

Welcome to the Ernst Strüngmann Forum podcasts—a series of discussions designed to explore how people collaborate under real-life settings. Joining us in the series are high-profile experts from diverse areas in society, whose experiences will lend insight to what collaboration is, what it requires, and why it might break down. This series is produced in collaboration with the Convergent Science Network.

P. Verschure My name is Paul Verschure and together with my colleague, Jenna Bednar, we are speaking today with Naina Agrawal-Hardin, who is a representative of the US Youth Climate Strike Coalition, an organizer with the Sunrise Movement and Know Your IX, and a freshman at Yale University. Welcome, Naina. Could you start by giving us a sense of what brought you to be involved in a highly complex collaborative process of the Sunrise Movement?

N. Agrawal-Hardin Sunrise is a US-based, youth-led movement and organization whose mandate is essentially to stop climate change and create millions of good jobs in the process. Sunrise is partially responsible for pushing ideas like the Green New Deal into the mainstream here in the United States and is currently working on co-governing with the Biden administration as we enter this era of climate action in America. In terms of my personal trajectory, my dad's family has its roots in rural northern India, in Bihar, and my mom's parents have a home in rural Appalachia in east Tennessee, nestled in the Great Smoky Mountains. Both of these places have been vulnerable to climate disaster. While growing up, I've seen how challenges like chronic poverty and social inequalities exacerbate the difficulty of recovering after climate disaster strikes. So that's the way the climate crisis showed up for me as I was growing up. When I discovered Sunrise, what excited me about the movement was that it was a collaboration between people from front-line communities as well as from very different organizing backgrounds: people from fossil fuel and anti-fossil fuel infrastructure strikes, campus divestment strikes, and financial sector divestment strikes. People who had been working on lobbying and politics for a long time. This combination of regional diversity with the relative racial, socioeconomic, and social diversity, as compared to other parts of the climate movement, along with that diversity of experience is what drew me to Sunrise.

P. Verschure You describe Sunrise as a movement and how you discovered that movement, but you're also active in the Sunrise Movement as a political and partnership strategist. How did you end up in that role?

N. Agrawal-Hardin I started out organizing locally in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which is where my parents and I are based and where I just graduated from high school. Gradually, as the 2019 global climate strike movement (an international collaboration) got underway, I began to represent Sunrise in the national coalition of youth-led organizations that were working on planning and executing that strike mobilization at the national level in the U.S. I was asked to assume that role in part because I was a high schooler, in part because I have strong roots both in the United States and internationally, and in part because I had been organizing with Sunrise for some time and had a good sense of the movement's core mission and how to advocate for that mission in this coalition space. I sat on that coalition representing Sunrise with a colleague for about a year, and when it became clear that mass in-person mobilization wasn't going to be possible for a while because of COVID, I started to do other political and partnership work for the movement, looking at our partnerships with Gen Z and high-school-led organizations and also looking at how we make our political communication accessible to that age group, to that demographic.

P. Verschure Before we delve into the specifics of collaboration, what should we think of when you speak of the Sunrise Movement? What's the scale of this organization? How is it organized?

- N. Agrawal-Hardin Sunrise has over 500 of what we call hubs across the U.S.A., and these hubs range in membership. Each hub can have anywhere from 3 to 30, 63, or even sometimes 300 members. The hubs vary in terms of their size, but they organize under a common set of principles, and often they're working together or working on a campaign that the national movement leadership has helped to design. So, Sunrise, the organization, is a set of national staff members who work full or part-time on setting up support resources and devising strategic campaigns for hubs to use as needed. Hubs are also encouraged to create their own strategic goals that are applicable in their local context. In that way, they can choose where to put their energies. In terms of other work that the national organization does, we've done a lot of work with the Biden administration. In the lead-up to the general election, our executive director was on President Biden's task force for unity and climate policy, helping to craft some of that policy. Now we're working on enacting that.
- P. Verschure How would you define collaboration within the Sunrise Movement?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin At a Sunrise training a year and a half ago, there was a module on power, where we had this classic discussion of the distinction between power *over* and power *with*. In the context of Sunrise, I would define collaboration as an effort to build power with very young people toward the common goal—Green New Deal legislation. It is a mass mobilization to combat the climate crisis in a way that is in line with what science and justice demand. That's how I would define it: young people working to build power with each other toward that goal.
- P. Verschure If we want to build power with others, then you have to shape or build your organization. You have to engage people and bring them in. What are the concrete steps you would take there? In your experience, what's the method used to build power with?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin The theory of change can be broken down into two pieces. We teach one of those pieces in almost all of our introductory training, and this is something we disseminate to as many people as we can within the movement network. First is people's power. And by people power, we mean two things: (a) mass mobilization, direct action, and protest, and (b) talking to our communities. This is core to what Sunrise does: trying to relate to people who may not already be engaged in the movement on a personal level through our personal stories or through narratives that are anchored in the places that we care about, whether you're in a hub or whether you're on the national staff. That's the first piece: building people power and absorbing new people into the movement, and then activating members to take action in protest or contact government representatives or whatever else might make sense at that moment—but getting them energized to take action.
- The second piece is political power. When Sunrise was founded, the basic idea behind the political power piece was to get fossil-fuel money out of our elections as much as possible and to vote out leaders who are beholden to the interests of fossil-fuel executives and instead vote in leaders who are aligned with the movement. The theory of change is that, with those two pieces combined, you can change the government agenda, the agenda in the places we call home, and the legislation we want to tackle the climate crisis. Those are the two pieces: people power and political power.
- P. Verschure Do you see them as independent pieces or interlinked?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin Very interlinked. Sunrise absolutely believes that our political leaders are responsive to mass protest and to popular action and ideas. Certainly, if you're able to activate young people at the voting booth, then that's going to be helpful when it comes to building political power. If your mainstream political leaders are talking about your movement's ideas, more people are going to get involved. So, they're very connected.
- J. Bednar We should mention that most of your membership is too young to vote, right?

- N. Agrawal-Hardin Yes. I don't know if it's most, but it is a significant chunk.
- J. Bednar In keeping with what Paul's questions, you must have been 15 or 16 when you started working with this movement. What was your power? What was it that you could do? Because you couldn't do anything at the ballot box.
- N. Agrawal-Hardin Do you mean what is it about working with Sunrise that was empowering to me?
- J. Bednar No, although I'm sure a lot. Since you can't vote yet, what are you trying to reach in those who can vote? Are you trying to build up some sense of purpose among young people who, once they can vote, will express that? Is it kind of like a promissory action in the future, and through that, it's going to influence politicians? Or is it through the protests that you think it's good for those who can't yet vote? Is that where their real power is?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin I think the answer is yes to all of the above. Sunrise has done a lot of voter registration work as well as to turn out young people at the polls and turn out people who are concerned about the issue of climate change. I think absolutely that peaceful, nonviolent protest, moral protest, holds a lot of power and often look to examples of that kind of protest from the past, like the civil rights movement, for inspiration. It's particularly inspiring, actually. I've done a lot of independent study of the ways in which civil rights leaders collaborated with each other to win legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And so I think, yes, absolutely, as someone who can't vote, being able to show up in that way has been critical. It is also about helping young people develop a political consciousness even before they can vote and combating climate anxiety and a pessimistic or even fatalistic view of the future that many young people are starting to develop because of the climate crisis by saying that "we have an opportunity to build something better if we can work together well enough to make that happen." I've felt power come from all three of those sources that you mentioned.
- P. Verschure You emphasize this very central concept of power in your analysis. Power over/power with. That's not necessarily a straight line because by developing power with your membership, you do try to develop power over the opponents that you face from the fossil-fuel industry, for instance, and their associated politicians. How do you balance that? Because whether you like it or not, and whether you find power with your overarching value through that, you are trying to exert power over. How do you balance that?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin Such a good question. One that I remember grappling with that day at that training I mentioned where that idea was introduced. One of the things about being in a movement setting with people who share your values is that you're trusting each other to hold each other accountable to the goals of the movement, the values of the movement. That's what makes it less intimidating to have power over anyone, even if those people are corporate executives and wealthy politicians who historically have held a lot of the power in our society. For me personally, the idea that the people who I work with fundamentally want the same things I want, for the same or similar reasons—they want a society that works for everyone, that takes care of everyone, that is more equitable, and that has a sustainable future—makes me much more comfortable with the idea of power over because it makes me feel like if we overstep our bounds or if we do something that exists outside of those values, then we can correct that because we're working together.
- P. Verschure You feel that the movement is self-correcting. There are a number of issues that then crop up. I could say that by exerting power over, you also set up a dialectic that helps you to build your power with, because now you have pointed out an enemy and it's us "against" instead of "for." The power over is almost a necessary ingredient to build your power with. And that would then, of course, make the "power with" also intrinsically unstable. Or do you think that my interpretation is unnecessarily negative and cynical?

- N. Agrawal-Hardin No, I think it's an interesting point. I would push back slightly on or add to this idea of pointing out an enemy. From the very beginning, Sunrise has been very intentional about naming a few wealthy executives as an obstacle to the world we want to build. But it has actually always been much more about the world we want to build. The storytelling and public narrative, for example, that Sunrise incorporates into its work is never about this person or this demographic has wronged me or wronged my community and now it's time to take back the power or act in revenge. It's always about what I envision my community looking like if we could pass this legislation, or if we could begin to think about this in a different way, whether that's about sustainable, locally grown, fresh produce accessible to everyone, or clean water coming out of the tap no matter what zip code you live in, etc. It's very much about this vision for a better world, at least in my eyes. It's been much less about antagonizing corporate executives and instead has been about being candid about what the obstacles are, not dwelling on who's responsible and how we punish them. I would want to make that clear. But I think you're right. Inherently there is some component of the work that is about building power over those who have historically held power.
- P. Verschure We can now switch the objective from the power over and against to the power for. You described what you are for and that defined your end goal: the realization of a Green New Deal. What does the world that the Sunrise Movement is for look like?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin I can anchor it in the places with which I'm familiar. In the state of Michigan, for example, where I've grown up, I would want to see Indigenous People regain control of much of the land, water, and natural resources and resume a rightful role as stewards of this place. I would want to see public education funded much more equally across racial and socioeconomic divides, and I would want to see our public education include case-based education about the state and its natural resources, its environment and how we can properly take care of it. I would want to see something like the Flint water crisis never happen again. I would want to see Detroit residents be taken care of and not bankrupted if their homes flood because of excessive precipitation or other climate-related disasters. The list goes on and on. I would want to see some of the most polluted cities cleaned up. Similarly, a place like Appalachia, where my mom's parents have a home, I would want to see Indigenous People regain a lot of control of the land and resources there. I would want to see some alleviation of the chronic poverty there and certainly some investment in better infrastructure. I think it boils down to a society in which we take care of the land and the environment, and we are taken care of also by our neighbors and by our government.
- P. Verschure Is that program defined somewhere by the Sunrise Movement? Is there a statement on that outlook?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin The Green New Deal resolution lays out a lot of that and then also the organizing principles I mentioned earlier.
- J. Bednar This is fascinating because it's such a complex platform or vision. It was interesting to listen to you describe it because you switched and said, "I," "I would like to see." How is it within your organization? We should also talk about different scales because your organization operates at a local scale (hubs) and at a national scale. At either one of those scales, how does the organization form a vision, its goals? What is that process like?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin That's such a wonderful question. Many hubs have distinct processes for developing things like demand if they're going to hold a nonviolent action or if they're going into a meeting with a local politician or whatever the case may be. Some of those processes involve the entire hub membership getting together virtually or in-person and going through a process where everyone talks about what's important to them to get out of the meeting and get out of the action or to have accomplished a year from that point. They

work together over time to develop a list of demands or a broader vision for how they want to transform the place where they're anchored.

J. Bednar

Does the hub lead to conflict with the national office?

N. Agrawal-Hardin

Absolutely not, as long as it operates within the organizing principles, which I would be happy to share later on. Essentially, these principles states that we are nonviolent in word and deed and talk about being inclusive in the movement of all kinds of different backgrounds. A hub can and should do whatever makes sense to the national organization, at least in a perfect world. The national level does not presume to know more about a local context than the people who live there. Hubs should not have to get permission from national organization. Again, some processes at the local level have everyone involved. Some processes are spearheaded by what we call a hub coordinator who is responsible for overseeing the function of the hub. Others are spearheaded by maybe a hub political director. Each hub is structured differently, and that's fine. Many hubs are connected online via Clockwork Spaces or some other social media platform and will share documents or insights or get on the phone. Two leaders will get on the phone with each other and say, "This is what worked for us when we were developing our vision or our demands. This is the process we used. You have a similarly sized hub. You have a similar local context. Maybe we both organize in very conservative areas or maybe we're both in big cities." Whatever the through line may be, hubs will share their expertise with each other, when possible. That happens on the local level. At the national level, people are bound together by this shared theory of change I mentioned earlier and by the set of principles under which we organize. At the national level, one of the difficult and yet one of the great things is that centralized decision-making and visioning processes change pretty regularly based on what the staff of the organization have identified as strengths and weaknesses in our approach. It is almost always collaborative, whether that collaboration looks like one or two people drafting a document, followed by many people giving feedback and revising and honing, or whether it looks like a series of six meetings where people get together to share thoughts, feelings, emotions, hope, fears about what comes next for the movement or what comes next for the country and then putting that into a shared action plan. The list of ways that that process can unfold goes on and on. Both locally and nationally, it is almost always a collaborative one.

P. Verschure

You're saying almost always collaborative, so when is it then not collaborative, and why?

N. Agrawal-Hardin

Nationally, because people are employed, there's a little bit more structure to the collaboration. At the local level there could be instances where, due to group dynamics, it's possible that one person calls the shots and organizes on their own, e.g., in a small hub of five people, when four start to burn out. Similarly, one person may have a lot more experience or more confidence than others in the group, and until the group dynamic can accommodate that, the other four may see that their contributions are also valued, that one person is still collaborating in name but not in practice. That's pretty rare. Generally, things work as they're supposed to but it's a possibility.

P. Verschure

What you're pointing to, which is always difficult to regulate, is how to resolve conflicts. You have nodes, you have a dynamic within a node, you have a dynamic between nodes, and then in some hierarchical relation to a central node. In the end, how do you deal with conflict? Is that formalized in some way? Is there a process for identifying conflicts?

N. Agrawal-Hardin

I have seen hubs at the local level share wisdom and knowledge on this topic as well. If a hub is having conflict over whether it makes sense in their local context to engage in mutual aid, or whether they should stick to legislative work, they might reach out to another hub who's had that same debate and ask how they guided their discussion. When collaboration is difficult within the hub, collaboration with another hub can help resolve that, which is fascinating to me. If there's an interpersonal conflict (e.g., someone has committed harm against another hub member), Sunrise National does have human

resources and has hired personnel to help. Local members have access to those people should they want that kind of help or that kind of intervention. It depends on whether the conflict is about members clashing or injustices that have happened, or if it's about the ideas themselves or the mission itself.

At the national level, I would say the process for dealing with conflict has evolved and changed many times over the years. We've worked and are continuing to work toward a culture that's not conflict avoidance, but rather can respond to conflict in a way that's productive for everyone involved. That is easier said than done, but it's definitely a goal. I've seen people talk about it very openly. Sunrise is a 501(c)(3) organization with a 501(c)(4)<sup>1</sup> arm, so, we have human resources and staff members whose job it is to help resolve conflicts within the movement. We also have many task forces, committees, and teams who address these big conflicts that are not interpersonal but are about where the future of the movement is going. How do we ensure that Black people, for example, are at the forefront of where our movement is headed and are listened to and respected? That's been a big thing we've worked on over the past year and a half, two years. There have been many teams that have arisen internally to collaborate toward answering some of those questions. I wish I could give a "this is the process" answer, but the truth is that it changes all the time based on feedback.

J. Bednar                    You're talking a lot about structure, and we're getting a clear sense that this is a very decentralized organization where so much is happening within hubs that have a lot of autonomy. You've talked about how the movement has used that decentralization as a strength. That it's been able to define goals locally because the national organization recognizes that the people at the local level know the ground game much better than they do. That's fantastic. Also, the sharing of information from one hub to another. What are the downsides of this radical decentralization of the movement?

N. Agrawal-Hardin        Sometimes there is tension between our local hubs and our national organization. I have been a local organizer at moments where there's a lot of work, a lot of motion happening in the national organization, and it can get overwhelming and hard to stay caught up if communication isn't crystal clear. These are humans at the end of the day who are staffing the national organization, trying to do their best. But of course, sometimes it falls short of where it needs to be. It can become overwhelming, it can get confusing, it can feel too directive at times or not supportive enough. For example, some of our national leaders are frequently meeting with people from the Biden administration. How do you maintain security, privacy, and discretion while communicating candidly about complex policy dilemmas to a network of five hundred plus local hubs without also seeming like you, at the top of the national organization, are somehow better or more important than a local organizer? That's a hard question. Back to this idea of power: How does proximity to power of a few translate to all of us building more power instead of fighting with each other? I think Sunrise does a good job of that, but it is a challenge to overcome. I would say a drawback or challenge is the tension that can arise between local grassroots organizers and national staff when there's a disconnect in communication or an imbalance: the national organization is either too directive or not directive enough.

J. Bednar                    The movement has guiding principles that are probably very complex visions. When the national organization is consulting with the Biden administration, there is a clearer platform, or vision, that they're proposing. To what extent is that decentralization a hindrance to making progress toward bigger goals?

N. Agrawal-Hardin        On balance, it's much more of an asset. Having this huge, decentralized movement of people who by and large care about the same thing backing movement leaders as they go

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<sup>1</sup> A 501(c) organization is a nonprofit organization in the federal law of the United States. 501(c)(3) tax-exemptions apply to entities that are organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, literary, or educational purposes. A 501(c)(4) organization is a social welfare organization, such as a civic organization or a neighborhood association.

into these meetings in the halls of power is much more of an asset than anything else. We have to be intentional, however, about how we create a strategy. There have been times in the movement's history where local and grassroots organizers have stood up and said, "We had no hand, or we did not have an adequate hand in creating this strategy that our movement is now posting about on social media and organizing national mobilizations around, and that's not OK." Then the processes have had to be refined. Sometimes national staff members are dedicated entirely to scheduling, facilitating, and documenting calls with grassroots leaders that are open to anyone where questions are asked or feedback is given on an upcoming campaign proposal, or where there's an exchange of ideas in the early stages of crafting the next phase of strategy. That has helped. But again, ideally, we do engage in that before we move on the scale of federal policymaking or co-governance. Actually, I don't think that's a drawback either. I think it's probably also a value, but it takes time and a lot of energy, and it doesn't always go the way you want it to the first time, and that can be hard. I haven't seen so many instances of problems like this during my time at Sunrise, but I can imagine scenarios where someone on our national political team is having a complex and precarious conversation with a congressperson, and then that hub targets that congressperson or one of their close allies, and that interferes with that national negotiation. There's always that possibility because hubs have so much autonomy.

- J. Bednar                    How does the organization respond when you have a problem like that?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin        You would probably have to ask a political staff person for an example from their actual work because it has never happened to me. Often, we lean on relationships. Ideally, our "highest level" or "highest rank"—I am loath to even use those terms—staff people of the national organization have significant relationships with members of our strongest hubs or hubs in regions that are of personal importance to them and can lean on those relationships in moments of crisis or miscommunication and lean on built trust. If a situation like that did arise, the ideal path forward would be for whoever was engaging in the national negotiation to talk to someone they have a relationship with in the hub and say: "We know each other, we trust each other. I have to say I'm doing these things. Is there any way you could back off?" Maybe the hub replies: "No, we know what we're doing. We've been engaging in this campaign for longer than you've been in your negotiation. Can you please back off?" That's something that they would have to figure out using that relationship and trust. That's usually the best recourse. But again, you'd probably have to ask someone who has had that specific thing happen.
- P. Verschure              Having looked at where things can go wrong, can you give us some examples of where it went right? Where you would say that by virtue of the way it works, the movement was successful in instances where no one else managed to succeed previously.
- N. Agrawal-Hardin        I can use an example from Ann Arbor, Michigan, to start us off. About two years ago, the Sunrise Ann Arbor hub launched a campaign to persuade Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, who represents our district in the House of Representatives, to cosponsor the Green New Deal resolution. The campaign started with meetings and discussions with the congresswoman about what the Green New Deal was. As time progressed, it escalated toward nonviolent direct action at her office. I think even a couple of hub members were arrested in the fall of 2019. The relationship between the hub and the congresswoman was very tense for quite some time. Eventually, we had a meeting behind closed doors that diffused some of the tension, and we credit the congresswoman for being willing to engage with us in that setting. One of the challenges was that it was hard for the congresswoman—this is totally understandable—to grasp who the key negotiator was: whether it was legislative and policy at the national level, or whether it was the people who were planning the mobilization that the hub was engaging in. In that setting it would have been the hub leaders because the national leaders had nothing to do with the creation of this campaign arc that was manifesting in protest at her office. This made

communication hard because how was she to know who to talk to in this complicated network of Sunrise Movement leaders. Once that was clarified, one of the results of the campaign was that the congresswoman became, and I say this in a way that is appreciative of her, much more receptive to hearing from young constituents who were previously angry. She even suggested setting up a quarterly meeting with the hubs to talk about what she was doing on the environment that was working and what was not, and what ideas we had. She also became someone that the national movement was able to work with in productive ways. She has a wonderful and unique relationship to the auto industry and to many labor unions that are critical to our national work. In response in part to the protests that the hub launched at her door intermittently for several months, she became even more invested in working with the national organization on things like town hall events or the THRIVE Agenda, which was a legislative package in line with the Green New Deal. We worked with many members of Congress behind the scenes to think through these questions about how labor or the auto industry can come together under something like a Green New Deal vision. I hope that's a clear explanation. It was hard in the beginning; now she's a key ally to the movement.

P. Verschure What's interesting about your example is that you found a supporter of the movement. But what was the impact outside of the movement that actually moved toward realizing the objectives of the Green Deal?

N. Agrawal-Hardin To have Congresswoman Dingell convening conversations with labor unions, autoworkers, and leaders in those sectors is moving toward where we need to be because it's expanding the circle of collaboration in critical directions.

P. Verschure What was the critical feature that the Sunrise Movement brought to the table to make it happen: Was it because of the constituents, the young people who speak with her constructively? Was that a decisive factor, or was it the collaborative approach? What made the difference?

N. Agrawal-Hardin It's hard to pinpoint one thing. Young people have unique moral authority, especially when it comes to the climate crisis, that grabs attention, and that certainly has helped—not just with regard to the situation with Congressman Dingell, but generally about the movement's impact. So, yes, some people's moral authority. Sunrise was founded to shape American politics, but it's not a lobbyist organization. The way that Sunrise gets elected officials' attention is not through scheduling closed door meetings with their legislature—not that there's anything wrong with that approach. It is by protesting outside of their offices or, specifically, calling them out with signs that say their name in big black letters. It is public. The moral authority that young people actually have is part of what makes that strategy work; these things are connected. But how easy would it be for young people to get the attention of some of our nation's most powerful political leaders if they weren't engaging in mass mobilization? Maybe not as easy? In the past, it certainly hasn't been.

P. Verschure Let's also look at the other side: What has been the biggest failure so far? On a lot of occasions, I'm sure things did not work out the way it was planned. Could you give us an example and the underlying reasons?

N. Agrawal-Hardin I am trying to think of a failure from which we recovered well, but had the biggest emotional impact on the movement. Sunrise endorsed Senator Bernie Sanders in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary. Many of the grassroots members of our movement became invested in that campaign and in its mandate. When Senator Sanders dropped out of the race, it was hugely impactful on the whole youth climate movement in the U.S., and Sunrise especially because we had endorsed him. It was hard for people to get excited about campaigning for President Biden after so many months of working to draw the distinction between him and Senator Sanders. In the end, Sunrise made many, many, many phone calls for President Biden's campaign and worked constructively with his team



to create a platform that we felt better about and we are now working to co-govern with him, and that's wonderful. But I would say for a long time, the national movement or the national organization was moving ahead with a better platform, and was processing together as a staff and figuring out where our next political footsteps should fall. But grassroots supporters were not quite there yet; they were not ready to help that other guy win this election. They got there eventually, but there was a significant disconnect that cost us time and some trust as well, because the grassroots supporters had a hard time with the fact that the national staff was moving forward at a pace that maybe wasn't what they would have wanted it to be. It was difficult for people to come back from that. Maybe it was not a failure, but a drawback.

- J. Bednar The failure wasn't picking the wrong candidate, because that's not a failure. The failure was—correct me if I'm misunderstanding—either the organization's framing of the significance of this candidate and the uniqueness of this candidate in being the only vehicle for you to be able to pursue your goals. Maybe that was true. Or, was the failure that after reality struck, you had to switch horses mid-race, and although the national team was able to get behind Biden, it failed in its ability to communicate that to the local teams. How would you label the failure?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin You articulated it well with the second thing you said: the failure to align around the next step in the wake of disappointment before moving forward. I touched on that earlier, too. This need to be, by virtue of our structure, very intentional about how we design our steps forward.
- J. Bednar You use the word trust. Can you tell us a little bit more about the role that trust plays in your organization?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin There's a saying in Sunrise, and in many other organizing spaces I've been in: "We move at the speed of trust." I think that's very true. I mentioned this example of relationships and trust built between local and national organizers to diffuse tension and solve conflict when it arises. Also, in day-to-day work, there are so many little ways in which, if you trust your collaborator, even if you don't know them on a very personal level, but trust their intentions—we also say "assume best intentions"—you can move much more quickly because there's less need to explain where things are coming from. Sometimes it's good to take a step back and reevaluate and work to earn and build trust instead of just having it there. "We move at the speed of trust" is something which I think is very true.
- P. Verschure Was part of the shock in this period because you were on the knife-edge between the Black Deal in the sense of coal and more fossil fuel, driven by Trump and his friends, or a Green Deal? Was part of this emotional shock also the discovery that the Sunrise Movement is not only about an ideological objective but is also a political movement? Was that the realization that set in and needed to be translated to the grass roots? To say: we have our goals, we have our ideals, but where the rubber meets the road, that's called politics. Was that part of the emotional shock?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin It may have been. Sunrise is responsive to scholarship and literature which asks us to think about movements as ecologies, to think about different organizations, individuals, even theories of change as distinct organisms that work together in this ecology to make it function so that it can flourish and achieve its goal. Sunrise was conceptualized in 2016 or early 2017 and took off in 2018 and has had a huge impact given how young the movement is. But there have been growing pains as well as missteps. One thing that we're thinking about now is how the movement ecology for the Green New Deal is populist in one sense because it encompasses so much racial justice, immigration justice, and gender justice work. But you're right when you say Sunrise fundamentally is a political organization. I don't think Sunrise can hold all of the other potential facets of the Green New Deal, such as mutual aid, organizing that exists outside our dominant institutions and in settings to build alternative institutions, or social justice organizing (which is not

explicitly about climate, even if it is very connected to the climate crisis). The Green New Deal encompasses a very broad and ambitious set of goals and vision for the future. As that idea has become more popular and politically possible, there is a sense that Sunrise cannot be the only organization in the movement ecology for a Green New Deal. We need more organizations that are collaborating with Sunrise, whatever Sunrise becomes. Maybe it is very focused on politics or maybe it's something else by collaborating with Sunrise on these issues; for example, what does it look like to fight for the sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples, the idea of Land Back<sup>2</sup> under this vision of a Green New Deal? What does it look like to talk about police reform or defunding the police or these ideas that have come into the mainstream through the lens of combating the climate crisis and how do those things work together? The list goes on and on. But the bottom line is that maybe we need a more populist ecology to meet this moment. Maybe Sunrise is the political organization, and that's where its expertise should be, or maybe it's somewhere else. But it's probably not big enough and it probably doesn't have enough expertise to do it all. I'm interested to see how Sunrise will collaborate with other organizations and other demographics of people, not just youth, but other constituency groups that have a stake in combating the climate crisis in an equitable and just way as we move into the next political era in America and this next era of dealing with climate disaster as it intensifies.

J. Bednar You've just raised something that is hugely important: the need to collaborate with other organizations. Does trust play a role? How do you build trust within the movement? What is it that you do intentionally to create, to foster that trust? If we're talking about collaborating with other organizations, there is a real possibility that you compete because they may not have exactly the same goals. How could you take the trust that you're building within an organization that has a temporary membership (because people age out of it), and build upon it so that your interaction with other organizations remains collaborative rather than becoming competitive?

N. Agrawal-Hardin To your first question, what do you do to build trust individually, I'd like to paint you a picture. Let's go back to the summer of 2019. I was at my first ever Sunrise training in person and it was the Midwest summit. People from all over the Midwest came to be trained by national trainers. We were in a very retro movie theater in Detroit. Everyone was sleeping on sleeping bags on the floor and eating bagels and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch, sitting in the movie theater seats and watching slideshows and training all day. It was hot. There were big ideas that we were grappling with, and the movement's executive director was there, our organizing director was there, many of the highest-ranking national staff people were there. I had been in the movement for just a couple of months, and I remember thinking that there should be more high schoolers here, there should be more teenagers here. I was able to just go up to Varshini, our executive director, and address that. I had never met her before. She was in town for just a couple of days. She had many, many closer friends than me at that event. But she sat down and we just talked about it. That kind of gathering where you don't know each other, but you're trusting each other with things like preparing each other's meals, or you're sleeping in the same room with people you don't know because you share values and you think "I trust that this is going to go OK. I trust that there are systems in place to support me if it doesn't." That kind of access to the movement's top leaders for someone like me who had been around for a couple of months and had a lot left to learn is huge for collectively building trust. Again, this was my first training. As a local organizer, this made me trust the national organization more. This was before I started holding a national role. That's the individual level: those kinds of gatherings and those kinds of practices and that kind of culture helps build trust, both among local organizers and with national organizers. In terms of avoiding competition with other organizations in the movement ecology, one

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<sup>2</sup> Land Back is a campaign that seeks to re-establish Indigenous People's political and economic control over land that historically belonged to them prior to colonization. This campaign is supported by members of Indigenous Groups in the U.S. and Canada.<sup>1</sup>

thing that's been interesting to see is that as people have aged out of Sunrise, they've joined what we call movement adjacent endeavors. Maybe that's working for a policy think tank helping to push out what the Green New Deal looks like in practice. Maybe that's working for a polling firm, like, Data for Progress, which does a lot of the polling that summarizes preferences as we craft campaign plans or as we write press releases, etc. Maybe it's working for a firm like New Deal Strategies, which helps us with our communications and to train our spokespeople, etc. Maybe it's even getting an academic job where you're studying the implementation of ideas in the Green New Deal, or maybe it's working at a legal practice ready to defend *pro bono* people who face legal consequences for protesting. There are so many movement-adjacent roles. There are also movement organizations where it's not all about use. I've learned so much from Indigenous elders who are on the front lines. Indigenous water protectors who are much older than me and have so much wisdom to impart. Movement veterans can still be critical to crafting strategy. One way of avoiding that sort of competition is to have a movement ecology where the relationship still exists, even if they're no longer within the same organization, but rather across different organizations or across slightly different pieces of the movement's broader aim.

P. Verschure I'm impressed with how you speak about the Sunrise Movement with confidence and poise, and how you have mastered the theory. I would like to challenge that theory a little bit to see how stable it is. One issue that has come up is the duality in the movement, which you sketched out earlier when you spoke about potential conflicts with the grass roots. You also used an ecological metaphor to describe the organization as an organic whole, which would imply there's no central coordination. Yet, you do have a central master node in Washington, D.C. When we spoke about possible conflicts, it was between levels of the organization that have different objectives, understandings, commitments, and responsibilities. Is it fair, then, to speak of the organization in these organic terms? I know it sounds nice, and it fits very well with the Green New Deal, but you could also say that it is actually a very centrally guided political organization that uses the grass roots to exert its political power.

N. Agrawal-Hardin I don't want to push back at all. It's funny. I have yet to take my first intro to political theory classes in college. That will come in a couple of weeks. I would say the reason I don't think it is entirely true that it's a centralized political organization that has the grass roots to back its aims is because the grass roots has always played a big role in defining the national organization's path forward. It is clear that if the national organization takes too big a step without consulting the grass roots, it will not have the grass roots to back it anymore. They will change their name, and they'll keep organizing for the same principles, things that they value in their communities, without having any affiliation to Sunrise National. And Sunrise National is very aware that they are accountable to this network and there are mutual benefits to being in this relationship together, but they don't have to be. Hubs can organize their communities without Sunrise National. Sunrise National could be a lobbying organization or have some other purpose that's not backed by grass roots. But as of right now, generally, both feel that there's some benefit to being intertwined in the way that they are. There's a sense of accountability to the grass roots that requires consultation.

P. Verschure I get it. The other side of the story is also how do we deal with the commons. Let's say that the common good is the ecological common good of avoiding climate catastrophe. There are many examples where this common good is instrumentalized by others. For instance, take the recent *Seaspiracy* documentary: organizations that were supposed to certify that fish sold in supermarkets were caught in sustainable way were actually in cahoots with the fishing industry. How much risk do you see for instrumentalization of this common interest in sustainability and avoidance of climate collapse?

N. Agrawal-Hardin Could you restate the risk you are referring to?

- P. Verschure For example, I could start a movement and collect money and say: “We’re going to save the planet. Please give me all your money.” I have instrumentalized the commons and as long as I’m a slick communicator, I’m sure I’m going to be successful with it.
- N. Agrawal-Hardin You’re asking what’s ensuring that the use of resources is accountable, and doing what it says it’s going to do?
- P. Verschure The Sunrise Movement has ideological objectives and mechanisms in place to assure that you adhere to these ideals in a proper and ethical way. However, there might be other organizations in that same space who have instrumentalized that commons for personal gain. Given the current interest that people have in our society in realizing something like a green deal, is there a risk that this interest will be exploited? Even the oil industry is jumping on it: “We’re green.” How do you deal with that risk?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin Part of it is drawing a distinction between what lies within the movement ecology and what does not. If you ask most Sunrisers, they would say that companies such as Exxon or Shell are not in the movement ecology in the sense of working toward the same goal, even when they say they are. People outside of Sunrise, maybe even some people in Sunrise, would say that if they want to join us, let them join us. That is an ideological debate that people can have as well. But drawing the distinction between who is our teammate and who is not is one thing. For the second piece, I am of the belief that most organizations within the movement are successful and have an engaged base because they’re offering something. Maybe with a more established big green organization, that something is lending credibility to younger activists’ ideas or having access to particular political leaders who might not meet with younger activists. But there is something that each organization can bring to the others, even if they are competitors, or even if one has more financial resources than the other. The key is recognizing the particular thing that each organization can offer to the others and then taking advantage of that as part of a broader movement.
- P. Verschure You could say that we have to go for solar power. In the meantime, however, we also know that China is the main supplier of the components that we need to deploy solar power systems. That means that the more you push for a green deal, the more you also support a country and economy that’s not necessarily adhering to your values. How do you deal with these kinds of potential conflicts and ideological objectives?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin I think there’s a lot of inter-movement dialogue. There’s a lot of recognition that the system that we operate under is actually pretty far from being aligned with the values that our members hold. That requires our members to be in conversation with each other all the time about what is the least harmful or most promising path forward, given the constraints of the world we live in and the systems under which it operates. In my mind, there is no right answer. There’s no way out of those ideological dilemmas. But we can move forward in ways that more people feel good about, or that more minds have thought about and thought of as sound if we talk to each other.
- P. Verschure That’s communication. To finish up, I have two questions: Do you believe that humans on this planet, on a global scale, will be able to develop and maintain sustainable collaboration?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin Do I believe we will? I don’t know if I can say with confidence that we will, but do I believe we can. I definitely think we can.
- P. Verschure The last question is if I give you a magic wand, and you can change anything you want about humans—their genome, their metabolism, their brain—what’s the one thing you would change so that they collaborate?
- N. Agrawal-Hardin I wish I had more eloquent terminology to refer to this, but I would make it so that they’re not operating from a scarcity mindset and instead have faith in abundance. In a movement context where there’s only so much recognition, success, and credit that can be distributed among the movement organizations, competition is created and hinders

collaboration between organizations, between people, etc. On a much larger scale, in places like Appalachia or Bihar, where my family is from, when flooding comes, when fire strikes, are people going to come together across socioeconomic divides, race divides, gender divides, etc., and help each other and trust that there can be enough food, enough clean water, enough clean air, enough space, enough shelter for everyone to thrive if they lean on each other? Or are people going to close themselves off? Will they divide along these lines of race, class, gender, etc., and try to protect what's theirs and not help their neighbors? Both at the neighborhood level as well as at the international level – that's what I would change. I would make it—and of course, that requires systems change too—so that instead of operating from a place of scarcity, we're operating from a place of abundance.

P. Verschure Very good. Thank you, Naina Agrawal-Hardin, for this conversation. Is there anything that you would like to mention that we forgot to ask?

P. Verschure

N. Agrawal-Hardin Just one more example of a Sunrise success came to me. The New York City hub has mobilized targeting Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer around this idea of a civilian climate corps, which Sunrise National is pushing right now. After about a month of mobilization, a week or two ago, Senator Schumer came out publicly and said that we need a civilian climate corps. He voiced his support. That's been helpful for the national movement's push for a civilian climate corps to be funded robustly in forthcoming proposals from Washington.

J. Bednar Why is Sunrise nationally limited? Is there a sense that it ought to be international?

N. Agrawal-Hardin Definitely. It has come up in the past. There have been people from all over the world who have expressed interest in starting a Sunrise hub in their area of the world. One would probably be best served to ask our founders this question. The political landscape of the United States is unique to the United States. Sunrise was conceptualized to change that political landscape: the movement's structure, its culture, its narrative, and its practices are set up with the United States' politics in mind. It's not clear whether this would necessarily translate well to a different nation. That said, committed individuals in a different nation could take what we've learned from Sunrise here in the US. For example, we probably should have had a much more diverse group of founders than we actually had four years ago. We should have assembled a group and front-loaded similar projects that are in line with the values of the Green New Deal that perhaps operate with a similar organizing principle and adapt it to their state's political landscape. Because it is so focused on politics, specifically American politics, it is a question of whether that would translate well.

P. Verschure You should link up with the G7 to avoid falling into the typical US-centric isolationism which holds that it will solve the whole ecological crisis.

J. Bednar Tomorrow I'm giving a talk to the organizers of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) and will talk about the need for them to act at a human scale and bring localities into decision making, make them feel meaningful and needed and necessary at the human level, which may also include having differing goals. Would you mind if I describe to them the Sunrise Movement's organization, its structure? This could provide a really nice example for them to imagine how this might play out.

N. Agrawal-Hardin That would be an honor. Feel absolutely free, and if you have any follow-up questions, you know how to get in touch.

P. Verschure & J. Bednar Naina, again, thank you very much. We encourage you to go international as there's a lot of potential for goodwill. Good luck with your next steps.