

More People Power

Building a stronger global movement for democracy and development

“We need a new global identity because national institutions are incapable of handling a set of unprecedented global predicaments.”

- YUVAL NOAH HARARI, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*

Millions of people with the most at stake in the global struggle for democracy and development are on the sidelines. To effectively respond to climate change, extreme inequality, large-scale migration, AI, and rising authoritarianism, more people whose well-being is threatened by these interconnected challenges need to be actively engaged in civic and political life. This goes beyond consultation and mobilization. People need to be members of organizations powerful enough to hold governments and companies accountable, organizations rooted in communities so they can drive development, while networked nationally and internationally to influence policies that perpetuate poverty. To defend and deepen democracy, we need stronger narratives that unite people across nationality, race, and religion and motivate people to organize together.

In 2018, Faith in Action International began a concerted effort to strengthen, grow, and better connect grassroots faith-based organizing in Central America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Five years later, we support organizing in 274 communities in eleven countries, and growing. Through the **Root Causes Initiative** and **A Way Forward in Haiti**, we're bringing U.S. diaspora communities together with organizations in Central America and Haiti to shape U.S. development and foreign policy. We're strengthening ties between secular and religious organizations working for social change globally, and helping U.S. organizers learn from peers in other countries. We describe our work as building a world where everyone **belongs, thrives, and has a say over their future**. What we're learning has implications for locally-led development, policy change that addresses the underlying causes of poverty in developing countries, and the struggle to defend and deepen democracy worldwide.

This paper has a **chart summarizing our theory of change** and **two main sections on democracy and development**, followed by **examples from some countries where we support organizing**.

SNAP SHOT

274 community teams

7,500 grassroots leaders

11 countries

Africa: Ghana, Rwanda, Tanzania and Kenya

Latin America: El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and México

The Caribbean: Haiti




Eastern Europe: Hungary and Slovakia



Theory of Change

Linking democracy, development, and policy change at local, national and international levels

Building a more powerful global movement for democracy and development requires scale, discipline, and long-term thinking focused on strengthening and better connecting organizations. Faith in Action International contributes to this movement-building by providing coaching, training, fundraising, and peer-learning to national multi-faith organizations that work through teams of grassroots leaders in local communities. We help organizations grow their membership, capacity, and ability to run national policy campaigns. We connect organizations to work on regional and international issues, and help people build new or stronger organizing efforts in their countries. Our goal over the next five years is to build a global organizing network with hubs in West and East Africa, Central America/ Mexico, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe. The chart below summarizes how we think about the intended impact of our work.

	LOCAL	NATIONAL	INTERNATIONAL
Democracy 	Creating democratic accountability between organized people and their elected officials.	Building multi-faith civic power to counter-balance authoritarianism and connect democracy to improvements in public welfare.	Building political will for international rules that raise the cost of undermining democracy and human rights.
Development 	Driving development based on priorities set by local residents.	Channeling domestic resources into development prioritized by residents in the most marginalized communities	Changing how aid institutions operate to follow the lead of civic organizations with deep grassroots bases.
Policy Change 	Local organizing campaigns drive the design and implementation of national policy campaigns.	National campaigns on land rights, climate, social spending reorient governments to inclusive development.	International campaigns re-focus US and international policy on the root causes of poverty and migration.



Defending and Deepening Democracy



Strong local civil society and international norms are two critical factors determining the see-saw between democracy and authoritarianism. The return to multi-polar competition between great and medium-sized powers is creating more space for bad actors to break democracy and human rights. To counter-balance the political and criminal forces conspiring to undermine the rule of law in country after country, we need to strengthen civic movements within countries and build a more powerful global constituency behind policies, such as targeted financial sanctions, that raise the cost of authoritarian governance. We have ample evidence that the combination of internal and external pressure can prevent democratic backsliding and, under the right circumstances, resurrect democratic institutions. And that grassroots organizing can play an important role in connecting democracy to material improvements in living conditions.

Faith leaders in Latin America and Africa are among the most important civil society actors supporting human rights and social progress. They and their institutions could play a bigger role in building a stronger, more people-powered, global democracy movement. Far from being an American or European-imposed agenda, human dignity, rule of law, and self-determination are deeply rooted in religious traditions across the Global South. Multi-faith organizing that brings people together for social progress is a powerful counter-weight to authoritarian politics. Too much is at stake to sideline faith communities and moral narratives or cede them to the Right.

Faith in Action International's approach to democracy includes both patient grassroots organizing to deepen the social justice leadership of faith institutions, and strengthen civil society more broadly, creating tangible examples of how democratic accountability can translate into improvements in public well-being, and building international coalitions of faith-based and grassroots organizations to collaborate globally to advance democratic norms.

Grassroots organizing is a crucible for democratic governance: The 274 grassroots teams we support across 11 countries are crucibles for regular people to develop leadership skills and hold their elected officials accountable. Grassroots leaders listen to their neighbors, organize community assemblies to vote on priorities, and do research to understand what can be done to resolve community issues. People are prepared and have their communities behind them when they make demands on politicians. This process of connecting democracy to the resolution of tangible issues helps counter corruption, makes it harder to manipulate voters, and reinforces the legitimacy of national efforts to protect democratic institutions.

Bringing faith-based and grassroots organizations together to create a shared agenda: To influence national and international policies, grassroots leaders and organizers need to meet, in-person and virtually, to share their analysis, the issues they are working on, and develop a shared agenda. Without this investment in relationship-building, it may be possible to mobilize some people at times of crisis, but it is harder to sustain long-term efforts to transform systems and narratives. Launched in 2019, the **Root Causes Initiative** brings together dozens of faith-based and grassroots organizations from Guatemala, El



Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and the US to change US policy toward Central America to focus on democracy, better-paid jobs, and locally-led development. As one focus, we've been pushing the US to impose targeted financial sanctions on the corrupt officials and elites undermining the rule of law in Guatemala.

Growing the power of diaspora communities: One in ten Haitians and one in four Salvadorans live in the United States. Diaspora communities can be an important constituency for better U.S. policies toward their countries of origin. Through **A Way Forward in Haiti**, we're growing the power of Haitian diaspora communities and pressing the State Department and USAID to change their approach to Haiti. We've built a working relationship between our Haitian affiliate, OPODNE, and organizations with large Haitian-American memberships, including Faith in Action affiliates in Massachusetts, Florida, New Jersey, and New York. Diaspora support helped OPODNE launch a successful COVID prevention campaign and pushed the Biden Administration to send vaccines to Haiti. Allies in the U.S. are helping OPODNE win USAID support for local Haitian farmers. In September 2023, we worked with the National Haitian American Elected Officials Network, FAMN, and other diaspora organizations to organize a National Day of Action to Support the Haitian People, with 35 visits with Members of Congress, including face-to-face meetings with Senate Majority Leader Schumer and Senators Cardin, Booker, and Markey.

Building an international learning community: The regional variation in the political contexts in which we're supporting organizing creates valuable learning opportunities, from **Haiti**, where our affiliate holds local elections for each of their 62 grassroots member organizations in a country with almost no functioning government, to **Rwanda**, where organizers are using space at the local level to bring people together to hold their government officials accountable. We also support faith-based organizing in **Hungary** to help strengthen the pro-democracy movement. In June 2023, we brought some of the best community organizers from the U.S. to Hungary to compare notes with Hungarian organizers and activists about working for social change in authoritarian contexts. With support from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Global Ideas for U.S. Solutions program, we hold monthly International Learning Exchange calls and organize regular delegations to help U.S. organizers learn from peers in other countries.

Realizing the Promise of Locally-Led Development and Policy Change



Many organizations are working explicitly or implicitly at the intersection of democracy and development, such as Oxfam globally, and the Institute for Democracy and Justice in Haiti. USAID and other aid agencies are putting more resources into locally-led development and strengthening civil society. Yet most aid is still locked into discreet projects designed and controlled by for-profit contractors and INGOs. The democracy and development fields can feel like parallel universes. And within development, there can be an arbitrary distinction between development projects and policy change campaigns, such as



the work supported by the International Budget Partnership, which are crucial for long-term social progress in countries.

The throughline connecting democracy, development, and policy reform is people power. To achieve lasting improvements in living conditions, people need the power to hold governments accountable and demand changes in national policies and public administration. Democracy doesn't necessarily translate into public welfare, but organizing can help make it more likely, and accountable democratic institutions increase the potential to channel resources into public goods rather than corruption. Changing the international development paradigm requires both strengthening grassroots organizations so they can drive development, policy change and policy implementation, which in turn requires fundamentally restructuring how aid agencies operate.

Community organizing drives development: Grassroots organizing is an invaluable tool for communities to take control of their development. Faith in Action International uses a very adaptable approach to community organizing that nurtures people's leadership. Practices such as one-to-one meetings, team building, listening campaigns, research meetings, public actions, reflection, and evaluation help people decide community priorities and see themselves as active and powerful agents for social change. Through organizing, people are bringing tens of millions of dollars in domestic investment into their communities for health clinics, schools, clean water, sanitation, roads, bridges, and reforestation projects. Development gains are more lasting because people listen to everyone, set the agenda, and mobilize their existing resources.

Local organizing anchors larger-scale policy change campaigns: In El Salvador, organizing that began with families in two communities winning title to their land has grown into a national campaign to win land rights for 350,000 families. In Haiti, after developing agricultural coops for many years, in 2022, OPODNE trained 150 grassroots leaders who listened to 4,000 small-scale farmers about what they needed to adapt to drought and climate change. OPODNE then launched a campaign – We Plant Today So We Can Feed Ourselves Tomorrow – to change USAID's approach to agriculture to support small-scale farming for domestic consumption rather than cash crops for export. People know best what their communities need and can be invaluable drivers of policy change. And when governments institute good policies, organized people can press for consistent implementation, often the biggest bottleneck in development.

Reforming USAID's approach to localization: For locally-led development and policy change to reach scale, aid agencies need to change their internal culture and incentives to shift power to community-based organizations. Localization cannot mean treating local organizations as vendors carrying out projects dictated by international institutions. USAID has a goal of 25 percent of its funding managed by local entities by 2025 and 50 percent following the lead of local organizations by 2030. In FY2022, 10% of funding went to local entities (including branches of international companies). Looking under that data, only one percent of grants, the most flexible USAID funding, went to local entities. All the progress in localizing funding was through Cooperative Agreements that give USAID staff significant management over decision-making and staffing of projects. For localization to succeed, community-based organizations need flexible funding that supports their existing plans



and a voice upstream over USAID’s Country Development Strategies, Annual Program Statements, and calls for proposals. In Central America and Haiti, we’ve been pushing USAID to follow local priorities around land rights, government accountability, and food systems. Progress is slow.

Conclusion

In *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that humanity needs a shared global identity to respond to the threats we face, and that religion, so often divisive, could play a crucial role in nurturing that identity. In his words, religion can help us determine “who are ‘us’ and who are ‘them,’ whom we should cure and whom we should bomb.” This unifying role is far from certain in the current state of the world. But it points to the need to build a shared narrative that motivates more people to participate in shaping the future of their communities, country, and planet. In the face of technological and political changes that threaten human agency, people are searching for meaning and purpose. The question is whether we have the will and foresight to channel that energy into work that will create a better future for humanity.



Country Examples

EL SALVADOR

Holding Government Accountable to Citizens

In El Salvador, where Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele is centralizing control over the state, **Communities of Faith Organizing for Action (COFOA)** has built a large grassroots membership base. Teams of residents in 135 communities hold mayors accountable for spending public funds on community priorities. COFOA organizes large public events at government buildings to press for land reform and the release tax funds designated for community projects. In 2023, COFOA teams began negotiating for investments in schools, clinics, roads, and water projects worth \$15.2 million. They won approval of \$2 million in investments. National legislation to regularize property titles, which COFOA leaders are negotiating with the Housing Ministry, would transfer property worth more than \$1 billion to the poorest families in the country.

At the same time, COFOA has opposed Bukele's State of Exception in newspaper ads and has run workshops about the upcoming national elections with hundreds of grassroots leaders. The organization, which has strong support from several Catholic bishops, is training people to be poll watchers, organizing local and national candidate forums around a joint policy platform, building stronger ties with community development associations, parent groups, and Catholic and Evangelical churches, and planning a large community-led Get Out the Vote campaign. These efforts to strengthen Salvadoran society may not be enough to counteract Bukele. Still, they represent an important dimension of the power struggle for democracy in Central America.

GUATEMALA

Strengthening International Grassroots Networks to Protect Democracy

As important as it is to strengthen civil society from the bottom up, defending against democratic backsliding often requires rapid response and international solidarity. In 2019, Faith in Action International worked with COFOA, Hope Border Institute, and dozens of faith-based organizations in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and the US to create the **Root Causes Initiative** to change US policy toward Central America. The Initiative provides organizations from the five countries with a platform to develop a shared agenda and directly engage US policymakers at the State Department, USAID, and the White House.

As COFOA builds a new organizing chapter in Guatemala, we are supporting Guatemalan efforts to reverse the attack on democratic institutions. We've pushed the Biden Administration to impose targeted financial sanctions on the corrupt officials and elites who've persecuted journalists, human rights activists, judges, and prosecutors. In response to efforts to undermine election results, we've reiterated the call for sanctions in a letter



from 75 organizations, organized a delegation of faith leaders to Guatemala during the second round of voting, met with State Department officials, and worked with allies in DC, including the Latin American Working Group and WOLA, to press for a more consistent U.S. approach to Guatemala.

GHANA

Uniting Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Organizations to Deepen Democracy

It's also crucial to strengthen existing democracies. In Ghana, we're supporting the **FAITH in Ghana Alliance**, representing the country's prominent Muslim, Catholic, Pentecostal, and Mainline Protestant religious bodies. We're helping FAITH in Ghana build dozens of regional and local multi-faith alliances across Ghana. People are identifying development priorities and negotiating investment in their communities to make the country's commitment to decentralization and community-led development real. In a region where democracy is under stress, multi-faith organizing brings thousands of people into efforts to increase social investment in health and education. It reduces the risk of bad actors using religion to manipulate and polarize society. It's an approach that other countries can follow to ensure that religion is a source of unity and social progress, rather than division.

RWANDA

Bottom-up development

In Mumeya, a rural community in Eastern Rwanda, residents organized to bring a health clinic to their community. It is now a 37-room medical center and the anchor of a development process that has transformed surrounding community. The clinic was the first time the Rwandan government made a central government resource allocation decision in response to organized community pressure. After building the clinic, residents brought electricity, roads, reforestation, and new schools to their community and surrounding villages. They've also trained hundreds of residents and local officials in other parts of Rwanda to advance community-led development by listening to everyone in the community, identifying existing resources, like land, labor, and materials, and holding research meetings with government officials.

HAITI

Making the most of available resources

The People's Ecumenical Organization for the Development of Northeast and North Haiti (OPODNE), founded in 2014, is an umbrella for 62 grassroots community organizations. With a staff of ten, OPODNE provides training and coaching to 5,000 grassroots leaders who meet every other week in their communities. Elected presidents of each local organization meet quarterly. With little functioning government and a collapsed economy, OPODNE is helping people survive and stabilizing conditions in North Haiti. OPODNE teams run a dozen



agricultural and commercial cooperatives, operate 22 mutual solidarity funds, and launched the Northeast Haiti Community Seed Bank in 2023, in partnership with the St. Barnabas Agricultural Center.

OPODNE is campaigning to change how USAID, other aid agencies, and NGOs approach food systems in Haiti. USAID's food policy in Haiti has focused on large-scale, water-intensive production for export. For-profit international contractors have managed all of its agricultural development projects. In contrast, farmers in Northeast and North Haiti say they need help with high-quality seeds, irrigation, tools, credit, and guidance from agronomists. To adapt to a decade of drought, OPODNE is pushing USAID to support a regional water management plan for the Plaine du Nord-Massacre aquifer. While OPODNE continues to meet with USAID, the organization is seeing first-hand the gap between the commitment to localization and the reality of aid agencies seeing community-based organizations as implementers.

Selected Media Coverage

[Faith-based groups sound alarm about fairness of Guatemala elections](#)

Crux, John Lavenburg, July 14, 2023

[USAID' freight train' creates big localization frustration in Haiti](#)

DEVEX, Teresa Welsh, June 23, 2023

[A.I. Could Prove Disastrous for Democracy. How Can Philanthropy Prepare?](#)

The Chronicle of Philanthropy, Gordon Whitman, October 23, 2023

[How Diasporic Solidarity Can Inform Multi-faith Movements](#)

Rev. Dr. Cassandra Gould, Word & Way, March 29, 2023

[Haiti activists rally at White House seeking end of US support for Henry](#)

Reuters, October 9, 2022

[Faith groups call on US to pressure Guatemala on democracy, human rights](#)

CRUX, June 7, 2022

[Sanction bad guys, not poor people](#)

The Hill, October 13, 2023

[Hurdles remain for Biden's 'root causes' strategy in Central America](#)

DEVEX, February 4, 2022

[Faith groups aid Haitian migrants, denounce mistreatment](#)

AP, September 27, 2021

[Central American caravan is 'first moral test for Biden,' say activists](#)

Religion News Service/National Catholic Reporter, Jan 21, 2021

[Faith groups call on Biden to support Central American migrants, refugees](#)

DEVEX, Jan. 21, 2021



Selected Reports and Case Studies

[Organizing for Power in El Salvador: Lessons from a National Land Rights Campaign](#)

[Protecting Guatemala's "New Spring"](#)

[Resetting US Priorities Toward Central America: Year two assessment of the Biden-Harris root causes strategy](#)

[Haitians Rebuilding Haiti: Foreign Assistance Lessons from the 2010 Earthquake](#)

[KEEP IT LOCAL: Analysis and recommendations for getting US foreign assistance to people, places, and priorities that need it the most in Central America](#)