

Constructive Collective Action: A new lens for understanding how to achieve lasting social change

What is constructive collective action?ⁱ

When people come together to address challenges like inequality or pollution, they can pursue change through various avenues. One is through contentious collective actionⁱⁱ like a protest, strike, or boycott, which aims to create social change by disrupting the status quo. Scholars have studied contentious collective action widely and these actions are often very visible to the public.ⁱⁱⁱ An emerging body of research, however, highlights another avenue to social change: building alternatives to the status quo through constructive collective action.

Constructive collective action is a sustained, organized, and cooperative effort to create social change by building connections and community. The word constructive comes from Latin, meaning “build together.” As a lens for understanding how to achieve lasting social change, constructive collective action highlights group actions that build solutions to social challenges in addition to (or instead of) mobilizing to express dissent.

For example, groups of people working for climate justice might pair contentious and constructive collective action by campaigning for both divestment from fossil fuels and reinvestment in climate solutions. Diverting funds away from fossil fuels is *contentious*. Divestment aims to address climate change by disrupting the status quo practice of investing in companies that are disproportionately responsible for carbon emissions. In contrast, channeling funds toward climate solutions is *constructive*. Reinvestment aims to address climate change by building sustainable and collaborative alternative institutions like agricultural cooperatives and community-owned solar farms that promote equity and environmental stewardship.

Constructive collective action: a group’s sustained, organized, and cooperative effort to create social change by building connections and community.

How does AmeriCorps exemplify constructive collective action?



Example of how AmeriCorps’ messaging promotes constructive collective action.

The idea of constructive collective action is woven throughout AmeriCorps’ values and work.



Values: AmeriCorps advances constructive collective action in its mission, strategic planning, and messaging. The agency’s mission “to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteerism” emphasizes that building connections and community are critical for achieving social change. AmeriCorps’ [strategic plan](#) calls for sustained group efforts to alleviate poverty and advance racial equity by cooperatively partnering with communities to focus on their local needs. Solutions-oriented messaging such as “be a changemaker in your community” and “United we stand. United we serve” also captures the essence of constructive collective action.



Work: AmeriCorps’ grantmaking, programs, and partnerships support constructive collective action by promoting sustained, organized, and cooperative service opportunities that build connections and community. Examples of this include:

MLK Day of Service: On Martin Luther King, Jr. National Day of Service, AmeriCorps encourages communities to address local and societal issues through collaborative service. The effort calls communities to action that will build lasting change. (See the below Case Study box for a deeper dive into this example.)

AmeriCorps and Service Year Alliance Partnership: In response to President Biden’s call to service at the United We Stand summit in 2022, AmeriCorps announced a partnership with Service Year Alliance to “develop members as active citizens and arm them with the skills and motivations to bridge divides in society.” This partnership exemplifies collaboration around a shared goal to increase social cohesion.

Addressing the Climate Crisis: AmeriCorps supports various Civilian Climate Corps programs that bring people together to engage in conservation, renewable energy, and community resilience projects that address the climate crisis. This organized, community-driven approach seeks to build sustainable solutions grounded in local needs.

Case Study: AmeriCorps’ MLK Day of Service

The call for service on AmeriCorps’ Martin Luther King, Jr. National Day of Service [webpage](#) uses language that highlights key aspects of constructive collective action.

Focus on cooperation and solutions

Call to build alternatives to the status quo to achieve lasting change

Emphasis on building connections and community

AmeriCorps Invites You

- Engage with your community and create constructive action.
- Act on Dr. King’s legacy of social justice and equity.
- Recommit by volunteering to serve others. You can clean up a public space, mentor a young person, or help those who are food insecure.



About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](#) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation’s most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles; and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. **Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](#).**

ⁱ Schlachter, L. H. (2020). *Contention and Construction in the Movement for a New Economy: Case Studies of Economic Democracy and Climate Justice*. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Wisconsin-Madison. Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/contention-construction-movement-new-economy-case/docview/2478616270/se-2>.

ⁱⁱ Tilly, C. (1978). *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

ⁱⁱⁱ McAdam, D. & Tarrow, S. (2011). Introduction: Dynamics of Contention Ten Years On. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 16(1):1-10.