

# Uncommon Allies

## HOW ENVIRONMENTAL FUNDERS CAN ENGAGE NON-TRADITIONAL CONSTITUENCIES

### About Arabella

Arabella Advisors helps philanthropists and investors find innovative ways to maximize the impact of their resources. Our team provides research, strategies, and management to help clients make a difference in the issues that matter most to them. For more information, contact us at [info@arabellaadvisors.com](mailto:info@arabellaadvisors.com) or 312-283-0362.

### About the Authors

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To accomplish long-term policy goals related to protecting our air, water, and land, environmental funders should consider building relationships with influential constituencies outside the traditional environmental movement. Supporting environment-friendly arguments, voices, and organizations within such constituencies is critical. The environmental community alone is often not strong enough to prevail in policy battles against strong opposing interests: to win, it needs the support of influential allies — messengers who represent varied stakeholders and who can influence decision makers. Identifying and supporting such messengers requires engaging beyond the traditional environmental community. Environmental funders can play an important role in this process, engaging the funders of non-environmental constituencies and building diverse, well-resourced coalitions and networks of organizations that work together to build power over time.

To help guide future donor investments in this area, Arabella Advisors examined the constituency-building strategies of leading environmental funders who have invested significant time and energy in working with the health, faith, and national security communities. The following paper lays out a five-step framework, based on lessons learned from those funders' work, that can help other environmental donors begin to identify and engage influential constituencies that can help them achieve their goals. Our framework provides an introduction to thinking about engaging new constituencies in environmental efforts; funders will, of course, need to develop more-nuanced and detailed strategies around the particular opportunities they pursue.

## Our five steps for environmental constituency building include:

- 1. Identify the influential constituencies:** Determine which constituencies can contribute influential new voices — and ultimately political power — to your cause.
- 2. Build bridges with funders and organizations within those constituencies — and do so on their terms:** The environmental community has often made the mistake of believing that the rest of the world views issues the way it does: through an environmental lens. Looking for common ground with new constituencies requires working to see the issues from their perspective.
- 3. Provide support that enables leaders within new constituencies to find their own voices on environment-related issues:** Work to elevate messengers who are respected in their communities and can leverage constituent organizations and networks as a platform. Support them in efforts to develop, articulate, and deliver targeted messages that resonate with their constituencies.

**4. Plan for long-term movement building and coordination:** Funders need to make long-term investments in the organizing capacity of organizations within the constituency to educate and organize their membership around an environmental issue.

**5. Monitor and evaluate results:** Funders need to support sustained and consistent public opinion monitoring, which is required to gauge the effectiveness of campaigns over time.

Constituency-building is a long-term strategy that carries considerable risk but a high potential for reward. This strategy differs from traditional campaigns, which succeed in mobilizing committed activists for specific objectives but are not designed to build ongoing engagement or a life-time commitment from non-traditional actors. Investing in the capacity of constituencies to engage and mobilize can build a broader base of support for your goals over time and position advocates with more support when the time comes for significant policy battles.

## STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR CONSTITUENCY BUILDING

### 1. Identify the influential constituencies

Think carefully about what you hope to achieve by engaging new constituencies. Different communities will be more influential in some debates than others, and you should invest in building relationships with those most likely to help you achieve your political objectives. The easiest relationships to build may not be the best ones to invest in. For example, building relationships with other groups that typically support the same political candidates as the environmental movement may not ultimately change the way anyone votes. Consider who the key political decision makers are on your issues and which constituencies they listen to when they vote.

Also, make sure that any constituency you seek to build a relationship with has an existing infrastructure you can tap into — a well-established body of leaders, organizations and networks that can be engaged around your issue and are willing and able to work together. In general, decision makers are more likely to be swayed when many different groups, rather than one or two well-resourced national groups, advance a similar message. Having leaders and institutions in place will allow you

to leverage the new constituency's existing political influence.

**Example:** In regions with large commercial fisheries, professional fishermen often have political clout and existing relationships and networks that can make them influential voices for environmental action. Funders might begin to engage fisherman around conservation with a short-term goal of securing support for efforts to improve or protect fish spawning habitat in order to increase fish numbers. A long-term goal might be to engage fisherman as advocates in supporting candidates who support conservation-oriented economic development.

### 2. Build bridges with funders and organizations within those constituencies — and do so on their terms

To build relationships and trust with a new constituency's funders and organizations, start by learning more about the constituency and its perspective on the environmental issue you're working on. Examine the constituency's key

beliefs, motivations, and concerns, and look for common ground by considering your issues from its perspective. Recognize that non-traditional allies may not be accustomed to advocacy or to working on environment-related issues, and they may fear that environmental funders are trying to pull them away from their core missions. It may be necessary to support constituent organizations in their own priorities to help build trust. Constituent organizations will require time and additional capacity to mobilize a campaign around your shared issue.

While environmental groups may play a key coordination role, funders should work with donor partners from within the community or with intermediaries acceptable to the particular constituency rather than employing environmental groups as intermediaries. Sectors you seek to reach have existing institutions (professional associations, trade organizations, nonprofit organizations, affinity groups, etc.) that already have power and influence in key places. When possible, tap into these existing spheres of influence. Also, remember that building relationships with donors that support key constituent organizations is crucial. Such funder partners have experience working with the constituency and can serve as critical allies in your effort.

**Example:** Climate advocates can find common ground with the national security community on issues of climate security — the domestic and international national security risks posed by global warming — as well as reducing our reliance on foreign oil. While the national security community is uncomfortable with advocating for policy change, advocates have found ways to work with the military on its own terms. The Department of Defense has come to recognize the importance of energy innovation to enhancing operational effectiveness, bolstering national competitiveness, and increasing security.<sup>1</sup> Advocates are working with the leadership of the Department of Defense to reduce its own footprint, and the military is becoming a leader in creating alternative fuels, advanced energy storage, and more-efficient vehicles on land, in the air, and at sea.<sup>2</sup> Funders interested in advancing the clean energy economy have an opportunity to highlight the positive example set by the Department of Defense as it works to reduce its footprint and to engage the military in a more public way on issues of climate security.

### 3. Provide support that enables leaders within new constituencies to find their own voices on environment-related issues

Constituencies are far more likely to listen to leaders and organizations that they already recognize as insiders — people who share their values and speak their languages. With that in mind, seek to empower leaders who are respected in their communities, and carefully consider which organizations should host these messengers. Leaders often need to be housed in organizations that are respected by the target constituency, rather than in environmental organizations.

Environment-minded organizers within a new constituency will also need support to develop tactical messages that appeal to specific groups of people in specific geographies who can influence your desired outcome. Again, recognize that environmental issues must be framed in ways that resonate with the target constituency's interests. Messaging research should be conducted by firms and experts who understand the target constituency, and should be sustained over a long period.

Funders can also support efforts to convene the community and help leaders educate their own members about the importance of environmental issues and how they impact the causes the constituency cares about. After building a base of support within the community, you can begin to empower leaders to engage policymakers who respond to the community and further amplify these leaders' voices.

**Example:** The faith-based community has powerful and influential messengers who environmental funders can engage to make moral and ethical calls for environmental action to the over 80% of Americans who identify as having a religious affiliation.<sup>3</sup> This community has proved willing to engage on issues of environmental justice and health, and can be powerful messengers for action. For instance, the faith-based community can play a significant role in efforts to limit the negative impact of coal plants on surrounding communities. Evangelical and Catholic faith groups have begun to develop messages around the impact of mercury from coal plant pollution on unborn babies that resonate strongly with their pro-life audiences. In addition, the faith-based community has powerful grassroots and grassstops messengers who can help make a moral and ethical demand for action.

## 4. Plan for long-term movement building and coordination

Building relationships and mobilizing a community for political action requires sustained support over many years. Too often funders engage organizers for short-term policy wins but do not sufficiently resource longer-term movement building and coordination. Work with funding partners with experience in the community and leading organizations within the constituency to carefully map long- and short-term strategies. Support for planning will help these organizations find a direction, align groups around a common set of objectives, make decisions along the way, and evaluate incremental progress to determine course corrections.

Making a long-term investment in organizing capacity will also help develop leaders and ensure a base of support for policy efforts. Empower a lead organization to act quickly and efficiently during campaigns. Lead organizations will need the resources to staff the coordination of field organizers and leaders — paid and unpaid — to mobilize communities. Provide additional support for a broad group of organizations to work together, creating open structures through which they can share expertise, resources, and campaign strategies.

**Example:** Funders looking to engage the health community in environmental policy advocacy will need to invest in the capacity of both national and local health organizations. Over time, national health organizations have recognized that advocacy aimed at preventing pollution that harms health is an important component of their core mission, and they have begun to play an important role in efforts to reduce chemicals in household and consumer products and in anti-coal campaigns. Yet organizations in the health community are more accustomed to providing

services and educating their members than to coordinating prolonged policy campaigns, and their capacity for organizing is limited. Funders need to address this need before expecting health organizations to engage in advocacy campaigns. This will require support for paid organizers, trainings for volunteers, and messaging research.

## 5. Monitor and evaluate results

Monitoring progress and evaluating results will be crucial to understanding whether your efforts are causing constituency opinion to change and are ultimately likely to lead to greater political action. The goals and metrics for success in constituency building are often different from typical investments and may require an adjustment of expectations. Constituency building is a long-term strategy, and funders are unlikely to witness significant change in a year or even two. Building a larger strategy for success will require the inclusion of short- and long-term goals. In addition, being responsive to changes in public opinion and adjusting messages accordingly will require support for data-driven monitoring.

**Example:** To date, climate messaging research has largely been done in small, intermittent pieces. For example, the most recent poll of evangelical opinions on climate change was conducted in 2008. At the same time, most messaging work has been conducted at the national level, and there is a need for more targeted research at the state and local level to develop messages to better connect with key constituents. Funders engaging non-environmental constituencies will need consistent and sustained public opinion monitoring in specific communities to gauge shifts in constituent attitudes on environmental issues.

### Notes

- 1) Pew Charitable Trusts (2010), "Reenergizing America's Defense," 10. [http://www.pewtrusts.org/our\\_work\\_report\\_detail.aspx?id=58542](http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=58542)
- 2) Ibid, 4.
- 3) The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008), "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey." <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>