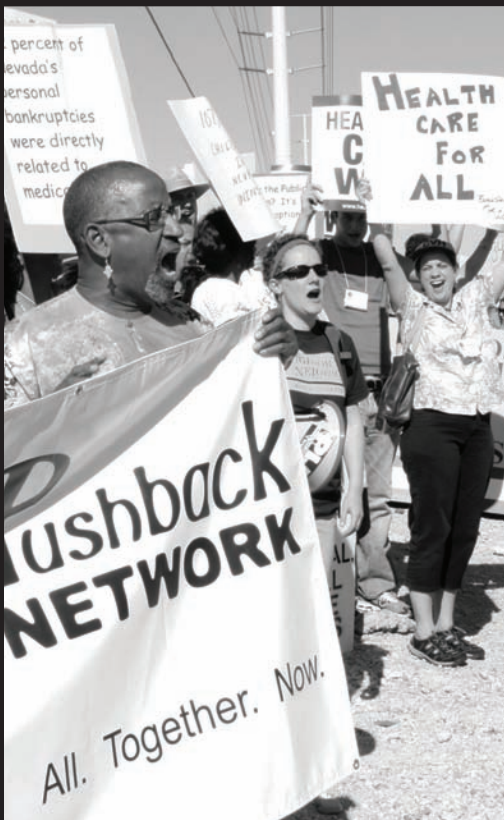


December 2010

CONNECTING CROSSROADS **at the**

Alliance Building and Social Change in Tough Times



Manuel Pastor | Jennifer Ito | Rhonda Ortiz

Commissioned by Public Interest Projects

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With heartfelt thanks and deep admiration, we first want to acknowledge and celebrate the alliance builders we interviewed – and those who we were not able to – for your vision, patience, and dedication to the work. What you do to find common ground across cultural, geographic, and demographic boundaries is laying the foundation for sustained change in America.

For those leaders that we were able to interview by phone or in person, we thank you for sharing your time and wisdom. For those that came to a convening in New York in July 2010 where we previewed our preliminary findings, we thank you for the constructive criticism, suggestions, and support. Finally, we offer a special shout-out to Ai-Jen Poo of the National Domestic Workers Alliance for providing feedback and input on an early draft of this report.

Three authors are listed on the cover and we did indeed drive the research and the writing – but as anyone familiar with a project of this scope and scale knows, it takes a team to do the work. Our particular team included the following people: from the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, research lead Vanessa Carter and production designer Jacqueline Agnello; from UCLA's Department of Urban Planning, graduate student researcher Madeline Wander; from USC School of Policy, Planning and Development, graduate student researcher Jared Sanchez; and from the Department of Community and Regional Development at UC Davis, Associate Professor and long-time collaborator, Chris Benner.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge Public Interest Projects for making this project possible and for giving us the opportunity to speak to old friends and meet new ones. We hope that this report accurately reflects the thoughts of all those who contributed comments of various forms along the way and trust that it will be helpful in inviting more foundations to the conversation about what alliances are, why they are important, and how they can be supported.

-- Manuel Pastor, Jennifer Ito, and Rhonda Ortiz
USC Program for Environmental & Regional Equity

PROGRAM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND REGIONAL EQUITY (PERE)

Established in 2007, the University of Southern California's Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) conducts research and facilitates discussions on issues of environmental justice, regional inclusion, and social movement building; it has also been responsible for developing and staffing the start-up operations of USC's Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (CSII). In general, we seek and support direct collaborations with community-based organizations in our research and other activities, trying to forge a new model of how university and community can work together for the common good.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It's tough times in America. The 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama provoked hope that change was possible, with his campaign bringing new constituencies into the political process and his victory marking a crucial milestone in the American dilemma of race. Two years later, it seems like we are mostly surveying the wreckage: the economy remains stuck in neutral, progressives are frustrated with the timidity of Administration policy, and a conservative wave, tinged with worrisome racial undertones, has captured media and public attention.

With the nation bucking up for years of political gridlock, some commentators have noted that the real factor limiting the Obama administration and breathing life into the conservative agenda is not a failure of audacity nor is it simply the overwhelming money unleashed into the electoral process by the decisions of a right-leaning Supreme Court. Rather, the real challenge facing not just the President, but progressives in general, is the absence of social movements that are deeply rooted, deeply intersectional, and deeply effective.

This is not to say that elements of such a movement infrastructure do not exist: we have seen an impressive mobilization of immigrants and their defenders; labor has made inroads in key metropolitan regions; environmentalists have recently beat back efforts to upend California's climate law; and LGBT activists have put the issues of marriage equality and military service squarely on the American agenda. What is missing, in part, is the connection between all these efforts – the alliances that would allow such movements to flow into one stream of sustained social change.

Coming together is critical partly because the issues that face us are interconnected – you cannot improve worker rights without resolving

immigrant vulnerability; you cannot stress immigrant integration without furthering African American economic and political progress; and you cannot protect civil rights unless you include all people who want to serve their country, raise families, and contribute to the nation. Multi-ethnic, multi-issue alliances, in short, are crucial in the long-term fight for a more equitable future – and they are especially important in a period in which the dynamics of division and despair will need to be challenged by the constructs of coalition and community.

ALLIANCES AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

In this report, we define alliances as the coming together of two or more organizations to build power to affect broader change and transform systems of power. These are not mergers: member organizations retain their own identity and internal decision-making processes but

agree that there are problems best addressed and momentum best engendered by working in collaboration. We focus here on alliances of a particular sort: independent base-building organizations that believe in building long-term connections

across geographies, constituencies, and issues as a key movement-building strategy.

This definition leaves out a few important parts of the movement ecosystem. First, we do not include in our analysis short-term, tactical coalitions that come together around a specific campaign then disband; while such efforts can help build an alliance, we are interested in the long-term relationships that might flow from such campaigns. Second, we focus on grassroots groups and spend no time considering national collaborations that are important and often effective but have more shallow roots in community organizing. Finally, we

Multi-ethnic, multi-issue alliances are crucial in the long-term fight for a more equitable future . . . we need social movements that are deeply rooted, deeply intersectional, and deeply effective.

do not consider national organizing networks, such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, that create affiliate organizations that are similar in form and purpose; we think these are important groupings, but they have been studied elsewhere. We do, however, include in our analysis the particular affiliates of the networks that “play well with others” and so work in alliances with other very different groups.

What do these grassroots alliances look like? Consider the United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations, a community-level effort that brought together African American, Latino, and Muslim residents in Chicago to win 500 summer jobs for youth. Think about the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports, a Los Angeles example in which labor, community, health, and environmental groups united their efforts to secure environmental regulations and good port trucking jobs for low-income workers,

many of them immigrants. And contemplate Basic Rights Oregon, a group dedicated to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, that is working in alliance with a group of African American churches in Portland to fight police brutality that affects both the LGBT and black communities – despite their disagreement on gay marriage.

Of course, alliances come in many shapes and forms – and sometimes call themselves “partnerships,” “networks,” and “coalitions.” Because we think they are so crucial to the American future, we are less hung up on the semantics and more focused on the actual forms and possibilities of these grassroots alliances. With support from Public Interest Projects, we thus embarked on an investigation that took us from a review of the written literature on alliances and social movements, to interviews with thirty organizations covering a wide variety

of issues and constituencies, and finally to a convening of more than twenty of the best alliance builders in the country at which we presented the first draft of this analysis. This report tries to capture the wisdom of those in the field and especially those who provided direct feedback – and to use that learning to make recommendations for strategic investments by both the organizations and their philanthropic supporters.

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

We found that alliances tend to fill four functions for those who participate: information and resource sharing, including the development of materials for popular education; strategic dialogues and relationship building, including the creation of a deeper political consciousness about the work; leadership development, including the acquisitions of new skills; and joint actions and campaigns, including victories that move policy and build power.

Alliances sometimes include very like organizations – such as the similarly structured labor-affiliated think and



action tanks that comprise the Partnership for Working Families (PWF) – and some very different organizations, such as the very diverse groups promoting racial, economic, and environmental justice under the aegis of the Colorado Progressive Coalition. Sometimes the geographic scale reaches across the nation, as with PWF, and sometimes within a more compact area, such as a state or even one metropolitan area.

Whatever the nature or geography of the members, alliances eventually have to make choices about organizational structures. Alliances can either be a less formal body or become an independent 501c(3); the challenge with the former approach is that staff time and costs may be hidden and the challenge with the latter approach is that the new alliance organization may become a competitor in the fundraising world. As we explore below, there are also issues of decision-making: while a democratic process can insure buy-in from all participants, the reality is that some organizations have a deeper commitment and therefore want more say. Balancing these cross-cutting rationales in terms of structure and governance is as much an art as a science.

Such choices about form and function come up through what we characterize as the stages of alliance development: analysis of the need, early outreach to others, formation of initial alliances, operationalization of programs and campaigns, and institutionalization of the infrastructure. Throughout, organizers need to be consistent and disciplined in evaluating their efforts, asking key questions like: Will we be more powerful working together? Are there others who should be at our table? Do we have enough trust to move forward? What actions can we take jointly? Is there a reason to make our relationship long-term?

CONNECTING, CEMENTING, AND SCALING

The fundamental task of an alliance is to connect groups that have stood apart. Whether to do that via long term, trust-building exercises, including the creation of reflective space, or simply in the heat of a campaign, remains a topic

of debate for academic analysts – but not for the organizers themselves. In our conversations, they all stressed that trust was the essential glue of an alliance, and that even groupings that had initially come together just for a campaign, such as the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, double-backed to create a shared vision and analysis.

Making connections across constituencies, issues, and skill sets can take the work to a new level: the Right to the City Alliance (RTTC), which emerged as a national vehicle to unite disparate efforts to combat gentrification and local displacement in inner cities across the country, has allowed local grassroots organizations to articulate a shared national vision about the need to protect public housing. There are always challenges, of course. Wedge issues, such as marriage equality, can be utilized to divide groups. Different organizational cultures, especially about the mix of protest and persuasion, can create tensions. Policy disagreements are always present, particularly since, as one organizer stated, “no policy is good enough or goes far enough.”

But sticking to it and cementing the relationships for the long term can yield benefits. Indeed, connecting diverse organizations is not what makes alliances unique; short-term, campaign coalitions can also be multi-ethnic and multi-skilled. The difference in an alliance is that the member organizations are committed to working together for the long term and the relationships are sustained over multiple campaigns. This requires the development of trust, a shared vision, and a democratic structure for participation and decision-making.

None of this is easy. Relationships can be built by simply working together – but deep trust takes time and can require long and difficult conversations. A vision seems all well and good when it is vague – getting specific about the details, strategies, and priorities for change can lead some to feel that their issues and their constituencies are being shortchanged. And the shared value of democracy needs to be balanced, as noted earlier, against the reasonable expectation that those groups within an alliance who have

more “skin in the game” – in terms of resources, organizers, and leadership – should not need to raise their voice to be more intently heard.

Scaling means taking it from the grassroots base to a level where regional, state and national impact is possible. This is perhaps the most exciting development in the field: we are increasingly seeing networks of grassroots groups pulling off big wins – such as the ports victory in Los Angeles – and coming up with strategies to replicate their success across the country. Statewide voter mobilization efforts – by grassroots groups not party structures – are gaining traction and the U.S. Social Forum has proved to be a vehicle for extending connections, including the formation of a new Inter-Alliance Dialogue that brings together the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, the Right to the City Alliance, the Pushback Network, Jobs with Justice, and the National Day Labor Organizing Network.

Scaling, however, presents challenges. In general, too much time spent on an alliance can mean too little time spent doing the deep organizing and base building that is the *sine*

qua non of movements. Moreover, attending alliance meetings and national gatherings can be easier for staff than for grassroots leaders, leading to organizational strains and miscommunications – getting leaders themselves engaged is crucial. Scaling also means forming effective partnerships with think tanks, researchers, and other intermediaries to develop policy solutions, requiring a new set of skills to both manage the process and keep the community voice paramount in the outcomes.

Finally, there is the scaling challenge many experience as they learn to work with a broader set of stories, messages, and appeals. As one organizer put it, “It’s easy to be popular with Bay Area lefties – it’s less comfortable when we try to break through to the middle.” Scaling means that organizers must go beyond “preaching to the choir” and learn to operate in that messy and uncomfortable space where the anti-government message of the Tea Party has gained traction and the progressive message of a caring solidarity has faltered. But that is exactly the terrain where we must go – and an emerging set of efforts, such as the California Alliance strategy to mobilize infrequent voters – is headed exactly there.



STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS FOR THE FUTURE

Even in good economic times, base building organizations and grassroots alliances are under-resourced. They are standing ground against multi-billion dollar oil companies and fighting to reverse disinvestments in education that are years in the making. They are protecting the human rights of immigrants and striving for change that can improve the lot of the most marginalized workers. They are tackling the criminalization of youth and pushing the frontiers of civil rights for those who have been disenfranchised. And they are doing all this even as they try to stay in deep connection with the aspirations of millions who have little voice in the policy process – meaning that the basic work of community organizing often has to come before any other priority.

In the context of an ailing economy, the need to prioritize is even more pressing. For organizers, this means they need to select carefully which alliances have the most potential and how much time should be devoted to them. For funders, this means understanding that many of the most important activities that produce alliances – relationship-building, trust-forging, and analysis-sharing – are long-term not short-term, and so resource continuity is critical. And for both the field and philanthropy, this means recognizing that philanthropic investments in an era of fewer resources and evidence-driven boards requires working together to develop realistic benchmarks.

Furthering the connective aspect of alliances necessitates consistent attention to including the grassroots base – and not just staff – in actual alliance activities. It also means bringing together “unusual suspects,” something that requires groups to conduct power analyses to identify allies, engage in research and polling

to understand intersections, and work with others to develop new messages that can “break through” to the middle. And while it is important to include all groups big and small in such connections, it is also critical to recognize how anchor organizations with scale, scope, and sophistication can help the whole be greater than the sum of its parts.

The implications for funders are straightforward: support alliances but continue to recognize the importance of organizing and base building, provide technical assistance for new skills like polling and framing, and understand the need for anchor intermediaries, especially if such anchors can play this role (and many do) with a combination of leadership and humility. Where funders have a special role, however, is working to develop new anchors in places that have been under-resourced, such as the Deep South, and around issues that have sometimes been neglected, such as gender equity within movements.

Connecting with new people and new organizations is only half the work; the other half is making these connections stick. Moving from transactions to transformations – cementing the alliances for the long haul – requires that time be spent on relationship building, including convenings, dialogues, and peer-to-peer learning. This implies a new sort of intersectional leadership – especially the willingness to take on other issues as your own – and organizations could and should leverage existing leadership programs and organizing intermediaries



that can provide consistent high-quality training in a broad movement building approach.

This is a seemingly “soft” area for investment, but it is critical. Funders can help by providing the flexible dollars needed for such trainings and sharing of best practices, and by persuading other philanthropic actors of the importance of this set of activities. But they can also help by facilitating the development of independent funding streams that can be deployed to this purpose, including providing matching funds to encourage grassroots fundraising, as well as assisting in the development and implementation of new software and technologies that alliance-building organizations can use to develop, track, and manage individual donors. Just as important: funders and organizations can and should work together to develop new metrics of movement building that can be used to evaluate activities and justify funding.

Connecting groups and cementing alliances is a long process that requires careful attention and seemingly endless patience. At the same time, the problems are so urgent – and the political winds so prone to shift – that this must be balanced with the need to get to scale both quickly and solidly. One way to hit the sweet spot in the middle is to experiment with not just new messages but also new technologies, including social media tools. Scaling up also requires a sense of the geography of change, including where to invest first and why. And it requires a solid – and shared – base of research for defining problems and developing alternative policies.

Funders can help all this in several ways. First, they can help organizations better utilize new media – Twittering for social justice and texting for immigration reform can reach new generations and new constituencies for social change. Second, they can shorten the time to scale by investing in partnerships and alliances that seem organic rather than forced (or lured) into being by funding alone. Finally, they can help build better ties between grassroots alliances and research and policy institutions, including pooling resources to fund research and policy development and

convening cross-alliance trainings for researchers so that they can also move beyond their issue silos.

The geography of going to scale deserves a special mention. Partly as a result of the Obama campaign, funders and others became fascinated with states and metro areas that were “tipping” – traditionally conservative but able to be pushed into a progressive column. These are important – but so are “anchor” areas that provide the strongest nodes in the infrastructure and can “spill over” into other regions or issues. And just as organizers show patience as they build lasting alliances, funders should consider “long-term” investments in states and regions that may not have immediate results, but could generate significant returns in a decade.

LOOKING FORWARD

With the election of Barack Obama, many progressives thought that now was our time. Instead, we have seen a rise of a Tea Party movement that speaks to the public’s fear of change, its concern about government’s over-reach, and an underlying unease about the nation’s changing demographics. Apparently, now was their time too. So if we are to make a better America, now is our time to get it right – and alliance building, we think, will be a central part of our task.

We can after all, choose to retreat to our issues and our communities, working to defend that one critical environmental law, secure that one crucial union contract, or achieve that one incremental victory for LGBT rights. Or we can realize the breadth of the overall forces standing against multiple forms of progress and realize that what is at stake is a much bigger issue: how generous, united, and forward-looking we are as a nation.

We are, we would argue, at a crossroads. In a time of seeming danger and despair, we can connect or we can separate. Across the nation, a new wave of grassroots organizers has chosen to overcome difference, forge relationships, and build the base for a movement that can sustain change. They deserve our admiration and our support.

INTRODUCTION

It is – to definitively not coin a phrase – the best of times and the worst of times. The 2008 election of the nation’s first African American – and community organizer – as president sparked a renewed sense of hope, possibility, and political mobilization, especially among youth and people of color. President Barack Obama entered the White House with one of the most forward-looking political frameworks and presidential agendas in decades, promising major reforms to our immigration, health care, and financial systems as well as a new tone of unity and caring. With nearly two million people showing up for Obama’s inauguration, the progressive movement thought the wind was at its back: it was finally time to make change happen in Washington, D.C.

Two years – and an election – later, the mood is palpably more somber. While there have been notable policy victories in health care and financial reform, progressives are frustrated that we have not achieved enough – immigration reform is on hold; economic strategies are seen as decidedly timid; and many argue that the health care and financial reforms could have been much stronger. Meanwhile, conservatives, including the Tea Party movement, have energized a predominantly older, whiter base of activists around an agenda of small government, reduced social services, and lower taxes. The wave of reaction helped Republicans take control over the House after the November 2010 mid-term elections, making the fight for progressive federal policies even more difficult.

Conservatives have found success by tapping into the public’s fear and suffering caused by the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The financial collapse, long-term unemployment, and housing foreclosures are wreaking havoc on the health and vibrancy of communities throughout the country – especially those communities that were suffering even before the recession. Progressives have not been as effective as conservatives in using the crisis as an opportunity to mobilize affected communities around a new vision of the economy and government’s role. Instead, the economic crisis

has also brought a funding crisis, including in philanthropy, that threatens the very existence of progressive organizations that should be seizing the moment to lead the fight for change.

The conservative movement – as reflected in its constituency – also speaks to the public’s unease with a slower-moving but nonetheless important change: the demographic transformation happening across the country. Demographers project that we will be a majority-minority nation soon after 2042 and that our youth will be majority-minority as early as 2023. While Obama’s election was hailed as a breakthrough in racial relations, racial gaps in social, economic, health, and educational outcomes persist. Meanwhile, an older generation, apparently bent on retaining Medicare but cutting public education, seems to be lifting up the drawbridges of economic and social opportunity just as the new generation is arriving.

How do we better connect the diverse constituencies that can constitute a progressive movement? How do we cement these relationships in a way that will both challenge the conservative agenda but also speak to the real anxieties that have driven parts of the nation rightward? And how do we scale efforts to meet the times – both the opportunities that the Obama administration hoped to create in Washington and the challenges of a conservative wave that has swept much of the middle of the country?

The answer, we would suggest, lies less in investigating the policy and political divisions in the nation’s capital than in understanding and fortifying the dynamic connections that have been bubbling up in regions across the country. In the same year that Obama was elected, the United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations brought together African American, Latino, and Muslim residents in Chicago to win 500 summer jobs for inner-city youth. In Los Angeles, labor, community, health and environmental groups united their efforts to secure environmental regulations and good port trucking jobs for low-income workers – many



of whom are immigrants. Three years earlier in Oregon, the LGBT community and communities of color came together and defeated several ordinances that would have forestalled immigrant integration and stripped workers of their rights.

Behind each of these victories is an *alliance* of organizations committed to building a social movement that is grounded in grassroots power – and efforts like these are laying the real groundwork for sustained change in America. For as some commentators have noted, the real factor limiting the Obama administration and breathing life into the conservative agenda is not a failure of audacity or even the overwhelming money unleashed into the electoral process by the decisions of a right-leaning Supreme Court – it is the absence of social movements that are deeply rooted, deeply intersectional, and deeply effective.

In our view, alliances are a critical factor in that equation: they are the way in which organizations become part of movements. Within alliances, member organizations retain their own identity and internal decision-making processes, but they come to the table to advance a common vision and goals based on a shared set of values. They do so because they realize that the scale of change needed to reverse inequities is beyond the ability of any one organization – and so they have to learn to stick together through differences to make progress.

It is a lesson important to an increasingly polarized nation – talking together and sticking together matters. It is, moreover, a way to address the diversity that is currently being used to provoke anxiety rather than hope: building strategic

alliances that span ethnicities, issues, and geographies is the route to an effective movement for change. Finally, as our problems, ranging from immigration to climate change, require systemic solutions, we have to scale up our victories from the neighborhood to the nation – and alliances can help us get there.

Yet the good work of alliances is often invisible to foundations. This is, in part, because they are not the work of a single organization or institution but exist at their

intersection. Commissioned by Public Interest Projects (PIP), *Connecting at the Crossroads: Alliance Building and Social Change in Tough Times* is an attempt to narrow the knowledge gap so that funders and alliance builders can engage in honest dialogue about the needed investments to build alliance capacity.

While alliances can come in many shapes and forms, our focus is on independent, grassroots alliances with a strong organizing component and an authentic community base. Pulled from the wisdom and experiences of leaders of these sorts of groups, this report presents a framework for defining the forms and paths that alliances take over time and understanding how alliances can connect people, cement connections, and scale impact. But we hope to offer more than analysis: we also attempt to lift up opportunities for strategic investments in alliance capacity that can – and should – be made by both organizations and funders in this political moment.

With the election of Obama, many progressives thought that now was our time. Instead, we have seen a rise of the right, including a Tea Party movement, that speaks to the public's fear of change, its concern about government's overreach, and the underlying unease with the nation's changing demographics. Apparently, now was their time too. And if we are to make a better America, now is our time to get it right – and alliance building will be a central part of our task.

PROJECT AND REPORT OVERVIEW

Public Interest Projects (PIP) commissioned this report to remedy what it saw as a knowledge gap between the important work that many grassroots, social justice alliances are forging and a lack of recognition and support for this work in the philanthropic field. PIP has a history of bringing people together and building alliances with funders and among non-profit organizations. Many of the organizations funded through PIP are on the forefront of alliance building, like Miami Workers' Center, Colorado Progressive Coalition, and the Rural Organizing Project, all working to build bridges to make the most impact in their work.

For the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE), this project is a natural extension to a series of recent reports looking at today's social movements. With support from The California Endowment, we published *Making Change: How Social Movements Work – and How to Support Them* (2009), in which we identify ten characteristics of effective social movements, six capacities needed to build them, and three specific recommendations for how foundations can be supportive. With funding from the Bill

& Melinda Gates Foundation, we wrote and released *The Color of Change: Inter-ethnic Youth Leadership for the 21st Century* (2010), a report in which we stress that youth-focused social justice organizing can transform young adults into an active, engaged, and empowered constituency base that will change – and hold accountable – the institutional structures that stand in the way of improved educational and economic outcomes.

Connecting at the Crossroads: Alliance Building and Social Change in Tough Times is a next step in which we apply a social movement framework to alliance building to bring more clarity to this complex, nuanced, and ever-evolving work. Because we wanted this report to reflect the cutting-edge knowledge and expertise of those organizational leaders working closely within alliances and immersed in alliance building work, our analysis and recommendations rely primarily on interviews with organizations that engage in alliance building as a key strategy for addressing inequities and injustice and that are committed to building an authentic base in marginalized communities.



We identified organizations to interview initially by drawing on PIP grantees, those identified in the literature, and others that PERE has worked with in the past. We selected our sample of organizations to have a mix by constituency, place, and issue. When possible, we interviewed alliance staff as well as staff from member organizations in order to gain multiple perspectives. Through snowball sampling, we identified additional organizations and alliances. In the end, we interviewed twenty-nine organizations. Appendix A presents a list of interviewees.



After completing the interviews, we convened 22 alliance builders in a meeting at the offices of Public Interest Projects in New York on July 21, 2010 to present our preliminary analysis. They both verified our findings as reflective of on-the-ground work and identified missing elements. Together, we probed for needs in terms of capacities and funding for alliance building among social justice organizations, especially within the context of this current political moment. Appendix B includes a list of participants in that convening.

The organizations that we talked to are just a sample of the organizations forging this field. Our sample runs the spectrum from workers centers to environmental justice groups, from Georgia to Oregon, from immigration to LGBT rights. We were, however, not as successful as we had hoped in capturing organizations and alliances that have a gender equity focus and analysis. Certainly some alliances, such as the Domestic Workers Alliance, are making great strides in promoting the rights of women, but we would recommend a deeper look to understand this important sector — and others that we have inadvertently missed in this scan.

The report is organized as follows. The first major section – called “Understanding Alliances” – begins by offering a working definition of alliance and explaining what we decided to include or downplay in this report. Because alliances are complex, ever-evolving, and multi-form, we briefly distinguish different models by looking at five

primary dimensions: their function, membership, geography, structure, and stages of development. Finally, we acknowledge that the evolution of alliances is influenced by both external and internal factors and review how and why context matters.

The second main section takes up what we think are the three main dimensions of social movement alliances: they connect us, they cement our connections, and they scale up our power and impact. We discuss each of these dimensions in detail, including the challenges that each presents to organizations. While we use examples throughout, we also present three case studies that demonstrate the activities (and interconnected nature) of connecting, cementing, and scaling.

The final section presents new opportunities for strategic investments for building alliance capacity in this political moment. We discuss what organizations can do, what foundations can do, and what grantees and funders can do together. We try to be as specific as possible – this is no traditional call for “core operational funding” (even though we think that is important) but rather an attempt to offer some specific and rather concrete recommendations. Among them is the development of new movement metrics that can help groups demonstrate and funders evaluate success. Because such success is desperately needed: the American future, we would argue, depends, in part, on whether we get alliance building right and to scale.

UNDERSTANDING ALLIANCES: A ROAD MAP TO THE FIELD

DEFINING ALLIANCES

What do we mean by “alliance?” One clear gap – and major point of confusion – we encountered is the lack of common terminology in the field. What one organization calls a “coalition” is what another calls a “partnership.” What we want to avoid is having an alliance that calls itself a “network,” “partnership,” or “coalition” be left out of the conversation due to a mere difference in terms.

For the purposes of this report, we define “alliance” as two or more organizations coming together to build power to affect broader change and transform systems of power. Within such alliances, member organizations maintain their own independent identity and internal decision-making processes; this is not a merger but a coming together. In this report, we focus on grassroots alliances that are

We define “alliance” as two or more organizations coming together to build power to affect broader change and transform systems of power.

predominantly led by independent base building organizations that believe in building long-term alliances across geographies, constituencies and issues as a key movement-building strategy.

The movement-building and system-change aspect of the definition is crucial. As noted in our 2009 report *Making Change: How Social Movements Work – and How to Support Them*,

social movements have defined much of America’s social change over the last sixty years, from civil rights, to gender equity, to environmental regulations. They are sustained groupings

that develop a frame based on shared values, maintain a link with a real and broad base in the community, and build for a long-term transformation in systems of power.

Figure 1: Building Blocks to Social Change

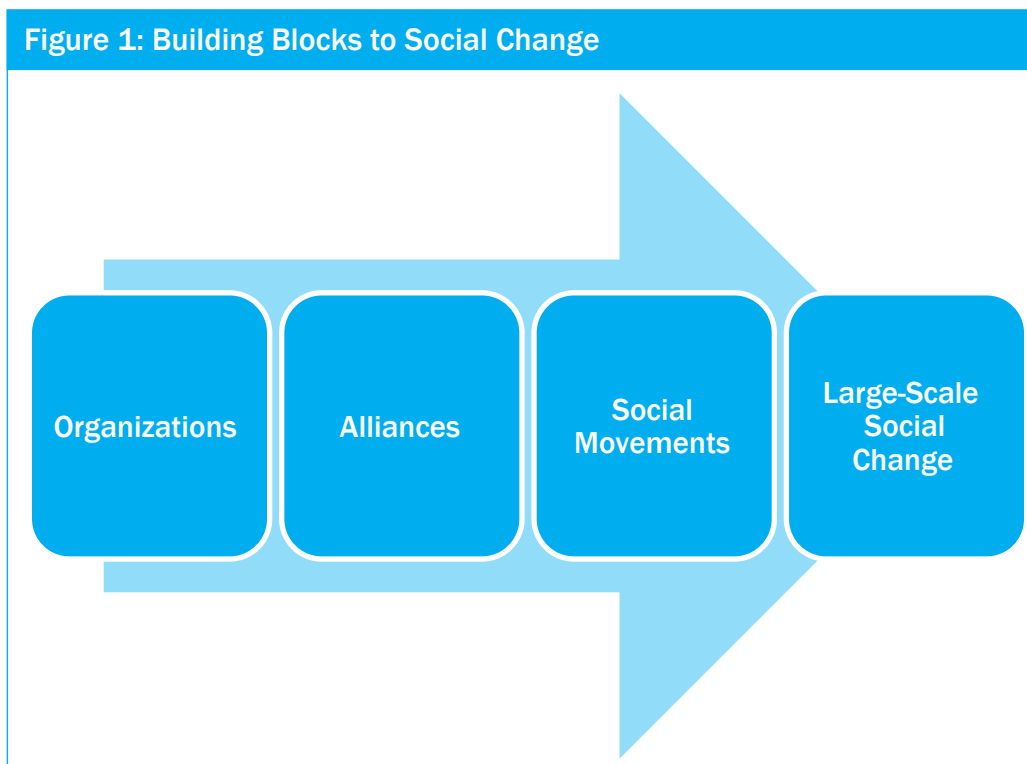


Figure 1 illustrates our notion that alliances are the structures that connect organizations and their individual power bases – whether their power is drawn from an ability to mobilize people, a particular expertise, a set of relationships, or financial resources – to a broader social movement and larger struggles. Because the alliances we consider are nested in this way, even as the issues and the times change, the relationships in an alliance are likely to persist. Through alliances, the victories and efforts led by individual organizations stream together to form the river of social movements that build towards large-scale, long-term change.

Not included in our analysis are short-term, tactical coalitions that come together around a specific campaign then disband. Tactical coalitions are narrowly defined by their campaign goal, such as the recent coming together of environmentalists, environmental justice proponents, green-tech venture capitalists, and moderate Republican leaders, such as former Secretary of State George Schultz and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, to defeat a proposition on the California November 2010 ballot that would have overturned California's historic 2006 legislation tackling global warming. It was an unusual collection of characters – and they are not likely to stay together in the aftermath. That said, forming campaign coalitions is usually part of a movement-building organization's overall alliance-building strategy – demonstrating short-term wins not only builds an organization's power (people want to be part of a winning team) but is also a good measure of one's power (how much influence do you have?).

Nor do we include in our definition of alliance the national organizing networks such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a network of local organizations founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940, or People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO), which is comprised of federations of primarily churches and schools, founded in 1972. These networks create affiliate local organizations that tend to be somewhat

similar in organizational form and purpose – indeed, they all bring their leaders through some form of national training and generally have an established pattern for bringing in new affiliates around an already-defined vision and agenda (albeit with localized issue selection). We believe that such national networks are an important part of the ecosystem of social change, but they are not the focus here – and we refer those interested in their workings to the excellent work of Mark Warren (2001) and Richard Wood (2002).

While the national organizing networks do not fit our definition of alliance, we did investigate the alliance-building work of certain local affiliates,

Alliances are the structures that connect organizations and their power bases to a broader social movement.

such as LA Voice, a PICO affiliate based in Los Angeles, Gamaliel of Metro Chicago, and Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), a

Gamaliel affiliate in Ventura, CA. Their alliance-building work at the local level resembles that of other independent, grassroots organizations in the sense that they are working across sectors and constituencies, have to navigate different organizational cultures, and are working towards finding common interests and a shared agenda.

Given the recent mobilizations around national health care and immigration reform, one might wonder why we did not include in our scan the highly effective efforts of Health Care for America NOW (HCAN) and Reform Immigration for America (RIFA). In our view, these groupings may better fit the definition of a campaign coalition. Their identity is defined by their policy objective: comprehensive health care and immigration reform, respectively. While there is substantial grassroots participation in HCAN and RIFA, these and other similar national efforts are led by large, national organizations. While they are critical – imagine how health reform would have played out if HCAN had not existed – our focus here is on independent, grassroots organizations leading alliances and building relationships that are on the cutting-edge in terms of their diversity of constituency, place, and issue.

Of course, many of the organizations that we interviewed are members of HCAN, RIFA, and other national alliances led by large institutional players. Their experiences and insights were important in understanding the balance between local grassroots organizations and, in particular, Washington, D.C.-based intermediaries – both in terms of what it means for the possibilities of getting to scale (which we discuss when considering strategic directions for alliances and funders) and the tensions of building a community base while targeting national decision-makers. But when your report is already clocking in at the length we have here, choices must be made – and so we limited our focus to grassroots alliances.

THE LITERATURE ON ALLIANCE BUILDING

While the literature on social movements is vast, the written research on the specific topic of alliances is decidedly thinner. Alliance and coalition building are discussed but often as just one element of power building and movement building. As a result, alliances are less frequently a focus of analysis than, say, broad social movements or grassroots organizing.

While the paucity of existing literature has two great advantages – it made that portion of our research quicker than expected and it means we may be filling an important niche – it also meant that we relied mainly on interviews with practitioners in our research. It also meant that it was critical to present and check our preliminary findings, as described above, in a convening of organizers to see whether they made sense “on the ground” (or at least, in our meeting). Of course, presenting the results to some of the country’s best organizers made us nervous – it was sort of like describing basketball principles to an audience that includes Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, and LeBron James – but we more or less passed the test and used the comments from that gathering to refine this final report.

Some academic and other literature does exist, of course, and one area that has received special attention recently is alliance building between

African Americans and Latinos. Recently, for example, the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity published *African-American-Immigrant Alliance Building* (2009) and the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) released *Crossing Boundaries, Crossing Communities: Alliance Building for Immigrant Rights and Racial Justice* (2010). The challenges of alliance building in this arena are particularly complex, yet facing them is central given both the historic role of African Americans in the fight for social equality and the emerging dynamism of the immigrant movement in the struggle for economic justice. One analytical difference to note is that BAJI’s study focuses on cross-racial community alliances – which can be built within one organization. Our focus is on inter-organizational alliances – which are built between two or more organizations.

Within the recent alliance-building literature, we identified five key themes which provided the foundation for our research and the questions that we asked in our interviews. They reflect the characteristics and impacts of alliances in building power and a broad social movement:

- **Bridging Sectors and Movements:** New alliances are overcoming historical divisions between sectors (community-labor and labor-environment) and between movements (reproductive justice and immigrant rights). But connecting across these divides requires deliberate bridge building processes and skilled bridge builders in order to break through cultural, identity, and issue silos (Dean and Reynolds 2008; Nakae 2008; Beamish and Leubbers 2009; Mayer 2009).
- **Trust to Transformations:** Authors often refer to alliances as becoming more than the sum of their part when organizations expand their individual identities and interests towards a goal of long-term movement building. In the process, they move from being disconnected social change organizations each with its own separate mission and agenda to becoming “social movement organizations” connected through a shared vision and a commitment to change. Such transformations happen when there are strong relationships

and a culture of trust (Chetkovich and Kunreuther 2006; Building Movement Project 2008; Nicholls 2008; Zemsky and Mann 2008; Dobbie 2009; Nicholls 2009).

- **Place Matters:** There is a geography to the formation of trust and relationships between organizers that make alliance building possible. Nicholls (2008) writes that social movements thrive in major cities because so many high-quality resources, like social capital, can be used at this level. Alliances face the inherent tension of being simultaneously place-based and regional, statewide, national, or transnational (Dean and Reynolds 2008; Leavitt, Samara et al. 2009). Organizations must remain local – their base is their legitimacy and power – but scaling up exposes organizations to new possibilities and is necessary for effective change.
- **Remaking the Narrative:** A local organization does not have sufficient reach to remake the national narrative. Working in alliance with others, however, can help groups reframe issues in ways that resonate in the daily lives of Americans and help build a broad shared vision (Dean and Reynolds 2008; Zemsky and Mann 2008; Beamish and Leubbers 2009). This is the ideological – or sense-making – level at which corporate media and the Tea Party work, and progressive voices need to be there to offer an alternative analysis. And since it is hard for one group to do this alone, alliances – in which a collective story is actually part of the cement – can be critical to developing and testing new messages.
- **Shifting Power:** Finally, some in the literature note that alliances have the opportunity to profoundly impact American politics. While alliances are waging campaigns around transit, education, and health care, this is often just the tip of the iceberg – they

are more centrally focused on rearranging power relations so as to bring about equity (Leavitt, Samara et al. 2009; Pastor, Benner et al. 2009). Examining how alliances can move beyond issues to broad social change is exactly the focus of this report.

FORMS AND FUNCTIONS

With our definition of alliance as our lens and the themes from the literature as guideposts, we devised an interview instrument and went into the field to talk to people on the cutting-edge of alliance building. We found that no two alliances are alike – which may explain why they are often overlooked and under-appreciated. For foundations that are structured to fund institutions and tackle problems, it can be especially difficult to recognize alliances, which form at the intersections of organizations and, often times, issues.

In understanding the complex array of alliances, we found it useful to look at five primary dimensions of alliances: their function, their membership, their geography, their structure, and the stages of development they tend to go through. We explore each of these briefly below.

Common Functions

Based on the literature review and on our interviews, we found four common functions that alliances serve (see Figure 2): information and resource sharing; strategic dialogues and relationship building; leadership development; and joint actions and campaigns.

5 Dimensions of Alliances

Function
Membership
Geography
Structure
Stage of Development

By working in alliance, organizations with common needs can leverage limited resources through information and resource sharing. For example, member organizations of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, a national alliance of grassroots organizations building a popular movement with international allies through working on global issues including climate justice, environmental justice, migration

and militarization, found a shared need to deepen their communities' understanding of globalization, so they formed a committee to develop and share a popular education curriculum.

Organizations also use alliances as an opportunity for **leadership and organizational development**. The Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network (REJN) was founded in 1989 for grassroots organizations working with mostly Southern workers, women, and youth to understand and effectively respond to global economic restructuring. REJN sees its space as an opportunity to build leadership and to model the democracy its members want to see in the world – which means addressing gender discrimination, homophobia, and even organizational practices in deep, transformative ways.

Organizers also talked about using alliances as a way to step back from the day-to-day work and engage in **strategic dialogues and relationship building** with their peers. For example, Housing LA, a cross-sector alliance of labor, faith, community, and business, originally formed around specific policy objectives; however, it has

now turned into a space where local organizers are building relationships and developing a broader progressive agenda for Los Angeles.

In most cases, strategic dialogue and relationship building among organizers and leaders is a step towards finding common interests and developing a plan for **joint actions and campaigns**. Alliances do not form simply for the sake of forming alliances, but rather to build power to move policy changes. Waging campaigns creates an urgency, relevance, and concrete sense (and reality) of change that is good for recruiting new allies and sustaining existing ones.

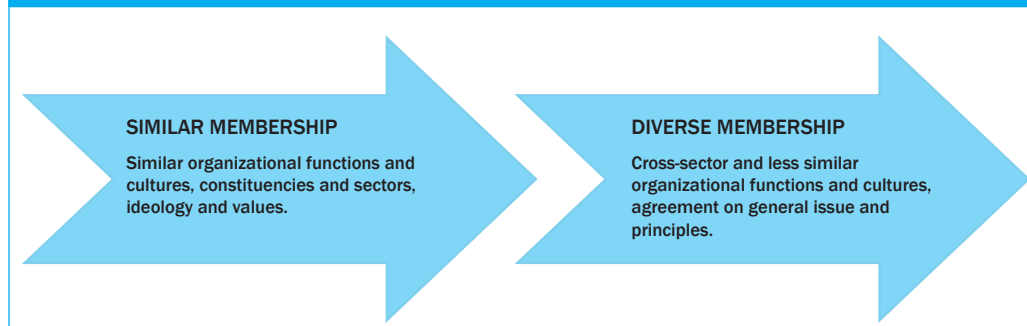
Spectrum of Membership

Membership composition of alliances spans a **spectrum ranging from quite similar organizations to highly diverse**. Some alliances are made up of **organizations that have similar organizational functions and cultures**, constituencies and sectors, and ideology and values. As Figure 3 shows, these types of formations tend to build trust among like-minded organizations and then expand to include less similar organizations.

Figure 2: Four Common Functions of Alliances



Figure 3: Spectrum of Alliance Membership



One example of this end of the spectrum is the Partnership for Working Families (PWF), a national alliance of twelve local (usually metro-level) organizations working to reshape the economy and urban environment for workers and communities through quality jobs and affordable housing. Originally composed of organizations with highly similar structures – essentially, labor-affiliated think-and-action tanks with a commitment to broad community alliances such as the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) and Working Partnerships in San Jose – PWF has expanded to include some additional variants on that basic theme such as Pittsburgh UNITED and Georgia Stand-Up in Atlanta. The groups are more alike than different, however, and all share a commitment to a new model of responsible development and community benefit. Carmen Rhodes at FRESC, a Denver-based PWF member organization working to ensure economically and environmentally sustainable communities for the benefit of low- and moderate-income workers and their families, suggests that going to a PWF meeting is like “coming home.”

Other alliances, like the Colorado Progressive Coalition, a statewide alliance of diverse progressive organizations working to promote broadly racial, economic, and environmental justice, begin with a **diverse base of member organizations that are cross-sector** and have somewhat dissimilar constituencies or organizational functions. Despite their dissimilarities, organizations within the alliance have agreement around a general issue or a set of principles and actively build long-term trust.

Alliance composition is fluid and membership may shift along the spectrum over time depending on the external context, organizational strengths and weaknesses, alliance goals and the stage of development. One size does not fit all, but it is important to assess where any particular alliance is and where it wants to be.

Geography

There are three dimensions of geography in alliance building. One dimension is the **scale at which individual member organizations are building power**—local, regional, statewide, multi-state regional, or national. Another dimension involves **where the individual member organizations are located**. The third is the **scale at which the alliance as a whole is building power**: Is the alliance seeking to affect policy changes at the local, state, or national level?

The geography of alliances, in particular, how the alliance wields its collective power, is actually fluid and evolving – and this flexibility is exactly what makes alliances powerful. For example, the Alliance for Appalachia is comprised of **local** grassroots organizations located throughout the Appalachia **multi-state region**. Together they are working towards **federal** policy to stop mountaintop removal. The Pushback Network is comprised of independent, **local** grassroots organizations across eight states. While the **membership is national** in scope, their focus is on building powerful alliances at the **state** level. Right to the City (RTTC) is made up of grassroots organizations building power individually at the **local** level and collectively at the **national** level. In three of the nine cities,

Los Angeles, New York, and Boston, local organizations also anchor **regional** alliances.

Structure

Alliance structures greatly vary, ranging from less formal bodies led by member organizations to more formal independent 501(c)3 organizations with boards and alliance staff. Again, no one model is necessarily better than the other, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, **alliances with less formal bodies rely on staff from member organizations**, which can strain already-strapped organizations – but this sort of governance can also build buy-in and ownership. Those that form **independent, non-profit organizations with independent staff** may find themselves in a position of having to raise funds both for their own organization and for the alliance. And there can be tension between how much centralized infrastructure to build for the alliance versus how much of the resources should be allocated back to the individual members to sustain their participation.

In any model, alliances require **democratic decision-making processes** to ensure that no one organization dominates and that there is buy-in from all the member organizations. At the same time, organizers note that those with more “skin in the game” – organizations that bring resources, commit organizers, and demonstrate leadership – should be recognized as such and be allowed to have more voice. This is not an easy balance to strike and figuring the “sweet spot” between these two impulses is as much an art as it is a science.

In either case, **transparency in decision-making** is also critical for alliances, especially when members are still building trust and may be (reasonably) wary of each other’s intentions and motivations. One organizer we interviewed talked about a decision that became contentious – not because anyone necessarily disagreed with the decision but because they did not know how the final decision was made and who exactly made it. Process counts and strong alliances pay attention to this, particularly in their early stages of development.

Stages of Development

Alliances are not set in stone – or they would never form anew. Rather, alliances grow and change over time. Although certain alliances may not follow our model of alliance development stages step-by-step – they may enter stages in different orders, or stages may overlap with one another – we found that alliances generally go through five important stages.

As Figure 4 shows, the first stage of alliance building is **strategy development**, in which at least two organizations come together in recognition of a problem facing their communities and constituencies. Activities in this stage may include defining the problem through research, planning the process for building an alliance, and conducting a power analysis that helps identify potential allies.

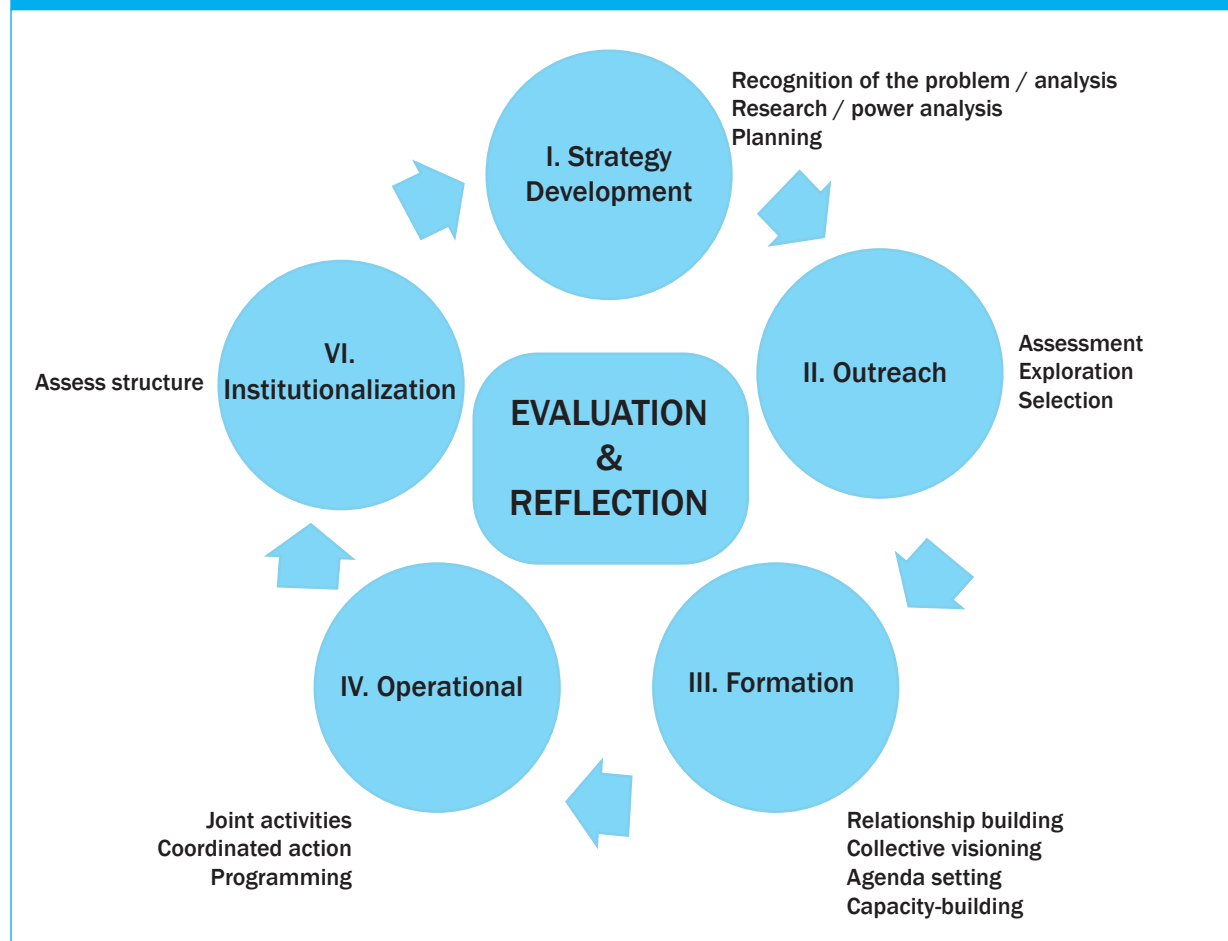
In the second stage, organizers conduct **outreach** to potential allies and new members. They assess opportunities and gaps, explore the universe of possible allies, and strategically select new members. Several alliance builders told us that it is important to choose the right members who fit into the alliance (and for whom the alliance can be an important part of their own program) and to avoid bringing on peripheral organizations for the sheer sake of having a large number of organizations at the table.

The third stage is the **formation** of the alliance. This includes the vital processes of relationship building among organizations and individuals, collective visioning, setting the agenda and plans of action, and capacity building.

The fourth stage is the **operational** stage – this is when the alliance moves from collective thinking to collective action. Joint activities range from leadership development programming to coordinated actions to win policy change.

The final stage is **institutionalization of the alliance**, in which alliances assess their structure, their decision-making processes, their membership composition, and consider expansion, contraction or other infrastructural adjustments.

Figure 4. Stages of Development for Alliances



Throughout all the stages of development, organizers need to be consistent and disciplined in **evaluating** their efforts and determining next steps and phases. Moving from one phase to the next requires asking key questions: Will we be more powerful working together? Are there others who should be at our table? Do we have enough trust to move forward? What actions can we take jointly? Is there a reason to make our relationship long-term?

This last question raises an important point: How long should alliances last? Social movements, we argue, build for a long-term transformation in systems of power to create large-scale social change. But organizations may form and disband, depending on their purpose and their utility in the struggle. For example, the early 1990s marked a shift for groups involved in international solidarity work. The electoral loss of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the unbanning of the African National Congress in South Africa, and the change in U.S.

administration required a rethinking of strategies that had been pursued in the 1980s. Some groups refocused their work, and others disbanded, like Tecnica which had created opportunities for people to work directly in Nicaragua and South Africa and then return to share their perspectives and build broad opposition to U.S. foreign policy.

Alliances of organizations can mimic the same pattern of formation, operation, then closure. In the context of social movements, when should organizations choose to commit for the long-haul? When should they strategically disband? While tactical coalitions usually form for the sprint of a campaign, social movements need to run a marathon; alliances that link organizations as part of movement building are somewhere in the middle and may quite reasonably shift form, membership, and degree of institutionalization over time.

PATHS TO POWER

In general, there are two primary pathways that alliances take in their long-term trajectory towards building power. The first is through **joint action on a focused issue or campaign**. This path begins by uniting groups around concrete objectives then stepping back to define a broader change agenda. For example, in Tennessee, immigrant and refugee groups came together and led a successful campaign allowing immigrants, regardless of status, to have access to driver's licenses. An alliance grew organically out of that shared campaign, and the groups collectively created the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition as the statewide voice for immigrants and a vehicle to serve their collective interests.

The second pathway is through intentionally **creating a space** for sharing resources, developing joint strategies, and **building relationships to sustain the alliance over time**. This path begins by providing a deep understanding of the perspectives of the participating groups and lays the foundation for long-term trust and collective work. Such an approach is used by numerous organizations building multi-constituency understandings; for example, the Miami Workers Center conducted a Circle of Consciousness training to help African Americans and immigrants see each groups' history in the context of a global economy (Pastor and LoPresti 2007). Creating a similar sort of space for groups that share values and principles is particularly important in alliances where the issues are large and numerous, as in the case of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance and the use of the U.S. Social Forum as a vehicle for groups that share the same political alignment to come together across sectors and issues.

Each approach to alliance building has its merits and each confronts challenges. For example, the challenge facing the campaign pathway is that in the heat of a fight often the relationship and trust-building processes may be bypassed, which are critical for holding an alliance

together. The challenge facing the relational pathway is translating these shared spaces into campaigns and actual policy victories – and doing so quickly enough so that more action-oriented participants do not lose interest.

CONTEXT MATTERS

While the formation of alliances may look ad hoc or accidental, we found that organizers are very intentional and strategic in how they build alliances. It is a dynamic process that is influenced by both external and internal factors. While our task as researchers is to find common themes and lessons, we were constantly reminded by people in the field that alliances need to be understood within their own unique context.

The form, function, and evolution of alliances are largely tied to the world in which they operate, the analysis of power dynamics of that situation, and the individual mix of players involved. The external factors that are particularly important are: the existence and capacity of progressive organizations, the level of fragmentation or unity among various social justice sectors, the receptiveness of the political establishment to change, and the resources available (or not available) to support progressive organizations.

Alliances need to be understood within their own unique context, including existing power dynamics and the mix of players involved.

Existence and Capacity of Progressive Organizations

Some places, like Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, have strong organizations that have a track record of success but also recognize the limits of a go-it-alone approach. These places are ripe for alliance building and also might be thought of as anchor locations. While foundations are often eager to invest in the “next new thing,” it is important that the roots of a new approach to social movement alliances be strong – and such anchors play a key role.

A longer track record also generally means that organizational leaders have a history of working together and if they have done this well, they have

a baseline level of trust, something that helps the process of forming further alliances. This certainly made a difference in contemporary Los Angeles: once known as the “wicked city” for its anti-labor fervor and now seen as a hopeful swirl of labor and community organizing, the main architects of that new organizing have circled around each other for several decades (Pastor 2001; Milkman 2006). Sets of relationships like these are sometimes just an accident of history, but the process can be intentionally facilitated when leaders pay attention to building personal ties – something that leadership programs such as Rockwood Leadership Institute and Social Justice Leadership are doing and something that funders can facilitate by understanding their importance of and providing the resources for such trainings.

Fragmentation or Unity in Issue Areas

One of the challenges to building a movement is that organizations often work in issue or campaign “silos.” For example, organizations working on health care reform may not work with organizations working on immigration reform. But the threads connecting these issues and others are potentially there and they could make more progress and win victories if they collaborated.

Not connecting can also lead to rifts among progressive organizations that affect alliance building. In Oregon, for example, conservatives have used ballot measures restricting gay rights as a strategy to create wedges between LGBT and minority communities. Despite this, Basic Rights Oregon (BRO), an organization primarily focused on LGBT rights, argues that “our call for basic fairness extends beyond the gay and transgender community.” As a result, BRO also works with other organizations on reproductive freedom, worker protection, immigrant rights, and racial justice.

Political and Economic Climate

Poor economic conditions and changing political landscapes can both stymie and stimulate alliance building. Often times a common crisis – like the current economic recession – creates an urgency that brings organizations together to conceive of a collective, over-arching solution.

But crises can also deplete organizations of resources as they run from one fire to the next.

The parallel on the political side is a highly conservative atmosphere – think of Arizona – that can bring about a unity of progressive forces but perhaps to modest effect. On the other hand, an overwhelming liberal atmosphere – think of the Bay Area – can allow small differences between progressive groups to become unnecessary chasms. Somewhere in the middle is where alliances may really matter most in changing existing political conditions, but the main point here is that economic and political context matters and should be factored into strategic investment decisions by both organizations and foundations.

Resources

The availability of financial resources to invest in progressive organizations and alliances also affects alliance building. Some regions, like the Deep South, have been historically underfunded and are often invisible to the philanthropic world. Even within states and regions that have been more prominent in the philanthropic eye, sub-regions can be ignored. For instance, California’s Central and Inland Valleys have been short-changed relative to the progressive coasts, and it shows in the level of organization and the political bent of those sub-regions. More attention is needed in these areas to move the political needle – and it should be patient attention because change will be slow.

This imbalance of resources among organizations can affect working relationships. For example, community organizations can be distrustful of allying with labor, which usually has access to more funds, more influence over decision-makers, and greater capacity for research, policy, and communications. Another common tension is between large intermediaries and small grassroots organizations. Funders often rely on strong intermediaries, but alliances are stronger when those intermediaries are generous in how they allocate and support smaller groups for whom every dollar – and every hour of staff or leader time – is critical to organizational survival.

CONNECTING, CEMENTING, AND SCALING: THE ROLE OF ALLIANCES IN BUILDING A MOVEMENT

While writing this report, we were reminded of the anecdote about an academic who was confronted with the example of a well-functioning government program that challenged his ideological predilections for a smaller state and free market solutions. His observation: “Well, that works fine in practice but what about in theory?”

We share neither that academic’s ideological framework nor his surprise that people in the field may put together something before those in universities have figured out why it might actually work. Because of that, our effort in this project has been to pursue a deductive (and perhaps detective) methodology: to see what is working, to lift up lessons, and to provide a theoretical framework to tie the pieces together.

Our deductive skills were put to the test for this project because no two alliances are alike, nor should they be. But we did find that alliances have certain things in common as they harness the grassroots to power broader social movements. First, they **connect** constituencies, issues, and skills. Secondly, they **cement** those connections for the long haul by building trust, a shared vision, and democratic structures and processes. Thirdly, they **scale** up reach, power, and impact.

And since practice may be clearer than our theory, we highlight three cases below that illustrate the work of connecting, cementing, and scaling. These cases, not coincidentally, also demonstrate three different geographic scales: the statewide California Alliance, United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations in Chicago, and a national alliance of national alliances called the Inter-Alliance Dialogue.

CONNECTING CONSTITUENCIES, ISSUES, AND SKILLS

Alliances play an invaluable role in connecting organizations so as to **empower emerging constituencies** and **to lift up their issues** of concern. Part of the need to do this is demographic: with the U.S. becoming majority-minority, no one racial or ethnic community working alone will be able to garner the support and influence needed to make substantial progress

in reversing racial inequalities. But it is also that the issues are interconnected – you cannot improve worker rights without resolving immigrant vulnerability; you cannot stress immigrant integration without furthering black economic and political progress; and you cannot protect civil rights unless you

include all people who want to serve their country, raise families, and contribute to America. Building multi-ethnic, multi-issue alliances, in short, is an increasingly important linchpin in the fight for a more equitable future.

Successful alliances connect constituencies across geography and race so as to elevate their power. The Right to the City Alliance (RTTC), which emerged as a national vehicle to combat gentrification and local displacement in inner cities across the country, **connects local grassroots organizations** that individually do not have a lot of power but collectively can reach federal decision-makers. In May 2010, RTTC released a report, *We Call These Projects Home: Solving the Housing Crisis from the Ground Up*, which documents the experiences of public housing residents across seven cities and offers federal policy recommendations. Wanda Salaman

Alliances are “vehicles for individual members to think and act collectively on key issues that cut across all of our organizations and communities, and also to see where there is value added, or gaps and opportunities where we, through concentrating resources across our alliances, can actually make a substantial difference in our fights.”

Ai-jen Poo

National Domestic Workers Alliance

of the Bronx-based community organization and RTTC member Mothers on the Move (MOM) spoke about how MOM could write a paper on public housing conditions in New York, but it would not be taken seriously or be seen as having federal policy implications. By connecting local stories to a national frame, the alliance empowered its members by getting each of them to important decision-making venues in Washington D.C. – something **no one group could have accomplished on its own.**

Successful alliances also connect and **lift up the issues** of key concern so that member groups do not have to leave their own campaigns at the door. TransForm is a regional advocacy alliance in the Bay Area comprised of a wide range of organizations from affordable housing advocates to environmentalists to bicycle advocates. Incorporating each group's specific policy goals is impossible – or would create an ineffective laundry list of demands. By developing an overarching set of goals that identifies issues that are core to each individual interest, such as creating livable communities

and fighting for transit justice, TransForm advances a progressive agenda with concrete policy wins that no one group could achieve on their own, and a unified vision acts as the umbrella holding the alliance together.

Alliances also connect organizations so as to **access multiple skills and capacities.** As we note in our report *Making Change*, building a movement requires an authentic base, research capacity, viable policy models, and strategic communications. These capacities are rarely held within one organization; even when they are, one organization still cannot win alone. Effective alliances combine organizations with these capacities so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Connecting organizational skills in a transformative way can blur the lines between individual organizational priorities so as to create a new powerful force. The Coalition for Clean & Safe Ports in Southern California, for example, harnesses each organization's strengths for the greater whole: National Resource Defense Council's (NRDC) legal knowledge, Sierra Club's policy expertise, community organizing groups' on-the-ground knowledge and mobilizing power, and labor's financial resources and relationships with decision-makers. A central demand of the Coalition is a concessionaire system at the Port of Los Angeles that favors larger companies on the grounds that they would find it easier to bear the costs of replacing older diesel trucks with clean trucks. Labor is interested because such a system also facilitates unionization and could also allow what is now a heavily immigrant Latino workforce of independent truckers to improve their standard of living. When the American Truckers Association (ATA) sued the Port of LA to stop the concessionaire system, NRDC stuck with its labor allies and provided a legal team that beat back the ATA challenge in a stunning victory in August 2010 that paves the way for protecting workers as well as the environment.

By working in alliance, member organizations can also individually gain from **exposure to different skills and capacities**, as well as **exposure to decision-makers and funders** that they would



not otherwise receive on their own. For instance, through its involvement with the Pushback Network, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC) has taken the lessons learned from voter engagement tools and practices in other states and applied them to its home turf in Kentucky. Pushback also provides local and state groups with access to national players.

As Burt Lauderdale at KFTC puts it, Pushback provides “good exposure for the organizations not just with funders or supporters, but it’s a good indicator to decision-makers and political folks about the character of the organizations and provides a different kind of platform for the individual partners.”

Challenges in Connecting Constituencies, Issues, and Skills

Connecting diverse constituencies requires overcoming gaps that can divide communities and organizations. At the neighborhood level, shifting demographics often **fuels tension and distrust** between long-standing residents and newcomers. As historically African American neighborhoods become majority immigrant, for instance, native residents can feel threatened by the potential struggle over political power and ethnic representation and by competition for limited jobs. As noted in the literature review, recent reports discuss innovative alliance building between African Americans and immigrants – but this is, of course, not the only arena in which challenges of connection are faced.

Wedge issues can create divides both across and within communities. Wedging tactics are often successfully used to position environmentalists against labor or communities of color against LGBT communities. Groups can resist the bait, of course. Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) works with the faith community on economic issues that affect low-income families. They have not reached

agreement on LGBT equality or reproductive rights – the wedge is there, but it has not managed to pry them apart on what they do agree on.

Differences in organizational cultures and strategies for social change can also create tensions. Alliance members come to the table

with very different organizational styles and processes. Alliance members often struggle with reconciling these differences and learning to

work together in new ways. For example, a legal or policy advocacy group may be uncomfortable with a protest that a community organization organizes under the umbrella of the alliance and may even face blow-back from board members who wonder about new friends and new tactics.

In a long-term alliance, groups are more likely to get past differences and find agreement.



Policy disagreements can threaten alliances. As one organizer stated, “no policy is good enough or goes far enough.” Disagreements can thus occur because of the gap between an ideal policy and a winnable policy. There may also be disagreement about the series of incremental steps to reach a shared goal. For example, groups can share a common vision of a well-funded, quality public education system yet disagree on working with charter schools as a short-term solution.

To emphasize a key difference between social movement alliances and short-term tactical coalitions: groups committed to a long-term alliance are more likely to get past differences and find agreement where it is possible. From such transactions – we both agree to support the issue we already agree on – can come transformation – we understand why this issue is important to you and support you on it. The latter is the stuff of movement building, and it is alliances that can get us there.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE CALIFORNIA ALLIANCE

In 2009, the California Alliance (the Alliance) launched a multi-year initiative aimed at reforming the state’s tax and fiscal system by building a grassroots movement of new constituencies and coalitions. The key strategy is winning over 500,000 new, occasional, and “moveable middle” voters – which requires both deepening their understanding of the need for progressive reforms and getting them to act on that understanding.

The Alliance is currently comprised of 12 independent, membership-based organizations that anchor regional coalitions that involve a total of 27 community, labor, and service groups across 10 counties. The Alliance members represent a broad swath of California’s low-income communities of color ranging from urban to rural, youth to seniors, and African Americans to Asians. In their individual work, organizations wage campaigns on a myriad of issues including education, foster care, jobs, and immigrant rights.

Connecting Concerns, Campaigns, and Constituencies

Originally convened in 2003 by Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE), a South Los Angeles-based community organization, the California Alliance came together with shared values and concerns about the conditions facing poor and working class communities of color across the state. The Alliance started with a belief that progressives needed to move from playing defense to offense, and that they could do this by connecting their sectors (community, labor, environmental justice) and issues through a shared policy agenda and by scaling up the capacity of independent, grassroots organizations to reach and engage voters.

After a five-year exploratory process, the Alliance agreed on a tax and fiscal policy reform focus – a cross-cutting issue that bolsters rather than competes with members’ core issues. Making progress in solving the state’s budget crisis would not only benefit each group’s individual campaign, but they could win more together (update an outdated tax structure to end the deficits) rather than separately (win more education funding by cutting health care).

The two top challenges the Alliance faces: 1) bringing a new constituency of grassroots organizations to an arena with powerful statewide players – labor, policy experts, think tanks, lobbyists, and politicians; and 2) winning support for tax and budget reforms among a splintering electorate.

From the Neighborhood Block to the State Budget

To be recognized as players in an otherwise closed field, the Alliance is focused on gaining an ability to “tip” elections. To do this, the group is building a civic engagement infrastructure (organized and trained grassroots leaders, an online voter database, predictive dialing phone banks) anchored by local and regional organizations that can reach 500,000 new and occasional voters – what is required to “tip” closely-contested ballot measures.

While contacting half a million voters is a tall order, it can be tackled with trained organizations, sophisticated technology and research, and sufficient funding. But convincing Californians to support real reforms also requires a new story about the role of government and taxation. So through partnerships with experts in social values analysis and polling, creative communications, and focus groups, the Alliance is shaping a communications strategy that both resonates with their base communities but also moves new constituencies and convinces the unconvinced.

Based on social values polling, the Alliance has shifted from a traditional, organizing approach of targeting communities by race/ethnicity, class, and geography to a new, values-based approach that identifies constituencies by their shared values.

According to its analysis, only 15% of the California electorate supports progressive reforms – this is the group the Alliance calls the Pro-Tax and Fiscal base. While this includes some of the traditional components of a progressive coalition, such as public sector union members and urban blacks, the Alliance realizes that making change requires a hybrid approach to organizing – one that connects “traditional” members (low-income, African American, Latino) to whiter, more conservative constituencies.

Moreover, it involves a reconceptualization of the base itself. Using a values-based approach, the Alliance has identified new constituencies who might be persuaded to support a progressive approach to taxes and spending. One such group: “Aspiring People of Color.” These are middle and working-class folks who do not operate from a “justice” frame and hence frequently go unmobilized by activists. These individuals, however, do believe in an active government; the key is getting them to engage – vote, join organizations, get involved. Another moveable

constituency is the “Balanced Suburbans.” These are frequent voters but they are less likely to support major change, so the focus is to develop messages to “activate” values that offer the greatest potential for moving them in a progressive direction (Kunisi 2010, forthcoming).

Armed with new messages, new technology, and new urgency, the Alliance, in its first year, has already reached 377,000 voters with 260,000 of them open to changing California’s outdated tax structure. The 2010 elections provided a test

run of the ongoing strategy – and in the ten counties in which Alliance groups worked, Alliance-identified voters represented about four percent of the votes that helped beat back an oil company-funded challenge to California’s climate change law.

While not a game-changer yet, the neighborhood

organizations are well on their way to gaining access and influence that they would never have if working alone. The process of working together has also helped member organizations to shift their thinking about what constitutes their natural constituencies for social change. Connecting, in short, has enhanced capacity, furthered strategy, and built new strength for the future.

CEMENTING RELATIONSHIPS FOR THE LONG TERM

Connecting diverse organizations and constituencies is not what makes alliances unique; short-term, campaign coalitions can also be multi-ethnic and multi-skilled. The difference with an alliance is that the member organizations are **committed to working together for the long-term**; the relationships in an alliance are sustained over multiple campaigns.

The three essential ingredients for this long-term commitment are 1) **trust**, 2) a **shared**

Essential to the [movement building] process is a vision of a transformed result that is grounded in relationships with others. Both individuals and organizations need to ground themselves in something that will sustain them over the long haul, through the discordant times, to a time when the underlying melody breaks through and pulls it all together (Zemsky and Mann, 2008).

vision, and 3) a **democratic structure and process** for sustained participation. This is what we call the cementing role that alliances play in building a movement.

One of the basic elements of alliances is a **culture of trust** so that members can struggle through differences and discover common ground. Successful alliances create *safe spaces* for members to learn about each other's different organizational cultures, tactics, strategies, and theories of change and to identify common values. Alliances need more than transactional conversations, they also need to create the space for transformational dialogues – where members can be open and honest with one another, struggle through differences, confront internal prejudices, and make meaningful changes within their own organizations. Deep relationships and trust form the internal scaffolding of the alliance that need to hold up against racism, wedging tactics, and internal struggles.

Near the beginning of its formation, the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) – a multi-racial and multi-issue alliance – realized the need to address the deep divisions between white people and people of color within the alliance. PLAN worked with the Western States Center to put together “Dismantling Racism” workshops for its members. At first, it was a very difficult process of confronting internally held prejudices, and many people left feeling “beat up.” But understanding that the process of breaking down barriers and building relationships is an uncomfortable and turbulent one, PLAN continued with the workshops and found their intentional creation of a safe space to confront tough issues paid off and resulted in PLAN's long-lasting culture of trust.

Alliances also create *shared spaces* for developing a **vision of broad-based change** and an understanding that a just society requires large-scale transformations in structures of power. Developing a shared power analysis and narrative

allows members to step back from their individual issues and to see their futures as intertwined – in other words, they recognize they can win more together than fighting alone. A vision is essential to anchoring the separate parts to the whole. The vision needs to be inclusive of every group's core issues but also defined enough to offer some specific implications for policy and organizing.

The path to common ground may also not be through just common stuff. While its main focus is overcoming inter-racial distrust and tensions, the Center for Community Change has launched a project called “Black Space” based on the idea that black leaders need a safe space to work through difficult issues on the way to building trust and shared vision with other racial communities. Developing a shared vision is not about erasing difference but seeing each community's history in the context of a broader struggle.

Successful alliances provide **structures and processes** so as to facilitate and sustain participation over the long run. Alliance builders are intentional about *who* they bring in and *how* they engage them. A come-one-come-all approach that allows new participants to join the table can be disruptive to the trust-building and vision-setting process. The focus is on getting the “right” people and organizations to the table rather than simply getting the largest number to the table. The “right” organizations may be those that have a strategic self-interest in the vision or agenda you are setting or that are critical to the power equation of a region. They should also have a “team-player” approach.

Once people are in, democratic leadership, transparent decision-making processes, and effective communication systems are important to keeping them. Successful alliances ensure that no single organization dominates and instead seek to build common ownership among the member organizations. At the same time, certain groups can be anchors and may at times

The focus is on getting the “right” people and organizations to the table rather than simply getting the largest number to the table.

provide the key staffing and resources to get an alliance jump-started. Structures and processes will then evolve as the goals and priorities of the alliance are defined – as one alliance builder quotes Aristotle: “form follows function.”

Challenges of Cementing Relationships for the Long Term

Establishing a foundation of trust and a shared vision takes time and resources – and a particular attitude of openness, honesty, and humility. There are many challenges in cementing relationships for the long haul but the following were the most-commonly cited by the organizers we interviewed.

The divides between organizations – racial, ideological, religious – can run deep, and confronting them

can be a **messy, uncomfortable process**. If these conversations are not taken seriously, they can do more damage than good. Alliance facilitators need to be mindful of the risks and be careful to create a safe and open space where people can struggle together and heal together. When deep tensions or divisive issues arise, facilitators have to be willing to put the agenda at-hand aside in order to deal with the tensions appropriately.

In addition to being difficult and uncomfortable, building trust, a vision, and reaching agreement on internal structures and systems is often a **slow process**. Ideological differences, organizational cultures, and communication styles need to be reconciled. Knowing when to build consensus and when to agree to disagree is a difficult, yet often necessary, step in the process. Changes in staffing and the comings and goings of organizations can slow down progress. It can take years before an alliance gets to a point when they are ready for joint action. On the other hand, some alliances back into a long-term process after winning a joint campaign – essentially, the members of a tactical coalition realize that they should continue working together and set in motion the mechanisms to explore that possibility.

Given the often difficult and slow process, alliance building can strain **organizational capacity**.

Knowing when to build consensus and when to agree to disagree is a difficult, yet often necessary, step.

Alliances can take up a lot of staff time – which is limited, especially for smaller organizations. Generally, the cost of alliance participation is not factored internally and not recognized externally. Member organizations struggle with the balance of devoting staff and resources to their own work versus that of the alliance. Since limited capacity is always a challenge, organizations must be strategic when choosing whether or not to participate in an alliance.

Given the uneven capacity among organizations, **power dynamics** can make alliance building

challenging. Organizations on the margins (of an issue or region) come to the table from a position of scarcity that can make discussions, especially around fundraising, tense. An

imbalance of power and resources can also fuel distrust. For example, while labor unions often feel under attack in an increasingly pro-business environment, community groups remember labor’s history of exclusive practices, especially in the trades, and are even less resourced. This tension is a rightful legacy of past conflict and is just one of many challenges to work through. In general, this means that stronger organizations need to listen well, be generous with what they have to share, and understand the position of others.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: UNITED CONGRESS OF COMMUNITY AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Founded in 2005, the United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations (United Congress) is a Chicago-based, grassroots-led, multiethnic human rights alliance mobilizing people, policy and ideals for the equitable advancement of marginalized communities. TARGET Area Development Corporation, an African American grassroots organization, and the Coalition of African, Arab, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois (CAAAELI) launched the Congress after recognizing a lingering distrust and a disconnect between their respective communities even after having waged

and won campaigns together. The Congress started with the idea that deep relationships across communities need to be formed in order to effectively confront the issues that affect all of them.

Getting the “Right” People to the Table

Recognizing that they were building something new and untested, the founding organizers took a methodical approach to the early planning and outreach phases in order to get the “right” people to the table. Exploratory conversations began with the Executive Directors who in turn each brought in board members and other staff most likely to support the concept.

The early partners – TARGET, CAAAELI, Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), Ambassadors for Christ Church, and Disciples for Christ – knew they had to create safe spaces for honest dialogues in order to understand their differences. According to IMAN Executive Director Rami Nashashibi, he joined because it was a “dignified and empowering space.” People came together because they shared a deep commitment to grassroots leadership, had been successful within their own organizations, but realized they needed to do more across communities. They did not know how to build the relationships across race, religion, and culture but they were committed to figuring it out together.

The founders engaged in “no separate peace” dialogues for a year and a half before United Congress became an official organization. Leadership from the top-down had to commit before they then organized larger events that brought together their respective bases of Muslims, African Americans, and Latinos. The lesson here is that the organizational leadership had to bond first before bringing the difficult conversations to the membership.

Building a Foundation of Deep Trust and Understanding

In 2006 and 2007, United Congress facilitated an 18-month process with their grassroots membership to deepen understanding amongst each other. The “Lived Experiences” series gave specific identity groups – African Americans,

Latinos, Muslims, immigrants – space to relate their lived experience in the United States so as to offer an alternative to the public narrative about their group. Using a fishbowl format – one group tells their story, others listen and ask questions – the Lived Experience series emphasized “working through misperceptions and mistakes to promote mutual understanding” (Grant-Thomas, Sarfati et al. 2009).

The “no separate peace” dialogues and Lived Experience series have knit together alliance member organizations from the base, not just the leadership. New similarities have been found – like how immigration enforcement in the Latino community and excess incarceration in the black community both heavily impact families and marginalize so many in their respective communities. The result of this foundational trust building: United Congress’s slow but steady work has created what they call a “brotherhood” throughout their community.

Shared Values, Vision, and Victories

By building a deep foundation of understanding and working in alliance, United Congress members have a more powerful, unified voice advancing their collective agenda. In 2008, for example, United Congress won 500 summer jobs for youth in Chicago’s inner cities. Before organizers say, the groups would have fought on their own for these jobs and would have won less. More recently, the alliance worked to ensure that traditionally undercounted populations were accounted for in the 2010 Census. The group also has a bill winding through the Illinois state government called the “Prisoner Census Readjustment Act” that would count prisoners as members of their communities of origin, rather than as members of the communities in which the prisons are located – an important technicality that affects redistricting and the distribution of power. Speaking to its leadership development accomplishments, United Congress also has one of its own leaders in power as a Cook County Commissioner.

More recently, United Congress developed a human rights framework that connects, rather

than divides, their issues of education, housing, immigration and criminal justice. In 2010, a multi-ethnic delegation of leaders disseminated a human rights policy guide for racial equity to state legislators. While the United Congress wages issue-specific campaigns, its work always comes back to human rights. This frame expands notions of what is right and wrong and “broadens individuals’ worldviews, making a compelling case for why group members should be concerned about the welfare of other groups”(Grant-Thomas, Sarfati et al. 2009). This broader view is integrated at every level of the alliance and helps United Congress remain focused on the long-term.

The original partners’ vision was that it would take ten years for the whole community to see a profound impact. For some, ten years

is too long – and it is certainly a stretch for results-oriented funders – but the trust that has been carefully cultivated will likely make for lasting change both in policy and in the partners (Grant-Thomas, Sarfati et al. 2009). Building something that can endure, in short, takes time – and it takes the cement of relationship building to keep it solid for the long haul.

SCALING UP POWER AND IMPACT

Organizations build power by working in alliance and drawing on each other’s strengths to win bigger victories than would be possible if they were working alone. Alliances thus play a critical role in scaling up an organization’s ability to affect greater change by expanding the sphere of influence and elevating issues to **more strategic targets** – that is, enhancing organizational ability to influence regional, state, or national-level decision-makers that have more resources or authority.

The broader potential of [the grassroots organizing] sector exists in uniting the bases of these local organizations and networks through shared action and dialogue to create strength operating at higher and more potent levels. The establishment of new vehicles for collaboration nationally marks an important next phase for [grassroots organizing] development. It sets the table for organizing unified political strategies at the federal level, and for defeating the persistent forces of racism and reaction at the local and state levels.

– *Building a Social Force for Progressive Change (Inter-Alliance Dialogue 2010).*

In 2006, thirteen local groups from five states across central Appalachia came together to form the Alliance for Appalachia to end mountaintop removal – a devastating form of coal mining affecting local communities in states across the region. By pulling together a critical mass of local organizations, building their organizing capacity, and equipping themselves with strategic communications, legal and policy expertise, the Alliance has not only gained support from

national organizations but also has inserted regional interests and needs into the national debate. The challenge – one the Alliance takes seriously – is remaining accountable to the grassroots base as it strategically targets larger national decision-makers. But this is, we would note, a better problem to have than lacking the larger and louder collective

voice needed to move policy.

Expanding influence also means expanding the breadth of issues an organization takes on. Working in alliances may expose an organization’s staff, leaders and members to new issues and can help them become more versed and able to **take on new issues**.

The Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports’ unprecedented win establishing environmental regulations and good port trucking jobs for low-income workers at the Port of Los Angeles solidified the importance of bringing unlikely allies together and overcoming historic, in this case blue-green, divides. Partners have taken on new issues and positions supporting one another in fights outside of the original coalition work. For instance, the Teamsters reversed their position on drilling for oil in Alaska and joined the Sierra Club’s opposition to this environmentally risky practice. The Teamsters even went against

some of their own local members' position. This is solid evidence of a point made above: transactions can lead to transformations, and alliances that are intersectional and long-term can make this happen.

Challenges of Scaling Up Power and Impact

Scaling up is critical to achieving large-scale policy change, yet it is an area where many grassroots organizations and alliances lack capacity. While alliances are important vehicles for scaling up the power of grassroots organizations, they also can strain base building efforts. Alliance building tends to be staff-intensive and nearly always staff-led because it is challenging to **engage grassroots** volunteer members and leaders. Even just educating the membership on alliance activities can be difficult when an organization has a two-hour meeting and needs to focus on its more local and immediate campaign.

Base building organizations often struggle to **maintain accountability to their bases**, especially in crunch times when last minute decisions or negotiations need to happen. It is a balancing act to navigate the tension of reaching scale (hitting decision-making targets in a state capital or D.C.) and going deeper into the membership (engaging the grassroots in policy development and legislative delegations).

Alliances also struggle to **influence the dominant debate** and frame, which is increasingly important in reaching scale. Breaking through to reach the public at-large means finding messages, stories, and images that can win over the middle.

The progressive community often excels at “preaching to the choir,” something that can turn off others less versed in the language or framing of the left. Finding ways to speak to a broader audience – which maintaining the connection to the loyal choir – is a challenge that alliances face as they scale up.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE INTER-ALLIANCE DIALOGUE

Coming out of the United States Social Forum (USSF) in 2007, the leadership of six national grassroots alliances of social justice organizing groups – the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ), Jobs with Justice (JwJ), the National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON), the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), Pushback Network, and the Right to the City Alliance (RTTC) – started a conversation about forming a unified national front. The leadership had been working together formally and informally for over a decade and built trust steadily over the years. They were each noticing resources for grassroots organizing contracting at the local level causing their member organizations to struggle. With GGJ and JwJ as anchoring organizations of the USSF, and with RTTC and NDWA both launching at the USSF, it was a catalyzing moment to scale up the visibility and impact of grassroots organizing. It was time to connect with each other and form the Inter-Alliance Dialogue (IAD).

Identifying Strengths and Gaps

In the initial conversations, members of the IAD realized that each of their alliances held



similar progressive visions, wanted to have large-scale impact on key policy items, and sought to put forward a more transformative agenda at the national level—but tended to narrowly focus their work within each of their different sectors. In order to scale up and impact their cross-cutting issues, they recognized the necessity to intentionally work together to develop resources and coordinate strategy. This way, their work would be more efficient and effective rather than duplicative. Together, they examined the anatomies of their individual alliances – membership, geographic reach, key issue areas – and identified gaps and overlaps. They recognized the limits of a go-it-alone approach, so they came together to have greater impact on key issues, like jobs and health care. Taken alone, each alliance knew that it did not have the power to have the necessary impact. But taken together, they could harness the power to have influence. As one IAD leader describes, through this initial dialogue, “It became abundantly clear that this was right.”

After a year of conversations, the economic crisis hit, severely impacting the organizations and their members. This created an urgent and pressing need to generate resources and strategy collaboratively. At the same time, President Obama had just been elected, so there was also a new sense of hope. These factors taken together – the history of working together and culture of trust, overlapping visions and issue areas, and a newfound need for collaboration – cemented these groups into an alliance.

After the economic crisis hit, the IAD turned its focus to the federal economic stimulus – which it felt was not addressing the root causes of the crisis. The IAD groups collectively envisioned new ideas for how the country could, as one IAD member describes, “re-tool and re-shape the economy in such a way that was about democratizing it fundamentally and about a more sustainable way of building.” They knew that no one of their alliances could create an agenda for economic recovery, but together they hoped to shift the debate in Washington to fulfill their collective vision of a transformed economy – one that works for America’s low-income workers and families.

Seizing Opportunities to Make a Difference

The Inter-Alliance Dialogue has given each of the six national alliances a vehicle to scale up by thinking and acting collectively, and seizing opportunities to concentrate resources to make a substantial difference in local and national fights.

For instance, when Arizona passed legislation in April 2010 institutionalizing racial profiling and criminalizing immigrants (SB 1070), IAD had already identified immigration enforcement as one of its areas of focus. NDLON was already working on immigrant rights issues in the state and had established relationships and leadership in local communities. In response to SB 1070, the IAD sent organizers and resources from each of their individual alliances to plug directly into NDLON’s organizing strategy and infrastructure. IAD members also organized national actions against SB 1070 across the country.

The Domestic Workers Alliance (DWA) sent a delegation of women to Arizona on Mother’s Day to document stories of women and children



in the wake of SB 1070. After reporting back to over thirty women's organizations from across the country, DWA was able to leverage a hearing with members of the U.S. Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues, co-chaired by Arizona Representative Raul Grijalva, to expose the human dimension of SB1070 and the danger it poses for women and children. In front of a packed room filled with press and political decision-makers, five women from Arizona described the harm SB 1070 would cause them and their children, and helped to shift the debate around SB1070 in our nation's capital.

The IAD gives its member alliances a way to streamline resources in the midst of crises and influence the national agenda. As one IAD leader explains, "[the IAD] gives us the capacity to turn these crises moments from defensive mobilization into strategies for building power." This is exactly what we mean by scale – but at the same time, we must recognize how even these efforts are falling short of the scale needed in light of the shifting national political climate and the enormity of the needs. All of us – organizations, funders, and even researchers – must step up our game, and it is to this challenge that we now turn.

LOOKING AHEAD: STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Times are tough. The economy is stagnant, conservatives are ascendant, and progress in Obama's Washington has often been frustratingly slow. The tendency in such moments is to turn on others – to blame self-serving politicians, a captured media, and even our less courageous allies.

But perhaps we should turn to – not on – each other. Frankly, our social movement infrastructure is just not strong enough. If it were, the last two years would have seen more progress on immigration reform, far stronger health care and financial reforms, and a President more willing to directly address race and injustice – knowing that a broad and organized constituency would both back him up and hold him accountable. So it is not time to point fingers but to contemplate how we bulk up the movement for the difficult era ahead (LaMarche and Bhargava 2010).

Staying focused, positive, and collaborative is a challenge. It is particularly hard when the economy is weak, and many organizations are struggling for survival. Even in good economic times, base building organizations and grassroots alliances are under-resourced. They are standing ground against multi-billion dollar companies and fighting to reverse disinvestments in education that are years in the making. They are hoping to break through with messages

in a media environment that favors famous commentators (often of a particular ideological flavor) rather than regular people. And they are trying to do all this in a way that requires that they stay in deep connection with the aspirations of millions who have felt like they have little voice in the policy process – meaning that the basic work of community organizing often has to come before any other priority.

But keeping attention on strategic alliances is also critical – and given the times, investments in alliance building must be done in a targeted and smart way. For organizations, this means realizing that not all alliances have the same potential; picking and choosing wisely will be increasingly important. It also means realizing that building up their collaborators – who may often also be their competitors in the world of philanthropy – is actually critical to maintaining a healthy ecosystem for social movement growth.

Funders also have to be smart and strategic. Part of this is continuing to support basic organizing: while investments are needed in alliances, they cannot be made at the expense of strong, local groups that form the core power base of a social movement. Part of this is taking the long view: many of the most important activities that produce alliances – relationship-building, trust-forging, and analysis-sharing – are long-term

not short-term. And part of this is recognizing that philanthropic investments in an era of fewer resources and evidence-driven boards require working hand-in-hand with the alliance-builders themselves to develop the metrics of achievement that can justify grants and mark results.

The aim of this section is to provide potential directions to both organizers and funders about how to support alliance building for sustained social change in America. We should note that these are not solely our own ideas but rather have emerged from our interviews in the field and our convening in New York with movement leaders. Our goal for this section is to be specific – to not just call for more operational funding (although this is not only needed but really popular with the leaders we interviewed!) but rather to point to particular areas and decision points for organizers and funders alike. Thus, for each area – connecting, cementing, and scaling – we offer one overall goal, three objectives and a range of very specific strategies and activities.

BUILDING TO CONNECT

Alliances are a critical connector in the movement-building landscape: they connect streams of power created by individual organizations to a river of change led by social movements. Through the Inter-Alliance Dialogue, groups channeled organizers and leaders into Arizona not only out of solidarity with the day laborers standing against SB 1070, but more importantly, as Sarita Gupta of Jobs with Justice noted, “to bring back skill sets and a deeper understanding of [SB 1070] back into our network so that we can be better, stronger allies.” Effective alliances allow members to transcend issue silos and consolidate their power for larger struggles.

Alliances need to go deeper and connect with those people that have the most at stake. An alliance with deeper roots into the grassroots membership can more quickly respond and deploy their collective “troops” when the political moment arrives. Once changes are won, a broad,



engaged membership base can keep policymakers accountable and ensure victories are sustained.

Alliances also need to reach beyond the usual partners to find common ground with new constituencies so that they can make greater progress on multiple fronts and on multiple issues. To do this, there needs to be a solid infrastructure of social movement organizations: both those that can serve as anchors and those that can participate as active members.

Our proposed goal, objectives, and strategies related to building the connecting capacity of alliances are as follows:

Goal 1. Build the depth and breadth of grassroots alliances

Objective 1.1. Increase investment and ownership of existing grassroots alliances by the communities that have the most at stake

Building the depth of the field is about increasing the investment and ownership of alliances by the communities most affected – this means involving not just staff but leaders and members as well. While some alliances, like United Congress, have been successful in bringing together leaders and members, others struggle to move alliance work beyond a small set of staff.

Having all levels of the organization invested in success can allow for more active and sustained participation – involvement is likely to continue even when leadership and staffing changes. Grassroots Global Justice Alliance has found some success by requiring co-representation from organizations – one staff and one leader – on their coordinating committee and by organizing joint staff-leader delegations to social forums.

Organizations can be intentional in pushing the envelope to be more inclusive and funders can provide the funding to cover the expenses required with deepening participation. An alliance's ability to quickly mobilize large numbers

of people starts with a simple step: people identify as being part of the alliance. This is not as simple as it may sound. Potential strategies for deepening investment and participation include:

- Systems and practices to increase communication with the base;
- Leadership structures that require staff and leader co-representation;
- Peer-to-peer exchanges and conferences that bring together organizations' bases; and
- Funding to cover expenses associated with involving grassroots members.

Objective 1.2. Build unusual alliances that transcend single sectors, issues, and geographies

Building the breadth of the field involves creating unusual alliances with organizations from different sectors (i.e. community, labor, faith-based, academia), issues, and geographies. For the white, middle class bicycle activists in San Francisco, this meant connecting with immigrant and low-income communities that use bicycles as a means of everyday transportation. By joining TransForm's alliance between environmentalists, social justice and transit advocates, and labor

unions, the bicycle activists have found more success in moving their issues while also becoming more involved in the alliance's other campaigns.

While social justice organizing groups primarily focus their work in poor and working

class communities and communities of color, they are recognizing the need to move beyond their traditional base if they are serious about crafting a progressive majority for large-scale change. At a recent meeting we held at the Gates Foundation to present our report, *Color of Change: Inter-ethnic Youth Leadership Development for the 21st Century*, we were surprised – but should not have been – when three African American male organizers spoke one after the other about the need to organize in white

Having all levels of the organization equally invested can allow for more active and sustained participation – involvement is likely to continue even when leadership and staffing changes.

communities. Their view: while the demography might be inevitably headed in the direction of a majority-minority nation, we needed to become one nation much, much quicker.

Organizations with primarily constituents of color can seek allied institutions that have deeper connections in white communities, such as labor unions, faith-based institutions, and environmental organizations. This will mean marrying issues of primary concern to white, middle class communities (in TransForm's case, alternative transportation and the natural environment) to the traditional concerns of marginalized communities (jobs, housing, and education, to name a few). This is exactly why the "green jobs" movement holds so much promise. It is also why the work of the California Alliance – which is using a values-based strategy based on polling and focus group research to identify "new" constituencies – is so novel and important. Funders can be supportive by encouraging groups to take risks on new partnerships (more on this in Goal 2) and by sharing their "birds-eye" knowledge of other groups and efforts. Potential strategies for building unusual alliances include:

- Power analyses to identify opportunities for new allies;
- Research and polling to identify potential intersections;
- Technical assistance with messaging and framing; and
- Cross-sector, multi-issue conferences and convenings.

Objective 1.3. Cultivate the anchors and allies that make long-term alliance building possible

A solid infrastructure of social movement organizations makes building the depth and breadth of alliances possible. One organizer pointed out that funders often want to see them working in a particular region yet do not support the regional infrastructure of organizations that make long-term alliance building possible.

Strong anchor organizations are especially important in alliance building. They are likely to be larger, more established organizations that have a willingness to shift some resources and priorities towards longer-term alliance investment. Anchors often have the capacity to organize a broader constituency base in the geography where they already organize or to pivot to a new region (move from a local convener to a statewide presence) or to a new issue (moving from immigration to health care) in response to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities.

In addition to anchors, strongly organized organizations in key regions and constituencies of emerging importance are also critical. Special

attention should be paid to under-resourced regions – especially where demographics may suggest opportunities to build new cross-racial leadership that can challenge power structures solidly fixed in the hands of an elite. This includes places like the Deep South, and subregions within relatively well-resourced regions, such as California's Central and Inland Valleys. There are also under-represented voices that need to be lifted up in alliances. These include youth, gender equity groups, LGBT allies, and others.

Anchors can seek out and bring in smaller or newer groups in under-resourced regions into an alliance so that it helps raise their visibility among funders – like the Southeast Regional Environmental Justice Network does for smaller groups in the South. For organizations and alliances to cultivate new allies, they will require more fundraising capacity and systems to re-grant, and will likely need to have difficult conversations about how funds are allocated among members. Potential strategies for funders include:

- Continue to fund organizations with a solid alliance building track record;
- Fund organizations that are on the "tipping point" – that with an extra infusion of funding could move into an alliance-building leadership role;

"An alliance is not going to make weak organizations stronger."

– Regional alliance staff

- Make a longer-term commitment to target regions that are currently under-resourced; and
- Consider funding existing anchors to help build in new regions, communities, and issue areas.

INVESTING TO CEMENT

Our first goal is about connecting with new people and organizations, but that is only half the work. The other half – the real transformational work – is making these new connections stick. This requires what we call “principled conflict” – the understanding that groups may not always agree on all the specifics of a policy but share a general vision and are willing to hash it out to get to common ground. Principled conflict has another meaning as well: that groups will be willing to be honest about differences and to struggle about them with respect, integrity, and a commitment to sticking together. Indeed, what makes alliances different and more powerful than short-term coalitions is the long-term commitment – something that is based on hard-earned, not blindly-given trust.

The pay-offs from dedicating the time, resources, and patience in building trust, relationships, and the long-term commitment are many: organizations can expand their reach by trusting allied organizations to carry their issue as their own in a meeting before the mayor, for example; organizations are more likely to hang together through multiple campaigns, strengthening their presence and influence over time; with each new initiative, the start-up phase can be quicker if the groundwork has already been laid through previous collaborations; and by bringing together diverse constituency bases, tensions between communities will ease over time.

These benefits, however, often occur long after grant cycles have ended and the upfront investments in trust and relationship-building are often not recognized or valued by foundations. So investing in cementing strategies is also about creating funding streams that allow grassroots alliances to have more say in what they do rather than pretzeling around foundation

guidelines and parameters. This is not a blank check: we also suggest that organizations and funders can work together to develop better metrics of accountability and success as well as develop strategies and capacity to decrease the dependency on foundation resources.

Our proposed goal, objectives, and strategies related to cementing new connections are as follows:

Goal 2. Invest in strategies to sustain alliances over time

Objective 2.1. Commit to relationship-building activities that are critical to cementing connections

Both funders and organizations must have a commitment to the relationship-building activities to address the barriers both within philanthropy and within organizations and alliances. The barriers in philanthropy include short-term funding cycles, programs siloed by issue, and limited evaluation metrics. The last of these is especially critical: with general operating grants becoming less common, organizations and alliances are increasingly held accountable to specific deliverables and issue-specific outcomes. While wins are obviously important, an emphasis on short-term results favors short-term coalitions – and both the wins and the coalitions could be short-lived. If an alliance begins in campaign-mode and must demonstrate wins in the first year, the longer-term transformative work may be put aside.

For alliances and organizations, committing to a process with outcomes to-be-determined is a risk they must be willing to take. The first step is usually developing a shared analysis – starting with each other’s history and identifying shared struggles and values. For example, in Oregon, immigrants and the LGBT community have a similar history of being attacked by conservatives. That shared experience of struggle has helped the two communities work together so that the immigrant rights coalition stood by the LGBT community and supported pro-gay marriage legislation. The next step

is then translating that shared history and values into a clear, actionable policy agenda.

Leadership programs with a movement-building perspective, such as Rockwood Leadership Institute and Social Justice Leadership, can also play an important role in establishing personal connections that seed long-term relationships. These programs operate under the premise that deep transformation at the societal level starts at the personal level. The deep bonds that form between the individuals in a learning cohort can provide the glue for building deep bonds between their respective organizations.

Organizing intermediaries can also leverage trainings, convenings, and other resources to cement inter-organizational connections. Western States Center (WSC) is an organizing intermediary that works in eight, generally conservative Western states and helps to build relationships between environmentalists, labor unions, LGBT community, and immigrants. WSC's work has been crucial to "blunt the wedge attacks" against environmentalists in timber country during the spotted owl crisis and against gay and lesbian activists in the anti-marriage equality ballot initiatives in Oregon. Western States Center developed strategies to help organizations understand why it was in the broad interest of people to "fight the battles that initially you didn't think were your battles" to stand "shoulder to shoulder" in order to combat a conservative wave and promote an alternative agenda.

Potential strategies to encourage relationship- and trust-building work include:

- Fund and conduct convenings and dialogues that foster honest and direct communication;
- Share political education curriculum and methodologies that build common identity;
- Support informal networks for peer-to-peer learning; and
- Leverage leadership programs and organizing intermediaries that have a broad, movement-building approach.

Objective 2.2. Develop flexible funding streams that can support cementing activities

In addition to providing specific support for alliance building, foundations can also support organizations in their efforts to diversify funding, thus giving the organizations the opportunity to prioritize the "soft" work of alliances all on their own. In the long term, this funding diversification can also help organizations weather the ebbs and flows of foundation support. After all, grassroots alliances are often dependent on foundation funding – and funds tend to flow to an alliance when its issue, strategy or geography is "hot" in the philanthropic world. Sometimes the flows will last three years then suddenly stop – for reasons usually unforeseen by groups on the ground and often unrelated to whether the groups perceive the alliance to still be viable, necessary, and productive.

Some organizations have found success in diversifying their funding; others need a shift in culture but find success once they do it. Membership dues and individual donor funds allow organizations to stay true to their work and mission. Larger network organizations, such as PICO and Jobs with Justice, and more established organizations, like Project South, have had success with this. Oregon's Farmworker Union, *Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste*, has a big donor campaign that is bringing in almost a million dollars for its CAPACES leadership institute at a time when the economy is down and businesses are shutting down. When Grassroots Global Justice hit a wall in foundation fundraising for the first U.S. Social Forum, it put out a "movement call to action" and in three months organizations stepped up and made it happen.

But getting small funds from many individuals takes a lot of work – especially during the start-up phase. For many organizations, it is easier in the short term to drop membership fees and shift to foundation funding – where you can raise more funds with relatively less effort. Foundations can help organizations to make the upfront investment in new systems and structures for membership dues and individual donor drives – even as they help educate other funders about the importance of the long-term

work of alliance building. Potential strategies for both organizations and funders include:

- New software that allows groups to track and manage individual donors;
- Provision of matching funds to encourage grassroots fundraising;
- Trainings, mentorships, and sharing best practices with regard to funding diversification; and
- Deeper relationships between organizations and funders to educate and gain support in the philanthropic sector for alliance building.

Objective 2.3. Test new metrics of success that reflect cementing processes and outcomes

While more and more funders are gaining an appreciation for community organizing, alliance building, and social movements, there is still a gap in understanding what it takes to build effective alliances, what alliances look like in practice, and how best to fund them. The most-commonly cited challenge related to funding is the gap in understanding how to classify and measure long-term alliance-building outcomes. For example, an alliance that begins with a year of dialogues, leadership development, and trainings may not have as many external impacts and measures as an alliance that builds trust through joint action and campaigns which produce quicker policy wins – but experience suggests that the slower start can yield similar or even better results further down the road.

Metrics must, therefore, capture both the transactions and the transformations that happen during the cementing process. Transactions, such as the number of meetings and alliance partners, are easier to define but are only part of the story. The real success is hidden in the transformational interactions: did a conversation happen that would otherwise not have occurred? Has an advocacy organization overcome their discomfort with an organizing group's tactics? Have groups deepened their understanding of each other's work? Are they able to act on that understanding – as when environmentalists

meet with city council members but also carry labor's needs and demands into the discussion?

At the same time, foundations need to demonstrate results both because of a new emphasis on effective grantmaking and simply because scarce money deserves maximum impact. Alliances themselves want results: actions and achievements help keep people at the table. So measurements should and must happen, and we recommend that organizations be proactive in working with allies in philanthropy and research to develop the metrics and realistic timeframes that can link trust building to real policy victories. Potential strategies include:

- Work with researchers and organizations to develop an alliance building evaluation framework to test in the field;
- Provide technical assistance and participatory evaluation for alliances to better capture quantitative and qualitative progress;
- Be open to new metrics tailored to different alliance models and approaches; and
- Document and broadcast successful “cementing” efforts to build support for the field.

RAMPING UP TO SCALE

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the geography of change. National strategies will always be needed because the issues of concern – climate change, immigration, health care, workforce development – are affected by federal policies. But the local, regional, and state arenas are equally important and sometimes more relevant to making changes in everyday lives. Moreover, some groups have found that they can gain national policy traction through changes that bubble up from the region – consider how organizing around local living wage laws helped build a grassroots swell to raise to states' and then the national minimum wage (Dean and Reynolds 2009; Pastor, Benner et al. 2009). And the current – or at least likely upcoming – political climate in Washington may mean that creating progressive examples at the regional level will be important. In short, the ability to

respond flexibly at multiple levels – wherever and whenever opportunity exists – is critical.

Indeed, the three dimensional geography of alliances – where members are building power, where they are located, and where the alliance as a whole is building power – is fluid and ever-evolving based on circumstances. Alliances that span multiple places are more likely to be able to pivot and focus at the scale of opportunity. This was true in the example of the Inter-Alliance Dialogue where national partners were able to put people on the ground locally to affect statewide legislation with threads to national policy. This model may be adapted and replicated as grassroots alliances grow and evolve – and gain enough power to push proactive policies rather than just react to fight bad policies.

Another aspect of scale is not geographic but political. Having impact means going beyond the “usual suspects” – those with whom we are already familiar and comfortable. Once focused solely at moving folks at the margins of society, grassroots organizations and alliances are recognizing the need to get their messages out into the mainstream so as to influence the dominant debate and ultimately shift social values and policy decisions. This is hard and uncomfortable work – it means consciously reaching out and creating space for those who are not yet in an alliance or a movement. It requires new thinking and new language – and the conviction that speaking to the middle is not the same thing as watering down your message and your politics.

Our proposed goal, objectives, and strategies related to these issues of geographic and political scale are as follows:

Goal 3. Expand the impact and power of grassroots alliances

Objective 3.1. Equip alliances with the strategic research and policy analysis needed to win

Getting our messages out into the mainstream...requires new thinking and new language – and the conviction that speaking to the middle is not the same thing as watering down our message and our politics.

While an organized, engaged base is essential to making change happen, an organizer we interviewed pointed out that “organizing alone won’t get us there” – a viable policy package is critical. At the same time, a good policy means nothing if you do not have a broad, organized base of support ready to fight for it. And research and polling are becoming increasingly important as groups are fighting more and more battles around propositions and ballot initiatives and thus engaging with a broad electorate that goes well beyond their specific and traditional base.

Collaborations with other sectors can expand an alliance’s capacity and open the possibilities for change: research institutions, policy think tanks, national intermediaries, and even government

agencies can be strategic partners. For example, Oregon’s Farmworker Union, PCUN, is working with federal agencies, specifically the Department of Labor, Environmental Protection Agency, and US Department of Agriculture, to change

regulations that hurt farmworkers. But given the imbalance of resources between grassroots alliances and national intermediaries and advocates, partners need to be attentive to power dynamics (whose voice has more influence over the policy agenda?) and issues of credit and competition for resources (who has access to funders?). Finding researchers, policy experts, lawyers, and advocates that can be good collaborators with grassroots alliances means finding those that are committed to a bottom-up, participatory approach.

This is not just an outside game: building alliances’ in-house research and policy capacity is also important. Alliances are best positioned to develop a policy agenda that reflects the needs and interests of grassroots constituencies – and they, therefore, need their own ability to analyze problems, develop solutions, and identify political opportunities and obstacles even as they partner with others more versed in the worlds of research and policy.

Potential strategies for increasing alliances' research and policy capacity:

- Invest in partnerships between grassroots alliances and research and policy institutions where they organically evolve;
- Provide funding for alliances and organizations to develop in-house capacity;
- Convene cross-alliance trainings for researchers and policy analysts so they better understand movements and go beyond their own issue and research silos; and
- Pool resources to fund research and policy development.

Objective 3.2. Ramp up the communications capacity to impact the public debate

Across the board, alliances cited communications as a much-needed capacity. There are three distinct types of communications capacity that alliances need: internal, mass, and strategic. By internal communications, we mean the systems and practices that allow alliances to communicate with their organizational members and with the grassroots base. Mass communications is about reaching the public at-large. And strategic communications includes the framing strategies and methods to impact the public debate and values.

Effective internal communication systems and practices can help ease the tension between scaling up and keeping one's perspective firmly grounded in the grassroots base. For example, the seemingly straightforward task of updating the membership (both organizations and their base) on an alliance meeting can be difficult when there are a myriad of more urgent issues at hand. Newsletters and emails can help keep members in the loop, but such mechanisms are not sufficient when information needs to flow back to the alliance. For alliances with national membership and few face-to-face meetings, organizers are experimenting with

technologies, such as online meeting forums and message boards, to ensure the greatest participation and transparency possible. And as the digital divide for certain technologies narrows (ranging from cell phones to laptops), organizers – with funders' support – can experiment with multiple modes of communication and coordination so as to deepen ownership, buy-in, and influence.

“The lack of media communications doesn't kill us but it hurts us. People don't know that we're having an impact. We're losing potential to build a movement even stronger.”
– Grassroots organizer

Alliance builders also talked about the need to reach the masses – beyond the one-on-one interactions generated from the door-to-door and person-to-person contacts that are the basics of organizing. Getting media coverage – particularly the right type of coverage – can help an alliance increase its visibility and claim its victories. It can give alliances and organizations legitimacy and credibility, which paves the way to recruiting new partners and supporters, including funders. But issues of credit and recognition can be challenging. Groups need to balance the promotion of individual organizations and the alliance as a whole; an alliance partner with more media capacity needs to not only self-promote, but also lift up others.

Alliances also need to reach out with messages that can influence the broader public debate. Effective narratives and framing need to be grounded in the experiences of members' lives but go beyond the usual ideological frames that can alienate potential allies – resonating beyond those already enamored by one's solidly leftist politics is critical. United Congress, for example, uses a “human rights” framework for their legislative policy agenda, which captures the issues of importance to their constituency bases and has caught the attention of legislators.

Messages and frames that span campaigns and unite issues will help build broader alliances. But it is also important to stress that alliance building itself – which requires that progressives have to at least reach other progressives – provides a space to practicing speaking in a language that stretches beyond one's own members to at

least one's own allies. The challenge, of course, is to break through to the middle, and this is exactly where critical investments by funders and commitments by organizations are needed.

Potential strategies for increasing communications capacity are:

- Invest in internal and media communications systems and staffing;
- Provide framing and messaging training and technical assistance;
- Experiment with social media tools and technologies; and
- Support peer-to-peer learning and the sharing of best practices.

Objective 3.3. Experiment with different geographic scaling models and approaches

While the last few years have brought increased attention to the scale and geography of change (local versus regional versus state versus national), there is no single answer as to which level is best, in which situations, and when (Soja 2010). Despite this, the organizers we interviewed suggested some general guidelines about scale: the need to be grounded at the local level where poverty, racial tensions, and disinvestment are experienced; the need to pay attention to regions where economies are organized and social actors are increasingly focused; and the imperative of achieving policy changes at all levels to realign institutions, programs, and funding.

Scale is critical in both long-term movement building and short-term politics. Coming off the heels of a contentious mid-term election and heading towards the next presidential election in 2012, we can expect a rightward swing within the Obama administration. How and where can alliances tool up and scale up to create a constructive policy alternative? Should the action be in states and regions and/or what is the mix with national concerns?

Alliances – and foundations – can be intentional and self-conscious about the benefits and challenges to different scaling models and approaches. Whatever emphasis a foundation

has – state, region, issue or constituency – we would suggest the need to invest in “anchors” whether they are anchor states, regions, or organizations. These are the strongest nodes in the infrastructure that require support to maintain their strength, to experiment with new approaches and to “spill over” into other regions or issues.

At the same time, it is critical to invest in places or organizations that are at the “tipping” point. Support here can help alliance builders get to the next level, gaining depth, breadth, or traction. Other places and issues that look like tough bets now – like investing in the conservative environs of Texas or tackling the criminalization of youth – could look like wise “long-term” judgments as the demography changes and the costs of bad policy become increasingly apparent.

Finally, if it is true that social movement organizations can maximize their impacts through alliances, it may be equally fruitful for foundations to consider collaboratives as appropriate. This is not to say that all funders should think and invest alike – diversity in experimentation will lead to more learning about best practices in alliance building. At the same time, some coordination could reduce duplication and lead to more knowledge about how best to promote alliance building.

Potential strategies for experimenting with scale include:

- Diversify funding efforts to include a mix of anchor, tipping point, and long-term investments;
- Support state-based strategies that elevate local politics and possibilities;
- Develop a national political landscape analysis to identify openings and opportunities for grassroots groups to make progress on a national front; and
- Collaborate to document the benefits and challenges that alliances with different models of reaching scale face.

ALLIANCES MATTER NOW

Remember the speech in Grant Park? Remember the sense – even by those who had voted for another candidate – that the election of Barack Obama signaled a major breakthrough in American politics? Remember a cold January day when millions gathered in the nation’s capital for the inauguration of a new President and for what many hoped would be a new era?

For some, the political sea change in 2008 signaled that the doors to Washington D.C. were now open. Indeed, they were – but the Tea Party managed to quickly beat its way to the entry. In retrospect, this was to be expected: change is hard and lost in the fuzzy memory is that the Grant Park speech included the warning that “the road ahead will be long.” Equally lost, as Van Jones has recently reminded us, was the fact that the campaign slogan was not “Yes, he can” but “Yes, we can.”

Building up the “we that can” requires social movements and the alliances that undergird them. Such alliances need to be deeply rooted in the communities with the most at stake. They need to be bold and reach across ethnic lines, issue concerns, and geographic boundaries. And they need to think both big and long

term: achieving social and economic equity means more than winning a dollar raise for domestic workers – as much a victory as that is – it also means changing the political climate and shifting society’s values and worldviews in order to create a more equitable playing field.

For our strengths to matter in this continuing arc toward justice, we have to work on our weaknesses. For alliances, this means augmenting the power and voice of their grassroots base by widening the circle and connecting the unconnected. For funders, this means understanding that the activities that cement organizations into alliances – relationship-building, trust-forging, and analysis-sharing – are long-term not short-term. And for both the field and its funders, this means working together to define meaningful and realistic measures of success.

If we are serious about making a better America, we have to start investing in the future of alliance building now. Across the nation, a new wave of grassroots organizers has chosen to overcome difference, forge relationships, and build the alliances that are laying the foundation for sustained change. They deserve our admiration and our support.



APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWEES

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Page 2: Darren Calhoun, at an event of the United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations

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