

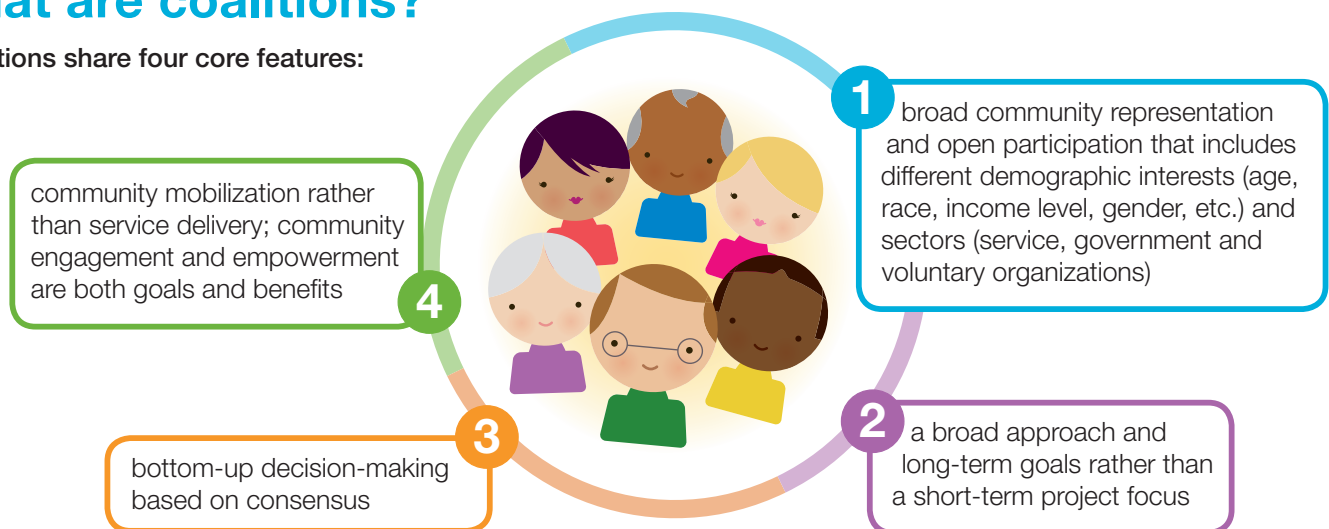
## Harvesting the wisdom of coalitions: Review highlights

Coalitions have become increasingly popular as a way of organizing to effect change on important social issues. The grassroots, community-based approach that is typical of most coalitions has contributed to their appeal. Many funding agencies now require a coalition-style organizational model for the projects they support. Building coalitions takes a considerable investment of time and resources, however. Understanding how they develop and work is essential to building well-functioning coalitions.

This information sheet contains key findings from *Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions*, a literature review of more than 100 academic articles, case studies, guides and web content published about or for coalitions mostly since 2000. The review was completed as phase one of a three-part study on community coalitions in Alberta undertaken by Alberta Culture, Alberta Education and the Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap).

### What are coalitions?

Coalitions share four core features:



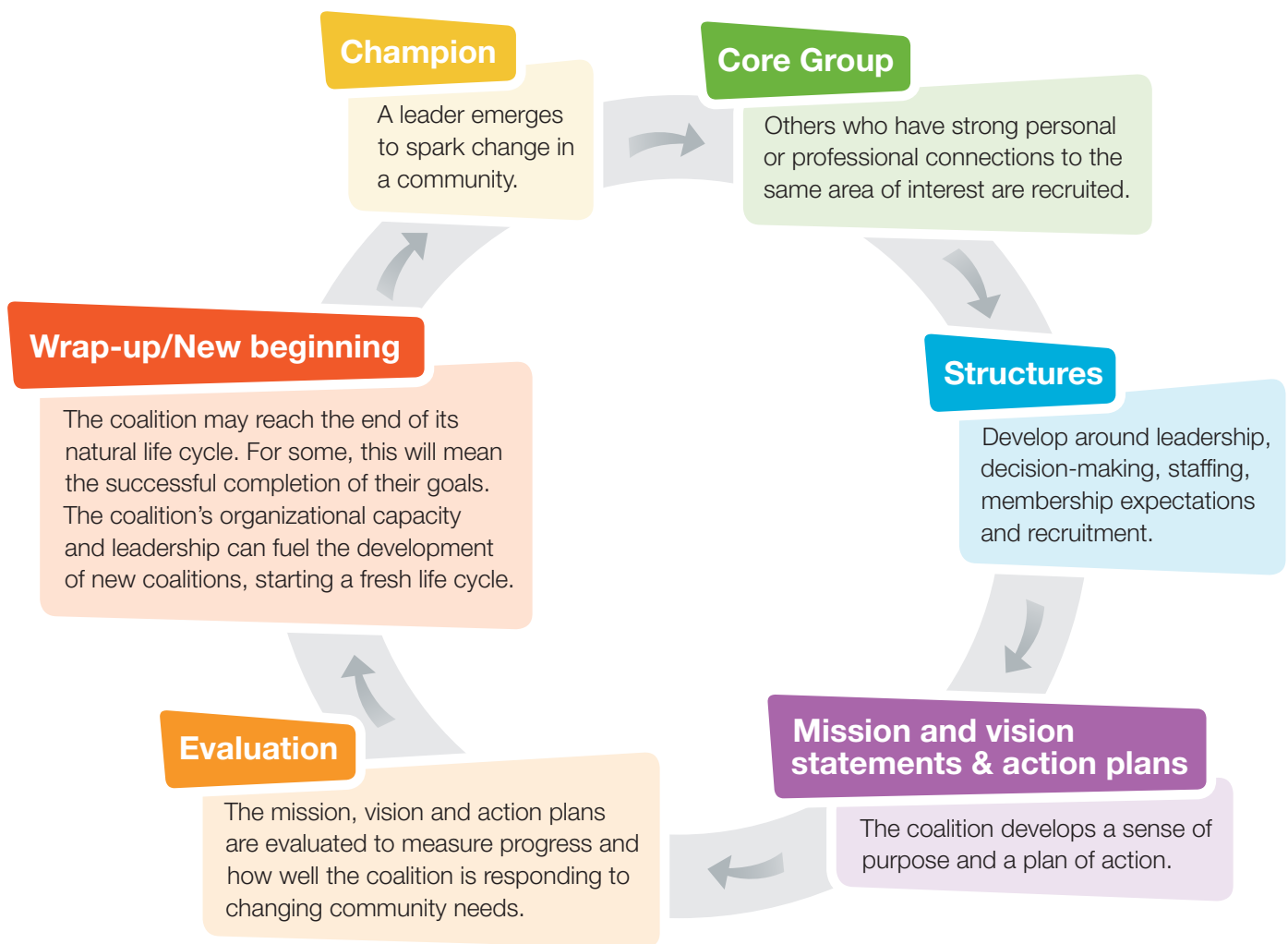
### Read the report

To download the full report — *Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions* — please go to [http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Final-Harvesting-the-wisdom-November-2013\\_final.pdf](http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Final-Harvesting-the-wisdom-November-2013_final.pdf) [http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Final-Harvesting-the-wisdom-November-2013\\_final.pdf](http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Final-Harvesting-the-wisdom-November-2013_final.pdf)

**Definition:** Coalitions are groups of people who come together to effect change around a particular issue in their community. Coalitions value and benefit from diverse membership, democratic practices, a broad focus and long-term goals. By bringing together people from different sectors of society and pooling resources, coalitions can accomplish goals more effectively than any one organization working independently.

## How do coalitions develop?

There is no one recipe for developing a coalition. Experiencing the struggles that are unique to building each coalition can in fact contribute to the passion and feelings of ownership experienced by members and to the sustainability of the coalition. Coalitions are unique, but they also go through a number of phases during their life cycle.



# What factors are important in sustaining coalitions?

1



**Community history:** Previous attempts to organize coalitions and existing relationships between different organizations and segments of the population can be a strong predictor of coalition success or failure. Communities that have experienced prior success with coalitions may have leaders and support already in place, and much valuable experience and knowledge. Levels of trust and engagement amongst coalition members are also closely tied to their history of collaboration.

2



**Membership:** Coalitions by definition aim for broad representation and open participation. Attracting and engaging a diverse membership takes time, but is crucial to the success of the coalition. It may involve a significant amount of personal contact, cultural awareness and conflict management skills. Membership should include the demographic most affected by the issue the coalition is trying to address. Membership satisfaction is important to retaining members. Members need to feel valued and recognized and have opportunities for personal and professional growth. Power differences also need to be addressed as the specialized knowledge and confidence of some members may intimidate those who feel that they have less to contribute and erode grassroots participation.

3



**Quality of relationships:** The importance of relationships cannot be overstated. Strong relationships based on trust and respect can help sustain groups through periods of conflict. Building strong relationships takes time and can be supported through: finding common ground and unifying the group around a common set of values and purpose, informal socializing before, during, or after meetings and an inclusive leadership approach that encourages everyone to have a voice.

4



**Leadership:** Successful coalitions are built by leaders who belong to the community where the coalition is based and who are committed to the cause, open and inclusive, inspire action, skilled in conflict resolution and confident in the collaborative process. Shared leadership can be highly effective in coalitions. Ongoing recruitment and training of new leaders are essential.

5



**Vision and purpose:** A clear mission, vision, organizational structure and action plan increase a coalition's capacity to effect change, attract and maintain members and overcome personal agendas. Community members feel a stronger stake in coalitions that they have built and defined. Reviewing the vision and mission and evaluating progress on a regular basis helps coalitions to evolve with the changing needs of their communities.

6



**Concrete, measurable 'wins':** Taking action and creating change is the purpose of community coalitions. Producing results, especially during the initial stages of the coalition, helps to sustain the interest of members and the support of the wider community.

7



**Larger ecological factors:** As grassroots organizations, coalitions have a limited capacity to deal with problems that have a regional, provincial, national and/or global scope. A coalition's success is often dependent on favourable political, economic and community conditions. Members should take these factors into account as they plan and take action around a particular issue.

*continued*

## What factors are important in sustaining coalitions? *continued*

8



**Funding:** Funding or support from a “backbone” organization benefits coalitions in a number of ways, especially in terms of administrative support. Case studies show that hiring a core staff person enables coalitions to take a more complex approach to addressing issues and produce results more easily.

Multi-year funding that allows coalitions some autonomy and the ability to adapt to the changing needs of the community has also proven useful. Funding alone does not guarantee success or failure. Coalitions that were created in response to a funding opportunity find it more difficult to sustain their work when the money runs out than coalitions that got started without any initial funding.

9



**Training:** Bringing experts in to train coalition members ensures more active and effective participation. Members also benefit more from their coalition work. Ongoing training during the formative development phase is more useful than one-time-only workshops. Training materials and other resources are widely available online.

10



**Marketing:** Effective marketing raises a coalition’s visibility, increases public support for the coalition and attracts members and funding. Marketing strategies include branding with a logo or catchy name and communicating key messages through newsletters, ads, brochures, posters and social media.

## How effective are coalitions?

The literature is inconclusive at this point. Measuring the impact of coalitions on their communities or on a given issue is a complex challenge. The broad changes that coalitions often aim to achieve can take a long time. This makes it difficult to measure change and attribute particular results directly to coalitions. More work is needed to develop common measures of coalition success.

## How do coalitions contribute to communities in general?

Coalitions can improve the quality of community life more generally, however, by increasing community capacity. Coalitions can help to promote trust, strong working relationships, effective leadership and organizational expertise well beyond the life of the coalition.