

HOW COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS CAN BUILD NATIONAL NETWORKS

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Across America, tens of thousands of local community organizations of all stripes do invaluable work caring for people and striving for a more humane and democratic society. But are local efforts enough? Many community leaders look for ways to work with other groups to influence regional, state, and national decisions that affect many people's lives. My research shows that national efforts have successfully confronted the challenge of building clout above the local level. The most dynamic networks share three key characteristics:

- **Local roots, tiered networks.** While local roots remain vital, organizers link community groups into regional, state, and national networks to impact higher levels of government.
- **A public narrative connected to people's moral sentiments.** Successful networks marshal longstanding, heartfelt moral values to sustain the fight for social justice and responsive democratic government. Over four decades, powerful interests have twisted American democratic and religious values to serve selfish interests and justify policies that hurt millions of people. But there is no need to cede our shared values. Successful networks don't just focus on single issues or narrow interests. They help members speak out using religious ideals and other values to tell stories of engaged citizens who make a difference.
- **Ambitious strategic vision.** The intense effort required to build higher-level networks can feel like a distraction from important local work – unless something that really matters is at stake and everyone can see how coordinated action could have a big impact. The most dynamic and successful national networks got underway by asking themselves: How can our local work add up to more real change? What kinds of alliances could fundamentally reshape public conversation and persuade decision-makers to do what is right? Network organizers looked beyond the horizons of good but limited local work by developing an ambitious strategy – and then patiently experimenting to implement it.

Successful Examples – and a Close Look at the PICO National Network

Various networks have demonstrated that community organizations can work successfully together – typically around a vision of citizenship grounded in secular and religious democratic traditions. National People's Action and the PICO National Network are currently among the most effective national efforts, and other national or regional networks include the National Domestic Workers Alliance, Domestic Workers United, Interfaith Workers Justice, the Industrial Areas Foundation, Gamaliel, DART, and the Ohio Organizing Collaborative. To show in greater detail how one effective national effort came together, the PICO National Network is worth a closer look.

Founded in 1972 as the Pacific Institute for Community Organization, PICO now unites 55 local federations that together link citizen activists from more than 1,000 religious congregations. In the mid-1990s, after 25 years of building local efforts focused on improving the quality of life in poor and middle class neighborhoods, key leaders in PICO realized that they were replicating local victories yet still “getting our ass kicked.” Local politics alone could not overcome bad decisions at state and national levels. So 18 local organizations united in the PICO California Project. By the early 2000s, PICO California had led statewide struggles for better public education and improved health care for poor people. Two crucial insights emerged from that experience: First, organizers and citizens learned that higher-level organizing, if done right, could strengthen local work rather than interfere with it. Secondly, California PICO participants saw that state-level decisions were constrained by the federal government on key issues such as health care, immigration rules, and housing policy. Ways would have to be found to work across state lines.

Beginning in 2003, the PICO National Network was launched, building on local and state organizations that now spread across 20 states. The PICO National Network’s priorities include comprehensive immigration reform, housing foreclosure relief, and accountability for financial institutions. But its reputation for clout rests on its role in national-level debates about health care reforms. PICO was a key player in a broad coalition of organizations that led the successful fight for the 2009 reauthorization of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, vetoed twice by George W. Bush but signed into law by President Barack Obama. Subsequently, PICO influenced the 2010 Affordable Care Act to better cover poor people and immigrants, especially by increasing subsidies for the working poor. PICO helped religiously minded groups and activists give voice to the moral reasons for improved health care.

Larger Lessons

Leaders in the PICO National Network have learned several key lessons:

- Strategic partners can help activists understand policy options, government budgets, and legislative dynamics. In addition to allying with other organizing and mass-membership groups, PICO works with think tanks and sympathetic legislative aides from both parties.
- Important as it is to have an ongoing presence in state capitals and Washington DC, lots of important political work leverages *local* strengths across many legislative districts.
- Staff and leaders must be savvy about communications technology and media outreach.
- Shared values matter even more when people are organizing across long distances, because groups need to keep in mind why they are working together. For PICO, this means keeping front and center the spirituality shared across diverse faith traditions.

Read more in Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2002) and “Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing,” in *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change*, edited by Marion Orr (University of Kansas Press, 2007).