

PAN VALLEY INSTITUTE

Fostering Belonging, a Culture of Inclusion, and Equity

A policy recommendations document developed
by immigrant and refugee participants of the
Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program
(TCOFP) (2011 - 2017)



*“Creating welcoming spaces where immigrants can gather to
dialogue, learn from one another, and rebuild their world”*

2011-
2017



American Friends
Service Committee

TAMEJAVI

A project of the American Friends Service Committee Pan Valley Institute

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TAMEJAVI

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The Pan Valley Institute

Established in 1998, the Pan Valley Institute (PVI) of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a popular education center located in Fresno, California. Our reach extends to other counties in the Central Valley such as Merced, Madera, and Tulare. Since PVI's inception, we have placed a high value on what immigrants bring with them to this country--their experiences, abilities, and cultural practices--which are often formed by prolonged and daily struggles against economic and social injustices. To increase immigrant participation and influence in the region, we bring a diverse range of grassroots immigrant leaders together through popular education, cultural organizing, leadership trainings, thematic residential gatherings, community dialogues, and our signature fellowship program, the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing fellowship Program (TCOFP). Implemented from 2011 to 2017, TCOFP graduated 24 fellows and indirectly supported over 200 community members who participated in the learning groups involved in the program.

PVI's vision is that California's Central Valley will be a place where all people are respected, cultural diversity is embraced, and immigrant communities actively participate in the social, cultural, and political life of the Valley as equals. Our mission is focused on creating welcoming spaces where immigrants can gather to dialogue, learn from one another, and rebuild their world.

PVI's work is guided by the principles of popular education. We strongly believe that meaningful and sustainable social change can only happen when the voices and actions of those directly affected by social inequities are included in the process of designing solutions to the problems they experience. By creating opportunities for immigrants and refugees to engage in dialogue, reflection, and analysis of the issues they face, they gain a deeper understanding of their place in the Central Valley, and own their power as active participants in the world. By engaging immigrants and refugees in popular education, PVI ultimately hopes to alter the social inequities fostered and maintained through a region that has long been burdened by the production of great poverty through industrial agriculture.

Dedication & Acknowledgements

This Policy Recommendations document is dedicated to the 24 immigrant grassroots leaders for their commitment and numerous hours devoted to the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP) from 2011 to 2017. These leaders engaged in the TCOFP community assessment with diligence and a passion to lift up the stories of their communities. Although community engagement was not new for many of the fellows, taking the time to involve their community in the program was a very new experience. During that process, fellows learned the values of: taking the time to listen intently while community members shared their most pressing social and cultural problems; conducting home visits; observing the many ways their communities organize; and more than anything, looking beyond the problems, and exploring existing social and cultural assets within their communities that can bring about change for the Central Valley.

Our deepest gratitude to the Coordinating Group formed by members of PVI Program Committee and volunteers for accompanying and advising PVI staff and fellows through this innovative cultural organizing program: Mina Abdollahian, Lar Yang, Hans Van de Noordaa, and Eduardo Stanley.

Our sincerest appreciation to the West Region AFSC leadership for their trust and support throughout this groundbreaking program, which resulted in expanding the boundaries of programs for this organization.

Finally, the implementation of a previously untested cultural organizing program such as TCOFP could not have been possible without the support and generous funding from the James Irvine Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation.

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Introduction

The idea for this Policy Recommendations Document emerged at an evaluation meeting with fellows in the second TCOFP cohort (2013-2015), PVI staff, alumni from the first TCOFP cohort, consultants, and PVI participants from several popular education and cultural organizing projects. Assessing the implementation of a program or project, gathering lessons learned, and identifying steps for moving forward has been a practice since PVI's inception. One of the central topics discussed at the evaluation meeting was how to best use the community assessment data gathered by the first and second cohort of fellows. Meeting participants agreed that a document detailing the data and resulting in policy recommendations would be an effective tool for emerging grassroots immigrant leaders to share their participatory research with stakeholders from diverse sectors. There was also a strong belief that elaborating this Policy Recommendation Document would be an innovative grassroots policy development exercise.

Three central intentions inspired this Policy Recommendations Document:

- To document the process and methodology of the TCOFP community assessment, key findings, and policy recommendations emerging from those findings--most importantly, to validate the data gathered by grassroots immigrant leaders involved in TCOFP. The community assessment was conducted meticulously following the principles of popular education and using participatory action research and cultural organizing methodologies.
- To demystify the policy development process by engaging grassroots leaders in the policy development exercise. Fellows agreed that few policies that impact immigrant communities include their voices, and even less those of rural Central Valley immigrants. Immigrants often play an important role in advocating for policies coming from the top, but they rarely are included in the development of those policies.
- To provide tools for, and to encourage and support immigrants, refugees, and other community members to advocate for increased opportunities, access, and equitable resources that strengthen their civic and political leadership; and to enable them to practice their cultural and creative expressions for a greater sense of belonging.

Summary

For many decades, immigrants and refugees from all over the world have made the Central Valley their home. They have contributed toward the region's agricultural production--which feeds the nation and the world--and have made the Valley rich with their diversity of cultures. TCOFP fellows gathered insightful perspectives and observations from the following communities: Hmong, Khmer, Salvadorian, Punjabi, Palestinian, Nigerian Igbos, and Indigenous Mexicans including Mixteco, Zapoteco, Triquis, and Purhepechas. Each inaugural fellow initially formed a local learning group to conduct a community assessment and cultural inventory to gain a better understanding of pressing concerns, collective cultural assets, and the impact of migration and displacement on individuals, families, and cultures in their community.

Four key structural challenges faced by these Central Valley immigrant and refugee communities emerged through the TCOFP participatory action research: 1) *Histories and Effects of Colonization*; 2) *Impact of Migration*; 3) *Social, Cultural, and Political Exclusion*; and 4) *Sense of Belonging*. These challenges are manifested in many shared experiences among diverse immigrant and refugee communities: displacement from their homelands; migration to escape from poverty, wars and violence, and cultural discrimination; being targeted by unjust and anti-immigrant policies; weakened support systems for community and civic engagement; loss of language and cultural knowledge; and intergenerational differences and gaps in leadership; among others. Despite these hardships, community members and fellows long for connectedness to their communities and exhibit an openness to adapt to new social and cultural realities in their newfound home. They want to cultivate and strengthen new ties and create more authentic opportunities that will activate the participation of their youth, elders, and families to address their needs and create lasting change for their communities.

At the Pan Valley Institute, we adhere to the United Nations Human Rights Declaration and proclaim ***cultural rights as human rights***. Following our core belief that the world is not static, that it is open to change, and that poor and oppressed people have an active role to play in creating a better future--we know that acts of creativity, self-expression and identity formation are central to activating this change. Based on our years of experience, we know that cultural expression and tradition is not a choice but rather a right that, when denied, can cause social isolation and prevent immigrants from becoming fully engaged in the social and political matters of the communities where they are looking to build a sense of place.

The following policies are recommended for supporting immigrants and refugees to become active and critical members of society—they can serve as agents of change in creating a more democratic, culturally vital, and resilient Central Valley:

- **Adopt policies that emphasize *belonging***, through support for shared use initiatives
- **Invest resources in ways that reflect a culture of inclusion, justice, and equity**
- **Expand programs that fosters preservation** of indigenous/native languages
- **Transform public institutions into community-centered hubs** and provide opportunities to strengthen community and civic engagement
- **Educate students about indigenous, refugee, and immigrant communities**; their histories of migration, and their contributions to the Central Valley
- **Increase youth-centered leadership development opportunities**

Overview of the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP)

Since its founding in 1998, the Pan Valley Institute has worked with a vibrant mix of immigrant and indigenous communities in the Central Valley to strengthen their leadership capacity, build community, and foster civic engagement. From PVI's popular education and participatory research practices during the past twenty years, a model for cultural organizing emerged: the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP). PVI understands that cultural organizing is a concrete step toward building communities that are cohesive and capable of responding to challenges. Working in the context of culturally diverse communities in the Central Valley, cultural organizing also implies: an intercultural learning process that encompasses understanding; respect for differences and negotiating collaborative community building practices; and cross-pollination of ideas and traditions among different ethnic groups. In the long run, cultural organizing in the context of PVI work is understood as a strategy for supporting immigrants in their efforts to become more socially- and politically-engaged.

In 2011, PVI launched the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP), an 18-month fellowship program designed to strengthen the cultural organizing skills of the Central Valley's emerging cultural leaders. The program grew out of PVI's Tamejavi Festival, a public cultural exchange festival that elevated the stories, cultures, and arts of the Valley's diverse immigrant communities. The word Tamejavi is an acronym composed of the initial syllables from the words for "marketplace" in Hmong, Spanish, and Mixteco: **TA**j laj Tshav Puam... (Hmong), **ME**rcado... (Spanish), nun**JAVI**... (Mixteco). Established in 2002, the Tamejavi Festival would serve as an invaluable public gathering space for diverse immigrant and refugee communities to share and experience one another's cultures over a period of nine years. The festival honored the histories, experiences, and contributions of diverse cultural communities in the Valley. Inspired by the power of the festival, PVI launched TCOFP as a means to grow and strengthen the leadership of immigrants organizing creative learning spaces centered around the cultural arts within and across their own communities. Fellows selected to participate in TCOFP reflected the diverse communities of the Central Valley: Hmong, Khmer, Punjabi, Iranian, Palestinian, and Indigenous Mexican including Mixteco, Zapoteco, Purepecha, and Triqui. They were teachers, artists, farm workers, dancers, leaders, and organizers; and residents of Fresno, Madera, Merced, and Tulare counties.

Community Assessment Approach

The TCOFP community assessment took on a unique approach guided by a basic principle: *Oppression is based on lack of knowledge; knowledge is power; reclaim knowledge and bring people together to build and create knowledge to change the world.* Fellows listened to the concerns and issues that oppress and marginalize their communities, they engaged others in understanding those issues and their root causes, and in that process, fellows realized that ordinary people can take action and change their conditions.

“Cultural organizing provides a voice for those that deeply desire to be heard or understood without being scared because they know their voice counts and so does their culture.”

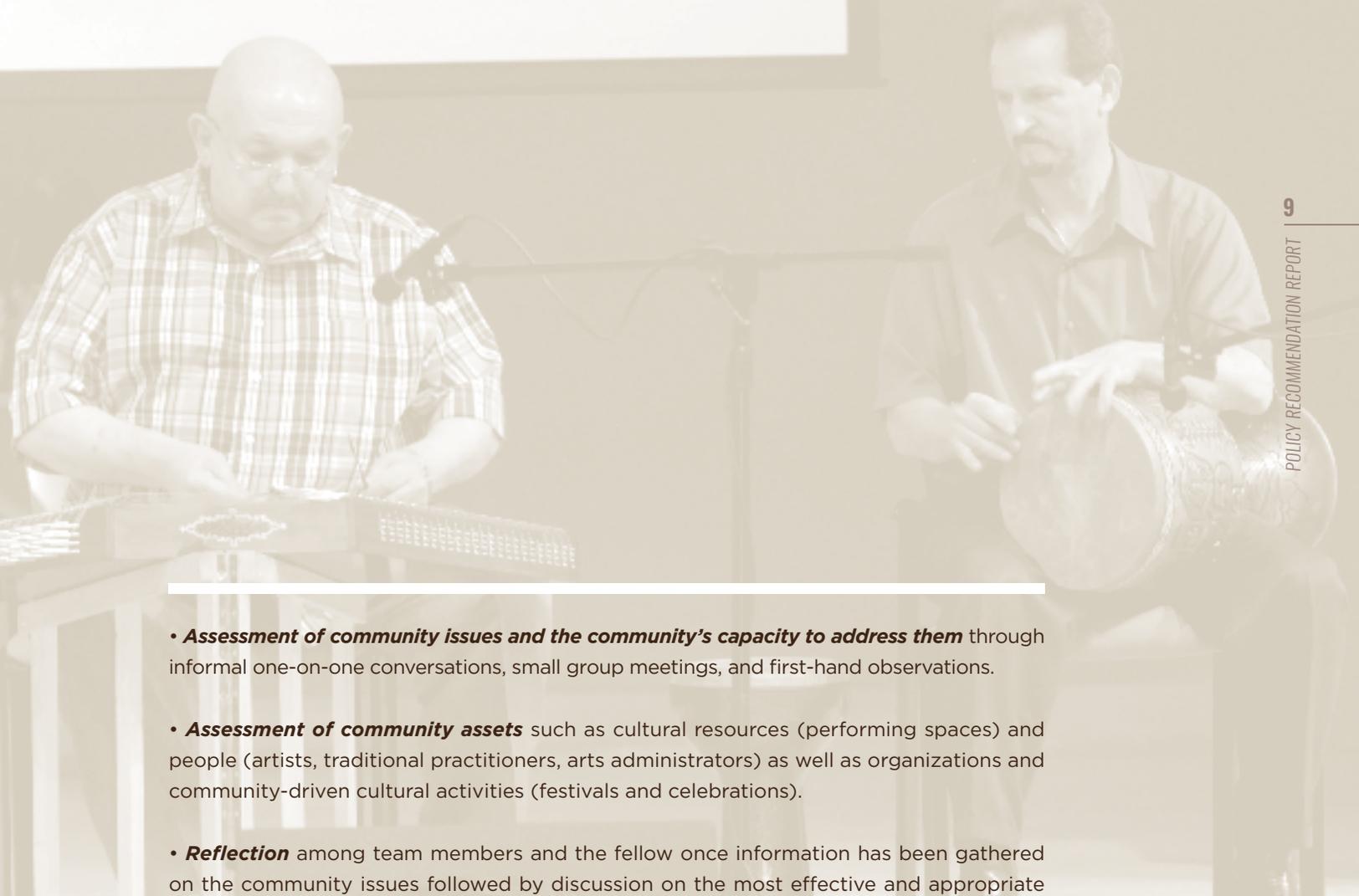
- **Genoveva Vivar Galvez,**
TCOFP fellow

Central to the implementation of TCOFP was that participants not only learned the theory and principles of popular education, cultural organizing, and participatory action research but that the program offered opportunities for them to put those theories and principles to work. A primary goal of TCOFP was to train and provide resources for participants to become effective cultural organizers capable of engaging community members in a popular education process while increasing their capacity for effective civic participation. In order to do this, fellows conducted community assessments intended to directly engage community people around issues that were important to them and created opportunities for them to partake in a creative learning process.

In preparation for the community assessment, TCOFP fellows were trained in the basic principles of popular education, participatory action research, and cultural organizing.

The community assessment included the following steps:

- **Formation of a learning group** that included individuals from diverse backgrounds willing to volunteer their time and experience to help plan, assess, and reflect about all aspects of the assessment.
- **Identification of key community contacts** representative of various social, educational, cultural, traditional and non-tradition institutions that helped the fellows identify important community issues, needs, and readiness of the community to organize in action together. Key contacts included youth, elders, cultural holders, wedding and funeral ceremonial masters, shamans, community-based organization leaders, business leaders, and the media, among other contacts.



- **Assessment of community issues and the community's capacity to address them** through informal one-on-one conversations, small group meetings, and first-hand observations.

- **Assessment of community assets** such as cultural resources (performing spaces) and people (artists, traditional practitioners, arts administrators) as well as organizations and community-driven cultural activities (festivals and celebrations).

- **Reflection** among team members and the fellow once information has been gathered on the community issues followed by discussion on the most effective and appropriate approach to organize the community to come together to address the issue.

- **Evaluation** of the cultural organizing process and activities based on the level of participation of the community, quality and efficiency of the work, satisfaction of community members with the work, and influence of external factors on the success of the work.

- **Determination of the impact and changes** that have occurred in the community as a result of the of fellows' cultural organizing efforts: changes in knowledge capacity; quality of discourse; shifts in attitude and values; increased capacity such as creative skills, leadership, and ability to take action; level of participation and mobilization; and, changes in policies, systems, conditions, and equity.

To ensure success in the community assessment, fellows employed several key practices:

1) Learning Groups

2) Tools - Questionnaires, Community Dialogues, Observations and Surveys, and Media

3) Trust-Building and Confidentiality

4) Cultural Protocols

5) Reflection

6) Documentation.

Learning Groups

Learning groups played a crucial role in guiding and helping fellows design and implement the assessment. One fellow explained, *“There are two main reasons why my group is important: First, I want them to feel that this project belongs to the community, it’s for the community and not for PVI or myself. Secondly, I feel that for this assessment to be well rounded there needs to be input from different points of view and not just mine.”* Fellows approached forming a learning group in various ways—through personal acceptances of invitations, presence at community-led activities, display of respect for community members as their equals—which helped build relationships and trust with youth and elders willing to contribute to the assessment. One fellow was intentional in involving her mother, who served as a valuable resource to the learning group: *“I find it hard to explain what popular education is and its relation to cultural organizing. Adding to these challenges was my difficulties translating certain concepts in Mixteco. Neither could I describe such concepts in Spanish since their understanding in this language is limited. My mom was my bridge to the women, and she helped me clearly articulate why it was important for us to be organized as a community.”* Together, fellows and learning group members brainstormed questions and strategies for effective community outreach, accompanied each other on home visits, attended events and social gatherings, reviewed, interpreted, and shared perspectives on community issues and solutions needed to address them, and organized and promoted community events among many other tasks throughout the fellowship.

Tools: Questionnaires, Community Dialogues, Observations, Surveys, and Media

QUESTIONNAIRES

Through an Ethnographic Interview method, fellows worked closely with learning group members to develop questions that would help determine the present capacity for community action to address problems. Questions focused on what people knew about the problem; how and to what extent they communicated about it; how strongly they felt or thought about it; what their capacity for taking action was and what actions, if any they may have already taken; and what policy or system changes they would like to achieve. Community members interviewed were encouraged to share their firsthand experiences, personal observations, and their stories.

A set of five to seven general open-ended questions developed around community problems and cultural assessment helped guide conversations between fellows and community members:

Community problems and civic participation resources:

- What is/are the biggest problems you have observed in the community?
- What have you seen or experienced yourself or heard about first-hand to these problems?
- What community stories do you know that illustrates these problems?
- How much awareness or understanding have you observed among people about the nature and source of the problem? Is part of the problem that people do not know enough about the issue(s) involved?
- How good is the quality of community discussion that you have heard about the problem?
- What are the most common community attitudes about the problem?
- From your viewpoint and experience, what is the capacity of the community to take action in response to the problem(s)?
- Do you see community people actually taking action on this problem? To what extent?

Cultural assessment:

- What are the traditional cultural values that guide, protect, or promote action among the people of the community?
- Who in the community remembers, maintains, and promotes traditional cultural practices and arts?
- What community institutions (education, religious, artistic, etc.) incorporates or teach community creative cultural expression? Have any of them documented traditional creative practice and events?
- What traditional cultural activities (festivals, pageants, religious or feast celebrations, neighborhood activities, family/youth activities) occur regularly in the community?
- What community public cultural events are open to all ethnic groups?
- Who are the artists, craftspeople, traditional practitioners, and arts organizations within the community?
- What public spaces and facilities are available for performances, exhibitions, festivals, or multi-purpose uses?

COMMUNITY DIALOGUES

Community dialogues emerged as one of the most widely used practices among fellows to conduct the assessment. The dialogues occurred through informal face-to-face and one-on-one or small group conversations. These important conversations occurred between fellows and the elderly, artistic masters, and cultural holders in their communities. Dialogues took place during home visits or community settings, which at times proved difficult for fellows as not all the target communities lived concentrated in one physical location. During this process, one significant discovery emerged—underprivileged people do not get many opportunities to engage in dialogue around the problems that impacted them, let alone were they asked to share their ideas and solutions to such problems.

Interpersonal communication skills were necessary for many fellows to successfully facilitate focused conversations around identifying community problems and cultural assets. While they held conversations with the community, fellows:

- Explained the purpose of the assessment and to build rapport, shared their desire to learn about their own community and culture.
- Used appropriate language when talking with people and avoided jargon.
- Began conversations about food or something familiar to the community member.
- Understood dialogue may not be common in some communities, which did not mean that there was no communication.
- Understood that often, communication in the community occurred outside the home at fiestas, family gatherings and *remates* or swap meet.
- Understood news spread quickly in tight knit communities.
- Understood people did not mind being asked questions about community issues and were given the opportunity to ask the fellows about the need for such questions.
- Understood people felt more comfortable talking in casual and informal settings instead of a formal and professional settings which they feel pressured to find sophisticated terms to express their opinions.
- Understood that individuals in some cultural groups prefer not to talk about personal issues.
- Observed that individuals did not like to talk when in small group settings or in public settings.
- Learned that some groups were not used to being asked to share about their culture to outsiders because of a distrust toward governmental agencies.

OBSERVATIONS AND SURVEYS

Some fellows fully immersed themselves in their communities and resorted to using the observation approach. They gained insights about how decisions were made by attending traditional civic engagement practices with clan leaders and family heads of households. Others attended cultural activities held at religious institutions such as temples, and even conducted surveys at community-wide events, flea markets, and public gathering spaces.

MEDIA

To engage youth voice and make it more accessible for them to participate in the community assessment, some of the younger fellows promoted and distributed information about the project through various social media platforms, and even gathered data via video interviews with individuals. One fellow developed an online survey to specifically target Hmong youth participants for the assessment.

Trust Building and Confidentiality

TRUST BUILDING

One of the most important and crucial skills to carrying out a successful community assessment was building trust with community members. During a home visit or conversation, it was important for fellows to allow time for community members to open up, to listen to their stories, and make them feel heard. Equally important, community members were more willing to engage with fellows who identified themselves as a member of their specific community. Reassurance of confidentiality also built trust among immigrants who sometimes felt uneasy when asked their names or other personal information. They worried about giving away information to people they did not know, and were concerned about information getting into the wrong hands.

CONFIDENTIALITY

It was important that, right at the beginning of the assessment, Learning Group members understood and agreed to maintain confidentiality throughout the project. Additionally, it was important for community members involved in the assessment to understand that the information they shared with fellows would be documented and shared with PVI staff, and that no personally identifiable information about them would be exposed or shared with others involved in the project. Fellows took careful notice not to write down notes, video, or photograph individuals concerned about their confidentiality.

Cultural Protocols

Fellows respected and observed social and cultural protocols while conducting the assessment. During home visits in the Zapotecos community, it was important for fellow Brenda Ordaz to first speak with the eldest woman of the household and tell her how she could help, clearly explain the purpose of the visit, and identify the individual the fellow needed to talk with. Zapotecos were not used to home visits and felt uncomfortable having a dialogue about issues in the community. Brenda learned that sometimes it was best to generate dialogue with Zapotecos communities outside the home such as at social gathering and events, parties, swap meets, and other public places.

Speaking the native language was extremely important to address communication gaps with community members. This presented difficulties to one fellow who was not a fluent Zapotecos speaker. The fellow was wise to bring along a native speaker who was a part of the learning group to serve as interpreter during conversations with community members.

Fellows were also mindful of how gender dynamics played out in families and in public. Fellows commonly shared that people in their communities were not used to being asked questions or engaging in dialogues about the issues they faced. During visits, women were more reserved (in the presence of a man), and the men were more outspoken and tended to discuss political and social issues more openly and freely. In the case of fellow Sokhmaly Ky and the Khmer community, this was particularly true for the women who preferred not to share their concerns or family issues with people they did not know. To address these gender dynamic challenges during home visits, it was important for fellows to acknowledge and invite both the men and women to participate in the conversations, demonstrate patience and encourage each of them to speak at their own pace and in their own way.

Reflection

Reflection is a critical component of popular education. A popular educator never tells people what problems they face nor the solutions to address the problems—the people are the experts. The main role of the popular educator or organizer is to pose key questions that stimulate people to figure out for themselves what they should do and what they need to learn or understand in order to do it. For this approach to succeed, fellows needed to involve community people in reflection that enabled them to identify issues of most concern as well as available cultural resources that can illuminate and ignite action around those issues. This reflection took place both one-on-one as well as in small group meetings.

We saw the community assessment efforts as an exercise to provide opportunities for reflection at key junctures in the program. These included opportunities for people to: 1) reflect critically about key community problems, challenges, and opportunities they confront; 2) choose and organize the creative cultural action they will take in response; and 3) decide how effective the action was, and apply lessons learned to continue creative and civic action.

In the course of two cohorts from 2011 to 2015, nineteen fellows conducted community assessments and altogether engaged 200 people in their communities including members of their learning groups. Even though all fellows were provided with the same training, tools, and guide for conducting their community assessment, they also were given the flexibility to be creative and adapt the participatory action research approach to align with their own capacities, level of support received from their learning groups, as well as the diverse ways in which community members responded to the assessment.

Documentation

Fellows experienced many challenges in documenting their community assessments. With respect to community members nervous about having someone take notes, fellows tried their best and used the most common documentation methods: note taking, participant sign-in sheets to track attendance, drawings, pictures, social media, video recordings, and recollections of stories told to PVI staff. Some fellows had the help of learning group members as notetakers while others listened intently to the interviewees and then jotted down notes out of the sight of the interview, usually in the car or when they arrived home.

Limitations

As with any research project, there were limitations to the community assessment as demonstrated through the strengths and challenges of the prescribed approach, which to some extent, may have impacted the findings.

A primary strength of the assessment was the empowering aspect of having fellows do research within their respective community, which was critical to establishing trust among community members openly share their experiences. There was the opportunity for fellows to document firsthand knowledge gleaned from the various interactions with the community. Meeting with, talking to, and documenting the stories shared by people enabled fellows to validate their own knowledge and experiences. Although engaging others in the planning and implementation of the research was challenging at times, fellows found it a powerful and collective knowledge-building process that can often be isolating one, as it happens in many traditional research cases.

As the assessment process was new for many of the fellows, they were not as prepared to carry out the tasks, and required more training and technical support of PVI staff. This initially created multiple challenges, which delayed the assessment process. While conducting the assessment, fellows experienced difficulty drawing out information from people and engaging them in dialogue. A key reason for this was that no one had ever asked interviewees about their opinions. Fellows also discovered that people interviewed were well aware of the issues impacting their community, however, they felt disempowered and harbored the feeling that ultimately, no one cared about what really mattered to them as immigrants; they did not have the right to discuss issues of concern. Another challenge was the lack of thorough documentation. Some fellows observed that having paper and pencil, and even a laptop, during the conversations with community members intimidated and interrupted the flow of the conversations. This resulted in limited written data available. Fellows later retold the stories and experiences, and PVI staff then recorded them in writing.

These challenges do not in any way discredit the work that was completed or diminish the richness of the qualitative data. This demonstrates the true intent and nature of community-based research—the focus on the goals and principles of the process rather than solely on the method itself. Lastly, the flexibility and the ability of fellows to adapt the methodology to the realities of their communities added tremendous value to the assessment.

Ky and the Khmer community, this was particularly true for the women who preferred not to share their concerns or family issues with people they did not know. To address these gender dynamic challenges during home visits, it was important for fellows to acknowledge and invite both the men and women to participate in the conversations, demonstrate patience and encourage each of them to speak at their own pace and in their own way.

Key Findings

For the purposes of this document, findings from the community assessment highlighted four key structural challenges faced by both immigrants and refugees in California's Central Valley communities: 1) *Histories and Effects of Colonization*; 2) *Impact of Migration*; 3) *Social, Cultural, and Political Exclusion*; and 4) *Sense of Belonging*. These four challenges are further discussed in detail as below:

HISTORIES AND EFFECTS OF COLONIZATION

- Internalized Colonization
- Language
- Loss Of Culture And History Knowledge
- Social And Cultural Discrimination

IMPACT OF MIGRATION

- Root Causes And The Impact Of Migration
- Sense Of Belonging Within Families
- Immigration Policies That Criminalize Immigrants

SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL EXCLUSION

- Poverty
- Denial Of Rights and Access To Resources
 - >> Education
 - >> Access To Public Spaces and Resources
- Civic Participation
 - >> Access to Information
 - >> Disempowerment
 - >> Awareness Of Issues
 - >> Community Organizing Readiness And Leadership
 - >> Limited Cross-Cultural Cohesion
- Gender Dynamics
- Intergenerational Gap

SENSE OF BELONGING

- Dis-belonging

Histories and Effects of Colonization

Colonization is the action or process of establishing control over an indigenous people or domain through the settlement and reappropriation of native resources; and it also refers to a historical period, starting in the 16th century, marked by aggressive expansion campaigns from Western European nations such as Spain, Portugal, France, Great Britain, and Germany to dominate world trade in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Australia and Oceania. By the 1800s, the United States of America joined this cadre of international profiteers, forcing the massive relocation, migration, and genocide of respective indigenous populations.¹

Colonization is also a useful concept to frame and characterize discussions identifying systemic issues that continue to affect indigenous peoples, refugees, or undocumented migrants in modern day; and the contemporary immigration process. For many immigrant community members who participated in the TCOFP assessment, these recurring issues and topics of interest included: oppression, discrimination, identity formation, political participation, and integration.

Due to the diversity of immigrant and refugee groups in California's Central Valley communities, there were many challenges in identifying cross-culturally relevant issues that universally affected long-term legal migrants from Mexico, or *Mestizos*, as well as more recent populations of undocumented indigenous migrants from Oaxaca, Mexico. The term *mestizos* refer to a person of combined European and Indigenous American descent, and is used as a cultural term throughout the Latin Americas, Spain, and the Philippines. TCOFP fellows also conducted assessments with members of the Southeast Asian refugee community, including Hmong and Khmer participants; and members from the Igbo community from Nigeria. For the purposes of this report, the Central Valley region encompassed the following counties: Merced, Madera, Fresno, and Tulare.

However, TCOFP assessments revealed a key insight: from the moment they arrive in the United States, immigrants and refugees navigate complex sociocultural and political landscapes, adapting their identities according to their personal history in the country of their origin (*homeland*) while simultaneously referencing the more dominant American culture of their new host country. These are identities in constant flux and transition. For indigenous Mixtecos and Southeast Asian immigrants, such as the Hmong and Khmer, political labels such as "undocumented migrant" or "refugee," respectively, were acquired only after becoming established in the U.S.

Based on the data analysis from these community assessments, it was evident that immigrant and refugee communities in the Central Valley shared a common narrative regardless of where they came from originally or their influence by colonization: each group experienced displacement due to geopolitical and economic catastrophes such as war, persecution, state violence, psychological trauma; and each group had a long history of oppression through racial, cultural, and ethnic discrimination.

Internalized Colonization

Through their community assessments, TCOFP fellows observed that some immigrants believed that the best method to avoid discrimination, bullying, stigma, and psychological trauma was to deny their indigenous culture, creative expression, and avoid speaking their native languages. For these participants, the continual invalidation of indigenous cultural practice reinforced deep feelings of shame, humiliation, and embarrassment while creating the urgent desire to belong and integrate into the dominant culture. When an indigenous person is compelled to repress their native cultural identity and world view due to feelings of inferiority or as a mechanism of self-preservation to avoid discrimination, this is called *internalized colonization*.²

Internalized colonization can manifest in many ways, from self-isolation to reluctant cultural exchange, shame, and outright prohibition for the intergenerational transference of cultural knowledge. As a result, immigrants can lose respect for their own culture and religion,

as well as members of their own community. Parents can prioritize teaching their children English instead of their native language. The pressure to “make it” often forces younger generations to “shed their roots” in exchange for the promise of socioeconomic stability and success.

Nevertheless, TCOFP fellows also observed a groundswell of grassroots resilience and resistance against colonization among immigrant and refugee groups to balance self-censorship. These participants strove to preserve their indigenous cultural artifacts and rituals in order to proudly validate their native language, arts, values, food, world views, and identity for posterity’s sake.

“Often times, the rejection of indigenous identity does not come from outside. Instead, it originates within our own circles of families, friends, and communities. We incorporate unconsciously these rejections into our lives, and this is because we do not know our stories and history.”

**- Juan Santiago,
TCOFP fellow**

Language

Southeast Asian refugees--namely, the Hmong--and indigenous Mexican immigrants including Mixteco, Zapoteco, Purepecha and Triqui shared the unique distinction of having writing systems for their respective languages only since the beginning of the 20th century. Thanks to the resilience of oral traditions within these communities, their native language has been preserved despite generations of colonization. Today, some fear that these languages may be lost forever as transnational migration increases.

For many adults in indigenous communities, language learning was both a valuable strategy for cultural preservation between generations as well as a barrier to formal education and articulate self-expression in public discourse. This phenomenon, particularly that which impacted the Americas, was succinctly captured by Anibal Quijano: "When the colonization of the Americas began in the 1500s, indigenous people were forced into a new lifestyle and repressed (. . .) Their languages were labeled as inferior to that of the Spanish conquerors. This classification of indigenous people as inferior continues to this date."³ For example as illustrated by TCOFP fellow Juan Santiago, in Mexico, if someone is heard speaking an indigenous language in public, they are labeled inferior and often called *indio*, which means indigenous, but in a pejorative manner."

As older generations feared that integration would devalue the cultural practices that define indigenous communities, they also struggled to address the ever-increasing communication gap arising from the dual need for their children to learn the dominant language--in this case, English--to gain academic and social success, but at the cost of creating family tensions and resentment as youth commonly undertook the roles of interpreter and translator for their parents and grandparents. This communication gap also complicated the transfer of cultural knowledge from older to younger generations, even creating rifts between siblings where elder siblings who sided with older generations were labeled "generational deserters" whereas younger (and more integrated) siblings who challenged traditional ethnic practices were called "black sheep."⁴

Language and cultural practices are the essential components for building cultural identity, and they are especially significant endeavors for indigenous peoples and new immigrants who depend primarily on intergenerational oral traditions to directly transfer and preserve cultural knowledge. Some community assessment participants stated that they would be open to learning a second or third language, but they also stressed the importance of preserving their own native language as a common human right. Hmong American immigrants navigate this delicate balance between native language fluency and English-language proficiency, while struggling with high illiteracy rates in both languages. Vicky

Xiong-Lor's dissertation on the impact of language learning on cultural retention in Hmong American immigrants showed that for the Hmong, who depended on oral traditions for cultural preservation until the invention of the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) in 1953, they face dual challenges in that a large number of Hmong are illiterate in their native language; older generations speak fluent Hmong but are not English literate, while the reverse is true for the majority of younger Hmong generations who are pressed to "fit in" within the context of American socioeconomics. Xiong-Lor fears that "[t]his may mean that, in time, Hmong children will forget their Hmong heritage and will lose both their language and culture altogether" as a result of this intergenerational communication gap and disruption to establishing and maintaining a healthy Hmong American identity, because "[t]he ability to maintain one's language is key to sustaining a culture in the presence of a dominant language." Xiong-Lor adds that, on average, one language is lost every two weeks; scholars estimate that, by the end of the 21st century, there will be only an estimated one hundred languages remaining in the world.⁵

"Language to me represents my identity and is a very powerful cultural practice. Every time people hear me speaking Zapoteco they curiously ask me if I speak a dialect from Oaxaca. This creates an opportunity for me to share the history of my language and my people. The Zapoteco languages are the single most important and authentic cultural practice in my community. Throughout my community assessment assignment, when I spoke in Zapoteco with those I consulted for information about my culture, they felt very comfortable speaking to me in Zapoteco." - **Juan Santiago, TCOFP fellow**

Loss of Culture and History Knowledge

Based on community interviews conducted during the assessments, it was not uncommon to find that oppression was an underlying theme behind the historical and multinational suppression of cultural practices by displaced indigenous communities. Many stated that they felt that they had lost access and knowledge of their art, culture, language, and ultimately, a sense of belonging, due to oppression.

Displacement and forced migration burden immigrants and refugees to integrate into the dominant culture's existing spaces and practices--with little afterthought to the disruption of long-held cultural bonds, kinship ties, and social networks that typically unify marginalized communities--and at the cost of social isolation. Furthermore, these marginalized communities often reside in rural and urban areas of the Central Valley where there are limited services or resources like clean water, street lights, parks, public transportation, recreation areas, and public gathering places. Genoveva Vivar Galvez, a TCOFP fellow from Tonyville, Tulare County, recalls how, in these underserved communities, constant scrutiny and the pressure for her Mixteco community to integrate have discouraged cultural practices there.

“Cultural life in my community means being able to express yourself without the fear of being judged by others, the ability to speak your native language without others looking at you funny, and a capacity for artistic expression through music, cooking, and sewing.”

-- Genoveva Vivar Galvez, TCOFP fellow

Marginalized communities such as these are penalized whether or not they attempt to integrate. They are isolated and disconnected from mainstream society and discouraged from performing their cultural practices. As a result, most people feel vulnerable in public and prefer to stay within the closed circuit of their own insular cultural or ethnic communities.

Both indigenous Mexican and Southeast Asian participants lamented the deep feelings of loss for their cultural self-knowledge and history despite proudly identifying with their respective cultures. Many blamed migration for the increased diffusion of this cultural knowledge and history. In the case of indigenous Mexican immigrants, racism was cited for the disruption of their cultural practices.

Community elders hold a great wealth of knowledge and history but, as fellows discovered through their cultural inventory, they often lack opportunities to transmit this information to the next generation. In one example, fellows identified multiple artisans from the indigenous Mexican communities specializing in basket weaving, music, and traditional food preparation--however, they were not able to practice these activities because they spent the majority of their time as farm laborers in the fields of the Central Valley. Hmong elders, on the other hand, were more concerned with preserving the meaning and purpose of sacred rituals, such as funeral ceremonies, within the context of their traditional cultural practice. Many Hmong elders have openly criticized that shaman funeral ceremonies have been adapted and modified for contemporary Hmong American audiences; and these alterations may threaten the original symbolism and significance of this cultural ceremony.

Immigrant and refugee communities around the world continue to grapple with ongoing challenges to preserve the significance of traditional cultural practices while responding to contemporary cultures in transition.

“I feel that culture is very important in my community because we do not have a place, land, or country to call our own. So it is very important for us to hold onto our culture and preserve it because if the culture dies/disappears, so does our community.”

– Pov M. Xyooj, TCOFP fellow

Social and Cultural Discrimination

Indigenous peoples have faced long histories of discrimination, even within their own homelands. This is particularly true for indigenous Mexican immigrants whose response to perpetual distrust has been to isolate themselves, socializing only within their closed communities, to avoid being exposed in public. Fellows noted that some immigrant and refugee communities were very reluctant to share their culture outside of their own identity groups because they felt uncertain of how others would respond.

TCOFP fellow alumni Brenda Ordaz recalled, “With migration within Mexico Zapotecos faced discrimination for their appearance, for what they ate, for how they dressed, and for how they spoke. This was especially harsh on children as they were bullied for speaking “Oaxaco.” As a result of this bullying and cruel name calling, people began to speak only Spanish in public places and they stopped teaching their children the language in fear of having their children made fun of. This created a generation of children that didn’t learn Zapoteco, including me.”

Women have been especially impacted by many layers of cultural discrimination, and they are often reticent or hesitant to participate in community dialogues, event planning, and other organizing events unless it is facilitated by a trusted community leader who speaks the native language. Fellows noticed that this eased their anxieties about being judged for communicating their feelings and concerns.

Impact of Migration

Another factor investigated by TCOFP fellows was the reasons why people leave their country of origin, their homeland, and migrate to the United States--particularly to California's Central Valley region.

Root Causes and the Impact of Migration

For many indigenous Mexican families, poverty was the main reason for migration--first, within Mexico, then to the United States. Migration became a way of life as these immigrants, many of whom worked low wage, seasonal agriculture jobs which forced them to uproot and resettle continuously throughout the year. Despite their overall improved economic status in the U.S., as compared to the extreme poverty which they fled in Mexico, many indigenous Mexican immigrants still live well under the poverty line and live in areas that lack access to basic services such as clean drinking water. This is true for the community of Mixtecos living Tonyville, and unincorporated community located 59 miles south of Fresno in Tulare County. A large majority of indigenous immigrants who settled near Madera also live in areas lacking basic infrastructure.

Civil wars and state-mandated violence by authoritarian governments were also the root causes for the forced displacement and migration of Hmong, Khmer, and Salvadoran communities. Displacement by wars presents tremendous difficulties adapting to new societies because of emotional and psychological trauma. TCOFP fellows from the Khmer community reported that incidences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) continued to impact families even many generations later.

*"It is important to start embracing the idea of the **right to not migrate**. Basically, what this means is that people should not be obligated or forced to migrate. They have the right to have employment opportunities like the people in the upper class in their countries of origin."*

- **Juan Santiago, TCOFP fellow**

The most commonly-mentioned impact of migration noted by TCOFP fellows was family separation, such as when some members of a family unite migrates while the remaining stay in their original home-country. As a result, fellows observed that households often had widely-varied migration histories and mixed legal statuses: there were family members who migrated as children, teens, or adults; and there were family members who were born in the United States. These vast differences had deep repercussions on the formation of national and cultural identity within each household, as well as varying levels of *sense of belonging* within each family. Household access to public and local resources relied heavily on family members' individual legal status. In the case of indigenous Mexican immigrants in the Central Valley, the large number of undocumented people within the communities also informed which immigration policies and issues received higher priority for local advocacy efforts.

Sense of Belonging Within Families

Identity formation within immigrant and refugee communities vary greatly because they are directly influenced by the nuances of their personal migration histories as well as their age upon first arrival in the United States. In many immigrant and refugee families, the legal status of each individual member can determine the level of integration into their host society as well as each person's sense of belonging.

The Hmong value close and well-maintained kinship ties based on patrilineal surnames whose origins are passed down, from generation to generation, through oral storytelling. Unfortunately, many first-generation Hmong refugees focused much of their time integrating into American culture at the cost of American-born second-generation Hmong youth who often know very little about the culture, customs, rituals, and traditions of their indigenous community. The so-called 1.5 generation, who are comprised of Hmong refugees who entered the United States as young children (less than ten-years-old), arrived in multiples waves of immigration starting from the mid-1970s through the early 2000s.

Hmong youth from both the second and 1.5 generation continue to struggle with integrating traditional Hmong values and cultural meanings despite growing up solidly immersed within American culture. According to Hmong fellow See Xiong, there are subtle disparities between first and 1.5 generation Hmong refugees versus second generation Hmong Americans who were born in the U.S. due to vast differences in personal narratives during the thirty-year period of transnational immigration. These disparities have shaped Hmong youths' identity formation as related to socioeconomic status, educational achievement, level of cultural integration (or lack thereof), and standards of living despite their similar age ranges. Xiong also observed that each generation self-identifies, more or less, as "Hmong."

The Khmer community's migration history was similar to the Hmong refugee community's timeline in that many families immigrated to the U.S. in multiple waves following the end of the Vietnam War, but they differed in that Khmer immigrant communities were already established in America, which helped foster easier transitions to American culture. The Khmer community also had the financial resources and capacity to build public gathering spaces such as temples, which made it possible for this Southeast Asian immigrant community to sustain their cultural traditions in Fresno while cultivating a stronger sense of belonging and ownership.

In contrast, limited access to indigenous materials, supplies, and resources have challenged indigenous Mixteco and Zapoteco communities to appropriate, reinvent, and recreate their cultural arts traditions, events, and cuisine with ingenuity.

Immigration Policies That Criminalize Immigrants

In recent years, immigrants, particularly those from Middle Eastern and Latin American countries, have been targeted by harmful rhetoric framing immigrants as national security threats and social burdens. Such negative narratives and anti-immigrant policies have alienated many immigrants from public discourse and, worse, encouraged xenophobia from non-immigrant communities.

Immigration policy dramatically shifted nearly overnight following the wake of 9/11 in 2001. Prior to this devastating national tragedy, U.S. Congress seemed poised to reinstate comprehensive immigration reform. However, public policies have since then emphasized the enhanced enforcement of border security, thereby criminalizing immigration and demonizing immigrants. This rhetoric has since escalated with the current White House administration under President Donald Trump, openly propagating xenophobic rhetoric against communities of color--immigrants, in particular--inciting a climate of divisiveness and political polarization. The ongoing national debates on border security and anti-Muslim sentiment have far-reaching effects, heightening reported hate crimes and violence directed toward the Muslim and Sikh communities at the local level--and many suspect that the number of unreported hate crimes is more devastating.

Immigrant communities continue to live in a state of constant fear and uncertainty due to U.S. policies that separate families, threaten indefinite detention and deportation, forcing these communities to further retreat away from the public eye, in silence. As one of the more vulnerable groups of peoples currently under attack, this reduces their agency and development as potential community organizers to address socioeconomic inequalities and the political disparities that maintain their marginalization.

Social, Cultural, and Political Exclusion

A recurring concern observed during discussions with immigrant and refugee communities was the systemic denial and violation of human rights through persistent social, cultural, and political exclusion. Some examples of these phenomena include the denial of full access to basic resources and benefits, and lack of opportunities to participate in community decision-making.

“The political, educational and other government systems in the Central Valley and U.S. at large have neglected to create welcoming spaces for immigrants that contribute so much to their society. We believe that if a more hospitable environment existed, indigenous communities would be able to contribute more in terms of cultural, artistic and civic participation.” - **Brenda Ordaz, TCOFP fellow**

Community members want to participate in civic discourse. They want to connect with their neighbors and society at large. They want to belong and also preserve their cultural heritage--each is an important component to staying connected to their peoples.

“The way the U.S. immigration policies have been implemented; it is a tremendous challenge for my community. The future of my community in the United States is very uncertain.”

– Juan Santiago, TCOFP Alumnus

Poverty

Despite having elevated themselves out of extreme poverty, indigenous Mexican immigrant farm laborers still live well below the national poverty line: the average annual household income for a family of four ranges from \$16,000-20,000 per year.⁶

Furthermore, these immigrants are also denied access to basic healthcare, higher education, pathways to citizenship, and other methods to true upward mobility.

People in poverty are forced to focus on meeting immediate demands for daily survival, and often do not have the time or opportunity to participate in social and political activities let alone leisurely recreation due to the physical, time, and travel demands of seasonal farm labor. This further distances these marginalized communities from participating in political discourse. Undocumented immigrants are also barred from legally participating in civic and political activities, leaving them essentially voiceless and powerless to oppose immigration policies that negatively impact their communities.

Do governments have a legal obligation to address the systemic exclusion of people living in poverty--regardless of their legal status--from the democratic process? For Magdalena Sepulveda, U.N. Rapporteur, the answer is obvious: people living in poverty must be recognized as equally-empowered agents of change who have the freedom to express their own views, make their own choices, and protest against stigma and prejudice that threatens their dignity and human rights.⁷

“[A] Human Rights approach to poverty is a crucial tool to combat stigma and prejudice against the poor.” - Magdalena Sepulveda, U.N. Rapporteur

Denial of Rights, Access to Civic Engagement Opportunities and Resources

EDUCATION

Indigenous Mexicans have experienced a long history of denied access to formal education, resulting in low literacy rates among adults and diminished job prospects. Education is a priority for most immigrants and their children.

Although the children of these immigrants may not face the same obstacles to obtaining a formal education, like their parents did, they still must navigate unique challenges in the academic system that presents pitfalls for indigenous youth as well as immigrants in

rural areas. For one, some students feel hopeless about the possibility of higher education due to its costs: it is too expensive and unaffordable, or prospective students lack local resources to navigate financial aid options. For others, schools do not feel welcoming or they do not actively foster relationships with parents to support student success; or, the admissions process is confusing and convoluted. As a consequence, some youth drop out of school to enter the job market to help financially support their family while sacrificing opportunities for further schooling.

According to fellows Brenda Ordaz and Juan Santiago, parents noted that higher dropout rates negatively impacted the entire Zapotec community. When the children of immigrants pursued higher education, the fellows noted, it was seen as a way to lift the entire community--not just the individuals alone.

The Khmer fellows observed that adults in their community struggle to understand the reasons why children drop out school and confront so many educational challenges. They see education as the future for the next generation and are concerned that those challenges affect not only the parents but ultimately the social mobility of the Khmer community.

Women from both indigenous Mexican and Southeast Asian community assessments placed their children's educational advancement as a top priority despite personally expressing their own regret for their own language and literacy limitations.

There is a prevalent misconception that immigrant parents are indifferent to their children's educational success--this is borne from a cultural misunderstanding: many women in the community assessments suggested that schools take on the responsibility to make concerted efforts to initiate relationships with parents, and to collaborate generously with local grassroots leadership to encourage new ways of learning how to work together and meet student learning outcomes as a community. In some immigrant cultures--Mexican, Khmer--parents place the responsibility of educating children solely in the schools, while the parents' role is to nurture and raise the child to adulthood. It is this separation of roles, public and private, that contributes to the erroneous assumption that immigrant parents do not care about the quality of education received by their children.

The lack of education deters many immigrants from civic participation due to self-consciousness about literacy and fluency of self-expression and can be disempowering for immigrant adults. Hmong and Khmer refugees expressed their frustration for depending on younger generations, their children and grandchildren, to communicate in English. Indigenous Mexican communities that neither read nor spoke English nor Spanish are often excluded from all civic discourse due to the significant language barriers.

ACCESS TO PUBLIC SPACES AND RESOURCES

The preservation of cultural traditions depends on access to opportunity, the right materials, proper infrastructure, and well-connected support networks, both within and outside the culture. Another crucial element is easily-accessible public spaces for social and cultural activities.

Indigenous Mexican and Hmong refugees who participated in the community assessment agreed that having access or owning a venue for the sole purpose of bringing people together to learn and discuss issues regarding their respective cultures while offering educational opportunities for youth and elders to share cultural knowledge was a high priority. For the Khmer and Muslim communities, houses of worship--temples and mosques--serve the same purpose: safe and public spaces where community members can congregate for cultural preservation activities.

Fellows learned that different communities perceive and interpret cultural arts in different ways. TCOFP fellow Cher Teng Yang (also known as Bee Yang) explained: *“For Hmong people, culture means a lot and is very important. It is part of who we are, and where our family and our roots come from. However, for some reason Hmong people see art as more connected to education, not culture. Hmong come from a background without formal education and the terminology of ‘arts’ is associated with picture drawing on paper or sculptures in the museum.”*

For some people, art was an activity that required higher education and mastery; artists were experts in their field, and expected to have advanced degrees or professional studies. This perception of art as a purely intellectual or commercial pursuit, as opposed to a form of creative expression and cultural practice, creates deep fissures along the boundaries of taste and aesthetics, lending an elitist air to high art (college-educated, advanced degrees) and derision for low art (mass-produced, outsider art), and plays well into feelings of cultural inferiority. “One approach to decolonization or addressing internal colonization can be to offer opportunities to communities impacted by colonization for reclaiming and validating their culture heritage and identity,” Quijano wrote. “For centuries, indigenous people have (. . .) come to believe that the work they do, or even their very existence, are meaningless, and internal colonization can result.”⁸

Cultural practices within indigenous communities are also not immune to internal factions, group fragmentation, and loss of unity through personal and political disagreements. One TCOFP fellow explained that, in the Igbo immigrant community, well-intentioned leadership practices guided by principle goals of autonomy and democracy were often diminished by local nepotism and favoritism. The same phenomenon was noted in other immigrant groups such as the Salvadorians, Hmong, Khmer, and others.

The fellowship program offered unique opportunities for indigenous communities to gather for the first time in public: Genoveva Vivar Galvez, a Mixteco fellow originally from the

state of Guerrero, Mexico, shared that her community assessment was the first event for the Mixteco community of Tonyville to gather together and engage in dialogue about real issues and challenges faced by the community. The event also presented an opportunity to share cultural traditions and nostalgia, memories which many had not shared publicly since migrating from Mexico to the US.

Civic Participation

Our understanding of civic participation, or what we call active citizenship, focuses on improving the capacity of individuals and communities to relate to the world around them as active, critical, reflective citizens. It is individuals coming together to shape the world around them, to influence and be active in decision making on matters affecting their individual, family and community life, in addition to voting.

Through the twenty years of our work we have observed the challenges immigrants and refugees confront to become full active members in addition to contribute to the economic agricultural wealth that is distinct to California's Central Valley.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

TCOFP community assessment shed light on some of the specific obstacles that prevent this population for engaging on public matters that impact them their family and communities. One of those is access to reliable and trustworthy media sources specifically produced for immigrant and refugee reading audiences. Media outlets providing current event coverage relevant to immigrant communities are few and far in between or nearly nonexistent. The lack of representative media further exacerbates social and political isolation, and a general lack of awareness and context for discussing and interpreting world events.

"When it comes to organizing communities, such as the Mixteco indigenous living in Tonyville, and unincorporated community in Tulare County, many obstacles occur along the way. When I was organizing the 'Ashamed No More' event, choosing the date, which one would think would be one of the easiest things to do, was actually one of the hardest. I had to choose a certain date because many of the member of my community migrate to other places, such as Stockton, Oregon, and Washington in search of agricultural jobs".

- **Genoveva Vivar Galvez, TCOFP fellow**



DISEMPOWERMENT

While others have long been excluded from participating in social change efforts, others have become apathetic and disengaged because of their experiences of being on the receiving end of the legacies of unjust policies. Such injustices have instilled in them fear and uncertainty, resulting in disempowerment, isolation and exclusion from social change efforts.

“When a person comes to a new country (I am basing much of this on my father’s experience) he has to decide how much he is going to become a member of the new society and how much he is going to remain a member of his old society. This can be emotionally difficult.” - Dolly Solomon, TCOFP fellow

On the other hand, fellows also noticed a lack of opportunities for immigrants and refugees to engage in dialogues addressing concerns of social nature. Illiteracy or limited formal education and mastering of the English language presents a tremendous obstacle for these communities to communicate and express concerns about social issues they confront. For a large number of the people participating in the community assessment this was the first opportunity to gather with other members of their community to discuss issues of public concern.

AWARENESS OF ISSUES

Based on dialogues and personal reflections, fellows noticed that the lack of awareness of how cause and effect manifested recurring issues also shaped how communities approached solving those issues. TCOFP fellow Cher Teng Yang (also known as Bee Yang) explained: *“Hmong adults have rich knowledge about farming but no knowledge of community issues. It’s overwhelming for them and they don’t know what to do about it.”* According to their assessments, people with some awareness of the root causes of recurring problems preferred to engage in informal conversations that concluded in feelings of regret and resignation; they would prefer to ignore the problem because they believed that they lacked the ability to implement the solution. In other cases, fellows observed that people who vented their concerns to others often expected those listeners to provide both the solution to their problem and the ability to implement all changes--a responsibility that was projected upon TCOFP fellows. The fellows concluded that it would be easier to engage, organize, and direct people toward solving a problem together if its causes and effects could be explained clearly to them.

Immigrants and refugees bring a wealth of cultural knowledge, yet they underestimate its value to their newfound communities in the Central Valley. Some fellows used this as a starting point to boost the confidence of their communities whereas other fellows used this as a point of departure to engage in introspective public dialogues. This is the particular case of Juan Santiago, who organized and observed a palm weaving workshop with Zapoteco women. *“Every time I hear the word culture, I have the tendency to connect it with the artistic works that my community does,”* Santiago said. *“The most visible and important artistic work is certainly the palm weaving of petates and tenates. Art has enabled the Zapoteco community to engage in dialogues.”*

“Since I got involved with this community assessment work, I noticed more and more people express their concerns to me when they see me.”

- Sokhmaly Ky, TCOFP fellow

“Culture means many things for my community, but above all we believe that culture connects us as indigenous people, and our cultural practices distinguish us from the mainstream society. Culture has a tremendous direct and indirect impact in the lives of the Zapoteco community. La Fiesta del Pueblo and Dia de los Muertos are some of our most significant events.” - **Juan Santiago, TCOFP fellow**

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING READINESS AND LEADERSHIP

Communities also experience difficulties in organizing people with limited resources. Common challenges that impede effective community organizing include: lack of time, lack of public gathering spaces, lack of opportunities to share different points of view. Work is the priority; it is the reason for migrating, a way to financially support family members in the homeland, and it remains the central focus of all activity. In this manner, community organizing can be seen as a social engagement, i.e. less of a priority.

One of the needs identified from the TCOFP fellows' community assessment is the need to develop stronger collective leadership among immigrant and refugee groups that inspires collaboration, empowerment, and positive change. Leadership capacity currently operates with limited power to implement solutions, resulting in feelings of apathy, insecurity, and general resignation about the value of organizing cultural events and public forums. Brenda Ordaz observed, *"The cultural strength of my community comes from the many cultural keepers living in the Valley. Many women know how to weave petates, and the community has already organized a Fiesta del Pueblo. This event demonstrates that there is potential to come together and organize; however, we still lack confidence to organize events because we don't think we are good enough to do it."*

Fellows observed that leadership pools were lacking or limited, despite the fact that other fellows could easily identify visionary and highly self-aware advocates and religious leaders from the Khmer and Muslim communities. What was missing was active collaboration and coalition building beyond initial enthusiasm, good intentions, internal politics, and potential disagreements on proper process. Fellows expressed feelings of hope and optimism to renew interest in developing these relationships.

Another challenge obstructing community organizing is the very nature of a community's insular, closed network itself: when immigrant communities come together in a show of ethnic cohesiveness, this does not render them into a monolith. Factions and internal divisions will arise based on qualities such as educational level, gender, and religious and political views. Fellows noticed that communication problems often derail opportunities to unite communities under a shared cause or common goal.

In addition, many leadership programs focus primarily on grooming potential individual candidates for success--at the expense of holistic strategies that would better serve the long-term needs for immigrant and refugee communities such as increased collective bargaining power, stronger coalition building, and strategic community partnerships that connect immigrants and refugees with collective leadership. As local leadership departs grassroots organizing efforts, once they have achieved nominal professional success or recognition, these communities are often left only with disillusionment and resentment.

Legal status was another challenging factor for community organizing as there are a large number of undocumented immigrants residing in the Central Valley. For this vulnerable population, they were intensely aware that their lack of proper documentation is an impediment to any attempts to cultivate civic and political lives. These individuals faced additional risks compounded on their uncertain future in the U.S.

LIMITED CROSS-CULTURAL COHESION

The third cohort of TCOFP fellows was tasked to deeply examine data gathered by the first two cohorts of fellows, and to initiate their recommendations for unifying Central Valley immigrants and refugees for increased collaboration, collective bargaining power, and cultural organizing. This signaled a shift in our community work: from building interethnic and inter-cultural cohesion to establishing a platform to increase civic and political participation. In this process, a different set of complexities was found: Central Valley immigrants and refugees do not always share similar political values, perspectives on social change, or assessments on systems of oppression. They also differed in the circumstances and era of their migration and/or displacement. They were not a monolithic community.

Nevertheless, despite these differences, immigrants and refugees in the Central Valley are similarly affected by systemic discrimination, oppression, and social exclusion. This has been very evident under the Trump administration. Both groups share similar reasons for migration: poverty, war, trauma, and other forms of social violence. Both groups were forced to leave their homelands due to the influences of international economic and geopolitical systems that forced them to relocate in the U.S., where they now struggle with racial and cultural discrimination, e.g. xenophobia and Islamophobia. Despite their different personal histories and timelines, their legal status or process of integration into American society, all immigrants and refugees desire to belong.

Immigrant communities find it difficult to negotiate cross-cultural understanding and acceptance with so few opportunities for positive interactions and cultural exchanges. When they are unable to share and promote mutual understanding, this enhances their sense of isolation, disconnection, and exclusion from mainstream society--which, in turn, widens further differences between generations in respect to approaches to religion, ethnic identity, gender dynamics, and more. Their systemic exclusion from public discourse increases their vulnerability to hate crimes, because it removes their agency to dissent, protest, and denounce xenophobic rhetoric from non-immigrant communities.



Gender Dynamics

Gender dynamics can influence women's level of participation, inclusion, involvement—or lack thereof—in public conversations on topics of political and community interest. Traditionally, these types of discussions were gendered masculine, meaning that women often deferred to men for public debates regarding issues that impacted the community as a whole, partly because women were traditionally not accustomed to being invited to share their thoughts on issues and challenges that they faced.

“This is especially true for Cambodian women, who don’t like to share their concerns or family issues with others, no matter how big or small their problems are. This is a big part of Cambodian women’s cultural issues. Some people in my learning group said they want to express their concerns and feelings about community issues but find it hard to find someone they trust or that is interested in the issues they face,” explained Sokhmaly Ky, TCOFP fellow

For many of the women interviewed, it was their first time ever being asked to share their opinions. Even so, some women expressed that they did not have the right credentials, authority, or position to speak about issues and on behalf of their communities. However, according to observations by the fellows, the traditional gender roles have begun to change. For other groups such as the Mixtecos, women were more willing than men to participate in community conversations as observed by Genoveva Vivar Galvez.

“I believe that women are the cultural holders of my community. While doing my community assessment, I came to realize that if women are given the opportunity and space to share issues they relate to, they are more than willing to express themselves... because the majority of them don’t usually talk. They were clearly excited to have the opportunity to communicate about their crafting and cooking skills in their own language and welcomed the chance to share with each other what they know.” - **Genoveva Vivar Galvez, TCOP fellow**

Intergenerational Gap

For younger generations, the pressure and emphasis on achieving the American Dream and “making it” presented conflicting and competing expectations for immigrant youth. They were expected to be professionally and academically successful while also competently preserving the cultural knowledge transferred from older immigrant generations. Unfortunately, these immigrant youths were often unable to bridge that communication gap, and hence failed to embrace their roots, history, and heritage to the level of expectations anticipated by the older generation. At the same time, the older immigrant generation also struggled with how to communicate cultural knowledge to a younger generation in transition.

Many factors combine to explain the generational gap between younger and older members within an immigrant community, but the most prevalent factor is language. When immigrant parents forgo teaching their children their native language in exchange for the socially dominant language, English, this eventually creates a communication barrier when parents and children no longer share equal mastery of common languages. In addition, children of immigrants whose parents refrained from sharing indigenous cultural practices, history, and heritage often suffer a dual sense of rejection: disconnection from their native, or family, culture; and discrimination, racism, and prejudice from mainstream culture. These youths sometimes suspect that they do not fit in or belong anywhere; they live within a gap that cannot be bridged between generations. These youths navigate, negotiate, and code switch between their *bicultural consciousness* daily.

This cultural gap may instill the fear that future generations will remain ignorant of traditional cultural practices, which are so essential to the formation of indigenous cultural identities. Immigrant parents may fear that their native cultures will be lost completely without their children’s active participation in cultural practice; and they have a difficult time understanding the circumstances of coming of age in the liminal spaces where cultural transformations happen. This cultural and communication gap often leads to family tensions between multiple generations of immigrants living in one household.

Participant dialogues revealed the need to bridge these cultural differences between older and younger generations to improve mutual understanding.

The community assessments also revealed that many youth felt discouraged to preserve their cultural traditions because they felt unappreciated or undervalued by their own communities. For example: Hmong youth members did not feel like active participants during traditional ceremonies because they were not asked to contribute their ideas or creative solutions during any part of the event. They felt like passive recipients; witnesses to a cultural practice being performed for their benefit, but not for their participation. In contrast, youth from indigenous Mexican immigrant communities are required to work alongside their families as they continually migrate between multiple job locations, leaving little room for ongoing education, leadership development, or opportunities to exercise cultural practices. They had no stability.

Some youth feel that older generations are out of touch and simply serve as gatekeepers to the old vanguard, obstructing attempts by emerging youth leadership to provide new ideas and new perspectives. L.A. Times journalist Peter H. King observed that “[s]ocial workers and Hmong leaders believe that the transitional problems facing the Hmong will not be solved in time to help the older generations; it is the children who will flourish.”⁹

“The cultural holders in my community are probably the elders, shamans, clan leaders, doctors and researchers, but I feel that my friends are the cultural holders in the community. They are proud to be Hmong, and they embrace the Hmong culture and traditions fully. Anyone who is proud of their culture is a cultural holder in the community,”

- TCOFP fellow Gao Vang shared.

According to one fellow, Gao Vang, “*In regard to [traditional Hmong] ceremonies, the younger generation does not see the importance of it. The younger generations have accepted the American ways, and parents wanted their children to have a good education and a promising career.*”

“*Parents cling to the old culture while their children are adapting to a new one, resulting in a communication gap between the elders and youth,*” explained fellow Sokhmaly Ky.

Sense of Belonging

“My family feels like why bother getting involved or doing things here if you are just a guest; and not only that, but an unwelcome guest.” - Minerva Mendoza, PVI staff

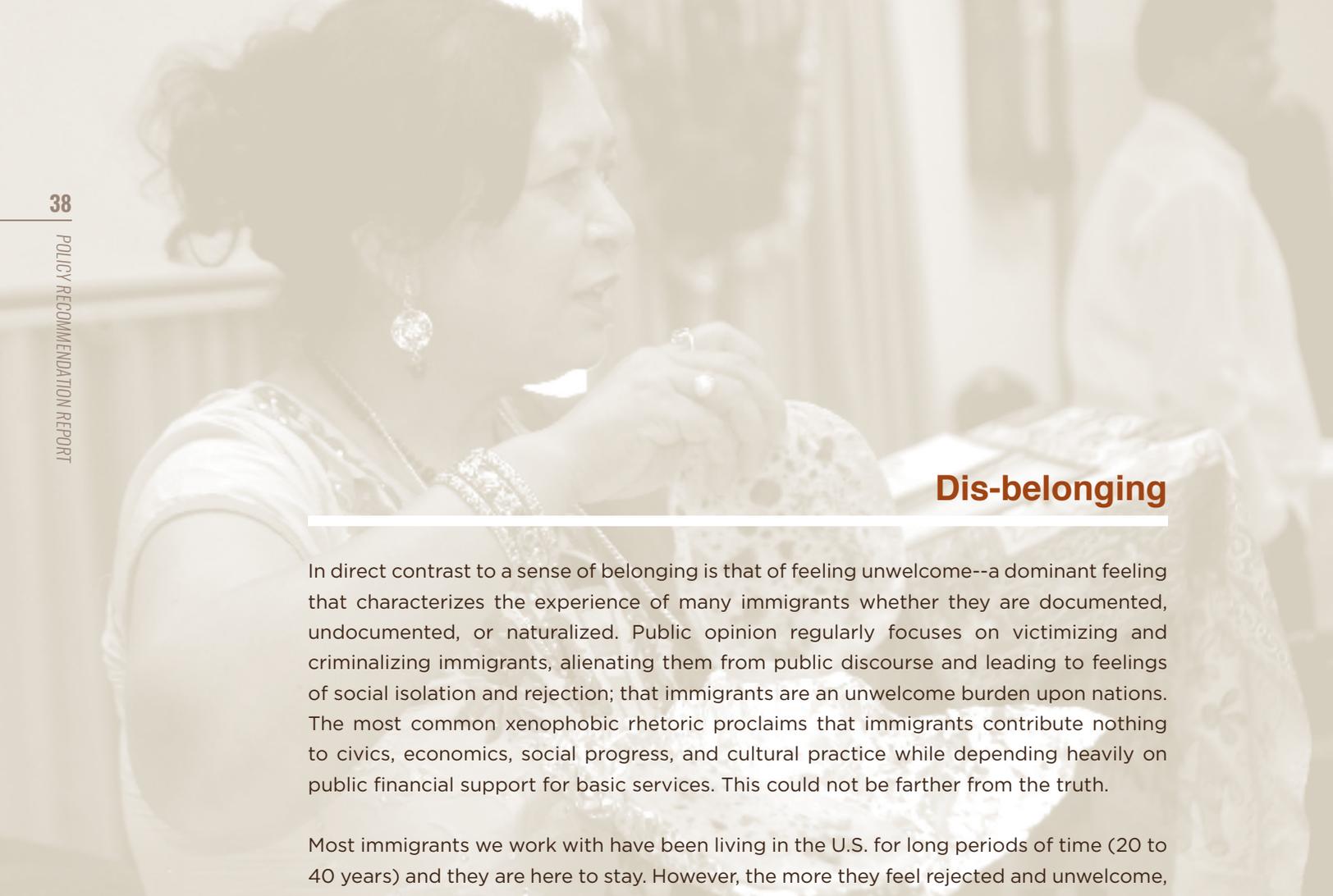
Through our work with immigrants and refugees throughout our twenty-year history, the Pan Valley Institute (PVI) has come to understand the centrality of building a sense of belonging as one crucial element for fostering civic, political and, in some instances, economic engagement. During PVI’s TCOFP fellowship program, fellows observed that immigrants ultimately developed a dual sense of belonging with each advancing generation, and their connections to their homeland are fed by both cultural practice and nostalgia.

A *sense of belonging* is the connection of people to a place or land, whether that be a country, city, town, or even neighborhood. It’s also the commitment an individual has for caring for that place and its people. A sense of belonging is important for an individual’s interaction within their community’s sociopolitical and economic context.

Some important elements included in the concept of belonging include:

- the social cohesions, networks, coalitions and ways in which individuals organize
- people’s understanding and expressions of life, such as individual memories, stories, forms of creativity and types of foods
- the formation of networks of care, commitment and solidarity
- the sense of dignity that stems from feeling a part of something larger than one’s self

“Culture is very important to my community because it is the only sense of belonging we have. When we migrate, we can only bring what we can fit in one backpack, so instead of bringing belongings, we bring our culture – practices and art that we carry in our hearts. Culture is the essence of a person; it is who we are,” explained Brenda Ordaz, a TCOFP fellow of Zapoteca origins.



Dis-belonging

In direct contrast to a sense of belonging is that of feeling unwelcome--a dominant feeling that characterizes the experience of many immigrants whether they are documented, undocumented, or naturalized. Public opinion regularly focuses on victimizing and criminalizing immigrants, alienating them from public discourse and leading to feelings of social isolation and rejection; that immigrants are an unwelcome burden upon nations. The most common xenophobic rhetoric proclaims that immigrants contribute nothing to civics, economics, social progress, and cultural practice while depending heavily on public financial support for basic services. This could not be farther from the truth.

Most immigrants we work with have been living in the U.S. for long periods of time (20 to 40 years) and they are here to stay. However, the more they feel rejected and unwelcome, the more connected they feel to their homeland, sometimes even forgetting the unjust circumstances that forced them to leave in the first place. Immigrants want to make a home and be accepted here, but not at the cost of abandoning the memories and cultural heritage they carried with them. The history of colonization is intertwined with these migration histories, and internalized colonization regularly reinforces a deep feeling of *dis-belonging* as they confront xenophobic campaigns that criminalizes immigrants as community members who should be feared, distrusted, detained, and discriminated against with impunity. In recent years, these negative attacks on the dignity and human rights of immigrants and refugees have manifested as bullying at school, incidents of Muslim women being physically assaulted simply for wearing traditional Hijab, hate crimes, and discrimination in the workplace.

The most common approaches to supporting immigrants and refugees focus on integration, placing all the responsibility on them: If they would only speak English, figure out how the government works and learn to navigate the system, then they would be fully integrated members of society. While these are important factors, our experience shows it to be a one-dimensional strategy that excludes the contributions immigrants can bring to the process. Fostering their sense of belonging and giving them reasons to invest in the community results in a more inclusive integration process. We should expect immigrants to adapt while respecting their right to be different.

Policy Recommendations

The following are six policy recommendations, which are intentionally drafted to be broad and general in a sense that they can be used to encourage and guide the design and implementation of community organizing strategies, starting at the local level, by individuals, organizations, institutions, and communities at large. These policy recommendations aim to address common issues and solutions identified by participants from the community assessments, findings grounded in the view that those closest to the problem are also in the best position to solve it. TCOFP fellows proposed actions to further focus these recommendations centered on **opportunity, access, and equity**. These three values are the catalysts for community-driven change, because they strengthen cultural pride, inter-community connections, and a sense of belonging—which, in turn, cultivate the conditions for culturally-rich and resilient communities in the California’s Central Valley.

Adopt Policies That Emphasize Belonging, Through Support for Shared Use Initiatives

The right to belong and the need for public gathering spaces are two important factors to improving community relationships as well as building connections to larger social networks and society as a whole. Public gathering spaces are physical sites where community members can convene, dialogue about issues affecting their community, and both practice and share their cultures with others. In the current political atmosphere of anti-immigrant rhetoric, public gathering spaces are needed more than ever to sustain community cohesion, and to ensure that immigrants feel welcomed and have the freedom to practice their culture in their homes, neighborhoods, and communities. A sense of belonging, personal responsibility and ownership built upon mutual respect for ideas and implementation are desired by community members across all generations; and will help emerging youth leaders mature and learn the sociocultural rules needed to apply to complex public policy decision-making processes.

There are creative ways in which community-wide entities can establish and adopt a policy on belonging and create temporary public gathering spaces when community resources are limited. One popular model for creative placemaking is the *Standing for Cultural Democracy: The USDAC's Policy and Action Platform*, which was launched by the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC) in November 2016, where underused spaces--such as available school building assets, worship centers, public plazas, parking lots, and empty retail storefronts--were converted by local community producers into pop-up cultural centers.¹⁰ This model was applied to cities, both large and small, as well as unincorporated communities, where abandoned spaces became community assets that offset issues such as lack of physical space, competing demands, and cost for upkeep.

The creation of temporary, or pop-up, public gathering spaces can be done in formal or informal ways. For example, joint use of facilities can serve as an important strategy for collaboration providing accessible spaces for neighborhoods and communities through a shared-use agreement.

Communities can approach government agencies (such as city administration, school districts, or parks and recreation departments, libraries etc.), nonprofits, and private organizations to arrange to share spaces such as school athletic fields, parks, playgrounds, gymnasiums, and auditoriums. Community groups can work with elected and appointed officials who champion and adopt a policy on belonging (with community input); who can endorse joint use agreements as well as mitigate regulatory barriers, and leverage funding and resources to offset shared costs. Arts commissions can also play a role in championing such a policy. If there are no existing arts commission, groups can work with elected officials to create a commission that is inclusive of diverse representatives from indigenous, immigrant, and refugee and cultural communities.

Community-based organizations may support community groups on either side of a joint use agreement— securing and using public or school spaces, or sharing their own facilities and resources with the community. Organizations may offer kitchens for food preparations, gymnasiums for dance practices; and auditoriums or multipurpose rooms for communal meetings, celebrations, and cultural exchange events.

Cities and communities seeking to adopt and implement shared use agreements should work closely together and consider a range of practical and logistical avenues. A successful joint use agreement brings together stakeholders to plan and participate in the agreement, enhances (and possibly share) costs, maximizes the spaces, and ultimately, expands access for underserved communities. Additionally, shared use agreements can be creative in the ways that it offers communities with limited resources or capital to exchange their time, talents, and arts for use of community centers. This in turn empowers communities to strengthen their capacities and builds the infrastructure of support needed for their cultural practices to thrive. Shared use can set the foundation for effective community-driven strategies for building communities where all residents, regardless of race, culture, or income, can take part in creating communities of belonging.

Example:

Oakland Schoolyard Initiative (OSI) in Oakland, California, is a public-private partnership between the city, the school district, philanthropy, nonprofit organizations, and private businesses to renovate and modify school playgrounds and fields, made accessible to community-based sports organizations and other programs to use after school hours, on weekends, and during school breaks.¹¹ East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC), a community-based organization working with low-income students in high-needs communities, coordinates the initiative in partnership with Oakland Unified School District and the City of Oakland. Sports activities are offered using a middle school's outdoor field and gymnasium. Expenses are shared between EBAYC and the school.

Invest Resources That Reflect a Culture of Inclusion, Justice, and Equity

Indigenous communities can feel pushed to social isolation and exclusion through their fear of being culturally discriminated. Local arts councils and arts commissions are tasked to address and shift the attitudes that encourage systemic institutional bias; and to allocate resources that strategically prioritize inclusion, equity, and justice for diverse communities and their cultural arts in order to transform their communities. Intentional funding investments address cultural equity and cultural justice, enabling communities to have access to a fair share of federal, state and local resources, and power. This can be achieved by allocating a portion of a city's annual budget to support art programming such as promoting public art installations, funding cultural celebrations tied to designated heritages, and to foster opportunities to engage, participate, and elevate the city's creative community. In addition to funding for programs, the city can also create an Office of Indigenous Advisors to engage indigenous community members in the process of identifying programmatic and resource needs and ensure their voices are represented in the decision-making process. The city can work closely with the community to identify the best approach for selecting advisors for the office, making sure there is representation of intergenerational members of the community from parents to youth and grandparents, and with diverse multiple fluencies across several indigenous languages, plus roles they can play in the group.

Cities and arts councils can also set aside initial funding for annual Tamejavi-like festivals that recruit local artists for cultural celebrations, which are often the only opportunity for immigrant communities to comfortably adjust to a new environment and break away from social isolation. At these social gatherings, members of immigrant communities find great opportunities to engage socially, convene, find fellowship, and develop a sense of pride in their cultural heritages. Public cultural arts showcase validate the artistic merits and cultural contributions of immigrant communities to a city's diverse outlook. *"I feel that it's crucial to have spaces and opportunities to recreate our artistic and traditional practices, because it's the only way to keep our culture alive. Without these spaces, we can't practice our culture, and if we can't practice our culture, we will lose it. These spaces are important not only for us, but for the community at large to understand us,"* explained Brenda Ordaz.

As seen through the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program, all communities, no matter where they came from, each have artists. Despite the barriers in which they expressed and named their 'arts' immigrant communities were proud of their arts and longed to keep them alive for future generations. Communities need the arts to thrive. *"But why we ultimately need art is because the arts do something that nothing else does, which is drive more stable communities and build community attachment and social cohesion and civic engagement. Our research shows that people who participate in the arts are*

more likely to participate in activities beyond the arts, like volunteering, at higher rates,” according to Jamie Bennett, executive director of ArtPlace America.¹² Arts can serve as a vehicle for dialogue among diverse groups where their perspectives, experiences, issues are equally represented and acknowledged.

As the Tamejavi Festival has demonstrated, presenting cultural arts in shared public spaces connects people across cultural divides—which increases comprehension of historically-marginalized groups, and fosters the agency of underrepresented communities to create, preserve and share their own stories through the arts. Cultural arts, and the communities that practice them, are important resources to building stronger inter-community connections. Inter-community connections—increased understanding between people of different cultures, backgrounds, experiences, and histories—foster richer dialogue between groups. Dialogue expands personal insight, and it creates a shared sense of community, which in turn lays the foundation for collaboration and exploration of solutions to sustain vital cultural and community traditions.

Example:

Robert Garcia, City of Long Beach Mayor, committed funds from the 2019 city budget to sustain museums, murals, the Arts Council of Long Beach, new signage, the annual State of the Arts event, and new arts programming initiatives such as Percent for the Arts. The intention behind the Percent for the Arts program is to fund public art to bolster the city’s thriving creative community and local economy. Each year, the city hosts an annual State of the Arts event to reveal annual public arts projects and to recognize local artists’ contributions to the Long Beach community. The annual POW! WOW! Long Beach Arts Festival, produced in partnership with the Arts Council of Long Beach, also recently raised \$800,000.¹³

Expand Programs That Fosters Preservation of Indigenous/Native Languages

Community members interviewed shared concerns that the language gap among different generations made it more difficult for them to pass on cultural traditions, and that having access to case studies from active organizations and programs engaging with indigenous communities would provide much-needed context to further develop future programming models. While some educational institutions may already offer Spanish and other college-transferable foreign language courses, there is room to develop and even expand programs to include indigenous/native languages not already offered for communities through local schools, community colleges, adult schools, community centers and/or city-run recreation centers. Advocacy efforts can focus on putting together a program backed by community support, and adoption of the expansion of programs to enhance language preservation, bridge communication gaps, prepare workforce readiness, and strengthen language acquisition skills that support the academic achievement of students. Through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), local school districts are mandated to engage and solicit the input and feedback of parents, students, and community members in the development of the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), which serves as a budgeting tool aligning goals and allocation of resources intended to improve the achievement gap for low-income students, English Language Learner students, and Foster Youth. Communities can advocate for funds to support the inclusion of indigenous/native languages not already offered through local schools. Funds can be utilized to hire teachers and classroom instructional aids, and pay for classroom space and resources needed for language instruction.

Other institutions including adult schools, colleges, and universities can also play an important role in creating and offering summer language and arts programs linked to academic preparedness and literacy (and the prevention of summer learning loss) specifically for indigenous youth while providing teaching opportunities for student teachers-in-training as well as artists from the communities to teach the language and cultural arts. In addition, higher education campuses can also provide students and their families opportunities to tour the campuses and learn more about college preparedness, financial aid support, and resources available that help low-income students go to college.

Successful community-centered language arts programs are based on partnerships grounded in a shared vision, and where resources from both partners are leveraged for maximum benefits to the intended participants, in this case, students. According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language, there are numerous advantages and benefits of language learning for students which include support in the development of students' reading abilities, increased linguistic awareness, higher academic performance on standardized tests and in college, higher academic performance and greater self-efficacy among language learners who use native language skills to interpret for family members among many other benefits.¹⁴

Example:

Organizing and advocacy among teachers, parents, and students, led to the Fresno Unified School District board approval and pilot of Hmong language immersion program recently implemented at Vang Pao Elementary School—giving Hmong students access and opportunity to learn their native language.¹⁵ The next steps and goals were to expand Hmong language classes offered at all grade levels and attain the California Department of Education biliteracy seal of approval award for high school graduates who attain a high level of language proficiency for one or more languages in addition to English. Hmong heritage language classes are already offered at eight high schools providing instruction on communication, culture, reading, writing, and speaking. Another program, in its 14th year and run by Concordia University at Saint Paul, Minnesota, the Hmong Culture & Language Program Building Cultural Bridges Summer Camp offers a two-week summer learning program for Pre-K through 12th grade students.¹⁶ Housed on the university campus and taught by trained high school youth, university students studying teaching, and local school district teachers, the program offers classes in literacy, science, music, art, dance, and sports. Students receive breakfast and lunch provided through the USDA Summer Food Program.

Transform Public Institutions Into Community-Centered Hubs and Provide Opportunities That Strengthen Community and Civic Engagement

Interviewed community members shared a collective interest to engage in the larger society, to share their culture, and build relationships with other groups. Given the right opportunities, support, and infrastructure, relationships can be strengthened so that they bolster cross-cultural dialogues and increased civic engagement around shared community issues and aspirations. Public institutions, in this case, have an important role to play in communities. In recent research, a visit to the library was perceived as a positive experience for most people and the notion of libraries providing opportunities for various types of activities was highly valued among its visitors. Public libraries are valued by and serve as essential sources of information and civic pride for communities. There is much more today's modern library can offer to its diverse patrons and it can serve an important role in building community as well as encouraging civic participation. The traditional book-based library service is changing and this calls upon libraries to evolve and better meet the needs of communities—create safe and more inclusive environments for all—where a mix of programs and services, bilingual staff and language specific programs reflect diversity in wider communities.

Libraries, particularly those located in small and rural towns, are the one-stop-shop all year round providing free educational services, access to books, internet access and spaces for low-income children, youth, and adults. Some libraries may face challenges of limited staff capacity, funding cuts, and decreased amount of book loans. That makes their roles all the more valuable to communities. Libraries have tremendous potential to serve as a trusted community and cultural hub taking on the role as partners, conveners and facilitators of dialogue and services. They have the space, already serve diverse groups of people, provide Wi-Fi internet connection, and librarians have a wealth of knowledge on many topics that can benefit communities as well as address ongoing and emerging needs. Increasing community and civic engagement can be achieved through partnerships where libraries bring people together, listen to and learn from community voices that may help improve dialogue across inequality. Communities such as the Zapoteco group, of which fellow Juan Santiago is a community member, already have a culture of communicating, sharing, and gathering based on relationships and trust. *“Community-based dialogue is not common in my community, which does not mean that there is no communication among us. We see community dialogue very differently. To us, community dialogue takes places at fiestas, family gatherings, and oftentimes at the remate or swap meet. As a matter of fact, in my community, news spreads very fast because we all know each other. We are very good at communication indeed,”* reported Juan. Public libraries can engage communities as equal partners, work together and coordinate inclusive and community-led conversations, trainings, and educational and civic activities that span age and gender.

For example, communities wanted to learn more about current immigration policies and how implementation impacts communities, so they understand their rights and can become engaged in efforts to reform immigration policies. Libraries can partner with local community advocacy groups and organizations and put on educational workshops on immigration issues, voter education, citizenship, civic participation and so on. Librarians are trained and well positioned to inform the conversations around these issues that are taking place in communities. Libraries provide a critical link to communities and can partner with other public institutions such as county human services departments, health care clinics, child care centers, schools to enhance access to critical services that are grounded in the shared goal of seeing communities thrive. Shared services open up the library for new interactions and create a trustworthy relation with immigrant communities that would not otherwise visit the library.

Additionally, libraries can serve as vibrant cultural hubs--or “third places,” as described by Marcela Cabello and Stuart M. Butler in an article for The Brookings Institution--and over 90 percent of adults find public libraries to be “welcoming and friendly places” with arts programs for all age groups, cultural artist residencies, events honoring heritages, workshops, and exhibitions and so many more opportunities that engages diverse cultural communities. Cabello and Butler identified four key components to determine successful third places: location, accessibility, trust, and a sense of neutrality--and one reason why libraries thrive is because “they and their librarians have gradually taken on other functions well beyond lending out books.” In fact, “[t]hey help local people figure out the complexities of life.”¹⁷

Example:

The Hartford Public Library in Connecticut runs a program, The American Place (TAP), a free program that assists new immigrants and refugees acclimate to their new city. Through partnerships with community leaders and organizations, TAP provides a series of employment, immigration and citizenship, English language classes, legal orientation, Know-Your-Rights forums, and makes referrals to other services, all in five diverse languages.¹⁸

Educate Students About the Indigenous Communities, Their Histories of Migration, and Their Contributions in the Central Valley

Understanding of their own histories of migration among diverse immigrant groups helps shape the identities of indigenous communities here in the U.S. A shift in local school policies to integrate curriculum that educates students about the histories of migration and exposure to the cultural arts of indigenous groups in the Central Valley can play a critical role in how youth understand and address identity issues which in turn strengthens intergenerational engagement and communication. An educational setting can at times provide a starting point for youth to learn and reflect in ways they might not otherwise be able to do when at home or with their communities. Sometimes it takes structured learning opportunities to encourage and empower youth to reclaim their histories, stories, and culture that in turn encourages them to ask their elder family members to share their own stories. Sokhmaly Ky shared, *“The most important change we can make in regard to communication is encouraging youth and elders to understand and embrace their cultural differences.”* That encouragement can come through a school policy to adopt and implement ethnic studies classes where curriculum is shaped with the input and the stories that reflect local indigenous communities.

When implemented well ethnic studies addresses the disparity in curriculum, offering culturally relevant content that is reflective of the diverse student population. Ethnic studies teach students about the social, political, economic, cultural, and historical perspectives and experiences of diverse ethnic populations. In addition, ethnic studies challenges prevailing anti-immigrant narratives, negative stereotypes, and prejudices and in turn enhances the social and political awareness of the identities of racial and ethnic groups among students. A Stanford study reported that ethnic studies courses helped boost student attendance, grade point averages (GPA), and course credits for struggling students.¹⁹ More importantly, by taking ethnic studies courses, youth of color begin to see themselves in history being made in the present moment which boosts their self-esteem, critical thinking skills, and helps them become more involved in their education, their communities, and prepare for the workforce. Equally important, ethnic studies build multicultural understanding among youths of all ethnicities, even white students who have in some ways been miseducated about their own history as well as the history of people of color. Understanding welds connections between youths and paves the way for acceptance and more trusting relationships beyond the classroom.

Example:

Sacramento City Unified School District adopted a resolution and has implemented ethnic studies as a requirement for graduation scheduled to be in place by 2020.²⁰ The proposal for Ethnic Studies Resolution was brought forth by the Student Advisory Council after surveying 1,000 students through a participatory action research. In order to learn about the ethnic studies graduation requirement, the Advisory group partnered with California State University Sacramento, San Francisco State University, University of California at Davis, and several school districts across the state. The ethnic studies program was integrated into the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) to ensure adequate funding for implementation.

Increase Youth-Centered Leadership Development Opportunities

Fellows reported the need for meaningful roles and development opportunities for immigrant youth within their families and in the larger society. Families and youth shared concerns about youth not being able to partake in the continuation of cultural traditions and arts. The language gap and intergenerational differences contributed to a multitude of challenges for youth who in some ways desired to practice their cultures but felt pressured to also excel in school, to succeed in America, to grow as leaders so that they could help their families which meant sacrificing part of their culture and language. Critical to addressing these issues is the local investment of funds and resources toward mentorship and leadership opportunities for youth. One way is through publicly funded arts-based employment programs that incorporate academic enrichment, artistic/creative expression, leadership and workforce development, and community engagement at the same time. County-led workforce development boards and economic development organizations receive youth employment funds through local, state, and federal programs that can be commissioned, with creativity and innovation in mind, to hire local youth for community arts projects. Arts projects could be designed in partnership with public institutions, organizations, and businesses to promote new ventures, attract people to public spaces such as downtowns, and celebrate cultures through large scale events such as fairs, parades, sports events and so on. The public services projects can be offered in-school and out-of-school in collaboration with school districts that ensure access for all youth. These types of projects help youth feel more connected to their cultures and empowers them to develop new skills that bridge communication gaps within their families. Youth also gain valuable job skills and build leadership capacities to organize communities in solving community issues. Successful programs must involve youth voice in order to provide meaningful roles and projects that validates and instills pride for their work as well as their communities.

Example:

Creative Art Works, a program based in New York City offers full-time summer jobs and part-time after school jobs for youth 14-24 years old.²¹ Youth participate in the planning, creation, and installation phases of large-scale public arts projects throughout Manhattan. Through the program, youth develop valuable leadership and employment skills. Funding for the program comes from several foundations as well as the Office of the Manhattan Borough President and city's department of cultural affairs in partnership with the City Council.

Considerations

The Central Valley is rich in its diversity of immigrants who have migrated from all over the world and made this place their home. Immigrants have brought their cultures, values, and their aspirations for a better life. The lack of resources, spaces, infrastructures both within and outside of these communities calls for the reimagination and transformation of public institutions and public spaces and the ways in which they harness the wisdom of communities as equal partners in setting the foundation for communities of belonging. *“We continue struggling within tradition and modernity and perhaps we need to leave room for both because we are no longer in our country and we are building a new country,”* shared one fellow (unnamed). It is not only up to the immigrant communities and their elders and their youth to uphold their language, arts, and culture. Everyone has a role and a responsibility to create communities of belonging where cultures are valued and embraced for adding richness to the livelihoods and the place they call home.

Conclusion

Multiple conversations from the community assessments shed light on the shared aspirations for community unity, spaces for the expression of cultural arts and traditions, education, and youth leadership to create welcoming places for immigrant communities to live and thrive. Grounded in these collective aspirations, communities and public institutions can join forces to address shared concerns and influence positive change. Recurring concerns around integration, cross-cultural and intergenerational gaps to the loss of language and communication gaps among other issues challenges immigrant and refugee communities to catalyze their cultural pride and collective power to make the Central Valley a more accepting and welcoming place to call home.

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Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP)

Fellows Biographies

Bee Yang is a political refugee from Laos and identifies as ethnic Hmong. Seven years after the Vietnam War, his family escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand. In 1986, three months shy of his 18th birthday, Bee and his family came to America and settled in Fresno, California. He has taught Hmong language courses under the Linguistic Department at California State University, Fresno, since 1992 and, in 1996, he obtained a master's degree in social work from the same university. Since 2002, Bee has taught social work at the university. He also dedicates his time teaching Hmong language and cultural belief systems classes to the next generation of Hmong community members.

Brenda Ordaz was born in Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico, and is the daughter of Zapoteco farmworkers. She immigrated to Madera, California, when she was eleven. She is currently attending college and works as an organizer for the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. Brenda is also a committed cultural promoter, recently writing and performing in *The Fandango Zapoteco*, a play representing a traditional wedding. She believes the greatest changes can be achieved through culture and art, which brings communities together on common ground.

Chelsey See Xiong is a 1.5 generation Hmong American who was born in a Hmong refugee camp in northern Thailand. Her family immigrated to Central California in the mid-1990s. See worked as a coordinator for Fresno State's Office of Asian Pacific Islander Programs and Services, and she wrote for the student newspaper *Asian Pacific Review*. In 2014, she signed on to work on Hmongstory 40, an exhibit that tells the 40-year migration history and experiences of Hmong communities across California.

David Martinez was born in a small town called San Martin Itunyoso located in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. He came to the U.S. at the age of seven to be with his single mother. He currently resides in Madera, California. David graduated from high school in 2011, and, in 2013, he became an active member of Fresno Immigrant Youth in Action (FIYA). FIYA, working together with other organizations, helped organize DACA workshops helping undocumented youth across the Central Valley.

Dolly Solomon was raised in India. She earned a degree in English, Hindi, and Punjabi languages, and has worked in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh (India). Dolly learned from her parents to value education and hard work, and to give back to the community. She has served many roles as an educator for 20 years and was principal of Pretty Naveen High School in Gurdaspur, Punjab, and an editor of the college magazines *Deep Shikha* and *The Mirror*. Dolly considers herself a lifelong learner interested in self-development and the development of others, particularly, in the areas of mental health, family, aging, success and loss, domestic violence, and social justice. She is invested in making new Indian immigrants have space to pass on their cultural knowledge and artistic craft to new generations. Her work includes serving as a Punjabi Language & Cultural Specialist at Healthy House Within a MATCH Coalition in Merced, California, and working on a project benefiting the elderly in Livingston. Dolly was a Tamejavi fellow during the pilot phase of the program, and she hopes to continue the cultural work she started.

Gao Vang was born in Hamilton, Montana, and is the daughter of Laotian immigrants. She moved to Fresno when she was three and has lived there ever since. Although she was not raised with traditional Hmong values and norms, Gao learned more about her culture as she grew older and is an active member of the Hmong American Student Association (HASA) at Fresno City College. She is currently doing research into the history and cultural meaning of traditional Hmong clothing. This work will be exhibited during the 40th anniversary of Hmong refugees arriving in the U.S.

Genoveva Vivar Galvez was born in Guerrero, Mexico, and immigrated to the United States with her mother and siblings when she was eight. The youngest of five siblings, Genoveva was the first in her family to graduate from high school and attend college. Her experience working in the fields under harsh conditions showed her the importance of informing immigrant farmworkers of their labor and human rights. As a fluent speaker of Spanish, English and Mixteco, Genoveva bridges the communication gap and helps her community address the issues that impact them most.

Jameela Khan was born in Kenya (East Africa) and is of Pakistani/Indian descent. She grew up in an environment where diversity was a daily part of her life; she went to school with, worked with, and was neighbors with people that had a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities. Being surrounded by so many different types of people resulted in her being able to read, write and speak the Swahili, English, Urdu, some Punjabi and Gujarati languages. Upon arrival in Fresno, Jameela volunteered at the Islamic Center and was selected to serve on the Board of Trustees because of her dedication, leadership, and ability to collaborate on projects and events. Jameela believes her religion teaches her to help others and interact with everyone with peace, love, and unity, and she follows this teaching to the best of her ability. She believes people are much more similar to each other than they are different.

Jamillah Finely was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and she is the only child of a musician immigrant from Bermuda and an artist from North Carolina. Although she identifies as African American, she feels deeply connected to her British Island roots. Jamillah grew up experiencing

the arts community, and she is now a high school teacher who uses the arts to engage students and connect them with their community. Her youth organization The Talented Tenth raises awareness of social issues through poetry, dramatic interpretation, music and dance.

Juan Santiago Ramirez was born in Oaxaca, Mexico, where he and his family migrated frequently in search of seasonal farm work. As a result, Juan spent his early childhood working in the fields instead of learning in the classroom. This experience motivated him to enroll in school after emigrating with his mother to the United States in 2001, where he reunited with two older siblings in Madera, California. He is the first member of his family to graduate from both high school and college. Juan earned a bachelor's degree in political science from California State University, Fresno, and participates in organizations advocating for civic engagement in immigrant communities.

May Lee was born in Laos and grew up in the United States. She first arrived in the United States in 1978 and lived in Memphis, Tennessee, and Boulder, Colorado, before making Merced her home. She and her husband are blessed with six beautiful daughters and one son, and are the proud grandparents of three beautiful grandchildren. Family is the most important thing to May and her husband. They have always encouraged their children to reach for their dreams, work hard and accomplish what they set their minds to. She feels fortunate to have the support and love of family and know that she and her family can accomplish anything with determination and drive.

Michelle Xiong was born and raised in Merced, California. As a Hmong American, she has always felt the need to give back to the Hmong community. After graduating from University of California, Santa Barbara, Michelle moved to San Jose and interned for Councilmember Madison Nguyen for six months. Fueled by the desire give back to the Hmong community, Michelle moved back to Merced to live with her parents. She volunteered and worked as an advisor for a high school club, KIWIN'S, and organized a number of events and leadership activities teaching students how to communicate effectively with their peers and adults. She recently served as the Youth Coordinator for Building Healthy Communities in Merced. Michelle believes that giving back to her community is one of the most rewarding life experiences.

Pov M. Xyooj was born in Long Beach, California, and is the son of Hmong refugees who came to the United States from Thailand. Pov is the first in his family to be born in the U.S. and the first to graduate from a four-year university. He graduated with a B.S. in physics and a minor in Asian American studies UCLA. While in college, Pov was part of several Asian student organizations. He worked with the Hmong TV network and volunteered with several community organizations.

Reginald C. Maduako was born in the city of Mbandaka, in the southern region of Nigeria. After finishing high school, he moved to the United States to further his education. He is now a registered nurse and an artist. He inherited his artistic talents and cultural knowledge from his mother, who instilled in him a love for Igbo culture and tradition. Reginald sings, dances and is a versatile musician who plays many instruments. He would like to see more accessible cultural and artistic offerings in the culturally diverse Central Valley.

Ruben Lucero was born and raised in Fresno, California, and spent part of his childhood in Mexico. He identifies as Indigenous Otomin of Mexican descent, and studied history and Chicano Latino studies at Fresno City College. He actively coordinates community activities, including Cesar Chavez-themed marches and celebrations, “Barrio Art Collective”—a grassroots community gathering celebrating more than 500 years of indigenous resistance—and sustains several local community gardens. He is a member of several cultural organizations, including Co-Ce-Cha, May First committee, Fresno City Mecha, Fresno Brown Berets, Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), Fresno Copwatch, and the Community Alliance newspaper.

Salvador Ramos Romero is the oldest of twelve children and a member of the Purhepecha indigenous community of Cheran, Michoacan, Mexico. He and his wife are the proud parents of three daughters, who were born in Mexico and Lindsay, California. Salvador participated in Tamejavi Festivals as a self-taught papel picado artist, a skill that he learned in Mexico where he fondly recalls growing up very happy despite extreme poverty. He served on the advisory committee for the city of Lindsay’s 24th region migrant program, and is a frequent representative at regional meetings and conferences.

Sandab Suon was born in 1950 in Kampong Speu province in the West Central part of Cambodia. In Cambodia, Sandab was a nurse, soldier, and a refugee. From 1980 to 1991, Sandab spent his life in a refugee camp and participated with Khmer People National Liberation Front to fight against the invasion of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia. In 1991, he immigrated to the United States. In Fresno, Sandab volunteers his time working closely with Cambodian Community, participates and coordinates Khmer cultural activities and events as a means to build cohesion in the community.

Silvia Rojas immigrated to the United States in 1992 at the age of seventeen, and worked in the fields. Before coming to America, she managed the local clinic in the town of Santiago Tino Miztepec in Oaxaca, Mexico, from the age of thirteen. Silvia has since participated in the group Se’e Savi in Madera, California, as both performing artist and committee member. In 2006, she participated the Naaxini project, which helped further develop her leadership skills to address health issues affecting the indigenous immigrant community.

Sokha Serey was born in Khou I Dhang, a refugee camp located near the border of Thailand and Cambodia, and came to the United States when she was one-year-old. She is Cambodian American, the second-oldest of six children, and a practicing Buddhist. Sokha held the responsibility of being the oldest sibling, because her elder brother was blind since birth, and she became the first person in her family to attend college. She is the former president of the Cambodian Collegiate Association (CCA) and worked as a certified nurse’s assistant at San Joaquin Valley Rehabilitation Hospital. She aspires to become a physician and help improve the lives of others.

Sokhmaly Ky was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. When the Cambodian government collapsed, she was removed from the city to a rural village. After 16 years fleeing the communist forces, Sokhmaly made her way to America and recently received her American citizenship. She is proud to uphold the many Cambodian traditions and values through



her involvement in many Khmer community events and helped form the United Khmer Cultural Preservation, an organization that offers spaces for Cambodians to practice their art and culture and to address community issues.

Tahereh Taherian was born and raised in Iran, where she was nourished by her country's rich history, music, art, and poetry. Tahereh discovered her intense love, pride, and fiery passion for her culture and heritage as a teen. She moved to the United States when she was twenty, and she has worked as a Title I teacher at Steinbeck Elementary School. Tahereh is an active member of the Iranian Culture and Art Club, an organization that promotes the advancement of Iranian culture. She has coordinated programs and events focused on creating a deep cultural environment for fellow Persians, as well as introducing Persian history and art to American society. She takes on public relations roles and master of ceremonies at several programs, such as Nowruz, the celebration of Persian New Year.

Walter Ramirez was born in El Salvador. At the age of 16, he immigrated to the United States with his mother. As a Salvadorian immigrant, it was difficult being a minority within the minority. He felt discriminated against for being different, not only by the Anglo community, but also by his own Latino community. Walter has been heavily involved in immigrants' rights organizing, and he is a member and volunteer for several organizations that seek to improve the quality of life for minorities through education, arts, and culture.

Wasan Abu-Baker was born and raised in Palestine. She was brought up in a highly-educated household with a father who was politically active and outspoken for the civil rights of Palestinians through non-violent action. This upbringing, faith, family, and friends have instilled in her a desire to motivate others to do good and to advance their opportunities. A bachelor's degree in Medical Technology and a master's degree in Childhood Special Education have given her the tools necessary to approach the technical and humanitarian side of all issues. These skills have allowed her to use science and art to design programs to build understanding and communication between people of all ages and backgrounds. She has worked as a volunteer at area elementary schools, board member of MyDeen Center and the Central Valley Islamic Council, and has worked with various charitable efforts in the Fresno area to build support and understanding of the most vulnerable segments of our society.



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