

# COALITION ASSESSMENT

*Approaches for Measuring Capacity  
and Impact*

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# Coalition Assessment:

## Approaches for Measuring Capacity and Impact

Veena Pankaj, Kat Athanasiades, and Ann Emery

Why assess coalition capacity? How should a coalition be assessed? How can coalition assessment data be analyzed and used?

Coalitions are an important tool in the advocacy and policy change toolbox. They can be used to promote an issue, increase visibility, and eventually propel an issue to the forefront of a political or social agenda. They can provide a lot of horsepower—harnessing the combined power and expertise of many entities all at once. And they are a valuable technique for crafting more durable solutions generated by a broad constituency. For all of these reasons, developing and strengthening coalitions is a common strategy among advocates and advocacy funders.

### Coalitions

A coalition is an alliance for combined action.

In the social sector, coalitions may be formal (with membership criteria and bylaws) or informal. Participation or membership may be of individuals or organizations. Coalitions may be at a local, regional, state, national, or international-level. In the past few years, coalitions have become an increasingly common strategy for advocacy and policy change.

For evaluators, coalition assessment is a growing field of experimentation and learning. Innovation Network has been evaluating coalitions since 2006, beginning with the Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, a national effort to secure passage by the U.S. Congress for comprehensive immigration reform. Over the years, we have evaluated many different types of coalitions throughout the United States. Our coalition partners have worked at national, state, regional, and local levels on a variety of advocacy and policy change goals, such as healthy community design or childhood nutrition. This white paper provides practitioners and funders with insights into the coalition assessment process along with concrete examples and lessons we've learned from our own work.

### Why assess coalition capacity?

Coalition capacity matters. High-capacity coalitions are more successful than low-capacity coalitions in effecting advocacy and policy change.<sup>1</sup> But coalitions—like other types of advocacy strategies—take a while to achieve big wins or actual policy changes. In the interim, coalition capacity assessments determine whether coalitions are healthy, high-functioning, and on track for success. Assessments provide opportunities for coalition members to discuss results, make improvements, and build stronger coalitions. In turn, these strengthened coalitions are better situated to take advantage of opportunity windows than one that is unprepared.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sarah M. Moreland-Russell et al. (2007). *Coalitions: State and Community Interventions*. Prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>2</sup> Jared Raynor. (2011). *What Makes an Effective Coalition? Evidence-Based Indicators of Success*. Prepared by the TCC Group for The California Endowment.

## How should a coalition be assessed?

Building on our years of experience evaluating coalitions, Innovation Network developed a coalition assessment process and tool. Coalitions should be assessed relative to their goals. Every coalition we have worked with has had different capacity and policy change goals. The steps outlined below provide a high level overview of key stages in the coalition assessment development process.

### Step 1: Identify the coalition's goals

The first step in the process is to identify the capacities needed for the coalition to advance toward their advocacy and policy change goals. These capacities are vital to the overall functioning of the coalition and its ability to implement its advocacy and policy change strategies.

### Step 2: Develop a comprehensive set of criteria

Next, based on these capacities, a comprehensive set of criteria is developed for each identified capacity to capture a detailed picture of the coalition's health and functioning.

In a recent project, Innovation Network was tasked with developing a coalition assessment for a statewide community change effort focused on changing systems and policies to improve access to healthy foods and healthy community design. Given the advocacy goals of the project, seven relevant capacities were selected.

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | <b>Basic Functioning and Structure</b>            | The basic structures and processes inherent to the functioning of the coalition. The coalition's ability to function effectively and efficiently.  |
| 2 | <b>Ability to Cultivate and Develop Champions</b> | The coalition's ability to cultivate awareness about the advocacy issue, to garner supporters, and to cultivate champions.   |
| 3 | <b>Coalition Leadership</b>                       | The skills, relationships, and vision of coalition leadership. The leadership's contribution to coalition functioning and success.   |
| 4 | <b>Ability to Develop Allies and Partnerships</b> | The coalition's overall ability to build relationships with individuals and organizations outside of the coalition. The growing power of the coalition through relationships, networks, fields, etc. |
| 5 | <b>Reputation and Visibility</b>                  | The coalition's visibility with stakeholders and target audiences.   |
| 6 | <b>Ability to Learn and Improve</b>               | The coalition's ability to systematically scan the environment and collect data to inform decisionmaking. The coalition's ability to learn and improve over time.                                    |
| 7 | <b>Sustainability</b>                             | The groundwork being laid by the coalition to ensure a long-term life span.  |

Research and an extensive literature review contributed to the development of the supporting criteria within the seven capacity areas. In this application each capacity area included approximately eight to 12 criteria. For example, *the coalition increases the awareness of diverse groups within target audiences*, illustrates one of the criteria used to assess the coalition's ability to cultivate and develop champions. *Coalition members are seen as knowledgeable about their issues by target audiences* is another example

of a criterion used to assess the coalition's reputation and visibility. Each item is rated on a four-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

We recommend including a demographics section in the coalition assessment. For example, it may be helpful to ask respondents to indicate how long the coalition has been in existence and how long they have been a member of the coalition. The demographics section should be adapted for each project, and typically includes five to 10 items.

### **Step 3: Include a variety of perspectives in the vetting process**

The vetting process should include a variety of perspectives: the funder, technical assistance providers who work closely with coalitions, other local experts on the advocacy issue, and coalition members. It is also a good practice to pilot test the questionnaire with a small sample of coalition members to ensure that the assessment is aligned with the initiative it was designed to support, and that the language is accessible and meaningful to respondents.

### **How should learnings be shared?**

One of the main values of this type of coalition assessment process is the opportunity to share results with coalition members and use the results to make improvements going forward. We often share the coalition assessment results with each coalition in the form of a one or two-page snapshot, which are discussed during in-person convenings.

During the convenings, we ask coalition members to reflect upon a series of discussion questions. For example, they discuss whether overall and section scores are higher or lower than they anticipated. They also discuss where they are doing well (and how to continue doing well in these areas) and where they are not doing well

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*These questions... are good questions for us to have as a guide for our work... It is a goal to strive towards.*

*– Coalition member*

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(and how they can strengthen these areas during the next grant year). Coalition members often remark that these discussions help them plan for the upcoming year because the Coalition Assessment Tool is a rubric or guide for their work; the Tool specifies best practices to strive toward.

### **How often should coalitions be assessed?**

A coalition assessment can be used for one coalition at a point in time, for one coalition across several points in time, or to compare a cohort of coalitions. In the previously mentioned example, Innovation Network was charged with assessing 12 different coalitions at multiple points in time over the duration of a four-year grant. By administering our coalition assessment to all 12 coalitions on an annual basis, we are measuring how each of the individual coalitions progress over time.

### **How is the tool adapted?**

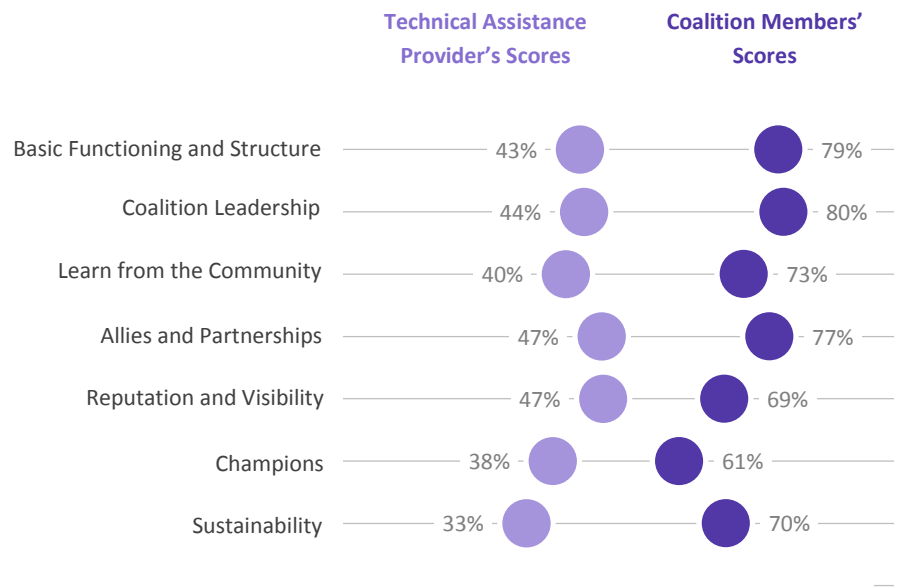
Although standard tools for evaluating coalition capacity provide value to the sector by making basic assessment within reach for all, we advocate for situation-specific assessment whenever possible. The Coalition Assessment Tool is modular; that is, we add or remove items in each section to match that coalition's unique goals. We also modify wording within items to match that coalition's common language and terminology. In other cases, we may add or remove entire sections.

## Who should provide a perspective on the coalition?

Coalition assessments are strongest when multiple perspectives are included, both internal and external to the coalition. We see value in including an array of voices from within the coalition: leaders, general members, senior participants, junior participants, and representation from a range of skill areas. In our example, an outsider perspective was also included; one technical assistance provider per coalition was included as a respondent to further ground the results and enhance the overall meaning of the data. The technical assistance provider’s perspective allows us to triangulate the information, as shown in the dot plots below.

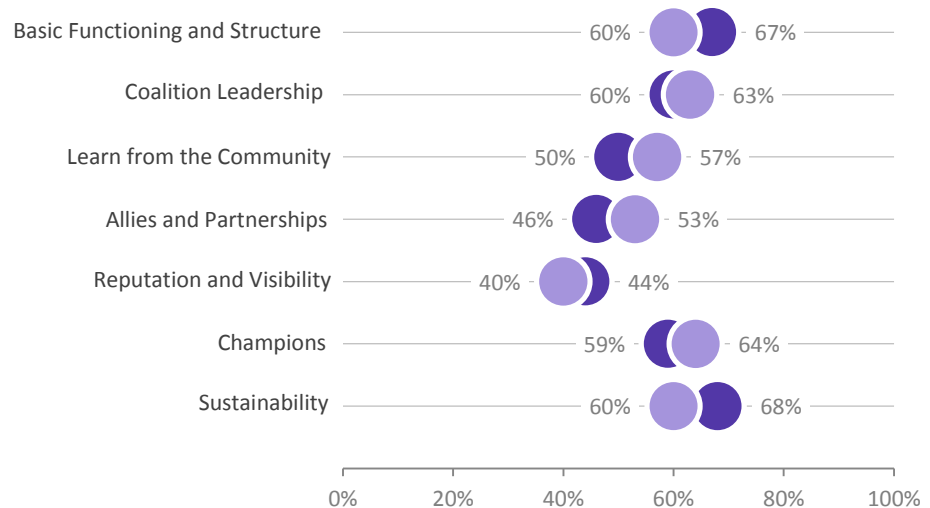
### *Coalition members might be more optimistic in how they perceive themselves compared to external raters.*

In slightly more than half of the coalitions in our example, the coalition members rated themselves higher than technical assistance providers.



### *Sometimes, few differences exist between coalition members and technical assistance providers.*

For the remaining coalitions, the results are typically mixed—sometimes the coalition members view themselves in the capacity areas than the technical assistance providers; other times, the technical assistance providers give higher ratings.



Occasionally, the coalition members score themselves lower than the technical assistance providers—but this situation is uncommon. Regardless of the scenario, the charts are used as a discussion starter; the coalition members and technical assistance providers spend time discussing where and why differences in perspective exist.

### What information can the tool provide?

The coalition assessment generates a broad array of rich information. Data from the tool can be analyzed at the level of each capacity, or as an aggregate score of all capacities. Before spending too much time exploring the data, revisit the purpose of the coalition assessment: What are the evaluation questions the assessment is designed to answer? Then, depending on how you intend to use the information, select the most appropriate level of analysis.

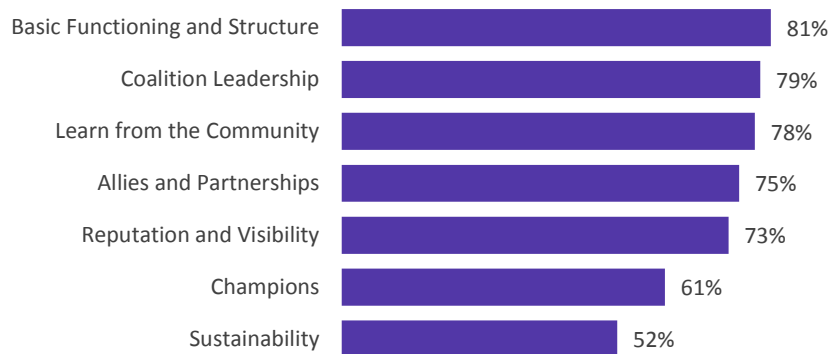
#### Looking across coalitions:

This bar chart shows how five fictional coalitions scored on *Basic Functioning and Structure*. Coalition 1 may have tips to share with the other coalitions.



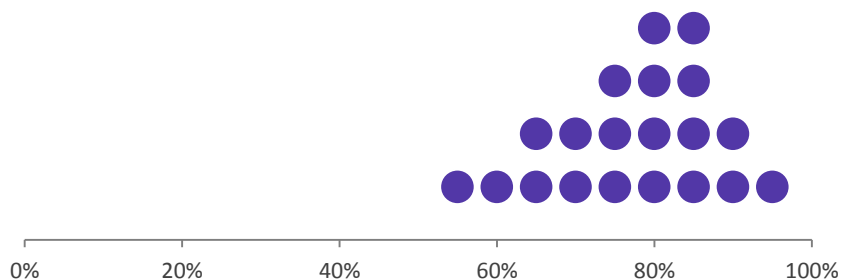
#### Looking at capacities within one coalition:

This chart shows how a single coalition scored on each of the seven capacities. Coalitions often score highest on *Basic Functioning and Structure* and lowest on *Sustainability*.



#### Looking at variability within one coalition:

Each circle represents one of 20 coalition member's individual scores on *Basic Functioning and Structure*. Overall, this coalition scored high—a median score of 81%—but scores ranged from 55 to 95%.



## Lessons Learned

***Tailor assessment to fit coalition priorities.*** This process of coalition assessment enables evaluators to select capacities and modify criteria. When putting together the list of coalition capacities it's important to think through and select those that are most relevant to the functioning and goals of the coalitions you are trying to evaluate. This is particularly important because coalitions often consider the assessment tool as a checklist to work toward.

***Understand the type of coalition you are trying to assess.*** Coalitions are not created equal. Think about the relative size and composition of the coalition, the governing body, impetus for formation, and/or membership cohesion; their unique characteristics are likely to affect the type of assessment that is useful—and possible.

***Value of the participatory approach.*** There is incredible value in including stakeholders—coalition members, technical assistance providers, funders, and other stakeholders—in the development and vetting process. In addition to increasing the quality of the assessment, a participatory approach establishes buy-in and increases the likelihood that the results will be used.

***Make the data actionable.*** This involves reporting relevant information back to key stakeholders in a meaningful and timely way. Figure out who needs which types of information to learn, adapt, and improve. Return results within weeks rather than months or years.

***Revisit the coalition assessment capacities and criteria each time it is used.*** This is especially important for multi-year projects. Coalitions may change, or their priorities may shift. Providing an opportunity for key stakeholders to re-engage or reflect on the assessment priorities contributes to understanding and buy-in.

## Coalition Assessment: Getting Started

Coalition assessment is a valuable approach that when done correctly, can enhance understanding about progress toward advocacy/policy change goals. As you contemplate coalition assessment, consider the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of the coalition assessment? How is it intended to strengthen the coalition? Think critically about what types of information coalition members and other stakeholders will want and be able to use.
2. Given the coalition's goals and strategies, which capacities are likely to be important? In the example we shared, there were seven capacities that were identified as important: *Basic Functioning and Structure; Ability to Cultivate and Develop Champions; Coalition Leadership; Ability to Develop Allies and Partnerships; Reputation and Visibility; Ability to Learn and Improve; and Sustainability*. Your coalition's capacity needs may be similar—or they might be different.
3. Which individuals—internal and external to the coalition—might have a valuable perspective to include? (Also, who should be included throughout the assessment process to build buy-in and support?)

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