

# HOW WE MAKE CHANGE IS CHANGING

## OPEN SOURCE CAMPAIGNS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



*Shut Down ICE action in Los Angeles, 2013 photo: Pocho1 Visual Movement*

By Marisa Franco, B. Loewe and Tania Unzueta

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Innovation is a constant buzzword in technology circles but the leaps forward in tech have far wider implications: The way we make social change is changing.

As early as the Howard Dean campaign of 2003, people were beginning to observe and theorize how technology that transforms our ability to connect to each other results in our ability to make collective impact in new ways.

During the Obama presidential campaigns, a lot of attention was paid to how data fueled the strategy. Twitter was described as central to the Egyptian revolution and Arab Spring. But social movements not only take advantage of new technological tools, the process of social change mirrors advances in technology.

At the #Not1More Campaign, started in April of 2013 to move President Obama to halt deportations, we experimented and tinkered with new and old concepts for organizing and, having succeeded in getting the White House to take executive action on immigration, are in the beta stage of #Not1More 2.0.

## OLD SHAPE/NEW SHAPE



*Civil disobedience by undocumented activists in front of the White House, September 2013*

A traditional definition of a campaign is a coordinated series of activities designed to meet a specific goal. That goal could be educating youth to make better eating habits, getting a person elected to political office, or stopping deportations. For organizations placed into competition by the scarcity of funding and cost of operation, such efforts can be taken as proprietary. In some places, you'll see an organization's logo on their sign before the message of their rally. Whereas technology advances are based on experimentation and risk, the pressure to

deliver predicted outcomes has impacted campaigns, often times actually limiting creativity and spontaneity, derailing the natural arc and essence of what emerges through the dynamic and dialectical process of change.

To accomplish larger goals, groups often form tables or coalitions to collaborate on campaign work. Whether it is because the formation of these coalitions may be heavily influenced by funder drive or explicitly in the interest of receiving resources or because of lack of trust between groups, almost every organizer has a story about when more time is spent structuring the structure and processing the process than on advancing concrete work. Even with good intentions, decision-making processes that push for flat agreement or emphasize unanimity without accounting for the varying interest of participants can lead to the lowest common denominator of demands. At the other end of the spectrum, the other extreme manifests when groups come into a coalition insisting on high demands that are not actionable. In either case, instead of capturing each participants' hottest passion and strongest contribution, the push moves toward following a predicted path of action. Instead of plans that catalyze, groups in collaboration end up with decisions that few are committed to implementing or motivated to achieve, and that rarely result in social change.

But in recent years, a different model is emerging. One that isn't remarkable just for how it integrates both social media and off-line organizing but by how it incorporates the principles and practice of open-source technology into organizing and campaign work.

## #NOT1MORE: MORE THAN A HASH TAG

Many of the external descriptions of the #Not1More campaign are the result of its intentional, but at times invisible, design. Whereas some called it leaderless or reduced it to a hash tag, it was actually built to innovate the trans-local campaign model: not just to replicate policy wins at the local and national level but (like how any successful platform impacts its sector) to disrupt and advance the immigrant rights movement.



(left) Mayanin Aguilar, New Orleans 2013 photo: Marisa Franco; (center) Zacil Pech, Los Angeles 2014 photo: Pocho1 Visual Movement; (right) La Reina de Aztlan, Santa Ana 2015 photo: Marisa Franco

Open source comes from coding and programming circles. Instead of building everything in-house and in secret, open source refers to something whose design is public, a central platform that invites modification and improvement through various entry points of collaboration. Think Linux versus Windows. Firefox versus Internet Explorer. Anyone whose installed a plug-in to make a Wordpress website work better has experienced the benefits of an open source approach.

In campaign terms, it manifests a little differently. Open-source campaigns may still use corporate tools like YouTube or Twitter. What makes them open-source is not the platform they use, but the way participation is designed. Whereas there's still a hub and a core development team, participants have an ability to see the code and alter it to improve it.

In #Not1More, we emphasize purpose and action to capture imagination and catalyze participation. To succeed in coordinating a nation-wide set of groups and individuals in a new form of campaigning, it required a platform with several key elements:

## ***Action Worthy Problem & Solutions***

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First things first. Does the problem you are trying to solve really matter to anyone? Is the solution you propose realistic and effective? In entrepreneurship, if the product you're selling doesn't meet a need or solve a problem, it's not going anywhere.

Will you make everyone happy with which problem you identify and which solution you propose? Of course not. But do you have critical mass to move? That's the key. We observed that people in the immigrant rights movement supported the idea of comprehensive immigration reform but the uncertain timeline in Congress didn't speak to the immediacy of the person whose family and community were being deported now. The problem of deportations was a bleeding point issue. And the lack of strategies people could employ to stop deportations was a gaping hole in the advocacy agenda. #Not1More provided one way for people to engage.



Community action to prevent the deportation of Bertha, Puente Arizona

work. It is well documented that an over-saturation of decision-making leads to diminished quality of decisions.

Part of what makes leadership a touchy subject for time immemorial is that people either don't understand how decisions are made, how to give input in decision making or don't feel there's a way to access decision-making spaces. This plays out in particular in the relationship between national, regional and local groups.

Collective processes should define the goals and parameters but leave implementation to those charged with implementing the specifics. Tiered decision-making recognizes specialization, respects local leadership, and decentralizes responsibilities. At the same time, it also makes visible both leadership and expertise.

One example of how tiered decision-making (alongside replicable actions, and improvisational strategy) played out in the campaign was during the series of 'Shut Down ICE' actions that took place across the country. Setting an example with a weekend of action in Arizona, we issued a call for civil disobedience saying that if the President wouldn't stop deportation, we would stop them ourselves. In Tacoma, Washington several people responded, attaching themselves together with pipes on their arms to form a human chain that blocked buses of detainees en route for deportation. Those detainees returned to their cells and organized a facility-wide hunger strike that received national media attention. Detainees in a detention center in Texas saw that news coverage. They later released their own demands in a letter and started their own strike.

Establishing critical mass and that the demand resonates are critical because it drives participation and defines the depth of the participant's commitments. It identifies and filters the team of the willing. For an open source campaign, if no one is moved by the problem addressed or the solution offered, it doesn't matter that there's an open door for his or her participation. Especially when there's a long way to go from problem, to solution, to victory, the campaign needs both a foundational team of key players who have the guts, need, motivation and skills to win and a trajectory that will translate into mass appeal as it progresses.

### Tiered decision-making

Many times we bottleneck decisions around one person or a small group, or worse, subject the full group to decide what color the table cloth should be at the campaign launch. Allow people to make the decisions that pertain to their aspect of the

**STOP THE DEPORTATION OF CECILIO GUTIERREZ-BERDIN!**

Movement **NOT ONE MORE!**

SIGN THE PETITION [bit.ly/cecilioL](http://bit.ly/cecilioL)

Call Chicago Field Office Director Ricardo Wong at (312) 347-2221

Sample script: "I am calling in support of Cecilio Gutierrez-Berdin (A# 099025599) and to urge for the favorable use of discretion for Mr. Gutierrez-Berdin. He is a father of two US citizen children that depend on him for economic and emotional support. Please grant him a stay of removal so he can be with his family."

**OCAD**

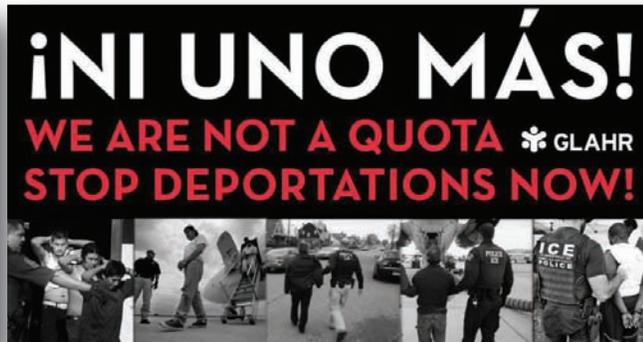
Organized Communities Against Deportations, Chicago IL

Meanwhile, families in Phoenix sat vigil outside their regional Immigration office demanding the release of their own detained children. Weaving the three distinct strikes together, the campaign converged with a month-long fast in front of the White House that became a point of reference when the President answered questions in press briefings.

Campaign actions can often lead to unexpected outcomes. In each of these sites, local leaders who were best positioned to assess conditions, capacity and strategic opportunities made pressing local decisions. Rather than intervening based on national interests, national organizers wove together the various local activities and supported local organizers to make decisions on how to move forward.



Action-prep meeting at Shut Down ICE Conference in Phoenix, AZ. Photo courtesy of Pocho1 Visual Movement



(left) Gabriela Marquez Benitez, Chicago IL 2013; (center) Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (2014); Children's March, New Orleans photo: Fernando Lopez (2015)



(left) Shut Down ICE action in Tacoma, WA (2014); (center) ICE detainers ended in Philadelphia PA, Vamos Juntos (2014); (right) Shut Down ICE action in Elizabeth, NJ (2014)

## Replication + Repetition + Innovation = Anti-Fragility

The cost of stifling innovation is far greater than the cost of failed experiments.

Tactics are to campaigns as code is to open source platforms. Instead of sticking to multi-year strategic plans towards predicted (i.e. fingers crossed) outcomes, establish an initial plan of action and create room for experimentation. Even failure and error provide key information that informs recalibration. Experimentation and interpretation leads to new meaning. Here are two examples:

Individual deportation defense was the bread and butter of the campaign. The circumstances of the cases illuminated enforcement practices. The organizing communicated the human impact. It addressed immediate needs and generated momentum towards the broader demand. The way it worked was that the national campaign team consulted on targeting, legal handle and strategy, and provided communications infrastructure to galvanize public support. The family or person facing deportation made key decisions on the case, as well as local groups who eventually took on more cases and in time, innovated on the steps and approach. Certain wins became precedent setting cited by other cities. Lessons were shared amongst the cluster or organizations focusing on this type of work.



Ferguson October mobilization, 2014

Another example is about intersectionality. Southerners on New Ground (SONG), a regional LGBTQ organization, didn't just enter the campaign as a supporter itself but sought to activate the broader LGBTQ sector to support the campaign. SONG developed messaging, frames and written pieces speaking directly to their multi-racial LGBTQ base and to the broader sector. They tapped into the common thread of confronting fear, made the connection and in

essence translated the established messaging to speak to an audience more specifically. They took the slogans of 'No Papers, No Fear' and expanded to messages of 'Come Out, Destroy Fear, Unleash Power' These frames expanded the meaning and breadth of the campaign, and made the room for more communities impacted and who could be moved to support more explicit.



*Images created by Southerners on New Ground, 2013*

Allowing and in fact encouraging the good faith reinterpretation and experimentation of tactics creates opportunities and lessons that make the work anti-fragile, able to be strengthened by both error and success.

## ***Purpose & Entry Points***

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Making something open source is not for the sake of saying it. Beyond simply promoting values of participatory democracy, it can actually work more effectively. In order to achieve that level of success the purpose has to be clear. If participants are modifying tactics and messaging, the motivation must be to improve functionality or deepen purpose. If that's not the case, the bottom falls out and the meaning grows hollow. Open source does not simply mean that the platform or campaign belongs to no one or that anyone is free to do anything. Even an experimental free form jam session has rules. Open source campaigns function best with clear purpose, frame, values that serve as basic parameters.

So how does this all work and how can groups and individuals plug in? What makes disparate change efforts in various cities into a cohesive national force is not as simple as just logging on but it is as etheric as creating a sense of belonging. Activities that supporters can do from their own city/town is key, online engagement can supplement but not replace this. Relational organizing and network weaving provides

points of entry to the bigger picture and broader objectives beyond the local context or immediate policy demand. Moments of convergence like a national march or day of action help people feel connected, and with that connection, they'll organically plug other people in.

For example, the call for a national day of action on April 5th of 2014 resulted in more than 80 groups planning over 100 events with no cost to the campaign beyond printing flyers and staff time. Through consultative leadership that informs activities through deep listening, calls to action were resourced by embodied agreement and not simply because there was funding allocated to do so.

At the national and regional level, the work centered on weaving local work and national convergence, providing technical and strategic guidance, and amplification. Perhaps this is a place to stop and make clear, none of this works without strong organizing and leadership. This work involves filling gaps, catching blind spots and devising convergence and narrative based off of the local work. It involves a tremendous amount of both identification of new participants but also real maintenance of relationships.

## EVERYTHING AIN'T EVERYTHING



*Mari Cruz Ramirez and Tomas Martinez, 5th anniversary of SB1070 in Arizona, April 2015. Photo: Chandra Narcia*

Recognizing that groups have varied in capacity, strengths and interests there are levels of participation. Participation is fluid; groups who are part of the campaign are not obligated to participate on every initiative and vice versa. Here's a basic description of the different levels:



*During President Obama speech in Chicago, IL,  
November 2014*

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## *The Share Bear*

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Unity the size of a tweet. Individuals or groups who may occasionally or religiously promote, share, retweet campaign propaganda. They also might be those who participate in online actions, signing and sharing petitions. Agreement is articulated through these actions, and because of the ability to contact organizers, share bears can communicate strong disagreement but because of the fluid nature of the relationship, are not consulted prior. Share Bears can impact in other ways, specifically by modifying campaign propaganda and messaging.

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## *The Ride Along*

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The groups or individuals at this level are the quintessential “see you when I see you.” Ride alongs are like that friend that you don’t always hang out with, but if you’re at the same place you might link up or at the very least give each other the head nod greeting. Groups might have other campaigns or work that takes priority, but occasionally the campaign’s tactics align or there is temporary capacity and groups jump on. Ride alongs can often times provide really key information on other sectors or issues, and over time even serve as bridges with other sectors and groups.

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## *The Adopter*

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Adopters are groups who are most consistently downloading or adopting content and tactics within the campaign. Groups at this level most often have current campaign work or organizational focus that overlaps. As a result, it is not a stretch for groups to participate in collective tactics, and in fact the national push supports their specific goals. It is often in this level of participation where key innovation can spark as groups take on and adapt strategies and tactics to respond to their particular conditions.

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## *The Co-Conspirator*

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Shared issue focus is one basis of participation, but also shared political vision and experience of collaboration. Co-conspirators collaborate deeply with the national campaign team. Often times the local strategies help drive the national strategy. Co-conspirators are advanced and true experts on the issues, and in the case of their position within the campaign, have invested a tremendous amount and in the overall political project. They are both thought partners and risk partners.

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# **WHY WOULD IT FAIL?**

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There are however, many reasons why this particular approach can fail or fall short. Writing about ‘new power,’ Jeremy Heimanns and Henry Timms observe, “There’s a fine line between democratizing participation and a mob mentality.” These types of structures and models often times are characterized as leaderless, and the perception of hierarchy or centralization can produce mistrust. We unite with the lifting up of ‘leaderful’ not ‘leaderless’ formations. There is a need for delineation of roles, experience,

and impact in how we do the work. Open participation and a leaderful approach that doesn't prop up any one figure do not erase the role of the central hub. A Share Bear may come up with a new messaging hook that gets taken up by the entire campaign. Those innovating on tactics can help illuminate a new direction that shifts the course of the work. Innovation can come from anywhere but there is still a core of co-conspirators in the lead.

As is the case in the programming sense – you are what you code, you are who you roll with. When done well, that rearranges the balance of power and leads to new openings. But the open door opens yourself up to people who you may not know representing in different contexts. The potential for co-optation and misrepresentation is very real. Credit and resources are not always simply granted to those generating momentum or doing the work. Groups with more access, relationships and money can take advantage and position themselves as responsible or representative of these efforts. This not only diminishes the capacity of the groups doing the bulk of the work, it eventually tarnishes and can damage the brand and meaning of the campaign itself.



*Lady Liberty, created by Cesar Maxit*

## THE WAY WE MAKE CHANGE IS CHANGING

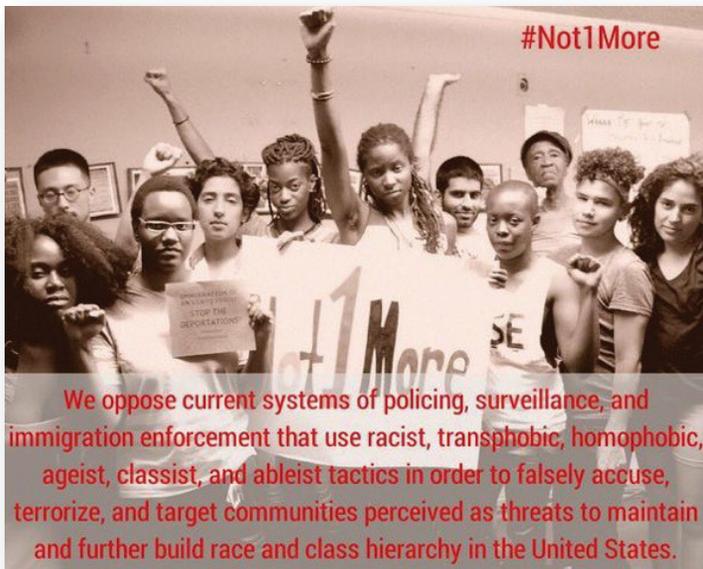
In our experience, what open source campaigning unlocks and provides an opportunity for is far greater than the risks. But the idea of 'open source campaigns' is just one way. Action based, experimental organizing and leadership that's willing to shift and adapt is much needed across the board to achieve transformational social and economic change.

In rooms of organizers and aspiring leaders watching different flashpoints turn viral, we've often heard the question, "how do we harness that energy for [fill in the blank pre-designed effort]?" A better question would be what do we need to do so that our efforts are relevant to and emergent from the untapped energy that flashpoints expose.

To us, the best lessons of open source technology are not about computers or wires. They are about how people can best work together to thrive. If we let go, humble ourselves long enough to listen, and let the surge of progress flow, we have the potential to generate game changing people power that disrupts what needs intervention, connects us to each other in service of justice and transforms what's possible.



(left) Northwest Detention Center detainee hunger strike, (center) Phoenix Pride 2015, (right) AFL CIO building in Washington DC 2014



(left) Audre Lourde Project, New York City; (right) Protest in front of Phoenix ICE Field Office 2014; (below-left) Photo taken of detainee inside a bus en route to Operation Streamline, Tucson AZ 2013; (below-right) Cupcake by Organized Communities against Deportations

