

JUST POWER

A Guide for Activists and Changemakers



JASS
JUST POWER

Introduction

We are living in unsettled and unsettling times. People and the planet are under incredible strain as the result of excessive greed, and the corruption and violence it generates. A parade of authoritarian and repressive autocrats seek to consolidate power in many corners of the globe. And, alarmingly, right-wing populist and fundamentalist movements echo a similar mix of patriarchal, racist, and imperialist narratives intended to generate fear and division, and turn back hard-won gains. And yet, against these threats, people in many places around the globe are taking action to demand accountability, democracy, and a liveable future rooted in care for people and the planet.

In this spirit, we take inspiration from the old organising adage from labor activist Joe Hill: “Don’t mourn, organise!” This Guide, based on decades of experience in and alongside movements, is by and for change-makers of all kinds. If you are an organiser, a movement builder, a community leader, an ‘artist’, a student, a social justice NGO worker, a philanthropist, or someone from any other part of the social change ecosystem – this Guide is for you!

How to navigate this Guide

Here’s how to find your way around this e-book.

<https://youtu.be/nj3xRwLpBCU>

Why this Guide?

The idea for this Guide arose from a series of regional and global gatherings of activists and allies convened by JASS and the Fund for Global Human Rights aimed at understanding the drivers of intensifying levels of repression and crack downs on activists, dissent, and human rights defenders. We took hope in the emergence of new social-justice movements in many parts of the world and lessons from movement history, but our conversations underscored the need for deeper thinking about power and about strategy. This Guide reflects the consolidation of reflection, learning, and experimentation that were set in motion from that initial spark. It draws on our two decades of work with and alongside activists and movement builders in dozens of countries. It is our offer to you.

<https://youtu.be/OJlipng4ARE>

Our starting point

Here is what we know: It is not enough to be outraged. It is not enough to be right. It is not enough to speak truth to power. It is not even enough even to be organised. We need a vision of the change we want, or we risk becoming reactive or rudderless-ness. We need to build collective power and momentum for that change, or we risk irrelevance. And we must be very strategic, or we risk hopelessness, danger, and failure.

Our hopes for the Guide

Because JASS believes in the need for sustained feminist movement building which centers intersectional feminist politics and leadership across social movements, our practice is always to

share back the knowledge and tools gained in our own work with others who could use them. It is our hope that this guide finds its way into many hands – community activists, movement builders, popular educators, networks and formations of change makers, allied NGOs, donors, and others committed to the work of liberation, justice, equity, joy, and collective thriving. If the guide has found its way to you – then we are glad. If you find it useful, we will feel successful.

Who you are

This Guide is intended for use by a wide range of people and groups. We believe that there are many roles to play in terms of creating change. We think about this in terms of an ecosystem, in which movements define and lead change and many others contribute and play important roles. As you think about how you want to use the Guide, it is important to start with what you bring, what you want to learn more about, and what you want to change in the world. Chapter 1: Getting Started will help you think about how best to use and adapt the Guide for your interests, context, and group.

We hope that this Guide will provoke thinking and questioning – some that may be uncomfortable – about received ideas about change, about power and relationships, about movements, about who has expertise, and about strategy. This is the nature of critical thinking and critical consciousness – to expand the parameters of our understanding and deepen our practice of liberation.

Who we are

JASS began as a network of popular educators, organisers, movement builders, and accompaniers from various parts of the world who were committed to strengthening and supporting movements, movement leadership, and other social-change formations. In the thick of movement organising, this founding network published a first iteration of power analysis and power-building tools – *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics* – rooted in the ‘global south’ or majority world and in an internationalist, feminist, and decolonial politics. Today, JASS continues to innovate and adapt powerful ideas and strategies in this spirit as a movement-support organisation dedicated to strengthening and amplifying the voice, visibility, and collective power of women for a just and sustainable world.

Our politics and practice

At the core of our work is a practice of movement building rooted in feminist popular education. This Guide draws both on two decades of JASS’ work, and on learning from hundreds, thousands, of activists working in the traditions of popular education around the world.

Our work begins with a commitment to liberation and justice. Popular education is the approach we use because of its political roots. Popular education and similar liberatory political and participatory education traditions form a thread through liberation and anti-colonial movements across at least the last century. Originally rooted in class struggle, popular education evolved to incorporate broader thinking on the intersections of oppression and of liberation, and by forging shared analysis, demands and collective leadership it served as the basis for organizing. Feminists specifically incorporated gender and the ways in which power inequities permeated intimate and personal spheres of life, proposing that liberation must therefore involve gender too. In this vein, we call our work feminist popular education (FPE). In keeping with the FPE traditions within which we work, we hold a set of foundational assumptions about creating progressive social change.

Questions and questioning. The Guide is based on collective reflection and analysis to dig into what you know, what you want to learn, and what you need to challenge and unlearn – all in the service of bolder change and bigger visions for transformation.

No recipes. Rather, we invite exploration, questioning, and adaptation of what you find in the Guide – tailoring it to what you need for where you and your group are, who you are, and what you are doing.

Context matters. Where you are and who you are working with matters and will guide how you use the Guide, along with other strategic choices.

Power matters. At the core of the work of liberation is the intention to challenge and transform the systems and structures that maintain oppression and inequity. In using this Guide, you will find many ways to reflect on power as both a oppressive and liberating force that shapes your contexts and your own lives from the most intimate to the most public aspects. Power also shapes what you build, and how you work together.

Collective knowledge building. We value and draw on lived experience and our bodies, hearts, and minds as sources of knowledge and wisdom. FPE practices often employ experiential learning and exploration – such as skits, drawing, games, and participatory activities. These can be misunderstood as simply energising or fun activities. While they do stimulate the group, the actual intention runs deeper.

Embodiment and creative expression. FPE recognises the extent to which people carry vital knowledge in their bodies, hearts, imaginations, histories, and experiences – knowledge that is often treated as illegitimate, unimportant, or merely ‘personal’. But in truth, when we fail to connect to that level of knowing, we lose the power that can be unleashed by our anger, outrage, longings, creativity, dreams, analysis, and brilliance. Our poetry, songs, dancing and other forms of creative expression are often the richest ways of knowing and connecting with one another. They can bring joy and humour to what can sometimes be difficult and painful work for change.

Action for change. FPE is not just about thinking; it centres on how we come together for collective action for change. Individual and collective reflection form the basis for shared agendas, strategy and action. The entire Guide is oriented to helping you and your organisation navigate and build power, make strategic choices, and take action for change.

As a facilitator

As you review this Guide and decide what you could do with it and how it might help you design a session, a workshop, or an action-learning journey, here are some points to consider.

Be adaptive. This guide is not a recipe to follow. Like good cooking, it will invite you to spice it up, and adapt it to your own context, issues, and participants. We offer a sequence of chapters, tools and activities built on our experience, but you will want to choose what you want to do, how you want to do it, and in what order.

Be experiential. Popular education is most effective when grounded in people’s own experience and practice, through cycles of storytelling, critical reflection, and action. Three case studies are offered to help deepen and apply learning, but you can substitute your

own cases and issues, and of course circle back to practical implications for action in your context.

Be creative. Deep and transformative learning is not only about cycling between action, reflection, theory, and experience, but also about allowing ourselves to feel and understand with our full beings, including our hearts, minds, and bodies. We invite you throughout to use creativity, art, storytelling, music, dancing, and drama to deepen analysis and learning.

Be power-aware. The design and facilitation of learning is never power-neutral. Develop practices of personal and group reflection to become aware of the power you carry, the power dynamics and relationships in the groups and organisations involved, and the power and leadership you seek to invite, catalyse, and nourish through the learning process.

Finally, a note on virtual vs in-person facilitation. The Guide is designed primarily with face-to-face workshops in mind, as there are many benefits to being physically present in FPE processes, to deepen collective understanding, solidarity, and action. Yet, as the Covid pandemic first demonstrated, many activities can be adapted to virtual spaces. We include links to some virtual resources but not instructions for various forms of on-line adaptations, which can include online breakout groups, white boards, multi-media content, and other ways to shape virtual engagement and learning.

Acknowledgements

This Guide is the work of many – more than we can name, many whose names we do not even know. Like hip-hop, popular education – the foundation of our movement building practice – is a forever riff, iterative and adaptive, borrowing and mixing from the work of others across time and borders. In JASS’ more than two decades, we have worked with thousands of activists, organisers, NGOs, popular educators, donor allies, and movement scholars in dozens of contexts and on many different issues. Each of those people has contributed to our learning about power and movement strategy. We can’t name them all, but this Guide is a tribute to that collective learning and commitment to strong feminist movement-builders and the transformative gender, economic, climate, and social justice movements they shape.

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- Illustrations: Hansel Obando
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