



SUMMARY REPORT – WORKING PAPER #14 :

Collaboration among grantmaking foundations: A review of the literature

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August 2016**

By describing and critically discussing foundation collaboration as a field of practice, this literature review aims to provide a conceptual and analytical framework to accompany the Canadian case studies on foundation collaboration that form Cluster 3 of the SSHRC research development project. While grantmaking foundations support and engage in collaborations with a range of different actors, the focus here is on collaborations amongst foundations themselves, in which other types of funding partners may also be present. For the most part, these collaborations build upon and around the central role that foundations play as grantmakers – as funders to third sector organizations.

The term “collaboration” is taken to refer to a broad range of relationships between grantmaking foundations. It has become a bit of a buzzword in the sector literature, in keeping with current ways of looking at philanthropy and social change. A move towards increased collaboration in the sector closely follows the shift over the past fifteen years towards more strategic forms of philanthropy. In this context, collaboration is often seen as the only way to achieve ambitious change goals, based on the recognition that multiple actors need to work together to solve complex problems.

Broadly speaking, grantmaking foundations collaborate in order to make existing work more efficient, to develop more effective interventions (“increase impact”), to support learning and to develop new knowledge, and/or to exercise combined influence with policymakers or other funders. A review of case studies reveals that collaboration among foundations can indeed achieve some of these purposes and yield synergistic effects that could not have been achieved by foundations acting alone. However, there is some doubt as to whether collaboration helps to improve efficiency from the grantmaker’s perspective.

A range of different collaborative forms exists to support these different purposes. These fall into two major groupings: “light-touch” collaboration types where participants generally retain their full autonomy over strategies and granting procedures, and deeper, more integrated forms of collaboration requiring partners to

establish joint objectives and ways of working. Most actual foundation collaborations combine different purposes and take on hybrid forms that evolve over their life course.

The deeper forms of collaboration are both difficult and counter-normative, challenging foundations' attachment to autonomy and brand and requiring that they relinquish some control over decision-making. In considering collaboration, foundations should give some attention to its strategic fit with their aims and to their own organizational readiness to collaborate. The literature suggests that few if any foundations will agree to collaborate purely for the sake of impact on the problem to be solved, if there are no individual or organizational benefits to be gained. This may be particularly true for public fundraising foundations that need to position their brand in order to survive in a competitive market.

Prominent among the key conditions or factors for collaboration success are the importance of shared purpose and realistic goals, structure aligned to purpose, flexibility and adaptive capacity, and investment in strong, trusting relationships.

This literature review indicates that collaboration holds promise for many grantmaking foundations seeking to strategically leverage their own limited resources, and for those seeking to contribute to results beyond what they could hope to achieve on their own. At the same time, by enabling foundations to concentrate and coordinate their resources, collaboration can amplify existing challenges of power and legitimacy associated with private philanthropy, including how it may work to amplify foundations' capacity to set and further agendas for which they are not held publicly accountable, and how it may reinforce inequitable granter-grantee power dynamics.

Finally, the literature review points to a few areas where future knowledge generation activities could make a useful contribution to the field, by:

- drawing more upon existing knowledge about collaboration and partnerships that has been generated within other sectors of activity;
- expanding the frame to focus on cross-sector collaborations that foundations engage in, many of which are particularly positioned to catalyze or to structure change within industries or institutional fields;
- seeking out the perspective of non-foundation stakeholders on the specific role that foundations are best positioned to play within these sector-spanning spheres of activity.