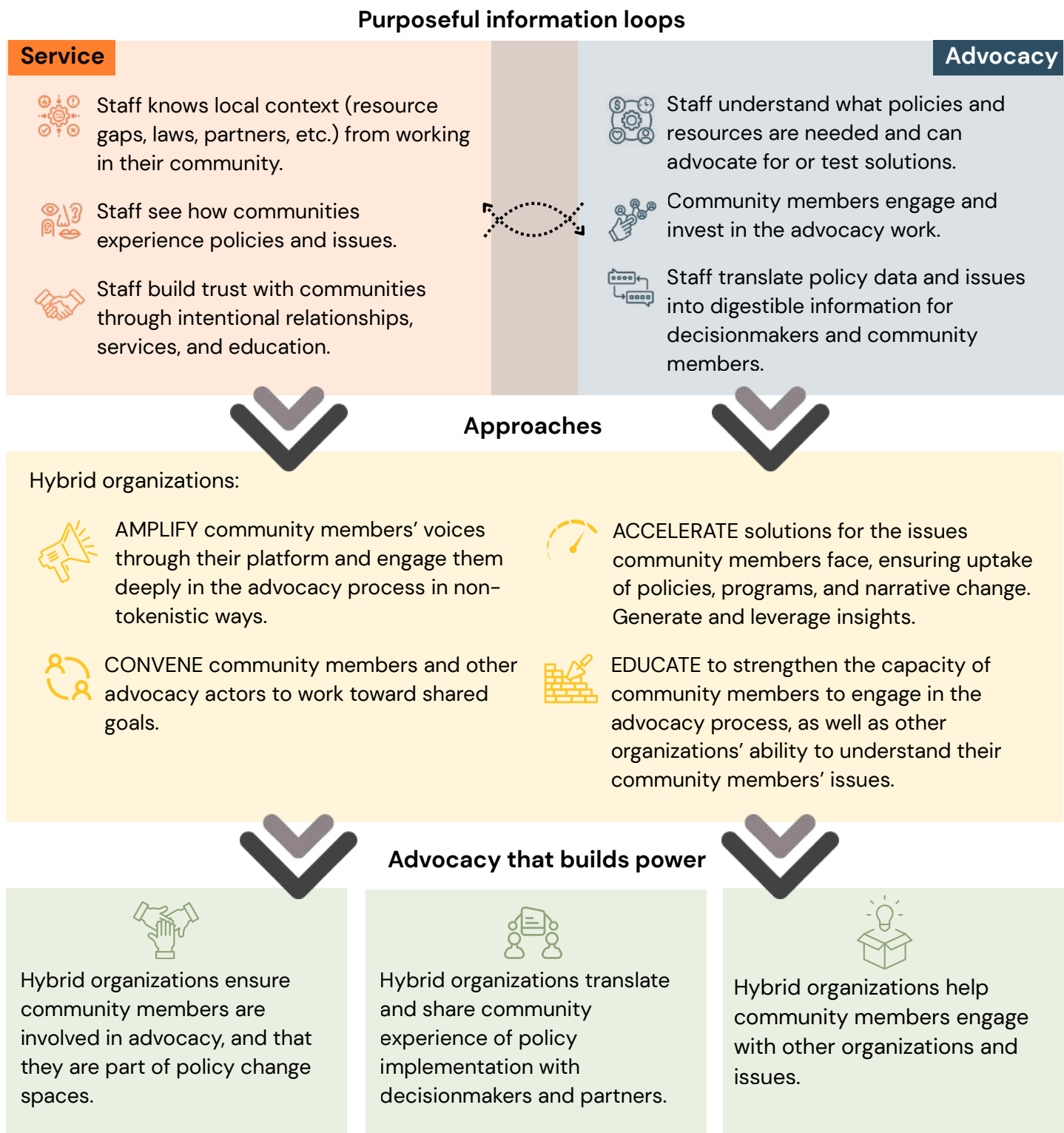
Power is a complex and multifaceted concept that is hard to define. Many scholars and social change practitioners have found it useful to categorize power into different types depending on the level at which it is wielded or where it originates. For the purposes of this model, we use the concept of “community power”, which Lead Local (2018) defines as **“the ability of communities most impacted by structural inequity to develop, sustain and grow an organized base of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision-makers that change systems [...]”**

WHEN SERVICE-ADVOCACY HYBRIDS BUILD POWER

A wide range of organizations, movements, and individuals can help to build power. This includes organizations that have been termed “service-advocacy hybrids” (Wells & Anasti 2019) that provide both direct service and participate in advocacy work that benefits their communities. They are in close relationship with community through their service provision, which allows them to advocate for solutions and policies that more effectively meet their needs and help them thrive (Boisvert, Georgopoulos, & Perlmutter 2024).

For many service-advocacy hybrids, their **purposeful information loops** between their service and advocacy functions make them effective centers for power building through the interplay of proximity to and trust with community, along with a dedication and expertise in systems and policy change. This structure allows hybrid organizations to employ particular **approaches** that amplify and center community member voices and experiences in the systems and policy change space. This leads to organizations contributing to **advocacy that builds power**.

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Purposeful information loops

Though the structures, processes, and workflows of service–advocacy hybrid organizations vary, their service and advocacy work interact in similar ways.

Service



Staff knows local context (resource gaps, laws, partners, etc.) from working in their community.



Staff see how communities experience policies and issues.



Staff build trust with communities through intentional relationships, services, and education.

Through the **service function** of the organization, staff are in close and frequent contact with community members, or the people receiving their services. Through these relationships and the process of providing services, organization staff gain a deep understanding of the people they serve and the context in which they operate and live. This includes understanding the issues that affect communities, what people need to thrive, and the complex web of resource gaps, laws, and the organizational

ecosystems in their area of service. In addition, through their frequent contact with and provision of resources and services to community, staff often develop great trust with their community members.

Much of the information and knowledge gathered on the service side then feeds into the organization's **advocacy function**. Using staff and community member knowledge and experiences, the organization is able to prioritize the types of policy change it advocates for. Because of their relationships with their community members, the organization often engages them in these advocacy efforts, educating them about and strengthening their capacity to participate in systems and policy change processes. Staff involved in the advocacy functions of the

organization also take care to ensure the flow of information is not one-sided. In addition to using what they learn from community members, staff use their own expertise and knowledge to translate and share back information with the community, further strengthening the trust that exists between them.

The information loops between service and advocacy in hybrid organizations are intentional. They ensure that the voices of community members are truly centered. Doing advocacy work without frequent, timely input from community members could result in miscommunication or staff-led decisions. Thus a robust system for coordination and information to flow between functions of a hybrid organization are key to their ability to do advocacy that builds power.

Advocacy



Staff understand what policies and resources are needed and can advocate for or test solutions.



Community members engage and invest in the advocacy work.



Staff translate policy data and issues into digestible information for decisionmakers and community members.

Approaches

With these intentional information loops, hybrid organizations are able to employ specific approaches to their systems and policy change work that would not typically be possible in another type of organization. These approaches center community member voices and allow hybrid organizations to fully leverage the rich information and relationships that they have with community.

Hybrid organizations are particularly effective at:



Amplifying their community members' voice in the advocacy process in non-tokenistic ways. Hybrid organizations deeply engage community members before, during, and after their systems and policy change work. They use their platform to amplify community voices and experiences.

E.g.

Listening to community priorities and stated needs and assets. They may do this by co-building advocacy agendas, conducting surveys and focus groups, and hearing directly from community through the direct services they provide, for example, through helplines.



Accelerating solutions for the issues community members face, ensuring uptake of policies and programs through shifting narratives and generating and leveraging evidence. Hybrid organizations implement policies and legislation and prioritize learning from that implementation. They use their insights to shift narratives, increase visibility, and bring people together to share experiences, all in service of greater and more sustainable uptake of community-centric policies, legislation, and programs.

E.g.

Providing guidance on implementation in cities, states, and at the federal level. They may develop frameworks or models for how to implement specific policies or programs, and provide technical assistance to implementation in other geographies.



Convening community members and other advocacy actors to work together toward shared goals. Hybrid organizations bring together a wide range of partners from diverse places in the ecosystem to work on shared goals.

E.g.

Cultivating relationships with larger policy organizations and networks and tapping into their resources. In these relationships, hybrid organizations bring community narratives and storytelling about how policies, legislation, and programs are impacting community.



Educating to strengthen the capacity of community members to engage in the advocacy process, as well as other organizations' ability to understand their community members' issues. Hybrid organizations educate communities themselves about how they may be affected by policy, and they engage in public awareness campaigns and public education to garner support for issues. They also often build the capacity of other organizations to understand communities' issues with data they have generated from pilots or research and insights they have heard directly from community members.

E.g.

Training community members on how to engage in advocacy and navigate the policy change process. This can include training community members on how to contact elected officials and engage them, how to participate in civic spaces such as town halls, and engage in a hearing process for a bill.

Advocacy that builds power

With their built-in information loops, hybrid organizations are able to employ specific approaches to their systems and policy change work that would not typically be possible in another type of organization. Hybrid organizations:



Ensure community members are included in systems and policy change spaces.

Historically, many policy and decisionmaking spaces have been reserved for a small subset of educated, well-resourced, and White groups. Even now, there are limitations on who can access these spaces if only due to constraints on resources and time. Facilitating participation in advocacy and access to these spaces is key to reclaiming power for the people experiencing the issues that policies seek to address.



Help community members engage with other organizations and issues.

No single organization can address every issue that communities face, and a lot of systems and policy change depends on long-term work. By engaging community members in their own systems change and policy work, hybrid organizations are also preparing them to engage on other policy issues with other organizations for the long haul.



Translate community experience of policy implementation.

In addition to letting community members speak for themselves in policy spaces, hybrid organizations help share about community member experiences with decisionmakers and partners understand community members' experiences with policies—whether they are effective at achieving their goals or failing to reach those they are trying to serve.

LEARN MORE

To learn more about service–advocacy hybrid organizations and the work this model is based on, please visit [our project website](#).

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About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

RWJF is a leading national philanthropy dedicated to taking bold leaps to transform health in our lifetime. To get there, we must work to dismantle structural racism and other barriers to health. Through funding, convening, advocacy, and evidence–building, we work side–by–side with communities, practitioners, and institutions to achieve health equity faster and pave the way, together, to a future where health is no longer a privilege, but a right.

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About Innovation Network

Innovation Network is a 501(c)(3) consulting firm that provides research, evaluation, and learning support to organizations working for equitable social change.

For more information, please visit www.innonet.org.

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