

PLACE, POWER & POSSIBILITY:
A Climate + Migrant Justice Guide Series

Governance

at the

Climate-Migration Nexus



TABLE OF CONTENTS

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This guide series is co-published with The Solutions Project and Just Solutions.

The following organizations also informed the series:

- APEN
- PODER
- WeCount!
- Catalyst Miami
- PUSH Buffalo
- Justice for Migrant Families

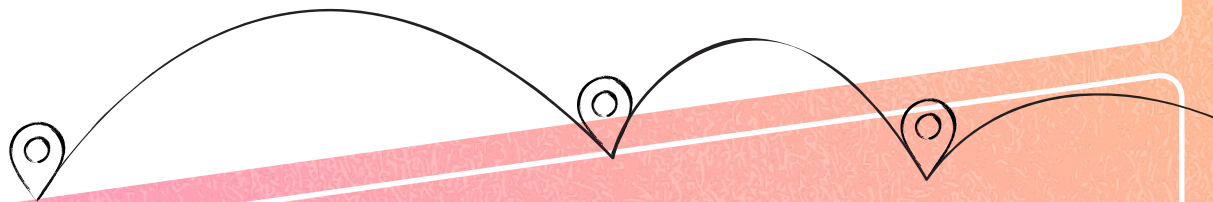
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4	OVERVIEW
6	INTRODUCTION AND CORE PRINCIPALS
10	KEY CONCEPTS IN COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE
14	ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES THAT SHIFT POWER
17	HOW DECISIONS GET MADE
21	WHAT GOVERNANCE REQUIRES TO SUCCEED

23	CORE PRACTICES FOR PLACE-BASED COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE
26	PRACTICAL MODELS FOR SHIFTING POWER
31	GOVERNANCE AS PRACTICE, VISION, AND JOY
33	GOVERNANCE AT THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE AND MIGRATION
34	CLOSING REFLECTIONS
35	TOOLS, TIPS, AND TEMPLATES FOR PRACTICE

OVERVIEW

Community governance refers to decision-making structures that give residents and frontline communities meaningful power over the issues that shape their lives.



This guide is designed to support community-based leaders, organizers, policymakers, and frontline organizations by offering frameworks, strategies, and practical tools for implementing and strengthening participatory governance.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is a living resource, not a linear manual. It is designed to meet you where you are, whether you are just beginning to build community governance structures, deepening existing practices, or looking for language and models to bring to policymakers and funders. There is no single right place to start. Use what's useful. Leave what isn't. Come back to it as your work evolves.

If You Are a Community Organizer or Grassroots Leader

Start with *Key Concepts in Community Governance* to ground yourself in shared language, then move to *Core Practices for Place-Based Community Governance* to see how organizations like yours are putting these ideas to work. The decision-making tools in *How Decisions Get Made* are immediately practical and can be adapted for your next meeting or campaign. The tensions listed there are worth reading with your team, they name the hard parts honestly and can open productive conversations about how your organization navigates them.

If You are a Policymaker or Policy Advocate

Start with the Introduction, then turn to *What Governance Requires to Succeed* for concrete policy and funding recommendations. The models in *Practical Models for Shifting Power*, community land trusts, participatory budgeting, proportional representation are documented with real-world examples you can cite and adapt.

Using This Guide With Your Team

Some sections work well as shared reading before a planning meeting, particularly *How Decisions Get Made* on decision-making tensions and *Governance as Practice, Vision, and Joy* on the long view. The tools and templates at the end are meant to be picked up and adapted directly for your context.

When something feels abstract, look for the quotes and field examples.

They are the heart of this document, and often say more than any definition can.

And when the work feels heavy, return to *Governance as Practice, Vision, and Joy*.

It's a reminder of why any of this is worth doing.

OVERVIEW

This guide is part of The Solutions Project's Place, Power & Possibility: A Climate + Migrant Justice Guide Series

These guides advance integrated strategies across community governance, policy advocacy, and narrative change.

Together, the series reflects a comprehensive approach to strengthening community power and advancing equitable climate and migrant justice solutions.



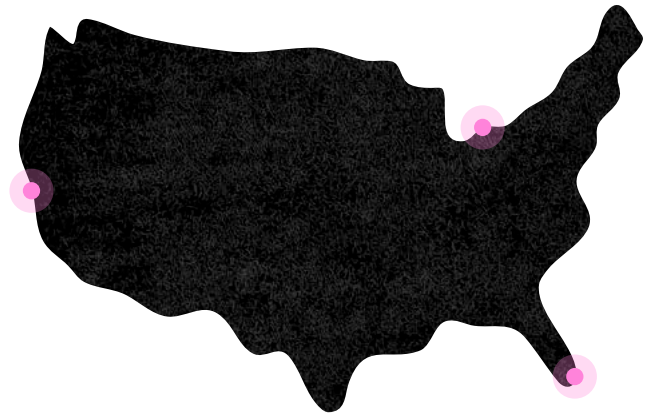
This Community Governance Guide curates governance insights, tools, and practical steps for neighbors to have more agency in place-based policy decisions. The guide highlights ways of working and models that bring community members together—across neighborhoods, cities, and regions—to coordinate, collaborate, and implement actions that grow community power and self-determination.

In the context of overlapping climate, political, and economic crises, this adaptive approach is essential to reducing harm while building long-term resilience. As such, its lessons can apply to community development projects, disaster resilience, recovery efforts, migration, displacement, and overall movement building.

Grounded in the lived experience of grassroots organizations participating in The Solutions Project's Climate + Migrant Justice cohort, this guide draws from leadership in Buffalo, NY; Miami, FL; and the San Francisco Bay Area, CA—U.S. regions navigating distinct but interconnected climate and migration dynamics. Whether you're a practitioner, policymaker, or funder, this guide is intended to support reflection, implementation, and long-term power-building strategies rooted in community-determined decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

POWER, PLACE, AND PURPOSE



Climate change and migration cannot be addressed through policy fixes or infrastructure alone—they require a fundamental shift in who holds decision-making power over the systems shaping community futures.

Across Buffalo, Miami, and the San Francisco Bay Area, frontline organizations are demonstrating that durable climate resilience depends on decision-making (“governance”) structures that center residents, workers, and immigrant communities. Traditional top-down models are proving insufficient in a world defined by rapid environmental shifts and systemic inequity. These organizations’ work shows how governance can and must move beyond symbolic participation toward collective decision-making and shared accountability in order to deliver meaningful and equitable outcomes.

Developed as part of The Solutions Project’s Climate + Migrant Justice initiative—with support from The Democracy Fund and Unbound Philanthropy and in collaboration with Just Solutions Collective. This guide complements companion documents focused on policy advocacy and narrative strategy. Together, the series recognizes that governance, policy, and narrative are interconnected pillars of climate and migrant justice.

Additionally, this guide surfaces a trans-local perspective in grassroots governance strategies, a way of seeing and acting that connects rooted local struggles to broader multi-regional and national movements. While every community is unique, they face shared systemic challenges. A trans-local perspective recognizes these shared conditions and fosters the exchange of strategies, solidarity, and learning across geographic boundaries.

Ultimately, this guide offers a roadmap for community governance grounded in equity, collective power, and long-term resilience. Ensuring that those most impacted by climate change and displacement have meaningful authority over the systems shaping their futures.

This guide reflects direct input from grassroots partners, gathered through focus groups and shared learning spaces:

[APEN](#)

Oakland, CA

[PODER](#)

San Francisco, CA

[WeCount!](#)

Miami, FL

[Catalyst Miami](#)

Miami, FL

[PUSH Buffalo](#)

Buffalo, NY

[Justice for Migrant Families](#)

Buffalo, NY

The work of these organizations advances governance, resilience, and movement-building across their respective regions.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

This approach is rooted in the lived experience of practitioners who view governance not as an academic exercise, but as a routine practice of justice, accountability, and self-determination.

The Shared Tenets of Community Governance Elevated by The Partners in This Cohort Include:



COMMUNITY AS RELATIONSHIP

Community is defined not just by geography, but by mutual support. Whether PUSH Buffalo’s focus on collective problem-solving or PODER’s “everyone eats” ethos, governance must center the most marginalized; for example, low-income residents, immigrants, and workers in precarious industries.



DESIGNING AND GOVERNING WITH COMMUNITY

The practice of designing, producing, and governing with community—not just on behalf of it. These principles of co-design are not add-ons, but are foundational to any effort that aims to be truly place-based and community rooted. When you design *on behalf of* a community, you are essentially guessing at their lived experience through the lens of your own expertise. When you design and govern *with* them, you are acknowledging that the community members are the primary experts on their own lives.



TRUST AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Place-based work is only as strong as the trust that supports it. Community governance requires intentional relationship-building and proactive steps to enable full participation. When people see their fingerprints on the design and their voices reflected in governance structures, they develop a sense of ownership and agency. Practices such as providing childcare, language access, stipends, and culturally competent engagement help ensure that participation is inclusive rather than extractive.



VALUING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Those closest to the problem hold the best solutions. Effective governance embeds Indigenous and intergenerational wisdom into ecological stewardship and urban design.

STRATEGIES

SHIFTING THE ARCHITECTURE OF POWER

The strategies detailed in this guide reflect a spectrum of community governance practices aligned to the tenets above. They represent a shift from being community-informed to being community-owned by inverting traditional hierarchies.

This Shift is Being Led by Organizations Through:



STRUCTURAL REIMAGINING

Radically tilting traditional decision-making models. Examples include WeCount!, where the board is 100% member-led with proportional representation for workers, and Catalyst Miami, which transitioned to a board split 50/50 between program participants and institutional partners.



ACTION TEAMS

Creating opportunities where community members don't just participate – they do the work and lead the work. This includes creating “sweat equity pathways,” where community members contribute sustained time, labor, and leadership to organizing efforts—such as leading campaign strategy, stewarding community land projects, or managing local initiatives—and, in doing so, move into formal governance and decision-making roles. One example is APEN's regional teams, who guide state budget campaigns.



ALTERNATIVE OWNERSHIP

Taking things people truly need—like homes and energy—out of the hands of investors who profit from them, and putting them under community control so they stay affordable. Vehicles for this include Community Landbanks, Community Land Trusts or worker-driven cooperatives to ensure permanent affordability.

These structural shifts reflect a deeper understanding shared across the cohort:

**Governance is not a fixed model or institutional design.
It is an evolving practice shaped through
relationships, experimentation, and community leadership.**

GOVERNANCE AS A LIVING PRACTICE

True governance is often messy. It involves navigating the tensions between democracy and speed, or services and organizing.

This guide does not offer a rigid template; instead, it outlines a set of flexible practices that communities can adapt to support long-term power-building.

Ultimately, community governance is about creating a “democracy that feels like

home.” It is a commitment rooted in Indigenous knowledge to thinking seven generations back and seven generations forward, ensuring that as we build resilient infrastructure, we are also building the joy, grace, and collective agency necessary to sustain it.



KEY CONCEPTS IN COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

COMMUNITY

Community is defined as relationships of mutual support rather than geography or demographics alone. PODER's principle that "everyone eats" captures the ethos of each one teach one, co-leadership distributed non-hierarchically amongst the organization's base. This model could include formal or informal membership, as well as decision making structures that center the most marginalized. PUSH Buffalo emphasizes collective problem-solving around shared interests. Justice for Migrant Families highlights displacement as a defining experience for many community members, requiring governance structures that can adapt as people move between cities, workplaces, and housing

situations. In practice, this means building organizing spaces where participants can shift between affinity groups, stay connected even when they relocate, and continue contributing to collective decision-making.

Across all six organizations in this cohort, there is a shared prioritization of frontline communities: low- and moderate-income (LMI) residents, representing roughly 80% of the community base, Black, Asian and Latinx immigrants, predominantly women, and workers in low-wage and unstable employment.. Many organizations describe themselves as "connectors and conveners" (Catalyst Miami), bridging grassroots power with entities like government, universities, and broader coalitions.



COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

A participatory framework in which local communities hold meaningful decision-making power over the issues that directly impact them. This approach centers frontline leadership, uplifts local knowledge, and moves away from extractive, top-down systems toward practices rooted in justice, accountability, and self-determination. Community governance is how communities shape, manage, and sustain solutions on their own terms – grounded in equity and collective agency.

COLLECTIVE POWER

Collective power is the capacity of communities to shape, influence, and transform decision-making processes across institutions, sectors, and systems. It reflects the outcome of sustained community governance—moving from symbolic participation to authentic power-sharing and structural change.

Organizations, such as the ones profiled in this guide, are building collective power by rooting decision-making in community priorities, embracing shared leadership models, and advancing principles such as community-controlled resources and collective ownership of solutions. In this guide, we also define this work as ‘power-building’.

“
People don’t want to be symbolic decision makers.”





“
**We
know
what
we
need,
where
we live.**

– PUSH Buffalo

VALUING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Social ecology advocates for a reconstructive approach that fosters a non-exploitative relationship between humanity and the natural world. Local communities possess unique and essential knowledge of their own social ecological systems and must embed and leverage it to achieve effective and sustainable outcomes. Indigenous knowledge passed down through oral traditions, stories, songs, and intergenerational teachings is especially central to conveying cultural values and ecological stewardship.

TRUST

This work is labor intensive and essential. Trust takes years to build and can be broken in minutes. Governance requires shared power, dynamic communication, and engagement that meets people where they are. Effective practices include multi-channel communication (digital and in-person), cultural competence, language access, and material support for community leaders such as stipends, food, childcare, and interpretation. These are baseline conditions for inclusive decision-making.

COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE PRACTICES

The following practices are models of governance that illustrate the many dimensions of how community governance is operationalized, and represented across the cohort of organizations that participated in this project:

Mutual Aid

Focusing on a voluntary, reciprocal exchange of resources and services for community support, built on solidarity rather than charity. It involves horizontal, grassroots organizing where people meet each other's needs, such as food, supplies, transportation, and care. It shifts the focus from delivering services to cultivating interdependence.

Community-Owned

Tangible assets are held and governed by community members. For example, through worker cooperatives, community land trusts, or real estate cooperatives.

Community-Controlled

Spaces or resources are shaped by community priorities and decision-making processes, even when legal ownership may sit elsewhere. Examples include public parks, resilience hubs, or repurposed vacant lots managed through community leadership.

Community-Determined

Community members shape and govern the systems that guide

their own development; for example, through worker-driven models, community-identified development projects, or youth-led design processes such as those used in the development of resilience hubs like the RYSE Climate & Liberation Center in Richmond, California.

Community-Accountable

Ensuring responsiveness to the community base through feedback integration, accountability mechanisms for elected officials, and refusing what organizers often call “dirty money”—funding or partnerships tied to actors whose practices harm frontline communities or conflict with community values.

Community-Designed

A participatory approach that centers residents as co-creators in the development of policies, programs, and spaces—for example, co-designing affordable housing that includes clinics and childcare, using design charrettes to shape neighborhood plans, or establishing advisory boards with real decision-making power.



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES THAT SHIFT POWER

With shared values established, we now turn to how governance takes shape structurally within organizations.

INVERTING TRADITIONAL HIERARCHIES

The following examples illustrate how cohort organizations are reimagining organizational governance through Board composition, leadership pathways, and communication systems that invert traditional hierarchies and make power more relational, accountable, and community-centered.

Inverting traditional hierarchies means shifting power from the top (executives, board members, or experts) to the base (front-line workers, community members, and those with lived experience). In this model, those most impacted by a decision become the primary architects of that decision, while the traditional leaders pivot into a role of support and resource facilitation. For example:

PUSH Buffalo's board bylaws require that 80% of members identify as low-income and come from the communities the organization serves, with 75% residing in the organization's core organizing neighborhood.

WeCount! operates with a 100% member-led Board and uses proportional representation; for example, if agriculture workers make up 30% of the membership, they hold 30% of board seats. This ensures that workers govern based on lived experience.

Catalyst Miami is transitioning from a traditional board model that was historically composed of bankers and funders to one that reflects a 50/50 split between program participants and institutional partners. This shift demonstrates how established organizations can move toward deeper community control.



ACTION TEAMS AS GOVERNANCE PATHWAYS

Several organizations utilize action teams as participatory governance structures to engage communities.

These teams require sweat equity—that is, meaningful and sustained involvement in concrete projects such as farm work, bike repair, or campaign planning—prior to assuming decision-making roles. Through this process, community members move from participation into leadership, gaining the experience and trust needed to shape organizational strategy and governance decisions.

PODER's action teams include *Pueblote* (housing), *Urban Campesine/x* (urban farming), and *Bicis El Pueblo* (bike access). For example, the teams at Hummingbird Farm, led by PODER and their Urban Campesine/x collective, direct campaigns by leveraging community organizing to reclaim underutilized public land for environmental and economic justice. Program design is shaped through a bottom-up approach that prioritizes intergenerational leadership, cultural heritage, and the specific needs of immigrant families in San Francisco's Excelsior district. PODER treats its farm as a revolutionary commons where solidarity-based economic models and collective decision-making take center stage. This governance practice is deeply rooted in Traditional Ecological Knowledge, integrating ancestral wisdom

with regenerative agricultural techniques to build climate resiliency and community well-being.

APEN supports multiple regional action teams through which community members guide strategy, influence decisions, and take collective action. For example, the Community Resilience Action Team steers resilience hub development, attends city council meetings, and engages in state budget campaigns at the Capitol in Sacramento.

PUSH Buffalo's Climate Justice and Housing Justice campaign committees function as action teams where directly impacted members and residents come together each month to learn, strategize, and plan key campaign actions and activities together as a group.





DECENTRALIZED COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

Decentralized Communications Networks are systems where information exchange and decision-making power are distributed across a wide array of participants rather than being filtered through a single, central authority or hub.

In the context of community work and land-based governance, these networks function as the “nervous system” for collective action.

One example of such a system in action is how Justice for Migrant Families uses a decentralized, multilingual communications structure grounded in overlapping affinity circles organized by language and culture. Trusted staff and volunteers serve as connectors across these circles, ensuring coordination with enforcing hierarchy. This model accommodates varied work schedules and includes

detained community members in decision-making whenever possible. Weekly staff meetings rotate facilitation duties, and use collective tools to assess whether decisions are high or low stakes, allowing for broader input at appropriate levels.

For example, when urgent decisions or information must be shared across the network, trusted connectors relay updates between language and affinity circles, ensuring that members working different schedules or navigating immigration constraints can still participate in collective decision-making.

HOW DECISIONS GET MADE

Community governance is not just about who is at the table; it's about how decisions are made and whose voices carry weight.

DECISION-MAKING TOOLS IN PRACTICE

The following tools and tensions illustrate what democratic decision-making looks like in practice, drawn from the cohort organizations, including both intentional strategies and the hard choices that come with real-time organizing.

FIST TO FIVE VOTING

Fist to Five Voting is a visual method to gauge agreement, used by PUSH, PODER, and APEN. It is a technique for quickly getting feedback or gauging consensus during a meeting. The leader makes a statement, then asks everyone to show their level of agreement with the statement by holding up a number of fingers, from 5 for wild enthusiasm (jazz hands) down to a clenched fist for vehement opposition.

VALUES FILTERS

Applying organizational principles to decision-making. For example, PUSH created a Community Advisory Board to guide contractor selection, project naming, community benefit goals, and development of the governance structure for their Community Solar Project. The Value filters (usually no more than 5-7 values) are a series of criteria that the community sets. When selecting contractors, project goals, etc., the filters whittle down the pool of finalists leading to decision points that meet the community's requirements.

SURVEY → RANKING → PRIORITIZATION → PIPELINES

WeCount! surveyed 323 nursery workers, identified 25 workplace rights, and then had workers rank them to determine priorities for collective action. Catalyst Miami uses a similar process.

KEY TENSIONS IN PRACTICE

Practicing community governance is not easy. No matter how good the tools, structures and the people practicing them, there will always be tensions or competing demands when doing this work. Sometimes the tensions can be solved but oftentimes all you can do is manage them.

Key Tensions Surfaced by The Grassroots Partners:

Democracy
vs.
Speed

Fast-moving campaigns often require rapid decisions, while genuine democratic processes—particularly those rooted in Indigenous practices—require time for dialogue, relationship-building, and consensus. Many organizations navigate this by establishing community agreements that distinguish between high and low stakes decisions and clarify who makes them.

Services
vs.
Organizing

When government institutions fail to meet basic community needs, grassroots organizations often step in to fill gaps in service delivery. While necessary, this can strain organizational capacity and pull energy away from long-term organizing and power-building.

Representation
vs.
Presence

Speaking on behalf of community members is not the same as ensuring their direct participation in decision-making spaces. While representation may sometimes be necessary, organizations strive to create conditions where community members can be present and exercise power themselves.

Symbolic
vs.
Real Power

When outcomes are predetermined, consultation becomes performative. Organizations strive to create meaningful participation by defining decision-making parameters with openness to community input.

Exclusion from
Formal Voting
Systems

Several cohort organizations organize with members excluded from formal democratic processes. Proposed strategies include:

- Ensuring community representatives in decision-making spaces where policies are debated or finalized, even when community members themselves are excluded from formal voting systems
- Encouraging eligible voters to act in alignment with the interests of those who cannot vote, including in their own household
- Holding elected officials and non-voters accountable to all residents
- Creating other community voting and decision-making processes

**Perfection
vs.
Progress**

As one cohort member stated, “*execution is where good ideas go to die.*” Even well-designed plans can stall under capacity constraints. Organizations balance ambition with practical implementation by effectively communicating realistic expectations with their community.

**Documentation
vs.
Doing**

Capturing history, including decisions made and lessons learned is critical, yet often deprioritized when community needs are urgent. Even low-tech, community-rooted documentation approaches require labor and intention to execute.

**Practiced Resilience
vs.
Institutional
Crisis Response**

Community organizations often balance two parallel responsibilities: building long-term resilience through practices such as mutual aid and community land stewardship, while also pushing governments and institutions to fulfill their responsibilities during crises. Whether responding to immigration enforcement, climate disasters, or state violence, organizations must prepare communities to withstand immediate threats while continuing to build durable systems of care and protection.

**Time Scale Crisis
vs.
Long Arc**

Groups must respond to immediate crises while sustaining long-term work. This includes integrating cycles of rest and joy for members and staff as necessary counterbalance to urgency culture.

**External Stakeholder
Process vs.
Implementation
Realities**

Institutions like state legislatures often move quickly through decision-making, while the implementation of those decisions is generally prolonged. Community groups must navigate both speeds simultaneously.

**Traditional Organizing
vs.
Innovation**

Face-to-face organizing remains vital, but current realities in many communities (increased call screening, changing communication habits, and the presence of immigration enforcement) require organizations to continually adapt outreach and engagement strategies.

**Political Threats
vs.
Shrinking Resources**

At a time of escalating threats, resources are increasingly scarce. Philanthropy, public funding, and donor support are also under pressure while entities often acting against frontline community interests—a such as big tech and fossil fuel interests—remain well resourced.

WHAT GOVERNANCE REQUIRES TO SUCCEED

POLICY AND REGULATORY CHANGES

While much of this guide focuses on internal practices, community governance doesn't happen in a vacuum.

It requires external conditions that support it—from public policy to flexible funding. This section names the broader shifts that organizations say are necessary to make community governance viable, scalable, and sustainable.

Establish and enforce community benefit agreements

that reflect local priorities and lived experience. A community benefit agreement (CBA) is a legally binding contract between community groups and a developer that ensures a development project provides specific, negotiated benefits to the local neighborhood. These benefits can include affordable housing, green space, or local hiring. Strong CBAs also include clear enforcement provisions so that community commitments remain binding if developers fail to meet agreed-upon benefits.

Create long-term institutional commitments

to land stewardship and community-based governance. Community Land Trusts (CLTs), for example, remove land from speculative markets through long-term ground leases—often lasting 99 years—ensuring that affordability and local oversight endure across generations. Similar approaches

can be seen in Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), where stewardship is grounded in Indigenous leadership and governance systems that treat ecosystems as living relationships rather than extractable resources. When paired with long-term financing strategies such as Project Finance for Permanence (PFP), these models can help sustain stewardship and community governance across generations and anchor for collective care.

Implement targeted hiring mandates, participatory budgeting, and language access policies at county and state levels.

Advance utility reform that enables community-scale renewable energy and meaningful energy affordability.

Promote transparent government spending and democratic structures for community control over public resources.

INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY INNOVATION

Resource communities to build alternative governance models, especially in places where no precedent exists.

Support intentional experimentation and resourcing to fail forward, recognizing that transformation requires risk.

Prioritize funding for community-led infrastructure and program design, with flexible timelines and deliverables that honor the iterative nature of grassroots innovation.

FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE SUPPORT

Invest in models of community ownership, such as co-ops and land trusts, over extractive capital systems.

Provide tax incentives for cooperatives and establish revenue-sharing structures that center community wealth. Increase access to land acquisition for affordable housing.

Make data visualization tools available in multiple languages to support inclusive participation.

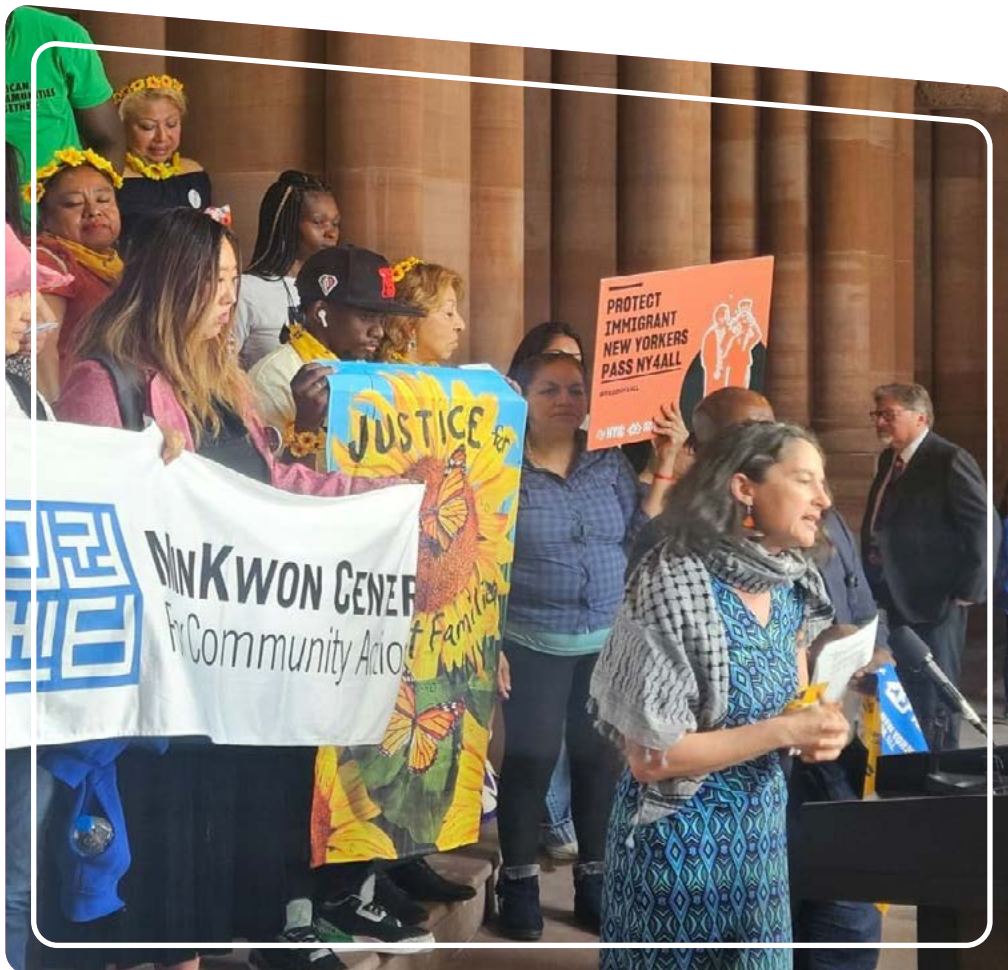
INTERNAL CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Ensure staff and member leaders have training in facilitation, decision-making frameworks, and conflict resolution to uphold democratic values in practice.

Provide resources for language interpretation, childcare, and stipends that recognize the labor of community leadership.

Establish multiple touchpoints in relationships with funders, institutions, and stakeholders to prevent single points of failure. A rupture with one individual should not lead to the collapse of entire organizational relationships.

Integrate cycles of rest and ease into organizational workplans. Sustained democratic practice requires breath, time to reflect, reset, and reimagine. We must make room for joy and collective care alongside struggle and strategy.



CORE PRACTICES FOR PLACE-BASED COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

While earlier sections describe the principles and structures of community governance, this section focuses on the core practices that make it possible in day-to-day organizing and decision-making.

Across the cohort organizations, several shared methods consistently appear as the operational foundation of place-based governance.

These practices—ranging from popular education to co-design and co-production—serve as the building blocks that allow communities to move from participation to real decision-making power.

Based on the practices of our cohort members, the following dimensions emerge as core practices that support effective place-based governance:

POPULAR EDUCATION

Popular education is a philosophy and methodology of teaching focused on social change, empowerment, and critical consciousness, often described as education for the people. Rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, it breaks down hierarchical, teacher-student roles, instead using horizontal, participatory methods that value the learner's own experiences to challenge inequality and oppression. Everyone is both a teacher and a learner. Governance models are grounded in popular education principles because the work is always evolving to meet the needs of the people. Building across generations and racial identities, constantly learning and reimagining together.

CO-GOVERNANCE

A model of shared leadership and decision-making where institutional power is shifted from a centralized authority to a collaborative partnership between diverse stakeholders. It moves beyond simple consultation toward a revolutionary space where communities and technical experts work as equals to manage resources, shape policies, and steward practices. Those most impacted are centered in organizing, policy development, advocacy, and community development. It is fundamentally understood that those closest to the problem hold the best solutions. Governance structures integrate popular education principles to ensure the process remains iterative, flexible, and people-driven.

CO-DESIGN

Is a highly participatory approach to creative problem-solving that treats end-users and stakeholders as equal partners and experts in the design process. It is rooted in the belief that those who will be most affected by a project, policy, or space should be the ones to lead its development. Co-design recognizes that community members are the experts in their own lives, and solutions. The role of experts is to work alongside them, offering technical expertise and resources to execute their vision.

This ensures those most affected by outcomes, the ultimate stakeholders and end-users, are empowered to drive the design of collective goals and positioned as the primary decision-makers from the start.

CO-PRODUCTION

Is a collaborative framework where service providers and community members work together as equal partners to design, deliver, and evaluate projects or services. Co-production moves beyond traditional service delivery by recognizing that the people most impacted by a system possess the vital knowledge and agency needed to make that system effective. Co-production models work hand-in-hand with community members to embed capacity and skill building directly into grassroots neighborhoods.

These practices are not optional. They are foundational. Place-based work cannot succeed without meaningful participation from directly impacted people across all phases of design, production, and governance.

Co-Production Models:

- Integrate workforce development into organizing strategies
- Ensure shared ownership over processes and infrastructure
- Support long-term sustainability and self-determination

Co-Created Outcome Examples:

Programs and Policy Campaigns

Spatial Design and Urban Design

Restorative Practices

Workforce Development



PRACTICED EXAMPLES

DESIGNING AND GOVERNING WITH COMMUNITY FROM THE FIELD

APEN

Richmond youth determined what got built and what gets powered during emergencies at the RYSE Climate & Liberation community center and resilience hub. They prioritized art spaces and music rooms as being as essential as phone charging stations, emphasizing that “in an emergency, people need to decompress, express themselves, and connect with each other”. They interviewed the solar developer to ensure they were values-aligned, and supported state advocacy campaigns to help other communities get the resources needed to build resilience hubs.

PODER

Over a 17–20 year campaign, community members fought for and won 100% affordable housing, a community park, and a clinic. Members also took educational tours to the Central Valley to understand other communities’ struggles and returned as stronger advocates.

Catalyst Miami

Community members met directly with Republican lawmakers to revise harmful medical debt legislation. Sustained dialogue led to real policy shifts, and the community is now developing proactive bills based on those relationships.

WeCount!

Their worker-driven social responsibility model, inspired by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), ensures that lived experience experts define workplace conditions.

PUSH Buffalo

After four years of deep engagement with more than 2,000 stakeholders, PUSH reimaged an 80,000 sq. ft. abandoned school building, purchased from the city, into a vibrant, mixed-use community hub.

Features Include:

- 30 affordable senior housing units
(designed with elders)
- A pocket park
(designed with children)
- The first low-income community solar project in NYS
- A green campus built by residents trained and employed through PUSH’s worker-centered Community Hiring Hall workforce program

“Locked arm in arm”

COHORT MEMBER REACTIONS

HOW THE PRACTICES IN ACTION LOOK AND FEEL LIKE

“Movement and rushing water”

“A warm hug”

“Home”

PRACTICAL MODELS FOR SHIFTING POWER

With these governance practices in place, communities also develop structural mechanisms that institutionalize community power.

The following models—from land trusts to participatory budgeting—show how governance moves beyond organizing practice into durable systems that shape land, housing, and public decision-making. These are not theoretical models. They are blueprints grounded in decades of organizing, experimentation, and



CORE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP OF RESOURCES

Self-Determination

Communities exercise meaningful decision-making power over the development and use of resources, a critical reversal for those historically deprived of such control.

Common Good

Assets are stewarded for long-term collective benefit, preventing speculation and displacement while aligning with shared values such as trust, justice and cooperation.

Democratic Governance

Decision-making power is distributed through inclusive, participatory processes that involve residents, local, and community representatives.

Community Ownership of Resources: Examples

The goal of community ownership is to decouple essential resources such as land and housing from the volatile speculative market and place them under permanent community control. This ensures lasting affordability and self-determination.

Community Land Trusts (CLTs)

MECHANISM:

A non-profit organization acquires and holds land permanently. Residents purchase homes at an affordable price, and resale price is governed by a long-term ground lease (often 99 years). This structure provides homeownership opportunities while preserving affordability for every future buyer.

Example	Location	Key Impact
Champlain Housing Trust (CHT)	Burlington, VT	One of the largest CLTs in the country. Formed with municipal support, it now stewards thousands of permanently affordable ownership and rental units.
Dudley Neighbors Inc. (DNI)	Boston, MA	Established by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. The city granted DNI limited eminent domain authority over vacant land. This unique power allowed the organization to acquire necessary parcels to build permanently affordable housing and community facilities, effectively battling displacement and blight.
New Communities, Inc.	Southwest, GA	Founded in 1969 by civil rights organizers. Widely considered the first modern CLT in the United States, it pioneered the model to combine collective land ownership with individual homes for self sufficiency and economic empowerment.

Tenant and Community Opportunity to Purchase Acts (TOPA/COPA)

MECHANISM:

Legal frameworks that give tenants or designated community organizations the right of first refusal when a property is being sold, offering a proactive tool to prevent displacement.

Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA)	Washington, D.C.	Enacted over 40 years ago, D.C.'s TOPA is the most comprehensive example of this type of framework. It has been used to preserve or create over 16,000 affordable units (2006-2020) by allowing tenants to purchase their building as a co-op or assign their rights to an affordable housing developer.
Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (COPA)	San Francisco, CA	COPA grants qualified community organizations the first right to purchase multi-unit residential buildings to convert them into permanently affordable housing.
Northwest Side Preservation Ordinance (Pilot)	Chicago, IL	This pilot program, approved in 2024, operates as a TOPA for a specific district. It allows renters to organize and purchase their apartment building when it is sold, serving as a direct anti-displacement measure.

**PUSH Buffalo established a CDC development arm in 2009, the Buffalo Neighborhood Stabilization Company (BNSC), with its own landbank. This allowed the organization to buy up vacant land and vacant properties to turn them into green affordable housing, commercial spaces, urban farms and pollinator gardens. They successfully built a concentration of affordability in a 40-square block area that stopped mass displacement in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. PUSH's current housing project, Climate and Community Homes, is transforming six 2-family houses on Buffalo's West Side into all-electric, affordable homes for first-time homebuyers. Deed restrictions on the land will ensure the properties remain permanently affordable.*

Powerful Models for Electoral Governance

These models redistribute political power away from concentrated interests and toward community members—enhancing transparency, accountability, and participation in decision-making.

Participatory Budgeting (PB)

MECHANISM:

Residents directly decide how to spend a portion of a public budget (often capital funds for infrastructure).

Example	Location	Key Impact
The People's Money (PBNYC)	New York, NY	One of the largest-scale PB programs in the U.S. The City Council allocates millions in discretionary funding annually (e.g., \$1 million per district) for residents to brainstorm and vote on specific projects for schools, parks, and libraries.
Durham, North Carolina	Durham, NC	The city successfully engaged a high volume of residents, with participation that matched the city's racial composition, demonstrating the model's capacity to bring new and diverse voices into civic processes.
Phoenix Union High School District	Phoenix, AZ	Launched the first high school district PB process in the nation, empowering students, staff, and parents to allocate a portion of the School Safety Officer budget to non-police community safety and wellness initiatives.

Proportional Representation (PR) Systems

MECHANISM:

Electoral systems like Single Transferable Vote (STV) ensure that a group's share of elected seats is roughly proportional to its share of the vote, preventing a simple majority from dominating governance.

Proportional RCV (STV)	Cambridge, MA	Used since 1941 to elect the City Council and School Committee. It ensures that minority political factions, neighborhood interests, and marginalized groups win seats in proportion to their voting strength, fostering a more diverse and representative government.
Proportional RCV	Portland, OR	Adopted in 2022 and scheduled for first use in 2024 for City Council elections. This move is part of a charter reform designed to increase representation and make the council more accountable to neighborhood and minority interests.
Proportional RCV	Eastpointe, MI	Used as a successful voting rights remedy to address historical underrepresentation of the African American community on the City Council, leading to better proportional representation.

By normalizing community control, governance models do more than disrupt unjust systems; they cultivate the conditions to build wealth, protect vulnerable residents from displacement, and foster a strong, resilient social fabric based on shared ecological stewardship and collective well-being.

GOVERNANCE AS PRACTICE, VISION, AND JOY

Finally, at the heart of this work is a vision that transcends structure.

Governance reflects the joy, humanity, and long-term commitment of communities building toward something bigger than any single campaign or program.



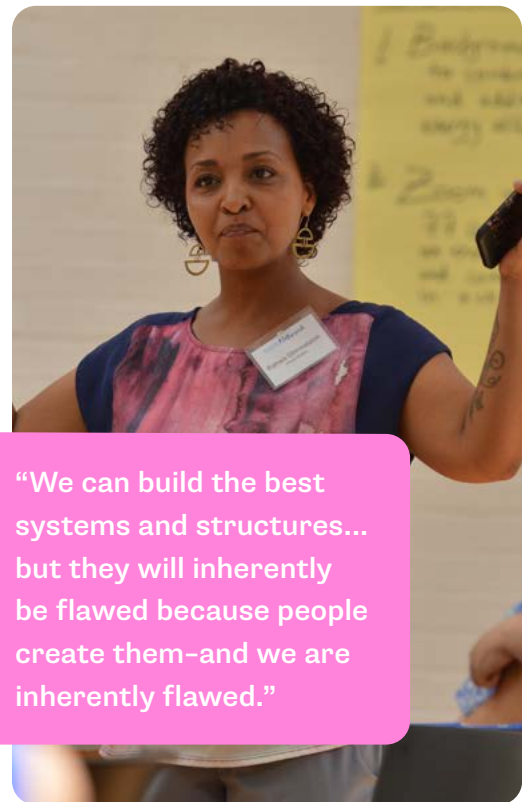
These closing reflections by the partner organizations speak to what that feels like when it's real.

Joy and Resilience as Governance Necessity

One PUSH meeting opened with music—elders started dancing, then everyone joined for a spontaneous dance party before productive discussion. Moving in the spirit of community requires responding to the need for joy. It requires breaking from “stiff, square, colonial” models of governance and instead centering practices that affirm life, culture, and connection.

Grace and Humanity in Systems

Governance rooted in community must account for human complexity. Organizations are called to humanize their processes, embedding grace into accountability structures. This means acknowledging imperfection, holding space for growth, while continuously striving for improvement.



“We can build the best systems and structures... but they will inherently be flawed because people create them—and we are inherently flawed.”



The organizations reflected in this guide represent decades of sustained work, most for more than 20 years.

The Long View

Community governance isn't achieved quickly. It requires commitment to iteration, adaptation, and trust-building. It requires learning from failure, celebrating wins, and intentionally passing knowledge across generations.

It reflects Indigenous frameworks, such as the principle of thinking seven generations back and seven generations forward, governance rooted in legacy and future-making.

The Ultimate Vision: "Everyone Eats"

This is the heart of the vision: a governance model that ensures every community member is sustained, starting with the most vulnerable. Democracy that feels like home. Like family. Like the collective power to build the world we need.



GOVERNANCE AT THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE AND MIGRATION

As climate change reshapes where people live and how communities adapt, governance systems must evolve alongside these realities. Communities are navigating a complex landscape of climate disruption, migration, and economic uncertainty—often all at once. In this context, participatory governance becomes more than a democratic ideal; it becomes a practical tool for ensuring that those most affected by these changes have a meaningful role in shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

Across the regions highlighted in this guide, grassroots organizations are demonstrating that governance innovation is already emerging from the communities closest to these challenges. Migrant and immigrant communities bring traditions of mutual aid, collective care, and translocal organizing that strengthen resilience across borders and neighborhoods. Indigenous knowledge offers deeply rooted models of land stewardship and governance that recognize the long-term relationship between people, place, and future generations. Together, these practices point toward governance systems that are more adaptive, more democratic, and better equipped to respond to the intertwined realities of climate disruption and human mobility.



CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Governance is not just a set of tools; it is an evolving practice rooted in community wisdom, experimentation, and care. The templates and prompts shared here are meant to support the real work of navigating complexity, making decisions together, and building structures that reflect community values. As with all governance practices, these materials are strongest when used with intention, humility, and the freedom to adapt as needs shift.

May these tools support you in building, testing, revising, and celebrating the ways your community governs itself with clarity, courage, and care.

TOOLS, TIPS, AND TEMPLATES FOR PRACTICE

To support ongoing experimentation, this final section offers a set of tools, prompts and tips for documentation, reflection, and adaptation. These are not templates to be applied wholesale. They are designed to be shaped by your context and your community.

FOCUS AND FORMAT

HOW TO BEGIN

Status	Item	Goal/Action	Avoids
■	Process Documentation	Does this document focus on how we do things rather than rigid rules? <i>Examples:</i> <i>How to facilitate, how to make a decision</i>	Overly formalized structures, rigid policies
■	Contextualized Examples	Is there at least one real-life example showing the tool/process in action?	Decontextualized tools
■	Adaptation Notes	Does the example include notes on: what was adapted, what worked, and what didn't?	One-size-fits-all prescriptions
■	Multiple Models	Does the document offer more than one model for comparison? <i>Examples:</i> <i>2 ways to facilitate a meeting, 3 decision methods</i>	One-size-fits-all prescriptions
■	Iterative Note	Is there a prominent note stating that this structure is experimental, likely to shift, and requires constant adaptation?	Assumption of fixed structures

PRIORITY CONTENT AREAS

WHAT NEEDS DOCUMENTATION NOW

Goal/Action	Tool Goal <i>(What should this guide accomplish?)</i>
Conflict & Trust	Relationship-building protocols for maintaining trust through conflict.
Decision-Making	A democratic decision-making guide that works under compressed timelines.
Inclusion	Clear language access and cultural competency standards (practical steps, not just statements).
Accountability	Restorative practice guidelines for addressing harm and moving forward.
Structure	Compensation frameworks and Board composition models (for adaptation).
Partnerships	Flexible coalition governance agreements and/or protocols for working with partners.
Communication	Communication channel design guidelines for reaching and engaging different communities.

THING'S TO AVOID

REVIEW AND PITFALLS

Status	Item	Review Question	Avoids
■	Accessibility	Can a new volunteer or non-professional read this and understand exactly how to apply it to their campaign/group?	Assumption professionalization = effectiveness
■	Simplicity	Does this tool use the simplest, most accessible language possible? Are terms defined?	Overly formalized structures
■	Applicability	Can people easily see applying this to their specific circumstances? <i>If not, add more context/examples</i>	Decontextualized tools

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION



Start Small

Focus on drafting one item from the Priority Content Areas using the Section 1 checklist.



Use Live Documents

Use shared digital documents that are clearly labeled DRAFT or EXPERIMENTAL and encourage collaborative feedback from users to facilitate the iterative process.



Clarify The Why

For every tool or resource, clearly state the context and campaign goal that led to its creation.



Track Versions

Always include the creation date and version number to support the documentation over time and track changes.