



14 Lessons for Social Movement Success

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Summary

This CI Brief summarizes lessons from the academic literature for building successful social movements.¹ This short review is not exhaustive of social movement strategies and conditions for their success. However, it outlines several core insights with an eye on their practical application for social movements, advocacy campaigns, and their supporters.

Determining whether a social movement is successful is complicated. Some social movement members might perceive particular outcomes as victories, while others may see them as partial victories or even failures. Without careful analysis, we cannot assume that simply because a movement exists that it was the driving cause of success (Tarrow, 2011). And what may first appear to be a success might later undermine the movement's efforts. These caveats aside, we can think of success very generally as whether a campaign or movement achieves its stated goal(s). This review thus excludes broader and longer-term changes to political culture.

Much of the social movement literature is based on movements in western industrialized countries (though not exclusively). However, as Mary Alice Haddad (2021: 36) writes, "successful strategies are similarly successful everywhere." Many of the examples in this Brief are drawn from environmental advocacy, but not all. Finally, applying any of these lessons does not guarantee that a social movement or a particular campaign will succeed. However, leveraging multiple strategies simultaneously greatly increases a movement's chances of success.

The 14 lessons for social movement success explored in this Brief are:

Coalition-building

1. Build broad-based coalitions of like-minded allies.
2. Stay focused. Be cautious about expanding the scope of conflict.
3. Identify and empower "brokers."
4. Leadership must be nimble and adaptive.

Strategies

5. Watch for political opportunities—and seize them.
6. Invest resources into shaping and capitalizing on public opinion.

7. Frame the issues carefully. These choices matter.
8. Amplify your frames for maximum impact.
9. Disrupt!
10. Use a "diversified portfolio" of tactics.

Adversaries and elites

11. Befriend political elites.
12. Leverage corporate vulnerability (if necessary).

Resources and support

13. Material resources matter.
14. Approach foundations to scale up.

¹ Much of this work draws on the author's research on the contentious politics of mega oil sands pipelines (*Mega Pipelines, Mega Resistance*—under contract with UBC Press).

Coalition-building

1. Build broad-based coalitions of like-minded allies.

Social movement actors often recognize that no one group has the resources to advocate for an issue successfully (e.g., Staggenborg, 1986). Coalitions facilitate cooperation between grassroots groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, governments, or other actors. In general, the larger the scope of an issue, the larger the coalition required. Uniting diverse allies is often a key ingredient in a successful campaign or movement (e.g., Fusco and Carter, 2017). Broad-based coalitions appeal to potential political allies more because they represent more constituents (see #11). Coalitions also provide an opportunity for organizations to pool their resources. More professionalized social movement actors—organizations that are well-established and relatively well-resourced like conventional NGOs—may help develop communication channels for the coalition (Borland, 2008). More professionalized organizations can also amplify local grassroots organizing and capacity while benefiting from the legitimacy of a broader base of support (Neville and Weinthal, 2016).

Successful coalitions are difficult to develop and are often built upon pre-existing relationships. Past interactions between individuals and organizations facilitate communication, trust, and shared understandings or goals (McCammon and Van Dyke, 2010). For example, Suzanne Staggenborg (2015) shows how pre-existing ties among informal networks of activists led to a broad coalition of local groups that organized protests at the 2009 Group of Twenty (G20) Summit in Pittsburgh. Activists developed strong ties based on trust through positive experiences in previous campaigns (ibid.). In short, pre-existing relationships and shared experiences are often necessary for quickly forming alliances, mobilizing resources, and developing effective strategies.

2. Stay focused. Be cautious about expanding the scope of conflict.

Movements often try to expand the size of the conflict, meaning they increase the number of actors, targets, issues, and competing perspectives they are challenging (Pralle, 2006). Movements sometimes expand the conflict because of changing political opportunities, limited success, or to court new allies. However, expanding the conflict may expose the movement to multiple counter-movements, creating too many signals for policymakers, and weakening the movement's influence. While competition with other organizations tends to limit their policy success, broadening coalitions can help overcome this dynamic to some extent. Scaling should be commensurate with the movement's resource base and the interests of the coalition members. Organizers should also be attuned to the implications of scaling up within the political context (see #5). Starting with local and small wins and scaling up to a national target can increase the likelihood of successful outcomes (Haddad, 2021).



3. Identify and empower “brokers.”

Brokers are actors that occupy central nodes in activist networks and build bridges between groups. Brokering is particularly important when there are no “pre-existing trust relations” among coalition partners (Levi and Murphy, 2006). For example, at the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, core members of an NGO called Public Citizen created a powerful coalition, bringing together environment, labour, and social justice activists (ibid.). Brokers are trusted to make credible commitments to sharing resources. Large networks can become divided when brokerage does not occur, as was the case with mobilization around the 2009 international climate negotiations in Copenhagen (Hadden, 2015). By connecting like-minded but diverse organizations and people, brokers can expand coalitions and improve access to elites and resources.

4. Leadership must be nimble and adaptive.

Leaders within social movements serve multiple roles, both public-facing and internal to the movement (Ganz and McKenna, 2019). Leaders play a crucial role in strategy formation, including adapting to changing political opportunities or making framing decisions (Hadden, 2015). Leadership is essential for strategic adaptation—the process of assessing and revising tactics in light of changes in the political context (McCammon, 2012). In short, effective leadership requires embracing a diversity of strategies and adapting quickly—but must be grounded in a strong base of labour (or volunteers) and financial resources (Andrews, 2001).

Strategies

5. Watch for political opportunities—and seize them.

Elections, inter-governmental conflict, financial crises, and significant political events constitute what the social movement literature calls “political opportunities” (McAdam, 1999; Tarrow, 2011). These opportunities provide openings or vulnerabilities in political systems for social movements to gain influence. There are also some basic political requirements for successful movements, such as freedom of the press and equal protection under the law (Haddad, 2021). However, social movements are not necessarily more successful in democratic states, though political violence is negatively associated with movement success (ibid.). Having access to multiple centres of power or decision-making—such as different levels of government—provides actors with more opportunities for success (Pralle, 2006). Broad-based coalitions are more resilient than narrow ones when facing adversarial political contexts.

6. Invest resources into shaping and capitalizing on public opinion.

The relationship between social movements and public opinion is complex and not fully understood (Uba, 2009). However, if a social movement’s goal(s) aligns with a majority public opinion, it usually increases the movement’s chances of success (Burstein, 1999). The movement or campaign coalition can leverage favourable

public opinion by gaining new political allies or by shifting strategies, such as demanding a referendum. Campaign coalitions and social movements can also influence public opinion, although this is challenging to measure. In theory, democratically elected policymakers are receptive to public preferences because mobilization may threaten their re-election chances (Mahoney, 2008). Whether policymakers respond to public opinion, however, is a different matter. Their response depends on other factors, including the issue's salience, whether it intersects with a societal cleavage or threatens strong interests (such as an industry), and the proximity to an election. After an election, a government might be more likely to respond to salient issues that its predecessor ignored (Stimson et al., 1995).

7. Frame the issues carefully. These choices matter.

Frames emphasize particular causes of a problem and potential solutions and are a core way to mobilize existing supporters, gain new support, and persuade audiences (Benford and Snow, 2000). For example, the latest framing of the climate change problem as a “climate emergency” has become a global phenomenon (though we do not yet know how this will affect climate policy) (McHugh et al., 2021). Early organized resistance—with established frames—gives social movements a comparative advantage over their adversaries. However, adversarial counter-frames may emerge that movements must respond to. For example, the Canadian fossil fuel sector has had success framing natural gas as a necessary “bridge fuel” (Janzwood and Millar, forthcoming).

Successful frames “hit home” (Fusco and Carter, 2017), drawing on shared values, threats, grievances, and/or experiences. Movements can also be successful when they use frames that have been successful in the past (e.g., the “Green New Deal”). Successful movements should also avoid frames that might be divisive or less relevant for the particular audience (Fusco and Carter, 2017).

8. Amplify your frames for maximum impact.

A powerful strategy for improving the salience of a frame is issue linkage—linking multiple issues together, like linking concerns about climate change and fishing in opposition to liquefied natural gas (e.g., Boudet, 2011). Issue linkage helps build support, expand coalitions, and reach broader audiences. Strategic framing is often a process of experimentation and adaptation. Frames that work well in one socio-economic or cultural context might not work in another (Strang and Soule, 1998) and frames that work well in a local context might be less salient when movements scale up. But even local concerns—for example, about specific energy projects—can successfully draw on more distant concerns that advance broader movements, as was the case with opposition to natural gas generators in the Yukon (Neville and Weinthal, 2016).

Amplifying frames also requires media attention. Professionalized organizations receive more media attention than less professionalized groups (Andrews and Caren, 2010). Effective storytelling to communicate ideas and emotions can take many forms; provocative photography and documentaries can make issues visible and create outrage.

9. Disrupt!

Civil disobedience describes non-violent, public acts that breach a law or occupy a legal “grey area,” such as sit-ins, blockades, traffic disruption, and encampments on bridges, roads, construction sites, or outside of government buildings (Brownlee, 2013).¹ Civil disobedience can disrupt institutions, provoke a political crisis, increase actors’ bargaining power, and/or threaten state security (Kolb, 2007; Piven and Cloward, 1993). Civil disobedience can either increase or decrease a movement’s public support depending on the public’s proximity to the protest site and the state’s response to the protests.

Political opportunities like elections can amplify the impact of disruptive protests (Almeida and Stearns, 1998). Allies or political elites can help a movement engaging in disruptive protests to increase its influence by raising the state’s perceived costs of suppressing or repressing the protest (ibid.). However, state repression can effectively quell movements by increasing the cost of collective action and minimizing their effectiveness (Boykoff, 2007). While it can be a powerful containment strategy, repression can also intensify a conflict, particularly if the public is already mobilized around an issue or if the movement can effectively contest the legitimacy of state laws or jurisdiction.

10. Use a “diversified portfolio” of tactics.

A movement’s organizational structure, resources, and leadership allow “multiple mechanisms of influence,” which increases the likelihood of policy success (Andrews, 2001: 75). In other words, a diverse set of actors, with a range of tactics, targeting multiple venues is often a recipe for success (McCarthy and Zald, 2001)—while being wary of over-expanding the conflict (see #2). However, engaging in multiple venues—such as courts and corporate boardrooms—requires greater resources (see #13). A strategy that worked in one case might not work in another as opponents adapt or conditions change; or conversely, a strategy that did not work in one case might work in another because the political context has shifted. In the case of environmental advocacy, more cooperative strategies tend to be more successful (such as engaging in public education or finding government allies) than more confrontational strategies like lobbying, lawsuits, or protests (Haddad, 2021). However, in general, pursuing multiple strategies simultaneously increases the chances of success.

¹ Here, illegality refers to the perceptions of the state. But it is important to acknowledge that in settler-states like Canada, there are multiple, often conflicting, systems of law. In Canada, blockades are erected by Indigenous defenders in longstanding conflicts over unceded territory. Unceded territory refers to lands that have never been surrendered or acquired by the Crown. Land and water defenders protect the land on which they have rights and responsibilities not recognized by Canadian law.

Adversaries and elites

11. Befriend political elites.

Cultivating access to and relationships with policymakers is perhaps the most essential tool for social movements (Haddad, 2021). Organized groups in a coalition campaign may seek sympathetic allies—politicians or bureaucrats that legitimize the movement or advocate for policy changes. Having political allies helps coalitions gain political influence (Amenta et al., 2019). Social movements with allies can help put issues on the agenda, increase pressure to develop new policies, prevent policy change, or—in rare cases—have direct input into policy design. Political allies tend to share the challengers’ ideas, values, or policy beliefs. For example, green parties are often natural allies with environmentally oriented movements (Rucht, 1999). Political elites might also ally with movements because that association resonates with their constituents (Stearns and Almeida, 2004); for example, opposition to wind turbines by rural communities in Ontario has been fueled by Progressive Conservative politicians (Walker et al., 2018).

Social movement actors can also have influence through lobbying, letter writing, or demonstrations outside political offices. However, more confrontational tactics can backfire if policymakers view these as threats. Activists can also change roles and become part of political institutions over time, becoming new potential allies for social movements. Building relationships with political elites at different levels of government and different political affiliations often strengthen a movement’s influence. However, befriending political elites can also lead to tensions within coalitions that must navigate partisan dynamics.

How policy elites perceive social movement organizations also matters (Skrentny, 2006). Social movement actors can be appealing to political elites because they have issue-specific knowledge or represent key constituents. Activists can cultivate these relationships by attending events with policymakers and sitting on governing boards or committees (Haddad, 2021).

12. Leverage corporate vulnerability (if necessary).

In order to change the behavior of corporate targets, they must be “structurally vulnerable” to challengers (King, 2008). For environmental advocacy, collaborative approaches with private sector actors that seek “win-win” outcomes tend to be the most successful (Haddad, 2021). However, corporate actors are not always willing to come to the table in good faith, necessitating the use of more disruptive tactics. For example, blockades and boycotts can impede a company’s ability to accrue resources either directly or by imposing reputational costs. Blockades can directly impact the company’s value (measured by stock price) (King, 2011), while boycotts are more successful if a firm is already concerned about its revenue or reputation (King, 2008).

Media coverage can also threaten a company’s public image (King and Soule, 2007), which may reduce shareholders’ confidence and, consequently, the company’s profit. For example, in the diamond mining industry, companies with greater risk exposure are more likely to increase or engage with social responsibility commitments (Bloomfield, 2017). “High reputation” firms are particularly vulnerable to negative media

attention (Dixon et al., 2016). In short, social movements should target an institution's vulnerabilities or pre-existing weaknesses around their revenue or reputation.

Resources and support

13. Material resources matter.

Resources support and sustain coalitions by providing members with crucial skills and capacity. Often larger and more professionalized social movement organizations provide resources to maintain coalitions and alliances within a social movement (Borland, 2008). Resources are necessary to access certain venues or actors and make certain strategies feasible (Hadden, 2015). A strong resource base is particularly important for legal challenges, which require significant financial resources and legal expertise.

The presence of resources generally reduces tensions within the movement (e.g., Staggenborg, 1986). But the absence of resources can cause members to leave the coalition (Levi and Murphy, 2006). Conflicts can develop over resource allocation, particularly if a coalition's material resources and financial decision-making authority are centralized, which can intensify or create unequal dynamics of control between different groups based on their size or identity. Decentralized, transparent, and more equitable systems for allocating resources can help maintain trust and coalition cohesiveness.

14. Approach foundations to scale up.

Private foundation funding has been critical to growing some social movements (Bernstein and Benjamin Cashore, 2000; Kohl-Arenas, 2014). Transnational networks and foundations can help scale up efforts to expand a social movement into other jurisdictions. Grant funding helps organizations operating within movements to develop communication channels between other actors in the coalition and develop sophisticated networks. Success also begets success; small victories create momentum and show "proof of concept" for funders. However, most movements and campaigns tend to have a limited life span (Gupta, 2009).

Some donors may have particular interests or requirements that may not align well with some of the movement's goals. To address these tensions, more professionalized members like NGOs can act as critical interlocutors between funders and less professionalized coalition members (Balboa, 2018). Supporting campaigns in different regional or national contexts also requires intercultural competence and a commitment to brokering between organizations and activists (ibid.). While international foundation funding has been used by opponents to attack campaign coalitions for being "foreign" funded (Matejova et al., 2018), transnational networks expand membership and contribute to coalition and movement resilience.

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