

ANIMATING ALLIANCES

What does it take to make these forms of multi-stakeholder collaboration efficient, effective and transformational?

Ros Tennyson

May 2018

Table of Contents

1. Why this Paper?.....	3-4
2. Definitions – Do they Matter?.....	5-7
• Different Terms Used for Collaborative Models	
3. Common Challenges in Alliances.....	7-10
– Members vs mission	
– Who pays? What do they pay for?	
– Visible vs invisible power	
– Leadership in a collaborative model	
– Who is accountable – for what, to whom?	
– The governance imperative	
– Structure vs flexibility	
4. Creating Fit-for-Purpose Alliance Structures.....	11-12
• Options for New Collaborative Structures	
5. Animating Alliances.....	13-14
6. Assessing Added Value.....	15
7. Concluding Thoughts.....	16-17
• 12 Suggestions for How to Animate Alliances	



Acknowledgements

Warm thanks are due to the members of the Global Alliance for Community Philanthropy (GACP) and the team at the Global Fund for Community Foundations for the opportunity to explore the whole issue of alliances (as opposed to partnerships, with which the author is more familiar).

Further thanks are due to Maria Hayes, whose image of an ‘unanimated alliance’(!) is on the cover of this publication. Collaborating with artists (whether painters, illustrators or cartoonists) has always added a deeper dimension to the author’s work in this field, for which she is very grateful.

All other images are taken from the internet – a great source of pictures and graphics that help to liven up potentially dry text and to convey concepts more directly and powerfully.

There are many other people who should be thanked for their influence during her 25+ years of working in this field on the author’s thinking and understanding of what it takes to collaborate effectively. We all stand on the shoulders of giants and we would be nothing without the leadership, innovation and courage of those in whose footsteps we tread.

Caveats

The author takes full responsibility for all opinions expressed here – they are her own, unless otherwise acknowledged in the text – and they do not represent the views of any of the organisations referred to, or associated with, this paper.

1. Why this paper?

Since September 2015, I have been part of a small team¹ assessing the value of a multi-stakeholder collaboration of donors known as the Global Alliance for Community Philanthropy (GACP). In April 2018, I facilitated a discussion with the GACP members² about if / how GACP should proceed when the current phase was completed. I was struck by many things that came out during the session about what Alliances are and how best they can be structured and ‘animated’ to optimise their potential. I have been asking myself a number of questions ever since, including:

- *What forms / structures lend themselves best to an Alliance model?*
- *What is ‘leadership’ in an Alliance model?*
- *Who shapes, steers and assesses the Alliance’s work?*
- *How can engagement of Alliance members be deepened when they are ‘time-poor’?*
- *How are acceptable decision-making and accountability processes established that still leave space for innovation and nimbleness to enable responsiveness to a rapidly changing context?*
- *How do members of an Alliance reach alignment over key issues such as: What is an acceptable level of risk? What is a reasonable ‘return on investment’?*
- *What may be required from those involved in terms of re-thinking existing mental models and mind-sets to create the kinds of arrangements that will ensure such Alliances work optimally?*

All these are intriguing questions and I will touch on them in more detail below, but a quite different question struck me most forcefully during the discussion – this was to do with the coordinating role. *What do members of an Alliance expect from the central coordinating function, often described as a ‘secretariat’?* Or perhaps more importantly: *What is needed from a central coordinating function if an Alliance is to flourish in terms of its efficiency, effectiveness and transformational impact?*

This paper draws on insights gained whilst working with a number of entities operating as (de facto) alliances. These are the: International Business Leaders Forum (1992-2011); Start Network (2013-present); CDAC-Network (2013-2015); GACP (from 2016-present) and World Economic Forum (2017 to present). (See box below for details)

Networks and membership-based alliances with which the author has had a working relationship

Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network (CDAC-N)

The CDAC Network is a growing platform of more than 30 Humanitarian, media development, social innovation, technology and telecommunication organisations that are dedicated to saving lives and making aid more effective through communication, information exchange and community engagement. It is based on the premise that effective communication at a time of disaster is as important as the meeting of other primary needs – in other words, that communication is aid.

Global Alliance for Community Philanthropy (GACP)

The Global Alliance for Community Philanthropy (GACP) is multi-donor and multi-stakeholder collaboration engaged in a series of joint research and learning activities aimed at advancing the practice of community philanthropy and at influencing international development actors to better understand, support and promote community philanthropy’s role in achieving more lasting development outcomes.

¹ On behalf of the Partnership Brokers Association – www.partnershipbrokers.org

² Aga Khan Foundation, Ford Foundation, Global Fund for Community Foundations, Inter-American Foundation, Mott Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers and USAID

International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF)

The **International Business Leaders Forum** (IBLF) was an independent, non-profit global membership organisation comprising multi-national companies committed to social and environmental improvement. It was widely seen as a pioneer in its promotion of cross-sector partnerships for social inclusion and sustainable development and by the time it closed (2013), it had spun off a number of independent entities that continue to flourish including the: International Tourism Partnership, Partnership Brokers Association, The Partnering Initiative, Youth Business Initiative and the Youth Careers Initiative.

Start Network (SN)

Start Network is made up of 42 aid agencies across five continents, ranging from large international organisations to national NGOs. The aim is to deliver more effective emergency aid, harnessing the power and knowledge of the network to help people affected by crises. It advocates for radical change in the system so that the world can deal better with the humanitarian challenges of today and of the future.

World Economic Forum (WEF)

The World Economic Forum, committed to improving the state of the world, is the International Organization for Public-Private Cooperation. The Forum engages the foremost political, business and other leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry agendas. It is independent, impartial and not tied to any special interests. The Forum strives in all its efforts to demonstrate entrepreneurship in the global public interest while upholding the highest standards of governance. Moral and intellectual integrity is at the heart of everything it does.

By exploring and sharing some key experiences and lessons, I hope it may trigger new thinking for those involved in the GACP (who are currently reviewing their Alliance and considering its future) as well igniting / provoking a wider debate on the merits of forming purposeful and productive a/Alliances for a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable world.

It is also to test out whether there is an appetite for building a movement to position and promote Alliances as a valuable, valid and more flexible alternative to partnerships.

Is there?



All suggestions, ideas and / or challenges to this paper are warmly welcome
Please feel free to contact me on: ros@partnershipbrokers.org

2. Definitions – do they matter?

‘Partnership’ has become so central to development thinking and practice that it even has its own SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) in the list of 17 drawn up by the United Nations. There are, however, a growing number of other terms being adopted to describe different types of multi-stakeholder collaborative models. What are the reasons for this? Is it to do with a reluctance to make the level of commitment that a ‘partnership’ implies? Might it be that other forms of collaboration are seen as more flexible and thus better able to accommodate new directions as they emerge? Or perhaps it is simply that there is a level of ‘partnership fatigue’ (not least from those upon whom a ‘partnership’ has been imposed rather requested)?

The word ‘partnership’ is used to describe a wide range of relationships from the ‘transactional’ (for example, where an international agency provides funding for an ‘implementing partner’ to deliver a project) to the ‘transformational’ (for example, where a range of cash and non-cash resources are pooled and all those involved co-create programmes on an equitable and inclusive basis).

The term ‘partnership’ is often not defined, or even explored, by those who are operating as partners – in fact it is not uncommon for partners to hold very different views of what being in a partnership means even when they are part of the same partnership!

Does it matter? Opinions vary on this, but I think it actually matters a lot what things are called and that it is quite important to question slippage in the use of language, especially when not to do so risks colluding with unproductive practices and / or undermining the potential of genuine partnerships to re-distribute power and to do things differently.

My own view on why new terms are being adopted for multi-stakeholder working relationships is that the term ‘partnership’ has become so loosely used, and so associated with meeting donor-driven requirements, that it has become counter-productive.

Let’s take a moment to consider the range of terms for collaboration that are being used increasingly across the globe (see box overleaf).

This paper seeks to explore forms of multi-stakeholder collaboration that are not described or seen as ‘partnerships’ – specifically to investigate the concept of an ‘Alliance’.

When the Global Alliance for Community Philanthropy (GACP) was formed, its goals were framed as follows:

The goals of the Alliance are intentionally broad and ambitious, and partners acknowledge that the work of the Alliance will be part of a complex landscape of actors, initiatives, and diverse institutions and geographies.³

Working together as an Alliance was seen as an acknowledgement that more could be achieved by collaborating than by working in isolation:

In coming together as a collaborative, each partner acknowledges that working together in the promotion of the practice of community philanthropy will yield greater impact than each organization could achieve on their own.⁴

The commitment made by those joining the Alliance as members⁵ was summarised as follows:⁶

In carrying out its work, the Alliance and its partners support the promotion and values of community philanthropy and are committed to:

- *Collaboration among and between organizations, communities, and funders*

³ GACP Guiding Principles – see Appendix

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Aga Khan Foundation, Ford Foundation, Inter-American Foundation, Mott Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers and USAID

⁶ GACP Guiding Principles – see Appendix



Different Terms Used for Collaborative Models¹

Term	Definition	Comments
Alliance	<i>A relationship among people, groups or states that have joined together for mutual benefit and / or to achieve some common purpose, whether or not there is an explicit agreement between them.</i> (Wikipedia)	Interesting to note that an Alliance can be quite loose / informal in character held together by an agreed common purpose and sense of mutuality (cf GACP). Alliances include leaders, but their impact comes from the symbolic as well as the actual commitment to a shared objective.
Association	<i>An organisation of people with a common purpose that has a formal structure</i>	Like an alliance but between individuals rather than organisations and more fixed / formal in character. Leadership is embodied in the governance structure of the organisation.
Coalition	<i>A form of alliance, especially a temporary one, between persons, factions and / or states.</i>	Used less in relation to collaborative approaches to sustainable development and more often associated with military intervention and / or peacekeeping. The focus is usually on a task or intervention.
Consortium	<i>A combination of institutions working together in order to undertake operations that require larger-scale resources / capital.</i>	Increasingly used by the INGO sector as a vehicle for working together to tackle a major crisis / issue. It is also used by donors to encourage INGOs to apply together for larger-scale funding (Start Network started as a 'consortium' of UK-based Humanitarian INGOs)
Forum	<i>A place of assembly for people to meet for the discussion of questions of public interest.</i>	This definition comes from the Greek notion of the market place, but is used nowadays to describe a far more committed, on-going, membership-driven arrangement. That focus is on creating and maintaining space for dialogue, interaction and controversy (cf IBLF, WEF)
Network	<i>Any netlike combination of filaments, lines, veins, passages or the like.</i>	This is probably the 'loosest' of the collaborative models – increasingly used interchangeably with 'platforms'. The key feature of networks is that there is no-one 'in-charge'. Most typically, they work through social media. (cf CDAC-N).
Partnership	<i>An on-going working relationship between people or organisations where risks and benefits are shared.</i> (IBLF – adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary)	There have been many attempts to define 'partnership' since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Some now work with this definition, others do not have a definition and their 'partnerships' are far more transactional in character than this definition implies.

- *Engagement with the community philanthropy field, its institutions and networks, through the inclusion of local practitioner voices and the promotion of context-appropriate approaches*
- *Working with partners from across the non-profit, philanthropic, academic, and private sectors in a community of practice*
- *Shared learning among partners, and sharing learning across sectors and,*
- *A “spirit of exploration” that will shape the range and scope of the work, which includes an appreciation of diverse perspectives, experiences and models of community philanthropy*

It is interesting to note that these aims are very ‘high level’ and general in character. Whilst this might be the best way to draw a group together (given that there is very little that could be seen as controversial), it doesn’t necessarily help to clarify specific expectations, outcomes and outputs. It is also interesting to note the use of the term ‘partners’ within an Alliance model, though it is not clear whether this refers to the members or to other non-member entities or whether it is a mix of the two. Being a member of this Alliance does seem, in the founding documentation, to offer a particular kind of exploratory opportunity with the potential to evolve in a number of directions.

But has it been / is it ever that simple?

3. Common Challenges in Alliances

The answer to the question at the end of the last section is, I believe, a resounding ‘no’!

This is not to suggest that GACP has failed or fallen short of its high-level intention (indeed, it is too soon to make a judgment of that kind), but rather to suggest that, as an Alliance, it faces just as many questions and challenges as any other form of collaboration, including partnership. And I have found this to be equally true of the other Fora and Networks with which I have been associated over the years (see pages 3-4).

What follows is a brief exploration of some the challenges and questions I have observed.

Members vs mission

During my years with the International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF) I saw first-hand the challenges of trying to drive a mission within the framework of a membership-based entity. IBLF was a world leader in engaging the business sector as a partner in sustainable development with a specific focus on societal rather than environmental issues (complementing rather than duplicating the work of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development). Its core funding was provided in the form of annual fees from a number of global corporations who were represented as Council or Board members and were, ultimately, the organisation’s decision-makers.

It was always unclear (possibly by design, since the founding CEO⁷ was by nature a highly independent-minded social innovator and not easily ‘managed’) whether the members were shaping / driving the organisation’s mission or were simply sponsoring it. Board meetings were often uncomfortable events with the (Board) members on the one hand expressing a high level of excitement at the achievements of the CEO and his team in terms of their cutting-edge work, whilst on the other hand conveying a high level of pique at not having being consulted about or involved in key decisions.

In an Alliance, which takes precedence – the interests / priorities of members or the perceived needs of the wider cause? Whilst the two may be broadly in alignment, when it comes to choices about specifics (about how time or money is spent, for example) it can quickly become polarised.

⁷ Robert Davies 1951-2007

I have seen this issue played out repeatedly in four of the five entities I have worked with, and whilst it is sometimes the case that such tension can be productive, it is also true that managing this tension can be immensely time-consuming and nerve-wracking for those who have to do so. Added to this is the fact that mission-driven individuals are often highly directional and impatient in character and this does not always sit well alongside the attributes needed for patient relationship- and consensus-building.

Who pays? What do they pay for?

Not unrelated to the inter-play between members and mission, is the issue of funding – specifically the funding required to cover the core costs of managing the entity in a skilled, professional and imaginative way. Simply put – who pays? It seems that there are 4 basic options – each of which have implications for the way the collaboration plays out:

1	Members pay an annual fee to cover pre-agreed core costs	<i>Likely that members will expect a high level of return on investment as a priority</i>
2	A number of projects / programmes are funded (individually, bi-laterally or collectively) by members from which an agreed % is allocated to core costs	<i>Tendency for delivery of projects to take precedence over broader aims thereby reducing the ability to be flexible and responsive</i>
3	Funding is provided by one or more third parties (ie by external donor(s) who understand and are keen to support the goals of the entity because they are seen to match or amplify their own priorities)	<i>Risk of high level of dependency on the external funder and having to deliver against their requirements rather than the primary aims of the entity</i>
4	Core funding is earned through other activities (for example, through the provision of goods and services) in a form of cross-subsidy	<i>Challenging to balance two kinds of operational models (income-generating business alongside not-for-profit development)</i>

In addition to **how** the core costs of a collaborative model are funded, it is also important to consider **what** qualifies as a ‘core cost’.

Whilst it is clear that funding activities and achieving impact are paramount, it is a mistake to underestimate what it will take to ensure a collaborative endeavour is well managed / led in order to optimise its wider ambitions. It is becoming increasingly recognised that something as complex as multi-stakeholder collaboration needs skilled and confident process management, in other words, that it requires far more than just simply administrative support, important though this is (explored more fully in Section 5).

If multi-stakeholder collaboration is to truly optimise its potential, funding is likely to be needed to cover the costs of the following:⁸

- **Inspirational leadership** – one or more people able to generate ideas, drive the collaboration to achieve its goals and to position it well to external audiences
- **Efficient management** – of the all-important administrative back-up, protocols and processes
- **Imaginative communications** – within the entity, within and between its member organisations and on behalf of the entity to key external stakeholders
- **Capacity development** – to enable the entity to flourish by challenging mind-sets, building skills and evolving the approaches needed for effective collaboration
- **Exploration of new ideas** – some kind of ‘opportunity fund’ to enable innovation in response to new challenges/opportunities or perceived gaps

⁸ I am not suggesting that each of these is a full-time role or that core costs have to be high – indeed my own organisation (Partnership Brokers Association - PBA) has demonstrated what can be achieved in a decentralised / distributed model, by a core team of 9 all working for PBA part-time that together are the time-equivalent of just 2.5 full-time staff

In the case of large and / or multi-country initiatives, there will also be the additional costs associated with premises, travel, meetings and more.

To date, there has been an almost universal under-investment in the central coordinating / brokering function required for effective collaboration.

Visible vs invisible power

In the world of partnering, the issue of power imbalance is the challenge cited most frequently as the factor that gets in the way of productive collaboration. Of course, we live in a world full of inequalities so it is, perhaps, inevitable that any collaborative venture, despite its best intentions, will mirror these.

Overbearing behaviour can occur for any number of reasons including:

- Expectations coming from professional status / seniority
- Having a strong / egotistical personality
- Being the gatekeeper who holds the key to the money or other important resources
- Fear of the loss of control
- Misguided sense of duty not to rock the boat' and / or
- Feeling better informed / more knowledgeable about the prevailing issue.

It takes considerable self-knowledge to recognise the origins of overbearing behaviour (in oneself as well as in others) and courage to behave differently – putting the needs of the group above one's own needs.

It is hard enough to tackle difficult behaviour even when it is recognised by the group and even when it threatens to disrupt or even destroy a collaboration. It is even harder to address power that is exercised in a more invisible way – behind the scenes, being (sometimes even unconsciously or under the guise of helping things along) manipulative and / or undermining of established procedures for tackling issues in more transparent ways.

All too often, collaboration efforts fail because, for whatever reason, those involved do not challenge inappropriate uses of power.

Leadership in a collaborative model

The points raised above are about inappropriate uses of power, not about leadership – if by the term 'leadership' we mean those who guide or provide direction rather than those who use a leadership position to dictate terms. What constitutes 'leadership' in a collaborative model is a relatively unexplored area but, undoubtedly, critical to effectiveness in multi-stakeholder initiatives.

The leadership that seems to work best in a collaborative model, where equity, inclusivity and mutuality are of central importance, is one that is shared between different players. It involves individuals stepping up when it is clear that they are best equipped to lead a specific piece of work and stepping back when someone else's skills, knowledge or experiences are more appropriate.

A good test of a genuine collaboration is how far the key players trust each other to take a lead on behalf of the group. Where the level of trust is strong (usually this is something that is earned over time and where there is a collective willingness to learn from mistakes) a group is far more likely to share leadership roles and responsibilities as well as being more willing to let go of the temptation to micro-manage.

In these circumstances, there will be more appetite and capacity for risk-taking which, in turn, can lead to more imaginative, innovative and breakthrough results.

Who is accountable – for what, to whom?

Another key challenge for any multi-stakeholder collaboration is that of accountability. Invariably there are at least two levels of accountability in any collaborative venture – the vertical one where every individual has a reporting line within their own organisational hierarchy, and the horizontal one where

members of the collaboration are accountable to each other. In other words, all those involved in any form of collaboration are invariably accountable to two different systems which may (or, more often, may not) easily align.

It is interesting (and impressive) to note that the GACP core document enshrines the notion of mutual accountability as a key aspect of the Alliance's modus operandi:

*We are accountable to each other for actively promoting the shared goals of the Alliance and for ensuring continuity of representation from our organizations on both the Advisory Committee, and in the Alliance's agreed programme of work.*⁹

I describe this as 'impressive' because the issue of accountability is all too often ignored in the governing documents of collaborative ventures, so credit is due to GACP for including this from the start. In practice, however, it is hard¹⁰ to know exactly what needs to be reported into – signed off by the group and what does not. When is an activity or decision owned by (and therefore accountable to) the group? When is an activity or a decision the sole responsibility of one or other of the member organisations and therefore of interest to, but not owned by, the group?

The governance imperative

Alliances / Fora / Networks may have very different governance structures. It is likely that the degree of formality will be in direct relationship to the scale of resources (particularly money) being handled. The Start Network, for example, in its early days enjoyed a considerable measure of informality and freedom to generate ideas and activities supported by the founding member agencies in a spirit of friendship (a group of Humanitarian Directors from a number of INGOs who decided to create the Start Network¹¹ as a way of supporting each other in their key roles and co-creating approaches to challenging and changing the wider system in which they were operating). Now in its 6th year, and with a much expanded, global membership as well as the responsibility of handling a budget of many millions of GB£s, it has a highly complex governance structure of Board, councils, working groups and regional platforms.

In GACP, by contrast, the governance and accountability arrangements are relatively straightforward:

The Alliance is guided by an Advisory Committee, comprised of representatives of funding members that have committed resources to the Alliance and / or to the GFCF. As members of the Alliance, we have an equal voice within the Advisory Committee.

*We agree that the primary decision-making responsibility for Alliance strategy lies with the Advisory Committee. The operational aspects of our work together are carried out by the GFCF acting as the Alliance's Secretariat and / or by the Alliance's member organisations.*¹²

This implies a relatively 'light touch' governance relationship – though it may seem strange that something called an 'Advisory Committee' also carries 'the primary decision-making responsibility for Alliance strategy'. Does this work?

Structure vs flexibility

What are the challenges of operating collaboratively in a largely non-collaborative system? And what is the appropriate balance between a framework and structure that will enable the collaboration to function well and hold together whilst also ensuring that there is the flexibility so essential to challenging, changing and transforming. That is the focus of the next section.

⁹ Taken from *GACP Statement of Intent* – revised in April 2016

¹⁰ Perhaps it is especially hard in intra-sector collaboration (like GACP) where the boundary between the work that each member organisation does as part of its core business and the work that is undertaken with, or in the name of, the collaboration may be quite unclear.

¹¹ Initially called the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA)

¹² Taken from *GACP Statement of Intent* – revised in April 2016

4. Creating fit-for-purpose Alliance Structures

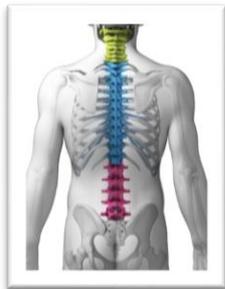
Despite the growing number of types of collaborative approach, there is still a sense of uncertain experimentation surrounding the possible models and structures that will service the needs of multi-stakeholder initiatives. Indeed, many initiatives seem to fall rather easily into a pattern of perpetuating 'business as usual' approaches even though this way of working is really nothing like business as usual. Exploiting the collaborative space for going beyond business as usual requires motivation and courage on the part of all those involved.

One attempt to address this is the relatively new notion of the 'backbone organisation' – developed by FSG (describing itself as a 'mission-driven consulting firm') in collaboration with Stanford University. This has proved useful and popular (particularly, but not exclusively, in the USA) and has been developed in response to the perceived need for a new model for *cross-sectoral*,¹³ *multi-stakeholder collaborative ventures*. The Backbone Organisation is described as follows:¹⁴

Backbone organisations essentially pursue six common activities to support and facilitate collective impact which distinguish this work from other types of collaborative efforts. Over the lifecycle of an initiative, they:

1. *Guide vision and strategy*
2. *Support aligned activities*
3. *Establish shared measurement practices*
4. *Build public will*
5. *Advance policy*
6. *Mobilize funding*

There are several features here that are interesting and relevant to this paper, perhaps particularly points 4 and 5 – the suggestion that such collaborations intentionally seek to 'build public will' and to 'advance policy'. Whether or not we adopt this particular approach (and to introduce the idea of imagery as an important mechanism for challenging and changing mind-sets!), it may be worth dwelling briefly on what the image of a 'backbone' conveys:¹⁵



The spine (or backbone) serves as a pillar to support the body's weight and to protect the spinal cord. There are three natural curves in the spine that give it an "S" shape when viewed from the side. These curves help the spine withstand great amounts of stress by providing a more even distribution of body weight. The spine is made up of a series of bones that are stacked like blocks on top of each other with cushions called discs in between to help absorb shock/load.

In adopting the term 'backbone', the implication is that the kind of organisation required to hold / manage a complex collaboration needs to be one that has the capacity to: **support** the weight of what is needed; **protect** vulnerable and critically important elements; **handle** stress and **absorb** (over)load.

Not a bad image, perhaps, for a collaboration structure... but there are many others. What will it take to open the door to a new way of thinking about structures that are truly 'fit for purpose' to meet the different needs of a range of collaborative models? Some initial ideas on this are set out below – they are ready for testing!¹⁶

¹³ It is specifically targeting collaborations that cross sectoral boundaries (i.e. business working with government and / or non-profits) – it may not be so pertinent for intra-sector collaboration (e.g. of donors or of INGOs)

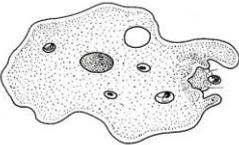
¹⁴ From: *Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 2*, 2012, Stanford Social Innovation Review

¹⁵ Taken from Spine Basics – <https://orthoinfo.aaos.org>

¹⁶ The author's idea of using imagery to explore different collaborative models (which informs the table below) came during a GACP meeting in Washington in April 2018



Options for New Collaborative Structures

Image	Description
	<p>Overarching shared goal with different arrangements between sub-sets of members (with regard to projects and / or types of relationship) operating semi-autonomously within the parameters and under the umbrella of the shared goal.</p>
	<p>A flexible organism that is nimble and fluid enough, like an amoeba, to be able to change its shape in response to a rapidly changing environment. Assumes that systems and bureaucracy can be minimal as capacity to respond quickly is of central importance.</p>
	<p>An interconnected web of relationships with, potentially, a very diverse range of actors that influence and inform each other. In which each actor has a high level of autonomy but where being connected can raise profile (especially of issues) and increase reach and impact.</p>
	<p>A container offering boundaried and yet open space that gives the possibility for a range of things to happen / emerge over time when the sense of direction and <i>'What is needed now?'</i> becomes clear. Particularly suited to complex issues where there is no easy or obvious solution.</p>
	<p>Self-organising group with a number of participating entities that agree to work in an unstructured and highly distributed way – working out how to collectively grow the ideas and undertake activities with the minimum of bureaucracy. Most likely to be adopted where there is relatively low risk in terms of financial accountability and / or legal compliance.</p>
	<p>Activity coming into and out from a central hub so whatever happens at the periphery is 'held' in relatively structured relationship to the centre. Particularly suitable for Alliances that seek to have a wide range of different activities connected to a common theme.</p>
	<p>Something else yet to be explored...</p>

5. Animating Alliances

The central question that triggered this paper is: How can Alliances best be enabled to optimise their potential? In other words, what form of organising principle do Alliances need that will provide an appropriate level of structured support as well as enthusiastic and energetic drive to achieve results?

Most of those involved in Alliances are busy people with many other calls on their time. Often their Alliance commitment is a very small part of a complex portfolio and sometimes they have to justify even the relatively small amounts of time they spend on Alliance business to their line managers who are more concerned with other organisational priorities. This means that, despite genuine enthusiasm from those representing member organisations at the Alliance table, it tends to fall to the Alliance's central coordinator / administrative hub to follow through and deliver on agreed actions.

Perhaps an additional factor is to do with the Alliance's origins: who initiated it and with what intentions? In the case of the GACP, for example, the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF), encouraged by one of its donors,¹⁷ drew together the members (six USA-based donor organisations – see footnote 5, page 5) and built the Alliance with a threefold intention¹⁸:

- To build a stronger **platform and voice** for community philanthropy
- To **explore and expand the role of donors** in supporting community philanthropy as an important development intervention and
- To **enable the GFCF itself to continue to push the boundaries** of community philanthropy by strengthening grass roots initiatives and promoting local self-determination

These are clear and laudable aims – they fit well within what an Alliance is¹⁹ as a loose affiliation of entities joined by a common purpose and operating with quite a high-level agenda (advocacy, influence and change-making) rather the kinds of projects and programmes more typical of, say, a partnership. In its *Guiding Principles* document, the GFCF is described as 'leading' the Alliance with the members (somewhat confusingly called 'partners') 'guiding' what the Alliance does.

"The Alliance is led by the Global Fund for Community Foundations, which is responsible for the management and implementation of its activities. The Alliance is guided by an advisory committee of partners and is continually informed by practitioners of community philanthropy around the world."²⁰

How can we best understand and articulate what is involved in the 'secretariat' function?²¹ And how far are the members of any Alliance (Consortium, Network or Forum) aligned on what that the central function actually needs to be for their collaboration to be effective in terms of both process management and the delivery of results?

In most of the entities I have worked with, this issue has been the source of considerable tension around the question of whether the central function is that of 'servant' (providing support services) or 'leader' (with an explicit role in shaping and driving the work).²² The entity that has done most work to explore this issue is the Start Network where there has been (and continues to be) a real difference of view between members about what the role of the Network's Director and his team actually is:

¹⁷ Mott Foundation

¹⁸ These 3 aspirations are what the author has understood from the various interviews conducted over a three-year period evaluating GACP as a collaborative endeavour – there are various other versions of the purpose of GACP (see: www.globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/about-the-gacp/)

¹⁹ See page 6 for a definition

²⁰ Extract from GACP's *Guiding Principles*

²¹ In my view the term 'secretariat' is very unhelpful since it suggests an essentially administrative function

²² Robert Greenleaf's seminal work *Servant Leadership* (1970), is useful in exploring this question

“From the beginning, there has been ambivalence about what the Director and his core team should do. Is the team a secretariat providing the coordination and support for the Consortium to deliver on its project commitments or is it a change agent seeking and seizing new opportunities to challenge the status quo in order for the Consortium to reach its more ambitious game-changing goals? It seems that, for the most part, the member organisations do not want or expect the Director and the core team to ‘play safe’ – most believe that the Consortium would not have survived without the determination, dedication and courage of the team. But this is not without its moments of exasperation and friction.”²³

Interestingly, in the case of both the Start and CDAC Networks, whilst the Network members took a clear decision at an early stage not to use the term ‘partnership’ for their entity, the staff teams of both were sent on a 4-day partnership brokers training course! This suggests to me that it was understood that some specific skills were needed to enable them to fulfil their coordination function. In other words, the need for skills in understanding and managing partnering processes – at least for those in the brokering / coordinating / animating role – are increasingly seen as essential.

What might be the **key characteristics of a good animator** (to further challenge the term ‘secretariat’ as being too narrow for what is a complex role requiring multiple skills and experience)? Here is a preliminary list to consider:

energy / enthusiasm • high-level facilitation / listening / speaking / synthesis skills • flexibility of thinking • understanding of group dynamics • patience / persistence • efficiency / rigour / reliability • capacity to ‘hold space’ • trust-worthiness • confidence in challenging poor behaviours or fixed mental models and... a good sense of humour

And there is something else that a good animator has: that is the courage, capacity and willingness to carry both risk and anxiety on behalf of the Alliance they are seeking to animate:



“Perhaps it is fair to describe the core team at Start Network as both ‘warriors’ and ‘worriers’ at one and the same time. This is to be expected, since warrior-ing and worrying are characteristics of many of those operating as partnership / collaboration brokers – whether as individuals or as a team. Studies suggest that those on the periphery of complex collaborative initiatives often have very little notion of what it really takes to manage the process well and, above all, what it takes to hold one’s nerve under considerable and sustained pressure from a number of directions.”²⁴



²³ From: *Dealing with Paradox: Stories and Lessons from the first Three Years of Consortium-building*, 2013

²⁴ Ibid

6. Assessing Added Value

What keeps any collaborative venture energised is that those involved with it feel that it is adding significant value either to an issue they personally care about or to the priorities of their own organisation (and, preferably, to both). As we have seen, Alliances tend to have goals that are quite high level and general in character. This means that it is hard to really assess their specific achievements. What matters, however, is what those involved and affected believe the achievements to be. In the case of the GACP, for example, a recent evaluation report²⁵ suggests that much of the value of the Alliance is intangible but, nevertheless, real: *The GACP is a worthwhile undertaking, even though the benefits, impact and achievements are not easy to articulate. It is clear that GACP matters to those involved.*

The intangible value was identified as being in four areas:

1. **Learning opportunities** – where members are able to deepen their insights and understanding of key issues and new imperatives in the field of community philanthropy by sharing lessons from each other's experiences and from the new initiatives and approaches of the Global Fund
2. **Symbolic importance** – the very existence (and persistence) of the Alliance and its public commitment to the promotion of community philanthropy in ways that actively involve donors
3. **Collaboration lessons** – providing an opportunity to explore the potential of multi-stakeholder collaboration both at donor and grass roots levels to shift power and grow new models of support and engagement
4. **Building a case** for community philanthropy both externally (advocating its importance as a valuable intervention particularly with regard to shifting power) and within each of the member organisations (where it may not necessarily be seen as a funding priority)

Such intangible but nevertheless important and valuable outcomes align well with the notion of 'collaborative advantage' as articulated in a paper in the Harvard Business Review in 1994:²⁶ *Collaborative advantage is strongest when the collaboration:*

*Yields benefits that are more than just a 'deal' but creates **living systems that evolve progressively in their possibilities.** Beyond the immediate reasons for forming the relationship, collaboration offers those involved an option on the future by opening new doors and creating unforeseen opportunities.*

*Creates **new value together** rather than simply getting something back for what you put in.*

*Is not 'controlled' by formal systems but works from a **dense web of interpersonal connections and internal infrastructures** that enhance learning.*

The suggestion here is that Alliances may be best understood as vehicles for systematic learning and influence that help to shape the future through their interpersonal connections and that operate more freely and independently because they are less formal systems.

Is this enough value to justify the transaction costs? Can those involved in Alliances accept that the more tangible outputs²⁷ may be only a small element in a range of somewhat more elusive achievements? And if those directly involved can accept this, what will it take for them to persuade their (perhaps more sceptical) colleagues that this kind of added value is as important as more direct project interventions. Perhaps even more important if, by working together and crossing organisational boundaries it becomes possible to extend reach and build influence in order to advocate for, model and contribute to real changes in mind-sets, practices and systems.

²⁵ Serafin & Tennyson, February 2018

²⁶ Adapted from: Rosabeth Moss-Kanter *Collaborative Advantage: The Art of Alliances*, 1994, Harvard Business Review

²⁷ In the case of GACP, two of the most tangible outputs of the Alliance were the Summit on Global Philanthropy (held in Johannesburg in December 2016) under the title: *Shifting the Power* and the production of a publication entitled: *How Community Philanthropy Shifts Power: What Donors Can Do to Help Make That Happen* (April, 2018)

7. Concluding Thoughts

If Alliances have the potential to operate as *'living systems that evolve progressively in their possibilities'*²⁸, then it seems to me that it is worth spending some time and effort in understanding Alliances as specific mechanisms for a particular form of multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Alliances have the ability to be flexible, inclusive and responsive in the way they operate. If they are appropriately structured and are well animated, they can challenge current practices, trial new ideas and model different approaches that are based on collaboration not separation. When old approaches have become unproductive and formulaic, Alliances (at their best) can indeed help us to evolve new possibilities.

To assist this process, for those seeking to build strong and productive Alliances, I offer a few suggestions for how to begin to truly animate them.

 <h3>12 Suggestions for How to Animate Alliances</h3>	
1. Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify how an organisation becomes a member, who decides and on what basis they do so • Push members to share their specific (underlying as well as explicit) interests in being part of the Alliance • Find ways to encourage members to be clear about any of their organisation's 'non-negotiables'
2. Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish the minimum core requirements needed to provide reassurance to members (bearing in mind these may be different) in how the Alliance will operate • Suggest that the appropriate model is 'grown' over time, as Alliance members become clearer about what will serve both their interests and the mission best • Help members to arrive at a good balance between 'control' (in exercising due diligence) and 'flexibility' (to enable innovation)
3. Mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide whether the Alliance can establish one over-riding mission and / or whether it can embrace several • Explore the diverse aspirations and expectations of Alliance members and agree how this diversity will be acknowledged, appreciated and managed • Test out the levels of discomfort or challenge that different Alliance members can tolerate with regard to a mission that challenges the status quo
4. Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions about what members assume about each other – and give them a chance to find out whether (or not) their assumptions are correct • Create a culture of curiosity in Alliance meetings and communications to support a 'de-layering' of assumptions and pre-conceptions • Re-visit members' views about what constitutes the 'added-value' of the Alliance – as compared to acting alone – on a regular basis
5. Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the role and remit of those responsible for coordinating / managing / guiding the Alliance

²⁸ See footnote 25

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ascertain which Alliance members are willing to step up / go the 'extra mile' to assist in brokering / animating / shaping the work on behalf of the group • Consider how best to support and acknowledge the animator(s) so their efforts get positive reinforcement or timely challenge (whichever is appropriate!)
6. Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Figure out, in this relatively loose model, what accountability actually means • Make mutual accountability a central tenet of alliance-building • Re-frame accountability as a way to challenge and change practice for the better rather than simply a mechanism for judging performance
7. Permission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish what authority those coordinating / managing the Alliance have • Agree which types of decision can (and cannot) be taken by member representatives on behalf of their organisations • Clarify who can act or speak on behalf of the Alliance
8. Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question the deployment of any protocols and procedures that fail to support the Alliance as an experiment (i.e. those that settle for 'business as usual') • Consider how mechanisms and systems can best be co-created in ways that are fit for the aims and purpose of the Alliance • Commit to trialling and testing out new approaches until they feel right
9. Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest the necessary time to evolve the best way of working together and build further capacity for collaboration where it is needed • Create a culture of inclusion, openness, respect so that questions / challenges about the Alliance or the behaviour of any of its members can be addressed frankly • Give space for the unexpected and encourage Alliance members to seize new opportunities
10. Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand what constitutes an acceptable level of risk for Alliance members • Explore where confidence / courage needs to be built to push for change • Decide in what circumstances it is better to lose an Alliance member (or even to discontinue the Alliance) rather than continue with an arrangement that is antagonistic or adding little value
11. Reward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the 'return on investment' sought by each member of the Alliance • Assess the intangible (i.e. influence) as well as tangible (i.e. project results) outcomes as they apply to the members as well as to other stakeholders / beneficiaries (if different) • Regularly check out how far and in what ways members are engaged / satisfied with the Alliance
12. Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the Alliance is task and target focused (and not drowning in processes and protocols that do not add value) • Explore whether members agree on what 'success' looks like in terms of evaluating the Alliance's activities and impact • Take full account of how other key stakeholders and beneficiaries of the Alliance view its activities and impact