

**SCALING UP TO INCREASE  
COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION VOICE\***

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**Abstract:** This is a collaborative, community-based study of the merger of two Chicago community organizing groups seeking to expand their geographic base and political power. While the merger enabled the new organization to increase and use its power, this case also illustrates the various ways the merger presented opportunities for the new organization to maintain effectiveness at multiple scales while sustaining strong internal democracy and connections to local residents. By consolidating and leveraging new and old political relationships, and by maintaining or increasing the civic benefits of organizing, this merger provides important lessons for organizing in diverse community settings.

### **Introduction**

A number of researchers have argued that *scaling up* is necessary to increase the power of an organization to challenge large-scale forces perpetuating inequality (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2010; Pastor Jr., Benner, & Matsuoka, n.d.; Scully, 2008; Wood, 2007). Rusch defines *scaling up* as “a process of coordination or unification among locally-rooted organizations for increased capacity, reach, and impact at higher levels of policy making” (2012, p. 51). Scaling up is seen as an antidote to parochialism sometimes inherent in neighborhood-based organizing (Gillette Jr., 2006; Santow, 2007). Researchers focused on the democracy-enhancing character of regional equity and governance have also pointed to the efficiencies and political value of scaling up (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2013; Orfield, 1997; Rusk, 2003).

However, scholars of community-based organizations have also described the dilemmas of scale. These involve the tensions, particularly acute for organizations with community-based constituencies, in maintaining internal democratic organizational practices while attempting to both help neighborhood residents understand the systemic nature of many problems experienced

at the local level and increase the organization's influence at larger scales (Kleidman, 2004). Additionally, calls for regionalism can sometimes come at the expense of minority and marginalized communities as decision-making moves to more regional scales (Swanstrom & Banks, 2007). Thus, community-based organizing groups must respond to the fact that success at the local level depends on the political decisions made at higher levels while accounting for the potential damaging effects of losing grassroots democratic processes or failing to link local conditions to larger, systemic causes.

We argue that effective change-oriented organizing takes place at *both* the neighborhood level and larger scales. Rather than framing the issue of scale as one of local-versus-national focus, it is instead an issue of complexity of scale. The reality is that citywide, regional, national, and global forces are already present in our lives at the local level – directly and indirectly. Most of the services or market transactions in local communities entail complex interactions with retailers, government agencies, and non-profit organizations that may be regionally, nationally, or globally based. Importantly, it is “[t]he interaction of the external forces and the basic needs that are provided locally [that] is the central tension that makes community a place in which interests and power are shaped, and in which important social, economic, and political conflicts occur” (DeFilippis et al., 2010, p. 16). In this view, communities are the entry points for understanding social, economic, and political forces. Local interactions can become the building blocks of processes that extend beyond the local processes.

In cases where communities are racially, ethnically, and economically diverse, the demographic heterogeneity of place itself enhances the connections between the local neighborhood context and extra-local forces. Such communities are microcosms of where the United States is headed in becoming a “majority-minority” nation by 2040. Organizing and

coalition building in these communities can provide insights about how intergroup tensions are addressed within the local community, but also how day-to-day community-level personal and institutional interactions already cross social class, occupational, racial, ethnic, and nationality lines in such communities. This militates against an organization adopting a parochial focus on place; rather the organization uses the different local perspectives as natural portals to regional and national issues. Thus, as Rusch (2012) points out, as organizations scale up to take advantage of its benefits while avoiding its dilemmas, it is particularly important to identify which practices may facilitate populist engagement and foster democratic processes.

### **Methods**

With this in mind in early 2014, a research team from the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) at Loyola University Chicago began a multi-year study of the merger of two established Chicago community organizing groups, Lakeview Action Coalition (LAC) and Organization of the Northeast (ONE). LAC and ONE merged in 2013 to form a new, larger organization called ONE Northside as a strategic way for them to restructure and increase their capacity to represent neighborhood interests. They also sought to match the political and policy decision-making powers that have increasingly moved to citywide, statewide, and national levels. Within the first year of its new existence, ONE Northside leaders approached CURL staff to engage in a collaborative research project to evaluate the merger that had just occurred.

This research is an ongoing collaborative university-community research project using community-based participatory research approaches. CURL's research model is distinguished from many research centers in its involvement of community partners in all aspects of its research – from conceptualization and design of the research projects to the collection of data, analysis of results, and completion of final reports (for further details on CURL's model of

collaborative, community-based research see Nyden, Hossfeld, & Nyden, 2011, pp. 19–22).

Consistent with this model, a 12-member research advisory committee comprised of CURL staff, student fellows, faculty researchers, ONE Northside staff, and other community members guided the research process. As any traditional academic team would do, this university-community advisory committee formulated a research plan to conduct a two-year, case study to assess the outcomes of the merger and evaluate the work of the new organization. In addition to providing guidance in identifying key interviewees, interview questions, and other research instruments, the committee ultimately reviewed initial findings and provided feedback. This added multiple perspectives in analyzing the data, and also insured that research did not miss nuances that might only be apparent to community members.

CURL researchers used ethnographic methods to study ONE Northside organizational and organizing practices, and participants' perceptions of the causes and consequences of the merger. The goal of the project was to initially document the merger process and also identify the structures and practices of the organization and experiences of participants in ONE Northside organizing activities. Ethnographic methods were particularly useful for observing firsthand the various processes and arenas in which ONE Northside carried out its organizing work as well as uncovering the meanings participants associated with that work. Therefore, a small team of graduate students, staff, and undergraduate research fellows engaged in in-depth participant observation, conducted interviews, and performed archival and historical research on ONE, LAC, and ONE Northside. During the first year of the merger evaluation, members of the research team attended important organization-wide events such as board meetings, membership councils, leadership councils, annual conventions, organizer trainings, and other public actions. Additionally, several of the research team members joined ONE Northside issue teams focused

on affordable housing, violence prevention, and worker justice to deepen their understanding of how ONE Northside worked with grassroots leaders in its organizing work. Extensive field notes were collected over the course of that first year of research.

The team also conducted 33 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 28 individuals averaging 90 minutes in length with current and former ONE Northside staff and leaders (follow-up interviews were conducted with several of them). These interviews focused on people's experiences with ONE Northside organizing practices and issue advocacy prior to and since the merger. ONE Northside leaders and staff who were part of the research advisory committee identified the interview subjects by selecting a list of roughly 35 of the most engaged participants who had been involved with the organizations prior to the merger or had significant experience with the new organization during that first year. In all, interviews were conducted with 8 current ONE Northside staff members and 20 community leaders (10 women and 10 men), ranging in age from their early-20s to their late-70s and included 8 non-white subjects.

In addition to the interviews, the research team conducted two focus groups with leaders from a selection of ONE Northside's most active member institutions to gain a better understanding of how ONE Northside's member institutions were engaged prior to and since the merger. The transcribed interviews and field notes were hand coded for general themes and then systematically coded in detail for important themes that emerged using qualitative software. When combined with the historical analysis and contemporary reporting in the media on ONE Northside's advocacy work, the team was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the conditions leading up to the merger, the motivations of grassroots leaders and staff related to the merger, and some of the impacts and outcomes of the merger for ONE Northside.

Rich arrays of data were collected lending themselves to a variety of theoretical considerations. For instance, one of the challenges for the larger community-based organizing group is to remain nimble enough to respond quickly to immediate local issues that arise on a day-to-day basis. Ethnographic methods are ideal for examining the formation of new organizational practices to address this challenge. Additionally, for this article, these data are equally suited for examining the merger itself as a potentially novel and instructive case of scaling up. Case studies using ethnographic methods are common in the social sciences due to the often expansive and rich data made possible through the particular arsenal of methods used in ethnography (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). Thus, this article presents the ONE/LAC merger as a case study exploring how the merger produced many of the benefits of scaling up while avoiding some of the pitfalls predicted by scholars.

### **Shared strengths and challenges for community-based organizations**

Understanding the trajectories of ONE and LAC helps to explain some of the benefits of scaling up for ONE Northside. Established in 1973, ONE was a community-based organization that grew from the efforts of Alinsky-style organizers in Uptown, Edgewater, and Rogers Park. These Chicago communities have consistently had a combined population of approximately 180,000 residents over the past four decades and collectively experienced heavy disinvestment and deterioration of a portion of the housing stock. During the early years of ONE, these neighborhoods saw an increase in half-way houses, prompted by the de-institutionalization of individuals from mental health institutions in the neighborhoods and elsewhere, as well as an immigration of low-income immigrants. ONE's early organizing efforts around promotion of affordable housing and countering economic disinvestment eventually grew to include a wide range of issues including education, crime, youth and family support, cultural diversity, and jobs

and economic development. During the last two decades, ONE's work focused on understanding and challenging these inequities to create a unified and socially just community.

A similar story was playing out during the 1980s in the Lakeview community of Chicago just south of Uptown—a community area of approximately 95,000 residents. In an effort to secure loans and mortgage insurance for low- and moderate-income residents, Lakeview Tenants Organization formed to organize executive directors of local service organizations to respond to these challenges of displacement. In 1992, through the influence of key funders and partners well-versed in multi-issue community organizing, Lakeview Action Coalition (LAC) was created out of the work of the Tenants Organization to retain and create affordable housing in the Lakeview neighborhood, then in the early stages of rapid gentrification. LAC expanded its issue base to include health care and included a strong emphasis on ensuring the civil rights of the LGBT community growing in Lakeview – particularly LGBT youth. Prior to the merger, LAC also forged a strong relationship with National People's Action (NPA), a national network of 29 organizations in 14 states, by becoming an organizational member. Importantly, Jennifer Ritter, Executive Director of LAC and soon-to-be Executive Director of ONE Northside, also served as a member of the NPA national board, providing a particularly strong link between the resources and expertise of LAC and those of a national network.

Before the merger, ONE and LAC shared a number of distinctive characteristics. ONE's and LAC's territories were adjacent to each other and their demographics were both highly diverse. Both had significant lists of organizing accomplishments, winning the respect of other organizers inside and outside of Chicago. The eight Chicago community areas fully or partially inside their combined boundaries – the boundaries of the new ONE Northside as well – have



consistently been some of the most diverse ethnically, racially, and economically for several decades (P. Nyden, Lukehart, Maly, & Peterman, 1998; Social Impact Research Center, 2017).

Both ONE's and LAC's governance structures sought to create strong democratic links between the respective organization's leadership and a broad range of organizations throughout the communities. Both had governing structures comprised of an institutional member base made up of social service agencies, religious congregations, educational institutions, and other non-profits. Membership councils - bi-monthly meetings of representatives of member institutions who voted on organizing priorities - governed both organizations. The vast amount of ONE's and LAC's advocacy work on issues was done by volunteer leaders. These were people who came from communities and populations at the center of the issues on which the organizations worked. For instance, both organizations had housing teams comprised of tenants of Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs), public housing residents, renters in affordable buildings, individuals experiencing homelessness, and others including market rate renters and homeowners. Importantly, each organization invested heavily in identifying and cultivating those leaders through training and leadership development activities. Indeed, the two organizations shared enough similarities that many times their issues overlapped and the two organizations collaborated to push ahead larger or particularly challenging campaigns.

However, increasingly the difficulties of winning results without a broader ideological analysis of the systemic roots of problems facing the community and a broader geographical member base were becoming apparent to ONE and LAC staff and leaders. Reflecting on the contemporary environment where economic targets lie at higher regional and national levels, a former ONE organizer observed that in the 1970s, ONE and similar neighborhood-based organizations, "were very rooted in the neighborhoods they were working in. If there was an

issue with redlining or a small business loan, you could take over [the bank] lobby and you knew the CEO was upstairs... [but] we are now so far away from that.” A senior staff member from LAC described a similar experience of realizing that their approach to local community issues needed to shift. In a meeting of leaders from community advocacy groups trying to address crises in both the state and national budgets related to social service cuts, she explained, “I remember just spontaneously saying, ‘Who here gets community development block grant money to fund their work and their agency?’ And every single non-profit raised their hand... it was just a moment of saying, ‘We are really in trouble.’”

In this environment, because of their past working relationship, and similarities between philosophies, strategies, organizational structures, member organizations and issues, the topic of joining forces emerged among LAC and ONE leaders. A central theme driving each organization’s agenda was to continually “build power” by increasing size and geographical reach. At the same time, the two organizations did not want to lose the voice of local residents and the input from community-based organizational members – a commitment to grassroots democracy that had been central to their organizing for decades. Key staff and leaders initiated merger talks in 2012 and officially merged in July 2013, creating ONE Northside.

### **Findings: Building and projecting power democratically**

This study sheds light on the ways the new organization displayed and projected its power after the merger, thereby achieving some of the benefits of scaling up. Additionally, by examining the organizational structures of ONE Northside, we find how these structures and the processes they engendered avoided many of the dilemmas of scale by enhancing the civic goals of community organizing groups. For the purposes of this article, we will be focusing on two of the merger impacts identified by the collaborative research team. First is identifying processes

the merger triggered that allowed the new organization to project its power by consolidating and leveraging both old and new political relationships. Second is evaluating how the merger maintained, or even increased, ONE Northside's ability to promote the civic goals of organizing by broadening the basis for building solidarity and by strengthening internal democratic processes.

### **Projecting power by consolidating and leveraging relationships**

Community organizers often define power as the ability to act. However, without understanding the processes that produce and operationalize power in people's lives it is difficult to know what facilitates or limits people's actions. Therefore, the research team wanted to identify those ways that the merger built the organization's power but also the processes it triggered that enabled the organization to be a vehicle for people to act and make their voices heard at multiple political scales. Relationships play a key role in understanding how power is produced (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Lukes, 2004). In some cases, the merger allowed ONE Northside to leverage their new relationships with actors in ways that increased their ability to bring the community's interests to bear on decision-making processes. In other cases, the merger created the necessary conditions for the new organization to simply remain as effective as the antecedent organizations.

**City Relationships.** The ONE/LAC merger dramatically increased the geographical representational power of the new organization, thereby commanding the attention of both new and old political players. As the consultant who helped guide the merger noted, "that's one of the benefits of being bigger... it does bring you into these kind of different funding relationships or civic relationships because you're bigger, you're more prominent, you represent a greater constituency, so you do get more respect." In a city where wards include 55,000 residents on

average, this meant a change from two organizations each influencing five wards representing 275,000 residents to one organization influencing ten wards with 550,000 residents. This is a population larger than the populations in Atlanta, Miami, Oakland, Minneapolis, or Cleveland. Increasing its size meant that ONE Northside created political clout through its larger constituency. Each former organization could only claim influence over 10% of the aldermen in the city (five each out of the 50 total wards). However, simply combining the two territories increased ONE Northside's associated representatives to 20% of the city council. Rather than simple addition, this larger number of aldermen created new political dynamics that resulted in both real political wins as well as providing new and advantageous levers of power.

This increased political traction was dramatically displayed in ONE Northside's victory of passing the Chicago for All ordinance, which instituted a city-wide policy that preserves SRO housing by incentivizing the sale of SRO buildings to affordable housing providers. Several years prior to the merger, housing organizers in both LAC and ONE noted an increasing trend of well-funded developers buying SRO buildings and converting them to market-rate "micro" apartments catering to a new, gentrifying urban clientele. But, as one organizer described it, it was too difficult for a small organization to organize SRO tenants building-by-building. Additionally, early attempts to pass a citywide ordinance addressing the issue had stalled, in part, lacking the adequate political momentum within city council. As ONE Northside took shape, the new organization could combine its increasing capacities with its ability to pressure more aldermen in order to pass the ordinance. In this case, the synergy created by their increased organizational capacities catalyzed their combined political representation.

Additionally, the organization's ability to play politics was also enhanced and illustrated through their ability to work strategically with multiple aldermen. Reflecting on successes with

legislation since the merger, a ONE Northside Board member and pastor of a long-time institutional member church, described how the larger organization has been taken more seriously than before. “It used to be we had two alderman ... and they just put you in their pocket and [would say] ‘you're cute.’ They'd pick you up and they'd pet you and put you back in their pocket. But now one alderman can't just make or break you. We're playing them against each other [now].” Increasing traction in one politician’s ward or district can also snowball, creating opportunities that would not have been possible without first gaining that geographic foothold. Referring to moving a national campaign on Social Security reform forward, one organizer described such a dynamic after the merger.

I never would have been able to effectively organize in [U.S. Representative Jan] Schakowsky’s district, because we had such a small sliver of it in our base. But now there is broader access. And after Schakowsky signed on, seven more progressive people in Congress signed on, so she sort of started this snowball of more people signing on.

**National relationships: National People’s Action (NPA).** LAC brought with them their relationship with National People’s Action (NPA has since been renamed to People’s Action, [www.peoplesaction.org](http://www.peoplesaction.org)), a national network that has worked with the PICO National Network and other associations of community groups organizing on national banking and community development reform issues (Goehl, 2014). The newly merged, and larger, ONE Northside created additional political synergy by combining increased local resources with an enhanced presence in national networks.

In the case of this coalition, the relationship between the two groups is a two-way, mutually influential one. There are multiple overlaps between ONE Northside priority issues and

those of NPA providing new opportunities for both organizations. For example, an early LAC campaign, which was incorporated into ONE Northside's work after the merger, became the building blocks for a larger NPA campaign to reframe national tax issues. The ONE Northside campaign sought to create transparency in the amount of taxes paid by large corporations – a campaign that was seen as a first step toward making large corporations pay their fair share of taxes. ONE Northside's local Chicago experiences with organizations facing budget cuts because of the loss of Community Development Block grants prompted ONE Northside to begin reframing the state's budget crisis as a "revenue crisis." NPA adopted the "revenue crisis" as their framing of tax issues at the national level afterwards.

Another case illustrating the two-way street relationship between ONE Northside and its national network was the involvement by ONE Northside's members in a national campaign to stop Walgreens, the nation's largest pharmacy, from moving its corporate headquarters from Illinois to Switzerland to avoid paying taxes. It was ONE Northside members who showed up in June 2014 to picket a high-profile Walgreens near the company's headquarters in Chicago at a critical juncture of a heavily media-based campaign. ONE Northside's relationship with NPA produced a flow of knowledge and resources in both directions that made this campaign successful. NPA had co-published a report that revealed Walgreens' motives to avoid paying U.S. taxes while making millions from U.S. customers (Americans for Tax Fairness & Change to Win Retail Initiatives, 2014). However, it was media coverage of June pickets that led to national media coverage of Walgreens' tax avoidance plan. The negative publicity helped push Walgreens executives to abandon their Switzerland plan (Fortino, 2014; Hjelmgaard & McCoy, 2014). In both the corporate tax transparency and Walgreens campaigns, local knowledge,

experience, and resources and networks contributed to national campaigns at the same time as the local organization benefited by demonstrating their national reach.

**Promoting the civic goals of organizing: Building solidarity and enhancing internal democratic processes**

Scholars have shown the important civic benefits that come from participating in community organizing and social movements (Erbaugh, 2002; Giugni, 2007; Warren, 2010; Wood, 2002). While not typical campaign wins, these benefits represent significant organizing goals because they indicate that the organization is mobilizing people into roles where they have the opportunity to practice civic participation in the public sphere. For instance, as more people became involved and participated in the expanded organizing work of ONE Northside they also became part of coalitions and strategic groups of activists that extended beyond ONE Northside. Many of the core leaders from ONE Northside housing campaigns formed a negotiating team composed of current residents of SROs to participate in the public debates around the Chicago for All (SRO) ordinance. Many of the issue teams have grown in size since the merger and new issue teams have been added. In the midst of this growth, the new organization still had enough additional human resources to lead one of the largest Get Out the Vote campaigns for the governor's race in its first post-merger year. Issue team participants served on task forces and bodies with other activist groups to provide guidance with regard to policy and issues of public interest. The organizers and leaders from the community have collaborated to strategically craft messages that highlight the broader political significance of particular issues and increase the media coverage and public framing of larger social issues that are not specifically ONE Northside-related (as of this writing, several ONE Northside leaders and staff are participating in

a March to Springfield to bring attention to the now infamously historic two-year lack of a state budget in Illinois).

Two important mechanisms that facilitate these civic goals of organizing are the ways that organizations can bridge diversity and use it to build solidarity and how the organization itself can model the democratic processes in which it wants its members to engage. The merger created opportunities for ONE Northside to capitalize on their new resources of geography and diversity as a basis for building solidarity. Additionally, it provided an opportunity to increasingly model democratic practices internally.

**Broadening the basis for building solidarity.** Creating solidarity within diverse movements is a difficult but necessary task, based partly on building bonds of moral sentiment for others (Alexander, 2006; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Scaling up and the related broadening of the number and type of communities in which ONE Northside works highlights racial, ethnic, and economic diversity within and between the community areas in which members live and work. Day-to-day interactions within such diverse areas underscore inequities and even tensions that parallel those facing the region, state, and nation as a whole. In turn, this has shaped the issues around which ONE Northside organizes and has informed the solutions they have proposed.

A leader with longtime experience working in ONE Northside's communities observes that the expanded catchment area of the organization has captured even more of these inequities under its umbrella. He argues that a powerful community is one that addresses these differences within the community. Focusing on economic and employment inequities, he states,

I'm not concerned for myself to be able to make more than minimum wage. I don't need the minimum wage laws so that I feel more comfortable. I need it



because our community isn't as strong as it should be until everybody has some basic securities. My experience with ONE and ONE Northside has constantly reinforced the fact that there are huge inequities in our society and those hold us all back.

Another leader echoed his sentiments, stating

Part of the power of having a large, diverse, grassroots community organization is that people who are vulnerable in communities... their issues are heard and are fought for alongside people that are not directly impacted by those issues but they care very deeply about them. I think that one of the greatest values of these organizations is this [orientation toward] social justice and equity.

As part of its popular democracy orientation, the process of building solidarity is based in large part on building relationships within campaigns by listening to leaders' concerns and then figuring out how to integrate these into current or new social change campaigns. The larger and more diverse constituency of ONE Northside shaped the relationships built between members within this process. Reflecting on the effectiveness of fostering relationships between people from very different life experiences within campaigns, a housing organizer shared how this prompted action on the part of timid churchgoers.

I've had tenants be in those meetings and [the congregants] say, 'Well, it's not right to go to a developer's office.' And the tenant will say something like, 'Well, it wasn't right when they took my housing and I became homeless for two weeks.' So they can always reframe and clarify why this is really about you being comfortable. And it helps people see the justice issue there.

Of particular interest is how the merger allowed each former organization to strategically enhance its membership diversity by capitalizing on the strengths of the other. Both LAC and ONE were very diverse organizations, *but of different types*. Leaders pointed out that ONE's strength was racial diversity, while LAC offered deep connections within the LGBTQ community. One leader reflected, "there are levels of diversity [now] in terms of racial diversity, gender diversity, religious diversity – just who the members are [now]. I think there's a higher presence of LGBTQ people within the organization. So it feels like we've been able to bring all aspects – the best of both organizations and have worked on blending those together." Another leader from a member congregation explained how the merger provided an easy avenue for church members to remain active in issues that weren't otherwise included in the work of the previous organization.

In fact, I wanted to get members in my church more engaged in issues, but a lot of them looked outside of our neighborhood [to do that]. And I thought, well this [merger] couldn't be better because there are some issues that ONE did that LAC didn't work on. Things like violence prevention – a big issue for a lot of members in our church. And now even voter registration seems to be a big issue for us to get involved in. I was like, 'This is great!'

While not a completed project, many participants recognize the real strides the merger took in incorporating the new and diverse membership in meaningful ways, one noting, "It's not a true reflection of the community, however it's ten times closer a reflection of it than most of our halls of decision makers in the world, whether it's a corporate board or the Chicago Board of Education or whatever, it's still much closer and it continually reinforces for me the work, the work that needs to go on."

**Strengthening internal democratic processes.** Scholars of community organizing note the necessity of deliberative and democratic processes *within* community organizations to help participants participate in democratic processes outside the organization (Evans & Boyte, 1992; Rusch & Swarts, 2015; Smock, 2004). ONE Northside's intentional adoption of more deliberative processes encouraging communication across racial, ethnic, and economic divides is part of building community power through building greater equity. These new democratic processes are also an important part of making sure that connections to the grassroots are not weakened in the scaling up process.

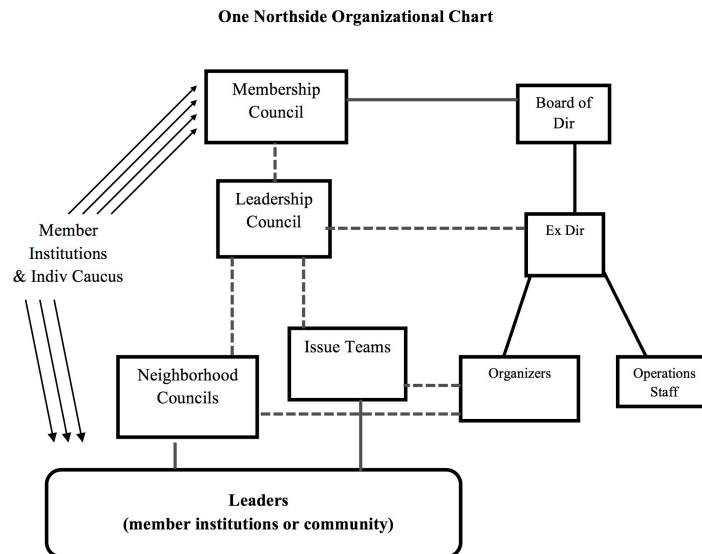
ONE Northside combines issue-based organizing and relational organizing to help maintain democratic organizational structures. Whereas issue-based organizing's goal is to advocate for a particular policy solution to a particular issue, relational organizing emphasizes building personal relationships and developing individual leaders through advocacy on issues. It is less concerned with social change on specific issues and is more concerned with a populist emphasis on enhancing community members' capacities to participate in democratic processes. ONE Northside describes all of this issue training and member involvement as "leadership development." When ONE Northside members talk of leadership development they are talking about strengthening democracy within the organization, as well as strengthening democracy in the community by making residents more effective advocates in challenging inequities and political leaders who allow those inequities to exist. It is an approach that maximizes participation of marginalized members of the community who perhaps did not think they had the ability to influence policies affecting their own community.

While leadership development was always a central element to the organizing work of ONE and LAC, the merger signaled a renewed attention to leadership development. Prior to the

merger, one organizer recollected that the basic introductory training sessions had fallen by the wayside in the crush of day-to-day staff responsibilities. However, since the merger there have been increased numbers of trainings, both introductory as well as more advanced, and increased *kinds* of trainings, such as trainings on structural racism and building larger systemic narratives for local campaigns. Some of these increased capacities came from ONE Northside's enhanced profile and participation in NPA, which offers several large training opportunities. But some of this came from greater staff efficiencies, heightened energy, and opportunities for reflection and action made possible by the merger. One leader commented, "It's about identifying leaders, giving them training and support to find their voice in the political process and their own power. And it's not that it didn't happen in [the previous organization] but now there is a training and an explicit invitation to participate."

The merger also presented an explicit opportunity to review and strengthen internal democratic structures, strengthening grassroots-leader ties as the organization scaled up. ONE had already put structural changes in place shortly before the merger. These included a newly-created group, the Leadership Council (see figure below), comprised of representatives of each Issue Team and each Neighborhood Council. One participating leader described how it works.

There are representatives from [all the issue teams], and we all sit together and we update each other on our issues. We ask for support and question each other about the direction [of] each team.... We make determinations together that go before the board before they [get adopted]. It's very representative of all the work that ONE Northside does.



These changes were carried over to ONE Northside. In addition, ONE Northside retained a Membership Council to give members control over prioritizing existing and new issue campaigns (Lakeview Action Coalition & Organization of the Northeast, 2013). Combined, these carried-over and new structures placed the majority of the decision-making power into the hands of ONE Northside's member organizations and not ONE Northside staff.

As with other findings, this emphasis on democratic decision-making within ONE Northside is not new compared to either ONE or LAC, however the merger created a new opportunity for the organization to redouble its efforts to institutionalize these long-standing priorities. Compared to the past ONE and LAC practices where senior leadership was perceived as setting the agenda for approval by subcommittee, there is now more opportunity for members to shape the agenda and direction of the organization. Reflecting on one of her first meetings of the Membership Council after the merger, a former ONE organizer observed that unlike the past, all of the member organization's leaders participated in the discussion. She noted that at this meeting another former ONE leader who had been active for decades exclaimed, "This is the best ... council meeting ever! I never experienced such a good meeting." She explained that

because the newly configured Membership Council provided opportunities and arenas for people to exchange ideas and opinions, it allowed her to have unprecedented interaction with high-level staff of member organizations. “[W]e were all on the same level, you could ask anything. I mean I would never ask things like this to an ED [executive director] in the past.... We have to be open and transparent, and we have to be honest.”

### **Tensions of scaling up and conclusions**

The two organizations’ scaling up process is, first, an effort to be more effective in a changing political, social, and economic environment where decisions are increasingly made beyond the neighborhood level. Secondly, it is a process to strengthen democratic structures linking leaders to community residents and community-based organizations. In doing so, ONE Northside seeks to be responsive to community member needs and engage local residents in social change activities that affect their communities, but are also linked to the broader changes in environments outside the community.

While this may be a matter of increasing power, it represents a needed adaptation to the changing political and economic environment. This is not a process of building a new organization from scratch. It is combining proven elements from decades of successful organizing experience and not only combining what were two different organizations, but also redoubling efforts to build stronger internal organizational democracy and stronger member voice in shaping the community agenda to achieve greater equity.

This case also illustrates some of the tensions involved in scaling up that have not been fully explored in the literature, one of the biggest being the question of how feasible scaling up can be as a strategy to either grow or maintain effectiveness for community-based organizations. The ONE Northside case also raises particular concerns for issue advocacy groups and

organizations aimed at political mobilization. As established relationships shifted because of the merger, some gained in traction while others may have been somewhat weakened due to a perceived shift in geographic emphasis of the new organization. Additionally, the relationship between geography and social issues presents a unique predicament for an organization attempting to democratically involve and represent multiple communities. For instance, within ONE Northside certain issues tend to draw from particular neighborhoods. In the smaller former organizations these differences may not have been as significant as they are in a larger organization where geographic or demographic divisions between issues are larger. At the same time, if such social divisions are to be addressed, the weight they take on in a larger organization may be a valuable tool to explicitly deal with them, particularly if the organization is also explicitly committed to leadership development through modeling democratic processes internally.

In response to some of these tensions of scaling up it is worth noting that the case of ONE Northside may be a unique case in that the organizations intentionally merged as a proactive strategy and had the resources and time to engage in a long and thoughtful process to facilitate the merger. However, it may not be a unique case in illustrating the multiple conditions in which organizations can capitalize on the benefits of scaling up. Not every organization must merge to take advantage of a strategic opportunity to recommit to, or institute, more robust internal democratic processes. Similarly, there are a number of ways for organizations to strategically increase their political traction in larger geographic areas through coalitions or similar arrangements. For organizations that do grow – due to mergers, sudden windfalls of serendipitous funding, or otherwise – this study illustrates that scaling up to gain more citywide, regional, statewide, and national power need not take place at the expense of grassroots

democracy. Both can take place together. Indeed, maintenance of grassroots democracy and scaling up may be mutually constitutive for increasing community voice.



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