



Just Transitions from the Bottom-Up

Case study: Phoenix

Waterloo Climate Institute Technical Brief

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The full report and three case studies are available on the [Waterloo Climate Institute website](#).



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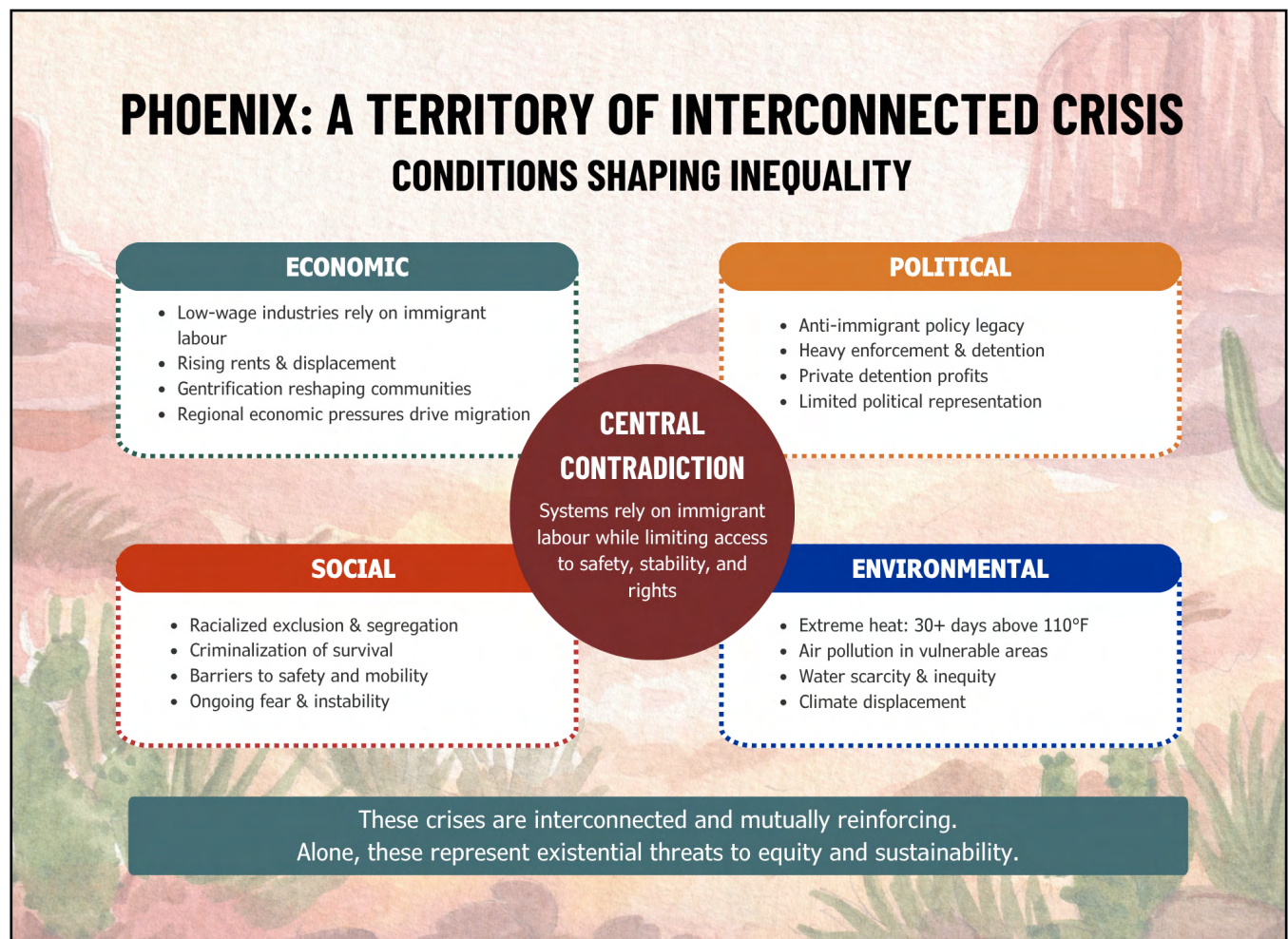
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Territory of struggle

Phoenix is shaped by overlapping crises that make environmental justice inseparable from race, class, land, and power. Extreme heat, air pollution, water insecurity, displacement, and rising energy costs disproportionately impact working-class communities, especially Latine, Indigenous, Black, immigrant, and unhoused communities. Shade, cooling, clean transit, and green space are unevenly distributed, and many neighbourhoods experience the city as a place where survival is privatized.

Politically, Phoenix is shaped by rapid growth, suburban sprawl, investor-driven development, and a governance model that often prioritizes policing, real estate, and business interests over prevention, care, and public goods. Environmentally, the city sits in a desert that teaches limits; however, dominant institutions continue to operate as if extraction, expansion, and endless growth are still possible. These conditions shape not only how inequities are experienced, but also how they are understood and addressed.

Graphic 1. Phoenix: A Territory of Interconnected Crisis. Conditions Shaping Inequality.



Dominant story

Conditions are often interpreted through a dominant narrative that separates what is, in reality, deeply interconnected. We are challenging the dominant story Phoenix is built on: a worldview that treats environmental racism, environmental degradation, anti-immigrant racism, displacement, policing, and economic inequality as separate issues rather than interconnected expressions of broader structural conditions. This narrative obscures how structural forces continue to shape the city.

In doing so, it fragments our understanding and narrows the scope of potential responses. It frames heat, pollution, displacement, and the lack of shade, transit, and public space as unintended side effects or policy gaps, rather than as predictable outcomes of systems that prioritize profit over public wellbeing and distribute protection, comfort, and mobility unevenly.

Graphic 2. What Narratives or Assumptions are We Challenging or Disrupting?

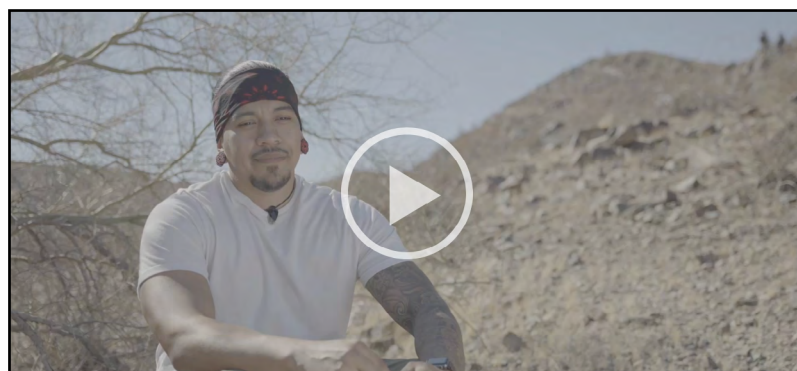
WHAT NARRATIVES OR ASSUMPTIONS ARE WE CHALLENGING OR DISRUPTING?	
DOMINANT STORY	YOUR DISRUPTION
If immigrants aren't publicly honored, their work is secondary or dispensable.	Belonging is multiple, simultaneous, and generative.
The teaching here is that water does not recognize nation-states: it creates shared territories of survival, movement, and relation.	You belong to both—and in fact, you create new forms of belonging that enrich both.
You are a problem to solve or a success story to assimilate.	You are simply human—with dreams, limitations, dependencies, and agency. You don't need to be exceptional to deserve dignity.
Leaving your country of origin is a betrayal of those who "stayed behind."	Many who stayed depend on you leaving. Your migration is an act of care, not abandonment. Remittances, knowledge transfer, and emotional support are forms of ongoing loyalty.
Belonging must be earned through assimilation, gratitude, or extraordinary achievement.	You already belong through presence, participation, and relationships—not because you've been granted permission.
You are either against "us" or for "us."	You are not a political pawn or a token. You are a person navigating multiple accountabilities. Reducing you to "ally" erases your independence, agency, and your ties to your own community.

Stories

Hear Masavi's story about why overcoming the border is about decolonization, empathy, and love...



Hear DJ's story about what decolonization means...



Life/nature teachers

The Sonoran Desert teaches interdependence, restraint, adaptation, and respect for limits. In the desert, water is life. Water reminds us that life is collective and fragile, and that systems built on overconsumption eventually reveal their consequences. Water is a collective relation rather than a resource. Heat makes visible that infrastructure is never neutral. Who has access to shade, cooling, transportation, and refuge reflects broader patterns of investment and decision-making. The land also holds memory.

Phoenix exists on Indigenous land, O'odham Jeved, and within systems shaped by colonization, extraction, and the transformation of desert ecology. The territory reminds us that survival in the desert has always depended on relationships, mutual responsibility, and knowledge of place rather than domination.

Graphic 3. Teachings that Unify Us Beyond Borders.

TEACHINGS THAT UNIFY US BEYOND BORDERS

1. Water as a Unifier Beyond Borders

The rivers Rio Bravo, Usumacinta, and Suchiate are named not as dividers but as connectors. The teaching here is that water does not recognize nation-states; it creates shared territories of survival, movement, and relation. These rivers shape the work by emphasizing fluid belonging over fixed citizenship.

2. Place as Memory of Dispossession (MMIWG ref.)

The acknowledgement that 'these territories were stolen from original communities' shows that place teaches accountability. The work is shaped by the tension between creating new territories through migration and labor and honoring that these lands were never empty - they carry Indigenous histories of theft and resilience.

3. Land as Indivisible from Community

Deserts, forests, and oceans are described as 'indivisible parts of our communities.' This challenges anthropocentric, purely economic views of land. The teaching is that ecosystems are kin, not resources. Therefore, their endangerment is also a threat to community survival.

4. Borders as Ecological Fictions

While political borders aim to separate, the text suggests that deserts, forests, and oceans cross them freely. The work seems shaped by the teaching that real territories are watersheds, bioregions, and migratory routes - not lines on maps.

5. Danger as a Shared Condition

The statement that many of these places 'are in danger' teaches that the struggle of immigrant and worker communities is inseparable from the struggle of the land and water themselves. Environmental destruction and social dispossession are seen as one crisis.

Methods-in-use (consciousness-raising)

Awareness is built through community organizing rooted in political education and relationship-building. This includes one-on-ones, popular education spaces, committee meetings, testimony preparation, story-sharing, and leadership development that help people connect personal experiences to broader systems. Rather than positioning individuals as passive recipients of information, this approach supports people in analyzing why current conditions exist, who benefits from them, and what forms of collective action are possible.



Spaces of Opportunity. The Just Transitions team participated in events held at Spaces of Opportunity, a massive community gardening space where Chispa Arizona holds a plot, runs workshops and other events under the leadership of Doña Blanca, a key organizer and community leader.



Doña Blanca, Mariela Caro, and Duván López sharing unstructured time at the lookout on top of South Mountain.

The goal is not only to inform, but to build analysis, agency, and a shared understanding of the issues at hand. This work also intentionally creates space for “slow time”, longer-term relationship-building, mentorship, and learning that are not always driven by immediate outcomes. Consciousness-raising is understood as something that develops over time through trust, reflection, and continued engagement.

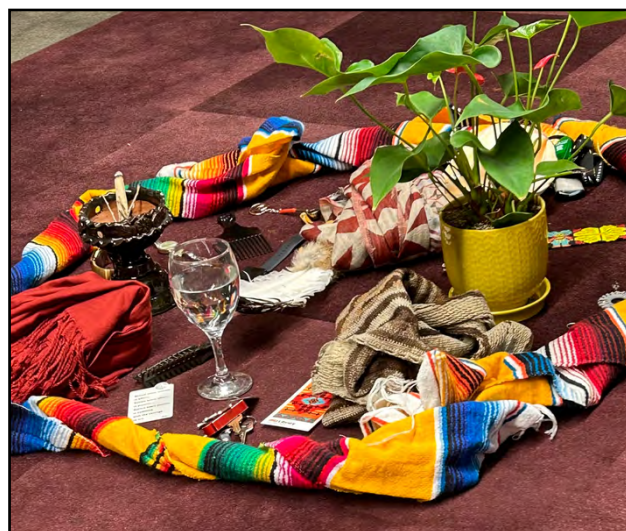
These methods also include story-based organizing, public testimony, and land-based practices such as prayer walks, prayer runs, story sharing, camping trips, and hikes. Phoenix can teach other sites through the integrated political education that takes place in interactions. These practices reconnect organizing efforts to place, memory, and responsibility. They are not separate from organizing, but deepen it by grounding the work in land and community.

In this approach, land and water are not only contexts but sources of knowledge. This includes naming the place, acknowledging its history, and asking what responsibilities it entails. It also involves moving beyond narrow framings of issues such as “migration” and instead asking broader questions about the conditions that shape movement, the relationships carried within it, and the responsibilities that follow.

At the centre of this work is a commitment to relationship as foundational, and to ensuring that knowledge is shared and sustained across generations through community.



DJ on South Mountain practicing danza to honour the land and the ancestors. Parts of this sacred mountain have been excavated to extract materials for the construction of one of the Phoenix valley highways.



This is a centerpiece in which all participants in a Community Circle at Chispa Arizona’s office are invited to contribute before beginning a round of sharing.

Contradictions/tensions

A central tension is that organizing often begins with immediate concerns, including utility bills, neighbourhood conditions, rent, health, and access to basic infrastructure. These concerns are real and urgent. At the same time, the work must extend beyond individual needs and support a broader understanding of shared conditions and collective responsibility.

This creates an ongoing balance between meeting people where they are and supporting a wider analysis of how these issues are connected. Lasting change requires moving beyond isolated demands toward collective approaches.

Additional tensions arise from the nature of the systems in which this work takes place. Environmental, social, and economic issues are interconnected, yet institutional structures often address them separately. There is also, at times, a reliance on nonprofit structures, public processes, and policy advocacy, even as these spaces are shaped by the same systems that contribute to the issues being addressed.

At the same time, relationship-building, cultural practices, and land-based approaches operate on different timelines than those imposed by funding cycles, crisis response, and policy processes.

Solidarity practice

Phoenix offers a model of solidarity grounded in place, relationship, political education, and cultural memory. It demonstrates that awareness is built not only through formal processes but through shared experiences such as storytelling, leadership development, and land-based gatherings that connect people to their environment. Phoenix highlights embodied learning and can be understood through its conditions (e.g., heat, long distances, and lack of shade).

This work also highlights the importance of recognizing the ongoing impacts of colonization in shaping environmental conditions, displacement, and cultural erasure. It underscores that environmental and social issues cannot be separated from cultural and historical contexts.

One key lesson is the importance of centring Indigenous knowledge and leadership. Indigenous approaches to land, water, and collective responsibility offer alternatives to extractive and profit-driven systems.

Phoenix also reflects the complexity of identity in a border region. The border influences belonging based on surveillance, policy, and systems of law that are determined by colonial histories, class, and race. The border is a place that makes structural violence visible and emphasizes the enforcement and organization of power. The border represents who experiences harm, has protection, is restricted, and permitted to move freely. Many communities include individuals with Indigenous or mixed Indigenous ancestry whose histories predate contemporary borders. This complicates dominant narratives about migration and belonging, highlighting the need for more nuanced approaches. Migration is impacted by climate change, political instability, and economic dispossession. The border highlights that social and environmental conditions are inseparable and systems of power determine safety, mobility, and protection. The border also represents resilience and connection as communities continue relationships despite division and enforcement. This resilience is shaped by language, care, collective memory, and culture.

In this context, solidarity is not only about shared goals but also about rebuilding relationships with land, history, and one another. Rather than just shared objectives, solidarity is about relationships as practice. It is about building solidarity through trust, time, and presence.



With colleague Erick Meza from the Sierra Club, the team visits with the OS3 (“zero stress” when pronounced in Spanish) cycling group, which provides used bicycles to the community, runs a competitive youth cycling club, advocates for cycling infrastructure in Nogales, and organizes with communities on both sides of the Arizona/Mexico border.



A visit to the Quitobaquito Springs near Ajo, where the border wall has artificially divided the Tohono O'odham territory in two.

What practices or lessons from Phoenix could inform other sites or movements?

1. Embrace Intersectional Organizing as a Survival Strategy

The Phoenix Lesson: The immigrant movement learned that fighting single-issue battles (e.g., only on deportation or only on drivers' licenses) was insufficient. Anti-immigrant laws like SB1070 were designed to criminalize people on multiple fronts—housing, employment, public space, family integrity. In response, Phoenix organizers built coalitions across the Chicano, Indigenous, Black, Queer, Asian, labor, and environmental justice communities.

Practices to replicate elsewhere:

- Cross-training: Teach immigrant rights groups about police brutality and vice versa. In Phoenix, this meant sharing know-your-rights training between immigrant defense networks and Black-led organizations.
- Joint campaigns: Instead of separate marches, organize joint actions where immigration, labor, and environmental issues are framed as connected (e.g., a fight against a factory that exploits undocumented workers and pollutes a Latino/Indigenous neighborhood).
- Shared political education: Regularly hold inter-community teach-ins about how the same systems (e.g., policing, detention, land dispossession) affect different groups.

2. Build Deep, Long-Term Community-Based Infrastructure (Not Just Rapid Response)

The Phoenix Lesson: Over 30+ years, the movement did not rely solely on legal clinics or hotlines. It built a broad ecosystem of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that address daily survival needs—housing, childcare, workplace justice, mental health—alongside legal defense. This turned immigrant communities from targets into organized political actors.

Practices to replicate elsewhere:

- From “services” to “power”: Create CBOs that offer translation, legal orientation, and food assistance but also have membership structures, leadership development, and direct action committees.
- Neighborhood-based hubs: Phoenix saw the rise of multi-issue community centers in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods that function as both sanctuary spaces and organizing bases.
- Long-term funding strategies: Advocate for flexible, multi-year funding to maintain infrastructure, not just emergency grants.

3. Hold Ground Through Sustained Presence, Not Just Moments of Mobilization

The Phoenix Lesson: Phoenix became “ground zero” for anti-immigrant experiments, but the movement refused to retreat. Holding ground for 30+ years meant showing up consistently—at school board meetings, county supervisor hearings, police commission sessions, and ICE courthouse visits—even when major laws passed.

Practices to replicate elsewhere:

- Permanent presence at sites of harm: In Phoenix, volunteers and organizers maintained daily observation at ICE detention centers and county jails, creating accountability.
- Rituals of resistance: Weekly vigils, monthly community assemblies, annual commemorations of SB1070’s anniversary—these create continuity across generations of activists.
- “We are still here” campaigns: When laws like SB1070 were struck down or weakened, Phoenix movements did not declare victory and leave; they pivoted to new fronts (e.g., workplace raids, anti-sanctuary city initiatives).

4. Re-center Frontline Leadership, Especially from Historically Silenced Groups

The Phoenix Lesson: The movement explicitly learned to reconnect with Indigenous, Chicano, Black, Queer, and Asian communities that had been fighting these systems for decades. This meant shifting leadership away from predominantly cisgender, Latino, Spanish-speaking immigrant narratives to include, for example, Indigenous migrant justice, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, and Afro-Latino experiences.



The Just Transitions team participates in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls - Solidarity Run. Saturday November 16, 2024.

Practices to replicate elsewhere:

- Co-leadership structures: Require that any coalition decision-making body includes representatives from Indigenous, Black, and Queer migrant organizations, not just large mainstream immigrant groups.
- Language and cultural access: Beyond Spanish, provide materials in Nahuatl, Mam, Mixteco, and other Indigenous languages; respect different community decision-making norms (e.g., consensus, elder inclusion).
- Healing justice: Fund and prioritize trauma-informed support, recognizing that undocumented LGBTQ+ people and Indigenous migrants face unique violence.

5. Use Local Electoral & Administrative Pressure Creatively

The Phoenix Lesson: Even in a hostile state capital, the movement did not give up on local government. They pushed for Phoenix city resolutions limiting cooperation with ICE (despite state preemption), elected pro-immigrant city council members in key districts, and held county sheriffs accountable.

Practices to replicate elsewhere:

- Targeted local campaigns: Focus on school boards, health districts, and public utilities—places where immigration status enforcement harms families directly. Win policies like “safe zones” in schools and clinics.

- Community oversight: In Phoenix, immigrant-led coalitions won seats on police oversight commissions and pushed for data transparency on immigration-related stops.
- Primary challenges: Where Democrats or moderate Republicans failed to oppose anti-immigrant laws, Phoenix movements backed grassroots challengers, even as third-party or independent candidates.

6. Turn the “Laboratory of Repression” into a “Laboratory of Resistance”

The Phoenix Lesson: Arizona was indeed an anti-immigrant laboratory (SB1070, employer sanctions, anti-sanctuary laws). But Phoenix movements learned to treat the state the same way—testing tactics, legal arguments, and organizing models that could then be exported. For example, successful know-your-rights trainings, rapid-response networks, and “immigrant freedom rides” were later adapted in Alabama, Georgia, and Texas.

Practices to replicate elsewhere:

- Document and share models: Create open-source toolkits for everything from sanctuary campus campaigns to eviction defense for mixed-status families.
- Solidarity tours: Invite organizers from other states to Phoenix for exchanges, and send Phoenix organizers to support emerging struggles elsewhere.
- Legal innovation: Partner with radical legal collectives to test novel arguments (e.g., challenging workplace raids under labor law, using environmental justice laws to fight detention center pollution).

7. Framing as “Bold Message from the Capital”

The Phoenix Lesson: Because Phoenix is the state capital and a major Sunbelt city, the movement understood that its victories and defeats would echo nationally. They consciously framed actions—mass marches, hunger strikes, civil disobedience at the capitol—as messages to the entire country about what is possible.

Practices to replicate elsewhere:

- Symbolic geography: In other state capitals (e.g., Columbus, Atlanta, Austin, Nashville), immigrant movements can leverage the capitol’s symbolic weight for high-visibility actions.
- National media strategy: Develop relationships with national press to cover local fights as “bellwethers” for what’s coming to the rest of the country.
- Message of possibility: Even when losing legislatively, frame resilience as victory: “We lost the vote, but we filled the streets—and that sends a message.”

- A Cautionary Note & A Strength: The Phoenix experience also shows that holding ground for 30 years is exhausting. Movements elsewhere should learn from Phoenix’s investment in survivor-led care networks, intergenerational mentorship, and rotating leadership to prevent burnout. At the same time, the strength of Phoenix is that it did not wait for perfect conditions—it organized under the boot and built power anyway.
- In short: The immigrant movement in Phoenix teaches that you survive a hostile laboratory by becoming an intersectional, community-rooted, multi-racial, long-haul movement that never cedes the capital’s symbolic ground. That lesson can be adapted anywhere—from rural towns to other hostile state capitals to national coalitions.

What scales/what must stay local (transferability)

Several practices developed in Phoenix are adaptable to other contexts, including organizing rooted in political education, relationship-based approaches to awareness-building, land-based engagement, and integrated frameworks that connect environmental, social, and economic issues. There is also broader relevance in centring Indigenous leadership and grounding work in local histories and knowledge systems. These approaches can inform work in other regions by encouraging a stronger connection between place, community, and policy. At the same time, many aspects of this work are specific to Phoenix. The realities of extreme heat, water scarcity, and desert ecology, as well as the impacts of colonial borders and Indigenous homelands, shape local conditions in distinct ways. These conditions cannot be directly replicated elsewhere. What is transferable is the approach: beginning from place, centring those most impacted, and allowing local context to guide both analysis and action. What must remain local is the specific history, relationships, and lived experience that define Phoenix.



A sweat ceremony performed as part of a multi-month protest of lithium mining exploration by Elder Ivan. The Just Transitions team accompanied a water prayer gathering to celebrate a temporary injunction stopping further exploration while also recognizing that this victory was only a small step in a much longer, ongoing battle.



Protect Ha’Kamwe: Stop Big Sandy Lithium Mine. Water Ceremony Saturday November 23rd, 2024, Prayer Camp Gathering off Cholla Canyon Ranch Road.

These are the strategic principles and relational dynamics that emerged from Arizona’s undocumented community victory. They are not blueprints to copy, but practices to translate into new contexts.

- **Naming the system accurately** – “Call it as it is, modern slavery.” This refusal of euphemism (e.g., “illegal labor,” “irregular migration”) is portable. Any community facing labor exploitation, wage theft, or captivity-by-status can adapt this practice of precise, unflinching naming.
- **Organizing from urgency, not permission** – The sense of urgency as a fuel, not a panic. Elsewhere, this looks like acting before the grant is written, before the nonprofit board approves, before the crisis becomes convenient. It’s a tempo.
- **Community-derived solutions** – Not expert-led, not savior-driven. The principle is: those who feel the problem first are the ones who design the response. This can be adapted to housing, healthcare, policing, education—anywhere institutions have failed.
- **Love as an organizing infrastructure** – Not sentimental love, but community love: the kind that shows up to bail someone out, cook for a protest, watch a neighbor’s child during a raid. That ethic is transferable. It requires no legal status, only relationship.
- **Resilience from collective memory, not individual grit** – The understanding that “we are resilient because others fought before us.” This counters the neoliberal “grit narrative” and can be adapted by any community with intergenerational trauma and survival.



What must remain grounded in this specific context: these are the irreducible particulars of Arizona—the things that cannot be lifted without distortion or harm.

The desert as a political actor – The Sonoran Desert is not a metaphor. Its heat, its terrain, the bodies left in it, the water drops, the Border Patrol’s use of geography as a weapon—these are specific. Elsewhere has different geographies (rivers, walls, checkpoints, freezers in meatpacking towns). You cannot transplant the desert’s cruelty or the desert’s lessons.

The exact legal architecture of Arizona – SB 1070 (“show me your papers”), employer sanctions laws, the specific web of local police collaboration with ICE. These statutes are unique to the state’s legislative history. Another state has different laws (e.g., 287(g) agreements, E-Verify mandates, sanctuary policies). Strategy must be remade for each legal terrain.

The business-mindedness – Arizona’s particular fusion of agribusiness, suburban development, and anti-immigrant sentiment created a specific exploitative economy (e.g., lettuce fields, construction, landscaping, hotels). Another region might have poultry plants, warehouses, tech campuses, or fisheries. The industry changes the vulnerability.

The lineage of unrecorded history – “The one you do not learn in colleges and universities.” That street knowledge is place-based: which neighborhood held the first meeting, which church basement sheltered organizers, which corner store became a safe house. These are not generalizable. They are sacred and local. Outsiders cannot claim them.

The particular texture of hope in Arizona – After years of Sheriff Arpaio, after SB 1070, after the deaths in the desert—the hope that emerged there is not the same as hope in Chicago or North Carolina or Texas. It carries a specific weight: we won something where everyone said we couldn’t. That specific victory cannot be replicated; it can only be honored and used as proof that other victories are possible elsewhere, but on their own terms.

The dangerous mistake – The mistake is to treat Arizona as a “model” to be exported. That erases your struggle. It turns your dead, your marches, your sleepless nights into a PowerPoint for a conference in a city that never passed SB 1070.

The alternative: listen for the echo, not the copy.

- Ask another community: Where is your desert? (What is the brutal geography they must navigate?)

- Ask: What is your SB 1070? (What is the law that tries to make you disappear?)
- Ask: Who were your before-us people? (Whose unpaid labor, whose tears, whose organizing made your footing possible?)
- And then help them find their street knowledge—not yours.
- A closing reflection: “The solutions come from the community.”
- That is the portable truth. But the content of those solutions—the exact tactics, the safe houses, the protest chants, the legal arguments—those belong to Arizona. They are not open source. They are earned.
- What can be adapted elsewhere is the method of listening to the ground.
- What must remain grounded is the ground itself.

Videography/photography/interview/ writing references

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