

## **Lessons Learned from Community Engagement: Puget Sound Sage's South CORE Coalition**

Puget Sound Sage was founded originally as a coalition between faith, labor and community organizations seventeen years ago. At the time, it was a fiscally sponsored project at UniteHERE Local 8 to build connections and long-term relationships between the varying constituent groups. Seven years later, in 2007, the organization spun off into an independent organization with a coalition board comprising of labor, faith and community organizations. Each of these organizations had a base of members or constituents to whom they were accountable and would serve as the base and advisors that would shape Puget Sound Sage's mission, vision, programs and campaigns.

Between 2011 and 2014, as an organization we began to refine our commitment to racial justice. We understood that we needed not only to advocate on behalf of people of color and workers, but we needed to center their voices and create pathways for people of color and workers to lead our work and our movements. Puget Sound Sage began hiring women of color with significant community organizing and policy experience, put women of color in positions to hire future staff, and updated our personnel policies and pay ranges to be more equitable. We invested heavily in training our staff to hold leadership positions in significant campaign efforts and during this time we also expanded our board to include more community partners. Changing our internal practices and structures towards racial equity was a time consuming but ultimately rewarding effort for the effectiveness of our external campaigns and relationships.

As we were moving internal work, we began playing key roles in significant environmental, housing, transit and labor policy campaigns. Shortly after we hired, trained and lifted the leadership of women of color from the communities we hope to serve, we began winning significant campaigns. We played leadership roles in developing policies and implementation practices in the Fight for \$15, Sound Transit 3, and the Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy. This internal work, combined with placing effective and community-oriented women of color in key leadership positions, built more trust with our community partners and began to reflect in our external coalition building capacity in early 2012.

In November 2012, Puget Sound Sage convened a coalition called [South Communities Organizing for Racial and Regional Equity](#) (South CORE) comprised of organizations in South Seattle and South King County that came together to be an organized voice against displacement. The coalition began as a series of three strategy conversations that brought nearly twenty community organizations together to inform our community benefits and development program areas. This coalition directed the work of Puget Sound Sage and in turn, we offered research and organizing capacity to the coalition to support their decision making.

The coalition members convened due to high touch and high relationship invitations. We developed a curriculum on local development and identified sample models and success stories, like the Dudley Street Initiative (founded in 1984 in Massachusetts), to demonstrate how a group of committed community organizations can influence neighborhood plans and leverage community benefits from new development projects.

By August 2013, the members of the strategy convenings officially formed the South CORE coalition. Attachment A consists of the vision, mission and values statement of the coalition. As we formed the coalition and determined what campaigns or strategies we would invest time and resources in, we followed the following processes:

- Identify type of work and people most impacted
- Present new idea/ opportunity/ decision to those who are directly impacted
- Determine if the decision requires anyone to drop, delay, or delegate any previously committed body of work
  - If NO – Decide how to proceed in team or with people most impacted
  - If YES – Follow steps below
- Have committee do first level of analysis and recommendation with pro/con list
- Present to collective for a final consensus driven plan

Five years since South CORE's formation, we have made gains in centering equity along the light rail corridor in South Seattle. During the initial construction of light rail, Graham Street Station was left out of the plan, leaving a significant business and residential corridor in Southeast Seattle with limited access to public transit. Once the light rail was built, bus routes were cut in the vicinity based on the assumption that they were no longer needed. Little insight was given to the fact that many residents used local stops for short trips to schools, childcare, grocery stores, places of worship, community centers and healthcare facilities. From 2014-2016 we successfully advocated, in coalition with One America and Transportation Choices Coalition, to include Graham Street Station (between the Columbia City and Othello stations) in Sound Transit 3.

In addition to this effort, South CORE members identified the need for access to community-controlled land near the pending station. This spurred our [Land for Justice Campaign](#), focused on moving an [equitable transit-oriented development policy](#) with Sound Transit that will transform how the transit agency acquires and disposes of surplus property at or around light rail stations, ensuring that communities can thrive in place close to transit.

One of the key challenges with convening coalitions is keeping aware of and mitigating power dynamics between organizations and individuals in the coalition. This requires developing

mindful facilitation and group process including: making sure everyone in the room can contribute to the work in their own way, reflecting that feedback and input is taken seriously and acted upon, and respecting the agency of each individual organization to contribute to the success of the big picture. This also means sharing funding and being transparent with the entire group about how key decisions are being made.

Additionally, we must also assess how we build a coordinated, equitable strategy with community groups and not for them. One of the key factors in providing helpful research to a coalition is that the researcher must keep in mind the core values and mission of the group as they present various options. The researchers and organizers must take care to keep in frequent communication with the coalitions they are staffing so that the programs are truly coalition led and not overly influenced by an individual staffer's biases or positional authority. Over the years, we have found that our most accountable and effective work is done when there is a deep sense of trust between us and community-based organizations.

South CORE continues to shape policy with the self-determination to create and implement systems change as it pertains to communities most impacted by displacement and gentrification. Because of the capacity building and technical assistance that Puget Sound Sage offers to members of South CORE, member organizations participate in policy making by creating an inside and outside strategy that roots folks in place with legislation that works for the people because it is championed by the people. This kind of work creates deep and trusting relationships between community leaders and policymakers that shifts the narrative of who holds the expertise on how communities can best thrive in place.

**Attachment A:** Drafted 8/1/2013 – Description of Initial South CORE coalition

**South CORE Members**

African Diaspora of Washington State  
Asian Counseling & Referral Services  
El Centro de la Raza  
East African Community Services  
Eritrean Association of Greater Seattle  
Ethiopian Community of Seattle  
Filipino Community of Seattle  
Friends of Little Saigon  
Got Green  
Homesight  
InterIm CDA  
One America  
Puget Sound Sage  
Rainier Beach Community Empowerment Coalition  
Rainier Beach Moving Forward  
Somali Community of Seattle  
Urban Impact  
UNITE-HERE Local 8  
United Food & Commercial Workers Local 21  
Vietnamese Friendship Association

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## South Communities Organizing for Racial & Regional Equity South CORE

### Mission

Our mission is to be an organized voice for community-controlled and inspired development.

### Vision

The South CORE envisions sustainable multi-racial neighborhoods in the Rainier Valley and South King County where all community members are socially included, economically self-sufficient, politically engaged, and are at the forefront of shaping the future of our city, county and region.

### Who We Are

We represent a growing coalition of community and member-based organizations rooted in South Seattle and South King County. Each of our organizations plays distinct roles in advocating for and serving our diverse racial, ethnic and faith-based memberships. We recognize the need to come together to:

- Support strong cultural and community institutions, affordable housing, and local community owned business
- Advocate for nurturing and edifying schools, living wage jobs and a safe and healthy environment
- Develop awareness of the impacts of structural discrimination so that new development and investments support families of all incomes to thrive in place

### Our Values

Full and active community participation

Multi-racial community leadership

Racial and Economic Justice & Social Equity

Organizing and Engaging

Responsiveness and Accountability