

# 2015 SEIRN Conference Report



**Southeast Immigrant  
Rights Network**

[www.seirn.org](http://www.seirn.org)





Dear Compañerxs,

The 2015 SEIRN Conference, “Seeds of Struggle, Roots of Resistance,” took place in Hampton, Georgia from August 28-30. This conference brought together more than 150 grassroots leaders, organizers, activists, advocates and allies from different parts of the Southeast, including Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, as well as from other parts of the country including Washington, DC, California and New York.

Although we know that the capacity building workshops that have been offered in past conferences are very important, due to the critical situation faced by black communities in the United States we decided it was crucial, and our obligation, to dedicate this year’s conference to having intentional conversations about the impact racism and white supremacy have in our communities; how these systems of oppression are connected to the struggle for immigrant rights; what role we play within these systems of oppression; and what we can do to help dismantle these systems that rob us of our dignity.

This conference also allowed us to create a space to develop strategies; reflect on our collective mourning for the lives lost because of police brutality and repression of the US government and elsewhere; and reflect on how our communities use culture to resist.

We also honored the legacy of our dear friend and colleague Catherine Han Montoya, who continues to guide us and inspire us. Cathy was one of the co-founders of our network and a key part of our work.

Thank you very much to everyone who participated and made the 2015 Conference a great success. Thank you to all the facilitators for their hard work and to the organizations that sponsored the conference. On the following pages we share a summary of what we built together at the 2015 SEIRN Conference.

In solidarity,

***Nayely, Luis y Mónica***

# *Thank you so much!*

The 2015 SEIRN would not have been possible without the support of the following people and institutions:

## **Planning team:**

Catalina Nieto, Meredith Cabell, Isabel Vinent, Reza Fernández, Carolina Vélez, Yanira Arias, Salvador Sarmiento, Francisco Argüelles.

## **Facilitation team:**

Catalina Nieto, Isabel Vinent, Reza Fernández, Yanira Arias, Salvador Sarmiento, Francisco Argüelles, Eunice Cho, Evelyn Servín, Leticia Álvarez, Ingrid Chapman, América Gruner, Tia Oso, Esmeralda Baltazar, Salvador Cervantes, Nadia Salazar, Sarai Portillo, Benjamín Tzompaxtle-Itehua.

## **Interpreters team:**

Ada Volkmer (Coordinator), Andrea Golden, Monserrat Ramírez, Gwendolyn Ferreti, Eva Cárdenas, Cecilia Sáenz, David Valenzuela

## **Childcare team:**

Teresa Castañeda, Emmanuel Muñoz, and Socorro Anaya

## **Cultural Touch:**

Danza Azteca Tonantzin (Yolanda Zavala, Carolina Espinoza Montesinos, Geraldine Rodríguez & Octavio Flores) & Grupo de Tambores Coreanos (Leng Leng Chancey, Son Ah Yun, Eunice Cho)

## **Logistical support:**

Maritza Pérez, Karla Vázquez, Emilio Vicente, Herlinda León, Flora Johnson, Adelina Nicholls, and Carlos Torres.

## **Organizations that lent us the interpretation equipment:**

Wayside Popular Education Center  
Fund for Democratic Communities

## **Foundations:**

Four Freedoms Fund, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Unitarian Universalist, Veatch Program, Fund for Democratic Communities, Peace Development Fund, Common Counsel/Grassroots Exchange Fund/Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice/New World Foundation

## **SPONSORS:**

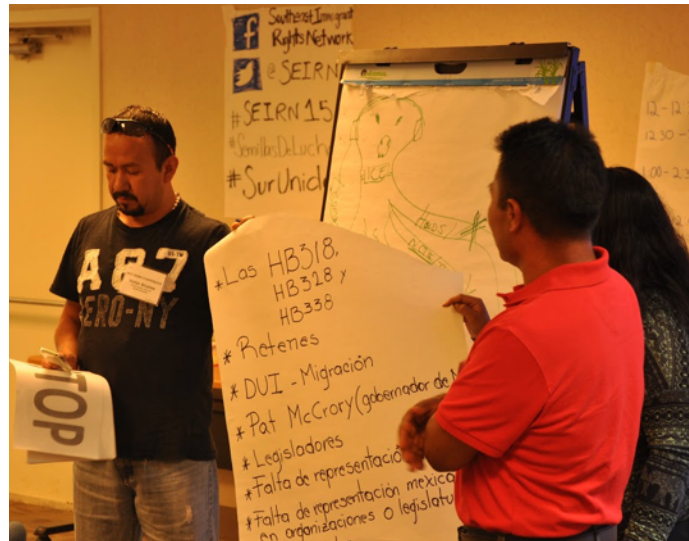
Southern Poverty Law Center  
Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice  
Florida Immigrant Coalition  
Arkansas United Community Coalition  
The Leadership Conference Education Fund  
Alianza Americas (formerly National Alliance of Latino and Caribbean Communities)  
National Immigration Law Center  
Fair Immigration Reform Movement  
Welcoming America



# Strategy Session

Forty SEIRN members and collaborators participated in a strategy session on Friday, August 28<sup>th</sup>. The objectives for this session were to:

- ❖ Celebrate our victories in 2014-2015
- ❖ Develop a shared analysis of the political context at the local/state, regional and national levels for the last 2 years.
- ❖ Share updates on the status of DAPA and DACA expansion, and the new enforcement strategies being implemented by ICE.
- ❖ Identify opportunities, challenges and possible collaborations to advance our work on DACA+/DAPA, elections, enforcement and other issues.



## National context:

Melissa Keaney from NILC, Salvador Sarmiento from NDLON, and Salvador Cervantes from CCC provided a national context. Melissa reminded us of the efforts to stop the implementation of DAPA and expansion of DACA, and shared an approximate time line of the lawsuit in the federal courts. Salvador Sarmiento explained how the detention and deportation machinery works, and the different enforcement strategies and tools that ICE is using, including prisons, checkpoints, the Secure Communities program, notifications, etc. Salvador reminded us that while DAPA and the expansion of DACA are still blocked, ICE is still functioning and improving its strategies, and that the power to fight these strategies is in the community. Salvador Cervantes talked about how the immigrant community has been able to stop anti-immigrant legislation, but that at the same time it is necessary to grow the number of voters in our communities to increase our power.





# Strategy Session

## Local context:

Participants were divided by state to discuss the issues that are having the greatest impact in their communities.

### South Carolina:

Check points; tickets for driving without a driver's license; cars can't be registered without an ID

### Alabama:

Check points in small roads; people who are driving without a driver's license are getting their cars confiscated

### Mississippi:

Check points; people can't acquire property without a driver's license

### Georgia:

Fines and harsher punishments for traffic violations; ICE is detaining people with previous cases of DUI and domestic violence even if they already paid their sentence.

### North Carolina:

Anti-immigrant legislation introduced in the legislature: HB 318 and HB 328; unreachable legislators; lack of representations of Mexicans in organizations; check points

### Arkansas:

We are seeing the "Trump effect"; use of the confederate flag; you can't apply for a driver's license in another language besides English; detentions are decreasing, but fines have increased.

### Virginia:

Notary fraud; deportations; gentrification in some parts of the state, immigrants are being displaced

### Texas:

Deaths and disappearances continue to rise on the border; impact of Texas' rejection of Medicaid expansion; increased rejection of medical services in Spanish; challenges to access to public education.



Benjamin Itehua

# Strategy Session

## Regional context:

Ingrid Chapman from ACIJ and Adelina Nicholls from GLAHR offered the regional context and highlighted how the immigrant community was perceived in the Southeast before and after anti-immigrant laws were passed in South Carolina (SB20), Georgia (HB87) and Alabama (HB56), and how after the introduction of these laws regional collaboration emerged among immigrant groups, but also with allies. They also emphasized the general problems that the region faces with the expansion of ICE-police collaboration, raids, lack of access to driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, the criminalization of the immigrant community, the introduction of “double-edged sword” legislation that often divides the community, and lack of access to services.



Benjamin Itehua

## Exploring possibilities for collaboration:

Participants were divided into four groups to explore strategies around three themes: DAPA and DACA expansion, immigration enforcement, and the elections. After outlining possible strategies, each group shared its proposals with the rest of the participants. Each group and organization met to determine what area they were interested in working. After a voting process, these were the results:

### Enforcement:

- Form a rapid response team joined by activists and allies
- Win a local campaign to get ICE out of a local jail
- Form a coalition among states that share the same ICE field office.



# Strategy Session

## Elections:

- Carry out a voter registration campaign aimed at youth
- Inform the community about the electoral process and explain it in a simple way
- Educate the community about how the electoral system can work in our favor or against us.



## DAPA & DACA+:

- Pressure presidential candidates to sign a pledge saying that they won't take away DACA, nor interfere with DAPA and DACA expansion.
- Get public officials from states in the South that have joined the lawsuit against DAPA and DACA+ to support these programs publicly.
- Carryout coordinated actions against governors who have joined the lawsuit against DAPA and DACA+.

## The most popular strategies were:

- Win a local campaign to get ICE out of a local jail
- Pressure presidential candidates to sign a pledge saying that they won't take away DACA, nor interfere with DAPA and DACA expansion.

## Next steps:

After the conference, SEIRN and ACIJ worked together to develop a sample pledge letter for presidential candidates, and hosted a call to continue to explore the possibility of collaborating to win a local campaign to get ICE out of a local jail.

SEIRN is currently working with NDLO on a campaign to get ICE out of North Carolina, and we are focusing on supporting grassroots leaders with a local "ICE out" campaign in Raleigh.

To obtain a copy of the pledge letter or to join future conversations on immigration enforcement in the South, please contact [nayely@seirn.org](mailto:nayely@seirn.org)

# Friday, August 28



## Welcome...

Our colleague Mónica welcomed conference participants on behalf of SEIRN and reviewed the theme of the 2015 conference and why SEIRN decided to dedicate this conference to the issues of racism and white supremacy. She emphasized that due to intensified institutional violence against black people, SEIRN decided that it was not enough to discuss the issues of racism and white supremacy in a 45-minute or one hour workshop, but that we had the obligation to devote the conference to having difficult conversations about these systems of oppression. Mónica reminded us that it is time to join other marginalized communities to truly create the South we believe is possible.

The Georgia Latino Alliance (GLAHR) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) welcomed us to the state of Georgia, highlighting the strength, resistance and hard work of immigrant communities in Georgia and the South.

We also shared a statement of solidarity with the Gulf South on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. [Click here](#) to read the statement.



## Say their names:

In a powerful moment, we named and brought into the space the people and communities that have been killed by or died because of police brutality and government repression in the US and other countries. In small groups we reflected on the connections and the reasons for these deaths.



## Altar of Resistance:

We then created an "Altar of Resistance" together, where we each shared an item, phrase or drawing that symbolizes what gives us strength to continue to move forward, and we reflected on the resistance of our people and what resistance means to each of us.

## Pre-panel activity:

On Saturday we began with an activity called “multiple introductions” to survey the issue areas that participants and groups are working on, and to learn who was present in the space.

We followed with an activity in preparation for the panel, where we asked participants to write/draw the words/images that come to mind when they hear the words repression, racism, white supremacy, and anti-blackness. Here are some of the examples that came out of this exercise:



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**Repression:** rejection, humiliation, power over, anger, fear, when the police arrests people of color, state violence against people of color, denial of human rights, violence, imprisonment, deportation, stealing the dignity of undocumented people and putting barriers that limit opportunities for them to survive, structural violence, violation of our rights.

**Racism:** Ignorance, segregation, lack of acceptance, discrimination, voter IDs, lack of consciousness, impotence, inhuman, police, hate, degrading words, social classes, intolerance, institutions, abuse, stereotyping, KKK, inequality, discrimination and racial profiling.

**White supremacy:** hatred, slavery, power, inequality, make minorities and people of color inferior, injustice, ignorance, only white people have privileges, KKK, segregation, lynching, Donald Trump, abuse of power, racism, historical legacy of hatred, confederate flag, modern slavery, fear, dehumanization.

**Anti-blackness:** prejudice, stereotypes, hatred, inhuman, brutal, sub-human, dark skin is bad, segregation, oppression, slavery, South, global problem, white supremacy, civil rights, repression, injustice, criminalization, contempt, abuse, illogical, cruel, confederates, death, political system.





Tia Oso from the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), Benjamin Itehua from Alabama, and Francisco Argüelles from Houston, shared how the struggle for immigrant rights, the Black Lives Matter movement, indigenous resistance and state violence connect, and how these communities are standing against racism, white supremacy and anti-blackness.

“We named our son Ehecatl because of pride, but we get criticized, even by our family... they tell us that we are condemning our son for life, but why? Because we have been taught for years to be humiliated and humiliate each other, to not learn about our history, about our own people, we have been divided. As an indigenous person in the United States, you are humiliated because of the way you dress, because of your accent, for not speaking Spanish properly, we’ve been shamed for our languages that we don’t even use much anymore. Our languages and our history are our roots. We must be like the seeds carried by the wind: even in a piece of soil in between a crack of concrete it can grow its roots, blossom and bear fruit. Today, the struggle continues, we cannot stop.

”

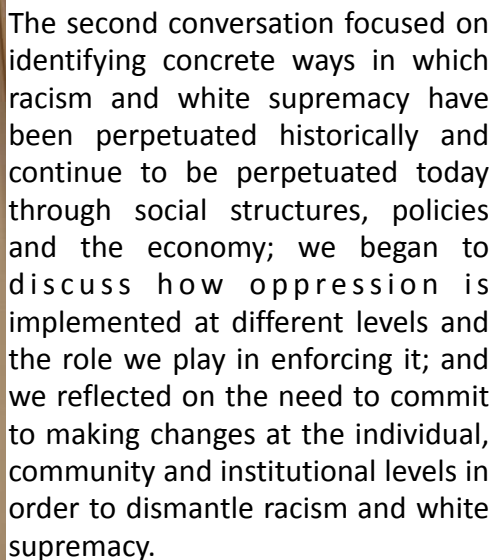
*—Benjamín Tzompaxtle-Itehua*

## Group Conversations:

After the panel, participants were divided into groups of 10-15 people, with 2 facilitators per group who used the same popular education curriculum to guide the conversations. We will soon share this curriculum so that it can be implemented in different communities.

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In the first conversation we shared definitions of racism, white supremacy, and anti-blackness to be able to guide the conversations, and we used different tools and activities to reflect on what the panel shared; to share how we've been impacted by white supremacy and racism at the individual and community levels; to identify the similarities and the differences of how racism operates in the United States in comparison to countries of origin; and we started the conversation of how we benefit from and contribute to racism, white supremacy and anti-blackness individually and at the community level.





# Anti-Oppression Tree

After the small group conversations, we returned to the plenary. Each group appointed two representatives to share highlights from their conversations, and we had an activity to identify what we can do to help dismantle racism and white supremacy at the different levels:



**Political/institutional:** put pressure on people who donate to political campaigns; create awareness among voters; report abuses; promote laws that make police and immigration agents accountable when they take racist actions; inform, educate, organize and act against institutions that promote racism and oppression; create community, organize and take direct action; protest against police brutality, abuse of power and hyper-policing; question discriminatory practices; come together and fight against unjust laws and share stories of oppression to raise awareness; promote, defend and know our rights; make elected officials accountable; change laws; be active in the political process; have an organized community; promote voting in our community; dismantle the economic power; oppose unjust laws.

**Economic:** change the perspective that says money is power; not fall into the mainstream economy; not support the economic sources that are against social justice; do we have capitalism because of white supremacy? Do we have white supremacy because of capitalism? ; be active in our communities and stay informed; demand transparency around the source of politicians' money; boycott private prisons' revenue sources; boycott large companies and institutions and prevent monopolies; stronger unions and demand accountability from Wall Street; encourage new generations to assume positions of power and to not forget their roots; claim our power; support local businesses instead of corporations; boycott all businesses that support anti-immigrant laws; organize a boycott to show our economic power; denounce collaborations between politicians, institutions and corporations; invest resources in the causes we support.

## Anti-Oppression Tree

**Cultural:** educate others about racism; be careful what we say; speak up; show support to other communities; treat others the way we want to be treated; educate ourselves and our children; speak up when someone says or does something racist; organize events and dinners with other communities to get to know each other and share our cultures; teach our children about equality regardless of race, color, language or culture; stop making and promoting racist jokes; coexist with other cultures; change the messages promoted in the media; do not forget where we come from; be careful about the way we express ourselves about others; create awareness so that history does not repeat itself; eliminate offensive language; do not judge based on appearances; accept and celebrate diversity; ask questions rather than assuming something about a person; educational campaign for racial equity; stop using "the black one" to refer to the darker son/daughter in the family; stop using nicknames that distinguish ethnicity in a negative context; preserve our roots.



### Some reflections from facilitators:

- How can we move from reflection to collective action?
- This tree is an example of the intellectual richness we have
- People who have suffered more have a kind of knowledge that people with privilege don't have.
- we have personal experiences and collective experiences
- all these ideas demand that we organize
- how are we going to form strategic alliances with other communities at the local level?

# Tribute to Catherine Han Montoya

Saturday, August 29

As a family, we honored the memory of our dear friend and compañera Catherine Han Montoya in a tribute where we remembered and shared her legacy. This was a special moment where we could celebrate her life in community.



Photo by Maritza Pérez

Cathy was a co-founder of SEIRN and co-organizer of our first conference, as well as a key part of the organizing team of later conferences. Her support for and commitment to SEIRN were always vital and unconditional.

Originally from Colorado, Cathy described herself as a "Queer Chicana Korean Feminist (and Denver Broncos fan)." Her ability to empathize across difference moved her to dedicate her life to helping others celebrate and live wholly in their identities. She was an ardent activist and tireless champion for civil and human rights, immigrant rights, Asian American women's rights, queer rights and racial justice, always bringing passion, humor, kindness and light to every endeavor and every relationship. Cathy was a brilliant strategist, organizer, coalition builder and visionary who despite all of her accomplishments, was humble, down to earth, and unassuming.

In addition to SEIRN, Cathy co-founded the first National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum chapter in the South, in Atlanta. She played an instrumental role in helping the Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice organize against HB 56 and provided invaluable support and mentorship to the organizing team of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, and to many other immigrant organizers and leaders in the South. She worked for National Council of La Raza, the Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights, and the American Civil Liberties Union, and served as consultant for the Four Freedoms Fund, always remaining rooted in and identifying with grassroots communities.

As an integral part of the SEIRN family, Cathy's absence leaves a great void and profound pain in our hearts. But her love, light and spirit, and her legacy for a just South that respects the dignity of all people will always be with us. Our hearts are with Meredith Cabell, Cathy's wife and life partner and another dear member of the SEIRN family, as well as their beautiful daughter, Catherine Rose Montoya-Cabell, who was born on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

**Rest in Power and love, compañera Catherine Han Montoya!**  
**May your love and light guide us always.**



# Sunday, August 30

## Healing through culture and in community:



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Danza Azteca Tonantzín of Raleigh, NC opened Sunday morning. The dancers shared why they dance and how it keeps them connected to their dignity and their roots.

Participants reflected on how their ancestors healed in community and we shared how we can remain rooted in our cultures/traditions today to heal and grieve everything that is happening. We then broke up into small groups and wrote poems reflecting the conference theme, “Seeds of Struggle, Roots of Resistance:”

“We are seeds of struggle planted in the community that flourish through unity, strength and collaboration. We are roots of resistance when we remain faithful to our ideals, culture and beliefs.”

“We are seeds of struggle that germinate from our ancestors, fed by hope for liberation from oppression, because we are fed up, as my grandparents’ and ancestors’ teachings are reborn and make me better, as we become stronger within the movement, when we accept ourselves and teach our children the love of struggle. We are roots of resistance who show up, because we are the strength of the universe, because despite oppression, we maintain ourselves with our effort, we bear the fruit of liberty, enveloping so much oppression; each day we resist even more, we confront discrimination, racism, injustice, but we defeat them and create new roads.”

“We are seeds of struggle when we use our voice, when we take care of each other, when others follow this example of struggle, when we demonstrate the difficult truth in society, when we build community. We are roots of resistance when we do not accept racism, when we transmit our culture, when we continue the struggle of our ancestors, when we do not submit to inequality, when we transform the systems that do not work for us.”

# Sunday, August 30

“We are seeds of struggle when we teach the new generations to be proud of their roots. We are roots of resistance because we want justice for all without oppressing others.”

“We are roots of resistance because the winds of violence do not reach us, rooted in the consciousness that we feed our movement and pursue survival”

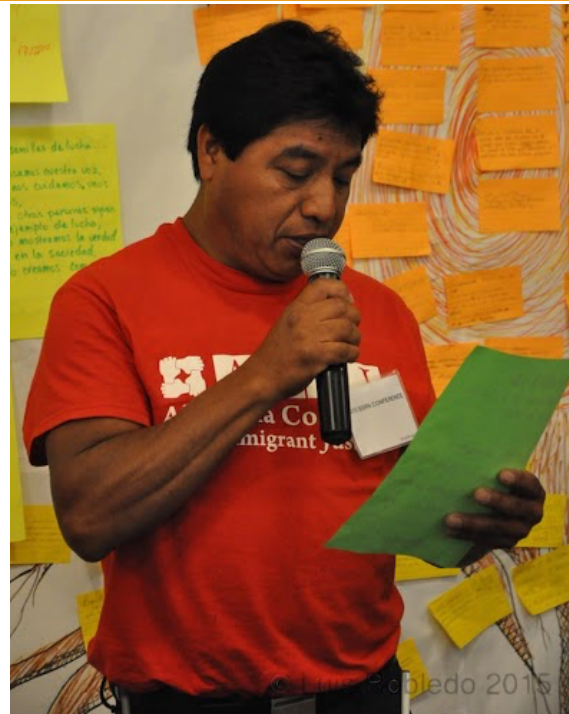
## Commitments:

We asked each participant to write one personal commitment to help dismantle racism on a postcard and to imagine how our community would look like once that commitment was realized. We later mailed participants their postcards.

Working to dismantle racism requires not only a personal, but also an organizational commitment, so we asked participants to break out by organization and to write a commitment.



- Hold a training about racism in our coalition
- As an Asian American organization we need to explore different ways of working with other communities. If we work together, we can move mountains.



### Some of the commitments:

- Take action when problems with behavior arises within our organization
- Find creative ways to share resources
- Support youth in their efforts to establish alliances with other immigrant communities
- Look within ourselves, build consciousness amongst our communities and celebrate our culture
- Build consciousness amongst our community regarding how to build power among our people to end racism
- Build alliances with other communities. Join efforts.
- Share what we learned in this conference

# Sunday, August 30

## Evaluation:

Participants evaluated the conference based on the following criteria: content/topics, methodology, tools, facilitators and logistics. They identified the positive aspects, what could have been better and offered suggestions.

**Topics (positive):** up to date topics, it's something we are living and suffering; excellent, it is necessary to dismantle; the tribute to Cathy was moving; important to talk about these topics at the same time, because they are interconnected; the topics were very important; very good conversations; very informative; current topics; we received a lot of very valuable information; we had time to share; we liked the topics very much; the topics were very interesting because they will help us to evaluate ourselves and they gave us elements to continue working in our community; we understood that these topics affect our daily lives and it is necessary to bring them to light; very good focus.



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**Topics (suggestions):** Leadership workshop; have “spoken Word” and other performances; workshops on how to include culture in organizing work; have conversations about how to be allies and form alliances; more time for conversations; provide material that we can take home: we needed answers and more time to discuss: more time to discuss the economic system; none, everything was excellent; more diversity in presenters; offer skills building workshops.

**Logistics (positive):** the place is very nice; Calvin Center is very nice; good interpretation; location was very central; dancing on Saturday night; best location in the last 3-4 years; a retreat center is much better than a hotel; spacious; nice bedrooms; clean bedrooms; great interpretation; very good socializing after the conference; excellent location; very good interpretation and organization; very good lodging; good transportation; good interpretation; childcare; interpretation team; most people were friendly; respect for diversity; the T-shirts are beautiful; we are and leave very grateful, we liked the food, the lodging, the place very much.



# Sunday, August 30

Logistics (suggestions): have a social media space; announce courtesy rules for the dormitories; be sure to answer our calls; share a contact list of organizations that are participating; better food options; offer a space for other organizations to do cultural presentations; have an art exhibit; find a similar space for next year; better sound; better food; closer dormitories; try to organize dorms based on who goes to sleep early and who goes to sleep late; it's hard to participate on Friday because of work; more time; rules for sharing rooms; follow the agenda; start on time; there were problems with the distribution of rooms; some rooms did not have hot water; the registration page was not user-friendly; there was not a good Wi-Fi signal; not enough materials.

Methodology (positive): the group discussions; the activities; it felt like a safe, non-judgmental space; very participatory; we really liked the focus on popular education; the facilitators were incredible; the icebreakers were very good; the emphasis on renewing the spirit to continue the struggle; presentation of topics; easy to understand; the tree and seeds concept; the parables; focusing on one activity; clear, precise and easy to understand; I really liked the songs, the dances and the tribute to Cathy; I liked the enthusiasm of all the presenters; the drawings and the presenters helped us understand the topic; I really liked the Aztec dance; the drawings, the iceberg, the icebreakers, the interpretation; facilitators were very dynamic; the tribute to Cathy Montoya was beautiful; it was good to see youth and adults mixed together; the opportunity to participate; good visual examples.



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# Sunday, August 30

Methodology (suggestions): share the microphone with participants; more history of immigrants; more African American people; share examples of successful alliances; more presenters in English; more corporal activity; more organizations from other communities; a space for groups to share their projects; continue to promote more youth participation; more spaces to talk about ways to advance our movement, not just about ideas and theory; better facilitation of groups; some leaders did not look very enthusiastic; divide participants based on the experience they have around the topics being discussed; more presenters in English; that the conference not be so focused on Latinos/Hispanics, the topics discussed affect all immigrants.

Participation (positive): the facilitators; the various organizations; the tribute to Cathy; people feeling uncomfortable; I felt it was easy to participate, people were respectful, people were interested; in the small groups, participation was good; people were engaged.

Participation (suggestions): invite other organizations that are not focused only on Latino issues; make time to build alliances and get to know each other as organizations; ensure that everyone participates; convene the groups based on the work that they do; there was not enough break time; have more outside activities; ask participants not to use their cell phones so much; I didn't want to participate much because my Spanish is not good and I felt that some were annoyed by that; lack of participation in large groups because of insufficient time; outreach to other groups.







# Join and participate with SEIRN!

If you are part of a grassroots group or a non-profit organization, we invite you to become a SEIRN member. Learn more about member benefits and how to become a member by [clicking here](#). If you have questions about membership, please contact [emilio@seirn.org](mailto:emilio@seirn.org)

SEIRN holds regular calls with grassroots leaders and community organizers. If you are interested in participating on these calls, please contact [nayely@seirn.org](mailto:nayely@seirn.org)

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# Thank you!