THE NEW BOTTOM LINE:

BUILDING ALIGNMENT AND SCALE
TO CONFRONT THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Following the economic crash of 2008, policies at the federal level did little to assist those communities hardest hit by the downturn and largely failed to hold the big banks accountable for the malfeasance that led to the recession. Recognizing these immense political and economic challenges, four national organizing networks—the Alliance for a Just Society, National People's Action, PICO National Network, and Right to the City—came together in 2010 to form the New Bottom Line (NBL).

Accomplishments

NBL was an unprecedented alliance that combined organizing efforts to build a grassroots movement powerful enough to win public policy to regulate the banks and change how they do their business. It broke new ground in the organizing sector and achieved major wins for American families. NBL's most significant accomplishments fall into three major categories:

• Building Connective Tissue between Groups: NBL represents the first time that four organizing networks self-aligned to create a national campaign. The NBL partners were not convened by a funder or coordinated by a national intermediary organization. And, the deep relationships built through the NBL partnership are a key element for future fights and have signaled to the rest of the organizing sector that old divisions can be overcome.

• Moving Ideas and Demands from the Margins to the Mainstream: When NBL first formed, the idea of “principal reduction” was on the margins of efforts to resolve the mortgage crisis. Through a series of campaigns with diverse targets, NBL helped make principal reduction—resetting mortgages to fair market value for millions of homeowners—a standard progressive demand nationally. NBL also supported the efforts of member organizations to advance key policy changes at the state level, winning relief for local communities even when federal politics was mired in gridlock and obstruction. Their multi-pronged, multi-year effort to put pressure on the state Attorneys General helped ensure that the $25 billion national mortgage settlement included principal reduction as a key provision. Furthermore, when the Bush-appointed director of the Federal Housing Finance Agency, Ed DeMarco, blocked similar efforts for principal reduction by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac, NBL mounted the successful campaign to “Dump DeMarco.” In early December 2013, Congress confirmed the nomination of Rep. Mel Watt as the new FHFA director. In addition, their demand for principal reduction was always rooted in their larger narrative about fighting Wall Street’s control over our country and democracy and the need for an economy that works for everyone.

• Bringing Direct Action Organizing to the Forefront: From the beginning, the New Bottom Line identified the big banks as the primary target and connected Wall Street’s influence to the weak and ineffectual policy decisions being made by the political elite. Through a series of creative mass actions, dubbed “showdowns,” and local events in cities across the country, NBL harnessed and mobilized the public’s anger and frustration. When Occupy Wall Street emerged in 2011, NBL and its members were uniquely positioned to connect to the 99% narrative and amplify it through concerted campaign and direct action tactics. The organizing that took place through NBL contributed to the larger narrative about inequality and corporate accountability that continues to gain traction in American politics.

Lessons

The many accomplishments of the New Bottom Line are even more impressive in light of their limited resources and the fact that NBL only formed three years ago. Progressive organizations and funders interested in learning from NBL’s successes and challenges should consider the following five lessons drawn from more than 20 in-depth interviews with NBL stakeholders, allies and supporters.
1. **Hold Vision and Action Together**: The networks that constituted NBL understood the importance of both developing a shared and shareable vision, and of having flexible but concrete actions groups could take together and separately. This combination of vision and action can be a reinforcing loop, particularly when the national staff fosters connections between member groups by supporting and celebrating local organizing wins and emphasizing the linkages between near-term local efforts and long-term national goals. Future alliances should strive to align strategies to win policy changes that build momentum for the movement, create staffing and organizational structures that can support advancement on all levels and discern how and when different partners can push for more radical demands that advance a broader movement vision.

2. **Create Structures that Foster Trust and Respect, Anticipating Conflict**: A majority of stakeholders reported that NBL was more respectful and able to manage internal disagreements than other alliances in which they had participated. While tensions inevitably arose within NBL, the alliance’s overall orientation towards building long-term trust and relationships helped ensure positive working relationships between the partners. At the outset of their partnership, the four networks developed and agreed on principles for working together. Future alliances should have similar discussions before conflicts arise in order to hold partners accountable and foster honesty, unity and shared power.

3. **Fund the Alliance and the Base**: Funding collaborative efforts is critical to making large-scale change; but it cannot be done at the expense of funding for individual organizations. While national alliances are in favor with funders right now, it is important to remember that alliances are only as strong as the organizations they bring together. Funders should take a “both/and” approach by funding nationally coordinated alliances and the individual organizations that do the organizing on the ground.

4. **Don’t Just Aggregate, Augment**: The benefits of aligning organizations and organizing networks go beyond simply aggregating geographic reach: alliances make it possible for individual groups to build on each other’s strengths and compensate for weaknesses. In order to create a meaningful “division of labor” across organizations, it often takes time for staff and leaders to develop the level of trust needed to be transparent about what they do (and don’t do) well. Mapping each partner’s capacities and understanding how each organization operates is essential at the beginning of an alliance’s formation.

5. **Build Connections at All Levels**: The New Bottom Line connected grassroots leaders from across affiliates and networks and also fostered deep relationships between national staff and directors. While conference calls are helpful for coordinating campaign partners, in person meetings and shared experiences at public actions are particularly important for building the connective tissue that keeps organizations in partnership when a specific campaign ends. Supporting relationship building and the development of shared analysis between stakeholders at all levels requires both funding and thoughtful coordination. For movements to succeed, relationship building must happen at the national, state and local levels.

The New Bottom Line effort was a daring experiment that grew out of a moment of crisis and a shared understanding that organizing in traditional modes as disparate networks would not be enough to win against the banks that had crashed the economy. The four organizing networks that formed NBL came together on their own initiative. They launched campaigns that opened up important space to consider new economic ideas. And they pioneered new ways of working across organizational lines. The New Bottom Line represents a significant innovation for the organizing field, and the NBL model will serve as an important touchstone for the future of organizing and movement-building for economic and racial justice.

To learn more about the New Bottom Line, download the full report at [http://www.buildingmovement.org/reports/entry/the_new_bottom_line](http://www.buildingmovement.org/reports/entry/the_new_bottom_line), or visit NBL’s website at [http://www.newbottomline.com](http://www.newbottomline.com).