CROSS SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Wendy Lee, MNA Candidate
Master of Nonprofit Administration - Capstone Project

SUMMARY

A growing interest in **cross-sector partnerships (CSPs)** has revealed that nonprofit organizations seek to address complex social issues and achieve greater impact through collaborative efforts. Organizations that engage in CSPs with the three traditional sections (nonprofit, public, private) experience varying opportunities and challenges. In order for nonprofit organizations to craft strategies and participate in CSPs, they must first understand the unique challenges and opportunities of each sector.

Through in-depth literature reviews, interviews with nonprofit experts, and secondary data analysis, this project captures the motivations of each sector and provides nonprofit organizations with multiple perspectives to think about how to engage with each traditional sector. Ultimately, this research encourages additional resources, investment, and support for nonprofit organizations to continue building cross-sector partnerships and related activities. Doing so ensures that there's long-term sustainability towards the efforts to achieve complex social impact goals. Findings will inform recommendations for nonprofit organizations to address unique sector challenges, participate in successful CSPs, and consider lessons learned from within the forth sector, otherwise known as social enterprises.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to identify the elements of CSPs that contribute to their success and that produce a synchronous movement towards social change. This research is important because complex issues such as poverty, homelessness, racial inequity and inequality require innovative solutions and the combined contributions of all sectors.

RESEARCH

1. What does a successful cross-sectional partnership look like?
2. What challenges do nonprofit organizations face as they engage in cross-sector partnerships?
3. How are nonprofits facilitating cross-sector partnerships that support movement towards deeper impact and systemic change?
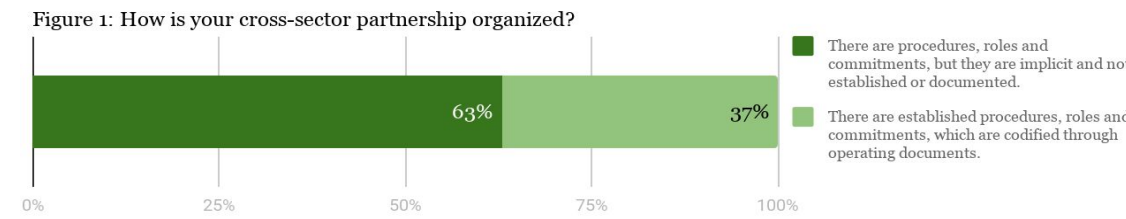
METHODS

This Capstone project used a mixed methods approach to gather data. The following is a list of methods used:
- Literature Review
  - Cross-Sector Partnership
  - Collective Impact
  - Corporate Social Responsibility
- Expert Interviews
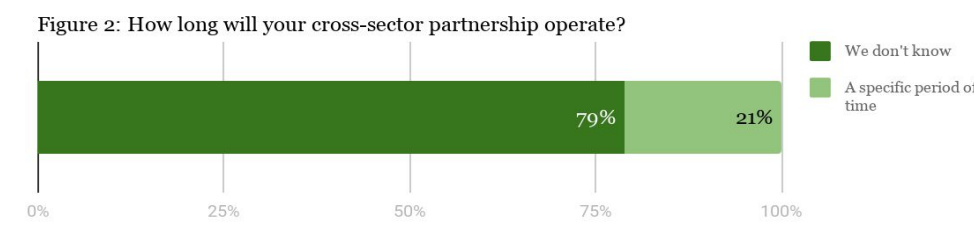- Secondary Data Analysis

DATA AND ANALYSIS

CSP Organization
63% report that their CSPs are informally organized although CSPs with formal structure tend to demonstrate better goal achievement.
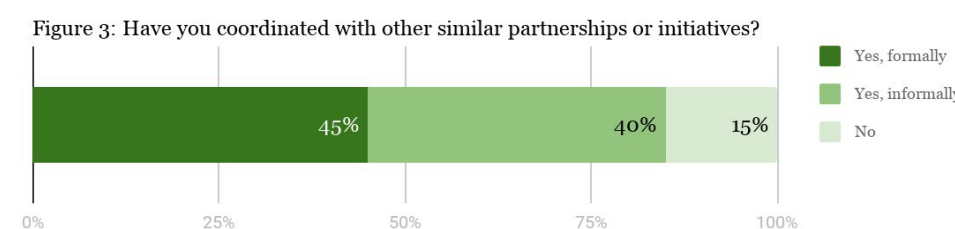
Figure 1: How is your cross-sector partnership organized?

63% | 37%

- There are procedures, roles and commitments, but they are implicit and not established or documented.
- There are established procedures, roles and commitments, which are codified through operating documents.

Length of CSP
79% of CSPs are not time bound. Not doing so poses the risk of creating CSP dependent social change.

Figure 2: How long will your cross-sector partnership operate?

79% | 21%

- We don't know
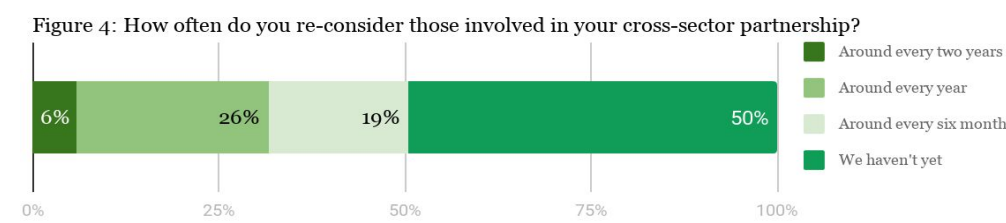- A specific period of time

Community Alignment
Only 45% of organizations have formally aligned and coordinated their efforts with other community initiatives to produces greater impact.

Figure 3: Have you coordinated with other similar partnerships or initiatives?

45% | 40% | 15%

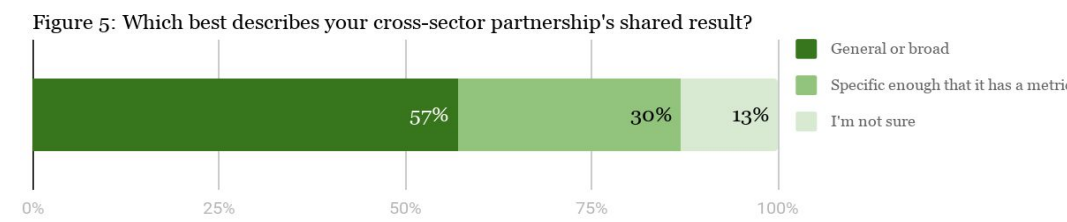- Yes, formally
- Yes, informally
- No

Partnership Evaluation
50% of organizations in CSPs do not reevaluate their participation, but since the work is inherently complex and will evolve over time, it is a natural process to sunset partnerships and bring in new partners.

Figure 4: How often do you re-consider those involved in your cross-sector partnership?

6% | 26% | 19% | 50%

- Around every two years
- Around every year
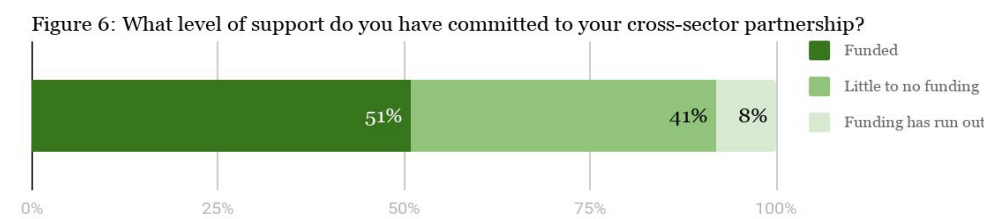- Around every six months
- We haven't yet

Shared Vision/Goals
57% have identified that their CSP have general or broad goals. Without a specific and measurable goal, CSPs won't know if they've reached success or how to get there.
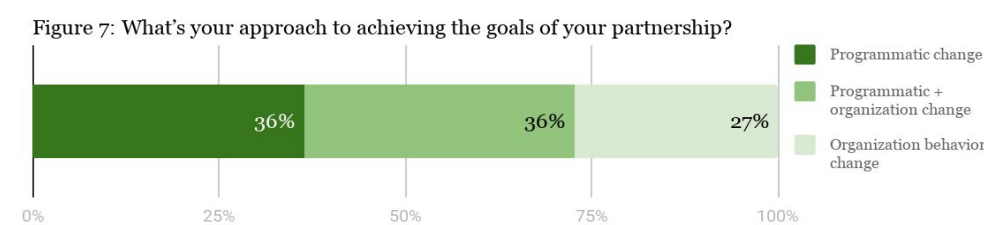
Figure 5: Which best describes your cross-sector partnership's shared result?

57% | 30% | 13%

- General or broad
- Specific enough that it has a metric
- I'm not sure

Funding
Funding remains super important to sustaining the work of CSPs and can be a challenge because it can be a localized issue.

Figure 6: What level of support do you have committed to your cross-sector partnership?

51% | 41% | 8%

- Funded
- Little to no funding
- Funding has run out

Partnership Approach
Only 36% of organizations are achieving their CSP shared goals by focusing on program and service delivery and organizational behavior change (policies). To be successful, there needs to be both.

Figure 7: What's your approach to achieving the goals of your partnership?

36% | 36% | 27%

- Programmatic change
- Programmatic + organization change
- Organization behavior change

data from 2016 Living Cities' Cross-Sector Partnership Assessment survey

RESULTS

Successful CSPs are motivated by the opportunities that each sector presents and guided by a strategy with a larger vision for social change. In addition, they view challenges also as important opportunities to address systemic gaps.

NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIPS WITH

Nonprofit Sector

Opportunities
- Increase ability to focus on core competency
- Access to new / more financial, social, human capital
- Community-led and owned solutions

Challenges
- Competitive nature
- Isolated & siloed actors

Private Sector

Opportunities
- Large volunteer base
- Drive and influence consumers or stakeholders

Challenges
- CSR has an internal/external perspectives
- Market driven
- Misalignment between large corporations and their local offices

Public Sector

Opportunities
- Policy development, wins and implementation
- Coordinates organizations doing similar work in a particular region

Challenges
- Risk averse
- Unstable budgets
- Dependent on political culture/climate

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Encourage Philanthropy**: Philanthropy can reframe their engagement with nonprofit organizations, play a larger role in sharing their social and human capital, and organize/facilitate cohorts of grantees to encourage a culture of partnership and sharing.
2. **Explore Social Enterprise Models of Partnership**: nonprofit organizations could learn how to be innovative and creative in their approach to resolving challenges they experience.
3. **Contextualize the Organization**: Understand your organization's role and contribution within the local, regional, state, national, and international/global context. Organizations should consider embedding their work throughout the community for long-term sustainability.
4. **Create and Utilize Metrics:** Data helps CSPs benchmark success and measure whether they are heading the right direction.
5. **Review CSP Participation on a Timely Basis**: CSP members should review their involvement on a regular cadence.
6. **Create Specific Roles for Partnership Activity**: Partnership building activities need to be assigned to an individual or team within an organization.

REFERENCES

Seitanidi, M. M. and Crane, A. (2014) Social Partnerships and Responsible Business: A Research Handbook

Buffett, H. W., & Eimicke, W. B. (2018). Social value investing : a management framework for effective partnerships.

Collective Impact Forum. https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/

Living Cities. https://www.livingcities.org