All In
Case Study

September 2024

Introduction

Pluralism can be hard to understand, much less imagine in practice. To start building the ecosystem's collective understanding of what pluralism looks like—knowing it can take nearly infinite forms—New Pluralists supported the development of four case studies of pluralism in practice. These case studies will start to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and real-world applications, providing tangible examples of how people across the country are practicing a different way of making decisions and being together. These practical illustrations not only enrich our understanding of pluralism's nuances and challenges but also serve as valuable learning tools for individuals, community leaders, and organizations interested in practicing pluralism themselves.

One example of pluralism in practice is the work of the All In alliances in the Naugatuck Valley region of Connecticut. The initiative is a collaboration among dozens of local organizations and is supported by two "backbone" nonprofits—the Naugatuck Valley Project (NVP), a community organizing network, and TEAM, Inc., a community service agency. This case study draws from two focus groups with All In staff and participants (see appendix for full list of participants).

FOUR CASE STUDIES

This case study is part of a broader evaluation to understand the current state of pluralism in the United States, including evaluating the health and vibrancy of the pluralism ecosystem and assessing the status of key conditions that promote or inhibit pluralism.

It is one of four case studies produced to explore instances of pluralism in practice—what it looks like, what it accomplishes, and what we're learning about what works and what doesn't work in practicing pluralism. The four case studies are intended to represent diverse approaches to pluralism work. The audience for them is curious ecosystem actors who want to learn more about pluralism.

Pluralism is both a worldview and a practice. As a worldview, pluralism is the belief that the coexistence of diverse opinions, ways of life, and value systems enriches all members of a society and that all people deserve to be recognized, respected, accepted, and engaged based on their diversity. As a practice, pluralism invites us to work creatively and collaboratively with the diversity we encounter in life—across races, ethnicities, creeds, religions, political affiliations, genders, sexual orientations, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, individual experiences, beliefs, and actions.

This case study is one of four exploring diverse practices, approaches, and ideologies in pluralism work. As you read, remember that these are real-world examples of organizations with different worldviews engaging in pluralistic efforts. The goal is not to agree with every perspective presented, but to appreciate the variety of ways and people involved in this work. This case study represents one approach to pluralism among many, highlighting the diversity inherent in the ecosystem.

ORSIMPACT

NEW PLURALISTS

Context and Overview

All In is based in and around the Naugatuck Valley in Connecticut. The region was once a national hub for the brass manufacturing industry, leading to a thriving community where unionized workers were paid living wages, received medical benefits, and earned pensions. However, plant takeovers by national corporations in the 1950s and '60s and deindustrialization in the '70s and '80s led to the eventual shutdown of all the brass mills in the Naugatuck Valley, with the last mill closing in 2014. Referring to the brownfields, which are former industrial sites affected by environmental contamination, Alex Kolokotronis, director of NVP, explained: *"It's not simply that, 'Oh, something left and there's something empty here.' No, something went that supported a community. And what was left in its wake was something that's actually actively harming our communities."* Kolokotronis went on to say: *"There has been so much loss. I mean, it's not just the loss of jobs, but the loss of the communities that are tied together and supported by those jobs."*

Yet the region is also experiencing a unique moment of opportunity. Less than 50 miles across, it includes cities, suburbs, and rural and exurban areas. Communities that were once majority white and white ethnic now include significant working-class Black and Spanish-speaking immigrant populations from Central and South American countries and the Dominican Republic, including many who are undocumented. As jobs disappear and housing and food are out of reach for an increasing number of residents, there is also an unprecedented opportunity for work in solidarity across races, classes, and town lines. Indeed, Kolokotronis explains that All In's work cuts across differences to tell stories, *"and in doing so, builds not just trust between people, but builds and rebuilds community."* All In aims to foster a pluralistic grassroots coalition focused on making long-term change in the Naugatuck Valley and beyond.

To achieve this change, All In's work is driven by community-level alliances across the region that are democratically run by members of each community (e.g., All in for Milford, All In for Oxford). Staff from the two backbone organizations—NVP and TEAM—provide support as needed, but residents lead the work and set the agendas, both locally and regionally. Lillian McKenzie, a staff member at TEAM, explained that the backbone organizations do not prescribe what they think the community needs. Instead, she said, they build *"the solutions together with residents— residents who are experiencing the problems firsthand directly, neighbors who care about each other, other business leaders, organizations, nonprofits like ourselves. We all come together, and that's what creates lasting solutions for our community."*

The following case study provides more detail about All In's approach to the work, its impact to date, and what its leaders and participants are learning along the way.

Approach

At its core, All In's work is about making it possible for residents to make their voices heard and change the conditions that affect their lives. Individual alliances take on issues and projects based on their communities' own wants and needs, but as a group they have all committed *"to make it possible for everyone to have a home, food, and a voice in the decisions that affect their lives."*[1] Lynn Aiksnoras of All In for Oxford emphasized that sharing stories and viewpoints is important, but the work is not just about good conversation: *"You want to get to action steps."* She explained that All In organizing meetings and community events focus on trying *"to articulate what's the action, what are we going to try to accomplish? And then to see that accomplished is very energizing, and it means you've just validated all that effort, and it gives you momentum for the next step."* Her neighbor Sara Locke gave the example of a recent event in Oxford. The goal of the event was to connect residents with local government officials—not just to talk and connect, but to actually solve problems together, such as making the community's primary meeting room more user-friendly and upgrading its audiovisual system. Locke explained that this will *"increase transparency."*

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1 https://allinalliances.org/

Each All In alliance works on issues that matter to and affect their whole community—thereby ensuring that those who are directly impacted by a specific issue or concern are the same people working on a solution. For example, Kristina Walton, an All In participant who became executive director of a local food bank, explained: *"We all work together, so I don't just have volunteers and then clients. … My clients may be my volunteers. They may be my donors. When you look around the room, you don't know who is who. We are all in there together. We're all making it work together, and we're all working together."*

No matter the issue area, All In alliances are working pluralistically. Jacqui Bayas, a staff member at NVP, explained that in every workshop and meeting, participants express that *"'we are the United States, so we have to be united. It's the only way we can do something better.' And I think that is the pluralist vision."* Many other All In participants shared a similar perspective. Reflecting on her experiences with other advocacy and organizing projects, Locke said that what makes All In feel *"refreshingly different"* is that *"the power comes from inclusion, not exclusion, and the acknowledgment that there is way more common ground than people realize."*

To find that common ground, All In uses storytelling to build individual and group relationships, including story circles, one-to-one relational meetings, and digital storytelling. These approaches build relationships that allow folks to co-create solutions. McKenzie emphasized that All In's collaborating and co-creating approach leads to creative solutions and stronger, more sustainable outcomes. Locke agreed, noting how All In's pluralistic organizing method leads to *"solutions that everyone is invested in, as opposed to solutions that people feel free to take potshots at because they weren't involved."*

Jenny Rice, who began as a participant in All In for Seymour and became a consultant with TEAM, explained that when people rally around a cause, they often take an oppositional approach. She sees All In as different because of its focus on building relationships: *"When we're advocating for something, we're getting to know the people on the boards, we're getting to know the people in leadership positions, we're getting to know where the community's at and taking that feedback with us and bringing that in a spirit of collaboration."* She made it clear that All In's goal is to co-create and build solutions with as large and diverse a group of collaborators as possible. They don't shy away from conflict when it arises, but they always strive to make it possible for everyone to be heard and for everyone's perspective to matter.

Impact

The All In participants we spoke to shared the impact of this work in terms of changes they've seen in their communities and in themselves.

Among the broader community, All In participants shared a number of positive changes through their work, including

- working with the planning and zoning commissions in several area towns to loosen the regulations on accessory dwelling units to help address the housing shortage;

- expanding a regional homeless shelter and support center with unanimous support from the town's planning and zoning commission;

- growing a youth-led summer food program in Oxford and Seymour to serve four times as many families;

- protecting food pantries in Oxford when a local real estate agent filed a complaint to remove them;

- participating in an inclusive protest across race, class, and ideology for tenants' rights in New Haven; and

- electing or securing appointment of All In participants to several town planning and zoning commissions, affordable housing committees, economic development commissions, conservation commissions, boards of finance, and other local and regional decision-making bodies in cities and towns across the Valley.

All In participants attribute these changes to a growing foundation of trust and a spirit of collaboration among All In members and elected officials. Locke sees that local *"boards and commissions are now welcoming community engagement and feel positive about it. … So it's starting to happen, and along the way, there's products that come out of it. But I think the biggest product is the process."* For example, Sarah Bromley from All In for Milford shared that her All In alliance was recently invited by their town's planning and zoning commission to make a presentation—the first time in 20 years of living in Milford that she had seen the planning and zoning board ask for help or invite participation from a group of residents. When asked what led to that change, Bromley talked about the trust they've been building over the past few years between All In and local government, with a spirit of *"You're working so hard doing what you're doing. … You may just talk to your friends and your neighbors in your own neighborhood and you think that's representative of the whole community. But guess what? It might not be. … And we can partner with you and collaborate because we're doing these gatherings where we're hearing from more people."*

At the individual level, All In participants report increased confidence from their involvement with All In and feeling empowered to voice their opinions and work with their neighbors to make change in their communities. Walton said that prior to joining All In, she was a stay-at-home mom *"trying to make ends meet. Not really feeling connected, not really feeling like I had a voice or say in anything that was happening."* Now Walton is the executive director of the Seymour Oxford Food Bank. She explained, *"I really would have never fallen into these spaces without All In. I think I've always had this deep passion within me, but All In gave me the space to bring it out."* Rice, who has seen Walton's transformation, noted that *"Kristina has also become a voice for the collective food vision and really been able to rally relationships. … It's been really beautiful to watch Kristina step into her power and leadership."* McKenzie explained that she has also felt invited to share her full and authentic self in All In meetings and events, going on to say, *"When I'm in different settings and different arenas, I try to take the lessons I've learned and the confidence I've built from All In into those, and feel that my voice is powerful."*

Participants also feel an increased sense of belonging and connection to their community. One example is Bromley, who shared her story of feeling disconnected from her community. Bromley explained, *"I lived in Milford 20 years and always felt like an outsider, even though I was volunteering for so many organizations and trying SO hard to break in and connect."* She described All In as her *"road to finding true community and belonging that I couldn't find in Milford before in 20 years of searching."* In general, participants described feeling less isolated and an increased emotional connection to their community through their work with All In. Jamie Rude, another All In participant who became a staff organizer, put it simply: *"While our communities are getting better, as individuals we are growing and becoming more healthy, more trustful, less anxious, et cetera."*

Learnings

Ben Fink, a consultant with TEAM who helped to start All In, shared three key lessons All In has learned about practicing pluralism in its work to date:

1 **Keeping the momentum going is the hardest part; community organizing skills help.** Fink talked about an All In participant who was in graduate school for urban planning. She told Fink that her professors would say the hardest thing about working with communities is the division, referencing the deep levels of disagreement and polarization that exist in many communities across the country. Yet she knew from her experience with All In that the biggest challenge in actual practice is often maintaining the momentum to keep the work moving forward. Fink observed that a key piece of building and maintaining that momentum is learning *"the skills of community organizing that actually … create the conditions for people to build from the ground up."* That is, when people are not just talking and learning together, but also co-creating and building together, they stay invested in the work for the long term.

2 **The basic principles of the model hold across contexts.** Fink also explained how he has applied the same core principles of All In—deep listening, relationship-building, identifying common interests, and making things together based on those common interests—in many different places, including in Appalachia, the South, and the Midwest. He noted that many of these communities are grappling with the effects of deindustrialization, just like communities in the Naugatuck Valley. When he invited a community leader from the Kentucky coalfields to visit All In leaders in the Naugatuck Valley, *"It took them about 20 seconds to realize they're doing the same work. And that's across lines of who they voted for and their races and all kinds of other differences. Because that shared experience of deindustrialization is really powerful, and it's a story that I think has not been fully told in our communities and nationwide."* In other words, the fundamental ideas and mechanisms of pluralism can be applied to and remain relevant across various communities and contexts. The cross-contextual validity of pluralism matters because it offers a reliable and adaptable framework for responding to societal shifts, such as deindustrialization.

3 **There is a misconception that pluralism and serious change for equity and justice are mutually exclusive.** Fink explained that some people think of organizing as bringing together everyone who agrees with them and fighting everyone else. He argues that this is not only detrimental to the health of democracy but also ineffective at achieving participants' desired outcomes. All In, on the other hand, brings people together not because they agree on specific issues but because they care about the place they live and they share a basic conviction that everyone in their community deserves a place to live, food to eat, and a voice in decisions that affect their lives. Within those common values, Fink explains that *"lots of people have lots of different ideas about how to get there, what role government should play in it, what role capitalism should play in it, what role different organizations and institutions should play in it. All of that stuff is up for grabs and debated. … Working that way makes us more effective at getting change made, not less."* In other words, All In sees pluralism and the pursuit of equity and justice as mutually reinforcing rather than exclusive. Fink shared the example of *"When a group of working-class people of color in our alliances was in danger of losing their homes last fall, they held a rally to stop the unjust evictions, and a bunch of wealthy white people from the suburbs—Democrats and Republicans—came and marched with them. And we won!"*

> **!** **Want to learn more about All In?** Visit the website: allinalliances.org.

Appendix

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS:

- Lynn Aiksnoras, All In for Oxford

- Jacqui Bayas, staff member at NVP

- Sarah Bromley, All In for Milford

- Shannon Bullard, All In for Seymour

- Therese Eke, All In for Milford

- Ben Fink, consultant to TEAM

- Alexander Kolokotronis, staff member at NVP

- Sara Locke, All In for Oxford

- Lillian McKenzie, staff member at TEAM

- Rachel Merva, All In for Milford

- David Morgan, staff member at TEAM

- Jenny Rice, All In for Seymour and consultant to TEAM

- Brian Riley, All In for Ansonia and Derby

- Jamie Rude, All In for Milford and consultant to TEAM

- Kristina Walton, All In for Oxford