



## Rural Networks for Wealth Creation: Impacts and Lessons Learned from US Communities

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By Paul Castelloe, Thomas Watson, and Katy Allen of Rural Support Partners

Supported by The Ford Foundation's Wealth Creation in Rural Communities – Building Sustainable Livelihoods Initiative

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# Executive Summary

This is a study of networks of organizations working to create wealth that sticks in rural communities. Our research is based on three concepts. First, *networks* are webs of organizations that are collaborating strategically to move forward a coordinated body of work. Second, *rural networks* are webs of organizations where the majority of the work takes place in towns with populations under 50,000 or in unincorporated areas. Finally, *networks for wealth creation* are webs of organizations that are developing institutions and collective strategies that build local assets and create wealth that stays local.

We conducted interviews with 24 practitioners in six different rural networks across the United States. The networks differed in terms of scope, geographic focus, areas of work, and approach. The six networks that we interviewed for this research included the following:

- Central Appalachian Network (five states, Appalachia, local food value chain work)
- Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises (four states, Appalachia, housing)
- Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network (two counties, South Texas, multi-issue)
- ROC USA® (national, resident-owned mobile home parks)
- Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (ten states, Western US, conservation policy)
- Value Chain Partnerships (statewide, Iowa, local food value chain work)

Our findings were varied and rich. In this report, we present findings related to network results, network management, network legal structures, network membership, structures and processes for getting work done in networks, structures and practices for governing networks, funders' roles in networks, and the key building blocks of a successful network.

We began our research with some basic questions about networks, questions such as,

- What is a network able to do that an individual organization is unable to do on its own?
- Why would we want to build a network in the first place?
- Why might a network be worth the time and money that it requires?

When we interviewed practitioners about their involvement in networks, they had several answers to these questions. They said that networks are places where people and organizations build the trust and relationships needed to dream big and get big things done together. When people and organizations join networks, they share ideas, approaches, and support – and their work becomes stronger. Organizations are often able to raise more money for their work through networks than they could on their own. Perhaps most importantly, by working together, organizations in networks are able to achieve concrete results that are deeper, broader, and greater in scale. Finally, networks allow people and groups to develop the collective power needed to influence institutions, systems, practices, and policies, and these are crucial for fundamental, long-term change in rural areas.



## Building blocks of a successful network

Looking over all of the findings from this research project, a few key points stand out. Below are ten building blocks for developing a successful network. We begin and end this report with these ten building blocks, because for us these ideas are the core of everything we learned through our research.

1. **Trust and relationships.** Trust and relationships are the glue that holds a network together. They are built over time as network members work shoulder-to-shoulder on coordinated work that meets their organizations' and their communities' interests. Building trust enables networks to take more risks and share resources more willingly.
2. **Shared analysis, vision, interest, and identity.** Network members mentioned the importance of having or developing a shared analysis, a shared understanding of the challenges that the network is coming together to address. Related to this are a shared vision, a collective identity, a shared interest, and a shared sense of place.
3. **Shared direction, goals, measurement, and work.** Network members mentioned the importance of setting shared goals, developing collective plans, creating a shared measurement system, and working together on a coordinated, strategic body of work.
4. **Strong network management.** Strong network management is essential for networks to grow, thrive, and accomplish their goals. Having a capable, committed, skilled, and focused network management team is necessary rather than optional.
5. **Clear benefits for local people.** Network members emphasized that a network's efforts have to connect to the bread-and-butter issues that people face every day in their communities and their work. Networks need to focus on getting something done; they also need to focus on something that everyone is concerned about.
6. **Shared power and control.** Networks operate most effectively and efficiently when power, control, and leadership is dispersed and balanced. Network managers, network staff, or staff at the network's sponsoring organization find ways to share decision-making, direction-setting, and planning with working groups and network members.
7. **Communication.** Communication within a network is important. People need to be in the loop and feel like they're part of the loop. Conversations among network members need to be focused on things that are of value to them, rather than getting together just to talk and share information.
8. **Enough structure, but not too much.** Network members described a balance between having enough structure and having too much. They felt that networks should focus on getting work done and let the processes, structures, and governance emerge from the network's collective efforts.
9. **Mutual accountability.** Network members need some way to hold each other accountable for moving the work of the network forward. This accountability can be either formal or informal, but it needs to be effective.
10. **Clear benefits for member organizations.** Network members are most engaged when there are clear and strong benefits for their organizations and their work.

# Chapter One

## Core Concepts and Research Overview

### Core concepts

This is a study of networks of organizations working to create wealth that sticks in rural communities. This research is based on three concepts, each defined further below:

1. *Networks*, webs of organizations that are collaborating strategically to move forward a coordinated body of work
2. *Rural networks*, webs of organizations where the majority of the work takes place in towns with populations under 50,000 or in unincorporated areas
3. *Networks for wealth creation*, webs of organizations that are developing institutions and collective strategies that build local assets and create wealth that stays local.

### What is a network?

In this study, we define *networks* as webs of organizations and individuals that are collaborating strategically to move forward a coordinated body of work. A network is a formalized association of inter-related, like-minded, yet independent organizations and individuals that work together strategically to bring about efficiency, effectiveness, capacity, learning, and impact that is greater than any single organization could achieve on its own. Practically speaking, a network is a web of interconnected organizations and people through which collaboration occurs. Through this collaboration, networks ultimately achieve greater results. More technically, networks are made up of nodes and links – webs of organizations or people (nodes) and the interconnections among them (links).

Our definitions echo other definitions in the field. In *Networks that Work*, which focuses on US networks, Paul Vandeventer and Myrna Mandell define a network as “many different organizations working in concert as equal partners pursuing a common social or civic purpose over a sustained period of time.”<sup>1</sup> They note that the goal for network members is to achieve greater social, political, or economic impact than is possible alone. They list three distinguishing features of a network: (1) network members build new networks, based on mutual interdependence; (2) networks differ in their complexity and therefore level of risks for members; and (3) no one is “in charge” of a network.

In *Networking for Development*, a book from international community development, Paul Starkey defines a network as “any group of individuals or organizations who, on a voluntary basis,

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<sup>1</sup> Vandeventer, P. & Mandell, M. (2007). *Networks that Work: A Practitioner’s Guide to Managed Network Action*. Los Angeles: Community Partners.

exchange information or undertake joint activities and who organize themselves in such a way that their individual autonomy remains intact.”<sup>2</sup>

Our definition differs from Starkey’s in that we focus in this study on networks that undertake joint activities. Our research did not explore “networking” among organizations, which we view as a form of pre-collaborative interaction. While networking is valid and important, it was simply not the focus of our research. We did not study networks where members come together occasionally to learn from each other, but do not work together strategically to move forward a coordinated body of work. Instead, we explored structures through which strategic and coordinated collaboration occurs. Thus for this study, we define networks based upon their coordinated work rather than their mutual learning. Mutual learning occurs, as our data clearly indicate; however, our focus was on organizations that are working together strategically.

### What is unique about rural networks?

In this study, we follow the US government in defining rural by what it is not; that is, rural areas are defined as areas that are not urban or metropolitan. Metropolitan areas are defined as having populations above 50,000, so we define *rural* as non-metropolitan areas with towns with populations under 50,000 or unincorporated areas.<sup>3</sup> *Rural networks* are therefore webs of organizations where the majority of work takes place in towns with populations under 50,000 or unincorporated areas.

But there is something at the heart of rural networks that lies beyond this technical definition. Rural networks have a strong sense of place, a shared culture, identity, way of life, landscape, and geography. This is captured in the passage below, a quotation from a network member in an Appalachian network that we interviewed as part of this study.

*But to the question of what are the core elements [of a network], I would say: sense of place, the geography of place would be one big element – that there's a shared understanding from the groups, from the people you're talking with, that you live in a similar kind of region, geography, and you share the Central Appalachian Mountains, or a watershed, or something that's real, that's on-the-ground and real. So you've got geography, you've got hills and hollers, and floodplains and lots of flooding in some places; and you've got exploitation of resources, whether it's timber or coal or people happening. You've got the mountains, which are where people derive a sense of pleasure and satisfaction and identity where they live. All of that makes it easy for people to come together and say, "Yeah, we need to share how we're approaching these problems. We need to share how we're getting funding, and share who's out there doing good stuff, and share good ways to build a house on the side of a steep mountain holler, where you can't drive a truck without getting run over by a bigger coal truck, or coming to a flooded-out bridge.”*

<sup>2</sup> Starkey, P. (1997). *Networking for Development*. London: The International Forum for Rural Transport and Development.

<sup>3</sup> Reynnells, L. & John, P.L. (2008). *What Is Rural?* US Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library. Retrieved from [http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/what\\_is\\_rural.shtml](http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/what_is_rural.shtml)



As this passage suggests, a sense of place and shared identity are at the heart of many rural networks. People have a shared sense of being from the same place, from the same culture or geographic region, something on-the-ground and real. People have a shared sense of identity, of working for a common goal or vision that everyone buys into.

## What are rural networks for wealth creation?

*Wealth creation* is a framework developed by The Ford Foundation's Wealth Creation in Rural Communities – Building Sustainable Livelihoods initiative.<sup>4</sup> The broad aim of this initiative is to “improve rural livelihoods with a systems approach to development that creates multiple forms of wealth that are owned and controlled locally.”<sup>5</sup>

The idea behind the framework is that the resources and assets of rural communities – their natural resources, agricultural produce, labor force, and young people – have for too long flowed out of rural areas, along with income and wealth.<sup>6</sup> Low-wealth communities in rural areas, in particular, have struggled to develop strategies and institutions that build local assets and create wealth that stays local. This applies to various forms or kinds of communities in rural areas, both place-based communities (e.g., small towns or counties) and communities of interest (e.g., members of the same racial or ethnic group or a community of collaborating practitioners).

In practice, networks and organizations that are working from a wealth creation framework use a place-based systems approach to rural development that can restore, create, and maintain wealth in low-wealth areas by simultaneously improving economies, the environment, and social conditions. This approach is based on networks and collaboration; it moves beyond single institution, single solution approaches. It also emphasizes approaches that build multiple forms of wealth at the same time (e.g., focusing on poverty reduction, job creation, and environmental sustainability all together).

*Rural networks for wealth creation* are networks based in rural areas that are using an approach that is aligned with the approach outlined above. Two of the networks that we interviewed (Central Appalachian Network and Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises) are currently receiving funding from The Ford Foundation's Wealth Creation in Rural Communities (WCRC) – Building Sustainable Livelihoods initiative; these networks are using the wealth creation framework officially and explicitly. Four of the networks we interviewed are not currently receiving funding from the WCRC initiative. Although these networks are not using the wealth creation framework to plan and evaluate their work, they are doing work that aligns with the wealth creation approach. All of the networks we interviewed are rural networks that are putting in place strategies and institutions that build local assets and create multiple forms

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<sup>4</sup> Within The Ford Foundation, this work is part of the Expanding Livelihood Opportunities for Poor Households Initiative.

<sup>5</sup> Wealth Creation in Rural Communities (2011). *Our mission*. Retrieved from <http://www.creatingruralwealth.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> Markley, D. (2010). *Wealth Creation in Rural Communities: A New Approach to Rural Development*. Yellow Wood Associates. Retrieved from <http://www.yellowwood.org/wealthcreation.aspx>.

of locally based capital. They are all networks that are working strategically to develop regional or national efforts that deliver economic, social, and environmental benefits to local communities.

## Overview of the research

In this research project, we interviewed 24 practitioners in six major networks that are using a wealth creation approach in rural areas across the United States. Two networks are based in Appalachia, one in the Western US, one along the Texas-Mexico border, and one in Iowa. One network is national in scope. The areas of focus and approaches of each network differ greatly.

We recorded and transcribed each of our 24 interviews, and these transcriptions, along with documents from the networks, provide the data for this research. We analyzed the data using thematic coding, a standard qualitative data methodology. The major themes that emerged from the data are outlined in this report.

When we present data (i.e., comments, passages, or quotations from our interviews) related to the major themes in this report, we have tried to make the quotations as anonymous as possible: we changed the names of the people we interviewed, we changed the names of towns and places mentioned in the interviews, and we removed or changed the names of organizations and networks mentioned in the interviews.

This report focuses on networks in general, rather than the specifics of the six networks that we studied. As mentioned, we present comments from network members anonymously. We do not focus on the practices, work, and results of each specific network; rather, we present general concepts, ideas, and practices that have concrete relevance for developing a network anywhere, in any place, at any time. Thus the report focuses on the general characteristics of networks. We do, however, present an overview of the specific structure and work of each network we studied in Appendix A. The six networks that we interviewed for this research are listed below. For more information about the specifics of these networks, see Appendix A.

- Central Appalachian Network
- Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises
- Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network
- ROC USA®
- Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition
- Value Chain Partnerships

# Chapter Two

## Why Networks Matter: The Results of Networks

### Why networks matter

We begin this chapter by presenting an overview of why networks matter. This section outlines the reasons that a group of organizations and individuals might want to form a network. The next section presents the results of the networks that we interviewed. Before we turn to concrete network results, though, we describe some of the things that a network is able to do that an individual organization cannot do on its own. Below, we try to outline the reasons why people and groups participate in networks. We describe the general, overall advantages and benefits of networks as compared to individual organizations. The points below answer some basic questions about networks, questions such as,

- What is a network able to do that an individual organization is unable to do on its own?
- Why would we want to build a network in the first place?
- Why might a network be worth the time and money that it requires?

**More trust, stronger relationships.** Although this is the least concrete benefit of a network, it may be the most important. Through networks, leaders and organizations work shoulder-to-shoulder on issues that are important to everyone. They come to know and trust each other. Through these trust and relationships, groups of leaders and organizations are able to develop and carry out efforts to improve communities that are more visionary, more risky, broader in scope and scale, and hopefully more effective. Trust and relationships are the seed from which everything else develops, and trust and relationships are developed by coming together to plan and work as a collective. This may be the core of what a network is about.

**Stronger leaders and organizations.** Leaders and organizations become stronger when they share knowledge, experiences, skills, and approaches with one another. Through networks, leaders and organizations learn from one another and improve their practices – which ultimately leads to stronger outcomes in communities. Networks are also places where leaders and organizations find mutual support as well as peer learning. This support can be crucial, especially for leaders who may be facing isolation and burnout, both of which are common in rural development organizations.

**More funding.** Networks can potentially provide a way for organizations to raise more money for their work. This can happen in at least two ways. One possibility is that a network can raise money for the work of the network, and pass some of that funding on to some or all of its members. A less direct (but equally important) possibility is that networks provide members with access to funders; networks also provide members with added credibility that may allow

them to approach funders for support of their work. Networks allow members to leverage additional resources, to bring more funding into rural communities.

**Greater results.** When the work of many organizations is aligned and coordinated, it makes sense that it is possible to have broader and deeper impacts in communities than any single organization would be able to achieve on its own. Through networks, organizations working across a large geographic area can connect and coordinate their work, so that the collective work fits together coherently and adds up to something far greater than its individual parts. This is true for both services provided (e.g., coordinating efforts to strengthen and connect local food systems across a large region) and for physical infrastructure (e.g., coordinating efforts to increase the stock of affordable housing units across a large region). Networks enable communities to bring about collective impacts.<sup>7</sup> Overall, networks enable organizations to achieve more and greater results, on a broader scale, than they would be able to achieve alone.

**Greater influence.** A network of organizations working in coordination is far more capable of building the collective voice and power needed to bring about fundamental, long-term changes in communities. This is particularly true for efforts related to institutional, systemic, and / or policy change. By coming together in networks, organizations can generate the numbers that they need to bring about systemic change and policy change. Another form of influence that networks can have is in the realm of ideas, concepts, models, approaches or frameworks. Networks often speed up the dissemination of new ideas or approaches, ultimately resulting in more effective work and greater outcomes among network members.

In sum, networks are places where people and organizations build the trust and relationships needed to dream big and get big things done together. When people and organizations join networks, they share ideas, approaches, and support – and their work becomes stronger. Organizations are often able to raise more money for their work through networks than they could on their own. Perhaps most importantly, by working together, organizations in networks are able to achieve concrete results in communities that are deeper, broader, and greater in scale. Finally, networks allow people and groups to develop the collective power needed to influence institutions, systems, practices, and policies, and these are crucial for fundamental, long-term change in communities.

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<sup>7</sup> Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011). *Collective impact*. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2011.

## The results of networks

The preceding section outlines why networks matter, in general. In this section, we move from the bigger picture of why networks matter to the specific outcomes, impacts, or results that the networks we studied are bringing about. The outcomes below are the ones that members of the networks we interviewed mentioned when we asked them about the benefits or impacts that networks have had on their work. We also looked through the documents that these networks have generated for evidence of networks' overall results.

### Network results as forms of capital

To organize the results, we have used concepts from the wealth creation framework, as described above.<sup>8</sup> One of the characteristics of the wealth creation framework is a focus on building community wealth, assets that are owned and controlled by a community. Creating community wealth means focusing on building multiple forms of wealth, often simultaneously. The wealth creation framework outlines seven forms of capital, which are outlined below.

The seven forms of capital in the wealth creation framework are the following:

- **Individual capital** – the stock of skills, capacities, and physical / mental health among people in a community or region.
- **Social capital** – the stock of trust, relationships, mutual support, and connections among people in a community or region; culture is also an aspect of social capital.
- **Intellectual capital** – the stock of knowledge, innovation, and creativity among people in a community or region.
- **Financial capital** – the stock of monetary assets among people and communities in a region.
- **Natural capital** – the stock of environmental assets in a community or region.
- **Built capital** – the stock of fully functioning infrastructure in a community or region.
- **Political capital** – the stock of collective power and goodwill among people, which can be used to achieve desired ends in a region.

In practice, the wealth creation framework is typically used to assess, plan, and measure collective efforts in communities. In this report, we are using the wealth creation framework as a way to understand the various categories of results that networks produce.

<sup>8</sup> Wealth Creation in Rural Communities (2011). *Creating multiple forms of wealth*. Retrieved from <http://www.creatingruralwealth.org/wealth-creation-approach/multiple-forms-of-wealth/>.

In our research, we asked network members to talk about the benefits for their organization of participating in a network. The people we interviewed talked about both intangible and tangible results. They also talked about network results at four levels: leaders, organizations, networks, and communities. The intangible results – individual capital, social capital, and intellectual capital – tend to occur within and among leaders, organizations, and networks. The tangible results – financial capital, built capital, political capital, and natural capital – tend to occur in communities. The people we interviewed talked about tangible results (i.e., financial capital, built capital, political capital, natural capital) as the important on-the-ground, concrete results in communities. While these are the primary results of a network, it was clear that networks would be unable to achieve these concrete results without equal attention to intangible results such as individual capital, social capital, and intellectual capital.

The examples below make these various kinds of results clearer.

- **Individual leaders within networks.** As one example, individual leaders within networks share individual capital (skills, knowledge, capacity, experiences) with other leaders within a network. Although this individual capital is shared within a network, it benefits local communities, because by gaining individual capital, leaders improve the work of their organizations and thereby achieve greater results in communities.
- **Organizations within networks.** As one example, organizations within networks build social capital (trust, relationships, mutual support, and connections) with other organizations in a network. Although this social capital is shared within a network, it benefits local communities, because by building social capital, organizations are able to take more risks together, and taking collective risks is essential to bringing about fundamental, long-lasting changes in communities.
- **Networks as a whole.** As one example, network members develop intellectual capital (new knowledge, frameworks, ways of working, or ways of seeing) that are shared and sometimes institutionalized throughout a network. Although this intellectual capital is shared within a network, it benefits local communities, because by sharing intellectual capital, network members are able to work more effectively and thereby achieve greater results in communities.
- **Communities.** Ultimately, networks are most concerned with concrete, on-the-ground results in communities. These include built capital (e.g., large numbers of new affordable housing units), financial capital (e.g., more wealth for people living in low-wealth communities), political capital (e.g., policies passed that bring environmental and economic benefits to low-wealth communities), or natural capital (e.g., decreasing the use of non-renewable energy use on farms throughout a rural area).

As we present stories related to results below, we begin with the more intangible and within-network results (i.e., individual capital, social capital, and intellectual capital) and move to the more concrete or community-based results (i.e., financial capital, natural capital, built capital, and political capital). We end this section with a brief case study that includes multiple forms of capital, to show how these various forms of capital are typically integrated and merged rather than addressed in isolation.



## Individual capital

Individual capital is the stock of skills, capacities, experiences, knowledge, and physical / mental health among people in a community or region. In the context of networks, examples of individual capital include skills and capacities that people and organizations bring to networks. Each member of a network has a set of skills, a set of organizational capacities, and a store of organizational experiences or best practices related to its work. Members of networks provide support for one another, and strengthen each other's work, by sharing these skills, capacities, and lessons learned from experience.

In the passage below, participation in a network resulted in a network member benefitting from the skills, capacities, or experiences of another network member. A member of one of the networks we interviewed talks about how she came to see the value of being part of the network for her local organization.

*You had asked about how we became convinced that the network was worth the money and the time. I guess if I had judged it on the first year, I just would've shrugged my shoulders.*

*But after that first year, I came back to my community and started scratching my head about what to do next. I would run into small barriers. You know, maybe a Forest Service folk thing, maybe them saying, "I'm not sure that we can do business that way."*

*And I would call someone that I met in another state [through network meetings], someone who was community-based like me, and ask them how they did something. They were very generous about sharing, "Well, here's an example of an agreement that we had with Forest Service or the BLM [Bureau of Land Management]."*

*And I'll tell you, I can't think of anything that works faster when my [local] Forest Service tells me, "We can't do this" – to get on the phone [with another network member] and immediately get an answer from an organization that's parallel to mine that says, "We did it. Here's the paperwork on how we did it. Send that to them [the Forest Service]." And their argument is over.*

*And I think that's what this network is about – about us realizing who we're a good match with, who has the experience.*

*So the policy stuff went over my head, but in those first years, the practical assistance that I received made me convinced that this was a group of people that I needed to grab onto their coattails.*

Sharing individual capital occurs when members of a network share knowledge and experiences with other members. In the story below, a member of one network we interviewed describes how new knowledge and information from other members of the network led her organization to focus more on community organizing, policy advocacy, and systems change.

*Respondent: They [other network members] really do teach you a huge amount. I had no idea that unless you really represent your community and get them to represent themselves – only then will a change be made. I just didn't want to get involved in that [community organizing and systems change] personally, because I'm religious and I just thought, "I just want to take care of people."*

*I realized I can't help take care of people if we don't attack some of these [systemic] problems, which our major funder has really helped open my eyes to. Just being on our general committee, on the individual working group, your eyes are opened awfully quickly.*

*Interviewer: I see. How do your eyes get opened?*

*Respondent: Well, by them [other network members] talking about these issues and me seeing that these issues are also occurring in my own colonia [or low-wealth neighborhood], which I really didn't even have my eyes open to before.*

*And really, I doubted some of the things that they were doing in the Immigration Working Group, because I did not know the history. But the longer I'm in it, the more I see why they're doing what they're doing, and my trust is up.*

*Interviewer: Can you make that concrete? You doubted what?*

*Respondent: Well, why we're working with the other organizations at times, for example, the national immigration groups. But now I realize that we have much more power when we do that – and I don't say power in the wrong way, but much more lobbying power, if we all stand on the same issue, which we usually do when it comes to those issues.*

Even in networks that do not focus specifically on learning, network members experience a lot of learning and they value that learning. Below, a network coordinator describes how she has come to view the sharing of individual capital as a key component of the network's work.

*I guess one thing I will say, thinking about all of this, is that in the beginning I tried really hard to keep this network very focused on collective action to change policy.*

*And the truth is that the network is a lot more than that, and that people are learning a lot about each other's community-based efforts. They're learning about best practices. They're developing relationships with one another. They're visiting each other's communities totally independent of us, because they've met at the APM [Annual Program Meeting], and they talk to each other on these working group calls.*

*And I have finally sort of given in and said, "This is part of this network, and we need to support it more." So in the spirit of change I recognized that the network members, they own the network, and they want it to be more than policy, and therefore it is. And so I think the challenge that we have in the future for the coalition is how to continue to do the good policy work that we do, but then also how to really build and meet some of these other needs that people have.*

## Social capital

Social capital is the stock of trust, relationships, mutual support, and connections among people in a community or region. A region's culture is also an aspect of social capital. The people we interviewed said repeatedly that trust and relationships make up the core of a successful network. Trust and relationships are the glue that holds everything together, the center around which everything else spins and flows. The comments below, from two members of a network management team, make this clear.

*Respondent 1: Relationships are the foundation of everything that you do, so building trust and transparency enables networks to be able to take a bit more risk and share resources more willingly than if you don't. We've tried to move towards deeper types of networks that can foster systemic change but will take more risk, and to do that you have to have more trust and more transparency in order to take that risk.*

*Respondent 2: I'd like to add to that, that a major component of developing that trust is building a sense of a collective identity. Part of the way of doing that is making sure that you're all moving towards a similar goal, you just may have different paths, and that's okay. And so you want to have this acceptance of different ways of doing things. And built into that is a really democratic process and a culture of appreciation for differences.*

*And knowing that those differences are complementary. When you do systems work, you can't have one line of specialists. That's just not adequate. You need to have lots of different kinds of people working and coordinating together. A big piece of this work is that mutual coordination and cooperation. I think we underestimated the sense of that collective identity.*

*Respondent 1: But again, I think in many of the working groups, you create this space for people to build learning and trust and to take a bit more risk. And that's what's similar across all of the groups is that creation of that space.*

*Sometimes it's done in such a way that there are these other benefits that you wouldn't expect. Like in the Niche Pork Working Group, even though these are competing groups, some of the companies actually started to transport pork to the coast together to save money. And they never would have thought of doing that before, because they were competitors.*

Another form of social capital within networks relates to increasing collaboration among network members. This is an important outcome for networks. Collaboration within networks takes various forms. In the example below, various working groups within a network shared funding with one another.

*When we did an evaluation, we found that some of the groups were actually giving up some of their funds to less well-funded groups. At the core team level [the core group that coordinates the entire network], you had some of the groups who were allotted, say – let's just put a number out there – ten thousand dollars to coordinate each working group. But*

*maybe a couple of the leaders of those groups were more successful at getting outside funding, so they said, “You know what? I don’t need all of your money. Why don’t you give it to another working group and let them use it?” Some of the working group leaders in the core team voluntarily relinquished funding allocated to their working group to more “needy” working groups that were not as able to secure additional funding.*

*In addition, there were geographically based regional food system groups within the Regional Food Systems Working Group who did the same thing – reallocated money they were to receive to other regional food system groups who had more need for the resources.*

*So there are some indicators of commitment to the bigger system’s picture. When groups are voluntarily dividing resources or giving them away to benefit the bigger picture and their neighbors, because they know ultimately that builds a stronger system – those are some of the lessons that I think we’ve learned that would inform the work that other networks are doing.*

## Intellectual capital

Intellectual capital is the stock of knowledge, innovation, and creativity among people in a community or region. Intellectual capital is embodied not in individual minds, as in individual capital, but in the enduring intellectual products that these individual minds create. Intellectual capital includes various kinds of standards, frameworks, models, and approaches that spread from one leader, organization, or network to another. Intellectual capital is about institutionalizing shared knowledge, new ways of seeing, and new ways of working.

One network we interviewed is focused on the national dissemination and scaling of a successful affordable housing model, which was developed in New Hampshire. Disseminating a proven model is a good example of a purposeful and strategic attempt to spread intellectual capital across a network’s members and across the country. In this affordable housing model, the basic approach is to provide organizing support and loans for groups of mobile home park residents who are coming together to purchase their community. Below, comments from a network partner outline the reasons for disseminating the model.

*In the case of this network, you have this great track record that they're building off of in New Hampshire of 25 years plus. More than 20% of the manufactured-housing communities in New Hampshire are now resident-owned communities. They still have a 0% default rate [on loans for mobile home community purchases].*

*It's a really solid, long-term basis of practical experience to build this model off of, so they knew they had something that worked, and that's where the inspiration came from in the first place. They were getting more and more calls from people saying, “Hey, can we come visit you or shadow you and figure out how you do it?” And they started doing training institutes or a small-scale training program.*

*I think it's really about taking a model that has worked incredibly well in a relatively small market, a model that has huge potential for improving the financial security and long-term stability of a very marginalized low-income population – and taking that nationwide, leading a national impact based on a proven model.*

*So they kind of have gone through the “proof of concept phase,” as Bob [the network’s President] likes to say, and now it's about figuring out how to impact the greatest number of lives possible with that proven model.*

But disseminating a successful model can be challenging. The work of spreading intellectual capital is inevitably bumpy. Here a staff member and a network member at this affordable housing network talk about some of the challenges that they have faced in disseminating a locally developed model across the US.

*Respondent 1: We're still trying to grapple with the differences among states and the ways in which the network’s standardized models and templates can actually be used in different states. It's probably a bigger task than any of us at first realized. It points to the fact that given the different state laws and the ways in which things have evolved over time, when you try to roll out a national network from a state-specific model, you can almost guarantee that there's going to be a lot of bumps in the road, a lot of work to tailor that model to make it work in different places.*

*Respondent 2: Don’s absolutely right: It’s much more complicated than we would have expected up-front and much more time-consuming.*

*Respondent 1: I think another challenge is that there’s some tension that's created by the central office and field office dynamic in the network. We have this long history of a successful program in New Hampshire, and we took this leap of faith that this was an exportable model and went about it as if, of course, it is. It's exportable until you prove to us that it can't be done everywhere.*

*But you've got a lot of the network’s resources that are still tied up in New Hampshire, and based on the New Hampshire experience, and also support the New Hampshire work. Then, you've got these other operations that are spread around the country, where we feel like sometimes there's lines of control in terms of the way in which we're going to do the work which are governed by our network agreement and by legal documents that we've agreed to. But there's also, in the Old West analogy, the supply lines, the Pony Express. It doesn't necessarily get to every corner of the country just as quickly. So we feel like sometimes the resources that support the work are more disproportionately focused in New Hampshire, because obviously, they've been doing this for 25 years.*

*Respondent 2: It's not easy. I think Don’s right. We came into this with the predominant experience in the national office out of New Hampshire’s experience. And that has just influenced us in a very deep way. I thought we did some things to overcome that, but the experience of the last three years has provided pushback to a point where we obviously*

*needed to learn a lot more and implement a lot more strategies in order to bust through the network's challenges.*

## Financial capital (and livelihood development)

As mentioned, the types of capital we discussed above are ones that are more intangible and are focused internally within networks. As we turn to financial capital, we begin to explore forms of capital that are more tangible and are developed outside of networks, primarily in the communities in which they work. With financial capital, we begin to look at concrete, on-the-ground impacts in local communities. There are two related concepts that we have brought together in this section: financial capital (which refers to monetary assets that people can invest) and livelihood development (which refers to people's ability to accumulate monetary assets).

**Financial capital.** Financial capital is the stock of monetary assets among people and communities in a region. Financial capital refers to monetary assets that can be invested in other forms of capital or financial instruments. Financial capital includes household savings and assets or an endowment created at a community foundation. It includes investments in land protection through land purchase or the purchase of easements. It includes local governments that build budget surpluses and rainy day funds.

**Livelihood development.** One thing that financial capital does not include is the work of increasing people's incomes. In terms of money, financial capital focuses on assets, wealth, and savings – on an accumulation, pot, or pool of money that has been built up over time and can be used to create more wealth. Income is not necessarily wealth. Even if my income increases, I may spend it all and have no wealth, assets, or savings left over. Income is a flow: income flows into a household and creates wealth, but only if that wealth “sticks” by not flowing back out (in form of expenses).<sup>9</sup> You can think of livelihood development and building financial capital as two ends of a continuum. The initial building block for improved livelihoods is greater income – jobs paying wages that allow families to get ahead, and businesses that generate increased revenues so that profits increase. *Livelihood* in this context means enabling a household or individual to accumulate assets, which in turn enables them to overcome vulnerability, maintain dignity, control their lives, take risks or seize opportunities, and rebound from setbacks.<sup>10</sup>

Several of the networks we interviewed have achieved livelihood impacts. The story below provides one example.

*Respondent: We had major culture wars [in our community]. I think it had been decades since our Forest Service was able to propose a project, get it through the environmental analysis, and not have it litigated. Even firewood sales were getting thrown out in court. So the gridlock was essentially between the environmental community and the Forest*

<sup>9</sup> Hoffer, D. & Levy, M. (2010). *Measuring Community Wealth*. Retrieved from <http://www.yellowwood.org/MeasuringCommunityWealth.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Yellow Wood Associates (2010). *Project Summary & Wealth Matrix: Wealth Creation Working Group*. Retrieved from: <http://www.yellowwood.org/Project%20Summary%20and%20Wealth%20Matrix.pdf>



*Service. And on every project, it would come down to the same concerns. The Forest Service would then offer up another project that really didn't change anything except for the location.*

*Interviewer: Right. And I'm sure this is a long and complicated story, but has there been movement on that since then? Is that still the case in Clear River, or is it a little better?*

*Respondent: Well, that's really where our organization takes a lot of pride. The first collaborative project that we worked on, we started in 2006 – on the discussions, handholding, and community-based design. The Forest Service took our recommendations and sent it through the environmental analysis process. It was the first project that received no appeals, no litigation.*

*And you know, there were a few environmental groups that had been litigant that did not participate with us [in the local network], but the other members of the environmental community who did participate acted as sort of a bridge to those organizations. "Hey, here's one of the things we're talking about, and we wanted to make you were aware of that. If you've got concerns, tell me know so I can bring that back to the group."*

*Interviewer: That's fascinating, congratulations.*

*Respondent: Thanks. It's one of those things that took a lot of persistence, but people are actually getting jobs out of it now.*

Moving from jobs and increased income to the creation of financial capital will require more intentional focus on building financial assets - helping people save part of their income through asset building strategies; using the power of a network to attract new investment into a region by business partners in a value chain; bringing new financial instruments into a region that provide better control over financial assets (e.g., the line of credit example in the Built Capital story on page 18 below).

Finally, several of the networks that we interviewed track outcomes related to increasing streams of income for households and individuals across their regions of service. Increasing income is another example of livelihood development. The outcomes related to increasing income are impressive. Two examples include the following:

- In the first year of its effort to strengthen local food value chains across a five-state rural region, one network we interviewed saw total farmer revenue increase from \$3.5 million to \$4.7 million; further, the amount of chemical-free or organic farmland contributing to these value chains nearly doubled.
- Over two years, farmers in a second network we interviewed increased their revenue by a total of \$879,000.

## Natural capital

Natural capital is the stock of environmental assets in a community or region. Several of the networks we interviewed focus on building environmental capital in their region. They focus on decreasing the use of non-renewable sources of energy (such as gas or coal), developing forms of renewable energy (such as solar or wind powered energy), and on developing environmental services such as flood control and waste assimilation. Natural capital also refers to efforts to avoid further environmental harm; building natural capital often means environmental restoration as well as environmental conservation.

As one example related to natural capital, the story below is from a group within a network that attempts to reduce energy usage on farms in rural areas. This is a single story of change on one farm in one state; however, this network's working groups could tell many different stories similar to this one. It is important to hear a single, relatively small-scale story, and then multiply it out exponentially to get a sense of a network's collective impact related to natural capital.

*Interviewer: Tell me the story about the farmers who came to the meeting to talk about their grants. What did they do and what impact did it have on their energy use on their farms?*

*Respondent: Okay, sure. The first farmer, Mike Orton, is a guy in Templeton locally. For me, this is an interesting story because when he first made a proposal, he wanted to buy a woodchip-burning boiler that he would use to heat a hoop house on his fruit and vegetable farm.*

*He ended up doing two things [with the small grant from the network]. He did install a wood-burning boiler. He gets some free logs from a local tree service that are pine and maple, I think he said, and so he just burns these logs in this boiler. It puts air into a germination hoop house.*

*So he did that, and then he also used some of the money to buy materials and pay for his labor to build what he called a "super-insulated," bigger hoop house. He put up a double layer of material on the walls of the hoop house and special doors that were super-insulated, and then he added some of his own ideas, like more insulation on the north side of the hoop house. Finally he had this other idea about filling some black barrels with water to act as a heat sink to get more heat into the hoop house. People at the working group meeting were really interested in that, of course.*

*Interviewer: So the bottom line is, I assume, that by insulating those hoop houses, he extends his growing season and can produce more and earn more. Is that the chain of results?*

*Respondent: Well, the important part is that it also reduces his reliance on LP gas [to heat the hoop houses]. He's reducing his traditional energy use, and he's also using a renewable resource. And he has a cost savings as well, because he's paying for less LP*

*gas, which is going up and up. Those are the kinds of things that we were hoping people would do.*

## Built capital

Built capital is the stock of fully functioning infrastructure in a community or region. This is basically a community or region's physical infrastructure – its water and sewer lines, fiber optic cables, housing stock, and so on. Two of the networks we interviewed focus on affordable housing, on increasing the stock of available and affordable housing for people living in low-wealth rural communities. Networks allow individual affordable housing entities to come together to think and act across a multi-state region or across the country, in a way that they would be unable to do alone.

Both of the affordable housing networks that we interviewed track their outcomes across their regions of service. These outcomes are impressive. Two examples are outlined below:

- Over the past few years, one affordable housing network has increased its network-wide annual production of affordable housing units across a rural, low-wealth four-state region from 2,000 to 4,300 units per year and increased its capital deployment from \$5 million to \$42 million per year.
- Since 2008, a national affordable housing network has helped groups of residents in 27 communities across 12 states purchase their mobile home communities, adding a total of 1,725 affordable housing units.

Affordable housing networks provide many benefits, services, and products for their members. We present one example among many in the quotation below. This network has products – loans and lines of credit – that its members use in their work. These products are an important benefit for network members. One network member that we interviewed outlined a few different ways that her organization had benefitted from the network's products.

The story below story makes clear how a network can help its members increase built capital. Interestingly, this story relates to financial capital as well. The network member describes a loan and a line of credit that the network provides, both of which allow the network member's organization to purchase or build more affordable housing. In other words, it is financial capital (the loan and line of credit provided by the network) that allows the network member's organization to develop more built capital (stocks of affordable housing). Forms of capital are often intertwined.

*Recently, this would have been last spring maybe a year ago, I was working on a deal that was a stretch for us. We were partnering with another group to purchase a 58-unit Section 8 project that was being sold by a retiring owner, in a county contiguous to but outside of our footprint, with the idea of buying it and renovating it. It's probably a 35- or 40-year old project.*

*I was working with our state housing finance agency on bringing some soft money to the deal to get some renovation done now in preparation for a wholesale rehab through the tax credit program in the near future. And to make a long story short, our state housing finance agency couldn't really do this deal and didn't tell me that for a long time, and we got to really the end of our timeframe with the seller and we were short [some of the money].*

*We had to come up with funds. I called William at the network and said, "Look, can you do something here? Can you lend us just a small loan for three years? You'll be refinanced when we get our tax credit." He turned this deal around. He saved the deal with his little bit of money that came in in a subordinate position. It was around \$60,000 that we needed to get the deal done. And he turned it around in a couple of weeks. And a lot of times it's those smaller pieces [of money] that make the difference. So boy, was that ever valuable.*

*And then the other [network] product we started using was a line of credit several years ago, maybe four or five years ago. We had a line with our local bank. And I realized that was something that we could do with this network. As a Housing Authority, I have to put it out to bid, so I had to look at bids from various entities, local and not. And there are some really good reasons to do business with your local bank, obviously, so I wanted to be very careful about who did this.*

*But they [the network] definitely had the better product. And after a year of being on a line [of credit] where we had to pay down once a year, which can be kind of tough, we're now in a situation where we no longer have to do that. And the line [of credit] has become absolutely critical. So that's just a good, well-priced, well-managed product. It's easy to draw on.*

## Political capital

Political capital is the stock of collective power and goodwill among people, which can be used to achieve desired ends in a region. Political capital can be used to increase access and control over other forms of capital. In the context of the work of networks, political capital often relates to policy change and systems change.

Several of the networks that we interviewed track political capital outcomes across their regions of service. These outcomes are impressive. Three examples are outlined below:

- One network has helped bring into existence seven major federal environmental laws or programs during its 10-year history, including the National Fire Plan, the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, The Forest Landscape Restoration Act, and the Community Forest and Open Space Program.
- Another network took the lead in developing a statewide Local Food and Farm Plan, through a series of 14 listening sessions in communities across the state; this eventually led to state funding to develop a new Food and Farm Council (with two network members serving on this council) to implement the recommendations in the plan.

- A third network recently joined other immigrants' rights groups in stopping the passage of over 100 bills proposed in the state legislature that would have been harmful to immigrants.

There are several relevant stories related to political capital from the interviews in this study. The story below is about a statewide Local Food and Farm Plan. As mentioned above, this plan was developed through a series of 14 listening sessions in communities across the state. The recommendations in this plan were foundation of a state senate bill, which eventually passed. At the time of the interview below, the state senate bill was under consideration. By the time this report was published, the network coordinators told us that the senate bill had passed. This bill appropriated funding to create a new statewide Food and Farm Council, with the money going to implement the recommendations in the Food and Farm Plan that the network wrote. Further, two representatives from this network are serving on the state Food and Farm Council, ensuring that the network will continue to influence and shape local food policies in the state in the future. In sum, this network clearly had a direct impact on influencing state policy, and its members are in a position to continue to shape policy in the future.

Below, two leaders within the network's management team describe the community-based process through which this plan was developed, and the early stages of policy change process outlined above, when the senate bill was being considered.

*Respondent 1: So it's an interesting story with the Regional Foods Working Group in particular that, among other things, has led us to the point right now where there is a senate bill that has a lot of local food legislation in it that was influenced by the Local Food and Farm Plan. It [the plan and subsequent legislation] would never have happened without it [the Regional Foods Working Group].*

*Respondent 2: I think the strand here is that ability of people to give, to contribute. And so that whole Food and Farm Plan demonstrated the capacity that's been built in the [network] channels and trust.*

*People could actually have a direct influence on policy through this whole process. They could say, "We need more meat inspectors," or whatever the actual recommendation was. That came from the grassroots. Through the network, people can influence things. They're not just receiving something, but they're actually having an influence at a broader than local level.*

*Respondent 1: And the plan was developed through all of the working groups, but that group of 14 local groups [that make up the network's Regional Food Systems Working Group], basically they coordinated all the local listening sessions. We had the infrastructure in place to do the plan because of all the network-building we had done already.*

Another outcome related to political capital is collective voice. There is a collective power and collective influence that is possible when groups band together that is not possible for any group on its own. While collective voice is an intangible quality, the outcomes that it leads to

are real – as the other passages in this section make clear. Collective voice is a key element, almost a precursor, for building political capital. The concept of collective voice is related to the process of building the stock of collective power and goodwill needed to influence systems and policies. The comments below, from a leader within a network’s management team, provide a sense of the importance of collective voice in networks.

*Respondent: Part of the point of this thing [this network] is to enable rural voices to engage in policy. One of your questions was, “What are the network’s goals?” Well, that’s always been a goal of the coalition – that there are all these people that go to Washington, but none of them are hardly ever muddy boots people from rural America, and so giving voice to them is crucial. Particularly in the public lands context, where you have this sort of industry-environmentalist slugfest, and the communities who are most affected by that usually don’t have a voice.*

*But I don’t know that someone [in the network] would say that. Like if you wanted to know what are the outcomes of it [the network], that’s the touchy-feely outcome that’s probably overarching, but is it the one that someone like Ann [a community-based rural leader] would say? “The goal of this coalition is to give me voice?” No.*

*Interviewer: Well, honestly, they do. When I talk with them, they say “us” rather than “me,” but yeah, basically they do say that.*

*Respondent: Interesting. And you know, a major moment of rubber hitting the road [related to people’s voice] is having created a reputation that leads people [on Capitol Hill in Washington DC] to call Ellen [the network coordinator] and say, “Hey, I’m doing a hearing. We need a community-based forestry witness.” And she says, “Here are four people.” And one of them gets picked.*

*I mean, that is huge. That’s a really, really big change, if you go back and look to who was sitting on these hearing committees in 1987. It’s completely different [now]. Recently there have been, more than once, hearings exclusively around community issues where everybody, every member of the panel, is community-based. And that was not happening before. The first time it happened, I think, was in 1995 or ’96, and it was a major, major deal to get this to happen.*

Policy changes are one crucial form of political capital. In the story below, a member of a policy-focused network describes a series of policy victories that led her and her community-based organization to value policy advocacy work. This is a long story, with twists and turns, but it gives a good feel overall for how policy advocacy work is done within a network and how it can benefit local communities on the ground. We break up the quotation into headings to make it more readable, but it occurred as one conversation.



### Becoming interested in policy work

*Respondent: So, the way the network approaches policy is really pragmatic. It's basically people from groups like mine getting together in a big room and sharing their experience about how they are trying to lift their community up out of some pretty dire situations.*

*You know, we started out only talking in the context of forestry, but that was a pretty big subject. You hear an example of a success story and you pick it apart. You say, "Well, why did that work there? Why were they able to use local contractors in that situation? What did you have to do first?" Then you'd hear an example, maybe from someone like me, where they had disasters happen. And we'd say, "Why did that happen? What were the barriers that caused that?"*

*To me, that's how you get normal folk interested in policy – you try not to use the policy too much and you try to talk about real life case studies. And why it worked, why it didn't work. We just happen to have smart enough people in the room that they say, "Well, you could tie that back to this act or this directive or this legislation. And this says you can do it. Or because of this legislation, the deck is stacked against you, and we need to change that. That should be a top priority for us." So then you get interested in it.*

### A concrete example of locally relevant federal policy change

*And here's a concrete example. There was something called the FLAME Act, and I can't rattle off to you what that acronym stands for. But when there's a catastrophic wildfire or when there's a big wildfire season, the Forest Service basically robs from all of the rest of their budget to pay for those fires.*

*What was happening with us is, we had been the victim of a very large fire, and then we tried to get our act together to create some fuels reduction projects so we wouldn't have another big fire. So we get the projects all ready to go. And then the Forest Service for fires in California steals from the whole Forest Service budget, including the spending budget. So our preventive measures then have no budget left.*

*One of the sign-on papers [in the network] was for the FLAME Act, and we were definitely in favor of Congress creating a separate pool of money for catastrophic, very large, very expensive wildfires and leaving the rest of the Forest Service budget alone. That was one of those things that was an incredibly important thing for my community and will continue to be.*

*I was able to contact some of our local congressional delegation, who just happened to be inordinately powerful in that discussion. You know, even though we're a small state, every now and then your guy's in the right place. It just so happened that one of our representatives was on the right committee to really move that forward.*

*And it passed. The FLAME Act passed.*

### The nuts and bolts of policy advocacy work

*Interviewer: So, a policy success. Concretely within your network, how does it work from where you sit in Clear River? Like you get the [issue] paper and read through the paper and then you have your talking points to call your representatives in Washington? Just how do you use the tool there?*

*Respondent: You'll get an email that says, "Here's the deadline for signing onto this letter." Then the network higher ups will move that signed-on letter up the chain. So typically all you need to do is send an email saying, "Yeah, my organization supports this. Here's my name and contact information."*

*Occasionally it's something that is more than a passing interest, it's one of those things where you're like, "Hey, if this doesn't pass, I'm really going to be in a lot of trouble, and this is going to be really bad for my community." Then I have let Ellen [the network coordinator] know that, and she's like, "Well, great." She encourages me to contact my senator. I'm now at the point to where I don't need Ellen to say, "Contact your senator." I do that independently.*

### Another concrete example of locally relevant federal policy change

*And when we went to Washington this year [for the network's annual week-long policy advocacy effort], there was something called the Collaborative Landscape Forest Restoration Act that was being presented and had actually come before Congress. That was something that was really near and dear to my heart. We'd been working on the community level, and this was going to create a grant program that was going to be able to allow us to see some of our work be able to get funded.*

*So during the year these issues started coming up, and I really paid attention to that with an eye on, "Hey, I want to go back to Washington and really be an advocate for this, because it's something that would benefit my community. It would benefit communities all over, a lot of communities like mine. This is not a maybe. This is something that I really need to kind of evangelize for." So I went to Washington, and that was my main ask [when meeting with legislators]. And that one passed too, and now it's a federal program.*

## Brief case study

### The results of networks: Mixing multiple forms of capital

As the stories above illustrate, networks create multiple forms of capital. Most of the stories above, though, focused on a single form of capital. In practice, these forms of capital are typically mixed, merged, or intertwined. As networks consider their results, the whole package is often richer, messier and more complex than the stories above suggest.

The story below comes from a network with particularly deep roots in local low-wealth communities. The story touches upon several forms of capital: individual capital, social capital, intellectual capital, natural capital, political capital, and perhaps others. As is clear from the story, these forms of wealth are all interrelated and intertwined.

Here the network coordinator tells the story of how local grassroots leaders brought about significant systems and policy change through a process that started with relatively small, concrete, step-by-step accomplishments – things like getting a new streetlight in their neighborhood. It is a long story, so we break it up with headings, but it is worth telling in its entirety.

#### *A large national foundation fails to see the power of grassroots leaders*

*Respondent: We had a large national foundation come down and visit, and they were interested in, “How are you going to leverage this [the work of the groups that make up network] to bring change?”*

*And, of course, they don't know us, so they're kind of like, “Oh, yeah, y'all really can't do this. How can these women in this UNIDA community [a local grassroots organization] know anything?” I'll never forget the director of the foundation saying, “I visited this woman. She had a really good story, but her analysis of power was that she got a streetlight at the corner of her lot and that's all she can see.”*

*And I was like, “Yeah, that's major. It doesn't take but one or two of those kinds of ‘aha moments’ and she is on her way to Allensburg [the state capital, to lobby for policy changes].” But they just don't really understand the history here, so we're working with them. They're coming along, though.*

#### *Learning about policy work through a Get Out the Vote campaign*

*Interviewer: Right. And then the other thing I wouldn't mind hearing a bit more about is the trip to Allensburg [the state capital], because policy work is a theme that keeps coming up again and again in networks. So can you tell me your process there and what seems to be working, and how you're helping the people like that leader in that UNIDA community to see the importance of policy advocacy?*

*Respondent: Oh yeah, that's interesting. You know, this is a great example. So UNIDA has never done Get Out the Vote work [which the network was carrying out collectively]. We had a strategy meeting, and we talked about, "What are some of the things we should do?" And they [the network members] said, "Well, we should bring the candidates in for a candidates' forum." And then they [the members of the network] go off and do their own thing.*

*And UNIDA would often say, "Well, we could bring the candidates' forum in, but we don't think the candidates understand us." And this is a local election, it's a school board election. The women in UNIDA said, "They need to understand what it means when our kids have to get up at 4:30 in the morning to go to school because they've cut the bus routes and they've combined high school and elementary school. So we're going to do two candidates' forums, and the second candidates' forum is the candidates coming to meet us." That was interesting, and they did that.*

*So they did the first forum. And then we had a second candidates' forum with all of the groups involved. Well, so these women have already done this once. By the second time around they were veterans at this. And it went very well.*

#### **Learning about policy work by advocating with local government entities**

*And then right on top of that we had an action on Council of Governments about the hurricane monies [some money coming locally to rebuild damage from a large hurricane in 2008]. There's a major canal north of this area that's a problem, because the county it runs through can't really maintain it. And if it's not cleared, it gets flooding, and none of the flooding gets handled.*

*Our take on it is that there are a lot of rich people affected by that, and so one day sooner or later they will find a way to fix it [in the wealthy neighborhoods]. But our local neighborhoods are not going to be fixed, ever. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. And these women went to both county governments and went up to the microphone one after another in front of 20 very serious-looking people and spoke their piece.*

#### **Learning about policy by advocating with state legislators to stop anti-immigrant legislation**

*So by the time Allensburg came [the opportunity to visit the state capital and lobby against anti-immigrant legislation], they were like vets. They looked forward to it. We took 400 people to Allensburg in the middle of the week to do a protest and a rally and lobbying. And people came from both ends of our region, which is very hard to do. There was just a very, very solid presence.*

*And this immigration stuff, it's just horrible down here. When your outcome is that we hope no legislation passes, that's not really a very high bar, except when there are 100 pieces of just ridiculous kinds of legislation being put forth in an atmosphere that's so anti-immigrant.*

*This kind of work brings about strong grassroots leaders*

*And I think this is what our network is all about. I think this is the bottom-line, long-range, hard-to-always-see goal. It's to get our families, our working class families, comfortable and recognized at the table of decision makers. Obviously the more local the table, the more power their decisions will have. I think that's the long-term goal.*

*And sometimes it's fun for us, because when that large national foundation was down here, they were like, "Are there any families from the colonias here at the table?" The slums down here are called "colonias." And I was like, "Well, yeah, actually, that one right there and that one right there and that one right there.... The groups themselves are all from the colonias." And they were kind of like, "Oh." And, of course, what was not said is that, "Oh, they speak so well from being from the slums." Oh yeah, they do [speak well].*

A postscript to this story: since this interview, this network coordinator let us know that the lobbying efforts described above (along with many related lobbying efforts all across their state) were effective. None of the 100 or so anti-immigrant pieces of legislation that they were trying to stop were passed into law.

In sum, the story above illustrates how multiple forms of capital are interrelated and intertwined. Concretely, the story above illustrates several forms of capital, all of which become merged together in the story:

- Individual capital – the women in the story build skills, capacities, and knowledge by speaking out for themselves and coming together with other network members
- Social capital – the women build trust, relationships, mutual support, and connections with other network members as they plan their various actions and campaigns
- Intellectual capital – the women develop a new (and potentially replicable) twist on a Get Out the Vote campaign, by holding two candidate forums, one where they listen to candidates and one where candidates listen to them
- Natural capital – the women work to strengthen natural capital in their local community by advocating that the local Council of Governments allocate money for flood control
- Political capital – the women build political capital by joining together with other policy advocates and lobbying successfully against the passage of over 100 anti-immigrant pieces of legislation

In much of this chapter, we looked at forms of capital in isolation. In reality, though, these forms of capital are more typically merged and intertwined.

# Chapter Three

## The Management of Networks

Chapter Two focused on why networks matter and the results of networks. It focused on what a network can potentially do for an organization that the organization is likely unable to do on its own.

This chapter focuses on how networks are managed. Chapter Four focuses on how networks are organized.

We focus on network management in this chapter because the people we interviewed for this research project lifted up the practice of network management repeatedly in our conversations. The skills and roles outlined in this chapter are some of the core skills and roles that need to be carried out to build a strong network. Also, the data in this section are powerful. The people we interviewed are clearly passionate about the importance of network management. That passion emerges from the various stories below.

We begin with two distinctions related to network management. First, we realized, in the course of our research, that there were two different entities that carry out the work of network management in the networks that we interviewed: network management teams and core groups.

We also realized that network management work was organized structurally in three different ways in the networks we interviewed: backbone support organizations, network maintenance organizations, and network staff. We expand and flesh out these distinctions below.

First, networks participating in this study use two major entities to manage or coordinate the organizational maintenance and development of their network:

- **Management team.** All of the networks that we interviewed have a network manager or network management team, a person or group that manages, coordinates, and weaves together the network. The management team is not made up of network members; rather, it is made up of staff hired (either permanently or on a contract basis) by the network or the sponsoring organization.
- **Core group.** Most of the networks have a core group, made up of representatives from network members, that works with a management team to manage and coordinate the network. Some networks call this group a steering committee or general committee.

Second, networks participating in this study use three different organizational structures to carry out the work of network management. In other words, network management teams (as outlined above) are housed or located in three different places structurally or organizationally within the various networks we studied:

- **Backbone support organizations.** Some of the networks that we studied have hired, usually on a contract basis, a separate organization to manage the network and serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. Following a recent paper on collective impact, we call these outside management organizations *backbone support organizations*.<sup>11</sup> In this case, network management is carried out by an independent organization that also engages in other work (besides managing the network) and has no ownership in the network or its efforts.
- **Network maintenance organizations.** Some of the networks that we studied are a project of a larger organization. One person we interviewed used the term “network maintenance organization” to describe these larger umbrella organizations, and that term makes sense to us. A *network maintenance organization* is a parent or umbrella organization that provides staff time and money for the maintenance and operations of a network. In this case, network management is carried out by a larger organization that started the network, has some ownership of the network and its efforts, and is responsible for raising and managing the network’s funding.
- **Network staff.** Some networks, particularly those that are formally incorporated, have a paid, permanent (rather than contract) staff team that works for the network. In other words, the network is large enough to have formed as a separate legal entity and hired a permanent staff member (or team) who focuses mostly on network management. In this case, network management is carried out by a person or team who is part of the network and beholden to the network’s members.

## Roles and tasks for network management teams

This section outlines the roles and tasks that network managers or network management teams carry out, regardless of how they are structured within a network. Backbone support organizations, network maintenance organizations, and network staff all carry out essentially the same roles. The basic work of a network management team is to coordinate both the work of the network and its development as an entity or organization. The role of managing a network has many components. The components of network management lifted up most frequently by the people we interviewed for this research are outlined below.

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<sup>11</sup> Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011). *Collective impact*. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2011.



Major roles and tasks for network management teams include the following:

- **Coordinating network tasks.** Network management teams wake up every day thinking about the network and its work so that members don't have to. They attend to and address the details of network logistics, manage networks tasks and timelines, manage the network's meetings, and plan and coordinate large network events.
- **Facilitation.** Network management teams facilitate face-to-face meetings and conference calls (keeping the group on track and moving forward), develop agendas for meetings of network members, and capture key reference points for the group.
- **Leadership and lead thinking.** Network management teams are good at unearthing a strategy that emerges organically from network members' conversations. They hear members' ideas, synthesize them, throw out what they are hearing and what they think ought to be done, then take members' direction as the group moves forward.
- **Vision.** Network management teams are true believers in what the network is trying to get done. They share the network's vision, but their vision is broad enough to incorporate all of the various strategies that the network might use.
- **Managing network structure and relationships.** Network management teams reflect critically on the network's structure in order to improve it, understand each member of the network and where it wants to go, make sure all of the groups within the network are coordinating well, and weave together the relationships of the groups within the network.
- **Communications.** Network management teams make sure all meetings and communication have value for members. They communicate regularly with members, get materials out early before calls and meetings, and serve as a clearinghouse for network documents and information.
- **Administration.** Network management teams manage the administrative needs of the network (e.g., making sure grant agreements are filed).
- **Data collection and reporting.** Network management teams help the network develop and use shared measurement and evaluation systems for its work, and develop summary reports of outcomes.
- **Fundraising.** Network management teams write grant proposals and reports, serve as a liaison between members and funders, and connect members with funders.
- **Organizational development support.** Network management teams support organizations' development and help them in times of crisis.
- **Policy work.** Network management teams coordinate broad-scale policy efforts (in policy-oriented networks), work with network members on specific policy advocacy efforts, and maintain relationships with legislative staff and government agency staff.

## Coordinating network tasks

Below, we look more deeply at each of the network management roles and tasks outlined above, providing stories from research participants that bring these roles alive.

As conceptualized by research participants, the role of coordinating network tasks includes several activities:

- Waking up thinking about the network and its work, so members don't have to
- Doing all of the little things that need to be done so network members don't have to worry about any network logistics
- Managing the network's tasks and timelines, holding members accountable
- Managing meetings: scheduling meetings, setting up logistics (lunch, location), notes
- Planning and coordinating large network events as well as ongoing meetings

Below, a member of the network management team at one of the networks we interviewed talks about the importance of coordinating network tasks, at a broad and general level.

*I feel like if we weren't involved, people would be like, "Oh what's happening with the network? What do we need to do?" It would just be constantly like, "What's going on? What do we do next?"*

*And I feel like with us involved, they have a sense that – even little stuff, like logistics for meetings or whatever – they just don't have to worry about it. They know we're going to let them know what they need to know. We're going to give them the information that they need when they need it. And we're going to make sure things run smoothly, and they're not going to have to worry about it.*

*The bottom line is that we wake up every day and think about what needs to be done with the network, and nobody else does.*

*We kind of take the need for leadership off of the members, because we do the agendas, we do the notes, we make sure things are going well. No one in the network has to be responsible for that, and I think that's helpful.*

*And everybody else benefits. They've got a whole plate of work already. They benefit from being a part of the network. They benefit from the funds. They benefit from the peer support. They benefit from the collaborations.*

*But the network is only a small part of their work. So it's just that we're making sure that everything is done so that it moves forward, and then everybody is happier and they get along better and they work tighter.*

## Facilitation

Research participants mentioned facilitation as a key role for network management teams. This included several activities and roles:

- Meeting facilitation: keeping the group on track and making decisions
- Facilitating both face-to-face meetings and conference calls
- Developing agendas with network members
- Capturing reference points for the group

Several respondents emphasized that high-quality facilitation is crucial for moving a network forward. The comment below provides a sense of the importance of strong facilitation skills in network management.

*Andrew has some tremendous facilitation skills. He keeps the group moving. Mary Ann Smith, his predecessor, she did not. She just wasn't as good at that. We'd sit in these meetings, and we'd spend all day hashing through stuff. You didn't feel like you got anywhere.*

*Basically, what Andrew and Molly [the network management team] have brought is process. "We're going to do X." They tell you what we're going to do, then we do it, and then we follow up to make sure that we did what we said we were going to do and that it's working. So there's a cycle of process that I think people are becoming accustomed to.*

*I think there was frustration [before]. I got frustrated. I remember leaving a meeting in Jonesville. I was down there for two days, and what did we accomplish? Nothing. So I think that role of a facilitator is important, somebody that's kind of neutral. They don't have a dog in the fight.*

Another key facilitation skill is capturing a group's reference points, the key ideas and concepts that groups come back to again and again in their work.

*I think one of the keys, in facilitation, is capturing and reminding people of reference points. I really am pretty keen on the idea. It's like you've got to give people things they said that are important signposts about their understanding of their work, or what we've agreed to do together, and make those really acceptable.*

*I'm talking about things like a set of principles, annual goals. Just those references that help a diverse group of people who don't think about it every day reorient themselves to the work, and then use the reference points to make decisions or planning, and so on.*

*For us, we have a document called "the foundation," and it's a two-page list of values and long-term goals, and I'm pulling them out all the time. Not because I forget them, but because I'm going to help other people remember them and know where to find them. So facilitation, reference points – these are crucial.*

## Leadership and lead thinking

Research participants lifted up the importance of lead thinking, which is a form of network leadership. Leadership and lead thinking are captured by the practices below, all of which were described by the people we interviewed in this study. Lead thinking is defined as follows:

- Hearing members' ideas, synthesizing them, and throwing out what one is hearing and what one thinks is the right thing to do, and then taking network members' direction
- Unearthing a strategy that emerges organically from network members' conversation
- Making suggestions to the network based on the facilitator's experiences, and having those suggestions be considered by network members as coming from a peer

One network member defines lead thinking as hearing the wisdom among group members, synthesizing that wisdom, and putting forth ideas based on the group's collective wisdom.

*Lead thinking is crucial. I think this is one of the tricky dynamics [in network management]. It's like somebody needs to be able to take a bunch of diverse ideas from a bunch of different people, and then sort of lead think and organize and synthesize those ideas, and then send them back out [to the group].*

*It's my sense that this role [the network management role] needs to do more than just be a reporter. Clearly, somebody needs to check in with lots of folks about what they need to be doing, and what the priorities are. But then they need to synthesize and spit out their thinking of what the right thing is to do. And the trick is that balance of asking, getting feedback, synthesizing, developing a direction, then saying, "All right, this is what I think I've heard, does this make sense?" And then going forward.*

Another network member lifts up the importance of reflecting back a group's collective wisdom, of unearthing a group's strategy that is emerging through a conversation or dialogue.

*I think in the best possible scenario, they [the network management team] need to have a leadership role to be able to reflect back to the group, like, "This is where I think you all are going. Is that right?" And to be able to see the moments, or be able to capture the things that are – this is going to sound like a cliché – that are bigger than the parts.*

*Because when we're all talking with each other, we're individually and personally invested in whatever we just said. And somebody has to be able to see the whole, and reflect that back and summarize it.*

*What Molly and Andrew [the current network management team] specifically did that we didn't have before, and that I think a group of high-powered peers will have a hard time doing, is unearthing the strategy that's coming out through the conversation. We really need somebody to just hold up the mirror and reflect it back.*

## Managing network structure and relationships

Research participants mentioned that network management teams need to understand networks. This is obvious, but important. Aspects of this role include the following:

- Reflecting critically on the network structure to improve it
- Understanding each network member and where it wants to go
- Making sure all of the various groups within the network are coordinating well
- Weaving together the relationships of the different groups

First, network management teams help network members think about the best structure for moving the work forward. This means helping network members develop a structure that is as lean and efficient as possible, so that there is no extra or wasted work. This is captured in the comment below.

*It's about helping us think strategically about the best use of our time. It's about the structure too: "Do we really need to be having all these activities that have all these tasks, or can it be done differently? Can it be done this way and approved that way?" It's about helping us to rethink [our structure] and work smarter.*

Network management teams also weave together the relationships in a network. Here one network coordinator describes his work as a network weaver, one who weaves together the relationships across a network.

*I really hated the term "network weaver" in the beginning, but that is what it is. It's weaving together the relationships of the different groups, more than anything else. I think the very first responsibility is to know and understand the work of each organization and know and understand their strengths and weaknesses, their history, and where it is they want to go.*

*So I think my vision, my role, is to foment the relationships among the groups. And if there's a hard moment, it's kind of like going over to somebody and saying, "You know, it probably would be good if you were a little bit nicer on this point." It's like they really respect your opinion, and so it's kind of pastoring work, actually.*

Network management teams facilitate network members' working together. Here the focus is not on facilitating meetings, but on facilitating relationships and communication among network members. Below, a network member describes the work of a network manager:

*Alan's role is a facilitator. He gets things done. He's the person who follows up on the issues and brings back an agenda and really facilitates all the groups working together. He contacts us every once in a while to see how issues are going. He really does carry out his role, and he doesn't get into the nitty-gritty of your other parts of the project. He only focuses on what the role of the whole network is. Basically, he does that well, and he gives you support as you need it.*

## Communications and information management

As conceptualized by research participants, this role includes several activities:

- Communicating regularly with members
- Getting materials out early before calls and meetings
- Making sure calls and meetings are meaningful for participants
- Managing the network's data collection, data management, and reporting
- Serving as a clearinghouse for network documents and information
- Managing a network website
- Writing and publishing stories about the network or a newsletter

One network emphasizes that communication among network members, and between network management teams and members, has to be meaningful to network participants:

*I would raise up the importance of communication, and communication in a few different ways. First, just kind of transparency, and having the channels there for transparent communications back and forth between network members and the network hub or parent.*

*But also designing the communication in a way that really meets the needs of the network members and holds value for them. When we first started, we held quarterly conference calls among our network members. But when those conference calls turn into sort of a round-robin reporting out what everybody is doing, it's not useful then. Because it starts feeling like an obligation for people to participate, and they don't participate because they think it's an obligation, right?*

*Really, the long and short of it is that those conversations need to be structured and need to be focused on things that are of value to the network members as opposed to, "Oh, let's just get the network together to talk." So that's where it starts: communication*

A member of another network states clearly that collecting data on network-wide outcomes, when done well, can be crucial to communicate a network's impacts to others. Being able to quickly communicate information is important too.

*And I think that the ability to just quickly communicate some results is huge. It was difficult to agree on what the "what" is [what will be measured in data collection related to network-wide outcomes]. That's the hard part. And, "Do we need to be measuring as much as we're measuring?"*

*But when I did a recent webinar for the network – boy, just a couple of those little data points [that the network management team provided] about a measurable increase in acres in production, or a measurable increase in wholesale [agricultural] sales... Wow. Yeah, it's painful to get that data, but that's what's compelling.*

## Fundraising

Network management teams often play a major role in fundraising for the network. Aspects of this role include the following:

- Writing grant proposals and reports
- Serving as a liaison between network members and major funders
- Being connected to funders and understanding funder's priorities

Fundraising and grants management can take up a lot of a network coordinator's time. Below, a member of a network management team lists grantwriting and grants management as her most intensive piece of work.

*There are a lot of grant proposals and reports. I would say that we spend the biggest chunks of time on that, or at least that I spend the biggest chunks of my time on it. It's definitely been a lot.*

In addition to writing and managing grants, managing relationships among funders and network members is an important part of the fundraising effort. Here one network coordinator describes the roles she plays related to fundraising.

*I think another part of my job with the network is, we do the fundraising. We do the grant management and administration.*

*We do the funder relations. When we do our big events, it's my job to think about what's the VIP strategy [for funders]. If we're getting foundations to the meeting, I'm thinking, "Who [among our network members] do I need to make sure meets that funder, because I know that they've got that project?" So it's also my job to serve as that networker – not just a networker for the benefit of my organization, but a networker for the movement.*

*If you look at one major foundation that we work with, they fund a lot of the groups in our network, and I think that that's because one, my boss is on the board of the foundation, but two, I've really worked hard. The program officer there is incredible, wonderful. And I've worked really hard to make sure that when she comes to our meetings, she meets the emerging leaders there so that she can have relationships with them. And if they can compete and get funding from that foundation, then that just makes me so happy.*



## Policy work

Network management teams also play various roles in policy advocacy processes. This includes roles such as the following:

- Coordinating broad-scale policy efforts
- Working with members on specific policy advocacy efforts
- Advocating for the network and network members in policy arenas
- Maintaining relationships with legislative staff and government agency staff, and making sure network members have direct access to those relationships

One network coordinator plays a key role in facilitating network members' policy work. Here she describes her role related to policy advocacy:

*I've heard a lot of people talk about gatekeepers, and I kind of consider myself the opposite of a gatekeeper.*

*My job is to establish relationships with congressional staff and government agency staff, because I get paid to have those relationships and I can maintain them. But my job is to take the relationships that I have created and give my partners direct access to those individuals, so that they don't have to go through me.*

*And my indicator of success is when the person in the network that I'm working with or community partner that I'm working with has a relationship with their congressional office or with a committee staffer independent of me. Because that's when I know I've done my job.*

*But in order for me to do that, I have to constantly be creating new relationships on the Hill [Capitol Hill in Washington DC]. I need to be mending relationships when political parties change, or when weird things happen, or when a community member comes in and expresses a lot of frustration, and that staffer might call me and say, "Blah-blah-blah...." And my job is to look at it from where they're sitting and to be the person that helps that.*

*And that, to me, is the opposite of a gatekeeper. I can see how a lot of people from a distance could think that I was a gatekeeper, but I honestly, from the bottom of my heart, don't feel that I do that in any way.*

## Brief case study

### Three perspectives on network management

Above we have presented data that outline various roles that network management teams play. Yet the work of network managers is more complex and rich than the sum of its parts. Below, we present several extended and general reflections on the work of network managers, some by network managers and some by members of networks. These comments give a full, rounded sense of what the work of network management teams often looks like on the ground.

The stories below emerge from slightly different perspectives on network management. Recall from above that there are three major organizational structures that networks in this study use to manage themselves:

- **Backbone support organization:** Network management is carried out by an independent organization that also engages in other work (besides managing the network) and has no ownership in the network or its efforts.
- **Network maintenance organization:** Network management is carried out by a larger organization that started the network, has some ownership of the network and its efforts, and is responsible for raising and managing the network's funding.
- **Network staff:** Network management is carried out by a person or team that is part of the network and beholden to the network's members.

Below, we have presented stories that provide a rich sense of the work of network management teams in each of the organizational structures outlined above. While the work of network management is common across all three of these structures, they differ slightly in emphasis.

#### Backbone support organization

The first story is from two members of a network management team that serves as a backbone support organization for a network. More concretely, these two people work for a social enterprise consulting business that was hired by one of the networks we interviewed to manage the network. Since these two network managers are part of an independent and separate organization, they emphasize roles such as facilitating the processes and visions of network members and having alternative visions of how the network could organize or structure itself. Since the quotation below is long, we have added headings to break up the comments and make them easier to read, but they occurred as a single conversation.

##### *Facilitation*

*Network manager 1: One of the big things [we do] is obviously facilitation at the meetings and [conference] calls. I think the biggest piece is facilitating the meetings. They [the*

*network members] used to come together, and the meetings were terrible, and they were just exhausting. And now they run smoothly and they're effective and they're efficient. And actually people leave there feeling like they've gotten a lot done.*

*But creating that common vision, creating those common plans, and then really helping to facilitate the development of all of that to where there's movement – it's just critical.*

### Managing grants and shared measurement systems

*Network manager 2: And then there are a lot of grant proposals and reports. I would say that I spend the biggest chunks of time on that. It's definitely been a lot.*

*All of the data collection is also a huge part of our time. And it's not just writing the reports, but what we've also been doing is a lot of conversations with the network's sub-regional partners [local partners of the network's core members] about the data collection and things like that.*

*Because we've been asking them for all this data, all this information, to write the first year report [for the network's largest funder], and we asked them for all the information to write the baseline report too. In the fall we just sort of asked them for the information and got what we could from them, and this time around we're trying to be much more deliberate about doing some training and education as far as why we're using this framework [a particular data collection framework that a large funder developed] and what the framework means, so that they have a context for this data collection. We're not just asking them for random information. We're trying to provide some education and understanding of the context as well.*

*So I've had a couple of informal conversations with some sub-regional people and then also did a conference call training last week for six people about the data collection framework and how to do some future [data collection] interviews that we're doing.*

*So when there are things as complicated as this data collection framework, it's like they've hired us to figure that stuff out that nobody's got time to figure out, and so we have dedicated time to step back and figure out that complicated stuff and focus specifically on how it relates to the network and how it can help the network move forward.*

### Communication and administration

*And then I would say the other big role is sort of the like managing communication among the members. Just all kinds of random questions that people have, and policies and procedures for getting funds reimbursed, and scheduling meetings and all of that kind of administrative stuff.*

### Vision for the network's structure

*Network manager 1: And I guess one of the main things I think we've brought to the network is vision. There were work plans in place and things like that, but I've heard one network member say a couple of times, she's like, "God, I'm so glad that you all have a vision for this network and how it could work." Right?*

*They had plans in place, obviously, and they had worked on stuff and so on and so forth, but I'm not sure that anybody was thinking, like, "How does the network work, and what is the work of the network, and how is it different from the individual work of each network member, and how do we sort of quantify that?" You know?*

*I think there's a clear vision now for the network's work and the purpose of the network versus a bunch of individual organizations just kind of doing something together.*

### Helping things work smoothly in general

*Also, I think it's just like all the other work we've done. We just make things work. It's just whatever needs to be done to keep the wheels moving forward, and there are just a lot of little things. I can't even begin to describe that, but we're just there for them. Whatever they need, they've got somebody to call, and we can help them get it done. We just help grease the wheels on everything, in essence.*

*Interviewer: Can you give a concrete example or two of that?*

*Network manager 2: Things that come to my mind are just like people needing files and documents and stuff that they have, but they don't know where they are, so helping them find stuff and things like that. Or they need a letter to prove that they were approved for these funds so they can use them for a match for another grant, and stuff like that.*

*Network manager 1: Yeah. Those are good examples. And then, I just think we help folks figure out where their collaborative interests lie and how they can begin to work together for a common good. That's both across the network and within the network. That's two organizations in the southern region [of the network], that's two organizations in the western region, and it's also across the whole network. I think that's a critical piece because everybody wants to work together – but on what, for what reason, and for what purpose? And then how do we do it? I think those are big ones.*

### Network maintenance organization

A second set of stories comes from two networks where the network management is carried out by larger organizations of which the network is a project. Recall that a *network maintenance organization* is a parent or umbrella organization that provides staff time and money for the maintenance and operations of a network. Since the network managers speaking in the quotations below are part of a larger organization of which the network is a project, they

emphasize roles such as sharing power and control with network members and struggling with issues such as financial oversight of the network's resources.

To begin, one network that we studied has been managed by a network maintenance organization that is a university research and education center. The university research and education center has collaborated closely with two other organizations in coordinating the network; however, the university center has served as the lead organization for the network in terms of network management. The lead person on the network management team at this network describes how people in the network's working group may not even be aware of the work of the network maintenance organization.

*Respondent: Each of the working groups we have is just so vastly different. So there is no cookie-cutter approach. But by having the facilitators [of the working groups] constantly talking and sharing problems, and also having the facilitators or leaders attending each others' working group meetings, we have this set of people that understand the bigger picture and how the pieces connect.*

*Interviewer: And this network is really sort of a network of networks, in a way. Is that correct? And it sounds like these facilitators are the ones who are aware that this is a network of networks around food systems.*

*Respondent: Right. And we've learned over time how best to sort of brand that. And if you talk to individuals within any one network [or working group], they wouldn't be able to tell you that much. They understand there is some coordinating mechanism going on, but they don't see it. It's sort of like in *The Wizard of Oz*. It's the man behind the curtain.*

*We are always very transparent about the "network of networks" with participants in each of the working groups. It's not that we keep anything from them. They don't want to know the details, only that the coordinating is taking place and they are benefitting from it.*

*Interviewer: Right. Okay. Except for the facilitators, correct?*

*Respondent: Right. And they understand the entire network, and they'll certainly explain where the funding comes from and how we're connected.*

In a second network studied, the network is a project of a large, well-established, regional nonprofit organization, which we call *Environmental Focus* (not its actual name) in the quotation below. Here a network member talks about the importance of the larger nonprofit organization for the network's growth and development.

*Respondent: So I'm also an academic who studies the sort of things I do, right? One of the things that is really key or noticeable in the network lingo is these things called network maintenance organizations. And *Environmental Focus* is that.*

*That's the core of this network. And yet there's always been this tension about whether people really know that the network is a project of Environmental Focus, or is it its own thing? Right?*

*And at one level it's a branding question, but on the other hand it's also a sign of a very successful network, which has this critical network maintenance organization. If Environmental Focus weren't there doing that [managing and funding the network], then this [network] wouldn't exist.*

*It's not a network that exists in the absence of its leadership, if you know what I mean. It's not a place with a network that has all these isolated cells, right, that should come together when the message is sent down the line. It's a network with a very clear hub.*

*Although, interestingly, over time that has changed some. Like Ellen [the network coordinator, an Environmental Focus staff member] at the beginning knew every person in every corner of this network, and that's no longer true, which is very, very interesting, I think.*

*But the extent to which Environmental Focus has funding and staffing to maintain this network is the extent to which it continues to exist and be successful.*

*And yet the leadership model is actually fairly diffuse. That is, they are providing a ton of staff time, and Ellen is clearly the intellectual lead – yet the culture isn't for her to just be the hub [of the network].*

*It's the core group [that is actually the hub], and she's really worked hard to make the core group feel like a team of which she's the lead team member, if that makes sense, as opposed to like a chairmanship of a committee, like a sort of an old fashioned Roberts' Rules of Order era where there's a committee with a chair. That's not how it feels.*

*They [Environmental Focus] are really a network maintenance organization. So for people in the thick of it, there isn't always necessarily a ton of clarity about how the cogs always turn, because in fact that's sort of the point, right? Part of the point of this thing is to enable rural voices to engage in policy. Well, the success means that those voices are heard, not that Environmental Focus gets headlines.*

The staff person who takes the lead on coordinating the network further clarifies the role of Environmental Focus as a network maintenance organization.

*People will often say to me things like, "What's the budget for the network?" And I'm like, "That's really hard for me to tell you, because of all the different levels of staff support."*

*The way this network is funded, I've never spent 100% of my time on the network. I've never had full time staff that are 100% dedicated to the initiative. The way that I'm able to buy the caliber of people, and the expertise that actually allows us to have the network run*

*with that level of competency, is because it's part of a larger program and part of a larger infrastructure at Environmental Focus.*

*If I tried to just raise money for this network, it would be dead. It wouldn't exist. And there's no way that I could hire somebody where 100% of their job was the network.*

*We're able to recruit the staff members that we have at Environmental Focus who work on this because we're a large regional organization. We offer an amazing benefits package. It allows us to a) get a better caliber candidate; b) people stay, there isn't that kind of turnover; and c) they have other activities in their portfolios so they're not just coordinating the coalition. I know that for some members this would break their heart, but frankly it's really hard work. If you didn't have other dimensions of your portfolio, it would be a complete burnout job.*

*So I think the fact that it's [the network] an embedded project in our larger organization [Environmental Focus] has been really important. But we totally didn't make that visible because we didn't want people to think that we were controlling it.*

*I have one person on my core group who's like, "I think we should have oversight over the network's budget." And I'm like, "You're crazy. I have a board of directors. This is a project of our organization. You have no fiduciary responsibility for this network. I show you the budget for the Annual Policy Meeting, for the Week in Washington. I share that, but you have no governance over it unless you want to be responsible for raising the money."*

## Network staff

A third and final story comes from a network that has formed as a nonprofit organization. This network, which is made up of around 50 organizations, has a staff of over 30 people. One staff person serves as the network's Membership Director, and the Membership Director receives administrative support from another staff member at the network. In this network, the Membership Director carries out most of the network management roles and tasks outlined in this chapter. Since the network manager speaking in the quotation below works for the network, he emphasizes roles such as being responsive to the network's members, ensuring clear communication between the network and its members, and working on the ground to help build member organizations' capacities.

*So, my role as Membership Director is to work with the existing members to make sure that the network is meeting their needs as best we can, and that our various divisions [within the network] are working well with them. And if there are communication lapses or issues, they're going to bring those to me, and I'll help intervene with the various divisions that we've got [within the network].*

*I'm also going to work on policy with the members, both policy around a particular program, and policy around legislation, both state legislation and national legislation. So there's an advocacy part.*



*But I'm going to communicate with them, and you might talk to some of them that say they get really tired of hearing from me. There's a balance about not wearing folks out, and keeping them informed as best we can about what's going on, and working with them to help them produce the affordable housing that they're committed to doing.*

*And that involves going out and meeting them on the ground at their organization and spending time with them, their staff, sometimes their boards.*

*It involves working with them around crises that they might have too. One of our member organizations found itself in very difficult straits due to poor leadership. And we – myself as well as several other folks on staff with the network – spent hours of time with the people in their organization. They were close to a million dollars in the hole. We have been able to restructure that debt through some workouts with their various suppliers as well as the IRS. That took a level of expertise, not just from me, but especially from our commercial lending director, to pull that off. Otherwise they would have gone out of business. The problem about losing an organization like that one is it would take years, literally years, for another organization to replace it.*

*My role might involve working on a regular basis with the replacement executive director at that organization, trying to get down there on a weekly basis to work with him, in this particular case, to restructure the organization and work with their board around best practices.*

*So we're doing some organizational capacity building. And historically, that's always been part of our mission. As organizations matured, we've backed off from that, and changed. We reacted to our membership. But as organizations go into crisis, then we've got to bring that back.*

# Chapter Four

## The Organization of Networks

Chapter Three focused on network management. It focused on the roles and tasks that are necessary for running a network's operations and efforts.

This chapter focuses on how networks organize themselves. In this chapter, we provide data from our research on how networks function, how they operate, and how they structure themselves to get work done.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of various issues related to the organization of networks, including the following:

- Network legal structures
- Network membership
- Structures for getting work done in networks
- Processes for getting work done in networks
- Structures for network governance
- Processes for network governance

## Network legal structures

The networks participating in this study have chosen various legal structures, various ways of organizing their network and its work legally according to US corporate law.

Legal structures used by networks in this study include the following:

- **Legally incorporated:** networks that have legally incorporated with federal and state governments, as a nonprofit organization, a Limited Liability Company, or both
- **Project of a larger organization:** networks that are a project or program of a larger organization
- **Unincorporated, fiscal sponsorship:** networks that have no formal legal structure and are not under the umbrella of a larger organization; these networks have a fiscal sponsor (a network member) that receives and passes through funding for the network.

Generally speaking, the more complex the network is, the more formal its legal structure. Three of the networks we interviewed are relatively large networks, with 50-250 members. Large numbers of members may require a fairly high level of formal organization. A fourth network we interviewed is a relatively small network in terms of its number of members (nine members); however, its work is highly technical, complex, and focused. This too requires a high level of formal organization, so this network is legally incorporated. The two unincorporated networks are relatively small in number of members (ten and six members, respectively) and engaged in collective work that is relatively less technical and complex. Thus these two networks are able to function and thrive with informal legal structures.

In the quotation below, a network leader talks about their network's decision to incorporate legally as a Limited Liability Company (LLC).

*The other thing that I think is unique about this strategy and structure, but more on the structure side, is the LLC structure at the national level. We brought together four large, well-established affordable housing intermediaries, and they have delivered strong leadership-level support. Our objective was clear right from the start: we want to leverage these partners and these organizations for the benefit of our mission, a mission that is well-aligned with our three LLC members and our one sponsor. I think it has helped deliver us in some places that we wouldn't have otherwise been able to get to. I think that's just on the top end of our scaling strategy: "How do you make your mission matter to large, established organizations?"*

## Network membership

Membership varies widely among the networks that participated in this study. The networks we interviewed vary widely in terms of the size of their membership: The largest network has around 230 members; the smallest network has six members. They also vary widely in geographic location and spread: The largest network, geographically, is national (with members in 33 states); the smallest network covers two counties. Two of the networks we studied are located in Central Appalachia, one in the Western US, one along the Texas-Mexico border, and one in the state of Iowa. As mentioned, one network is national in scope.

In addition to number of members and geography, the networks participating in this study differ on other aspects related to membership. The concepts in the box below outline a series of ways in which the networks we interviewed varied in terms of decisions they made about structuring their network membership.

Core issues related to network membership include the following:

- **Heterogeneity or homogeneity.** Some networks are made up of homogenous or similarly focused organizations; others have a more varied, diverse membership.
- **Openness.** In some networks, membership is closed to new members without approval; in other networks, membership is generally open and floating, and members are best described as participants rather than members.
- **Required commitment.** In some networks, each member, depending on their interests and time, defines their amount of involvement in the network; in other networks, there are clear expectations to which each member is expected to commit.
- **Growth.** Some networks have grown in size by being thoughtful and strategic about adding new members; others have chosen to remain the same size over time.
- **Beyond membership.** Some networks have organizations and individuals that are loosely part of the network without officially being members; others do not.

Below, we present quotations from our interviews with research participants related to each of these core issues. These quotations flesh out the issues and bring them to life.

### Homogeneity or heterogeneity of membership

Some of the networks we interviewed had relatively homogenous membership, and others had a relatively heterogeneous membership. This was typically purposeful and strategic.

As one example, one network we interviewed is made up of affordable housing nonprofits and government agencies. The membership is homogenous, made up of similar organizations with a

similar focus from a generally similar geographic region. This homogeneity is expressed or realized in the network's *Membership Requirements and Compliance* document, which lays out clearly the characteristics of network members related to affordable housing. The membership is strategically homogenous; the network aims to bring together similar organizations with a similar purpose.

Another network is purposefully heterogeneous. This large network is brought together under a deliberately wide tent. A network member describes their membership:

*We bring diverse perspectives and unusual people together. We bring together smaller industry, local environmental activists, community-based organizations, and elected officials. Our coalition includes all those people. And it's bipartisan. I think the fundamental issue for our network is giving voice to community-based folks, and yet it has never been a meeting of just community-based people. If you look at the list of the attendees [at our annual meeting], you see people from the regional office of the Forest Service, from the Washington office of the Forest Service. You see elected county government; you see academics; you see regional intermediary organizations. So if you took all the community people and you isolated them in one corner, they may not even be 50 percent of the people in the room. I mean, I don't know. You'd have to go look at the numbers. But I would say it's community-based folk and their partners.*

## Openness of membership

Some networks have a closed membership; others have an open membership. In some networks, anyone can be a member who wants to – whoever shows up at a meeting is welcomed in as a member. In these networks, members think of themselves more as network participants rather than members. In other networks, membership is set or closed. There is a set number of members, and those members think long and hard about inviting others to join the network.

Here a network member describes an open membership network.

*In our network, the invitation is open, and if you come [to a meeting], you're welcome. I mean, I call them participants [rather than network members]. I don't think membership is even relevant. It's just open, and if you have something to add, great.*

A second network is an example of a closed membership network.

*The core structure [of our network] is fairly tight and rigorous. I mean, I don't know how many people have come up to me and said, "I want to join this network." And I just go, "Forget it." You can come to a convening; you might be a sub-grantee; we'd love to continue talking with you. But our orientation isn't yet about our constituency, beyond our core group. People think this network is something you just bop into and bop out of. It isn't.*

Networks also have different processes that they use to invite new members. In some networks, there is a review of potential new (as well as current) members' financial and organizational health. In other networks, membership is less formal; an organization can simply ask to join, and become a member.

One network we interviewed reviews each year the financial audit and board lists of potential and current members.

*I think best practices would say that if you want to be part of a network, part of your responsibility as a member is that you renew your membership every year, and part of that renewal process is talking to us about board meetings, audits, who's on your board, updating the board membership list, sharing your financials with us so that we can get a better understanding of your organization and where you're at and what's going on.*

A second network, on the other hand, has a much less formal way of admitting new members. Basically anyone who wants to join can simply ask.

*Our membership is open in the sense that you could reach out to the core group, which, because it's hosted by a larger nonprofit organization, that would be probably where you would go. You would contact Ellen [the network coordinator], or someone from that nonprofit. And then you would be invited to the Annual Policy Meeting, so that there's pretty much an open invitation. I would say that just about everyone that is involved has a rural location, be it a community or region, that they are tied to.*

## Required commitment of members

Networks vary on the degree to which they expect their members to commit time, energy, attention, and other resources to the collective work of the network. In some networks, each network member, depending on their interests and available time, defines their amount of involvement in the network. In other networks, there are more clear-cut expectations to which each member is expected to commit.

The quotation below is from a network that encourages its members to participate at whatever level works for them. A member of this network describes the different levels of involvement that are possible. This is a policy-focused network, and one of their main tasks is developing issue papers throughout the year that network members then decide whether to sign on to or not.

*Respondent: I think this network was brilliant in setting up a structure that allows people to take the strengths that they hold and apply them to the different topic areas, and have the flexibility to be more engaged at periods of time and less engaged when they could not be.*

*The way the working groups are structured is such that you can hold a leadership position or deep involvement, and that's by truly becoming involved in a committee. You can also*

*just sign up so that you receive, say, the working group notes, so that you can stay abreast of what's going on because your time is committed elsewhere and you can't designate the specific time to participate in the conference calls, to review drafts of issue papers necessarily as they evolve, but you want to stay in touch with how it's evolving. And if you see a section [of an issue paper] that you feel you can improve, then you can become part of that drafting process. As the draft is going around, you can have your input for consideration, even though, let's say, you couldn't make the previous two, three calls or [help write] the first draft.*

*Interviewer: Would you say that everybody has some level of involvement, or some really are just kind of getting the information and signing on occasionally? Or is it that there is just a wide variety of participants?*

*Respondent: I think that there is a wide variety of participants. Some are county commissioners. They have day jobs. They're part-time commissioners. And all they really can do is read the final draft and decide whether they're going to sign on or not. In their case, maybe their county commission has decided that they're not individually going to sign on to things, but that doesn't mean that they would not be a good voice in DC.*

Other networks have written documents that lay out clearly either expectations or requirements for membership. As one example, the memorandum of understanding signed by each member of one of the networks we interviewed lays out the network's vision, goals, analysis, and definition of sustainable development. It also lays out principles of participation and roles and responsibilities. An excerpt from this document, the network's roles and responsibilities, provide a sense of the expectations for network members:

#### *Roles and responsibilities*

*Members agree to conduct the following activities to the best of their abilities:*

- *Engage in establishing the network's priorities and project criteria to direct the development and implementation of individual and joint work aimed at achieving the network's sustainable development goals*
- *Fully and actively participate in network efforts including conference calls, committees and meetings and providing feedback*
- *Engage in grant reporting activities as needed to ensure the network's compliance with fiscal agent and funder agreements*
- *Communicate proactively with the network's steering committee when raising individual organizational funds from a source currently part of the network's fundraising strategy*

## **Growth of membership**

The rate of growth or expansion in networks is important, as is the way that networks decide to expand. When networks do decide to grow, successful growth is strategic and thoughtful. Some networks decide not to grow, for financial reasons or because growth makes the work more complicated.



One network we interviewed has grown throughout its history, and it is a large and diverse network. Yet their growth has always been strategic and thoughtful.

*At our last [membership-wide] meeting, we were like 180-some people. Previously everything [in the network] focused on public lands. Now we're also talking [about] private lands. Two years ago, the first ranchers showed up [at network meetings]. We had nothing to do with grazing issues initially.*

*I think that [broadening of the network] has been done in a very thoughtful and strategic way. The organizations that were invited were invited thoughtfully. They were targeted, so that there were people from the agency who had a history of wanting to partner and maybe think out of the box. And we have kept our rural community focus. We've never lost that. The focus is still on the positive and negative impacts that decisions have on these rural communities; we've just broadened our base of rural communities.*

In another network, its members have decided not to grow largely for financial reasons.

*We still don't have a mechanism for expanding the network. As far as growing the network by expanding beyond our core members, we keep talking about it, but we've never been able to move that ball. I think a lot of it is that the partners don't want to see the opportunity for funding be diminished by having more groups. The more people you're dividing the funding by, the smaller the pie gets. When push comes to shove, many of us are thinking, "Well, wait a minute. Do we really want to divide this [funding] any further?" That's the struggle. We've always tried to struggle with, "How can you grow the network without diminishing the return you get from the network?"*

## Beyond membership

Some networks have organizations or individuals that are loosely part of the network without being official network "members." In some networks, these other organizations are partners in the network's efforts. In one network, other organizations purchase or use the networks products or services, but aren't actually members of the network.

Here one of the networks that we interviewed describes the organizations that are a part of its ongoing work, without being formal members of the network.

*I think probably most accurately our membership would be the 10 funded groups [10 nonprofit organizations funded by a large national foundation], in the sense that we can count on them. In other words, if I said, "Okay, well, who are the owners of this project?" it would be those 10 groups.*

*But at the same time, we have a lot of second-level, even third-level involvement. So, for instance, in the Health Working Group [one of six working groups within the network], they've got a relationship with the Children's Defense Fund. They [Children's Defense Fund] work on being sure everybody's got children's health insurance. So essentially all they want to do is sign people up for CHIP [a federal children's health insurance*

*program]. They're not doing policy analysis. They weren't doing much in the way of protesting until this budget cut stuff came in. So the Health Working Group collaborates with them on that level. But there's not a real buy-in [from Children's Defense Fund] to bringing about a policy shift [which is a central focus for the larger network].*

## Reflections on membership

Networks clearly think a lot about membership. The comment below indicates the amount of reflection that membership often elicits.

*We [the network membership] were asked to consider these key membership questions. And so we were having discussion at the working group level, and at the membership meetings, and it took up a large part of the spring meeting [of the whole membership]. We were really trying to talk this through as a large committee: "What does it mean to be a member? Who can be a member? How open, closed, or screened should our membership be?" We've just done sort of another round. I was on a committee that was trying to work through, "Okay, what about geographically enlarging our membership? What are the pros and cons of that?" And these issues have to do with the network's health, and obviously, as a member, I have to think that's important to me.*

## Structures for getting work done in networks

Networks participating in this study use various structures for getting work done, for doing what needs to be done to accomplish their goals. There are four main entities that networks in this study use to get work done; these are described below.

The four main network entities for getting work done are the following:

- **Working groups.** Most of the networks that we interviewed have long-standing, ongoing groups that focus on key pieces of work for the whole network. Working groups can be based on issues (e.g., a particular focus of work) or geography (e.g., a state caucus). Most of the work of a network takes place in working groups.
- **Management team.** In many networks, the management team (or the staff that play a management role) is also involved in planning and carrying out the work of a network, even though its primary function may be network management.
- **Core group.** In some networks, a core group (made up of representatives of working groups or members) is also involved in planning and carrying out the work of a network, even though its primary function may be network management.
- **Staff.** Some networks, particularly those that are formally incorporated, have a paid, permanent (rather than contract) staff team; this staff team is typically involved in planning and carrying out the work of a network, even though its primary function may be network management and coordination.

Each network has structures for getting the work of the network done. Working groups are the most common. Although the people we interviewed mentioned briefly the roles of management teams, core teams, and network staff in getting work done, they talked mostly about the importance of working groups. In this section, therefore, we mention that management teams, core groups, and network staff have a role in getting work done in networks; however, the quotations below all focus on working groups.

### Working groups

Most of the on-the-ground work in a network is done in *working groups*. While these groups may be called different names in various networks, most of networks in this study have long-standing groups that are organized specifically to get work done.

In one network, working groups developed out of a grassroots-driven national policy platform related to families' well-being and participation. This story gives a sense of the formation of a network and the formation of working groups.

*There was a process here called the Equal Voice Family Platform, and it was set up during the 2008 presidential election in the spring. And they [a large national foundation] did it nationwide with their groups, and they really pushed it, so it was done well. And there was, like, I don't know, 485 town hall meetings or more across the nation to try and prioritize what people felt was most important.*

*And we had six of them in this area, six town hall meetings. The last one was in Taylorsville, and there were a thousand people there. And they worked for five hours in this big old auditorium around tables. And I'll tell you, I was skeptical. I was just like, "Oh, one more meeting that these [working class] folks are going to have to attend." But no, they were engaged that entire time.*

*Then we sent 600 representatives from our region to Birmingham. There were simultaneous conventions held in Birmingham, in Chicago, and in Los Angeles, and they were linked by computer networking. And then out of that a National Family Platform was produced. And then they published it in a very helpful way that explained its ten priorities. So that was really, really helpful, because then we came back here [from Birmingham], and the organizations [that make up the current network] said, "Okay, how are we going to work together [on the National Family Platform]? Because, all right, so we are all sort of interested. Well, what are we going to do?"*

*And so they chose the working group model. And I've heard people dismiss it. They say, "Oh, yeah, that's just so much wasted time." Well, not for us. It's really worked out well. We took the ten priorities [from the National Family Platform] and reduced them to five. The other things are important, but we just didn't feel like we had the capacity to do them. But we did do [working groups on] housing, education, immigration, health access, and jobs. Later we added a sixth working group, civic engagement, and that has been very important for us. So anyway, they came back [from the Birmingham meeting] and the organizations chose a chair for each one of these working groups, and then off they went.*

In the passage below, another network describes the variations among its working groups. Each working group within this network is essentially a network of farmers, food processors, and others involved in local food systems across a particular state.

*When you get to the logistics of each working group, every one is different, and they've made different determinations about how frequently they will meet and how they will meet.*

*Like the Small Meat Processors Working Group decided they didn't need to meet quarterly. I think they had two phone calls, two conference calls. But [eventually] they realized [that] a face-to-face meeting was critical. And then at the Regional Foods Systems Working Group, you do have that face-to-face meeting of 80 to 100 people every quarter. And the Fruit and Vegetables Working Group. So for the most part, they're meeting face-to-face at least quarterly, but some may have additional calls.*

*The membership [in the various working groups] is different. The membership in the Niche Pork Working Group is mostly niche pork companies, owners, farmers and a few state*

*agency folks. The Regional Foods Working Group is farmers and bankers and economic development folks and [cooperative] extension and mayors and county supervisors. So it's much more diverse.*

Another network describes how its working groups are dynamic and changing, consolidating and splitting apart over time.

*This year we consolidated our working groups. This is what happened. One of the promises that I made at the very first meeting [of the network] was we would never create working groups that just became their own organizations. The idea was that working groups would come and go according to what we needed.*

*So some years, people are splitters, and we've had up to eight working groups. That gets really expensive, time consuming. And then the other thing that was happening was you end up having the same people that are showing up for two different working groups that are sort of dealing with the same thing but from slightly different angles.*

*And so at the core group retreat last year, I sat down with the core group and I said, "Look, you guys, you're all stressed out. How many more conference calls can you set up?" I'm like, "We need to streamline this. What I'm hearing from all of you is that you're overwhelmed. There's not enough time. We have to create a different system."*

*So at the core group meeting, which usually happens six months before the Annual Policy Meeting, we decided to aim to consolidate some of the working groups. And the promise that we made to ourselves is that we would go in with that aim, but that if it became obvious that the way that we were consolidating them didn't make sense, that we just wouldn't do it – that we would try it on.*

*And so the Private Lands and Ranching Working Groups combined into a Working Landscapes Working Group. And they decided to keep it that way. And then there was always a Stewardship Contracting Working Group, and then there was always this weird Public Lands Appropriations Working Group that was always very amorphous, and they consolidated to be a Public Lands and Economic Development Working Group. And they seem to be pretty happy there. I think a better name for that group would really be like Forest Service Policy, because that's really what they focus on is the Forest Service. Then we had thought that we would try and combine the Biomass and the Climate Change Working Groups, but that didn't work. They tried to see how they could combine with one another, but it just wasn't the right fit, and so we kept them separate.*

*So that's an example of how we sit in a room. We say, "This sounds like it'll work," and then we just keep checking in, and when we find out it doesn't work, we just don't do it.*

## Processes for getting work done in networks

Networks use various processes for getting work done; they use various concrete actions to move a network forward. Typically these processes occur through meetings, both face-to-face meetings and conference calls, of the various network structures outlined above. Networks' regular meetings are the backbone of network functioning. The networks we interviewed described many different forms and kinds of ongoing meetings, for both developing the network and getting its work done.

The various types of meetings that network members described include the following:

- **Membership meetings.** All networks hold regular (quarterly, semi-annually, or annually) face-to-face meetings of the entire membership. The purpose of these meetings is to make key decisions about the network, set its future direction, and build trust and relationships among members.
- **Working group meetings.** All networks hold regular (monthly or quarterly) meetings of its various working groups. The purpose of these meetings is to plan and carry out the work of the network, to move the network towards its purpose or goals.
- **Core group meetings.** All networks hold regular (monthly or quarterly) meetings of the group that focuses on network development, management, and coordination. The purpose of these meetings is to strengthen the network and to make sure that the work of the various working groups fits together in a coordinated, strategic, and coherent way.
- **Other meetings.** Various networks have various other kinds of meetings, which serve a variety of purposes.

### Various types of meetings

Meetings are the way that work gets done in a network. This section presents stories that provide a loose overview of the various types of meetings that networks use to get work done.

First, one network manager reflects on what brings network members out to all of the numerous meetings required to keep a network functioning and moving forward.

*Respondent: And actually, people do come [to meetings]. I am just amazed. Because with the stuff that's going on politically and socially and economically, it's a disaster for everybody. People are so busy. No one's got enough money. Everybody's worried about everything. We still had our 25 people show up at this two-hour meeting in the middle of the week, so I'm like, "Okay."*

*Interviewer: Why do you think that is? Any reflections on that?*

*Respondent: I think because the work is good, and I think – I'm really blessed with really serious people in these organizations. And that's the other kind of mysterious part: you can find somebody who's a really good network coordinator and they have really good support, but in the end, at the end of the day, it really does depend on the organizations.*

*So if you have organizations that really aren't committed to the cause, really, essentially, you're going to be in trouble. You can do whatever you want. You can bring in Jesus of Nazareth [to coordinate the network] and it's not going to matter.*

*And so I think that's one thing. People really are committed, and they're very serious about it. And I think that they've had good experiences, and so they come back. I mean, it has been a return on the investment [for network members]. But they do come, I have to say. I keep expecting them not to turn up, but they do.*

In one network, state caucuses play the role that working groups play in other networks. This network's state caucuses are essentially state-based, geographically-focused sub-networks within the larger network. Here an active member of one of the network's state caucuses describes the caucus's meetings. This story gives a feeling for the importance of regular meetings in the ongoing life and work of a working group.

*Each state [among the states covered by the network] has its own caucus. Our state caucus is going to meet next Thursday, the 31<sup>st</sup>, in Rutledge, and there are six or seven of us state caucus members. We meet quarterly. We try to do at least two face-to-face [meetings], and try not to have the face-to-face [meetings] at the annual meeting in the fall, or the spring meeting, which is usually in Kellington.*

*At the caucus meetings, we'll spend a fair piece of time with member updates, which is getting to know each other and reviewing what we're doing and our projects, and who's doing what on the [network's] staff. That tends to take a lot of time, and it's where we exchange stories and gossip about what we know, and what's frustrating and what's not working, and who we're mad at, and so forth.*

*And if there was a change in our congressional representation, there is time in the agenda for us to tell our congress member what we're doing and our impacts, and then hopefully hear something from them about their thinking and rationale for what's going on with programs.*

*And then, another major piece that's on this next quarterly meeting, we're going to review the bylaw amendments [for the network]. They've been sent around to each member group, and the vote will be at the annual meeting. Then there's a little bit of discussion around the nominating committee for the network's board membership. The caucus chooses, recommends to the nominating committee, two board members from our state. We want them [the board members] to be on the ground and hearing what the membership is talking about at these quarterly meetings. And then there are also updates on federal programs, on funding programs, what's happening.*



*At the caucus meetings, we also frequently have somebody on [the network's] staff in Kellington coming on the conference call or even come to the meeting. The information technology guy came to our last meeting. We've had their home finance people on the call, talking about changes to rural development products, or changes to loan servicing [some of the products that the network provides to its members]. So it's a really useful several hour meeting that we do quarterly.*

Below, one network coordinator outlines the yearly pattern of meetings for this particular network. This is a network focused on policy advocacy, so most of its regular meetings lead up to a week spent in Washington DC, advocating for policy changes that the network has identified throughout the course of the year. The comments below give a concrete sense of the various kinds of meetings that go on in a network throughout a year's worth of work. They also provide a sense of how all of the various components of network structure outlined in this report come together, in one particular network, across a year. We've broken the comments into sections, to make them easier to read, but they flow in one long description of the network's work across a calendar year.

#### Core group retreat: June

*Respondent: I'll just start with the core group retreat, which is generally in June or July. And that's a face-to-face meeting, for two and a half days.*

*We usually spend one day on overall strategy – [things like] politically what's going on, what's coming up, if it's a mid-term election or a general election, how are the Forest Service budgets. [These are] more strategic, what's-happening-with-the-movement kinds of conversations.*

*And then we do some, what I would call, business or operational conversations. We talk about fundraising. We'll kind of do a review of what worked well last year, what did we struggle with, what processes didn't work. We talk about how we might change it.*

*And then we spend a huge amount of time talking about the Annual Policy Meeting. And there are usually two or three really big components of that. One is that we really think through the meeting logic. We think about how each component of the meeting builds on itself and prepares us for the last day, which we often talk about as, "This is the beginning of all of our work for the year. It's not the end of the meeting."*

#### Annual Policy Meeting: December

*And then we actually have the Annual Policy Meeting [in early December]. Before we usually would focus on message development, strategies, tactics and work plan. Over time we just really changed that. Like the round robins that we do now [where sessions are presented multiple times so anyone can attend who wants to]. We didn't do those in the past. That was something I came up with in response to a lot of comments that people were*

*feeling really frustrated that they couldn't go to all of the sessions that they wanted to go to....*

*The second day of the Annual Policy Meeting focuses more on the platform development work [developing the coalition's policy platform for the coming year]. And you just pick whichever group you want to go to [to begin to develop goals for the coming year].*

#### Working group and core group meetings: December to April

*And then after the Annual Policy Meeting, usually there's a four-week to five-week hiatus of no activity whatsoever. It's just like recovering.*

*Then the working groups start to reconvene right after the new year, and they look through everything that came out of the Annual Policy Meeting, and they have to really decide, "What issue papers are we going to write? Like really, what are we going to do?" And then they have to get into that. And each group focuses on its own work plan.*

*And all along, the core group, which is made up of working group co-chairs plus some others, is having monthly conference calls. And a lot of that is just coordination of all of the work moving forward.*

#### Week in Washington policy advocacy effort: April

*And then we do our Week in Washington [in late April], and usually we have between 20 and 30 people who go to that. The working groups are very involved in helping develop the issue papers [which are the foundation for the coalition's policy advocacy efforts], but usually only two or three people from each working group actually go [to the Week in Washington]. And then when we go to DC, there's a required all-day orientation and training and last minute logistics on Sunday.*

*During the course of the Week in Washington, with all the people there, we can have anywhere between 90 and 130 meetings. That's because part of what we do is that if you go to the Week in Washington, the network usually sets up meetings with committee staff, or some of the higher-level meetings with the administration officials. But everybody has to make their own appointments with their [legislative] delegation. We don't do that for people, and you have to be able to call, send an email, request a meeting either with a staff person, or if you want to meet with your member [of congress or senate], you have to do that yourself. We'll help them write the email. We'll give them guidance on how to do it. But you can't go to DC if you're too shy to ask for a meeting.*

*Interviewer: Well, that's interesting. I didn't understand that. So some of it's sort of coordinated, and some of it is – well, not uncoordinated, but sort of organic, like "I go here, you go there."*

*Respondent: Oh, it's totally coordinated, 100%. We have a big Google document for every time somebody has scheduled a meeting. So we give everybody all the names and phone*

*numbers and email addresses of, basically, the entire western delegation. It's all there. Here's the natural resource person, here's the energy person – they have all of that on this spreadsheet.*

*In every meeting [during the Week in Washington] there's a lead. And that's the person that opens and closes the meeting and helps facilitate the dialogue. And then there's also one person that's supposed to take notes, which is why we encourage there to be three people. So the person who takes the notes might be somebody who's maybe not been to DC before, or isn't feeling really confident, and so they're there really to listen. But they're not just sitting there like a bumpkin, so they have a really important role. We give guidelines on what you take notes on, because we have a form that people use.*

*And then at the end of each day we have a daily debrief, and people go through the highlights of their meetings. And what's really good about that is then they can say, “When I was meeting with Barkley’s office he said that Albertson’s office was really important to this. Did any of you meet with Albertson’s staff when you were meeting with committee people?” Or “You're meeting with Wilkerson’s staff tomorrow. Can you touch base with them on this issue?”*

*But they start to really learn the process of policy making. What I like to say to people is that DC is like a giant high school. Everybody talks about everybody behind their back. Everybody wants to know who's going to the party, who's invited, who's not invited. And so you have to assume that anything you say in one office, that people are going to talk about that with other people later on. And that's why everybody always wants to know what somebody else's office thinks. So I train people on how you handle that, and not get yourself into a pickle.*

*And then the other thing that we do is a really large reception, where we'll have a keynote speaker, and usually that's somebody that we're trying to court as a champion of the issues that we're working on. So that's another way to kind of make it more visible. And that's been a really successful part of that week.*

#### **More working group meetings: June to December**

*So then when we come home, we have all of their meeting report forms that they have to turn in at the end of the day. Those all get typed up. The working group chairs have them, and they actually take the to-do list, because there's a section on every meeting report form that says what the follow-up was. And then the people who went to the Week in Washington, they then report back to their working groups what happened, and they have to do the follow-up. Sometimes a staffer will say, “Can you get me more information on the matter? Can you send me an example of this?” or whatever. And also I make everybody write thank-you notes, just because that's what you're supposed to do. So that's part of the cycle.*

## Structures for network governance

Each network has some structure for its governance, for making the decisions that need to be made to develop and build a network over time and set its direction.

There are three main network entities for making decisions and setting direction:

- **Core group.** Usually there is some group that is charged by the network with making decisions. We call this the *core group*, but some networks call this group their steering committee or their general committee. Whatever the term used, this is the group that is charged with coordinating the network's work and development, thinking strategically, and making major network decisions.
- **Executive committee.** One network also has a smaller group, an *executive committee*, that is charged with making smaller, more day-to-day decisions about network management and operations, decisions that do not need to go before the larger core group.
- **Network board and staff.** Finally, two of the networks that participated in this study had a *staff* and *board of directors*. In these networks, the staff and board played most of the decision-making roles that the core group plays in networks that have not formally or legally organized themselves as a corporation.

### Core group

Most networks have a relatively small group (also called a steering committee or general committee) that is charged with coordinating the network's work and development, thinking strategically, and making major network decisions.

Here a member of the one of the networks we interviewed describes their core group.

*Well, there is a core group, and that core group basically lays out the strategy for the year and is also responsible for bringing money to the table. They're bringing knowledge, expertise and funding to the table so that they can involve a broader group and grow the issues and the movement.*

*I think the core group also provides a different kind of leadership, which is more like a board, but it really doesn't play a rubberstamping role, nor does it play a kind of financial oversight role, or any of those kinds of nonproftity roles. It's more like a thinking board. Its job is to go off and do things, and then bring it back and mull it over, and figure out what is the right thing to do next.*

*Our [core group] calls are a lot of coordination. We usually do working group updates, for example, and then somebody says, “Well, okay, that's interesting. I've been wondering about who was working on public lands grazing. Is that a Working Lands Working Group issue?” And then there's like this whole conversation about who's going to do it and what's going to happen next. There's also the logistics of thinking about the Week in Washington [the network's annual policy advocacy effort] and making sure that people are recruited and all that kind of stuff, and are the issue papers going on the right timeline, and blah-blah-blah.*

## Executive Committee

In some networks there is an even smaller group that is empowered to make relatively minor decisions for the network, decisions that need to be made quickly and don't require input from a larger group. A member of one of the networks we interviewed describes how their Executive Committee functions.

*We have this thing called the Executive Committee. There is entrusted to three of us the ability to answer quick questions and then deal with big issues up front. I think this has been very valuable. We just did a thing on how to do Memoranda of Understanding, and doing some re-granting. And the information is out there for us three members [of the Executive Committee] to look at, to give feedback, and then Alicia and them [the network management team] will finalize it.*

*But one thing I know about working in this network is that everyone's got their opinions, and if you have to deal with too many of them, it becomes very complicated. Instead if you're just dealing with three who represent everybody, and everyone's comfortable with who those three are – I think that works really well, and I think that's been a real strong plus for us.*

## Network board and staff

Two of the networks we interviewed have formal legal status as a corporation (one as a nonprofit, one as a Limited Liability Company and a nonprofit). In these organizations, the network's staff and board carry out many of the decision-making and organizational development roles.

First, networks' boards of directors play a role much like most nonprofit boards of directors. A member of one network describes the role of its board:

*Interviewer: And the board, I'm assuming the board plays a typical sort of nonprofit board role, which I am familiar with and you don't need to necessarily spell out. Is that the case? Are there some other pieces?*

*Respondent: No, I think it's fairly typical. The network is staff-led, but very well managed in terms of trying to engage the board in the big questions, and also do all the right kind of reporting so that everybody's in the loop.*

Networks' executive directors also play an important role in networks that have formed as a corporation. A member of one network describes how new leadership emerging from an executive transition has transformed that network over the past eight or so years by focusing the network on network-wide, collective performance goals.

*One opportunity that came along was the [NeighborWorks] Achieving Excellence program [a leadership development program based at Harvard].*

*And Brian [the network Executive Director] was able to say to his own staff, "Here's a performance challenge. It's going to take us forever to fix the 100,000 homes across our region that need to be improved. At this rate, we're going to be doing this forever, and ever, and ever. We need to really ramp up what the membership is doing, from 2,000 to 4,000 or 8,000 units per year. And in order for the membership to do that, the central office needs to have in place the economies of scale around servicing of loans, around being able to offer a program – if it's manufactured housing, or a volunteer service program, or family development, green development, green building trade practices."*

*And you know, the network needs to help me, one of its members out here, to grow as well, if we want to collectively be able to do 8,000 units per year.*

*I really want to say that we wouldn't be where we are today, if it wasn't for Achieving Excellence, and the discipline and the training, and what Brian went through, and several other network members who have also gone through Achieving Excellence.*

## Processes for network governance

Processes for network governance refer to the practice of making key decisions and determining overall direction for the network. During our interviews with network members, people focused particularly on decision-making, systems of accountability, and conflict management.

There are three main processes that network members mentioned related to network governance:

- **Decision-making.** In most networks, there is a clearly defined decision-making entity (often the core group), and a clearly defined decision-making process (often modified consensus).
- **Systems of accountability.** In most networks, members hold each other accountable through a combination of formal mechanisms (e.g., Memoranda of Understanding) and informal mechanisms (e.g., relationships and trust); overall, accountability and systems of accountability are complex, challenging issues for networks.
- **Conflict management.** The networks we interviewed use informal approaches to conflict management, based on trust and relationships among network members.

## Making decisions

In most networks, there is a clearly defined decision-making entity, often a *core group* (or steering committee or general committee, see the section on network structure above). This decision-making entity is empowered to make certain kinds of decisions for the larger network. The decision-making process that seems to be used most frequently is modified consensus, where groups work to reach consensus, and usually do reach consensus, but have the possibility to vote as a backup if unable to reach consensus.

Below, one of the networks we interviewed describes its decision-making process.

*Respondent: Decisions are made by consensus, in all our committees. Although there's a clause in there that says if consensus can't be reached after a reasonable amount of time, you can vote with a three-quarters majority.*

*Interviewer: So it's modified consensus really.*

*Respondent: But I've never seen that happen. We've always kept going until we've reached consensus. Mostly, we're pretty effective about making decisions. Pretty much it's just people in a room who know each other and trust each other, and we'll kind of come to an*



*agreement. We usually try not to have decisions made if there are quite a few people who don't agree. We talk it out more and give it a little bit more time.*

A member of a second network describes how they abstain from decisions when unable to reach consensus.

*So, in the case of one issue, which I work on a lot, we're in the process of a major conversation about reauthorization of a policy. Some people want to have it changed, and some people don't want to have some details changed.*

*But in this particular case, this is an example of where we're going to have to say in a policy arena, in a way that's maybe going to make us weaker [as a network], "This network does not have agreement on this particular nuanced piece. We do not agree."*

*Because truthfully, there are two perspectives. There are people who have been involved in the network for a very long time [who have both perspectives], and we can't necessarily take a stand of one person over the other. We could say, "Okay, look, we're not going to reach consensus, but most people think X, so people who don't think X just don't have to sign on." But in this case it's among people who deeply care about this issue that don't agree. So we're not going to take a position where active person A and active person B don't agree. We're not going to pick A or B. We're just going to say, "This network does not agree."*

## Systems of accountability

In most networks, holding members mutually accountable is challenging. Each network member is its own organization and has its own priorities. In most cases, the priorities of the network are not always each individual member's highest priorities. In some networks, members hold each other accountable through a combination of formal mechanisms (e.g., Memoranda of Understanding) and informal mechanisms (e.g., relationships and trust).

In one network, a network member describes how the network's formal clarity around expectations and accountability was built into its beginning stages.

*When we were first approached about joining this network, some very clear expectations were put out there. I think one of the things that the network really did right was to really nail down the expectations of network members and to define the relationship very closely right at the outset. Then, there are levels of flexibility within that, but we understood that this was a finely honed concept [what membership in the network would require of members] that they had really vetted and carefully worked it out before admitting any members.*

*It caused quite a bit of pause on our part, in terms of, "Okay, this is a very closely defined relationship. Is this the kind of relationship that we really want to be in?" Because there were a lot of "dos and don'ts" and "thou shalt and thou shalt nots" involved. I think that was really a strength of the network-building aspect.*

Below, a member of another network discusses less formal, more interpersonal ways of handling network accountability among members.

*Yeah, accountability, it's hard. It's hard. I think we've done a medium job; more than mediocre, but not great.*

*There have been hard conversations with groups that didn't seem to follow through, where there was direct discussion about that. I mean, somebody would bring it up. Somebody would get the task and then there'll be a phone call that said, "Hey, here's the way we see a deviation from what you said and what's happened." So I think we've tried it. It's been hard.*

*I'm not sure I have the best practices about it. I think being clear that accountability is shared and a mutual accountability is really important. And then trying to figure out the mechanisms to support the principle is really important.*

## Conflict management

Most conflict management in networks seems to be informal, based on trust and relationships among network members. Below, a member of one of the networks we interviewed talks about conflict management in their network.

*Interviewer: How about conflict or disagreement? How is that handled? And is there a mechanism for handling conflict and disagreement, or is it just sort of informal?*

*Respondent: It's just resolved. I think if there are some problems, maybe someone pivotal will call, and figure out what's going on, and kind of deal with it.*

*We try to set these ground rules where it's not going to be a confrontational, hostile work environment. We're supposed to be friends, partners, working collaboratively together. So it hasn't been tough. Occasionally it gets frustrating, but we always say, "Well, we can agree." There are days when I personally feel that I'll say, "yes," just so I can move forward. I may not think this was the best decision, but I know they're smart people, and it works for them. We'll deal with it.*

Another network reflects on various ways that they prevent conflict among members by creating a network culture with certain characteristics. As both the comments above and the comments below suggest, much of conflict management may be simply assuming the best (rather than the worst) about one's colleagues and giving people a break.

*One of the things that the working group chairs have to do is keep their eye on things. As a working group chair, I'm listening to people on the call, but I have to know that there are other important opinion leaders in the coalition who may not be on that call, because they are being asked to be on all the calls and they're not going to be able to do that [be present on all the calls].*

*So I need to keep my eye on, “Hmm, it seems like this group came to consensus, but I know that there are some other voices. And I either need to go chase down those voices or I need to bring it to the core group to have them tell me what their group is thinking or what they personally are thinking.”*

*I think some working group chairs are more aware than others of this – the nonparticipant issue. The things I work on often have a lot of broadly, strongly held opinions that aren't always available at any given random call, and so I feel like that's something I really have to keep an eye on. Maybe in some of the working groups where there's a narrower interest, with some of the issues they kind of get what they hear.*

*And we also have a culture of giving people a break – assuming that everything is really complicated and there's a lot going on, and we don't have enough time to totally communicate as much as we need to. So there's that sort of giving-people-a-break culture.*

## Chapter Five

# Funders' Roles in Networks

Funders play important roles in the networks that we interviewed for this study. Obviously funders provide money for networks to operate and get work done. But it is clear that funders provide much more than money. These ideas are outlined below, and fleshed out in the quotations presented below. We also outline some concerns about funders and their role that the people we interviewed expressed.

### Roles of funders

Funders play important roles in the networks that we interviewed for this study.

There are several relevant issues related to funders and their roles in supporting networks:

- **Major funder.** All of the networks in this study have (or have had in the past) a major national funder that provides the majority of its financial support.
- **Funder influence.** Funders walk a thin line between influencing the direction of a network and supporting the network as its vision and goals emerge organically from network members and their work. Most respondents in this study feel that funders are generally doing this well.
- **More than money.** Networks reported that, in addition to providing grants or loans, funders provide a great deal of other kinds of support (e.g., consultation, advice, co-thinking, and alignment in goals and vision), and that this support is appreciated and important.

In most of the networks that we interviewed, there is at least one major funder that supported the network financially, while also providing additional kinds of support. Ideally, foundations provide many forms of support in addition to funding. Below, a network coordinator describes what they see as a good relationship with a major funder. This interview respondent also introduces some aspects that are less helpful in a funder-network relationship.

*I can say this because I'm extremely candid, so I'll just say that this one particular foundation was the best funder relationship I have ever had in my 18-year career. They listened to us. They let us write proposals that responded to the needs that we had. Honestly, they just supported us. They were very hands-off.*

*When we would talk with them, they were engaged and intellectually curious. Their staff were so smart. I could call Mike Wilson and be like, "Hey, Mike, what about this?" And he*

*knew people that were doing things, and he could be like, "Well, blah-blah-blah-blah," but he never said, "You need to do this."*

*Mike was our friend. I never felt like I had to say to Mike, "Oh, we got this done," when we didn't. I could call Mike and be like, "Mike, it's not working; this is totally messed up." And he would be like "Okay, what are you going to do?" And I would say, "I want to do this." And he'd be like, "Okay."*

*And with other funders that I work with right now, I would never tell the truth in a grant report, ever. Because first, some of them are really mean; and second, they have no tolerance for learning and being adaptive.*

*I'm like, "You people are crazy. Your boards are crazy that they're asking you to report to them these kinds of widgets. These are meaningless. I can report this to you, but this is not meaningful."*

*And it just shows me that they're not really invested in change, they're invested in whatever their part of the system is. And that's just really sad.*

One network is partly funded by its network maintenance organization, a university research and education center. In this case, the network managers are also grantmakers. When we talked to two leaders of the network management team, they had some insights into funding networks.

*This is a real important thing that I'm going to share here, something that we have done differently as a funder, that any time I talk to other funders, it makes them a little bit uncomfortable.*

*What we did in the Regional Food Working Groups, after we started the first three of these geographic place-based groups [the multi-county local foods groups that make up the Working Group], is that as we added new groups, all the existing groups had an equal say with us as to who would get funding.*

*So right now we have an RFP [Request for Proposal] out [for future funding], and there are 14 groups [that make up the Regional Foods Working Group], and each of those groups has one vote and I have one vote and Elaine [the other leader on the network management team] has one vote. And so we really have put the power in their hands.*

*Now, we're talking about pocket change here. We're talking two thousand, three thousand bucks per grant. But most funders aren't willing to share that much power. And if they really want to create change, they need to act less like a funder and more like a partner.*

## Concerns related to funders

Network members expressed several concerns related to funders' roles:

- **Funder control.** The main concern among respondents is when funders try to direct or run the network; they all said that this never works, that funder-directed or funder-controlled networks will not survive.
- **The culture of philanthropy.** People expressed concern over the movement among funders towards logic models, outcomes measurement, collective impact, and income generation among nonprofits. They worry that these emphases may result in foundations' control and direction of the work of networks and nonprofits; they also worry that an emphasis on income generation and financial self-sufficiency may take networks away from their mission of working deeply in low-wealth communities.

A member of one of the networks we interviewed raised concerns about funders' roles, about networks that are organized and driven by funders and their interests, and about changes in foundation culture in the US.

*I would say that in the funder-organized networks that I am involved in, that it wasn't until the funder stopped trying to run it that we've actually been able to get anything done. And so I have been involved in two – one current and one past funder-driven network – and I would say that they don't work. That's been my experience. I'm not saying that it's not possible, but in my experience it doesn't work.*

*The funders say to all of their grantees, "You guys should network with each other and really do all of this." So then everybody's doing it in order to please the funder. And what's so frustrating is that when communities come together and say, "We really need help with this, and we need to network together," they're like, "That doesn't fit in our funding box. Sorry."*

*And I think the whole movement in the foundation community towards logic models and all of this measurement with outputs and outcomes is going to kill everything that they built in terms of social capacity building over the last 15 years, at least in the field that I work in. If somebody doesn't wise up and realize that you're dealing with low-income, isolated communities.... This is public interest work. That's why nobody has to pay taxes; that's why the foundations have their money; that's why we're nonprofit. You're doing this for a charitable purpose.*

*The idea that poor people are going to be self-sustaining in doing things like policy development, networking, capacity building activities.... People have suggested to me, "Why don't you make your network like an association. Why don't you get all of the groups to pay to be part of it?" And I'm like, "Because I work with people who live in communities where the poverty level is 17 and 18%. You want me to ask them to give our organization money so that I can work to empower them?" I just won't do it.*

*I don't understand that. I mean, there's all this talk about "the new nonprofit," and what the new nonprofits are going to be like, and the current models aren't going to work. And I will say that for certain things that we do as nonprofits, I actually think it's true. But there are certain categories of work that I'm not embarrassed to say will always need foundation support. That's just the way it is.*

One network member expressed concern about the potential for funders to direct or control the direction and work of a network, especially as foundations aim to increase the overall regional impact of their funding.

*I am concerned that funders are going to start saying, "All of our funding is going to look a certain way, and here's our expectations." One of our major funders is already starting to do some of this. It's like, "These people have really got it, so they're going to be the lead for all of this, and everybody else come in with your vantage point, and we'll make sure that everything aligns so that we'll have these outcomes that we're going to be having. We're going to track it this way."*

*When that starts happening, I think it's detrimental. I think it just feels really constricting, especially in our region.*

*So that's one concern that I do have, is for the funders to direct the way the activity is going to go rather than to join in and say, "Look at these nonprofits here. Let's rely on these nonprofits to figure out how they're best going to work together. Because they're smart; they've got capacity; we're helping them figure out how they can align their work in ways that make sense." But sometimes lately it feels more like, "We've got this funding, and everybody will align, and everybody will do this, and you all figure out how you're going to do that."*



## Chapter Six

# Building Blocks of a Successful Network

In closing, we return to the ten building blocks of a successful network that we outlined in the Executive Summary. When we asked the people who participated in this research project what they saw as the key elements for building and running a successful network, these ideas are the ones that emerged. For us, these are the core ideas from this entire research report.

These building blocks have been addressed in some form already in this report. Rather than flesh them out further here, we close this report by outlining a series of practical questions for people or organizations that want to start or strengthen a network. We have organized these questions in clusters related to the ten building blocks outlined above.

By beginning to answer these questions, an emerging network could potentially chart a course for its development. An established network could chart a course for becoming stronger.

The research summarized in this report has practical implications for building rural networks for wealth creation. We explore these practical implications further in a companion toolkit, a set of self-assessment worksheets for emerging and established networks, that we have developed to accompany this report. This toolkit, *Building a Sustainable Network: A Toolkit*, is available from The Ford Foundation's Wealth Creation in Rural Communities – Building Sustainable Livelihoods initiative ([www.creatingruralwealth.org](http://www.creatingruralwealth.org)).

The self-assessment worksheets in the toolkit are more organized, structured, and practice-focused than the list of questions below. We present the questions below as a sample of the sorts of issues that emerging and established networks might want to reflect upon as they move forward. But if you are looking for a set of practical tools to use as you build or develop a network, please take a look at the toolkit. The toolkit is geared more specifically to the goals of network practitioners than either the data summarized in this report or the questions below.

Below, then, we outline the ten building blocks and provide a few questions for reflection.

**Trust and relationships.** Trust and relationships are the glue that holds a network together. They are built over time as network members work shoulder-to-shoulder on coordinated work that meets their organizations' and their communities' interests. Building trust enables networks to take more risks and share resources more willingly.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. Even if your network focuses on collective action, how will you create time and space for network members to develop relationships and exchange information?
2. Do you want to create structured, purposeful activities in your network that are focused specifically on trust- and relationship-building, or would you rather create the

time and space and let trust- and relationship-building happen organically through the ongoing collective work of the network?

**Shared analysis, vision, interest, and identity.** Network members mentioned the importance of having or developing a shared analysis, a shared understanding of the challenges that the network is coming together to address. Related to this are a shared vision, a collective identity, a shared interest, and a shared sense of place.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. What are network members' analyses of the challenges that your network has come together to address? Is there a shared understanding among most members? What is the information you need to have a shared analysis in relation to your shared goal? How will that information be collected, analyzed, and shared?
2. What is the network's vision for bringing about change? Is that vision broad enough to incorporate all particular strategies that could potentially be effective?
3. What is the sense of collective identity that binds together the members of your network?

**Shared direction, goals, measurement, and work.** Network members mentioned the importance of setting shared goals, developing collective plans, creating a shared measurement system, and working together on a coordinated, strategic body of work.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. Does the network have common, shared, or coordinated goals? Are there network-wide goals in addition to the goals of its individual member organizations? What process does the network use to identify or discover shared goals?
2. Does the network make collective plans as a network? Is the work of network members coordinated or strategic across the region that the network serves?
3. Does the network have a shared measurement system? Is there a system in place for measuring results or impacts across the entire network?
4. Are members of the network working together to carry out a coordinated, strategic body of work?

**Strong network management.** Strong network management is essential for networks to grow, thrive, and accomplish their goals. Having a capable, committed, skilled, and focused network management team is necessary rather than optional.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. Do you have a network manager or network management team that wakes up every day thinking about the details of the network and its work?
2. Does your network management team have the experience and capacity to keep network members on track and moving forward in its meetings and calls?

3. Does your network management team have the capacity to hear network members' ideas, synthesize them, throw out new ideas based on the ideas in the room, then take members' direction for moving forward?
4. Does your network management team have the capacity to do important network maintenance tasks such as administration, fundraising, and data collection and reporting?

**Clear benefits for local people.** Network members emphasized that a network's efforts have to connect to the bread-and-butter issues that people face every day in their communities and work. Networks need to focus on getting something done; they also need to focus on something that everyone is concerned about.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. Is the network focused on getting something important done that benefits local people?
2. Is the focus of the network important to all of the network members and their work?
3. Is the work of this network clearly bringing about stronger results for local people?

**Shared power and control.** Networks operate most effectively and efficiently when power, control, and leadership is dispersed and balanced. Network managers, network staff, or staff at the network's sponsoring organization find ways to share decision-making, direction-setting, and planning with working groups and network members.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. Who makes what decisions in the network?
2. Does direction in the network come primarily from network members – or from a network management organization, a network management team, or a funder?
3. When network decisions are made, are there voices that typically are not heard? Is it possible to include those voices in decision-making processes?

**Communication.** Communication within the network is important. People need to be in the loop and feel like they're part of the loop. Conversations need to be focused on things that are of value to network members, rather than getting together just to talk.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. Do most network members feel like they are in the loop, and that they are part of the loop?
2. Is communication within the network transparent? Are there channels for transparent communication back and forth among network members and between the network management team and members?
3. Does communication within the network meet the need of network members and hold value for them?

4. Are most of the network's meetings and calls necessary, important, and useful, as opposed to just getting together to talk?

**Enough structure, but not too much.** Network members described a balance between having enough structure and having too much. Networks should focus on getting work done and let processes, structures, and governance emerge from the work.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. What are the structures and processes that the network is using to get work done? Are these working effectively and efficiently?
2. What are the structures and processes that the network is using to govern itself? Are these working effectively and efficiently?
3. Does your network really need to have all of its meetings, activities, tasks, and groups – or can things be done differently and more efficiently, in a way that allows network members to “work smarter”?
4. How does your network handle membership? Is it broad or narrow, open or closed, heterogeneous or homogenous, flexible or carefully defined?

**Mutual accountability.** Network members need some way to hold each other accountable for moving the work of the network forward. This accountability can be either formal or informal, but it needs to be effective.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. How does your network handle accountability among its members? Is it formal or informal?
2. Is your network's system of accountability working well? Are members mutually accountable to each other?
3. How is your network accountable to its various stakeholders – for example, its members, its funders, or the communities that the network serves?

**Clear benefits for member organizations.** Network members are most engaged when there are clear and strong benefits for their organizations and their work.

Questions related to this building block might include the following:

1. What are the benefits of network membership for member organizations?
2. How do network members define these benefits? How does the network define its benefits, or the network management team that coordinates the network? Are these conceptualizations of network benefits aligned?
3. Are there enough concrete benefits for network members to justify the organizational costs of time and money invested in the network?

## Appendix A: The Six Networks We Studied

In this appendix, we provide overviews of the six networks that participated in this research. For each network, we provide an overview table and a chart or map of the network's structure and work. We list the networks in alphabetical order.

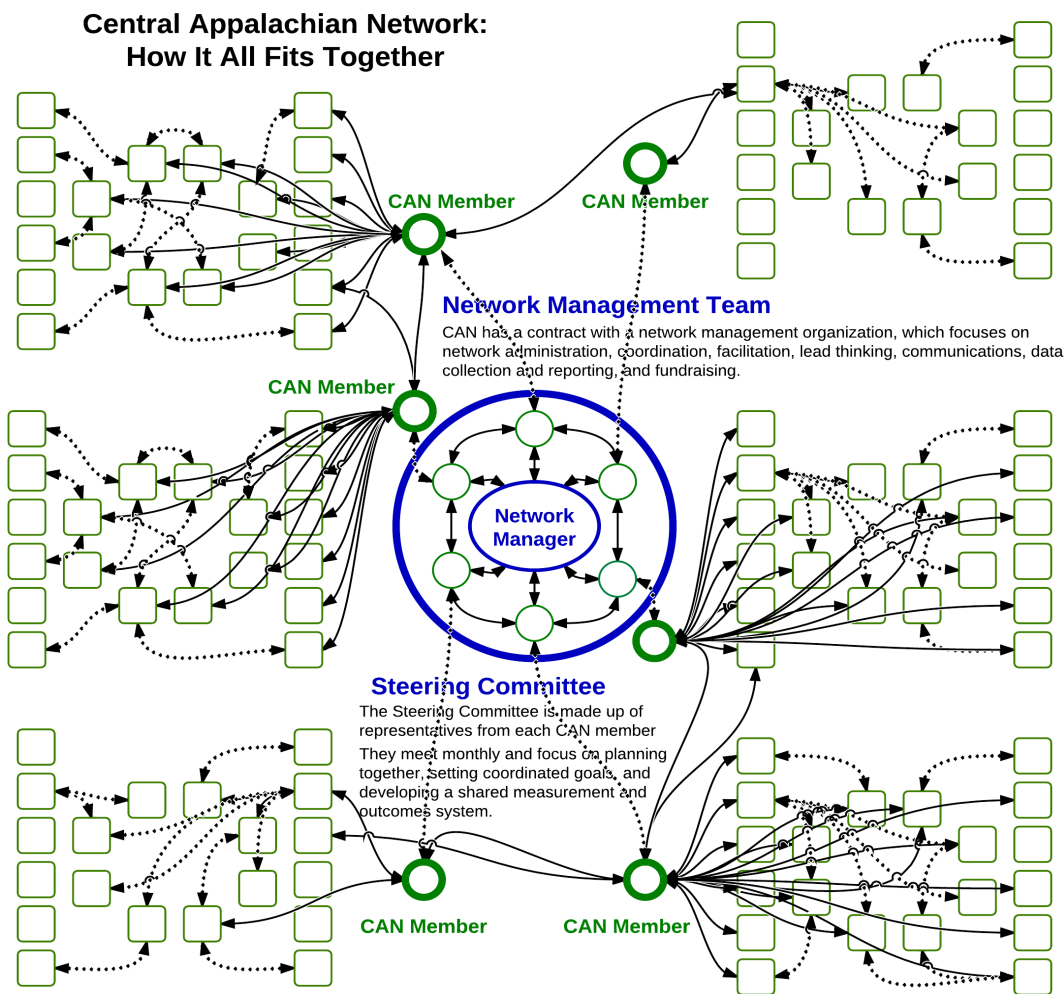
The overview table touches upon ten characteristics:

1. *Nature of the work.* Each network has a different focus; we'll start by outlining these.
2. *Membership.* Each network has a different membership, in terms of numbers and geographic reach.
3. *Legal structure.* The networks we interviewed had three legal structures: unincorporated (with a member serving as fiscal sponsor), a project of a larger organization (a network maintenance organization), or formally incorporated (as a nonprofit organization and / or a Limited Liability Company).
4. *Getting work done.* Networks use various structures to get their work done.
5. *Programs, systems change, and / or policy change.* Networks focus on on-the-ground program work in communities, systems change, policy change, or some combination.
6. *Tightly or loosely coordinated.* In some networks, the work of the network is tightly-coordinated, where network members are planning together, setting shared goals, creating shared measurement systems, and working together to move forward a coordinated body of work (program work, policy work, and / or systems change). In other networks, the work is loosely-coordinated, where members may be working individually towards the same general network-wide goals, but without shared planning, shared goals, shared measurement, or coordinated or collaborative work.
7. *Single- or multi-sector focus.* Some networks focus on a single sector (e.g., affordable housing); some focus on multiple sectors at once. Some have a tight focus; others have a broader, more varied range of areas in which they focus their work.
8. *Learning and support.* In some networks, peer learning and mutual support are a central focus (in addition to coordinated, strategic work together); in other networks, peer learning and mutual support are more peripheral or happen organically as network members come together to collaborate.
9. *Collaboration.* In some networks, members collaborate extensively and intensively with one another and / or with others outside of the network; in other networks, members do not collaborate extensively or intensively.
10. *History.* In some networks, there was a focus on coordinated, strategic collaborative work since the network's inception; other networks began as more of a learning network and then transitioned to coordinated collaborative work.

## Central Appalachian Network (CAN)

Characteristic	Central Appalachian Network (CAN)
Nature of the work	CAN currently focuses on strengthening local food systems and building local food value chains across six multi-county sub-regions. Concretely, CAN members work closely with local partners to strengthen local food value chains and make pass-through grants to local partners.
Membership	CAN is a network of six nonprofit organizations working across the Central Appalachian regions of KY, OH, TN, VA, and WV.
Legal structure	CAN is unincorporated; one of its members serves as its fiscal sponsor.
Getting work done	CAN gets work done through its six members and their various local partners in the sub-regions in which they work. CAN is managed by a contract network management team, a backbone support organization.
Programs, systems change, and / or policy change	CAN members carry out numerous programs and projects in collaboration with local partners to strengthen local food value chains. Taken collectively, this is essentially systems change work, the work of strengthening local food systems. CAN soon plans to focus more attention on policy change.
Tightly or loosely coordinated	CAN's work is tightly coordinated: CAN members plan together, set shared goals, use a shared measurement system, and work together on a coordinated body of work related to strengthening local food systems across Central Appalachia. This focused, coordinated work is new; in the past, CAN was focused on peer learning rather than coordinated, strategic work.
Single- or multi-sector focus	CAN is currently focusing on a single sector, local foods. Although its members use multi-sector approaches, CAN recently decided it could improve its collective impact across Central Appalachia by focusing on one sector at a time, and local foods is their current area of focus. However, not all CAN members are equally focused on local foods. There is a wide range of experience, level of involvement, and infrastructure across the various members and geographic sub-regions in which CAN members work.
Learning and support	Historically, CAN primarily focused on peer learning and mutual support; recently this has become secondary, as the network has moved more towards coordinated work among members.
Collaboration	CAN members collaborate naturally and frequently across geographic sub-regions, both as part of the network's coordinated program work and beyond or outside of it (e.g., collaboration in sectors other than local foods).
History	A focus on strategic, coordinated work among CAN members is recent and new. Some CAN members find the new focus on coordinated work in a single sector to be challenging and difficult; others far prefer it to the network's previous focus on peer learning and sharing.

**Central Appalachian Network (CAN).** CAN’s mission is to work with individuals, community leaders, businesses, policy makers, nonprofit organizations, and others to develop and deploy new economic strategies that create wealth and reduce poverty while restoring and conserving the environment.



**Local Food Value Chains**

Each CAN member works within one of six different geographic subregions to strengthen local food value chains.

A local food value chain includes farmers or producers, processors, aggregators, distributors, wholesale buyers, consumers, waste management companies, and many entities that support the value chain's development.

In the sub-regions in which CAN members work, some value chains are mature, whereas others are emerging. Some CAN members have a lot of experience and a lot of local connections related to local foods work, whereas others do not.

CAN members have shared plans and goals and a common measurement system for strengthening local food value chains across Appalachia.

**Wealth Creation Framework**

All of the work of the Central Appalachian Network is based on the Wealth Creation in Rural Communities framework, which was developed by the Ford Foundation.

Wealth creation is a place-based systems approach to rural development that aims to restore, create, and maintain wealth in low-wealth areas by simultaneously improving economies, the environment, and social conditions.

CAN has developed shared plans and goals and a common measurement and evaluation system for its local foods work, all based on the wealth creation framework.

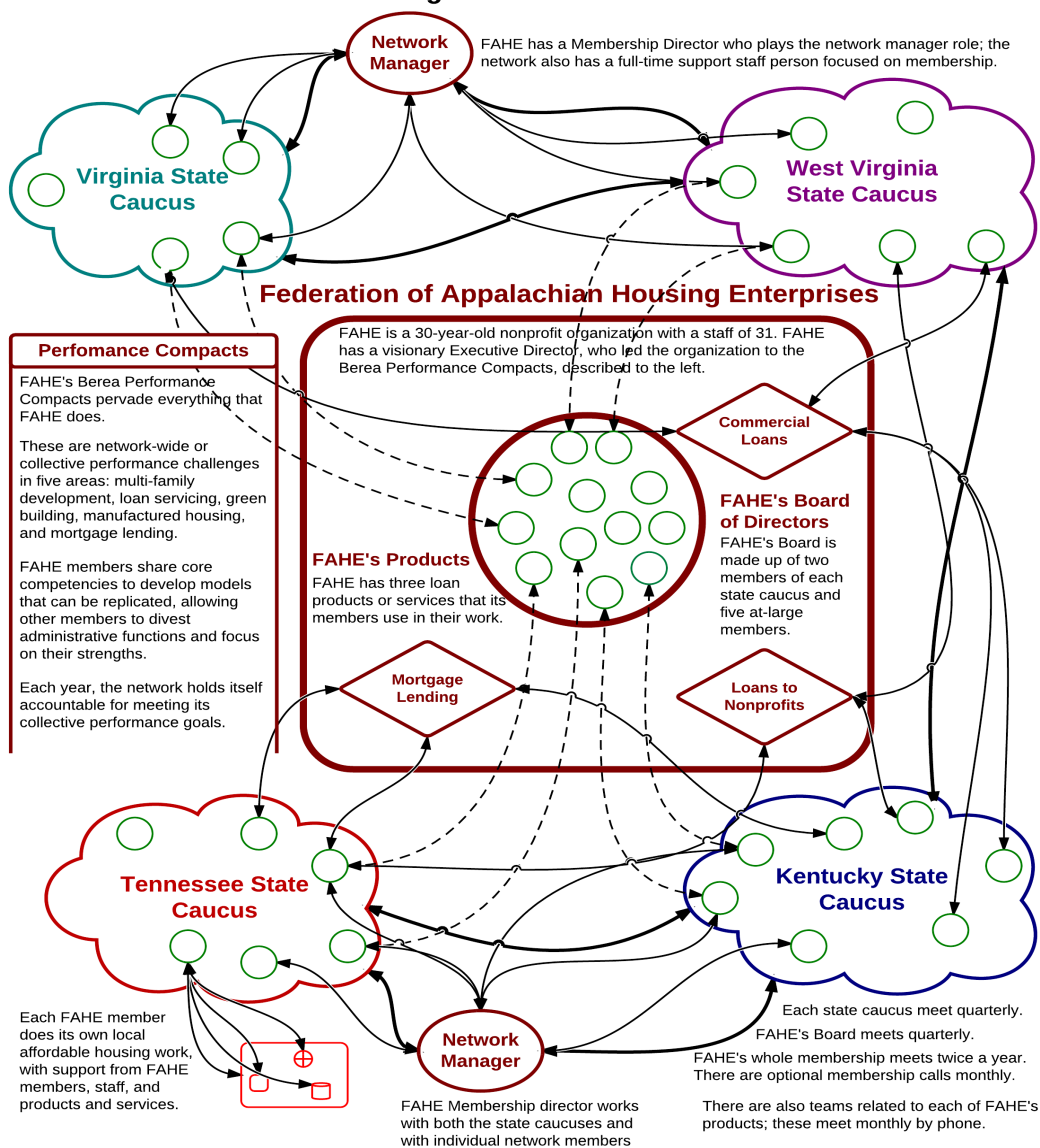


## Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises (FAHE)

Characteristic	Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises (FAHE)
Nature of the work	FAHE works to meet collective performance agreements related to the production of affordable housing units and loans for affordable housing. Concretely, FAHE sets network performance goals across four states and holds the network accountable to them, develops products (e.g., loans) needed to reach those goals, and provides training and education to build network members' capacities so that the network can meet its goals. In a period of five or so years, FAHE increased its annual production of affordable housing units from 2,000 to 4,300 units per year.
Membership	FAHE is a network of 48 nonprofit and governmental affordable housing organizations operating in the Appalachian areas of KY, TN, VA, and WV.
Legal structure	FAHE is incorporated as a nonprofit organization.
Getting work done	FAHE has a large staff with several divisions that provide products to its members. FAHE gets its work done in its state caucuses and its whole membership, with support from FAHE's staff. FAHE is managed by its staff.
Programs, systems change, and / or policy change	Most of FAHE's members' work focuses on affordable housing development in local communities; however, both the network and its members also focus on systems change (e.g., developing collectively owned performance goals across affordable housing systems in four states) and policy change (e.g., advocating for many federal policy changes related to affordable housing).
Tightly or loosely coordinated	FAHE's work is loosely coordinated: Although FAHE has network performance goals to which all members agree and are held collectively accountable, the network's 48 members don't work towards their shared performance goals through a centralized, coordinated, strategic, unified plan.
Single- or multi-sector	FAHE has focused on a single sector, affordable housing, throughout its history.
Learning and support	FAHE has a long-standing culture of sharing successful innovations among its membership rather than "one-upping" other members. This is even stronger now that the network is working towards network-wide performance goals. FAHE members mentioned this commitment to learn and improve and willingness to share as a key to preserving cohesion across the network.
Collaboration	Related to FAHE's long-standing culture of member-to-member learning, assistance, and support, FAHE members also report a good deal of collaboration. With its network performance goals, these collaborations are often business relationships, such as outsourcing and joint ventures.
History	Over the past eight years, FAHE has transitioned towards a culture that emphasizes performance, focusing on collective results, problem-solving, and accountability. This transition was hard for some long-time network staff and members, but performance has become the core of the network now.

**Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises (FAHE).** FAHE leads a network of Appalachian organizations to sustainable growth and measurable impact through collective voice and provides access to capital that creates housing and promotes community development. FAHE, like CAN, receives funding from The Ford Foundation’s Wealth Creation in Rural Communities – Building Sustainable Livelihoods initiative, and uses the wealth creation framework in its work.

**Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises:  
How It All Fits Together**

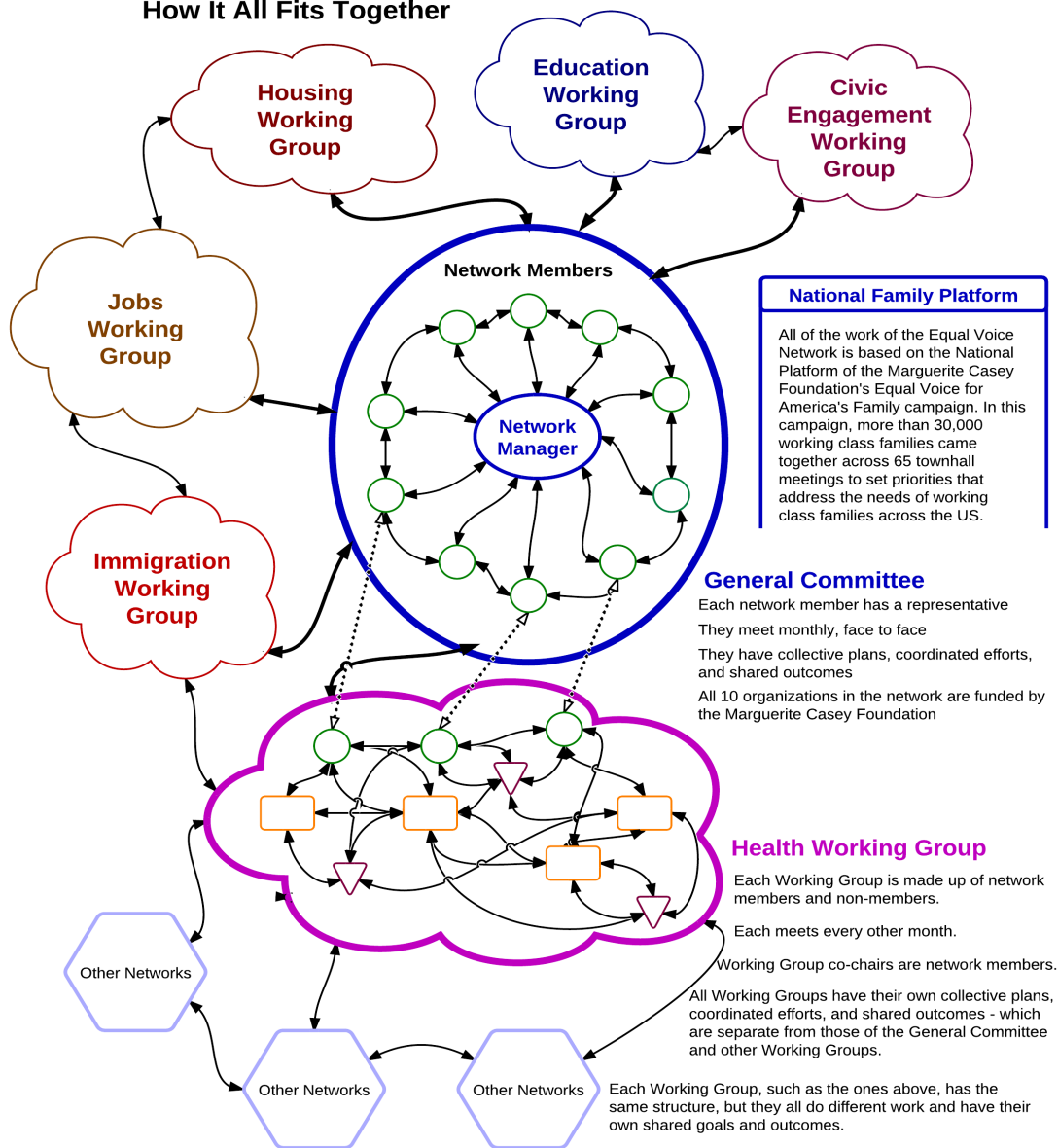


## Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network (EVN)

Characteristic	Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network (EVN)
Nature of the work	In addition to their individual family service programs, EVN members have committed to the development of a social movement that will bring families to the tables of decision makers in the region. Concretely, EVN members organized six working groups: immigration, jobs, housing, health, education, and civic engagement. These working groups develop and carry out ongoing collaborative efforts, involving both EVN members and other organizations.
Membership	EVN is an emerging network of 10 community-based organizations in a two-county area along the Texas-Mexico border.
Legal structure	EVN is unincorporated; one of its members serves as its fiscal sponsor.
Getting work done	EVN gets work done through six working groups, which operate separately and in coordination. EVN is managed by a contract network weaver.
Programs, systems change, and / or policy change	While its members engage individually in family service program work, EVN focuses on systems change and policy change. As examples, EVN worked with the US Census Bureau to change its practices locally and ensure a more accurate count, and the network advocated collectively with state legislators to stop more than 100 bills that would have been harmful to immigrants.
Tightly or loosely coordinated	EVN's work is tightly coordinated: As a network, members plan together, set shared goals, and work together on various systems change and policy change efforts such as the ones described above. Each working group also plans together, sets shared goals, and works together on its own issues.
Single- or multi-sector focus	EVN has a multi-sector focus. Of all of the networks we interviewed, EVN addresses the widest range of issues in the greatest number of sectors, working on immigration, jobs, health care, housing, and education.
Learning and support	EVN came together in the wake of the Equal Voice for America's Family campaign, where 30,000 people came together across the US to set priorities for working families. EVN's main goal was to work together on issues that working families had identified through this process; peer learning and mutual support has happened naturally as part of their collaborations.
Collaboration	EVN members collaborate extensively and continually on shared efforts and goals, both with one another and with non-EVN members who are part of the six working groups.
History	EVN is a new network. All of its members are bought in to coordinated work, but not all are equally involved in every aspect of the work. Members' buy-in exists because EVN's coordinated work is built solidly on the National Family Platform, and EVN members all believe deeply in that platform.

**Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network.** The Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network is composed of ten community-based organizations funded by the Marguerite Casey Foundation, and committed to creating a movement of social change through civic engagement of the more than 25,000 individuals who are the constituents of the different organizations in the network.

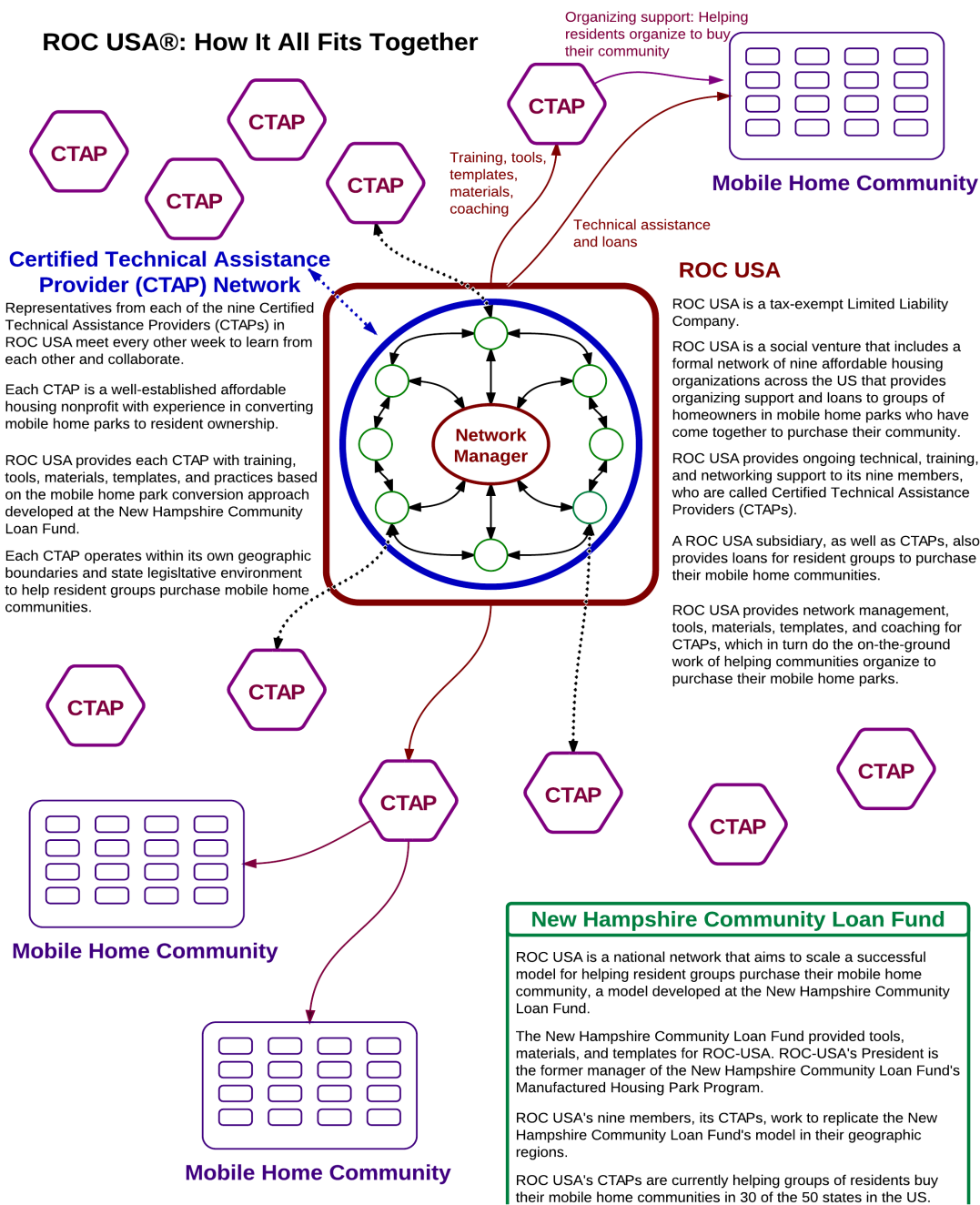
**Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network:  
How It All Fits Together**



## ROC USA®

Characteristic	ROC USA
Nature of the work	ROC USA is a social venture that includes a formal network of affordable housing organizations across the US that provides organizing support and loans to groups of homeowners in mobile home parks who have come together to purchase their community. Concretely, network members help resident corporations form, analyze, and purchase their communities. ROC USA's subsidiary CDFI, ROC USA Capital, and some network members themselves, also provide loans. For resident corporations that purchase their communities, network members provide ongoing support for the first several years as groups get set up and mature. Finally, the network's aim is to scale a model of resident-owned mobile home communities that achieved two significant outcomes in New Hampshire: 20% market share, and faster sales and higher prices in resident-owned vs. investor-owned communities.
Membership	ROC USA is a network of nine affordable housing organizations across the US that are working to help residents purchase mobile home communities.
Legal structure	ROC USA is a tax-exempt Limited Liability Company.
Getting work done	ROC USA gets its organizing and community support work done through its nine member organizations. A staff person at ROC USA takes the lead on network management.
Programs, systems change, and / or policy change	Much of ROC USA's work occurs at the community level: the purchase of mobile home communities by resident organizations. ROC USA also engages in policy advocacy work at both state and federal levels, with the goal of removing legal barriers to residents' mobile home park purchases and increasing the funding available for these purchases.
Tightly or loosely coordinated	ROC USA's work is highly coordinated: All network members use the same model of ownership and practices for supporting resident groups as they purchase their communities. They share tools, materials, and templates through a collaborative intranet. They have common goals and outcomes.
Single- or multi-sector	ROC USA has focused on a multi-pronged strategy within a single sector of affordable housing, manufactured-home communities, throughout its history.
Learning and support	Network members learn from each other through participation in the network, although peer learning is not a primary focus for the network.
Collaboration	Network members generally do not collaborate with one another across geographic region; each network member works closely with ROC USA staff, but not necessarily with each other.
History	Coordinated program work was the founding purpose of the network: to scale a successful affordable housing model across the US using a standardized set of materials, templates, trainings, and practices.

**ROC USA®.** ROC USA exists to make quality resident ownership possible nationwide. ROC USA's goals are to preserve and improve affordable communities, build assets for low- and moderate-income families and individuals, and support mutually-supportive communities and leaders.



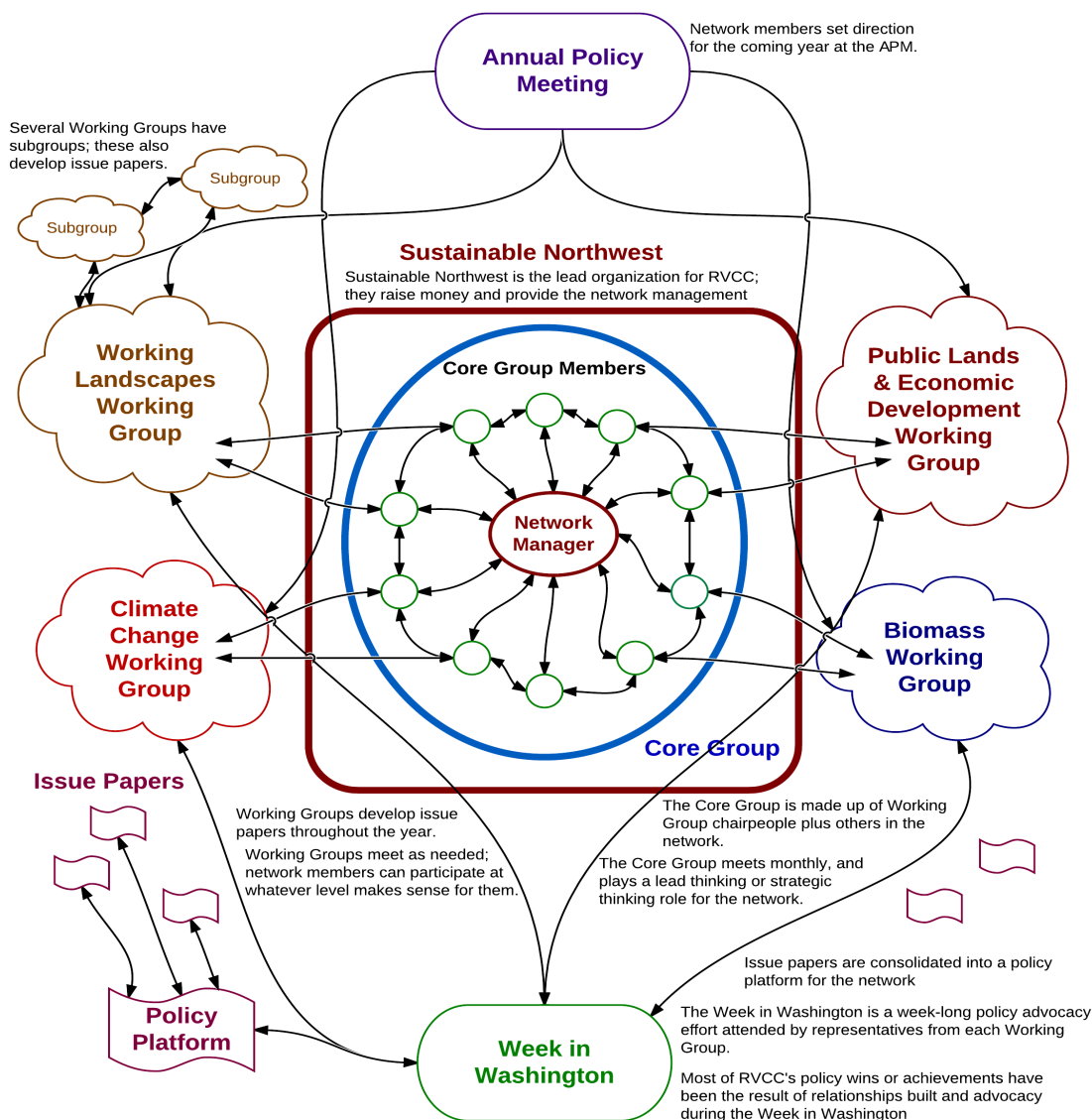


## Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC)

Characteristic	Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC)
Nature of the work	RVCC is a policy-focused network; they focus on policy issues that affect rural communities, public lands management, and the continuation of a natural resource-based economy in the West. Concretely, RVCC coordinates pragmatic, “muddy-boots” policy advocacy work; RVCC provides technical assistance and training that enables rural folks to develop a collective voice among policymakers in Washington DC.
Membership	RVCC is a network of 230 conservation organizations working in rural areas in the western states of AK, AZ, CA, CO, ID, MO, NV, NM, OR, and WA.
Legal structure	RVCC is a project of Sustainable Northwest, a nonprofit organization.
Getting work done	RVCC gets its work done through four issue-based working groups and a core group, which coordinates the work. RVCC is managed by staff at Sustainable Northwest, a network maintenance organization.
Programs, systems change, and / or policy change	RVCC focuses on policy change. RVCC holds an Annual Policy Meeting of its members. From that, working groups develop a series of issue papers and a policy platform. RVCC representatives then travel each year to Washington DC, where they share their priorities with policymakers.
Tightly or loosely coordinated	RVCC’s work is tightly coordinated: Network members work together to develop a shared, coordinated, strategic policy agenda over 10 western states. They then advocate collectively for this policy agenda through a week-long advocacy trip to Washington DC. For RVCC’s Week in Washington, network members plan together, set shared goals, and work together to advocate for the policy platform that they developed together.
Single- or multi-sector focus	Initially RVCC focused on public lands, particularly issues related to national forests, community-based forestry, and labor issues among forest workers. Recently the network made a strategic expansion to also focus on private lands, particularly issues related to rangelands, ranching, and grazing.
Learning and support	Although RVCC is a policy-focused network rather than a network focused on learning, much peer learning and mutual support occurs naturally as part of RVCC’s work. Members report that this learning and support is as valuable as the policy wins; RVCC staff report that they now recognize learning and support as a crucial, if secondary, component of the work.
Collaboration	RVCC members collaborate extensively and continually to develop and advocate for the network’s policy platform. Some program collaboration occurs outside of RVCC’s policy advocacy efforts, but this is secondary.
History	RVCC has focused on coordinated, strategic policy advocacy since its inception.

**Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC).** RVCC is comprised of western rural and local, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West. RVCC focuses on policy issues that affect rural communities, public lands management, and the continuation of a natural resource-based economy in the West.

**Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition:  
How It All Fits Together**

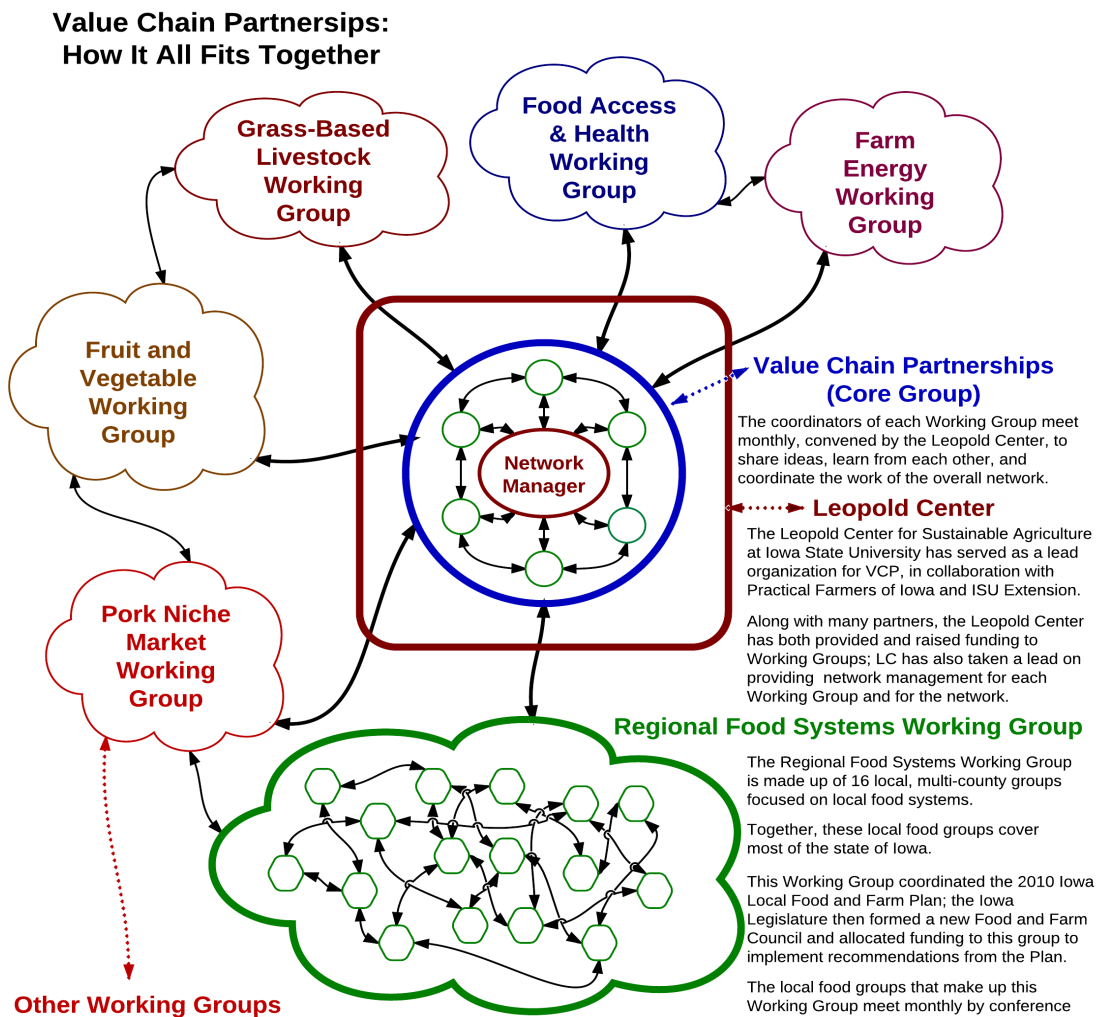




## Value Chain Partnerships (VCP)

Characteristic	Value Chain Partnerships (VCP)
Nature of the work	VCP is a network of networks, a network of six statewide working groups that strengthen food and agricultural value chains in Iowa. Concretely, VCP working groups bring diverse food system entities together to learn from each other, work together, and strengthen food and agricultural value chains. VCP serves as a “marketplace of ideas” and makes small grants to seed innovative ideas and collaborations related to local foods.
Membership	VCP has a membership made up of six statewide working groups that have members across the state of Iowa. There aren’t really VCP “members” as much as participants. The number of participants is large (several hundred).
Legal structure	Until recently, VCP was a program of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University; working groups are currently transitioning to become self-sustaining or moving under other umbrellas.
Getting work done	Most of VCP’s work is done within its six working groups. VCP also has a core group that is made up of the facilitators of each of its six working groups. VCP has been managed by staff at the Leopold Center, in collaboration with Practical Farmers of Iowa and Iowa State U. Extension.
Programs, systems change, and / or policy change	VCP’s primary work is to convene and catalyze relationships among farmers, processors, and private sector, public sector, and nonprofit partners. VCP also makes small grants for innovative, collaborative efforts. VCP also engages in policy-related work: VCP recently coordinated the statewide participatory development of the Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan, and the recommendations from that plan are now being implemented statewide.
Tightly or loosely coordinated	Generally, VCP’s core work is loosely coordinated: working group participants work autonomously, in various ways, towards the same general goal of strengthening agricultural value chains, but there is little shared planning or shared goals within or across working groups. In contrast, VCP’s policy work (the Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan, outlined above) was tightly coordinated, with shared planning and shared goals across the state.
Single- or multi-sector	VCP has focused on a single sector, agriculture and local foods, throughout its history.
Learning and support	VCP’s primary focus is mutual learning and support. VCP uses a <i>Communities of Practice</i> model for facilitating learning and support among participants.
Collaboration	In one VCP working group, focused on regional food systems, members collaborate extensively across multi-county regions on various local food issues. In other working groups, collaboration is less extensive.
History	Coordinated work emerged organically from VCP’s role as convener of food system entities and from the formation of a Regional Food Systems Working Group (a network of 16 multi-county local foods groups across Iowa).

**Value Chain Partnerships (VCP).** VCP is an Iowa-based network of food and agriculture working groups. These groups bring together a diverse ensemble of producers, processors, and private, non-profit, and government organizations across a variety of market-driven food and agriculture issues to deliver social, economic, and health benefits to clients and communities.



Most VCP Working Groups are made up of a wide range of local food systems entities, including producers, processors, distributors, aggregators, industry groups, university programs, government programs, and nonprofit organizations.

Most VCP Working Groups meet quarterly, most often face-to-face.

VCP Working Groups use a Communities of Practice framework. They come together to share what they know, learn from each other about their work, and build relationships and trust. They conceptualize their work as developing a "marketplace of ideas."

Once each year, all Working Group leaders, some Working Group members, and all Leopold grantees and their networks come together for relationship-building and learning.

**A Network in Transition**

Since its inception in 2002, Value Chain Partnerships has operated under the guidance of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University.

Recently the VCP's Working Groups have begun to become more independent and self-sustaining, which was a goal for the Working Groups all along.

VCP Working Groups are currently transitioning to new leadership structures; many will be housed under other organizations.

The hope is that each Working Group will continue to move forward, and they will continue to learn from each other and work together.