Conversation with Eli Moore
Ashley Hopkinson
February 15, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself. Tell me a little bit about yourself, your background and the organization you work for?

Eli Moore: I'm a program director at the Othering and Belonging Institute. The program is the Community Power and Policy Partnerships. We're a team at the Institute. The Institute has been around for a decade and is based at UC Berkeley, and we work toward a world of belonging for all without othering. We do that through collaborations with community leaders, communicators, policymakers, artists, and other stakeholders, creators to carry out research and strategy development that would support a diverse set of strategies for a more equitable world where there's belonging for all. So we have a bold vision and we work locally, nationally and internationally.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say makes the Institute distinctive?

Eli Moore: One of the things that's unique about our work is that we're both trying to advance change that really speaks to people's deep sense of who they are, who we are, and the way that we draw boundaries around who we are and hold these hierarchies within our identities about who counts, who deserves care, and who deserves to belong in our society. So we pay a lot of attention to that work, those deeply held narratives and identities. But we also really believe that material conditions matter and the institutional arrangements and the structures that distribute resources and rights and responsibilities absolutely matter. And that's part of belonging. So we also advance work that tries to build structures of belonging where communities who have been marginalized can govern resources in really meaningful ways that address some of the deep inequities in our society.

Ashley Hopkinson: The wellbeing economics framework is sort of this interconnectedness between how we can create systems or programs that evolve to better serve communities and

the environment. Have you found anything in your work that makes a difference when it comes to resources and rights in the community and people feeling a deeper sense of belonging?

Eli Moore: Some of our work is place-based work with communities that are trying to have more equitable development in their city. And what we've seen in that work is that typically the way development is done is that there's a private developer who sees some profit to be made in a project. And for that project to have equitable community benefits, the community leaders will advocate and organize and build power to try to negotiate some sort of improvement to that project so it's not just about the bottom line. The developer will typically say, "If I do all of those things you're asking, this project just won't pencil out, and so you'll have no project." And then communities are in this hard place where, do we keep pushing and risk no project, or do we compromise on what we really think we deserve and what we need?

Our analysis is that we need to get beyond that dichotomy, and communities need to be in a place where they have structures to govern development inside and outside so that the entities that are planning and directing development actually have community governance built into them and an equitable impact built into their mission. So that question of what's financially viable and still delivers meaningful benefits is something that the community stakeholders themselves can delve into and weigh that decision for themselves. So building those structures for community-driven, community-governed development has been part of the way that we've been trying to support that work of an economy that really works for all.

Ashley Hopkinson: How can development include community at the foundation level when it seems that most development begins with "we already have the plan" and now we would like to make good on the plan as opposed to (not sure if this is the right word) but co-creation perhaps with the community?

Eli Moore: Co-creation and community visioning, really starting the process with the community's own vision and analysis of what their needs are and opportunities and desires are for future development, so that that's not an afterthought. That's actually where the planning for the project begins. We collaborated with leaders in Richmond, California to create an entity that's now called Richmond Land. That's this type of thing. It's a mission-driven development entity, and it's got a governing board that's majority local residents, majority people of color, and it gets grant funding and does a lot of participatory planning and community visioning work. But then it also develops projects that can get financing and be developed as, mostly they're focused on housing now, but that's not their whole mission. And there are lots of examples like this around the country. There's a lot of experimentation. It's a really exciting time for that type of work right now.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share more about Richmond Land or is there another project that comes to mind that fits under that umbrella?

Eli Moore: Well the experience with Richmond Land, it actually came out of an earlier experience with a proposed expansion project of the university where we're based (UC Berkeley) where the university was going to build a satellite campus in Richmond. We started working with the community in Richmond because it's a low income, majority people of color environmental justice community that's dealt with a lot of impacts from a refinery and heavy industry and over policing and mass incarceration. And so this project could have been a real catalyst for long overdue investment and opportunity, or could have been a catalyst for displacement and gentrification. We were working with community leaders there around how the development and planning of the new campus could really have that positive impact. Ultimately, the project didn't go forward for other reasons related to the university, but what was clear from the experience is that the development was going to be done by a private developer and even the management of the campus was going to be outsourced.

So that scenario that we were just talking about, the community was on the outside. Even though this was a public entity, a state university, there was a private developer who was going to be making the most consequential decisions about how money gets spent and how the project gets rolled out, and who gets access and who decides and who benefits from the project. So out of that experience, many of the community leaders involved in Richmond felt that there needed to be a way to be proactive about development and get beyond that kind of dichotomy. That's what led to the creation of Richmond Land. It's still a young organization. It's only been around for a few years, and so there's still a big learning process. One of the realizations is that the funding and financing world just isn't set up for this type of entity. You are either like a nonprofit and you're getting grants to do charitable service-oriented work. Maybe it's base building and community organizing, but it's still thought of as it's not economic development or profit generating revenue generating. In fact, it can't be for the most part. Or you're getting financing, in which case you're dealing with interest rates and mostly looking at banks and CDFIs. …There is more attention these days on social impact investing, program related investments, all those things, on the ground. (But) most of the lending out there is still pretty high interest rates.

As far as a project that has a long community visioning and participatory planning process leading up to it and throughout the project, and then is really trying to deliver really meaningful community benefits, so that might include workforce development and job training or cooperative ownership or other things that are costly and time intensive, a lot of that financing just doesn't really match the need (and that's) one of the main constraints right now.

Community-owned entities are really important, but we need this broader infrastructure around financing so there can be a more reparative approach to financing projects. So it's understanding that at the end of the day, these projects might not generate a revenue for a long time, or they might, but they really might only be able to pay back part of that loan. And that's still a success because of the impact they have.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think helped Richmond Land get off the ground? Was it the synergy that there was already this movement building because of what was happening in reaction to UC Berkeley wanting to expand there? Or what's your sense of what actually made that come together? How did it come together?

Eli Moore: I think it's a lot of different things that have come together. It's the work of many people over many years that has really built to this moment where they're in Richmond. In many cities there are really strong advocates who have been working for environmental justice and economic justice for a long time. And so they have a really sharp analysis around the limits of some of the existing models and a willingness to collaborate and help build something that isn't going to be their organization. Richmond Land is a good example of many of the people who co-founded it, myself, the director of Urban Tilt, the director of Safe Return Project, and others. They were leading other organizations, but they were taking time to build this new organization that they weren't going to be necessarily personally benefiting from or directing or staffing, but they were willing to build it because they saw it as necessary infrastructure for achieving what the community needed. There's a willingness to collaborate in that way and (prioritize) long-term vision and commitment and an understanding of the infrastructure that is needed at the community level.

Also foundations who were recognizing the importance of that work and were willing to fund it with grants that would allow for the kind of general multi-year support that would allow an organization like that to hire some staff who maybe didn't have degrees or a lot of technical training in economic development, but they had a lot of lived experience and values and vision that they were bringing to the work, and they could have the time and support to gain some of that technical knowledge while on the job. So I think that funding to incubate and get up and running was big.

There's also been a lot of work to get local leaders elected who are really accountable to the community and are really trying to advance equitable change. And so there was partnership with the city that also really helped. So they've worked on a public lands policy, for instance, and have collaborated on city owned projects.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is an insight or takeaway you can share from doing this work, particularly the participatory work within communities?

Eli Moore: My experience is that strong participatory research often leads to whole new organizations. It isn't just about answering some research questions. It is about building whole new relationships and new knowledge that then really transforms how people are thinking about and committing to doing work in their community, such that it often transforms the institutions and the networks in the community for the better. It usually starts with recognizing how harmful research has been, because in many communities, even hearing the word research brings up memories or current realities of either academic researchers parachuting in and gathering some data and then disappearing with it to go publish it in a journal or something like that. Or much more harmful work that has either undermined communities by using the knowledge gathered to take action against them, or harming people like the medical research that has been done without consent. So there's a trust building process that's the foundation for any participatory research that has to be really authentic relationship building between the folks involved, recognizing the harm that research has done and really building a shared understanding of : what do we mean by research, what kind of questions are important to us, what's ethics do we have around gathering information and using it, and what's the impact that we want our work to have in our community? So it can look so many different ways, but the foundation of it is really that trust building process.

Ashley Hopkinson: Do you have an example of impact that you can share around participatory research? Whether it was something that you did at the beginning of a project or you were brought in, in the middle of a project that illustrates what is most meaningful about this type of work?

Eli Moore: I like to talk about a project that I was involved in that was a participatory research and community organizing project with folks who had come home from incarceration. It started because of a friend of mine who was a community organizer in Contra Costa County, California. We saw that the county and the state were making all these decisions around reentry planning, but nobody at those planning tables had any lived experience with being incarcerated and coming home from incarceration and what that meant and what support would look like. So we set out to carry out a participatory research process that would support the capacity and power of a group of formerly incarcerated people to engage in some of those decisions. We literally just hired a team of 10 formerly incarcerated community members, and then did a year of training, mentorship and support and facilitated strategy sessions with them around research and community organizing.

They designed a survey and carried out that survey to gather data. They interviewed a hundred other formerly incarcerated folks who were recently released to understand their needs and visions and interests. Then they used that data to shape a set of priorities and goals, and did advocacy at the city and county level. That team really just ran with the work and then became their own organization, so now, it's an independent nonprofit organization that's all staffed by formerly incarcerated people and has continued that work in many other ways. So that participatory research process was really about, fundamentally is about honoring that they were the experts, that their experience made them experts, and that they would have ways to not just represent their own experience, but to build relationships and build knowledge with other community members so that they could really be advocating for change and getting people involved in change that was anchored in a broader community.

And so the research was really about that kind of power building process and affirming their own dignity and capacity. So that was really inspiring, and that's not always the way it looks, but I think it's an example that I like to talk about because these are folks who would have just been so marginalized and were still considered basically throw away people because they weren't being given a second chance. They had done their time, and yet all they got when they were coming home was more surveillance and punishment. So yeah, I think participatory research is about how you create spaces for folks who've been marginalized like that to be at the center and create their own knowledge and vision for change.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's great the way you framed it around power building, because I think a lot of times it appears as if great movements just sort of happen. There's no sense that there was training, there were people walking alongside you helping to work. That's a part of the power building process that people feel agency but they also have support to hone skills to help make an impact. To pivot a little, what would you say is a challenge that you face in this work and how do you see yourself managing it?

Eli Moore: I talked about the challenge of how harmful research has been and building trust despite that. That's a big one. Another challenge that's always at play, especially these days is we've internalized a lot of the dominant narratives about how society works that really hold us back, us as agents of change and folks trying to make a difference because there are these deeply held worldviews that kind of limit our sense of what's possible. So an example is there's so much anti-government bias, a sense that the government can't be a part of the solution, that the government creates dependence, that it's corrupt, that it's harmful, and there are many valid reasons to believe those things. But the conclusion that government isn't where solutions can be found is a huge obstacle because they're just collective problems that we can't solve without government, whether we're talking about air pollution

or education or affordable housing. Almost every issue at some point comes up against regulations and public finance. So these deeply held narratives (are a challenge). Another one is that there's just this widespread sense that if one social group is benefiting, then another social group must be losing out on something. This kind of zero-sum mentality of progress for one means backsliding for another and that just upholds a kind of othering and hierarchy because of the way it leads you to be opposed to progress for somebody who you think of as different from you. So the work has to be confronting and transcending some of these deeply held narratives. And that's hard because sometimes winning in the short term is easier if you just gloss over or avoid or even leverage those dominant narratives. But then we're perpetuating them and we're going to have to deal with them again in the future.

So we're really trying to do work to understand how those narratives show up in people's understanding of the world. Some of that is with partners, we'll do focus groups or surveys that try to get at how some of these dominant narratives are showing up and how people express them. Also, what are the signals of emerging narratives that are more transformative, that would really uphold a world of belonging without othering. Then we work with our partners on narrative strategies that amplify those more inclusive narratives that try and get those frames out there that will help in the long run support change across different issues in different communities.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, and when I say right support, I mean the financing is there, the people resources are there, what would you like to see grow, expand, scale in the field that you're in? What would you like to see as it relates to this work?

Eli Moore: Wow. There are so many things. So to just pick one. I think we're in a moment where there is all this energy at the community level for real equitable development, for building infrastructure and businesses that really build up communities and really serve the communities that have been marginalized for so long. There's a ton of federal funding coming down and the kind of organizational infrastructure and economic infrastructure for creating spaces where community members can really envision and plan and govern the implementation of those projects that could leverage all of that funding, seems to me, to still be very much a work in progress and in need a lot of support. Too often, what that support looks like is intermediaries coming in and doing the work for communities. What I would love to see is support for communities to build these community-governed equitable purpose entities to do economic projects with technical support from intermediaries and consultants. But that they are the deciders, that the community leaders are the deciders, and that the financing is there that would take the long view and would support the incubation and the growth of these entities so that they could really dream big and bold, and then also be able to leverage this public funding that's

coming so that it doesn't just replicate the economy that we have that's racially inequitable and socially inequitable.

Ashley Hopkinson: In the work that you've done in the research, whether that's water, housing, gentrification, land, what are the gaps that stand out to you? I imagine that you see a lot of inequities, but what comes to the surface in terms of the research that you've done and the immediate gaps that you just see popping up time and time again?

Eli Moore: Some of our work is focused on just transition planning and how communities that are on the fence line of the fossil fuel economy can plan ahead for a transition away from the fossil fuel economy and towards an economy that's rooted in renewable, ecological, equitable systems economies. And that really takes radical imagination because it's not something that people have lived, and there's deeply held bias and narratives around the economy being this thing that's beyond control, that's sort of like a weather system that just happens to us. So the gap I'm trying to talk about is that radical imagination work and that long-term planning that is about systems design, that is about really rethinking what the economy looks like, who it serves, how it works, and the agency that communities have to govern resources and local economies.

Ashley Hopkinson: I've been a part of reporting and editing environmental justice stories in particular where you can sense that people oppose it and are simultaneously worried about opposing it. "Cancer Alley" and the petrochemical plants in Louisiana comes to mind where there are grassroots organizations that rise up in opposition. One of them is actually called Rise. But we also talked to people who said, well, my grandfather worked here, my cousins work here..so it's this, we need it to change. But also, what does it change to?

Eli Moore: Yes, there's a level of vulnerability in even just entertaining the thought that this might be gone someday and then what? That's a scary thought. And so that's the work of creating spaces where that type of visioning can happen and that type of long-term planning can happen means we have to confront those fears and we have to overcome some of the mainstream tendencies of how we do economic planning, which mostly is about cities waiting for a company or developer to come to them and tell them what they want to do, and then the city trying to make that possible by offering subsidies or approvals or whatever it is. And that's a very passive approach, kind of waiting for the economy to happen to you, rather than setting a long-term vision, understanding what some of the strategies might be around development and industrial strategy and planning.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision makers can do to advance progress in wellbeing economics? And my final question is, what does wellbeing economics mean to you? What does it mean in a world where we have 'social justice on a healthy planet'?

Eli Moore: Wellbeing economics to me, brings up that people have time to relax and be with their loved ones and breathe clean air and eat healthy food, and have stable, dignified housing. That to me is the end result. We really need leaders who are committed to that type of vision and that end result and aren't willing to compromise toward solutions that will leave out a whole part of the community or population. Leaders that will really help all of us move past some of these dominant narratives around government being the problem, zero-sum thinking about resources and that kind of crabs in the barrel mentality. And show that the economy can actually serve everyone, that there's enough to go around and that there's a pathway towards achieving that vision.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's great. I'll end it here. Thank you, Eli.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

* This conversation has been edited and condensed.