

Alliance-Building: Building Relationships for Transformative Change
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Two questions I often get in my field of social change philanthropy after I present myself as program manager of alliance-building opportunities are “What is alliance-building?” and “Why should we care about it?” I had the same questions when I was first introduced to this concept. Alliance-building helps create the pathway towards social change, and over the years, I’ve come to realize that what essentially drives it are the relationships built within the alliance. Done with “deep practice,” authenticity, and an open mindset, relationship-building can lead to transformative change.

Public Interest Projects defines alliance-building as more than just collaboration or building a coalition. Alliance-building “is a deeper, long-term process that brings together different and sometimes unlikely partners in a focused way to find a shared vision and values.”¹ How is this process realized?

Alliance-building is based on cultivating authentic relationships with peers, finding common ground and identifying opportunities for collaborative efforts. Building relationships is no picnic. As with everything else, it takes practice, energy, and time to make them strong. The long-term factor in alliance-building allows a process of “deep practice” in relationship-building, which Daniel Coyle, author of *The Talent Code*, describes as “struggling in certain targeted ways - operating at the edges of your ability, and where you make mistakes - [which] makes you smarter [and perform better].”²



[International Development Exchange](#) (IDEX), a non-profit organization specializing in global social justice grantmaking and building alliances between the Global North and Global South, has collected case studies of powerful relationship-building with community-based organizations. One that shines is IDEX’s relationship with the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), a grassroots environmental justice organization in South Africa. SDCEA has been IDEX’s grantee partner since 2010. SDCEA has been instrumental in reducing toxic releases from refineries in South Durban, proving the links between pollution and leukemia in the community, and building community resistance to apartheid-era laws that treat some communities as sacrifice zones for industrial development.³

In June 2011, IDEX brought Desmond D’Sa, environmental justice leader and chairperson of SDCEA, to the Bay Area, Seattle, and New York to share his findings on pollution left by major oil refineries in South Durban and their strategies for getting large oil companies to change their destructive ways. Through the deep practice of relationship-building, IDEX had proven its credibility and authentic alliance with the Bay Area-based climate justice movement for over two years. This allowed IDEX to facilitate connections between Desmond D’Sa and community-based organizations in Richmond, California that are advocating for better quality of life, in spite of being located next to oil refineries run by Chevron.

¹ <http://www.publicinterestprojects.org/learn-about-alliance-building/>

² Coyle, Daniel. “Chapter 1: The Sweet Spot” *The Talent Code. Greatness isn’t born. It’s grown. Here’s how.* New York: Bantam, 2009, 18

³ <https://www.idex.org/south-african-environmental-justice-leader-shares-vision-during-us-trip-2/>

Richmond has a long history of industrial activity, particularly the petrochemical industry, and its consequent pollution. Richmond is one of the lowest-income communities in the Bay Area, and it's also one of the most toxic. Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) has calculated that there are over 350 toxic sites in Richmond, with the California Department of Toxic Substances Control identifying 41 and the City of Richmond identifying 11 more.⁴

The common health concern between Richmond and South Durban is asthma. According to CBE's June 2009 Richmond Health Survey Report, "Long-time adult residents were more likely to have asthma than those who had lived in Richmond for only a few years, and the childhood asthma rate is high relative to national and California averages." In South Durban, due to the hazardous industries, there's an above-average chance of community members getting a respiratory disease such as asthma. In fact, South Durban holds the world record for the highest rates of asthma in a primary school anywhere in the world.⁵

Bringing Desmond D'Sa to the community of Richmond was a perfect match to bond learnings and strategies in environmental justice between the Global South and Global North. "These opportunities are surprisingly rare," said Rajasvini Bhansali, Executive Director of IDEX. "Leading up to the next United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in Durban, South Africa [in November 2011], it's important to highlight the victories that South Durban Community Environmental Alliance has had, and to build bridges with communities in Richmond who are fighting the same fight. This is a reminder for us in the Global North that what happens here affects the lives and livelihoods of people in places like South Durban."⁶

Having an open mindset furthers relationship building, as people form unexpected connections. As Geoffrey Colvin argues in his article, *What it takes to be great*,

"Armed with that mindset, people go at a job in a new way. Research shows [that those people] process information more deeply and retain it longer. They want more information on what they're doing and seek other perspectives. They adopt a longer-term point of view. In the activity itself, the mindset persists. You aren't just doing the job, you're explicitly trying to get better at it in the larger sense."⁷

Longer, strategic thinking in building relationships--particularly with those from different sectors--helps to build successful alliances. Without an open mindset, funders miss opportunities to leverage support, solidarity, and trust for global advocacy efforts.

Alliance-building means developing trust among disagreements. Building relationships is challenging because we all have different perspectives and different styles of working together. This diversity brings an opportunity for a holistic view of issues, but it can also create walls when diverse perspectives are confused with not having common values. This is where deep practice and an open mindset come into play. It's a social process where all perspectives are heard and filtered to find that common ground. Adopting an open mindset and "deep practice" will put you on a strong path towards effective alliance-building. As Daniel Coyle would say, "your small efforts produce big, lasting results."⁸

⁴ Communities for a Better Environment, Richmond Health Survey Report, June 2009

⁵ Susan Galleymore, *Beauty and the Beast*, Opednews.com March 2nd, 2010

⁶ <http://climate-connections.org/2011/06/21/south-african-environmental-justice-leader-joins-toxic-tour-of-california-refinery/>

⁷ Colvin, Geoffrey. *What it takes to be great* CNN Money, Fortune website, October 19, 2006:

http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/10/30/8391794/index.htm

⁸ Coyle, Daniel. "Chapter 1: The Sweet Spot" *The Talent Code. Greatness isn't born. It's grown. Here's how*. New York: Bantam, 2009, 19

During Desmond's trip in June 2011, IDEX helped coordinate a tour of toxic sites in Richmond, CA to highlight the struggles of local communities against Chevron's oil refinery. As one of the Bay Area's most polluting industrial facilities, and one the largest petroleum facilities in the United States, the refinery is a focal point for community demands to reduce toxic emissions, cease climate pollution, and forge a just transition to a post-carbon economy.⁹ The joint tour provided an opportunity to build relationships by exchanging experiences, learnings and strategies.

How can we test the true power of relationship-building? On August 6, 2012, thousands of East Bay residents were ordered to stay in their homes with the windows and doors closed after a series of explosions and fires tore through Chevron's Richmond refinery.¹⁰ Desmond D'Sa back in South Durban, South Africa responded with the following statement:

Today, as we witnessed Chevron's atrocities, we say 'strength to the people of Richmond and may their demand for justice against Chevron be heard by the Mayor of Richmond and all authorities in the USA to hold the company liable for their actions. The CEO of the company must be held accountable and brought before a court of law. We in South Durban stand in solidarity with the people of Richmond to demand actions against this aging dinosaur CHEVRON.'

Desmond's response shows that an impact on Richmond communities is felt by South Durban communities, a connection that transcends borders.

The path towards transformative change is happening here. Many people in the US are looking for national policy change, but they may not realize that their strongest allies and advocates aren't necessarily found in the same country. They may be found on the other side of the world. And the alliances that are formed can strengthen efforts for global policy change. When relationships are involved, finding that common ground and having the open mindset to develop new allies results in transformational change.

⁹ <http://climate-connections.org/2011/06/21/south-african-environmental-justice-leader-joins-toxic-tour-of-california-refinery/>

¹⁰ <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Fire-at-Chevron-refinery-in-Richmond-3767221.php>