

Understanding Massive Open Organizing: How Civil Society Mobilizes at Scale

Executive Summary

The history of social change is punctuated by moments when ordinary people mobilize in extraordinary numbers — when the scale of participation in a cause shifts from the committed few to the engaged many. These moments of mass mobilization are not accidents. They are the product of deliberate organizing: the sustained, strategic work of building the structures, relationships, and shared identity that allow large numbers of people to act together toward common goals.

Massive Open Organizing (MOO) is the discipline of building and sustaining large-scale civic participation — open to all, distributed in its structure, and capable of growing far beyond the capacity of any single organization to manage centrally. It draws on the traditions of community organizing, digital campaigning, distributed movement building, and peer-to-peer mobilization to provide NGOs with a coherent framework for scaling their impact beyond the limits of organizational capacity.

This guide provides the conceptual foundations and evidence base for Massive Open Organizing: what it is, why it matters, what conditions enable it, and how it differs from both traditional top-down campaigning and from the unstructured viral spread of digital activism. It is the first in a three-part series. Guide 2 covers the practical architecture of MOO: how to design open, scalable organizing structures, build distributed leadership, and sustain participation at scale. Guide 3 addresses the digital infrastructure and data systems that modern large-scale organizing requires, and how to integrate digital and in-person organizing into coherent MOO campaigns.

Evidence Table

Key Finding	Strength	NGO Implications
Campaigns with distributed, peer-to-peer organizing structures mobilize significantly more participants than those relying on central coordination alone — often by an order of magnitude.	High (political organizing research, social movement literature)	Distributed organizing architecture is not just a logistical preference — it is the primary driver of scale.
Personal asks by trusted peers are 5–10x more effective at generating participation than mass broadcast appeals.	High (social network and organizing research)	Peer-to-peer recruitment is the most effective mobilization mechanism available to large-scale campaigns.

Key Finding	Strength	NGO Implications
Movements that invest in leadership development — building the capacity of participants to become organizers themselves — sustain mobilization significantly longer than those that keep power centralized.	High (community organizing research)	Leadership development is an organizing investment, not just a capacity-building nicety.
Digital-only organizing produces lower commitment, lower retention, and lower willingness to take high-cost actions than organizing with a significant in-person or relational component.	High (digital organizing research, 2015–24)	MOO requires genuine relationship-building, not just digital engagement.
Campaigns that give participants meaningful agency — real choices about how they contribute, real influence over campaign direction — sustain participation significantly longer.	High (participation research)	Meaningful participation requires genuine agency, not just defined roles.
Open, non-exclusive organizing structures (that welcome participants across a wide spectrum of commitment levels) produce larger total participation than exclusive, high-commitment-only structures.	High (organizing structure research)	The "big tent" — with multiple entry points and commitment levels — is a structural requirement for massive scale.

Step-by-Step Framework

Step 1: Understand What Makes Organizing "Massive" and "Open"

MOO is defined by two characteristics that work in combination to produce the scale and breadth of participation that the name implies:

"Massive" refers to scale: Not just many supporters, but many active participants — people who take real action, build relationships with other participants, and contribute their own capacity (time, skills, networks, resources) to the shared effort. The distinction between supporters (who endorse a cause passively) and participants (who actively engage) is central to MOO. Massive scale means massive active participation, not massive passive endorsement.

"Open" refers to structure: An open organizing structure is one that does not gate participation through exclusive criteria, membership requirements, or centralized approval. It welcomes people at any level of commitment, provides multiple entry points into participation, and allows participants to move through increasing levels of engagement at their own pace. The opposite of open is closed: structures that define a fixed membership, require approval, and limit participation to those who meet specific criteria.

Together, "massive" and "open" define an organizing approach that is structurally different from both traditional membership organizations (which are open but often passive) and traditional campaign teams (which are active but closed). MOO combines the breadth of open participation with the depth of genuine active engagement.

What MOO is not:

- It is not a social media following. A million followers who do not act are not participants — they are an audience.
- It is not a petition database. Signatories who have taken one low-cost action are potential participants — not yet participants.
- It is not viral content. Content that spreads widely but does not build relationships, develop leadership, or sustain engagement is marketing, not organizing.
- It is not a centrally managed volunteer program. MOO requires genuine distributed leadership — participants who have real organizing authority, not just assigned tasks.

Step 2: Understand the Architecture of Scale

Most NGO campaigns are organized around a central hub — a professional staff team that designs the campaign, manages the messaging, coordinates the actions, and tracks the results. This hub-and-spoke model is fine for campaigns whose ambition matches organizational capacity. But it has a hard ceiling: the campaign can only scale as far as the central team can manage.

MOO breaks through this ceiling by distributing organizing authority — creating a structure in which participants become organizers, recruiting and supporting other participants, running their own local or issue-specific activities, and building the relationships that sustain large-scale participation. This structure has several key features:

Distributed leadership: The organizing capacity of the campaign is not concentrated in a professional staff team but distributed across many participant-leaders — volunteers who have taken on genuine organizing responsibility. These leaders are not just executing centrally designed activities; they are making real organizing decisions within a shared framework.

Fractal structure: Effective large-scale organizing structures are fractal — the same basic organizing unit (a small group of people with relationships, a shared goal, and genuine agency) replicates at every scale. A local group looks like a regional group looks like the national structure. This makes the structure legible, navigable, and expandable.

Clear entry points and pathways: An open organizing structure has multiple, clear entry points — easy first steps that a new participant can take without prior commitment or knowledge — and clear pathways for moving from initial participation to deeper engagement and eventually to leadership. The design of these pathways is one of the most important elements of MOO architecture.

A shared framework without central control: Distributed organizing works when participants share a common framework — a shared understanding of what they are trying to achieve, why it matters, and how it works — without requiring central approval for every decision. The framework (often called a "theory of change narrative" or an "organizing framework") is the infrastructure that enables coordination without centralization.

Step 3: Understand the Human Infrastructure of MOO

Scale is ultimately a human phenomenon: it is produced by the relationships between people, not by technology, platforms, or organizational structures alone. The human infrastructure of MOO has several layers:

Participants: The broad base of people who have taken at least one action and expressed interest in engaging further. Participants are the raw material of organizing — they need to be developed, not just maintained.

Volunteers and local organizers: Participants who have taken on a more active role — attending meetings, running local activities, recruiting others. They are the middle layer of MOO architecture, and they are consistently the most underinvested layer in most campaigns.

Leaders: Participants who have developed genuine organizing capacity — who can recruit and support other participants, run effective local groups, make organizing decisions, and develop other leaders. Leaders are the primary output of the leadership development process and the primary driver of sustained scale.

Backbone staff: The professional staff who design and maintain the organizing framework, develop and support leaders, manage the infrastructure, and steward the overall direction of the campaign. In MOO, backbone staff are coordinators and developers, not controllers.

The most important insight: The ratio of leaders to participants — not the total number of participants — is the primary predictor of organizing effectiveness. A campaign with 100 genuine leaders and 10,000 participants is far more powerful than one with 5 leaders and 100,000 nominal supporters.

Step 4: Understand What Motivates Participation at Scale

MOO requires sustained participation from large numbers of people — and sustained participation is only possible if people have compelling reasons to keep engaging. Understanding what motivates participation is foundational to MOO design.

The three motivational pillars of organizing:

Values: People participate because they care about the cause — they share the -ism that animates the campaign, or at least the specific goal the campaign is working toward. Values motivation is the entry point: it is what brings people to the campaign in the first place. But it is rarely sufficient to sustain participation through difficulty, setback, and the demands of ongoing engagement.

Relationships: People sustain participation because of the relationships they have built with other participants. The relational dimension of organizing — the human bonds formed through shared commitment and shared struggle — is the most powerful retention mechanism available to campaigns. People do not leave a movement when they have friends in it.

Agency: People deepen their participation because they have genuine power within the campaign — real choices, real influence, real responsibility. Organizing structures that treat

volunteers as passive executors of centrally designed activities lose participants to the organizations that give them genuine agency.

MOO design must attend to all three pillars: building values alignment through compelling narrative and ideological clarity, building relationships through genuine relational organizing practice, and building agency through distributed leadership and genuine decision-making authority.

Step 5: Distinguish MOO from Digital Activism and Slacktivism

The rise of digital organizing tools has created enormous confusion about what organizing actually is. Social media campaigns, online petitions, and viral content can generate impressive-looking numbers — millions of signatures, billions of impressions, enormous social media followings — while producing none of the relational depth, distributed leadership, or sustained engagement that characterizes genuine organizing.

The academic literature on this phenomenon — sometimes called "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" — suggests that low-cost digital actions (signing a petition, sharing a post, adding a frame to a profile photo) produce a sense of participation without building the organizing infrastructure that produces real change. Worse, they may sometimes reduce the probability that a person will take higher-cost, higher-impact actions — having discharged their sense of moral obligation through a low-cost gesture.

MOO is not anti-digital. Digital tools are essential to modern organizing — for communication, coordination, leadership development, and scaling relationship-building. But MOO distinguishes rigorously between digital actions that build organizing infrastructure (deepening relationships, developing leaders, enabling genuine participation) and digital actions that generate visible numbers without organizational depth.

The organizing test for digital actions: Does this digital action build a relationship? Does it develop a leader? Does it increase genuine agency? Does it sustain engagement over time? If the answer to all four is no, the action is marketing, not organizing — and should be understood as such.

Step 6: Assess Your Organization's Current Organizing Capacity

Before designing a MOO strategy, honestly assess where your organization currently stands on the dimensions that matter for large-scale organizing:

Participant base: How many people have expressed interest in your cause at any level? What is the quality of your data about them — do you know enough to make a personal ask? What proportion of your database has taken more than one action?

Leadership depth: How many genuine leaders — people with real organizing capacity who are actively developing other participants — does your organization currently have? This number is almost always much smaller than organizations think.

Relational organizing capacity: Does your staff team have genuine community organizing skills — the ability to have one-on-one conversations that deepen commitment, identify

potential leaders, and build the relationships that sustain participation? Or is your organizing model primarily broadcast-based?

Distributed structure: Does your organization have a structure that enables genuine distributed organizing — real local or issue-based groups with genuine agency? Or is all significant activity centrally managed?

Leadership development pipeline: Does your organization have a deliberate process for developing participants into leaders? What does that process look like, and how many people does it move through each year?

Tools and Templates

MOO Readiness Assessment: A five-dimension diagnostic: participant base quality | leadership depth | relational organizing capacity | distributed structure | leadership development pipeline. Scores and priority development areas.

Organizing vs. Marketing Matrix: A framework for evaluating organizational activities: Does this build relationships? Does it develop leaders? Does it increase genuine agency? Does it sustain engagement over time? Activities that score low on all four are marketing; activities that score high on multiple dimensions are organizing.

Participation Ladder Template: A visual tool for designing participant pathways: entry-level actions (low commitment, widely accessible) → intermediate engagement → active participation → local organizing → leadership. With specific activities at each level and clear transition mechanisms.

Recommended Foundational Reading:

- Ganz, Marshall. *Why David Sometimes Wins*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Alinsky, Saul. *Rules for Radicals*. Random House, 1971.
- Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Emergent Strategy*. AK Press, 2017.
- Han, Hahrie. *How Organizations Develop Activists*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Case Vignettes

Case Vignette 1: Distributed Organizing at Scale — The Sunrise Movement

The Sunrise Movement, founded in 2017 to build youth political power for climate action, provides one of the most studied examples of successful MOO architecture in recent US political history. Its structure was explicitly designed for distributed organizing: local hubs had genuine autonomy to run their own campaigns and activities within a shared national framework; leadership was developed deliberately through a hub leader training program; and the organizing model was relational — built on one-on-one conversations and small-group meetings, not primarily on digital broadcast.

The results were striking: by 2019, Sunrise had built a network of over 400 local hubs across the US, with tens of thousands of active participants. The organization's role in making the Green New Deal a mainstream political proposal — from a fringe idea to a serious policy platform endorsed by major presidential candidates — was driven not by a large professional staff but by the distributed organizing capacity of its leader network.

Key lessons: (1) Local hub autonomy within a national framework is the structural design that enables organizing at scale — not central coordination of local activity. (2) Leadership development investment (hub leader training) is the primary driver of scale — it is what converts participants into organizers. (3) The organizing framework (the story of why this moment matters, what needs to change, and how participants fit into that change) is the connective tissue that holds distributed organizing together.

Case Vignette 2: Open Organizing in Animal Advocacy — The Corporate Campaign Model

The corporate cage-free campaign model pioneered by The Humane League and diffused through the Open Wing Alliance represents a distinctive form of MOO adapted for the animal advocacy context. The campaign model is explicitly open: it welcomes participation from individuals, student groups, local advocacy chapters, and national organizations, providing a shared framework (target companies, campaign tactics, shared messaging) while allowing local actors genuine autonomy in how they run activities.

The open structure produced scale that centralized campaigning could not have achieved: corporate targets simultaneously pressured by campaigners in multiple cities, on multiple university campuses, and through multiple channels — creating the impression of a much larger and more distributed movement than any single organization could have manufactured alone.

Key lessons: (1) Open campaign structures that provide a shared framework while allowing local autonomy produce far more participation than closed, centrally managed campaigns. (2) The "open wing" model — multiple organizations coordinating under a shared framework without formal hierarchical integration — is a form of MOO that is highly effective in the advocacy context. (3) Providing campaigners with genuinely effective tactics (actions that produce real results) is the most important retention mechanism — people stay in campaigns where they win.

Metrics and KPIs

Metric / KPI	What It Measures	How to Measure
Active participant rate (% of database taking action in last 90 days)	Organizing health	Database analytics
Leader-to-participant ratio	Organizing depth	Leadership roster ÷ active participants
Retention rate (participants active in consecutive quarters)	Engagement sustainability	Database cohort analysis

Metric / KPI	What It Measures	How to Measure
Leadership development throughput (leaders developed per year)	Pipeline health	Leadership program tracking
Personal ask conversion rate	Relational organizing effectiveness	A/B testing / organizer tracking
Local group activity rate	Distributed structure health	Hub/chapter activity log

Risks and Mitigations

Risk: Confusing large database size with organizing capacity.

Mitigation: Track active participation rates, not raw database size. A database of 100,000 with 2% active participation is weaker than a database of 10,000 with 25% active participation.

Risk: Distributed organizing producing message inconsistency or off-brand activity.

Mitigation: Invest in the organizing framework — the shared narrative and tactical guidance that keeps distributed organizers aligned without requiring central approval for every activity.

Risk: Leadership development pipeline not keeping pace with participation growth.

Mitigation: Set explicit leader-to-participant ratio targets and track them quarterly. When the ratio drops below target, increase leadership development investment before expanding recruitment.

Risk: Digital engagement metrics being mistaken for organizing metrics.

Mitigation: Apply the organizing test consistently: Does this activity build relationships, develop leaders, increase genuine agency, and sustain engagement? Track organizing metrics separately from digital engagement metrics.

Implementation Checklist

- ☐ MOO readiness assessment completed across five dimensions
- ☐ Current participant base quality assessed: active participation rate, data quality
- ☐ Leader-to-participant ratio calculated and benchmarked
- ☐ Relational organizing capacity of staff team assessed
- ☐ Participation ladder designed with clear entry points and transition mechanisms
- ☐ Organizing framework drafted: shared narrative, tactical guidance, local autonomy parameters
- ☐ Leadership development process defined with annual throughput target

Glossary

Distributed Leadership: An organizing structure in which organizing authority is distributed across many participant-leaders rather than concentrated in a professional staff team.

Fractal Structure: An organizing architecture in which the same basic organizing unit replicates at every scale — local, regional, national — making the structure legible, navigable, and expandable.

Leader-to-Participant Ratio: The ratio of genuine organizing leaders to active participants. The primary predictor of organizing effectiveness, more important than total participant numbers.

Massive Open Organizing (MOO): The discipline of building and sustaining large-scale civic participation — open to all, distributed in structure, and capable of growing beyond the capacity of any single organization to manage centrally.

Organizing Framework: The shared narrative and tactical guidance that enables distributed organizers to coordinate effectively without requiring central approval for every decision.

Participation Ladder: A visual model of participant pathways from initial engagement through active participation to organizing leadership, with clear transition mechanisms at each level.

Slacktivism/Clicktivism: Low-cost digital actions that produce visible numbers without building the relational depth, distributed leadership, or sustained engagement that characterizes genuine organizing.

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