

Kayse Jama: Privilege and Power

At the Center for Intercultural Organizing (CIO), popular education works with immigrant and refugee community leaders because it is something they can relate to, based on cultural and historical background. It's a style that we know as indigenous cultures, for example, myself, as a Somali refugee. It's based on people sharing knowledge and having open space to solve and create space where people work together. So it's part of our culture, even though we may not have the same words for it.

Everyone brings something to the table, and everyone has a certain expertise, life experience, training, historical technique, or information to share. For me, a key principle is that we are all equally responsible to learn from one another.

Another key aspect of popular education lies in decentralizing information and knowledge. You can take it to the people—into their neighborhoods, instead of assuming or insisting that they come to the organization.

Space for Immigrant Community Leaders

For the first year and a half, we held public forums two times a month where local community members came, shared, and discussed their issues. We wanted the center to be grounded in the immigrant and refugee community, to be led by immigrants and refugees. At the same time, we opened the gates for everyone. Quickly, we found that we were over-run by white allies—more and more of them were coming, and less and less refugees and immigrants. Then we realized we had a big problem on our hands. So we spent three months restructuring as a membership organization and defining our constituencies: members, supporting members, and allies.

In our leadership development work, the work with immigrant and refugee community leaders is done in parallel with the work with white allies. To eliminate racism, we have to engage folks on race issues. The white and Anglo community needs to be challenged to eliminate and understand racism itself.

In the popular education trainings, we examine who has the power, how it is created, who makes the decisions, who is disadvantaged. We help people to understand power. For example, if you are first generation, you are a “constituent” member; if you are second generation born in the United States, then you are an ally. When someone joins, they learn the roles. It's not perfect, but it is part of the process of learning.

We define the popular education style at the beginning of the process. We help folks move away from the “I thought you guys are experts” mode. As soon as I define it, people love it and feel impressed and feel free. It creates a level of trust and relationship with everyone.

“You can't just learn and walk away.”

Generally, after students graduate, we ask them to an action. You can't just learn and walk away. We ask them to do a small project to practice and have an impact in the community. Eventually, in the last two years, we see multiethnic immigrant and refugee groups creating strategic campaigns to impact community issues and work cooperatively.

At CIO, we are not talking about black and brown, we are talking about Somalis and Ethiopians, Congolese and Liberian, Korean, Palestinian, and Afghani community leaders working with Latino leaders, African American leaders, and progressive white folks. And we are working on redefining leadership to honor the contributions of people who are leaders in the community but not recognized as formal leaders. To open the space for their leadership, we have worked with the progressive white allies to step back and support the work as appropriate, and also to challenge the version of leadership that is exercised by gatekeepers in the refugee and immigrant community. That's our vision of new refugee and immigrant community leadership for Portland: vibrant, diverse by race, origin, age, and a leadership that opens space for future generations of leaders. ■

Kayse Jama is the interim executive director of the Center for Intercultural Organizing (CIO), based in Portland, Oregon. Previously, he was a New Voices Fellow at the Western States Center, working as a trainer/organizer. Born into a nomad family in Somalia, Kayse left when the civil war erupted, and finally found sanctuary in Portland. An original founder of the Center for Intercultural Organizing, Kayse is also an adjunct instructor for University Studies at Portland State University.

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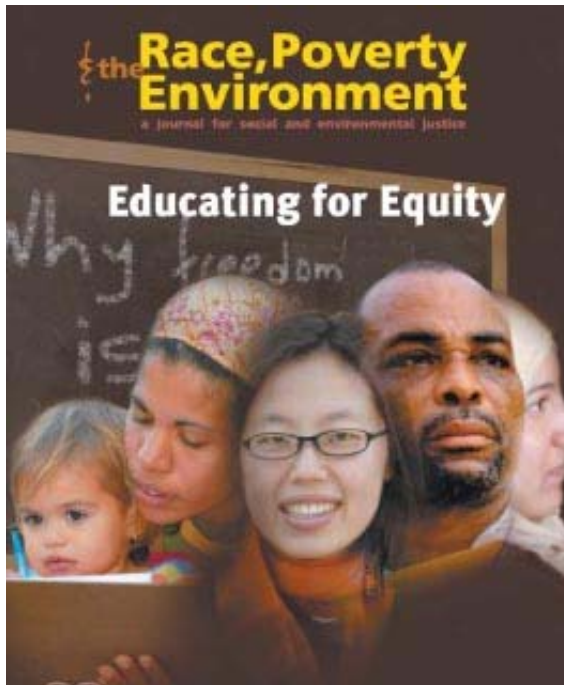
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