Too often networks are used as analytical pixie dust. Apply, and the broader policy system will “succeed.” Rarely are the origins of networks examined or their intricacies exposed (Provan and Kenis, 2007). This paper studies urban policy networks in Post-Katrina New Orleans and how neighbourhood associations use conflict to enter these networks. The results are striking, showing that urban policy networks have more in common with the urban conflicts of Saul Alinky (1984) than the network collaboration of Brown and Keast (2003).

Using mixed methods, including surveys, interviews, ethnography and document analysis, this paper challenges the traditional definition of networks by deeply diving into the activities of a stratified sample of neighbourhood associations in New Orleans. After Hurricane Katrina, these organisations saw a rise in membership and a corresponding rise in influence. The most powerful neighbourhoods produced City Councilmembers and often found their needs met by City Hall through the “bump up” system in which city services were provided according to local power and influence. But that was the experience for a minority of neighbourhoods. The results of studying 14 neighbourhoods and 71 partnerships challenge the understanding of networks as actors working together on common goals over axis such as time and shared resources. Those configurations exist, but starting after their formation misses the battle over priorities and entry into the network which presupposes such collaboration.

Neighbourhoods have their own set of priorities, starting most often with safety and neighbourhood beauty, and extending to their neighbourhood institutions. This work shows how when these priorities are ignored in New Orleans, neighbourhoods exert creative coercion to join the urban policy networks. Citizen participation is motivated by exclusion and token participation. Neighbourhood associations seek to be involved in networks early in the process. When excluded, neighbourhoods participate in protest, self-proclaimed “guerrilla warfare,” attempts to influence elections and even engage in political sabotage, just to get a seat at the negotiating table. Sometimes such methods are benign, with neighbourhood associations strategically joining the boards of third sector organisations to have a say in their activities. In other neighbourhoods, they involve public records requests or calls to local officials. And in extreme cases, neighbourhoods threaten and cajole power players until they are “invited” to participate.

Gone is the fuzzy, feel-good sense of networks. Instead of partnership, these urban policy networks form in response to battles over priorities and for seats at the negotiating table. In New Orleans, neighbourhoods fight for their principles. Thus, urban policy networks are recast as negotiations over priorities, rather than partnerships for common purpose. Exclusion results in conflict, blackmail and bribery, while invitation early in the process leads to partnerships and collaboration. For scholars, this is a fundamental reconfiguring of definitions and approaches to network governance. For local practitioners, it is a guide to
avoiding neighbourhood conflict by reaching out early and often in the goal-setting process. And for neighbourhood activist themselves, this research provides a roadmap for how to creatively insert themselves into urban policy networks before the priorities have been set.