

Understanding Movement Intelligence: Seeing the Ecosystem You Work Within

The conceptual foundations: what movement intelligence is, why ecosystem-level understanding is a strategic necessity, and how to assess your capacity for it

Executive Summary

No organization changes the world alone. Every social movement organization — whether it works on climate, housing, animal protection, gender equity, digital rights, public health, or democracy itself — operates inside a larger ecosystem of organizations, funders, grassroots formations, allies, opponents, narratives, and political conditions. That ecosystem, far more than any single organization's plan, determines what is achievable: which campaigns find traction, which coalitions hold, which resources flow, and which openings appear or close. And yet most organizations navigate this ecosystem with a picture assembled from fragments — the peers they happen to know, the funders they happen to talk to, the news they happen to read.

The predictable results are visible in every movement: duplication of effort where three organizations independently build the same program; strategic gaps where no one covers a critical population, geography, or capability; fratricidal competition for the same grants and the same headlines; coalitions designed around familiarity rather than complementarity; and organizations blindsided by opposition infrastructure that had been visible, and growing, for years. These are not failures of commitment or execution. They are failures of perception at the level of the field.

Movement intelligence is the systematic practice of understanding the ecosystem in which a social movement organization operates — its actors, relationships, resources, narratives, opposition, and operating environment — and translating that understanding into better strategy, coordination, and collective impact. Where organizational environmental scanning asks "what is happening out there that my organization needs to know?", movement intelligence changes the unit of analysis: the field itself becomes the thing to understand. It asks: who is in this movement, what are they doing and why, how are they connected, what does the whole field have and lack, who is working against it, and what does all of that mean for what each of us should do next.

This guide provides the conceptual foundations: a working definition of movement intelligence, the seven components of a movement ecosystem, the social movement research that explains why ecosystems behave as they do, the six strategic payoffs of ecosystem-level understanding, an honest account of the limits and risks, and a five-dimension assessment of your organization's current movement intelligence capacity. Guide 2 provides the practitioner's methods — actor mapping, network analysis, power mapping, resource-flow analysis, narrative intelligence, opposition monitoring, and field listening. Guide 3 addresses putting intelligence to work: strategic positioning, coalition coordination, shared intelligence infrastructure, and the ethics and governance that keep movement intelligence safe and legitimate.

Evidence Table

Key Finding	Strength	Implications for Movement Organizations
Movements with dense, bridging inter-organizational networks mobilize faster, coordinate more effectively, and sustain participation longer than fragmented fields of isolated organizations.	High (social movement network research)	The relational structure of a field is a strategic variable. Mapping and strengthening network structure is an investment, not overhead.
Diversity of theories of change within a movement is an asset when actors understand one another's roles — and a source of destructive conflict when they do not.	Moderate-High (movement ecology practice; radical flank research)	Ecosystem intelligence converts internal diversity from friction into complementarity by making different strategic roles legible.
Strong fields share five identifiable components: shared identity, standards of practice, a knowledge base, leadership and grassroots support, and funding and supporting policy.	Moderate (field-building research, Bridgespan / James Irvine Foundation)	Field strength can be assessed and deliberately built. Intelligence reveals which components are weak and where to invest.
Field catalysts — intermediaries that connect, inform, and coordinate whole fields — were present in a majority of studied fields that achieved population-level change.	Moderate (Bridgespan study of 15 fields)	Someone has to hold the whole-field picture. The intelligence function is a core capability of catalytic intermediaries.
Large-scale nonviolent movements that mobilized broad and diverse participation succeeded at roughly twice the rate of armed campaigns; sustained participation of even a few percent of a population has historically been decisive.	High (civil resistance dataset, 1900-2006)	Participation scale and diversity are measurable movement health indicators, not abstractions. Fields can and should track them.
Organizations and funders systematically misperceive field capacity, duplication, and gaps in the absence of structured field scans; funder-driven agendas can redirect movements away from grassroots priorities ("movement capture").	Moderate-High (philanthropic field scan practice; movement capture research)	Periodic structured ecosystem assessment corrects predictable perception failures — and its governance determines who benefits from it.

Step-by-Step Framework

Step 1: Understand What Movement Intelligence Is and Is Not

Movement intelligence is the disciplined practice of building, maintaining, and using an accurate picture of the ecosystem your organization works within. Like all intelligence work, it is a translation function: raw observation about the field is not intelligence; intelligence is observation that has been validated, structured, and connected to strategic implications.

What movement intelligence is:

- **Field-level in its unit of analysis** — the object of understanding is the movement or field as a whole, not your organization's immediate operating environment

- **Systematic** — a deliberate, ongoing practice with methods, cadence, and ownership, not an occasional landscape conversation at a strategy retreat
- **Shared by design** — because no single organization can see the whole field, movement intelligence is strongest when it is built and used collaboratively
- **Decision-oriented** — the purpose is better choices about positioning, partnership, resource allocation, and strategy, not knowledge for its own sake

What movement intelligence is not:

- **Competitive intelligence against peers** — the goal is complementarity and coordination, not out-maneuvering allied organizations for grants or credit
- **Surveillance** — movement intelligence never involves covert monitoring of activists, infiltration, deception, or the collection of personal data without consent; these practices are unethical and they expose the movement itself to serious harm
- **A substitute for strategy** — intelligence informs strategy; it does not generate it. A perfect map with no strategic translation is a sophisticated form of avoidance
- **Organizational environmental scanning** — the two practices are complementary but distinct. Scanning watches the world from the vantage point of one organization; movement intelligence takes the field itself as the object of understanding. Organizations serious about perception need both
- **A one-time mapping exercise** — ecosystems change continuously; a field map produced once and filed away is obsolete within a year

Step 2: Learn the Anatomy of a Movement Ecosystem

A movement ecosystem is more than a list of organizations. To understand a field well enough to act wisely within it, you need a working picture of seven interacting components:

- **1. Actors and formations.** The organizations and groups doing the work: established NGOs, grassroots and volunteer groups, informal collectives, coalitions and networks, service providers, research and media organizations, and funders (who are actors in the ecosystem, not observers above it). Actors differ in scale, capability, geography, constituency, and theory of change.
- **2. People and roles.** Movements run on people who occupy distinct ecosystem roles — organizers, researchers, communicators, litigators, funders, and the connective roles that field frameworks describe as weavers, builders, visionaries, disruptors, storytellers, guides, and caregivers. Individual leaders, and the relationships among them, often matter as much as organizational structures.
- **3. Relationships and networks.** The pattern of collaboration, information-sharing, co-funding, rivalry, and trust among actors. Network structure — who is connected to whom, where the bridges are, which actors broker between clusters, which actors are isolated — shapes how fast information moves and how effectively the field can coordinate.
- **4. Resources and flows.** Money (and its concentration among a few funders), staff capacity, volunteer labor, infrastructure (lists, technology, legal capacity, physical space), and knowledge. Resource-flow patterns reveal dependency risks, structural gaps, and who actually holds power in the field.

- **5. Ideas, narratives, and frames.** The ideological commitments animating the field, the frames the movement uses in public, the counter-frames deployed against it, and the state of public opinion and cultural narrative on the issue.
- **6. Opposition and countermovements.** Almost every movement generates organized opposition: incumbent industries, countermovement organizations, opposing legal and lobbying infrastructure, and hostile media ecosystems. Opposition actors have their own ecosystem — with actors, resources, networks, and narratives — and it can be understood with the same tools, using strictly ethical, public-source methods.
- **7. Operating environment.** The political opportunity structure (electoral conditions, institutional access, elite alignments), the legal and regulatory context, the media and technology environment, and the broader economic and cultural conditions within which the whole ecosystem operates.

Step 3: Ground Your Practice in Movement Research

Movement ecosystems are not random; decades of social movement research explain much of how they behave. Five bodies of work are foundational for the intelligence practitioner:

- **Resource mobilization theory** holds that grievances alone do not produce movements — organization and resources do. It gives us the vocabulary of movement organizations, movement industries (all the organizations working on one issue), and the movement sector, and it explains why tracking resource flows is central to understanding any field.
- **Political process and opportunity theory** shows that movement success depends heavily on openings in the political environment — shifting elite alignments, institutional access, divided opponents. Fields that monitor opportunity structure act when windows open; fields that do not, discover windows only after they close.
- **Framing theory** demonstrates that movements succeed partly through frame alignment — connecting their diagnosis and vision to the values audiences already hold — and that framing is contested terrain, fought over with opponents. Narrative intelligence is therefore a core intelligence domain, not a communications afterthought.
- **Field theory** describes issue spaces as strategic action fields in which incumbents and challengers maneuver for position under shared (and contested) rules. It explains why fields have internal politics, why new entrants destabilize settled arrangements, and why governance and standard-setting bodies matter.
- **Movement ecology and movement lifecycle frameworks** hold that healthy movements contain multiple theories of change — organizing, advocacy, direct service, personal transformation, alternative-building — working in synergy, and that movements move through recognizable stages, each demanding different contributions. These frameworks turn a map of "who does what" into a diagnosis of what the movement needs next.

Step 4: Understand What Movement Intelligence Enables

Ecosystem-level understanding pays for itself through six distinct strategic payoffs:

- **Complementarity instead of duplication.** When organizations can see what the field already does, they can define genuine niches — and stop building redundant programs that fragment

funding and confuse audiences.

- **Gap detection.** Field-level analysis reveals what no individual actor can see: unserved populations and geographies, missing capabilities (litigation, research, communications infrastructure), orphan issues, and under-resourced theories of change.
- **Better coalition and partnership design.** Choosing partners by complementarity of capability, constituency, and role — rather than by familiarity — produces stronger coalitions.
- **Smarter resource allocation.** Funders and organizations that understand field-wide resource flows can direct money and capacity toward leverage points instead of toward whatever is most visible.
- **Early warning.** Fields that systematically monitor opposition, policy environment, and narrative shifts detect threats and opportunities while there is still time to act.
- **Movement health measurement.** Only at the ecosystem level can a movement answer the question that matters most over the long run: are we collectively getting stronger — in participation, capacity, cohesion, resources, and public support — or weaker?

Step 5: Be Honest About Limits and Risks

Movement intelligence is powerful, and it is easy to oversell. Practitioners should hold four limits clearly:

- **Every map is partial and aging.** Movement ecosystems are complex adaptive systems; they change as you map them, and informal power is systematically harder to see than formal structure. Treat every ecosystem picture as provisional.
- **Intelligence is not strategy.** Understanding the field creates options; it does not choose among them. Organizations sometimes retreat into mapping because analysis feels safer than commitment.
- **Information about movements can endanger movements.** Detailed data on actors, capacities, and networks is exactly what hostile governments, opposition researchers, and bad-faith litigants want. A movement intelligence practice without data governance and security discipline is a liability to the field it means to serve (Guide 3 treats this at length).
- **Whose knowledge counts is a power question.** Field pictures assembled only from funder and large-NGO vantage points systematically miss grassroots knowledge — and intelligence commissioned by funders can become an instrument of movement capture, steering fields toward funder priorities. Intelligence governance must include movement voice, not just resource-holder voice.

Step 6: Assess Your Movement Intelligence Capacity

Before building new practices, assess honestly where you stand. Movement intelligence capacity has five dimensions; rate your organization on each (1 = absent, 5 = strong) and treat the two lowest scores as your development priorities:

- **Ecosystem awareness.** Could your team name the significant actors in your field, describe what each does and why, and identify the major gaps? Or is your picture limited to the organizations you already work with?
- **Relational position.** Is your organization connected enough — across clusters, not just within your own — to hear what the field knows? Do peers share developments with you early?

- **Analytical capability.** Can you turn scattered observations into structured, validated insight — with someone owning the function, a method for triangulation, and discipline about distinguishing evidence from anecdote?
- **Sharing and reciprocity.** Does intelligence flow both to and from your organization? Do you contribute to shared field knowledge, or only consume it?
- **Strategic translation.** When ecosystem insight arrives, does it actually change decisions — positioning, partnerships, programs, budgets? Can you name three decisions in the past year that field intelligence shaped?

Tools and Templates

Movement Ecosystem Inventory: A structured worksheet for the seven ecosystem components: for each — what we know | confidence level | key unknowns | best sources | strategic significance.

Ecosystem Question Bank: A living list of the five to ten field-level questions that most matter to your strategy (e.g., "Who is doing rural organizing in our issue area, and at what capacity?"). Every intelligence activity should trace to a question; every question should trace to a decision.

Theory-of-Change Diversity Map: A one-page grid plotting the field's significant actors against the major theories of change present in your movement — revealing crowded lanes, empty lanes, and your own position.

Movement Intelligence Capacity Assessment: The five-dimension self-assessment from Step 6, scored annually and used to set one or two capacity-building priorities.

Recommended Reading: Leslie Crutchfield, *How Change Happens* (2018); Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields* (2012); Bill Moyer et al., *Doing Democracy* (2001); Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011).

Case Vignettes

Case Vignette 1: The Coalition That Discovered Its Own Gap

A national coalition of thirty organizations working on food systems reform commissioned a simple ecosystem mapping exercise ahead of its five-year strategy refresh: an actor inventory, a theory-of-change diversity map, and a capacity survey of members. The exercise took one staff member and a consultant roughly ten weeks.

The results reorganized the coalition's assumptions about itself. Eleven member organizations were independently running federal policy advocacy programs — several with overlapping targets and near-identical policy asks — while state-level implementation work, where the coalition's own theory of change said its federal wins would succeed or fail, was covered by two under-resourced organizations. Rural organizing, repeatedly named in strategy documents as essential, had effectively no dedicated staffing anywhere in the field. Meanwhile, three organizations discovered they were separately building the same legislative tracking database.

The coalition did not command anyone to change; it simply published the map internally and convened a facilitated discussion of it. Within eighteen months, two organizations had merged their federal programs, a pooled fund had seeded three state implementation positions, and the tracking database had become a single shared resource with a modest cost-sharing agreement.

Key lessons: (1) Fields cannot see their own duplication and gaps without deliberately assembling the whole picture — no individual member had misperceived its own work, yet the collective pattern surprised everyone. (2) A credible shared map changes behavior without central authority; the intelligence itself did the coordinating. (3) The highest-value outputs were simple: an inventory, a grid, and a facilitated conversation.

Case Vignette 2: Blindsided by the Countermovement

A state-level housing justice movement won a hard-fought tenant protection ballot measure after a three-year campaign. Within eight months, the victory was functionally reversed: a preemption bill moved through the state legislature stripping municipalities of the authority the measure had relied on. The movement's organizations were shocked — and then discovered, in the after-action review, that they should not have been. The opposing industry association had been building for years: a preemption-focused legal center launched two sessions earlier, model legislation circulating through a national policy network, sustained donations to key committee members, and a narrative campaign in regional business media reframing tenant protections as a small-landlord issue. All of it had been visible in public sources. No organization in the field had been assigned to watch.

The after-action review produced a structural fix rather than blame: the field's research-oriented organization took on a formal opposition-monitoring role — public sources only, governed by a written ethics protocol — publishing a quarterly opposition landscape brief to the whole coalition. Two years later, the same early-warning function flagged a similar preemption effort in an adjacent policy area five months before introduction, and the field organized a preemptive counter-campaign that kept the bill from leaving committee.

Key lessons: (1) Opposition infrastructure is usually visible long before it strikes — the failure is almost never secrecy, it is that no one in the field owns the watching. (2) Opposition monitoring is a field-level function; it is wasteful and patchy when every organization does a little and no one does it well. (3) Ethical, public-source monitoring with a written protocol protects both the field's integrity and its intelligence.

Metrics and KPIs

Metric / KPI	What It Measures	How to Measure
Ecosystem inventory completeness	Coverage of the seven ecosystem components	Annual review of the Movement Ecosystem Inventory: components with current, validated entries
Decision citation rate	Strategic translation	Share of significant strategy decisions whose documentation references field-level intelligence

Metric / KPI	What It Measures	How to Measure
Relational coverage	Relational position	Share of the field's significant actors with whom you have an active, two-way relationship
Intelligence reciprocity ratio	Sharing and reciprocity	Instances of intelligence contributed to the field vs. consumed from it, per quarter
Time-to-detection	Early warning capacity	Retrospective: lag between a major field development becoming publicly visible and your organization registering it
Capacity assessment score	Overall movement intelligence capacity	Annual five-dimension self-assessment; track trend, not absolute score

Risks and Mitigations

Risk: Intelligence theater — maps and briefs that are produced, admired, and never used.

Mitigation: Anchor every intelligence activity to a named decision and a named decision-maker. If no decision would change based on the answer, do not invest in the question.

Risk: Single-vantage bias — a field picture assembled only from your own network, mistaking your cluster for the whole ecosystem.

Mitigation: Deliberately triangulate beyond your relationships: grassroots actors, critics, adjacent movements, and public data sources you do not control.

Risk: Security exposure — assembled field data becoming a targeting map for hostile actors.

Mitigation: Apply data governance from day one: minimization, aggregation by default, tiered access, and explicit rules about what is never written down or published (see Guide 3).

Risk: Analysis paralysis — the ecosystem is infinitely complex, and mapping can expand to absorb all available capacity.

Mitigation: Time-box intelligence cycles, cap the question bank, and ship a "good-enough" synthesis on a fixed cadence rather than pursuing a complete one.

Implementation Checklist

- [] Working definition of movement intelligence discussed and adopted by the leadership team
- [] Ecosystem boundary named: which movement or field, at what geographic scope, is "ours"
- [] Movement Ecosystem Inventory drafted across all seven components, with confidence levels
- [] Ecosystem Question Bank created: five to ten field-level questions tied to real decisions
- [] Theory-of-Change Diversity Map sketched for the field's significant actors
- [] Five-dimension Movement Intelligence Capacity Assessment completed; two priorities selected
- [] Distinction between movement intelligence and organizational scanning briefed to staff
- [] Ethical commitments adopted: no surveillance, no deception, public sources only for opposition monitoring

Glossary

Movement Intelligence: The systematic practice of understanding the ecosystem in which a social movement organization operates — actors, relationships, resources, narratives, opposition, and environment — and translating that understanding into strategy, coordination, and collective impact.

Movement Ecosystem: The full set of interacting actors, people, relationships, resources, ideas, opposition forces, and environmental conditions that constitute a movement or field.

Field: In field theory, a constructed social arena — such as an issue space — in which actors with varying resources maneuver for position under shared and contested understandings; used here interchangeably with "movement ecosystem."

Field Catalyst: An intermediary organization built to connect, inform, and coordinate the actors of an entire field toward a shared goal, rather than to deliver programs itself.

Countermovement: Organized opposition that emerges in response to a movement, with its own organizations, resources, networks, and narratives.

Political Opportunity Structure: The features of the political environment — institutional openness, elite alignments, electoral conditions — that expand or contract a movement's prospects at a given time.

Theory of Change: An actor's account of how its activities produce the change it seeks; movements typically contain several distinct theories of change operating simultaneously.

Movement Capture: The redirection of a movement's agenda toward the priorities of external resource-holders, typically funders, at the expense of grassroots priorities.

Movement Health: The collective condition of a movement over time, observable in participation, capacity, cohesion, resources, narrative position, and wins.

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