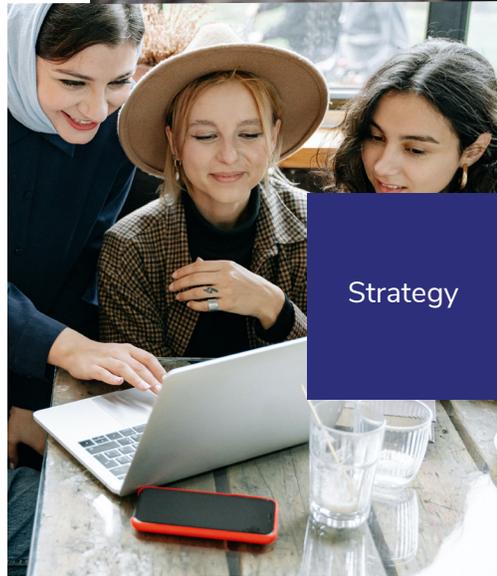




Capacity & Structure



Context



Strategy



Support

# Coalitions *as a Tool for* Advocacy

Evidence and  
Lessons Learned

# Introduction

Funders seeking to invest in broad social and system change frequently partner with advocacy organizations to advance issues through policy change rather than solely resourcing direct service organizations. Many funders take this investment further and seek to support coalition building instead of simply resourcing individual organizations. Coalitions are viewed as being stronger than their individual components and, at best, can bring together a variety of voices and positions to advance an issue. Given the current chaotic political environment, it is important to understand how coalitions are currently functioning in the advocacy ecosystem.

To stay abreast of this changing environment and be better positioned to effectively respond, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) has an active Learning Agenda to guide the work of its Global Policy and Advocacy Division (GPA). Building on previous work on advocacy coalition capacity, BMGF commissioned TCC Group to conduct research to help funders better understand key considerations in supporting coalitions.

## Purpose and Design of the Study

The research draws on three broad data sources:

**Interviews:** TCC Group conducted 24 interviews with three groups of stakeholders – BMGF staff, peer funders, and coalition experts (outside of those selected for case studies).

**Case Studies:** TCC Group conducted five virtual site visits, each with a coalition showcasing a unique approach or model of work.

**Literature Review:** TCC commissioned three independent researchers to review the available academic and peer-reviewed literature on coalitions.

Data were collected and analyzed using a four-part framework. Each part of the framework represents a domain of positioning in a coalition's environment. The four domains are: coalition capacity and structure, coalition context, coalition support, and coalition strategy (see Figure 1). When all four areas are being effectively developed and considered by stakeholders, it should lead to effective positioning of the coalition as a whole.

This report is primarily directed at funders and is intended to provide insights into when, how, and why to support coalitions under different circumstances. Advocates may similarly find value in some of the concepts and findings to inform their conversations with current and potential funders.

## Context

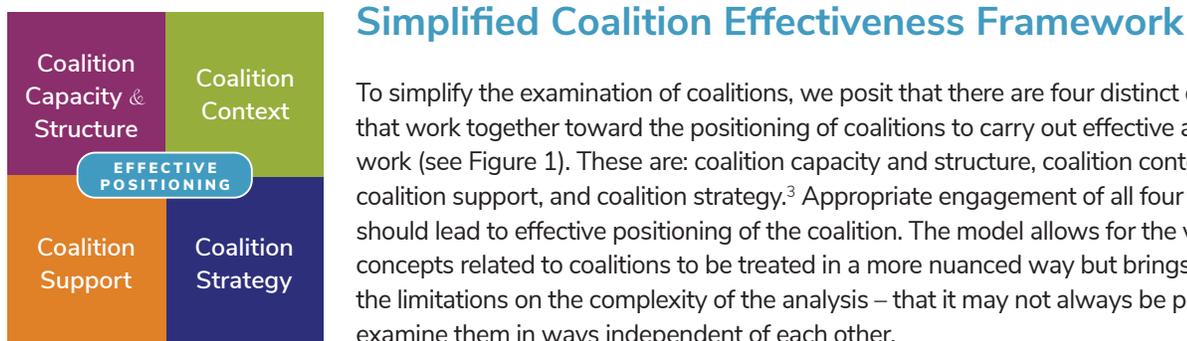
For the purposes of this work, we use the definition of “coalition” provided by Terry Mizrahi and Beth Rosenthal in their 2001 paper on the complexities of coalition building: “An organization or organizations whose members commit to an agreed-on purpose and shared decision making to influence an external institution or target, while each member organization maintains its autonomy.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mizrahi, T., & Rosenthal, B.B. (2001). “Complexities of coalition building: Leaders' successes, strategies, struggles, and solutions.” *Social Work*, 46(1), 63-78. Available at <https://doi.10.1093/sw/46.1.63>.

Coalitions – and conversations with and about them – are inherently complex. From a funder’s perspective, coalitions represent both a means (building strong partnerships around key issues) and an end to carry out advocacy work and implement programming.<sup>2</sup> This dual placement – outcome and mechanism – expands our interest in coalitions to not only understanding their impact on the eventual policy goal but also the process by which the coalition itself is created, strengthened, and operated. Put another way, funders can often have two levels of goals that may be related to a coalition. The first is strengthening the coalition itself by using strategies such as capacity building that will further the coalition’s ability to achieve its stated goals. The second is the achievement of the stated goals of the coalition which, presumably, should be tied to the funder’s desired impact within the advocacy arena.

Figure 1



## Key Learning Questions

For coalitions to be successful, they must have a wide variety of strategies and tactics, and the actors working to support or evaluate these coalitions must themselves have a deep and nuanced understanding of the coalition’s structure, strategies, and desired outcomes.

TCC Group worked with BMGF staff to develop a comprehensive list of learning questions to guide our study. The list below shows the highest priority questions for each component of the framework. A complete list of the questions for each component is included at the beginning of the section that details that aspect of the framework.

### Capacity and Structure Questions (Page 5)

- What are different coalition models?
- How rigid should coalition advocacy agendas be at formation? How should coalitions best make decisions about when coalition strategy should be altered?

### Context Questions (Page 17)

- How do nonprofits best establish coalitions with non-traditional partners (e.g., business community, military/veteran groups, etc.)? What factors should be considered?
- What are the effects of working with non-traditional partners (e.g., looking at coalition membership, leadership, and communication; capacities and issues related to measurement, learning, and evaluation, etc.)?
- What are the trade-offs of bringing in partners who have opposing views on other issues?

<sup>2</sup> Raynor, J. (2011). *What makes an effective coalition? Evidence-based indicators of success*. TCC Group. Available at <https://www.tccgrp.com/resource/what-makes-an-effective-coalition-evidence-based-indicators-of-success/>

<sup>3</sup> This model was developed for this report based on previous TCC work.

## Strategy Questions (Page 29)

- What key decision criteria should be considered for using coalition building as an advocacy tactic?
- Which tactics complement coalition building in different scenarios?
- What are the measurement frameworks being used by advocacy organizations to assess the effectiveness of different types of coalitions?
- When is it more helpful to “brand” a coalition as a formal entity versus having a set of coordinated groups branding their work independently?
- Is the coalition concept still relevant in today’s political environment?

## Support Questions (Page 40)

- What factors contribute to a healthy dynamic in the funder/coalition relationship?
- What factors should be taken into consideration when deciding to end funding to a coalition?
- Do coalitions that have been instigated by a funder risk running into particular challenges in comparison to those that have emerged organically and that are later supercharged by external funding? If so, how can such challenges be mitigated?
- At what point is it helpful to fund collaboratively with other foundations and donors? When is funding collaboratively worth the time investment on the funder side?

While this report provides fresh insights for funders resourcing coalitions, the landscape is frequently shifting. We believe additional inquiry is needed, especially around the ways coalitions are able to incorporate evidence into strategy development and how federally focused coalitions can best leverage and mobilize grassroots voices.

## Study Findings

For the purpose of this study, we used the four-domain model depicted in Figure 2 to frame our examination of coalitions. This framework was developed specifically for this study as part of the research concept development process and is based on our previous work and understanding of the literature. The areas of capacity and structure, context, and coalition strategy are basic considerations of any program and can be specifically explored within the realm of policy advocacy coalition work. Under other circumstances, the coalition capacity category would include an examination of coalition support/resources. For the purposes of this study, however, it was called out separately due to the specific funder orientation of this learning project. The model allows for treatment of the various concepts in nuanced way but requires acknowledgment that such an examination risks oversimplification in a complex environment. In other words, it may not always be possible to examine them in independent ways.

Notwithstanding the limitations, we use the framework as an organizing principle and go in-depth on each domain below. Each section is organized in the same way. It starts with an overview of the domain and a review of the related learning questions. We then address each learning question, including a description of the rationale for the question and the key findings on that learning question.

While this report provides fresh insights for funders resourcing coalitions, the landscape is frequently shifting. We believe additional inquiry is needed, especially around the ways coalitions are able to incorporate evidence into strategy development and how federally focused coalitions can best leverage and mobilize grassroots voices.

Figure 2

## Detailed Coalition Effectiveness Framework

### Coalition Capacity & Structure

- Values play an important part in determining the “right” coalition model.
- Coalition models exist based on purpose, leadership structure, or, increasingly, a multi-pronged hybrid.
- Setting the advocacy agenda should be secondary to alignment on mission and values. If done as a strategic effort, setting the advocacy agenda within a coalition represents a significant outcome because it represents resolution of some issues necessary for alignment.
- It is generally most effective to have a broader process for setting the advocacy agenda coupled with a narrower process to set strategy towards the agenda.

### Coalition Context

- Member trust and alignment are essential for coalition partners to come together, especially when working with nontraditional partners.
- Members within coalitions of nontraditional partners must be prepared to accept incremental change as a cost of coalition membership.
- Bringing in partners with opposing views may directly and indirectly undermine effectiveness when competing priorities of individual organizations rise to the surface.
- Coalitions of partners with opposing views work best for discrete, immediate issues.

### EFFECTIVE POSITIONING

### Coalition Support

- Unsurprisingly, multi-year general operating support is seen as the best tool to allow coalitions needed flexibility in their work.
- Funders need to balance providing strategic insight with directing strategy.
- Power dynamics are such that many coalitions feel they cannot turn down any type of funder request.
- Benefits of funder collaboratives include risk mitigation for the involved funders.

### Coalition Strategy

- Coalitions can demonstrate their relevancy by highlighting how their issue affects multiple stakeholder groups.
- Coalitions need to both manage the membership balance for diversity on the political spectrum and understand how to leverage those voices.
- Coalitions that lack the infrastructure or trust to share intelligence are hampering their own effectiveness.
- Branding can be helpful but must be backed by a strong reputation.
- The current environment is well suited to coalition work due to the need to incorporate different skills, perspectives, and relationships.
- Coalitions can serve as a way to grow and develop newer and smaller organizations and strengthen the pipeline of advocates.

# Coalition Capacity and Structure Findings

Coalition capacity and structure refer to the skills, resources, abilities, and design of a coalition. Capacity and structure are important because they provide the framework and execution potential of a given coalition. This idea is supported by an existing body of evidence in this area. For example, Raynor (2011) detailed a framework that looked at the research-based insights to coalition leadership, adaptability, management, and technical skills.<sup>4</sup> This work also segmented capacity by the ability of members to be good coalition partners, the adeptness of the coalition to run effectively as an organization, and structural considerations.<sup>5</sup> Community psychology identified a similar breakdown of coalition capacity, focusing on collaborative, relational, organizational, and programmatic capacity.<sup>6</sup>

## Learning Questions for the Area of Coalition Capacity and Structure

For this area, we identified four questions addressing areas of exploration for coalition capacity and structure. Priority research questions are in **magenta**.

- 1 What type of support does a coalition need during the different phases of the life of the coalition? What is important and when?
- 2 Is the membership model outdated?
- 3 What are different coalition models?
- 4 How rigid should coalition advocacy agendas be at formation? How should coalitions best make decisions about when coalition strategy should be altered?

<sup>4</sup> What Makes an Effective Coalition? Evidence-based Indicators of Success. Raynor (2011). Available here: <https://www.tccgrp.com/resource/what-makes-an-effective-coalition-evidence-based-indicators-of-success/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See Foster-Fishman, P. G., Berkowitz, S.L., Lounsbury, D.W., Jacobson, S., & Allen, N.A. 2001. "Building collaborative capacity in community coalitions: A review and integrative framework." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 29(2), 241–61. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010378613583>; Florin, P., Mitchell, R., Stevenson, J., & Klein, I. (2000). "Predicting intermediate outcomes for prevention coalitions: A developmental perspective." *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 23(3), 341–46. Available at [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-7189\(00\)00022-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-7189(00)00022-7); and Mizrahi and Rosenthal (2001).

## Learning Question

What type of support does a coalition need during the different phases of the life of the coalition? What is important and when?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Life cycle is not a good frame for determining coalition support; instead, use the planned lifespan of the coalition, the roles of individual coalition members, and the policy life cycle to determine support needs.
- Equity support cannot be an afterthought, and investing to help build and position organizations representing historically marginalized populations is important so that their participation in coalitions is not token.
- All coalitions benefit from support to build their capacities in communications and advocacy strategy.
- Coalitions need transition support as an issue moves from policy formation/passage towards implementation.



Rationale for  
Question 1

*If capacity undergirds effective coalition advocacy, figuring out how best to support capacity development would enable greater effectiveness. We are sometimes inclined to think about the life cycle of organizations (including coalitions) using the human growth model – birth, adolescence, maturity, and decline. In practice, this linear model often doesn't hold up beyond “birth” or conception. The research provided some important insights for understanding coalition capacity and support.*

## Key Findings

**Rather than using life cycle, there are other aspects of coalition typology that are helpful in thinking about how to provide capacity support.** Given the adaptive and emergent nature of policy work, coalitions rarely follow any distinguishable life-cycle pattern (apart from initial formation). Rather, the literature review, case studies, and other research suggest using these dimensions in thinking about support: temporal dimension (the planned lifespan of the coalition); coalition/member role; and policy life cycle. A brief examination of each of these other aspects is provided in the subsequent finding and associated table.

**The “temporal dimension” (i.e., planned lifespan) of a coalition is important because it frames longevity needs.** Many effective coalitions operate over the long term, constantly reinventing their positioning and work as the political landscape shifts. For example, one prominent coalition we examined that was founded over 70 years ago didn't simply grow into and maintain a mature organization. Rather, the organization has continued to evolve and adapt. Other coalitions form around specific events, campaigns, or other opportunities/threats

that are generally conceived of as short term. Another coalition we examined will form and retire coalitions based on specific opportunities or needs, such as when a threat emerges. The distinction between these two is sometimes called “enduring” coalitions versus “event” coalitions. These two types of coalitions each have advantages, disadvantages, and support needs, as described in Table 1.

Table 1

## Comparison of Event Coalitions and Enduring Coalitions

	Event Coalitions	Enduring Coalitions
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can quickly coalesce around immediate concerns</li> <li>Often able to take greater risks</li> <li>Can afford to alienate some members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accumulate credibility and a coalition-specific reputation</li> <li>Facilitate solid trust and partnerships that extend value beyond the coalition</li> <li>Develop a strong execution infrastructure</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater risk of coalition fracturing (even during a campaign)</li> <li>Formation/dissolution cycles create inefficiencies, especially over the long term</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can lack an element of nimbleness</li> <li>Reputation can pigeonhole the organization from a political lens</li> </ul>
Support Needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convening/connecting support and resources (e.g., introducing, bringing together, incentivizing, exploring similarities)</li> <li>Technical skills support (e.g., contractors, short-term positions, direct program support)</li> <li>Assistance facilitating intersectional and/or multi-dimensional relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General operating support</li> <li>Support in maintaining reputation</li> <li>Support in facilitating leadership building and transitioning</li> <li>Assistance facilitating intersectional and/or multi-dimensional relationships</li> </ul>

**Coalition member role is an important, and often overlooked, aspect of providing capacity support.** Not all members of a coalition have the same role or potential value. One way to distinguish them is using a role typology of core members, players, and tag-alongs, with an added dimension of equity.<sup>7</sup>

- **Core members have significant resources and capacity to shape coalition work.** For example, one case study coalition is a large umbrella organization for its sector, but there are some members that bring to the table both sophisticated advocacy work they've done on their own and important reputations. Core members need to be supported both to play the substantive role as well as to keep them incentivized to be in the coalition.
- **Players take part in coalitions for information sharing or reputational reasons.** They may have important contributions, but those contributions will be more targeted or sporadic. Players need support to continue to see the value of the coalition and to play targeted roles.
- **Tag-alongs may join a coalition for informational or legitimacy reasons but have limited ability or willingness to contribute to the work of the coalition.** They are largely valuable in the role of demonstrating the breadth and heft of a coalition within the context of a targeted campaign. The coalition may need support to do outreach or coordinate a response from these organizations, but there is generally limited value in building the capacity of this group.
- **Equity support cannot be an afterthought.** Providing support for coalitions using the lens of member roles ideally enables organizations to function as equal coalition partners, particularly among historically marginalized populations. When organizations representing historically marginalized populations engage in a coalition, they may be continually marginalized within the context of the coalition without specific attention toward enhancing their credibility and capacity.<sup>8</sup> Foundations can focus on building up the credibility and capacity of historically marginalized organizations as an investment independent of its coalition support. This positions these coalition partners to be more effective players, which enhances the coalition overall.

*Coalitions may or may not be the best positioned to monitor or advocate for successful implementation. However, regardless of what role they will ultimately play in implementation/monitoring, coalitions do need support to bridge the transition from policy creation to policy implementation. Deliberate capacity support is often missing for the transition period. Coalitions require specific capacity around policy implementation and need to be deliberate in finding partners to take on that work.*

<sup>7</sup> For the first three, see Hula, K. W. (1999). *Lobbying together: Interest group coalitions in legislative politics* (American Governance and Public Policy Series). Georgetown University Press. The equity dimension has been added based on data from this study.

<sup>8</sup> This finding is supported both in the academic literature (e.g., Beltran 2010; Cohen 1997; and Murib 2018) and in the interviews conducted for this study.

**The policy life cycle lens acknowledges that the coalition will need different types of support based on where the issue is in terms of policy development.** At the beginning/conceptualization phase of policy or when there are expected to be long lulls between windows of opportunity, support is needed to maintain a strong enough core so that the coalition can monitor the policy environment and can work on issue framing. This is where a single organization (e.g., policy shop or research entity) or formally incorporated coalition can be supported. As the policy consideration moves into a more active phase (offensive or defensive), specific skills are needed. In this phase, there needs to be strong strategic advocacy capacity supported by select tactical capacity (e.g., lobbying, grassroots/community mobilizing, etc.). As the policy moves towards implementation, the coalition needs to decide how active a role it is going to play.

**There are a few areas that need support, regardless of which typology is used.** Previous research has looked at general capacities that are needed by an organization, including technical skills, strong leadership, and management capacity. This round of research identified a few areas that have not been previously highlighted:

- **Strong communications capacity.** Controlling the narrative is an increasingly nuanced skill. In an age of micro-targeting, social media, and so-called “fake news,” strong communications capacity has become increasingly critical. For coalitions, the ability to frame issues as win-wins that appeal to multiple constituencies represents both a strength of coalitions and a needed capacity. Further, coalitions need to be able to lift up relevant and diverse stories and voices in order to appeal to segmented audiences. Again, this is both a strength of the coalition tactic and a capacity that needs to be built.
- **Power analysis skills/planning support.** Strength in numbers is not a de facto value of advocacy coalitions. Rather, the coalition must have strong advocacy skills. In several evaluations we have done, policymakers have commented on how coalitions that tried to work with them have fallen short because of not having a sufficiently robust tactical understanding of the policy process. For example, in an evaluation of a coalition effort to advance global health, a policymaker lamented that it was a good group, but they weren’t plugging in when they were most needed to advance the policy. Similarly, in an evaluation of a large transportation reform effort, policymakers described not having enough people with a clear knowledge of the policy process as a major obstacle to the coalition’s effectiveness. Conversely, highly successful coalitions are often acknowledged first and foremost for their advocacy skills. For example, interviews with participants in an education coalition frequently discussed the advocacy prowess of the coalition staff, including their nuanced understanding of the advocacy environment in which they are working. As described by one partner, the coalition doesn’t just ask for a policy day at the legislature. Rather, they have a sophisticated understanding of policy and the policy process that partners perceive to be strategic, which gives them confidence that any ask is a good use of their time.
- **Mission big enough for multiple issues.** This appears to be an emerging trend for effective coalitions. Previously, the literature has emphasized the importance of a clear goal and value proposition for a coalition. We would now add to that a goal/vision that is big enough to incorporate multi-dimensional characteristics. This allows for a bigger tent approach even on relatively nuanced pieces of advocacy. For example, in New York there was an invest/divest campaign that married public education (invest) to prison reform (divest). This is highlighted as an area where support is needed because many advocacy supporters do so primarily through the lens of their specific issue – e.g., carbon emissions, K-12 education, or access to healthcare. This finding suggests that advocacy supporters should consider “bigger tent” issue coalitions even if their issue is not necessarily the primary focus of the coalition.

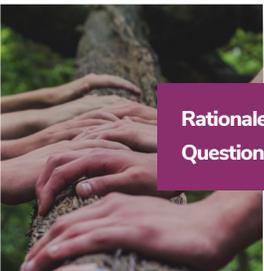
## Learning Question

# 2

### Is the membership model outdated?

#### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- The membership model remains a powerful and effective coalition model, particularly for coalitions that expect to exist in perpetuity under a large issue umbrella.
- Turning over all tasks and responsibilities to staff at member-model coalitions reduces the effectiveness of the coalition model – a clear active role for members is important.
- The membership model is less efficient when the advocacy issue is very narrow in scope or where the solution is particularly technical and uncontroversial.



#### Rationale for Question 2

The membership model of coalitions is characterized by a set of organizations who commit to a separately incorporated entity and where the arrangement is guided by relatively standardized benefits and obligations. There have been a number of shifts in the political environment in the last 10 to 15 years, including more outside funding (due to Citizens United), a more crowded advocacy environment in the United States, increasing levels of political polarization, and increased specialization in policy. Given these changes, the ongoing relevance of the model is an important foundational question. The research offered the following insights into the membership model question.

## Key Findings

**There remains a two-way value proposition for membership coalitions.** While there are emergent and less-formalized coalition models, the membership model remains common, particularly for enduring coalitions. Despite some limits on flexibility, the member model still provides benefits to both members and the coalition. Some of these benefits are captured in Table 2.

Table 2

### Membership Model Benefits and Challenges

	Members	Coalition
Benefits	<p>Provides intelligence to organizations that would be difficult to get on their own</p> <p>Provides strategic direction and capacity building as to how best to engage in the policy conversation, often doing much of the preparation work</p> <p>Pooling of resources brings technical capacities that would otherwise be challenging (e.g., lobbyists, communications, strategists, etc.)</p>	<p>Able to create a more cohesive voice on an issue and generate buy-in on particular issues, even some controversial ones<sup>9</sup></p> <p>Can create stability and a strong identity, which leads to increased power</p> <p>Has enhanced operational capacity</p>
Challenges	<p>Specific organizational needs may not be prioritized</p> <p>May feel like they are not receiving the personal attention they deserve</p> <p>Dues (if applicable) may feel excessive given benefits of membership</p> <p>May need to be part of multiple member coalitions if there is not perfect alignment</p>	<p>Takes a lot of resources to engage and build the capacity of all members</p> <p>Members rarely cover the full cost of operations</p> <p>There is a risk of underutilizing the coalition structure, as members feel staff should do most of the work</p>

<sup>9</sup> Bess, K.D. (2015). Reframing coalitions as systems interventions: A network study exploring the contribution of a youth violence prevention coalition to broader system capacity. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 55(3–4), 381–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9715-1>

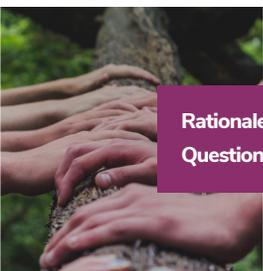
## Learning Question



### What are different coalition models?

#### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Values play an important part in determining the “right” coalition model.
- Coalition models exist based on purpose, leadership structure, or, increasingly, a multi-pronged hybrid.
- Establishing a regional infrastructure is an effective way to enable local advocacy, particularly for implementation, and a way to ladder up efforts towards larger state and national efforts.
- Coalitions will trend towards increased bureaucracy over time, and attention should be focused on ensuring that the increased costs come with commensurate benefits.



Rationale for  
Question 3

*Coalitions come in many shapes and sizes. While the question of which coalition model is most effective is highly contextualized, understanding the variation in models and their general strengths and weaknesses helps inform strategic decision-making. The research offered the following insights into the different coalition models.*

## Key Findings

**Coalition models are often a reflection of the values of the coalition.** We will describe several structures, but it is important to note upfront that the model of a given coalition is more likely a reflection of the values that they hold than the strategy they desire to pursue. For example, coalitions driven by a “strategy” set of values may be centralized, efficient, and technocratic. They are also more likely to be isolated, with their policy changes open to constant revision. Further, coalitions driven by a “community” set of values may be decentralized, inclusive, and humanistic. They are also more likely to be seen as inefficient, with their policy asks imprecise. In the absence of clear values, there is more likely to be disagreement about the coalition model and an increased likelihood of a more bureaucratic model. Recognizing this value underpinning, there are two different ways to think about coalition models (described in Table 3): the purpose/intent structuring of the coalition and the leadership structuring of the coalition.

**Purpose/intent structuring of coalitions is a “form follows function” organizational development model.**

Three structures for coalitions emerged out of the qualitative aspect of our research regarding function: letterhead structure, campaign/agenda-focused structure, and long-term orientation structure.

- **The letterhead structure is for looser organizations where the emphasis is on large numbers and the ability to quickly gain sign-on to specific asks and requests.** This type of coalition does not require significant member time investments. In these coalitions, having a diversity of partners is crucial, as it shows strength in numbers and broad positioning of the issue.
- **Campaign/agenda-focused coalitions coalesce around specific actions and may include shorter spurts of high-touch activities around specific actions.** In these cases, a diversity of partners may be useful but more as alliances rather than shared work. This coalition structure is akin to the “event coalition” described in Table 1.
- **The institution or long-term orientation structure can emerge out of the other two structures or develop independently.** This type of coalition is looking to move an issue over a long period of time and relies on strong trust between organizations and a clear set of shared values. Coalitions with this structure may be slower to get started and risk being less nimble over time, unless specific aspects are built-in to segment smaller portions of the work into smaller, within-organization groups.

**Hybrid models are increasingly common and show strong promise in a variety of contexts.** Based on the study data, while the letterhead and campaign/agenda coalition structures have their place, the most effective model appears to be a long-term orientation/campaign hybrid. In this model, the long-term orientation structure serves to build trust among a broader group of committed organizations with a shared vision of the world. From there, mini coalitions (often in the form of committees) are created around particular topics or opportunities. This allows members to be more deeply engaged on topics they find valuable and the coalition to be nimble in the context of specific campaigns while still retaining the benefits of the long-term orientation structure. For example, one of the coalitions we studied has a strong policy shop that operates as a distinct entity and simultaneously is a knowledge network for a range of organizations while creating action coalitions as opportunities arise. Another coalition functions as a traditional coalition/policy shop hybrid. Within this coalition’s main organization, other formal and informal coalitions can and have emerged. One final example of the hybrid model has to do with legal status – for example, a third coalition examined has a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) component. The (c)(3)/(c)(4) hybrid is increasing in popularity due to (c)(3) restrictions and increasing available (c)(4) dollars.

**Leadership structuring of coalitions places value on the ownership and decision-making.** Another way to think about coalition structure is through the lens of leadership. Leslie Crutchfield’s work on movement building divides leadership into three areas:

- Leaderless efforts that are purely democratic with very flat structures
- Leaderful efforts that have multiple leaders doing collective decision-making with a layered coalition structure and simultaneous grass-tops and grassroots leadership
- Leader-led efforts with one dominant leader, a competitive structure, and that are grounded in technocratic prowess<sup>10</sup>

Crutchfield promotes leaderful movements, arguing that leaderful coalitions employ a more networked leadership structure, and thus are nimbler and more adaptive to change. She says, “Successful ‘backbone’ leaders don’t give specific orders; they provide high-level strategic directions.”<sup>11</sup> Our research suggested something similar – that coalitions with stronger and more centralized leadership (as it pertains to advocacy strategy) and broader, more inclusive leadership on agenda setting appeared to be more effective.

<sup>10</sup> Crutchfield, L. (2018). *How change happens*. Wiley.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

Table 3

## Types of Coalition Models

Models by Purpose	Hybrid Model	Models by Leadership Structure
<p><b>Letterhead:</b> Loose structure with an emphasis on large numbers/prominent members</p> <p><b>Campaign/Agenda-Focused:</b> More of an alliance structure; organized around a specific strategy</p> <p><b>Long-Term Orientation:</b> View effort on a longer time horizon, grounded in making sustained progress</p>	<p><b>Hybrid:</b> Increasingly common; characterized by mixing and matching multiple models simultaneously</p>	<p><b>Leaderless:</b> Purely democratic with very flat structure</p> <p><b>Leaderful:</b> Multiple leaders with layered, collective decision-making</p> <p><b>Leader-Led:</b> One or two dominant leaders, often grounded in charisma and technocratic skill</p>

**There is not one clear model of how a coalition should be staffed, but there was broad consensus around the needs of staff roles and challenges in navigating that role.** Effective staffing requires both good leadership and management, and coalitions have often found it challenging to find one person to play both roles. When there is an imbalance, tensions start to emerge. There is also an inherent tension around the delineation of “member work” and “staff work.” Coalitions that shift a large amount of work to members need to be able to strongly justify its value to members or there will be little justification for devoting that much labor to coalition efforts. On the other hand, coalitions with a greater proportion of staff work may not have sufficient buy-in and insight from members to give their work sufficient added value and relevance to member needs. One technique a coalition used to address this was to have a minimum participation threshold for members. Finally, in terms of staffing, coalitions, like other organizations, show a tendency towards increased structure (bureaucracy) over time. This is neither inherently good nor bad, but it does represent a place where there will be increased infrastructure costs. In many cases, these increased infrastructure costs are outweighed by the benefits. However, complacency and inattention can lead to unnecessary infrastructure costs that do not outweigh the benefits received by members.

**Regional structures are emerging as important aspects to state and national coalitions.** While the data is incomplete, there are several indications that state and national coalitions benefit from smaller regional infrastructure that can operate somewhat independently at the local level while also joining or laddering up to other efforts. For example, one coalition recently implemented a regional hub model that is already showing strength in local advocacy for policy change and policy implementation.

**Coalitions incorporate state and local partnerships in various ways.** Some coalitions use state and local partners as ways to experiment in smaller-scale test cases for policies or demands. Sometimes they are used as the grassroots arm for a national coalition, building local support and relationships with both local and federal policymakers. Other times, they share an overarching policy goal, but state and local arms are free to develop an independent agenda. Either way, national coalitions partnering with state and local groups need to have a clear understanding of local dynamics along with robust investment in local organizations.

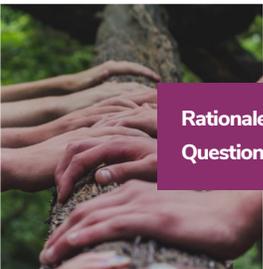
## Learning Question

# 4

How rigid should coalition advocacy agendas be at formation? How should coalitions best make decisions about when coalition strategy should be altered?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- **Setting the advocacy agenda should be secondary to alignment on mission and values.**
- **If done as a strategic effort, setting the advocacy agenda within a coalition represents a significant outcome because it represents resolution of some issues necessary for alignment.**
- **It is generally most effective to have a broader process for setting the advocacy agenda, coupled with a more narrow and technocratic process to set strategy towards the agenda.**



#### Rationale for Question 4

*For both event and enduring coalitions, there is a constant imperative to establish and revise an advocacy agenda. While this question might seem particularly relevant for new coalitions that are just forming, as described above in the life-cycle section, the emergent nature of coalitions and their environment makes this a relevant question for both new and existing coalitions.*

## Key Findings

**The advocacy agenda needs to be rooted in a shared alignment around mission and values.** If a coalition is not aligned around mission and values, it will function more like a trade association rather than a coalition with a shared frame. Setting a specific advocacy agenda should be secondary to this mission and values alignment. For example, when becoming members of one of the coalitions we studied, organizations are asked to sign a value statement recognizing the principles that guide the topical work-group's work in addition to the value statement they sign to join the coalition directly. Overall, building alignment around mission and values can be a time-consuming and resource-intensive process, as it requires building trust and attention to power dynamics. While this is particularly relevant for long-term coalitions, event coalition effectiveness can be significantly diminished if this step is skipped.

**Agenda setting is not only one aspect of coalition strategy, but a significant outcome that coalitions can facilitate.** While it may be “sexier” to think about a coalition’s effectiveness in relation to effectively advocating for policy, getting organizations to align around a shared set of policy advocacy priorities is not trivial. This is especially useful in sectors where there has been fracturing or where actors would not be in contact otherwise.

**The optimal level of firmness for the coalition advocacy agenda at the onset is as rigid as what the coalition can agree upon through the lens of its mission and values.** The research suggests that work on more discrete issues is the most important contextual factor that drives coalition formation, as it allows for building of trust in a specific context. To successfully transform a nascent coalition towards a social movement coalition of longer duration, the advocacy agenda needs to shift towards a broader perceived shared political opportunity of working together more broadly.

**The process of establishing a coalition advocacy agenda is very dependent on coalition structure.** Some coalitions place the function of setting the coalition's advocacy agenda in the hands of specialized groups (e.g., steering committees or staff), while others hold an open process of co-creation. It can be challenging to mitigate the influence of the largest and most well-resourced members in agenda-setting. Some coalitions proactively develop agendas internally and ask for sign-on, while others spend considerable time gaining buy-in for a co-created agenda. All these approaches have risks and rewards, and there was no clear consensus on which approach is better. However, there is some evidence that a broader process to set the advocacy agenda coupled with a more narrow and technocratic process to set strategy towards that agenda is optimal.

**Within the context of shared mission, values, and advocacy agenda, conflict management skills are important.** Agendas are likely to shift, and rifts in interpretation of mission or values may naturally emerge. Building clear conflict resolution processes can help mitigate the resulting negative effects. The case studies indicated that conflict resolution is more effective and longer lasting when leaders of participating coalition organizations get directly involved – meaning this is not something that can be handed to other staff. Further, coalition staff need to be savvy in terms of managing complex relationships and have an ability to distinguish when it is best to handle conflict privately or to address it within a larger group. Interestingly, one effective approach to conflict management as it pertains to the advocacy agenda is allowing organizations to fluidly step in or step out of particular agenda items at their discretion. In this way, the coalition avoids both watering down a potential agenda and asking organizations to do things that they fundamentally aren't aligned with or prepared to undertake. For example, one studied coalition is valued for having flexibility to adapt to ongoing shifts in the political climate. The design of this coalition allows for organizations to weave in and out of the organization where appropriate, such that the coalition can adjust the size, skills, expertise, and relationships they most need without losing the consistent presence of the coalition in Washington.

**Coming together around an appropriate budget/allocation agenda can be a major challenge in coalitions, especially in diverse coalitions.** Coalitions frequently experience discord around balancing a pragmatic ask with an aspirational ask. Unifying around a final number can serve as a proxy for other tensions and divisions within coalitions. In many coalitions, there is open disdain for the position of the other side of the framing. In the minds of some coalition actors, grounding budget requests around coalition values provides greater cover for an ambitious ask. Even though interviews mainly took place before the economic fallout related to COVID-19, there was a large amount of skepticism around ambitious asks during a time of relatively greater financial prosperity.

# Findings on Coalition Context

As an entity, a coalition must be examined in the ecosystem context in which it is operating. The political ecosystem is constantly changing. A crowded and multi-faceted ecosystem will dictate a different set of operating assumptions than a sparse ecosystem with a single influencing target. In considering context, we considered three important dimensions: jurisdiction of interest, political climate, and issue positioning.

For this area, we identified four questions addressing areas of exploration for coalition context). Priority research questions are in **green**.

## Learning Questions for the Area of Coalition Context

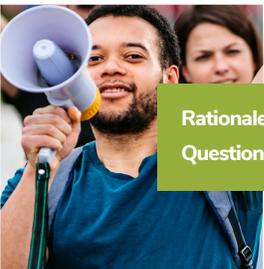
- 1 Are different types of coalitions needed depending on where an issue is on the policy spectrum (e.g., when is a highly formalized coalition preferable over an informal coalition, etc.)?
- 2 How do nonprofits best establish coalitions with non-traditional partners (e.g., business community, military/veteran groups, etc.)? What factors should be considered?
- 3 What are the effects of working with non-traditional partners (e.g., looking at coalition membership, leadership, communication; capacities and issues related to MLE, etc.)?
- 4 What are the trade-offs of bringing in partners with opposing views on other issues?

## Learning Question

Are different types of coalitions needed depending on where an issue is on the policy spectrum (e.g., when is a highly formalized coalition preferable over an informal coalition, etc.)?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- If a coalition is supported by multi-year funding, a more formalized coalition may be better positioned to allocate and monitor the resources and the outcomes associated with the invested resources.
- In some policy environments, grassroots groups are critical to the coalition's success, but planning for how to incorporate these partners in meaningful and effective ways is critical.
- In chaotic policy environments, the most successful coalitions are those that are adaptive (e.g., have diverse membership, skills, and resources) and work on a number of levels (e.g., have a state and federal strategy) to most effectively respond to chaotic political climates.



Rationale for Question 1

Where an issue is on the policy spectrum reflects the confluence of the issue's positioning, the political climate at the time the coalition is working on the issue, and the specific jurisdiction of interest for the issue. Given how these different factors contribute to wide variation in the contexts within which coalitions do their work, it is reasonable to wonder if different types of coalitions might be better suited to accommodate these varying contexts.

## Key Findings

**A formalized coalition is ideal when it is important for the coalition to have an identity that is distinct from the member organizations.** There are a number of factors that might determine whether a coalition develops as a more formalized entity:

- In cases where the coalition is bringing together “strange bedfellows,” it is especially advantageous to have a distinct identity that evokes a sense that the coalition is not driven by, or in greater alignment with, one subset of the membership.
- A formal coalition is also preferable because member partners can sign MOUs and be explicit about their relative contributions and responsibilities to the coalition. With smaller, more homogeneous coalitions this level of formality might not be necessary.
- A formalized coalition is more likely to be warranted when the coalition is older, has larger budgets, and receives a sizable amount of government funding.
- In addition, a formalized coalition may be less desirable when leading with the individual reputations of the member organizations would garner the coalition more sway with policymakers.

**Different types of coalitions might be needed depending on whether the issue on which the coalition is advocating is seen as a threat or a discrete issue.** The types of coalitions needed under different contexts have been organized into two different camps: social movement coalitions and interest group coalitions.

- **Social movement coalitions commonly refer to self-organizing groups of people or organizations that oppose powerholders and policies that promote unjust treatment, threat, or harm to a specific segment of the population.** When the issue is seen as a threat, meaning policies or changes that pose potential harm to certain groups and/or individuals (e.g., police brutality, loss of social services), coalitions in the form of social movements are more likely to be adopted. Furthermore, political opportunity that favors social movement coalition formation is likely to be a key factor in the development of a social movement coalition in response to an issue. Political opportunities can be both internal (e.g., appropriate coalition leadership, access to resources) and external (e.g., sympathetic policymakers, a significant social or political event). Finally, the decision to form a social movement coalition will be subject to the balance of the importance of the issue and inaction on the issue compared to the time, energy, resources, and strategic costs of pursuing a coalition.
- **Interest group coalitions have typically been understood to be formal organizations that shape public policy through “extra-electoral” channels such as lobbying, litigation, and developing model legislation.** When the issue is perceived as a discrete issue, meaning an issue that is related to a specific policy or budget concern (e.g., the employer mandates of the Affordable Care Act), formal interest groups are more likely to form. Also, if the issue is one in which key pockets of influencers and/or advocates are likely to have special access to information, interest group coalitions provide an attractive and efficient vehicle for information-sharing.

**In general, coalitions are an ideal structure for legislative advocacy.** The defined cycle of legislative activity with key points for advocacy work allows for a stable work-plan and clear opportunities for engagement. This can shift when budget negotiations stall, but generally there are clear cut windows of engagement. In order to have broader success in the legislative arena as a coalition, there must be clear political relevance.

**Executive advocacy does not seem as well suited to coalition work as it does to individual work, but it can complement legislative advocacy from a coalition.** The main timeframe for when executive advocacy makes the most sense for a coalition is during comment periods. The timing and sequencing of executive advocacy is somewhat less stable, making it less relevant as a standalone strategy for a coalition.

**In contrast to their fluency with legislative and executive strategies, coalitions are not as well positioned to engage with issues that warrant judicial advocacy.** There is some belief that funding might drive this – philanthropy is less invested in judicial advocacy efforts and organizations engaging in judicial advocacy. Actors in legislative and executive advocacy may not be as well connected to judicial advocacy organizations. Coalition work itself may be less well suited to engagement on judicial advocacy. There have been some examples of funders investing in simultaneous judicial and legislative/executive strategies, but the grants are separate and there is only very light coordination, which poses an added challenge due to the frequently moving timelines of judicial work.

**Broad-based coalitions can be effective for advocacy around appropriations.** Appropriations advocacy can be particularly effective when led by a broad-based coalition, especially with unlikely bedfellows. However, the traditionally secret and separate nature of appropriations work around military funding has resulted in a less ripe space for coalitions.

**Coalitions working at the federal advocacy level must be deliberate in considering how they want to incorporate grassroots voices.** Coalitions often struggle with how or why to include grassroots voices

into federal advocacy efforts. In some instances, there is a clear need for grassroots voices. If the targeted issue relates to embedded or personal experience, grassroots engagement is key. It is also helpful when demonstrating a need for broad bipartisan support so that policymakers can see how it impacts real people. It is also helpful to have grassroots partners to monitor and understand implementation efforts. In many instances, federal efforts focus on grassroots work as a proxy for grassroots mobilization or focus on specific grassroots actors to target specific individuals.

**An issue that exists in a sparsely crowded field will require a coalition that has at least one member who possesses the technical expertise that is relevant to the issue.** If an issue is only on the radar of a small number of players in the field, there needs to be technical expertise in at least one organization in the coalition. The “technical expert” can then coordinate engagement throughout the coalition with experts leading agenda development. If there are more players in the field with knowledge on the issue, expertise can be leveraged from diverse sources and coalesced into a unified agenda.

**In a chaotic federal environment, coalitions with state and local focus are better primed to make progress on issues.** There is a belief that coalitions can engage in more innovation and experimentation at the state and local level at times of federal gridlock. This can allow for test cases on messaging and positioning and strengthen community partnerships and community support around issue areas. However, when issues have relevance in federal, state, and local jurisdictions, it is important to examine learnings from all three spaces. Not all federal issues have relevant state and local work (e.g., global health policy), but for those that do, it is important to understand lessons learned in framing, messaging, and power building. Some Hill-focused coalitions do not have sufficient relationships with other jurisdictions to tap into this knowledge.

**Also, in chaotic political climates, coalitions that have a “top-down” structure are better positioned to engage in rapid response decision-making, but this may lead to greater secrecy and missed opportunities for engagement.** In these times, more decision-making occurs in secret, with less engagement with issues and a greater sense of inevitability. While framing messaging quickly and effectively can generate some success, this can create ruptures for coalitions with an intersectional lens and greater commitment to process and collaborative input.

**On issues that are set within highly mercurial policy environments, coalitions that possess high adaptive capacity are in the best position to adopt effective approaches.** The ability of a coalition to adjust to unanticipated hurdles, take advantage of opportunities, and respond to rapidly changing issue framing is known as adaptive capacity. Coalitions with high adaptive capacity are well-equipped to successfully pivot and be most effective in the moment. Both event coalitions and enduring coalitions may possess high adaptive capacity, though enduring coalitions might be more susceptible to inflexibility, which would in turn diminish their adaptive capacity. Coalitions with high adaptive capacity might undertake strategy shifts, such as:

- Taking a watchdog role on implementation rather than pushing new policies
- Strengthening messaging around “winning the loss” and reframing and resetting expectations
- Grounding coalition work in a long-term theory of change rather than in the immediate political climate
- Shifting advocacy work to target career agency staff rather than appointees
- Being pragmatic about issues that are unable to gain traction with chamber leadership
- Not celebrating wins publicly in order to provide cover for them

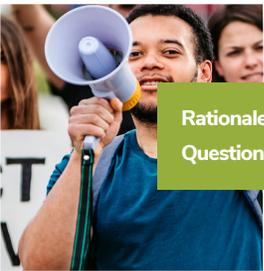
## Learning Question

2

How do nonprofits best establish coalitions with non-traditional partners (e.g., business community, military/veteran groups, etc.)? What factors should be considered?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Member trust and alignment are essential for coalition partners to come together, even when working with non-traditional partners.
- To work effectively and avoid appearing as though they are leaning too much in the favor of one subset of the membership, coalitions of non-traditional partners may take a more impartial stance on an issue or make very incremental moves to advance the cause.
- Relatedly, members within coalitions of non-traditional partners must be prepared to accept incremental change as a cost of coalition membership.



Rationale for  
Question 2

To advance their objectives in varying social and political contexts, coalitions must think strategically about which partners to convene in order to strengthen the capacity of the coalition. In some contexts, the partners needed to strengthen the capacity of the coalition might be non-traditional partners (e.g., members of the business community, military/veteran groups). The selection of non-traditional partners is still rooted in partnering with organizations that share the missional goals of the coalition. However, it differs from a coalition of only like-minded organizations in that a coalition of non-traditional partners might approach the issue from different perspectives, speak to different constituent groups, and have access to different policymakers. This leads to a question about what factors should be considered when assembling coalitions comprised of non-traditional partners.

## Key Findings

**A crucial component in whether to bring together traditional and non-traditional partners in a coalition is alignment around mission and values.** When coalitions encompass an entirety of a niche sector, they will function more like a trade association than a coalition with a shared frame. To better assert themselves as a mission-driven coalition, coalitions will be better served by broadening their membership to include groups outside of the sector itself. When there is a clear constituency, bringing them in can provide useful champions.

**Having a shared history is one factor that contributes to nonprofits and non-traditional partners coming together – especially a shared history of success.** In line with the idiom that, “The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior,” organizations that have a history of successfully working together are more willing to come together on future alliances. If a business organization has had a good experience working with a community partner on a city-wide event, it’s conceivable that they not only would be more willing to join the community partner as part of a coalition but also be willing to convince other businesses to join the coalition. Many researchers, including Thomas Wolff,<sup>12</sup> Lydia Marek, Donna Brock, and Jyoti Savla,<sup>13</sup> have found that having a shared history, especially of success, is an important predictor of coalition formation.

**It is easier to build coalitions with “strange bedfellows” when dealing with lower-controversy issues.** A low-controversy issue is easier to navigate and more likely to foster coalitions across the political spectrum, though specific nuances can add strain. High-controversy issues are harder to navigate and need more alliances or actors that can reach different places through varied tactics and messages. For example, one coalition’s approach to their coalition of “strange bedfellows” is to maintain a view on individual members’ priorities that is “30,000 feet away.” In other words, whereas the coalition advocates for increases to a particular part of the federal budget, individual member organizations are free to advocate for other budgetary issues outside of their direct coalition activities. Coalitions may be more valuable for moving the issue but may also have value in defensive positioning and narrative framing. It is also necessary to understand where disagreement may emerge within lower-controversy issues. The business community and nonprofit advocacy organizations may agree broadly that school funding should increase, but fractures could emerge regarding revenue sources (e.g., pension reform versus tax increases).

**The urgency of the perceived threat also impacts how coalitions should position the issue and whether they benefit from having a diverse membership.** Some coalitions will in fact frame issues with a false urgency to gain traction, even when the urgency is not clear. With a clear threat, there is a strong rationale for an urgent action and for employing diverse actors. With a less clear threat, a coalition may be better served by having a more aligned set of actors with expertise in technical framing and an ability to amplify the issue.

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<sup>12</sup> Wolff, T (2001). A practitioner’s guide to successful coalitions. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 29(2), 173-91.

<sup>13</sup> Marek, L, Brock, D. J. P., Savla, J. (2015). “Evaluating collaboration for effectiveness: Conceptualization and measurement.” *American Journal of Evaluation*, 36(1), 67-85

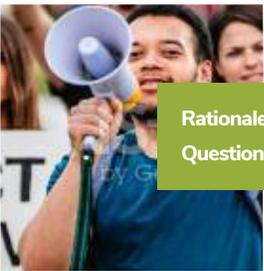
## Learning Question

# 3

How do nonprofits best establish coalitions with non-traditional partners (e.g., business community, military/veteran groups, etc.)? What factors should be considered?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- There are many potential positive (e.g., increasing the generalizability of the message) and negative (e.g., “watered down” advocacy results) effects of working with non-traditional partners.
- There are no standard weights for determining whether the positive effects of membership in a coalition of non-traditional partners outweighs the negative effects. Coalition members must make that determination for themselves.



Rationale for  
Question 3

*Given that there are certain contexts under which it is ideal to bring traditional and non-traditional partners together under the banner of a single coalition, a question arises as to what would be the resulting effects of pursuing that strategy.*

## Key Findings

There can be both positive and negative effects associated with working with non-traditional partners. Understanding the potential effects of aligning with non-traditional partners is critical to making an informed decision about whether to pursue that strategic route. The following delineates some of the benefits and disadvantages of working with non-traditional partners.

Table 4

## Potential Benefits and Disadvantages of Working with Non-Traditional Partners

Potential Benefits	Potential Disadvantages
<p>Potential to increase the generalizability of the message and the issue’s relevance. By bringing in non-traditional partners, coalitions can convey to policymakers that their issue is not niche but rather is important to many people in many different segments of the population.</p>	<p>Potential risk of blurring the mission and fracturing the coalition. By bringing together non-traditional partners, a coalition might risk some partners deviating from or co-opting the agenda of the coalition to serve their organization’s primary interests.</p>
<p>Potential to expand the constituency that cares about the issue. In addition to conveying to policymakers that the issue is relevant to many different sectors of society, different segments of the American public might grow to adopt an issue as a personal priority. For example, if a group that caters to older Americans joins a coalition that advocates for climate change, more older Americans might begin to see climate changes issues as personally relevant.</p>	<p>“Adversarial allies” might lack the trust and goodwill needed to engage around a shared agenda and do more harm than good together. “Adversarial allies” refer to partners who might be on the same side of issue but disagree about how to move forward, who to target, how to deploy resources, who should lead, and so on. As a result of all the energy expended on the in-fighting, the coalition undermines itself and diminishes the energy, focus, and time it has to actually work on the issue.</p>
<p>Coalitions can leverage a wider range of resources and networks. By bringing in members from sectors that do not traditionally convene on their issue, coalitions can gain access to new networks for distributing their message. For example, one coalition that historically did not work with the business community was able to leverage their business community members’ connections to other associations and councils for distributing the coalition’s messaging.</p>	<p>Potential to result in “watered down” advocacy results. When non-traditional partners are brought together with varying levels of commitment to the issue or the other partners, there is the risk of the coalition not being able to capitalize on the full strength of its membership. In one example, an organization that was receiving a grant to participate in a coalition agreed to be a part of the coalition to remain in the good graces of the funder but made lukewarm contributions to the coalition itself.</p>

## Potential Benefits (continued)

Coalitions can diversify the overall capacity of the coalition. In addition to a wider range of resources and networks, a more diverse membership body means a more diverse set of skills among its members for the coalition to draw on. This also has implications for the individual capacities of the member organizations. For example, an organization that has historically not convened on this issue might also build their skills in advocacy on this issue by working with partners who more traditionally operate in this space.

Working with non-traditional partners can make the coalition more adaptive. By having partners from different sectors or industries, coalitions can take advantage of their partners' different relationships and affiliations to execute the coalition's strategic tactics more effectively. For instance, a coalition that includes parent groups and private sector partners can have the parent groups present the ask when dealing with legislators that work on children's issues, whereas when working with legislators that are more focused on finance issues, the coalition could ask their private sector partners to make the ask. In addition, coalitions might be able to implement different tactics more easily by just tapping in the relevant groups in their membership, rather than getting sign off from the full membership.

## Potential Disadvantages (continued)

Potential to place unfair burden on small, less-resourced partners. Coalitions that comprise special interest groups and grassroots advocacy groups might encounter challenges in equitable distribution of the work. The coalition might have expectations for some coalition members to lead on-the-ground efforts that far exceed their human resources. In other cases, some coalition members might be expected to engage in grassroots advocacy but not be equipped with the proper training or information to be effective. The division of administrative or "grunt" work within a coalition might also fall more heavily on members who are less high profile, whereas invitations to meet with policymakers are reserved for the higher-profile coalition members.

Potential for discordant or inconsistent messaging around the issue. By definition, non-traditional partners have different frames of reference and come to the issue from different angles. While all partners might be on the same side of the issue and even be a part of the same coalition, partners' different perspectives might filter the messaging. For example, how coalition members from the business community talk about the coalition's objectives might differ from how coalition members that represent the teachers' union might speak about them. This results in the coalition as a whole seeming unclear about its objectives and its position on the issue.

## Potential Benefits (continued)

Bringing together non-traditional partners can be a means to optimize info sharing. Different partners will have different pre-existing relationships with local, state, and federal leaders and policymakers. This translates to different sources of information about where policymakers stand on an issue, anticipated plans (or lack thereof) to act on an issue, and insight into what actions other groups might take on an issue. Bringing together non-traditional partners under a single coalition facilitates increased access to information that a single organization alone might not have.

## Potential Disadvantages (continued)

Coalitions of non-traditional partners are limited in how far they can push an issue. As we discussed previously, coalitions comprised of non-traditional partners tend to deal with lower-controversy issues or deal with the least controversial point on an issue. As such, the coalition cannot push too far towards either extreme on an issue without the risk of alienating its members. As an example, one coalition described their position as a “30,000 feet in the air” view; they don’t pick sides on the details of the issue, knowing that once one gets into the details on the issue, there is guaranteed to be dissension among their members. However, this also means that if the issue framing shifts or the opposing group takes more extreme actions, the coalition has less capacity to counter.

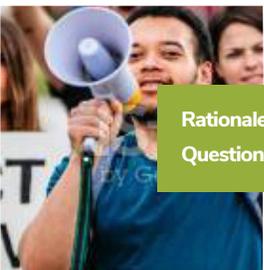
## Learning Question

# 4

What are the trade-offs of bringing in partners with opposing views on other issues?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- **Bringing in partners with opposing views may directly and indirectly undermine the effectiveness of the coalition when competing priorities of individual organizations rise to the surface.**
- **There is less likelihood of partners with opposing views coming together for long-term coalitional engagements. Coalitions of partners with opposing views work best for discrete, immediate issues.**



Rationale for Question 4

*While coalition members should be aligned in the mission and values of the coalition, in some social and political contexts, coalitions may include members who share opposing views on other issues. This may be the case for coalitions comprised entirely of nonprofits as well as for coalitions that resemble “strange bedfellows.” The decision to convene as a coalition with members who share opposing views on other issues is usually driven by the benefits to all parties involved that would result from presenting as a unified voice on the issue on which they agree. This, however, does not nullify the fact that there are trade-offs for bringing in partners with opposing views on other issues.*

## Key Findings

All of the disadvantages associated with bringing non-traditional partners together are true of bringing together partners with opposing views. Note that we hold that there is a distinction between non-traditional partners and partners with opposing views, though the distinction may be nuanced. While it can probably be argued that non-traditional partners will have some opposing views, that is not always the case. As for partners with opposing views, many groups might be seen as typical players in the same advocacy space but hold opposing views on the issue in question. As an example, it is not uncommon for environmental groups to band together, and yet even among these groups opposing views might exist around, for example, treating corporations as partners or treating them as targets.

There are two other findings that are related to the trade-offs in bringing together partners with opposing views:

**Partners with opposing views might have a more survivalist mindset that results in directly and indirectly subverting the effectiveness of the coalition and the member organizations.** One way in which partners with opposing views differ from non-traditional partners is that with non-traditional partners, they likely share some distance between their primary spheres of operation. For example, outside of their coalition-based work, a nonprofit group and private sector partner likely have different missions, are not engaged the same activities, and are not vying for the same sources of revenue/ funding. For this reason, they are less likely to see the other organization as a direct threat to their sustainability. Conversely, among partners who operate in a similar space (e.g., coalition members who are invested in global agriculture), there is a heightened sense that the viability of one organization directly diminishes the viability or perceived utility of another. This scarcity of resources mindset can undergird a number of damaging behaviors.

- **Coalition members with opposing views might try to dissuade the coalition from taking a position or adopting a course of action.** If a partner organization perceives that the coalition's activities or statements would create challenges for the organization's other activities, the organization might try to convince the coalition to adopt a different but less effective approach.
- **Having coalition members with opposing views can result in imbalanced information sharing.** If a coalition member has access to information that would help their organization advance towards their other objectives but which, if known to the coalition, would result in actions that undermine the organization's ability to capitalize on the information, the organization might not share this information. As one of the frequently cited benefits of coalitions is access to information sharing, this reluctance to share impinges the value of the coalition.
- **Outside of the coalition, the work of organizations with opposing views might directly sabotage each other's non-coalition work.** Members with opposing views on other issues don't frequently suspend their activities on those issues. As such, even if members are able to work together on a shared agenda towards the coalition's issue of interest, they may be actively working against each other on other issues. As an example, two organizations might work together on climate change, but one group might publicly protest the other regarding their position on environmental tax credits for businesses.

**Partners with opposing views are likely to come together for short-term engagements (i.e., event coalitions) rather than for ongoing collaborations or building solidarity.** A great deal of time and energy is needed to build up the trust and mutual understanding that characterizes more enduring coalitions. For the reasons discussed elsewhere (e.g., issues with trust, risk of co-opting the coalition's mission), there is less incentive for partners with opposing views to invest this time and energy. For these coalition partners, membership in the coalition is part of a strategic move that is a means to an end; membership itself is not seen as the end. With the understanding that their membership is expected to last only as long as needed to achieve a discrete gain, partners with opposing views are more willing to keep their opposing views at bay as they engage in coalition work.

# Findings on Coalition Strategy

Coalitions, like other advocacy actors, have a range of strategy levers at their disposal. As we consider coalition effectiveness, we are not primarily concerned with analyzing the specific merits of the various strategy levers, but in understanding if coalitions are particularly effective using certain levers compared to other types of advocacy actors. Coalition strategy concerns include coalition positioning, message framing, and tactics, as well as the strategic choice of choosing to act in the coalition itself.

For this area, we identified five questions addressing areas of exploration for coalition strategy. Priority research questions are in **dark blue**.

## Learning Questions

1

What key decision criteria should be considered for using coalition building as an advocacy tactic?

2

Which tactics complement coalition building in different scenarios? What are the most effective coalition tactics?

3

What are the measurement frameworks being used by advocacy organizations to assess the effectiveness of different types of coalitions?

4

When is it more helpful to “brand” a coalition as a formal entity versus having a set of coordinated groups branding independently?

5

Is the coalition concept still relevant in today’s political environment?

## Learning Question

1 What key decision criteria should be considered for using coalition building as an advocacy tactic?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Coalitions can better demonstrate their relevance by highlighting how their issue affects multiple stakeholder groups.
- In chaotic environments, it is helpful for coalitions to have the ability to shift to different advocacy arenas.
- Coalitions need to both manage the membership balance for diversity on the political spectrum as well as better understand how to leverage those voices.
- Coalitions should actively develop and deploy a strategy for positioning themselves.



Rationale for Question 1

*Program officers lack clear guidance on when and how to consider using coalition building as an advocacy tactic. Given the complexity of advocacy work and the inherent challenges in coordinating efforts, there is not always a clear indication of when a coordinated and strengthened coalition provides an added value compared to resourcing individual actors. Program officers may also benefit from additional insights into key areas where coalitions can provide strategic value and on the challenges and trade-offs inherent in a branded coalition.*

## Key Findings

**A coalition will have more value to the advocacy arena if it has an intersectional lens.** Coalitions need to be seen as relevant across a variety of issues. Furthermore, they need to be perceived as adding value and strength to an issue rather than taking up space. Coalitions can use this approach through building up relationships with organizations representing different constituencies, even if they are not directly working on the coalition's issue. To do this successfully, the coalition must be able to articulate how their issue impacts a broad swath of people. When a coalition is able to tie their issue to other relevant issues and demonstrate a broad constituency for their issue, it is easier for them to do their work (e.g., engage in grassroots mobilization, generate media coverage) and to persuade policymakers of the salience of their demands.

**A coalition will be more effective if they are able to be nimble in their advocacy arena targets.** In defensive times, some coalitions may pivot from legislative to executive advocacy. Relatedly, if the executive office is hostile, the coalition may need to pivot to the work of building legislative champions or target executive staff who are tenured rather than new staff who are political appointees. Coalitions may also use this time to build coalition capacity to engage in policy process or to monitor implementation. Having a wide range of actors that are capable of undertaking these shifts and that understand when pivots are needed will allow a coalition to be more flexible.

**A key skill for a coalition to develop is effectively managing its membership and competing voices.** Coalitions by nature need to have a range of voices on an issue. There also needs to be a balance – having an enormous tent may be counterproductive, but having a lack of diversity of political voices may make the narrative too narrow. Either way, diverse coalitions face challenges in making controversial decisions and in balancing demands. Some coalitions mitigate this by keeping “flank” partners (affiliated organizations with more partisan voices) that can be utilized in targeted situations where it makes sense but in a way that doesn’t disrupt the overall coalition. A coalition that does not know how to leverage the positioning and perspective of their members to further the narrative will be missing a huge advantage of coalition work.

**Coalition positioning itself needs a clear and detailed strategy.** Effective positioning should be grounded in power analysis and have a clear articulation on how coalition assets (e.g., members, the brand) will be leveraged. This allows coalitions to have more effective tools for dealing with a number of tricky situations, such as when to publicly celebrate a win and how to build relationships within and outside of the coalition.

**Funders must be cognizant of the various considerations involved in whether or not to invest in a coalition.** When investing in a coalition, either by resourcing the coalition directly, funding existing coalition members, or funding other players to have a seat at the table, a funder should understand whether the advocacy goal is one that would be best achieved by a coordinated effort with differing voices as well as whether they view the coalition itself as an enduring force or a group responding to an immediate threat that could dissolve if the threat is neutralized (e.g., operating in more of a campaign function). Other considerations are examined in Table 5 below.

Table 5

## Coalition-Building Considerations

Condition	What to Consider
No current coalition exists	<p>Funder-instigated coalitions can be perceived as inauthentic and too beholden to funder agendas</p> <p>It can take a long time for coalitions to build trust, so they may not be very effective early on</p> <p>This will take a lot of management time on behalf of the funder</p>

<b>Condition</b> (continued)	<b>What to Consider</b> (continued)
Coalition exists but needs additional partners	<p>Be mindful of tokenizing organizations representing underrepresented groups</p> <p>Be mindful of capacity needs that may prevent them from participating fully</p>
Issue area represents an imminent threat	<p>The coalition may need rapid response funding to be more nimble</p> <p>There may need to be flexibility on grant duration</p>
Coalition has other funding needs that your foundation can't meet	<p>Consider working in collaboration with other funders but know that this will mean additional work on your end to be most effective</p>
Coalition members have conflicts in other issue areas not related to your funding area	<p>Assess how effectively the coalition is managing its membership and its positioning – coalitions will struggle mightily if there is conflict further down the line</p>
Coalition does not have diverse partners (e.g., representing different ideological perspectives, lived experiences, sectors, etc.)	<p>Coalitions that are not able to tie their issue area to broader messaging will be drowned out in the current environment. They may need help bringing on new members, but the funder will need to help with fit and capacity.</p>

## Learning Question

# 2

Which tactics complement coalition building in different scenarios? What are the most effective coalition tactics?<sup>14</sup>

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Coalitions should have a sense of what other coalitions are doing and demanding.
- Coalitions that lack the infrastructure or trust to share intelligence are hampering their own effectiveness.
- Unless there is an extremely engaged community to easily deploy, federally focused coalitions struggle to execute grassroots advocacy strategies to their detriment.
- Coalescing around a budget request can be a fraught and challenging process for coalitions.



Rationale for Question 2

*It is important for funders to understand where coalition work fits into their own theory of change/theory of influence so that they can identify where coalition work is needed and helpful. It is also crucial that funders understand where coalitions are best positioned to advance a goal. While there is no hard-and-fast rule governing where coalitions may or may not be useful, the study uncovered key areas where coalition building can provide value and where coalitions are best positioned to influence change.*

## Key Findings<sup>15</sup>

### Tactic: Evidence/Analysis

**Not all coalitions use research as a coalition activity, and it is often best used in support of a policy goal.**

There are outstanding questions about whether researchers should be playing a policy advocacy role. Multiple interviewees believed that research should not be the driver of the policy agenda, but there is a strong benefit for research to be driven by the policy agenda. Coalitions may commission research themselves, hold relationships with research organizations, and/or work with funding partners to support parallel research streams.

**There is value in looking at what other coalitions are doing.** Even if other coalitions aren't making overlapping asks on a bill or a budget line, it is important to know what is going on with related pockets of work in order to assess the concrete demands being made or to capitalize on leverage points. This also can allow for greater field level coordination.

<sup>14</sup> These questions were combined given that findings overlapped.

<sup>15</sup> Key findings are organized by general advocacy tactics, which were drawn from the BMGF Theory of Influence.

## Tactic: Influencer Communications<sup>16</sup>

**A key activity for coalitions, especially with legislative advocacy work, is intelligence sharing.** This activity is only successful when there is significant baseline trust in coalition members. Coalitions with low levels of trust or massive divergence on issues outside of the coalition are often unwilling to broadly share intelligence. There also needs to be a strategy for how and where intelligence is gathered and shared, such as a standardized mechanism for assessing policymaker support (e.g., a policymaker ratings tools) and a meeting structure for sharing intelligence throughout the coalition.

## Tactic: Public Mobilization

**Coalitions working on federal advocacy struggle to incorporate grassroots mobilization work into their activities.** While there is an acknowledgment of the value of community and grassroots voices, the actual engagement is often limited unless there is an explicit focus. Sometimes state or local partners (in addition to or as a proxy for grassroots) will be used to add a fresh perspective to the work, but it is not often well integrated with the coalition. In a lot of this work, the perceived expertise of sector leaders is prioritized over community expertise. This is a challenge for coalitions, as research has shown the prominence of grassroots efforts in achieving social change.

## Tactic: Decision-Maker Engagement

**Policymaker education is a key component of coalition work, especially when working in a niche area or in times of large legislative turnover.** This type of work presents challenges to coalition work because it is harder to get and celebrate wins when so much work is spent on education. It also complicates government relations activities because it is a needed precursor.

**Champion building has become more sophisticated and wide-ranging.** Coalitions have increasingly focused on building champions early, identifying and cultivating potential champions before they begin running for office. Coalitions with (c)(4) partners may engage in coordinated electoral work to elect these types of champions. Champion building has grown to focus more on affirming and uplifting champions rather than criticizing detractors. However, this can become a challenge when champions fail to deliver on coalition demands. Coalitions generally are perceived as being either confrontational or more concerned with reputation and access, and there are certainly trade-offs to both approaches.

*“In almost every other winning modern societal change we studied, grassroots activism played the key role...Conversely the causes that are faltering in the early 21st century can attribute their struggles in some part to weak or uneven grassroots efforts.”*

- Leslie Crutchfield, *How Change Happens*, pp.23-24 (2018)

<sup>16</sup> Given that some types of influencer communications are covered under “Public Mobilization” and “Decision-Maker Engagement,” we will consider other coalition actors/sector actors as influencers in this section.

### **Tactic: Advocacy Capacity Building**

**More sophisticated coalitions engage in direct mapping of tools/strengths/skills of member organizations and where there are gaps.** This is especially crucial for coalitions relying on members to execute specific strategies or when examining leverage points of the coalition. This kind of mapping can be done by staff, members, consultants, and/or funders. It is also crucial to look at this activity as an ongoing audit, as these skills, capacities, and relationships can change over time. Coalitions can then choose to build these capacities internally, bring on partners with needed capacities, or seek out capacity-building resources.

**Capacity building itself may be a coalition strategy, but it depends on the needs and skills of the coalition.** Capacity building can be passive or active. Alternatively, the coalition may pass on capacities (e.g., communications) to members through their staffing. Capacity building is dependent on what needs members have as well as on the equitable distribution of resources. Coalitions that need a strong voice from under-resourced organizations will have to be more proactive in strengthening these member organizations to be able to play equitably and successfully.

### **Tactic: Shaping Financial Mechanisms**

**Coalitions can play a powerful role in budget/allocation request work, but coming up with the right number or “ask” can be a major challenge, especially in diverse coalitions.** Coalitions frequently experience discord around balancing a pragmatic ask with an aspirational ask. Unifying around a final number can serve as a proxy for other tensions and divisions within coalitions. In many coalitions, there is open disdain for the position of the other side of the framing. In the minds of some coalition actors, grounding budget requests around coalition values provides greater cover for an ambitious ask. Even though interviews were mainly taking place before the economic fallout related to COVID-19, there was a large amount of skepticism around ambitious asks during a time of relatively greater financial prosperity. It will be interesting to see how coalitions reflect on this stance once the economy rebounds.

### **Tactic: End-User Behavior Change/Demand Generation Efforts**

**Coalitions can contribute greatly to their perceived value among members by helping a field coalesce around priorities.** This is especially useful in sectors where there has been fracturing or where actors wouldn't be in contact with one another otherwise. It allows for a more holistic examination of the landscape to better craft policy demands and positioning.

## Learning Question



What are the measurement frameworks being used by advocacy organizations to assess the effectiveness of different types of coalitions?<sup>17</sup>

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- There is not a consistent measurement framework used by coalitions and funders, with many coalitions not moving beyond outputs and policy analysis.
- Coalitions with a strong learning orientation make good use of measurement tools.



Rationale for Question 3

*Due to the adaptive and often long-term nature of advocacy work, coalitions can struggle to demonstrate their effectiveness. Funders are not always clear on what data is most important to collect from coalitions and how to assess whether a particular coalition is effective, especially in areas beyond the win itself.*

## Key Findings

**There is not a consistent measurement framework being used by coalitions and funders.** Funders resourcing coalitions with general operating support grants may choose to engage outside evaluators or encourage coalitions themselves to set their own benchmarks and report accordingly. Project-based grants may allow for more specific reporting targets, but there is not a consistent approach. Coalitions most frequently were asked to report on policy wins, champion development, and activity outputs.

**Coalitions that are proactive about assessing their effectiveness tend to set clear targets and have strong learning and measurement infrastructure.** Many coalitions engage in evaluation work when asked by a funder, but for those that have incorporated evaluation and learning into their overall work, evaluation can provide strong value to their work. Coalitions were most effective in learning and evaluation when their targets were clear and understandable.

**There is some skepticism of the quality of coalition-supplied data.** A few interviewees felt that coalitions are not well capacitated to report accurate data and that external evaluation is crucial to be able to tell the story. While there was some concern voiced about grantees simply telling the funder what they want to hear, there is also the perception that advocacy evaluation can be too nuanced and complex to ask coalitions to contribute to on their own without additional resources.

<sup>17</sup> For additional insights in this area, please see the “Coalition Support Question #1” section of this report.

## Learning Question

# 4

When is it more helpful to “brand” as a formal entity versus having a set of coordinated groups branding independently?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Branding can be helpful but must be backed by a strong reputation.
- Coalitions that lead with a “big tent” brand can struggle to consolidate across ideologies and make the case for relevance.



Rationale for Question 4

Organizations coordinating policy/advocacy efforts can choose to have an informal alliance, a formal unbranded coalition, or a branded public coalition. There are tradeoffs for all these approaches, but most coalitions choose to publicly label themselves as a coalition. In some instances, especially when coalitions are engaged in electoral and (c)(4) work, state regulations may prevent coordinated actions as a coalition. Program officers may be challenged in determining whether it is a worthwhile effort to fund branding work for coalitions or how important it is that a coalition have a brand or distinct identity.

## Key Findings

**Having a branded coalition (a known entity) rather than a more “undercover” or loosely organized conglomeration can provide distinct benefits, with some key caveats and considerations.** Coalitions are often well served by having a recognizable brand, but the brand must be backed by reputation. Key insights into branding include:

- It is often most effective to have a clear brand, but it is also important to lead with the reputation of members.
- Branding can be especially helpful when there is staffing/organizational turnover in the coalition.
- Branding without clear reference to members is not a long-term strategy. Coalitions need to be able to build credibility through the reputation of members as well as through the reputation of the coalition itself.
- In situations with a lot of legislative turnover, a strong brand can be helpful in making in-roads with newly elected officials and staff.

**The use of a big tent branding can be useful but can come at a relevance and ambition cost.** A big tent can allow for a greater member engagement across different ideologies. However, it then becomes harder to explain positioning to outsiders and to make a case for relevance, makes it more difficult to take on controversial issues in order to avoid seeming partisan, and risks losing “flanking” organizations on either side of the spectrum that could push from the outside.

**Having a strong coalition brand can be challenging in managing credit for work and wins.** When a coalition has a dominant brand, there can be tension around sharing credit for wins with organizations. The nature of coalition work makes these kinds of conversations challenging even outside the branding discussion, but there can especially be challenges in parallel workstreams when member organizations enact an organization-specific advocacy strategy along with coalition participation. In many instances, the coalition brand can take up a disproportionate amount of space.

**Coalition branding can seem inauthentic if not positioned well and tied to origin stories.** There are challenges with brand effectiveness if a coalition is perceived as funder-driven or unable to articulate a clear origin story. Some coalitions find that the branding can be overly rigid and would rather lead with member reputation.

**Some coalitions are able to brand effectively as a “go-to” in a certain issue area, but there can be tradeoffs.** Being seen in this light helps with branding, currency, political capital, and reputation. There can be some concern if a coalition is seen as representing a topic rather than representing a mission, aligning with previously described findings on coalitions versus trade organizations. It is somewhat easier to do brand as a “go-to” with a narrower issue, but it may also preclude inclusion in broader conversations and opportunities.

## Learning Question



### Is the coalition concept still relevant in today's political environment?

#### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Rather than being perceived to be less relevant, the current environment lends itself even more explicitly to a coalition model due to the need to incorporate different skills, perspectives, and relationships.
- Coalitions can serve as a way to grow and develop newer and smaller organizations and as a way to strengthen the pipeline of advocates.



#### Rationale for Question 6

*Given today's chaotic and fractured political climate, BMGF was curious if there is still support for the coalition concept as a way to advance policy. While funders of coalitions and coalition actors may not be the most neutral respondents, it is important to understand why proponents of coalitions believe in their relevance.*

## Key Findings

**There is strong support for coalition efforts in today's environment.** Many of the challenges of the current political climate are well-suited for coalition work. Having multiple eyes on the ground to share intelligence, having entities with different skills, capacities, and lanes, and having the ability to bring together organizations representing differing viewpoints are all key assets in the current environment. Furthermore, given legislative turnover, there is a strong need to have organizations that can engage in deep policymaker education and relationship building, something that can be daunting for an individual organization. Finally, coalitions that are able to work across federal, state, and local contexts may be able to continue to drive momentum in wins at one of the targeted jurisdictions. They may also be better poised to offer test cases of what success can look like at a smaller, local scale.

**Coalitions play a unique role in reducing uncertainty.** Individual advocacy organizations may lack an understanding of the actions of other organizations as well as the actions of decision-makers. A coalition formation can reduce this uncertainty in both groups by sharing information among organizations and sharing intelligence regarding political operatives and decision-makers. In smaller organizations, there may not be other colleagues to serve as thought partners and co-strategists – the coalition formation may also build the capacity of smaller actors by engagement with more seasoned strategists.

**Coalitions can serve as a gateway for organizations to build political capital and reputation on an issue.** Given the multitude of entry points into coalition participation, coalition work can allow an organization to “learn the ropes” in low-stakes and low investment engagements. This can strengthen their capacity to engage in heavy lifting later on and strengthen the overall field response to an issue.

# Findings on Coalition Support

Coalition support refers to how funders structure and resource their grants to coalitions. Elements of coalition support we examined fell into two main buckets: the logistics of how funding is awarded (e.g., structure of funding, timing of funding, amount of funding) and the role a funder plays in relation to a coalition. As the main audience of this learning study were program officers at a foundation, there is little emphasis on coalitions that independently sustain themselves without philanthropic resources.

For this area, we identified eight questions addressing areas of exploration for coalition support. Priority research questions are in **orange**.

## Learning Questions

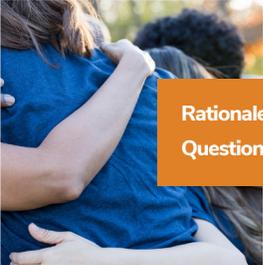
- 1 What kind of data are appropriate to request from funded coalitions?
- 2 What factors contribute to a healthy dynamic in the funder/coalition relationship?
- 3 How can coalitions best be sustained after a funder ends its funding? What can funders do to ensure smooth transitions?
- 4 What factors should be taken into consideration when deciding to end funding to a coalition?
- 5 Do coalitions that have been instigated by a funder risk running into particular challenges as compared to those that have emerged organically and that are later supercharged by external funding? If so, how can such challenges be mitigated?
- 6 At what point is it helpful to fund collaboratively with other foundations and donors? When is funding collaboratively worth the time investment on the funder side?
- 7 What are additional roles funders can play in resourcing coalitions?
- 8 When is it helpful to use the funder name/platform in support of a coalition? When is it harmful?

## Learning Question

What kind of data are appropriate to request from funded coalitions?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Coalitions will likely need additional capacity to collect meaningful data.
- Funders should incentivize learning from data, not just data collection.



#### Rationale for Question 1

*Under most grant agreements, funders require grantees to share some data around the work they are doing that is supported by the grant. However, there are no clear standards across foundations to guide decision-making around data collection. This is true for both program and general support grants.*

## Key Findings

**Data collection and reporting is often more compliance driven than learning oriented for a coalition.** Even seemingly simple data requests can be resource intensive for a coalition to gather. Many coalitions did not have a measure, evaluation, and learning (MEL) system in place, nor any sort of metrics or evaluation plans to guide their work. Often, the data was collected because it was required to be reported back to a funder and was not used for any internal learning.

**Coalitions prefer general support grants because they allow for flexibility, including flexibility on data requirements.** General support grants are seen as a way to allow coalitions to respond to emerging or urgent needs. These situations often don't lend themselves to clear-cut data collection or necessarily tell the story the funder is thought to be most interested in.

**For coalitions without strong evaluation capacity, qualitative reporting is often seen as a better fit.** Qualitative reporting is seen as offering space to share the story of the coalition's issue, its context, and how the coalition has been able to meet the current moment. It is more in line with how coalitions themselves think about their work.

**Data requests can be used to shift grantee priorities.** When dealing with grantees who receive larger awards, the data the funder requests can have the potential to shift what grantees themselves drive towards. For example, asking for grant data related to acting in solidarity with other issue areas would likely move grantees towards emphasizing that work themselves. Given this, data requirements were seen as an active prioritization of what coalitions should strive towards rather than as a neutral report.

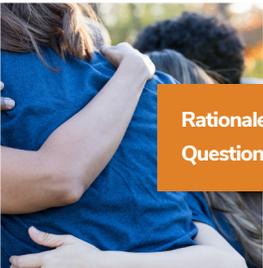
## Learning Question



What factors contribute to a healthy dynamic in the funder/coalition relationship?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Unsurprisingly, multi-year general operating support is seen as the best tool to allow coalitions the needed flexibility in their work.
- Funders need to balance providing strategic insight with directing strategy.
- Power dynamics are such that many coalitions feel they cannot turn down any type of funder request.



Rationale for Question 2

Power dynamics are a frequently cited downside of philanthropy. Funders, by controlling purse strings, have the ability to influence coalition strategy, partners, and reputation among other factors. This may be especially true for a large foundation. From the lens of coalition actors as experts in their own right, one could assume that increasing a funder's ability to engage in healthier dynamics could increase the efficacy of a coalition's work.

## Key Findings

**Multi-year general operating support is overwhelmingly preferred by interviewees as a support structure and seen as a core element of a healthy funder/coalition dynamic.** There is a perception that project-based funding support can be too prescriptive around strategies, even if it is not the intent of the funder. Having general support allows for greater flexibility for advocacy work. While funders often allow for flexibility in deliverables and requirements for program grants, there is a need to be very explicit about that flexibility. There is also a perception that program grants are shorter in duration, which goes against the need for multi-year grants to really home in on coalition work.

**There is a delicate balance involved when funders themselves have extensive strategic expertise.** Funders can bring a valuable perspective or insight to strategy work but should not be overly directive. Advocates found that having a well-informed funder as a sounding board is more helpful than having them involved directly in strategic formulation. There was also a desire for funders to transparently share what is important (or a deal breaker) to them but to not engage in agenda-setting. Some funders provide funding for an external person to review and weigh in on a strategy, which allows for the support without the messy power dynamic.

**Coalitions sometimes feel that they cannot turn down funder requests to engage on an issue, even if it is not in their best interest.** This can create major challenges for coalitions, which can strain credibility when perceived to be too beholden to funder interest or engaging in work that is not mission-aligned. This is especially challenging for large funders with an outsized influence and may indicate that funders need to be extremely sensitive around requests.

**The coalition should have a clear value proposition – and one that aligns with the foundation’s own theory of change.** Every coalition should be able to articulate why it is more effective than isolated advocacy organizations working to advance a particular issue. That articulation should presumably align with a foundation’s own understanding about the types of changes that need to occur within a particular issue area and how that fits into the foundation’s theory of change. Otherwise, there may not be enough value of a particular organization to demand funding, nor synergy between the foundation and the grantee.

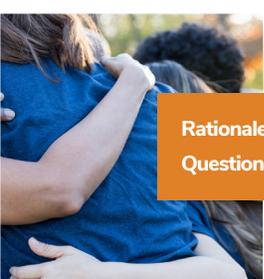
## Learning Question

# B

How can coalitions continue to thrive and grow after a funder ends its funding? What can funders do to ensure smooth transitions?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Guidelines for ending funding should be decided in advance – ideally, during the grant award process.
- Winding down funding and making connections to other funders are ways to help coalitions have an easier transition.
- Winding down funding should take into account what percentage of the current budget is being supported by the funder that is ending funding.



Rationale for  
Question 3

*Foundations are often refreshing their strategic goals and priorities, and sometimes this leads to needing to sunset some grantees from their portfolios. Ensuring that grant exits are done with minimal harm should be a part of the pact funders and grantees make together. A funder that makes relatively large grants may have a greater duty to think carefully around grant exits and transitions.*

## Key Findings

**Few funders we talked to had guidelines they used to think about ending funding.** Nearly all funders we spoke with said they didn't have any concrete markers to think about ending coalition support, whether across their portfolios or for any given foundations. Funders did stop funding particular coalitions, but this was often because their own grant making strategies changed rather than something changing within the coalition or in the coalition/funder relationship.

**Coalitions felt a wind-down policy was the most responsible way for a funder to end funding.** Coalition actors felt funders had a responsibility to wind down funding in a supportive way. Rather than immediately stopping funds, a multi-year slowing of funds (with decreasing percentages each year) was seen as able to help coalitions come up with additional resources to make up the difference in funds. For a funder shifting strategies, this would likely include earmarking some funds for a responsible exit from previous strategies.

**Connections to other funders was seen as crucial for allowing a grantee to “make up” the lost funding.** One program officer explained how funders often expect grantees to be able to absorb large decreases in grant revenue without helping them with the skills, connections, and infrastructure they need to do so. This person explained, “I think if we really want to have a serious conversation about ramping down, the foundation needs to think about what role we can play...to bring in more funders...where else would [grantees] go?” The idea of sustainability that exists outside of philanthropic grants is likely unfeasible for the vast majority of coalitions.

## Learning Question

# 4

What factors should be taken into consideration when deciding to end funding to a coalition?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Written guidelines or conversations around ending funding when coalition funding is starting can help the conversation be strategic rather than responsive.
- Funders should be realistic around the impact of ending funding.
- Ending funding too quickly after a policy win can have negative impacts for policy implementation.



Rationale for  
Question 4

*Even a funder with large financial resources cannot fund all grantees continuously forever. A funder should have some criteria for themselves to decide when it makes sense to stop supporting a particular coalition, whether these factors are related to the coalition's functioning or the foundation's own strategic work.*

## Key Findings

**The foundation needs to think about the broader ecosystem of support that surrounds the coalition.** While funders can and often do make decisions to end grant support in isolation, ideally this decision-making would also account for which other funders, if any, may be willing to take on support. If the pool is limited, the funder should acknowledge that the coalition may have to reduce its scope or cease operations altogether and include that information in its decision-making.

**Articulating how to think about stopping funding in advance may be easier than creating justification in the moment.** Deciding during the time of grant application what the coalition needs to maintain funding (e.g., capacity considerations, a certain number of policy wins) is likely a more straightforward path into the conversation of grant renewal. Without this preexisting guidance, funders may find it difficult to figure out how to approach the conversation.

**Ending support too soon after policy “wins” could have negative impacts.** For advocacy coalitions working on one clear issue, like setting a new policy into law, funders may believe once the issue is won (e.g., the policy becomes law), the work is over. However, this ignores the large amount of work that goes into policy implementation to ensure that the desired benefits actually accrue. This work can take years, and it often requires ongoing watchdog-like vigilance. Funders who withdraw support without thinking about the longer-term needs for the issue area are likely undercutting themselves.

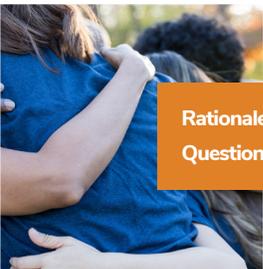
## Learning Question

# 5

Do coalitions that have been instigated by a funder risk running into particular challenges as compared to those that have emerged organically and that are later supercharged by external funding? If so, how can such challenges be mitigated?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- **Funder-instigated coalitions have several challenges around reputation and branding.**
- **Funders should consider seeding the conversation across potential participants in a new coalition to see if interest in a new coalition emerges or if other tactics are more aligned with field needs.**



Rationale for  
Question 5

*Funders and grantees have distinct field vantage points. Funders may see gaps across their portfolios where they believe a new coalition could make a key difference. There's limited long-term research to show what, if any, differences exist between funder-instigated coalitions and more organic, grantee-instigated coalitions. Funders with more awareness of the particular challenges of a funder-instigated coalition can better think about if and when to start a new coalition and how to position it to be as effective as possible.*

## Key Findings

**Funder-instigated coalitions are seen as less authentic than those that form more organically.** These coalitions can carry a perception that people are at the table because of money rather than because of a clear need or vision around the issue. This is mixed with a sense that organizations already working on the issue saw no need for a coalition and therefore did not choose to create one themselves. These coalitions also can be subject to reputational and credibility challenges if a funder carries a particular reputation (especially in partisan circles).

**When interested in a new coalition, funders were encouraged to play a less heavy-handed role.** Rather than announcing interest and immediately asking for grant applications, funders were urged to do some softer legwork to see if they could dovetail with any organic desire for a coalition. Opportunities here included hosting a funder convening around an issue and seeing what emerged or providing resources for organizations to discuss whether coalition formation makes sense but not tying other funding to whether a coalition is formed.

**Branding and staffing are seen as particular challenges for funder instigated coalitions.** Both are areas where a coalition has the opportunity to reclaim the mantle from being funder instigated to standing for something on its own. The ability for a coalition to build a brand away from a particular key funder and to create a meaningful origin story beyond being funder instigated was seen as instrumental to its future success. Staffing a new coalition with well-regarded individuals ready to take on full ownership was also seen as a strategy to prevent a coalition from being seen as a veneer for a funder's organization.

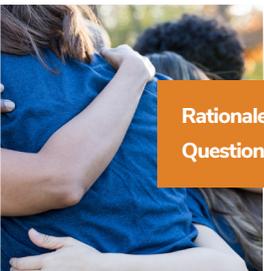
## Learning Question

# 6

At what point is it helpful to fund collaboratively with other foundations and donors? When is funding collaboratively worth the time investment on the funder side?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- Funder collaboratives can work well but often require significant capacity from the participating funders.
- Benefits of funder collaboratives include risk mitigation for the involved funders.
- Funder collaboratives may be able to play a unique role in connecting national and local efforts on a particular issue.



Rationale for Question 6

Funder collaboratives can be an effective way to support coalitions and are often more insulated from strategic shifts at any one foundation. However, participating in a funder coalition can come with significant costs. Guidance on when the benefits of funder coalitions outweigh these costs can help program officers make decisions around participation.

## Key Findings

**Funder collaboratives can be very rewarding but need a lot of work from funders to be successful.** In ideal funder collaboratives, funders behave like ideal coalitions: they leverage each other's strengths (e.g., ability to fund technical assistance, ability to fund in different ways, relationships), successfully share knowledge and insights, communicate clearly, and demonstrate value to members. In practice, funders generally do not devote sufficient time and energy to making these collaborations as successful as they could be. Smaller, well-staffed, high-capacity, and particularly passionate funder collaboratives are more likely to come out on the benefit side of the equation than other coalitions.

**Funder collaboratives carry a benefit of risk mitigation, which may be worth the resource drawbacks.** Risk mitigation was noted as a particular area where funder collaboratives had a real benefit. Rather than publicly putting out one funder as the voice of an issue, funders were able to pool their funds (many times privately) to ensure that there was at least some level of broad support for the issue and funding strategy. In particularly risky issue areas, strategies, or contexts, this may be a worthwhile effort for the individual funders.

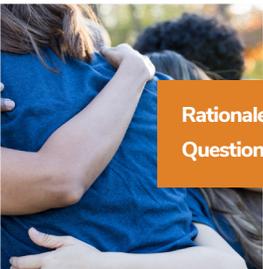
**A key opportunity for funder collaboratives is to connect national and local efforts.** Funders have relationships and space to do this kind of work. Connecting a national effort to local work requires authentic relationship building at the funder and advocate level. It also may require deeper relationship building and/or capacity-building support when partnering with foundations with smaller resources.

## Learning Question

What additional roles can funders play in resourcing coalitions?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- **Supporting policy implementation, ensuring a pipeline for grassroots organizations to participate in coalitions, and supporting coalition brokers were all potential roles for funders.**



While funders play a large role in resourcing advocacy efforts, some aspects of funder support remain under deployed by foundations. To that end, certain key aspects of the advocacy arena remain under-resourced but do not require massive shifts in funding strategy (e.g., pivoting to (c)(4) funding).

## Key Findings

**The policy implementation phase is often treated as an afterthought by funders and may be a niche to play.** Advocates have not found much interest in funder support for implementation work – whether through the coalition itself or through a targeted hand-off to a more appropriate partner or coalition. While implementation work may not have the excitement of direct advocacy, there are countless examples of issues experiencing major losses after a failed implementation.

**Ensuring a pipeline for smaller and more grassroots organizations to be equal coalition players is seen as a necessary role and one that funders could amplify by choosing to do this work.** Several experts and coalition experts noted that the formal coalitions often tend to amplify the voices of the most powerful. The commissioned literature review noted this as well, stating how rules often based on principles of democratic participation may be used “by more powerful members of coalitions to silence the voices of those who have relatively less access to financial and non-material resources (Beltrán 2010; Cohen 1997; Murib 2018; Strolovitch 2007). This often results in the erasure of issue positions that might be considered radical approaches to shared problems.”<sup>18</sup> There was a perceived need in the field to have more resource delivery (whether direct funds or capacity building or both) to grassroots organizations to ensure that they were able to be full actors within the coalitions they work in, rather than being seen as a token representation of community without any true power.

**Coalition brokers may also be a helpful role for funders to support.** Coalition brokers are individuals who have the skills necessary to help coalition actors build trust and deepen relationships. These actors are often leaders of organizations who have the “special sauce” to understand complex dynamics and help mediate conflicts in ways that further the overall dynamics of the coalition. Having explicit funding available for organizations that house individuals to play these roles, rather than only resourcing the more formal pieces related to coalition functioning, may help build longer-term coalition capacity and impact.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Strolovitch, D, Daneri, D., Murib, Z. (2020). Untitled Coalition Literature Review, unpublished, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 21.

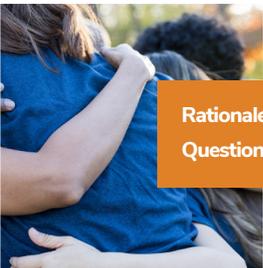
## Learning Question

# 8

When is it helpful to use the funder name/platform in support of a coalition?  
When is it harmful?

### Highlights from the Findings for This Learning Question

- No universal guidance on branding coalitions can be provided; it is essential to take the unique landscape of each coalition and issue into account.
- There was consensus that funders should resource others to engage in advocacy and policy efforts rather than directly engage themselves.



Rationale for  
Question 8

Once a funder has chosen to support a particular coalition, it may do so with a public splash or more privately. Giving program officers an understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of linking a coalition with the foundation's name and brand will allow them to better understand how and why to make these choices in the future.

## Key Findings

Grantees had different considerations when deciding when to brand publicly with funders, suggesting a universal decision can't be made. Some grantees felt it was best to keep the funder name private to ensure that the foundation's reputation didn't influence the campaign's, that the campaign was able to stay separate in public opinion, and that grantees did not feel as directly that they may be competing for the same pool of funders. Others felt that, depending on the funder, a foundation's positive reputation in the field can bring a heft to their work they couldn't access in other ways, even with a breadth of other funders. Aggregated, these anecdotes suggest that coalitions are engaging in a complex calculation in deciding if and how to publicly align with their funders.

While some felt funders with prominent profiles should use their bully pulpit fully, most people felt the risk is not worth the reward. Separately from publicly branding as a supporter of a coalition is when a funder itself directly tries to influence the advocacy agenda. As one interviewee said: "When you're in charge, you want your hands clean." There was a perception that the work of grantees is more credible when the funder is viewed as apolitical and not overly involved in strategy work.

# Conclusion

## Discussion of Best Practices

As the length of our compiled answers to the study questions indicate, there is a lot of information for advocacy program officers to keep in mind as they support coalitions. Overall, some key best practices emerge across the various sections of study, along with key recommendations for funders:

### The importance of understanding coalition context (internal and external).

Funding decisions are not made in a vacuum. Rather, program officers need to understand the context, including coalition actors, the political landscape, etc., that each potential coalition grantee is operating in. Only with this full context can a program officer understand a coalition's strengths and weaknesses and better understand how to fund and support the coalition. Funders can understand internal and external context most effectively by:

- **Learning from peer funders.** While it is important to understand what role other funders are playing in a specific space on their own merits, it is also helpful for funders to engage in intelligence sharing with peer funders. It provides a landscape assessment, a sense of durability of peer investments, and the ability to partner to address coalition or field gaps.
- **Developing relationships with members of the coalition independently as well as with the coalition as a whole.** Having one organization serve as the relationship broker can be dangerous. However, there have been instances where a coalition coordinator/manager/quarterback can serve as an effective broker and messenger if they are able to be a truly neutral party.
- **Mapping how the coalition fits into the overarching theory of change/theory of influence.** Program officers should identify areas in their own theory of change/theory of influence where coalitions are best poised to make an impact. Looking more broadly at the landscape, they should conduct an analysis of gaps (e.g., skills and people) in the sector and how they are best positioned to resource these gaps.
- **Ensuring a good fit between the coalition and the funder.** In looking for a coalition that may be a particularly good fit for the funder, program officers are unlikely to find a perfect fit. Funders should resist asking the coalition to champion the funder's priorities or adopt a specific model and instead invite the coalition to engage in a conversation about fit and how there might be opportunities to incubate ideas. Funders should also consider how clearly the values of the coalition align with the coalition's existing structure, as well as how they align with the funder's values.
- **Setting realistic benchmarks for success and effectiveness tailored to the political context.** Funders must be willing to adjust their definition of success when political realities adjust what a win or progress could look like.

### A willingness to prioritize the coalition as the expert and the funder as a supportive partner.

Coalitions need a certain flexibility in their funding to do the work in the way that feel is most effective. This includes being able to change strategies, advocacy targets, and even goals as needed to respond to the political environment. Funders must be willing to allow coalitions to take the lead on responding to shifts, including awarding them the financial and grant flexibility they need to do so.

- **It is tempting for funders to invest in the creation of a new coalition, but this should only be done with deep consultation from field experts.** Funders should think twice before creating a new coalition; rather, they should consider what needs the field itself perceives. If a funder does create a new coalition, it should take pains to have it operate independently from the program officer(s) that guided its creation.
- **Coalitions are best positioned to know what metrics they can report on, but power dynamics may result in over-promising.** The adaptive nature of coalition work makes metric-setting hard. Providing resources to strengthen internal learning and reflection can make this process more helpful to the funder and the coalition.
- **The traditional coalition model is shifting, but there is no need to stick to tradition.** Sometimes coalitions look and act like traditional coalitions, and sometimes they look like loose networks or individual organizations operating as a single entity and still call themselves coalitions. As long as their work is grounded in a strong advocacy analysis, they can still be successful in engaging in traditional coalition activities.
- **Make funder role(s) explicit.** Funders should be clear about what resources they are providing (e.g., are they providing capacity-building resources, are they connecting coalitions with other funders, are they expecting to provide strategic guidance). There is not one role funders should be playing, but it is most important to be transparent about what roles they want to play.
- **Funders can play a role in agenda formation, but there should be some care in this space.** There are several actions funders can take to support agenda formation. First, funders should resist trying to set the agenda for the coalition (either overtly or through subtle clues). Second, funders can provide explicit financial support for agenda development, which acknowledges that activity as both valuable and resource intensive. Third, when possible, funders need to provide support long before the window of opportunity is expected to be open. Finally, funders can play a role in encouraging the resolution of conflicts rather than suggesting they be buried for the sake of expediency.

### Understanding that most decisions related to coalitions have trade-offs.

Funders can ask coalition partners to include a strategy, which may be at the expense of effectively utilizing other strategies. Or, a funder may emphasize adding non-traditional partners, which comes at the expense of deepening trust with pre-existing partners. Funders should examine their requests with an understanding of the full implications of what those benefits and drawbacks are likely to be to the given coalition.

- **Funders are unlikely to be catalytic with short-term investments in an area.** Less seasoned funders often want to make a big investment with a fast payoff in an advocacy space, but the long game is much more important. Funders may be helpful as an accelerant to an existing long-term effort, but generally there are no catalytic quick wins.
- **There can be unforeseen consequences for funder actions, even somewhat removed from the coalition space.** If a funder is taking an action that could impact a coalition's work or positioning (e.g., investing elsewhere in the space, taking a public position, etc.), it is important to talk through that with the coalition and be clear on potential decisions.

## Good intentions are not enough when working with coalitions to navigate equity issues.

Be thoughtful and deliberate when considering equity issues. Many funders and coalitions have made missteps that have led to harm when trying to bring on partners from excluded groups. Funders can be proactive in this area both through the requests of the coalition (such as their plan for inclusion of historically marginalized organizations) and by providing specific support to important organizations that might be marginalized due to their perceived capacity limitations. This can include capacity-building support, legitimizing support (e.g., grant dollars that the organization can allocate to others), and positioning support, such as highlighting their work and publicly asking for their input.

- **Funders cannot just mandate a diverse coalition.** If a funder wants diverse voices to be at the table, they need to be resourced.
- **Funders and coalition members may not have the knowledge and skills to address racial equity on their own.** Both funders and advocates may need to engage in capacity building to be better able to understand the issues and navigate the nuance.
- **Funders and coalitions cannot dance around issues of racial equity.** If you don't tackle them head on, don't assume you can treat them as subtext.

## Areas for Future Inquiry

This study involved a large amount of data collection and analysis, but due to the current environment, it almost feels behind the times. Coalitions tend to create their own ecosystems. The coalition space is rapidly evolving into different models and affiliations, yet many organizations in this space still use the language of coalitions. Understanding the ever-changing shifts is crucial in the current environment, and finding ways to incorporate this learning in real time will help funders respond most effectively.

For foundations interested in more information on how to effectively support coalitions, rest assured that we feel some questions remain unanswered. Potential areas for future inquiry include:

- **What frameworks other funders are using to guide their coalition-related grantmaking**
- **How coalitions themselves are using evidence to guide their strategies and advocacy goals**
- **Models for how federal coalitions have been able to effectively integrate grassroots voices or a mobilization strategy into their work**

We believe that further research would benefit from engaging a broader number of coalition actors – ideally in a more systematic fashion and extending beyond those with close ties to BMGF – to provide feedback to the field of philanthropy.

## Appendix A: Methodology and Limitations of the Study

### Methodology

TCC Group used a three-pronged approach to answer the questions articulated for this learning study. This approach included:

**1. Interviews:** TCC Group conducted 24 interviews with three groups of stakeholders – BMGF staff, peer funders, and coalition experts (outside of those individuals interviewed for case studies). The number of individuals interviewed in each category can be seen in the table below. A full list of interviewees can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1 - **The Number of Individuals Interviewed by Stakeholder Category**

Stakeholder Category	Number of People Interviewed
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Staff	5
Peer Funders	9
Coalition Experts	10
Case Study Interviewees	69

**2. Case Studies:** TCC Group conducted five virtual site visits<sup>20</sup> each to a coalition showcasing a unique approach or model of work. We had originally intended a sixth site visit, but circumstances became less than ideal, and that site visit was removed. During site visits, we interviewed coalition leadership, staff, members, affiliated organizations, BMGF program officers, and other funders. The point person for each coalition was asked to generate the list of interviewees. Site visits included a mix of focus groups and individual interviews.<sup>21</sup> Each site visit produced a case study that explores that coalition's model and where it is situated in the capacity framework. Each selected coalition, and the rationale for including it, are described in the table below.

Table 2 - **Site Visit Coalitions**

Campaign for College Opportunity
myFutureNC Commission - Postsecondary Attainment Coalition
Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
InterAction
U.S. Global Leadership Coalition

**3. A Literature Review:** TCC commissioned three independent academics to review the available academic and peer-reviewed literature on coalitions. This literature review used the coalition framework that undergirded this learning study to guide its work. The literature accessed included the fields of sociology, political science, community psychology, public health, nonprofit management, gender and sexuality studies, education psychology, and race and ethnic studies. Literature review findings are not publicly available.

<sup>20</sup> The original intent was to have all site visits conducted in-person; however, COVID-19 resulted in the need to adapt to virtual site visits. Ultimately, two site visits had some in-person interviews, while the remaining three site visits were entirely virtual.

<sup>21</sup> Each site visit served as the basis for a case study that explores that coalition's model and where it is situated in the capacity framework. Individual case studies are not publicly available.

## Limitations

- **A Case Study Approach:** Given the nuance involved in coalitions, we believed a case study approach was the most appropriate way to collect exploratory data to answer the questions proposed in this study. However, the case study selection process necessarily prioritized some conditions over others, leaving gaps in the findings. These gaps may also lead to a limited ability to generalize findings; however, we aimed to mitigate some of this risk through the literature review and full report.
- **A Lack of Peer-Reviewed Literature Specific to Coalitions:** While the project included a formal literature review, there is a relatively light body of peer-reviewed literature on the topic. The literature review therefore incorporated gray or white literature as well as sources that focused on coalitions in a less traditional manner. This may mean the evidence base for some of the findings is less rigorously supported than might be desired.
- **Limited In-Person Data Collection:** TCC Group's site visits were slated to start just before COVID-19 became prominent in parts of the United States, preventing us from conducting in-person interviews and focus groups during site visits. While our staff are skilled at remote interviewing, it is possible some nuance was lost in a mostly remote process.
- **Deliberate Interview Sample:** TCC worked with BMGF to identify a range of other funders and coalition experts to interview. The list was not exhaustive, and it is certain that we were not able to interview many important viewpoints.

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## About TCC Group

TCC Group collaborates with leaders to solve complex social problems. As a certified B Corporation and with nearly 40 years of experience as a mission-driven firm, TCC Group partners with foundations, nonprofits, and companies to propel positive social change through strategy, capacity building, initiative design, strategic communication, management, and evaluation. We design and implement solutions for social impact by immersing ourselves in interconnected communities and systems, co-creating innovative and effective processes, and applying and sharing our experience with the field.

## About the Authors

**Kate Locke, Associate Director of Evaluation and Learning.** Kate has worked as an evaluator for over 15 years, specializing in evaluation of policy/advocacy efforts, collaborations, and equitable evaluation methods. She draws on her experiences working as a direct service provider and program manager in the HIV/AIDS human services realm.

**Jared Raynor, Director of Evaluation and Learning.** Jared specializes in evaluation and organizational development of innovative and complex efforts and has worked with hundreds of diverse organizations throughout the world. He is sought after for his expertise in a variety of areas, including capacity-building initiatives, convening effectiveness, prizes and competitions, policy and advocacy evaluation, and networks and coalitions.

**Deepti Sood, Senior Consultant.** Deepti brings a relatable style to engaging stakeholders at all levels. Highly responsive to changing environments with unwavering focus on key goals, she is an effective communicator, willing to raise difficult issues and address them head on. With a background in advocacy and working with grassroots organizations, Deepti is inspired by opportunities to proactively partner with communities to impact change. She understands the practical needs various stakeholders require and tailors the evaluation work accordingly.

**Ijeoma Ezeofor, Consultant (former).** At TCC Group, Ijeoma leveraged her skills and knowledge on a wide range of subjects including health, advocacy, and equity to help partners surface and make meaning of the connections between their activities and their desired impacts. Ijeoma collaborated regularly with organizations like the Skoll Foundation and conveners.org to advance collective understanding within the sector on effective evaluation of convenings.



**NEW YORK**  
333 7th Avenue  
9th Floor  
New York, NY 10001  
212-949-0990

**PHILADELPHIA**  
1500 JFK Boulevard  
Two Penn Center  
Suite 1910  
Philadelphia, PA 19102  
215-568-0399

**[www.tccgrp.com](http://www.tccgrp.com)**  
**[info@tccgrp.com](mailto:info@tccgrp.com)**

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