

STRATEGIC ROADMAP

Scaling Economic Mobility Narrative Change



**NATIONAL
DOMESTIC
WORKERS
ALLIANCE**

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Executive Summary

Building on three years of research advancing understandings of dominant narratives relating to poverty and economic mobility, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) and TCC Group held a series of four convenings in 2021 to develop a strategy and roadmap to scale economic mobility narrative interventions in 2022 and beyond.

Sixty-three practitioners, researchers, evaluators, and philanthropists engaged in narrative change work were surveyed electronically and convened across four meetings. They were presented with a synthesis of research, interviews, and recommendations about narrative frames and implications on infrastructure needs from the field and funders. Stakeholders shared insights and recommendations on the narrative landscape, existing field infrastructure, and challenges and opportunities to bring new narratives about economic mobility to scale and achieve meaningful, measurable impact.

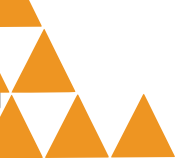
In the face of multiple challenges that allow the most harmful and dangerous narratives to gain momentum—lack of regulation of the content on platforms, the funnel from the platforms to news agencies like Fox News, and the well-funded, coordinated movements behind the narratives they propagate—narrative change practitioners struggle to respond at the pace, scale, and scope required. To counteract this growing threat, practitioners outlined four major goals, detailed below, that are essential for scaling economic mobility narrative interventions. Stakeholders also emphasized the need for access to funding that is responsive to organizations' unique needs, carries a long-term commitment and fewer restrictions (i.e. long-term rather than project-based support), and continues to invest in organizations and networks that are already engaged in narrative change work. The goals detailed in the report are presented in order of urgency based on participant feedback; however, all of the recommendations are essential in scaling effective narrative interventions over the next three to five years.

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Goals

- 1. Distribution:** Ensure content reaches strategic and mass audiences
- 2. Connection:** Collaborate and share knowledge with peers with intersecting expertise
- 3. Learning:** Integrate timely and relevant research and data about what works
- 4. Growth:** Scale innovative and promising work without interruptions in funding or support



Goal 1

Distribution: Ensure content reaches strategic and mass audiences.

OBJECTIVE 1: ADDRESS THE DIVERSE DISTRIBUTION NEEDS OF NARRATIVE ORGANIZATIONS.

The modern media landscape is constantly shifting, transforming, and being upended. To disrupt deeply embedded dominant narratives and compete with today's far-right platforms and media empires, narrative practitioners must effectively distribute and amplify their content in accordance with their unique goals and capacities. Organizations have various levels of expertise in getting their stories out. Many require training and capacity building in the basics and then mastery of strategic communications—such as paid media (advertising), owned media (email, SMS), earned media (press), shared media (social media)—to execute their narrative strategies. Others require support penetrating systems of media power, collaborating and shaping pre-existing content, and influencing established media makers (further discussed under “Goal 1: Distribution 2 & 3”). A distinct few are poised to design content and execute business deals with media entities such as producers and media makers themselves and need support to incubate and launch new companies and brands that can not only infiltrate current systems but seed new ones at scale.

OBJECTIVE 2: BUILD PARTNERSHIPS AND INCREASE NARRATIVE AWARENESS IN ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY, NEWS, JOURNALISM AND MASS MEDIA TO AMPLIFY ELEMENTS OF NEW NARRATIVES FOR ECONOMIC MOBILITY AT SCALE.

Major sources of cultural influence—Hollywood, entertainment, journalism, and more—present essential spheres of influence for carrying new narratives to broad audiences through existing platforms with massive reach, providing an important avenue for addressing the need for distribution that can undermine narrative change efforts if left unresolved. These industries and the creators within them show increasing interest and openness to new narratives for economic mobility. Updating creators' knowledge and helping influence mass media content requires a nuanced approach to account for the fact that artists, creatives, journalists, editors, and publishers have distinct visions and points of view. Creatives are best positioned to uplift and advance some but not all aspects of new narratives, and will require significant creative freedom. Engagement is best approached as transformational, not transactional, meaning that there is true alignment, buy-in, and a value proposition for artists, producers, writers, and creators at all levels to engage in this work in a meaningful, long-term fashion. This requires flexibility around narrative interpretations, and understanding of the diverse incentives that drive influencers and media makers across different sectors.

In the entertainment sector, support is needed for engaging creators and decision-makers like showrunners, writers, producers, directors, executives and entertainment industry leaders to boost awareness of the urgency and strategies for narrative change around economic mobility. Much can be learned and built upon from existing organizations dedicated and positioned to do this work, such as expanding current strategies like advisory boards, non-profits, consultants, and convenings focused on depicting and portraying social topics and marginalized groups. In the news, publishing and journalism sector, editors, publishers, and reporters are critical partners and collaborators for bringing new narratives to scale. Raising their awareness and commitment can be achieved through key activities including conferences that bring together grassroots leaders, reporters, and publishers; panels at journalism conferences; special sections and collaborations with outlets; support for local and non-profit journalism; prizes and more.

OBJECTIVE 3: ENGAGE CULTURAL INFLUENCERS TO TRANSLATE AND AMPLIFY NEW NARRATIVES.

Individual digital influencers (nano to mega), celebrities, and public figures must be engaged to use their platforms to advance new narratives for economic mobility. While relationships between movement organizations and cultural influencers at times emerge organically, intentional emphasis can and should be placed on engaging these public-facing figures. Intermediary organizations have begun to specialize in this form of engagement and offer an essential role in building and scaling this strategy. Support for continuing and scaling their work, as well as sharing best practices and resources, will help launch this essential pillar of work. Influencer engagement strategies must be built on meaningful, transformational relationships with increasing opportunities to ladder up investment, while accounting for the diverse incentives that motivate influencers and allowing for flexibility and creative freedom to advance some but not all aspects of new narratives.

OBJECTIVE 4: ENHANCE AND INCREASE FRONTLINES STORY PRODUCTION AND TARGETED DISTRIBUTION.

Creators committed to telling dynamic, authentic frontlines stories across journalism, media, and the arts are essential actors in developing and sharing new narrative content infused with new frames. Success will require an investment in the narrative quality and production value of new content, such as long-term open support to both existing and emerging storytellers that will enable them to develop and share their talents and voices in ways that are both authentic and aligned with shared narrative goals. A key source of content lies with content creators who are directly connected to or invested in telling the stories of people with lived experiences of economic hardship, including writers, reporters, illustrators, multimedia artists, playwrights, cultural programmers, and more. Production support such as arts residencies, fellowships, awards, training, and employment opportunities for storytellers from diverse backgrounds to cover and represent poverty and economic mobility will help elevate and amplify frontlines stories.

In addition to generating an abundant pipeline of richly informative and inspiring content, it is necessary to support distribution of cultural and journalistic content to strategic audiences. For the arts, this means funding marketing and promotion of content to new and existing audiences via artists, galleries, museums, film festivals, and other arts and cultural institutions. For writers and reporters, partnerships and fellowships are needed to help publish content in digital and printed news outlets to ensure content is distributed to both new and existing audiences. These niche audiences are a critical component of scaling new narratives because they are a space for organic, grassroots growth and diffusion of new narratives among potential allies and supporters, and help ingrain, instill, and normalize the use of new frames to represent economic mobility among the movement's base.

Partnerships between artists/storytellers and advocacy organizations are essential for developing and sharing this new narrative content. Success will require financial support for shared endeavors and capacity building for both parties to know what to expect through this engagement in terms of timeline, process, ownership/creative decision-making, distribution needs, and more (further discussed under "*Goal 2: Connection.*").



Goal 2

Connection: Deepen collaboration and knowledge sharing among peers with intersecting expertise.

OBJECTIVE 1: STRENGTHEN AND ENHANCE INFRASTRUCTURE, COLLABORATION AND NETWORK-WEAVING AMONG NARRATIVE CHANGE PRACTITIONERS.

Though narrative practitioners, researchers, and mobilizing organizations are eager to collaborate and learn from each other, limited bandwidths and sparse infrastructure necessitate funding an entity to proactively share information and strengthen relationships. Investment is needed to enable the field to coordinate efforts, foster collaboration, share knowledge, and craft and sustain alignment. This can include helping identify organization and field-level needs and securing resources like funding and capacity building. This need for network-weaving was emphasized as a top priority for the field to develop and scale narrative change, and addresses the fundamental need for a coordinated effort built around a shared narrative, goals, and vision for the future. Spaces for relationships to be built and nurtured over time are essential, and must go beyond online repositories or listservs and generate trust, meaningful connection, and a sense of shared purpose, power, and growth.

OBJECTIVE 2: ENGAGE INDIVIDUALS CLOSEST TO THE ISSUES TO CO-CREATE SOLUTIONS.

To elevate the voices of those most impacted by poverty, narrative strategy sessions and content creation spaces must be thoughtfully built and include mechanisms for deep listening and co-creation with community members with lived experience. This includes drawing on the expertise of organizations with experience supporting community members in sharing their stories in empowering ways, and building the capacity of artists, media makers, and media institutions to engage respectfully without unintended exploitation, paternalism, or other harm.



Goal 3

Learning: Integrate timely and relevant research and data about what works.

OBJECTIVE 1: INCREASE COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS, EVALUATORS AND ADVOCATES TO EFFECTIVELY PILOT EVIDENCE-BASED WORK, MONITOR IMPACT, EVALUATE PROJECTS, AND ITERATE IN REAL TIME.

There is immense appetite among narrative practitioners to use evidence-based practices, test narratives effectively, monitor and evaluate narrative work, and use research to engage and inspire more stakeholders to embrace narrative change. Organizations focused on research and evaluation have produced profound insights, but practitioners have struggled to implement learnings and effectively measure the impact of their own efforts. Researchers and research-focused organizations must be engaged in collaborations with narrative change practitioners to support the goals of advocacy organizations, rather than conduct siloed efforts or research that is not timely or relevant for the on-the-ground efforts. Research must occur in conjunction with a plan for implementation and a system to monitor progress in real time and create feedback loops that are quick and iterative.

OBJECTIVE 2: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES AND BUILD TOOLS THAT ALLOW PRACTITIONERS TO MEASURE PROGRESS TOWARDS LONG TERM GOALS.

For the broader field, particularly smaller organizations with limited resources for narrative change work, accessible and affordable tools and methods must be developed to help measure what's working over the course of months, rather than years. In order to best disseminate narrative research findings to be implemented in the field, ending the practice of proprietary research and encouraging collaborations with researchers and organizations should occur before research is conducted, so that real-world questions are addressed and strategies can be better implemented.

OBJECTIVE 3: INCREASE STAFFING, TRAININGS AND FUNDING TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT EVIDENCE-BASED NARRATIVE CHANGE.

Solidifying narrative change as a tool in organizations' toolboxes requires investment. Right now, there isn't a robust cadre of narrative change specialists embedded within organizations or integrated use of narrative within workstreams. Staff are often saturated with rapid response work, and organizations struggle to balance immediate fights with the long arc of narrative change work. Staff and leadership may not fully embrace or understand narrative change as an essential component of their work, or knowledge may be held by just one staffer.

To better weave narrative change strategies into movement work, organizations need opportunities to activate narrative strategies while accessing expert guidance and financial support. This requires support for narrative change roles within organizations; access to funding for content production, distribution, and measurement; support for partnerships with narrative organizations or experts; and training and capacity-building for existing staff. Importantly, it also requires funding that reflects a clear and pragmatic understanding of how mobilizing and advocacy organizations will integrate narratives into their current work. Because organizations newly engaging in narrative work may not anticipate all costs associated with new tactics, pooled funds for movement groups to access during implementation would provide much-needed sustainment and help counteract reported competition for resources, which disincentivizes collaboration. Narrative practitioners are well positioned to deliver trainings and partner on narrative strategies.



Goal 4

Growth. Scale innovative and promising work without interruptions in funding or support.

OBJECTIVE 1: FOSTER PHILANTHROPIC ALIGNMENT AND FUNDING FOR NARRATIVE CHANGE.

Philanthropic engagement needs to be more organized, collaborative, and strategic to propel and support narrative change strategy for economic mobility. Because foundations are often organized by population or issue area, colleagues in these different workstreams may engage in narrative strategy in silos, while overarching narrative strategies at the foundation level are missing. Grantmakers involved or interested in building or growing their narrative change practice relating to economic mobility need a space to network, learn, strategize, and collaborate to build power within their foundations and for their grantees to achieve widespread narrative transformation at scale.

OBJECTIVE 2: PRIORITIZE FLEXIBLE, LONG-TERM FUNDING FOR NARRATIVE WORK.

Advancing narrative change is a multi-year commitment that evolves with the cultural climate. To be most effective, organizations require open ended support from funders who understand their specific needs and vision. To see real change, funders must be prepared to support resource-intensive, iterative work that adapts and adjusts based on changing environments, project-based learning, and the dynamic interplay of various stakeholders. Narrative strategies will require time to mature and coalesce, with lessons and small victories revealing themselves and generating momentum over time. Investments in capacity-building, content development, experimentation, and evaluation will help organizations achieve long-term goals and ensure that their strategies are sustainable and adaptable.



Insights on New Narratives for Economic Mobility

Currently, promising aspects of a new narrative for economic mobility have been identified but are not codified into a fully articulated, shared, and accepted story. Stakeholder feedback suggested general support for a “hybrid” frame¹ that emphasizes both systems and humanity, embedding individual choices within a broader systemic context. This is further supported by expert observations that narratives about systemic change achieved through collective action are gaining traction in the current cultural climate. The proposed hybrid frame includes:

- **SYSTEMS.** *Locating problems in unfair systems that were designed and built by humans with individualistic intentions, and can be re-built and re-designed to produce more equitable outcomes.*
- **HUMANITY.** *Centering dynamic collectives of community as protagonists, as opposed to individual “heroes” or inhuman systems such as “the economy.”*

ALIGNMENT AROUND A SHARED NARRATIVE BUILT ON THESE ELEMENTS WILL REQUIRE TIME, COORDINATION, EXPERIMENTATION, LEARNING, FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY FOR DIVERSE AUDIENCES AND MESSENGERS.

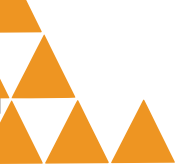
Practitioners favored narrative alignment over narrative consensus because it is more realistic and achievable, allows for creativity and expression among diverse messengers and mediums, and allows for variation and segmentation among audiences in ways that authentically resonates and moves these audiences.

To continue to move the field toward alignment and greater development of a flexible new narrative, funding is needed to support creative production pipelines and experimentation with narrative tactics. Emphasis should be placed on moving quickly to support the infrastructure for content creation, dissemination, and learning as described in the recommendations that follow.

Measuring Change

Given the complex and long-term nature of narrative change work, evaluating the impact of the recommended efforts must include a robust learning and inquiry lens for the field to advance deeper learning and understanding among practitioners and funders. Tracking the development and collective impact of the growing field of narrative change practice means measuring connectivity, alignment, collaboration, and whether individual efforts build up to a shared narrative. Much like other sectors, such as advocacy, mobilizing, and the arts, practitioners will need to be able to deploy tools that can generate data to sharpen and inform their strategy as well as demonstrate progress toward their goals (whether a goal is forward progress or holding the line). Funders of narrative change work must prioritize building and strengthening the evaluative capacity of practitioners and resource partnerships with researchers and evaluators to work in tandem to strengthen field-level standards and tools that carry meaning for practitioners with intersecting but diverse goals.

¹ USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, “Media Representations of Poverty and Their Impact on Audiences.” July 2020.



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