**The Road to Social Impact: Leveraging Community Power and Institutional Influence**

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**Community Networks: The Case of My Brother’s Keeper**

After President Barack Obama launched My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) in 2014 to close the opportunity gap for boys and men of color, Delia Farquharson and Francis Wynne eagerly pursued a chapter for their city of Mt. Vernon, New York. Farquharson and Wynne sought out assistance from local elected officials, school board representatives, and leaders in children’s mental health alongside others who were interested in building a MBK network in their city.

Their efforts were enough to bring together local organizational leaders and some grassroots supporters to launch the initiative, but Farquharson and Wynne met resistance from the start.  Many organizational leaders were happy to vocalize their support for the MBK network but refused to lead it, leaving Farquharson and Wynne to recruit network partners and lead meetings. This could be challenging, as neither of them had the organizational backing to compel other organizations to participate. Other innovations strained the relationships between the emerging community-led network and longstanding organizational leaders. For example, when they began monthly gatherings designed for students in order to boost youth participation in the community, some school district leaders accused the MBK network of hosting “gripe sessions” to complain about the schools.

Farquharson and Wynne’s efforts to include community members and the institutional leaders that could make systems-level change is common in community-based networks. The power differentials between institutions and community creates a myriad of tensions and may ultimately undermine networked efforts. However, there are concrete ways that coalitions can manage these power differentials and make a social impact that values both community voice and the systems change necessary to address opportunity gaps.

Mt. Vernon’s MBK network is one of 30 case studies featured in our upcoming book, [*Networks for Social Impact*](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/networks-for-social-impact-9780190091996?cc=us&lang=en&)*,*in which we seek to examine the conditions that lead to network success. In reaching that impact, however, network leaders must learn to balance dilemmas—and accept the trade-offs that come with trying to satisfy different constituencies. Dilemmas refer to those moments in which leaders must weigh conflicting demands and make a choice in response to those demands. Managers cannot solve these dilemmas once and for all. Instead, at different times, they must prioritize one value or the other.

When networks pull towards one side, the other side has a tendency to push back. Consider, for example, the need for “grasstops” and “grassroots” support. Farquharson and Wynne recognized that institutional support would lend the MBK network legitimacy in its early stages. One of the first accomplishments for the young network was a photo op on the steps of City Hall, signaling that local leaders would support the MBK network in its work. But institutional support alone cannot sustain such an effort, especially one geared towards creating opportunities for youth. When the network made an effort to include younger voices, more powerful actors pushed back. Farquharson and Wynne felt this tension as leaders of the initiative. When no existing organizational leaders stepped in to lead the MBK network, Farquharson and Wynne provided community leadership. But they felt the limits of their involvement without organizations behind them. Ultimately, Farquharson pursued a City Council seat in part to better position and lead MBK in Mt. Vernon, and the network moved under the jurisdiction of the local school district.

When the network moved under the jurisdiction of the school district and received funding from the state MBK network, community members were cut out of the process. The school district reports positive outcomes in the program and noted that they are responsible for meeting targets. But community meetings were stopped and Farquharson and Wynne rarely received updates on what the school district was doing.

**Tensions in the Institutional-Community Divide**

Many networks struggle with these institution-community power differentials as they strive to make their communities more equitable. While some networks embrace community power and realize inequity from the get-go, other networks launch their efforts without much public consideration of how existing power structures have contributed to the community problems they seek to solve. Leaning into the institutional side of the power differential may help secure funding or publicity in a network’s critical early stages, but can be embarrassing for networks that later try to add equity initiatives (what Vu Le referred to as [“retquity”)](https://nonprofitaf.com/2015/11/why-communities-of-color-are-getting-frustrated-with-collective-impact/) or invite community stakeholders “to the table” when in fact the table has already been set. Individuals and organizations that commit to the network during one stage of the work are likely to be frustrated when the network leans in the opposing direction.

Community development scholars have argued that there are two strategies that organizations and networks can utilize to address inequity: involvement and systems change. Involvement strategies focus on opening up opportunities for participants’ empowerment. These networks create multiple opportunities for community members, especially from marginalized and oppressed communities, to participate through working groups, action teams, and boards. These community members have real decision-making authority.

In contrast, systems change depends on the resources of local institutions (e.g., government, funders, nonprofits, school districts, businesses). They identify places where systems produce inequitable and unequal outcomes for communities. Through their actions, they disrupt the policies, privilege, and position that create inequality.

Very rarely can organizations and networks embrace both involvement and systems change practices. Brian Christens, a community development scholar, argues that “there remain relatively few organizations that can effectively build community power while sustaining settings that facilitate participants’ empowerment.”[[1]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftn1" \t "_blank) When networks attempt to do both, the tension between community empowerment and systems change practices are inevitable.

But networks can do better by their constituents if they acknowledge and embrace these dynamics. Although dilemmas such as the institutional-community divide are never completely resolved, there are several strategies that can lead to the network’s survival and, ultimately, positive impacts for the community the network intends to serve.

**Strategies for Social Impact**

1. **Build networks that encourage community participation and recognize their lower-power position at the outset.**

Networks need to move beyond tokenism to a critical mass perspective in their representation. Tokenism refers to selecting a single person to represent an entire community. A critical mass perspective recognizes that real participation and empowerment in network decision-making require more representatives from the affected community. If the research on gender diversity applies, a critical mass is equal to 30% of decision-makers.[[2]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftn2" \t "_blank)Networks that serve multiple groups may have difficulty embracing this recommendation because the communities are likely to be different from one another, have competing interests, and disagree on how to move forward.

Further, networks can explicitly adopt norms of participation that center members of disenfranchised communities. These norms might include limiting the number of talking turns used by more powerful organizations, promoting consensus-based decision-making processes, and inviting a trained facilitator to run meetings. They can encourage mindset shifts, like the[VOICE heuristic](https://nonprofitaf.com/2015/11/why-communities-of-color-are-getting-frustrated-with-collective-impact/), to promote deliberation.

Finally, networks can address the participation inequity gap between members who are paid to participate in networks as a function of their job (e.g., organizational leaders) and community members who are not. Networks can conduct meetings at a time (e.g., outside of regular work hours) and location (e.g., accessible for those with different abilities, can be easily reached by public transportation) that prioritize the participation of community members. Networks that value equity should also provide participants with resources that enable community participation, such as paid childcare and stipends.

Several networks we interviewed and studied illustrate how networks can address these differences. For example, The Blue Ribbon Commission to End Youth Violence in Wilmington, NC (now known as [Voyage](https://www.voyagewilmington.org/about)) established a Community Council made up of individuals. These individuals identified community needs, such as beautifying a local park and hosting community cookouts. The Blue Ribbon Commission provided resources for them to accomplish their goals. They also hire individuals from the community to serve as community resource navigators, connecting families and children to services and holding those institutions accountable for their responsiveness.

A network can also be in the business of building connections between community members, as depicted in the form of parent cafes organized by the [United Way Berkshires](https://www.berkshireunitedway.org/). These cafes, hosted by the network’s partner agencies, provide child care and dinner for parents to connect not only to local agencies but also to one another.

1. **Networks should anticipate that conflict will occur and consider their recruiting and governance strategies with this in mind**.

Our own research[[3]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftn3" \t "_blank)—as well as other research[[4]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftn4" \t "_blank)—suggests that networks that recruit their own members are more productive than those that are recruited by a funder. But even when networks recruit their own members, conflict is likely when organizations have different operating assumptions, represent different constituents, or are different sizes. Network leaders should be explicit about the assets that they hope organizational and community members will bring to the network and describe the assets that other organizations bring to the table that may not be readily apparent. These conversations are essential tools to enable leaders to practice perspective taking in the midst of conflict.

Network decision-making structures also have implications for conflict. Distributed governance, where many groups have a say in decision-making and goal setting, requires greater coordination among network members. When organizations have not established trust or have a challenging shared history, distributed governance structures make conflict more likely. However, when there are significant power disparities among network members, lead agency or network administrative organization governance structures can mask conflict. Network leaders should be cognizant of these tendencies and prepare for overt or hidden conflict that results.

Networks should recruit and invest in network leaders with conflict management skills—or in technical assistance for those leaders. Network leaders should expect to engage conflict as part of their jobs and be well-versed in varied strategies such as consensus-building, perspective taking, and shuttle diplomacy.[[5]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftn5" \t "_blank) In some cases, networks can benefit from a third party that can keep the network focused on shared goals and interests.[[6]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftn6" \t "_blank)

**Table: Network Conflict Management Strategies**

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| --- | --- |
| Consensus-Building | A process that seeks to meet the interests of every stakeholder and establish unanimous agreement. |
| Perspective Taking | Seeking to understand a situation or proposal from the perspective of another person organization. |
| Shuttle Diplomacy | Serving as an intermediary between two disputing parties for the purpose of mediating a conflict. |

Smart network leaders recognize that not all conflict can be solved. Networks achieve impact not because they manage to avoid conflict, but because they determine which conflict to resolve. Partners can learn to live with differences as part of their continued network involvement. Some conflict is useful for networks in that it can prompt network participants to re-consider a problem and generate new insights. Some networks have used a “two tables” solution in which they encourage sub-groups to focus on a network’s shared goal while also pursuing their own areas of interest. This strategy can keep groups with [divergent interests](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/who-says-a-common-agenda-is-necessary-for-collective-impact/) on board and encourage network members to articulate those differences while in pursuit of a shared goal.

1. **Redistribute network power and invest in community power.**

Bringing community leaders to the table and holding community forums is insufficient to address systemic racism, income inequality, and generational poverty. Networks that successfully implement both inclusion and systems change strategies cede institutional authority to community members. Community members have the power to make decisions for the network. The community determines goals and is intimately involved in the evaluation of the network’s progress against those goals. Evaluation data enables the community to identify where institutions marginalize or fail to serve communities, and they engage in policy and advocacy work to change those institutions. Some networks may engage in community organizing practices, supporting individuals in identifying their concerns, creating associations, and advocating for policy change.

These networks still experience the tension of systems change and involvement practices, but resolve this tension by ceding even greater institutional authority to the community. For example, [Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children and Families](https://www.aacounty.org/boards-and-commissions/partnership-for-children-youth-families/) is committed to community framing of issues, which ultimately seeks to reorganize community resources to those most affected. Community-centered framing is then translated into Anne Arundel’s goal-setting process. Community members drive this process entirely, and they decide the network’s goals and outcomes. Community members also determine which metrics to use to measure the network’s success.

Networks for Social Impact that value equity have to manage tension between involvement and systems change. Only a rare few networks are able to use both strategies simultaneously. Ultimately, one of the reasons that networks struggle to achieve impact is because they do not challenge the system in which they operate. Network leaders and participants must realize that the path to impact is not exclusively through institutions or individuals, but in recognizing the benefits that both can provide—while navigating the challenges that each side presents.

[[1]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftnref1" \t "_blank) Christens, Brian D. *Community Power and Empowerment*. (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[[2]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftnref2" \t "_blank) Jasmin Joecks, Kerstin Pull, and Karin Vetter, “Gender Diversity in the Boardroom and Firm Performance: What Exactly Constitutes a ‘Critical Mass?,’” *Journal of Business Ethics* 118, no. 1 (November 1, 2013): 61–72, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1553-6; Mariateresa Torchia, Andrea Calabrò, and Morten Huse, “Women Directors on Corporate Boards: From Tokenism to Critical Mass,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 102, no. 2 (August 1, 2011): 299–317, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-0815-z.

[[3]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftnref3" \t "_blank) See Katherine R Cooper and Michelle Shumate, “Interorganizational Collaboration Explored through the Bona Fide Network Perspective,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2012): 623–54.

[[4]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftnref4" \t "_blank) John Charles Morris et al., *The Case for Grassroots Collaboration: Social Capital and Ecosystem Restoration at the Local Level.* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

[[5]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftnref5" \t "_blank) Gray, Barbara, and Jill Purdy. *Collaborating for Our Future: Multistakeholder Partnerships for Solving Complex Problems*. (Oxford University Press, 2018).

[[6]](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-road-to-social-impact-leveraging-community-power-and-institutional-influence/?mc_cid=e41389bcfc&mc_eid=95d6cd02a7" \l "_ftnref6" \t "_blank) Barbara Gray, Peter T. Coleman, and Linda L. Putnam, “Introduction: Intractable Conflict: New Perspectives on the Causes and Conditions for Change,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 11 (July 1, 2007): 1415–29.