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More than a Contract

Black Self-Determination and People's Assemblies
in Jackson, Mississippi

Farish Street, Jackson Mississippi



Source: Natalie Maynor, "Farish Street historical district," CC BY

Learning objectives

- Understand the **democratic goals of civic engagement**, including mobilizing resources and building relationships.
- Ask and answer **key design questions** for planning engagement efforts.
- See the breadth of options for civic engagement and make **strategic choices**.
- **Assess and troubleshoot** civic engagement efforts.



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Exploration

Consider...

What was the conflict between Dr. Omari and the council members opposed to switching vendors for garbage collection?



Image source: Jeffrey Beall, "Garbage Truck," CC BY-ND

The most radical city?

“In Mississippi, we’ve always been at the bottom. We have to decide that we’re going to rescue ourselves. . . .So we’ve made the decision that we’re going to be the most radical city on the planet. We’re going to make certain that we change the whole scope of electoral politics.”

- Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba, 2017



Image source: Natalie Maynor, “Chokwe Antar Lumumba,” CC BY

Is there a radical way to take out the trash?

- *How did the trash contract decision connect to Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba's ambition to make Jackson "the most radical city on the planet"?*
- *How might history have informed the actors' perception of the subject under dispute?*

The Jackson People's Assembly (JPA)

Why did Dr. Omari and Chokwe Lumumba (Sr.) create the Jackson People's Assembly?



Safiya Omari,
social psychologist,
movement leader,
academic,
chief of staff



Chokwe Lumumba,
civil rights lawyer,
movement leader,
city council member,
mayor

Image sources (L-R): [City of Jackson](#), Natalie Maynor, "[Chokwe Lumumba 2013](#)," [CC BY](#)

What was distinctive about the JPA's design?

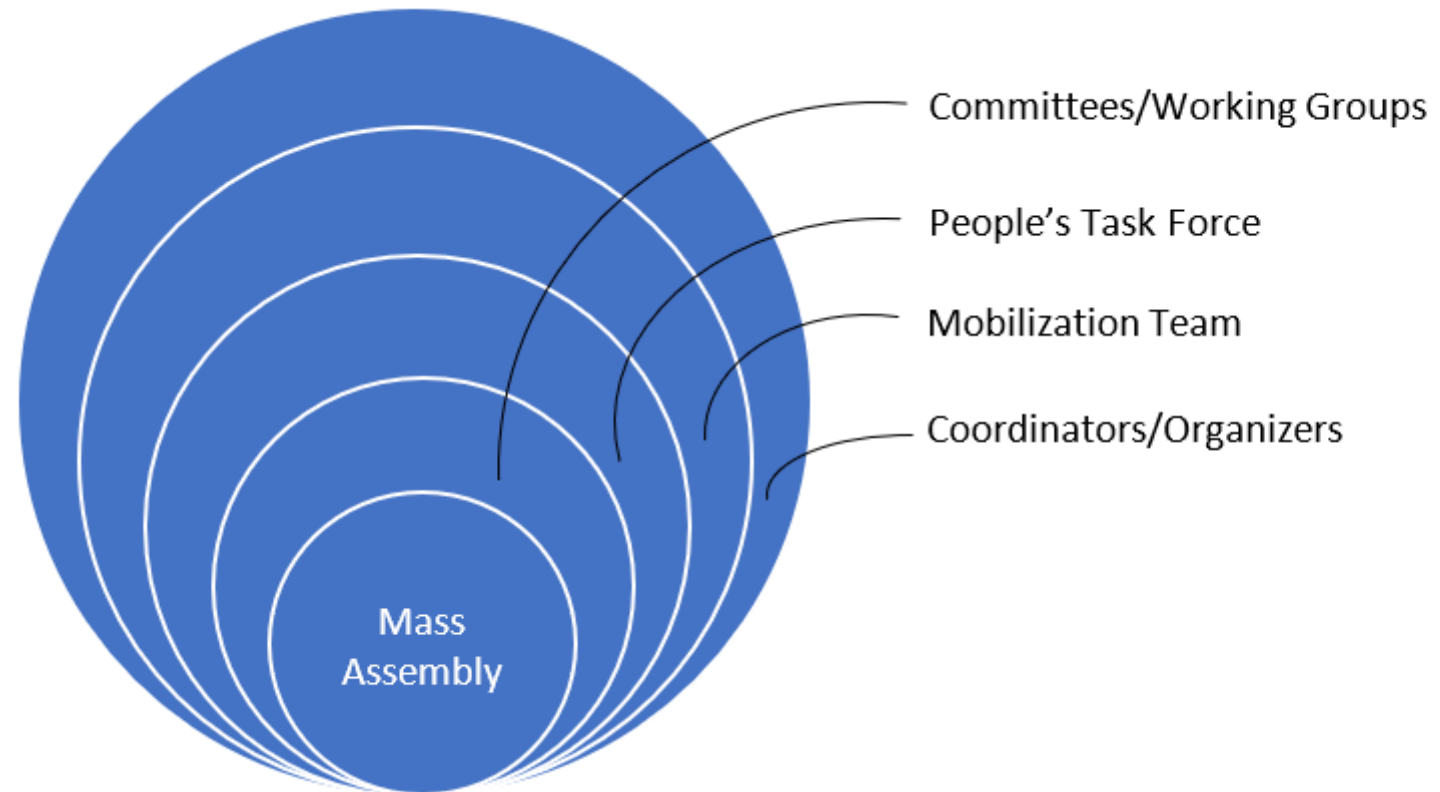
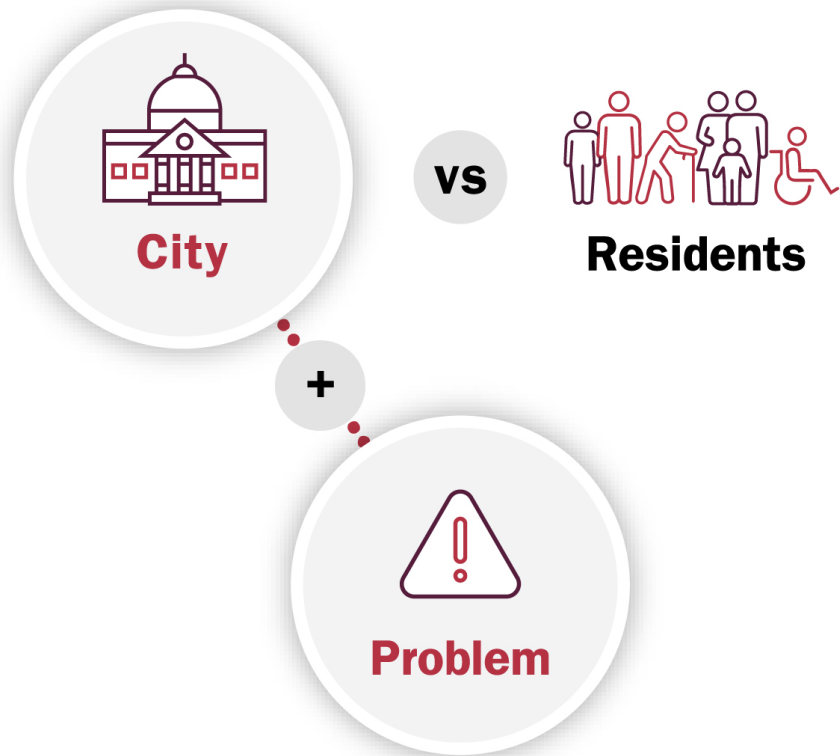


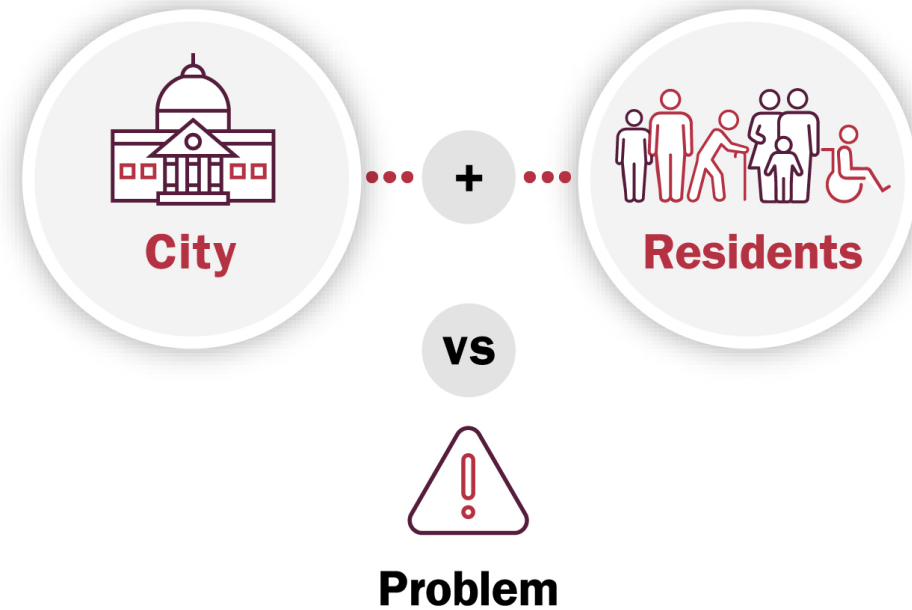
Image source: adapted by case authors from materials shared by Rukia Lumumba of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM)

Two paradigms of city governance

GOVERNMENT PARADIGM



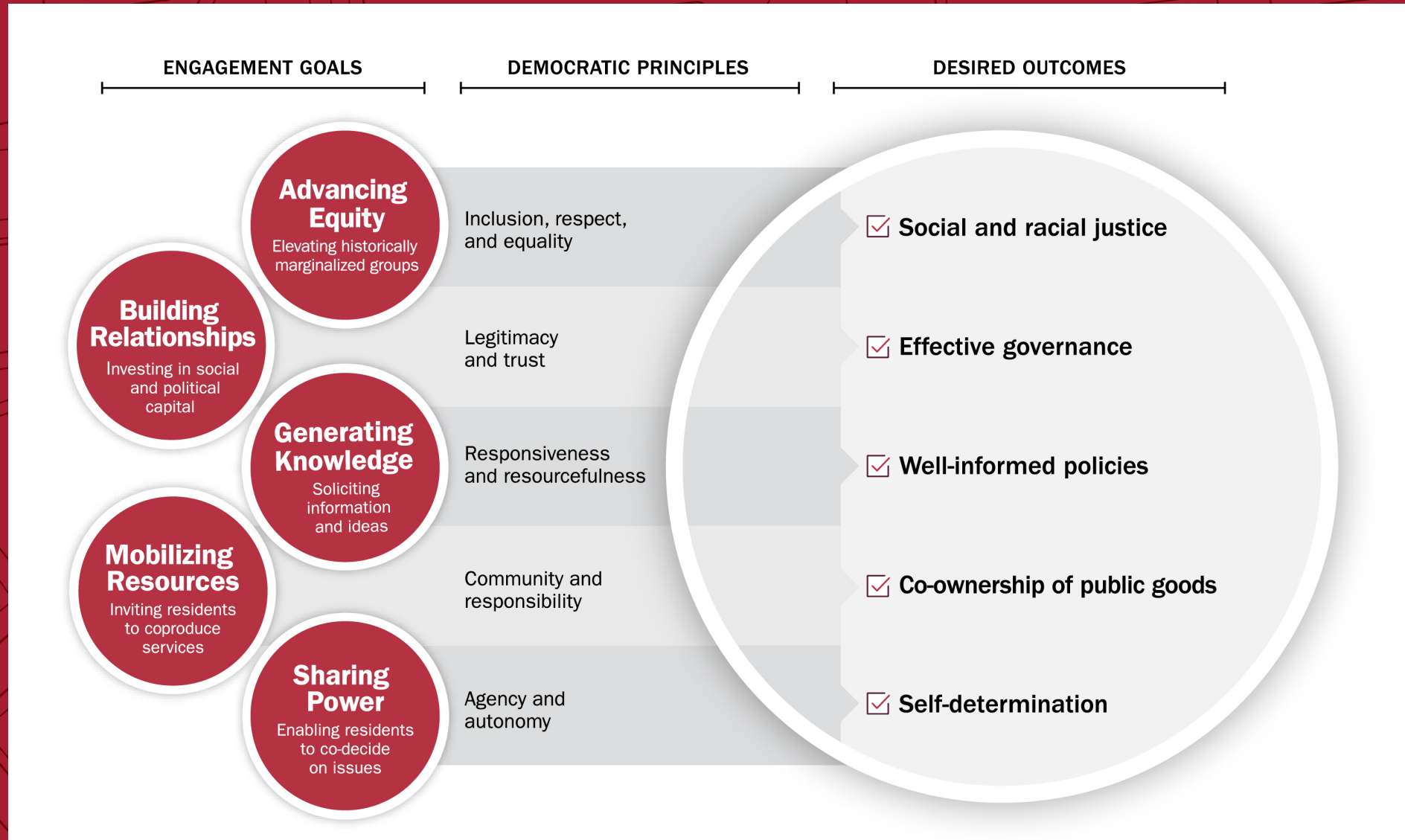
PARTICIPATION PARADIGM



Trash decision

- *Was there a pathway to resolve the conflict over the garbage collection contract using the government paradigm?*
- *Was there a role for the JPA to help resolve the issue?*

Five democratic goals of civic engagement



What Would You Do?

- *Considering these engagement goals and their desired outcomes, what would you have prioritized in terms of civic engagement?*
- *How would you have organized engagement to advance these priority goals?*

Participation Pathways

Four Key Design Questions





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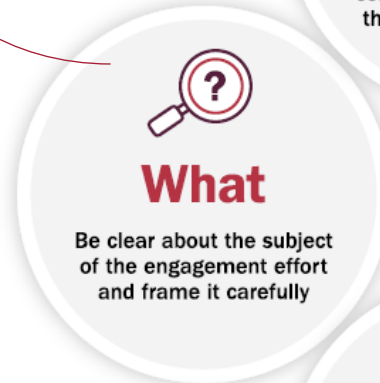
Diagnosis

Worth the fight?

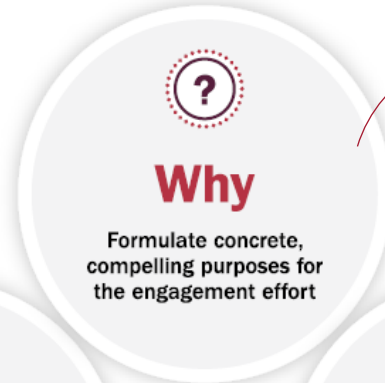
- *If you were Dr. Omari, would you have advised the mayor to fight city council on the garbage contract?*
- *Why or why not? What would you have advised as a next step?*

What Would You Do? Four Key Design Questions

WHAT: Managing solid waste in Jackson, (residential pickup, illegal dumping, litter), procurement process



WHO: Residents, trash collection workers, subcontractors, council members



WHY: Advancing equity? (equitable services, equity in contracting), sharing power? (engaging the JPA)



HOW: Town halls, people's assemblies, etc.



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Epilogue

What happened in Jackson?

- Council voted down contract with Richard's Disposal (4-3) three times in January and February 2022.
- Omari to press: *"As chief of staff to the mayor, my job is to move this city forward for its residents, and that requires that I speak the truth to the people."*
- Mayor Lumumba to press: *"I believe certain members of our council have accepted bribes and are steering a contract."*
- Council voted down contract with Richard's two more times in March.
- Numerous lawsuits and countersuits were filed and threatened.
- In April, Richard's took over garbage collection on an emergency basis under a legally contested contract. The mayor held "Trash Talk" town halls to explain the situation to residents and answer questions.

What happened in Jackson? (cont.)

- The mayor publicly urged council to put the trash contract to a referendum vote.
- Governor vetoed American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for Jackson, saying: *“Jackson is not one suburban golf course and one planetarium away from thriving.”* (MS Senator John Horhn: *“They punish us.”*)
- In spring, 2023, the expiration of an emergency contract with Richard’s Disposal and a still-deadlocked council led to garbage pile-ups and fines for the city.



Source: Emily P. “Tied bags with trash,” pexels.com

- A year later, at the end of another RFP process, Richard’s was awarded a six-year contract. WM did not bid on the contract. Council Member Aaron Banks cast the deciding vote.

Takeaways

- Naming and reflecting on **values at stake** in government action helps clarify goals for both city and residents.
- Designing efforts with clarity of purpose and **aligning goals** (WHY) with **topics** (WHAT), **participants** (WHO), and **methods** (HOW) is essential for improving engagement and reducing disappointment on all sides.
- Thinking about **what success looks** like and identifying **meaningful metrics** can also help clarify goals for city officials and residents.

Takeaways (cont.)

- The Participation Pathways Framework can help **structure conversations** and design efforts as well as **diagnose what works well and what could be improved** in ongoing engagement efforts.
- Civic engagement does not exist in a historical vacuum; **past efforts and outcomes inform residents' perceptions and willingness to engage**. Understanding this context will help you design more effective engagements.

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This slide deck, accompanying the case study “More than a Contract: Black Self-Determination and People’s Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi,” was created as an instructional aid by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies. It is not intended to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management. HKS Case 2276.41. Copyright © 2024 President and Fellows of Harvard College. (Revised 9/2024.)



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