

Driving systems change through Collaboratives

Why Collaboratives?

Collaboratives are increasingly gaining traction in the social sector as an effective way of solving complex socio-economic challenges¹. They help solve problems at scale, through a broad investment theory anchored by bringing together diverse stakeholders that have a range of relevant expertise above and beyond implementation. These stakeholders are committed to systemic outcomes, and can drive an assorted mix of activities and interventions. They include nonprofits, social enterprises, philanthropists, businesses, and the government among others.

To enable long term social change, literature and learnings from organisations such as Bridgespan, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, Dasra (among others) suggest that collaboratives offer significant value to the ecosystem through certain key characteristics²³⁴:

- Strategic alliance of partners providing financial viability and sustainability to projects with little or no support from traditional funding models
- Greater cross sector coordination that allows for knowledge sharing, agile decision making, pooling of resources and the hedging of risks
- Strong learning approach and commitment to continuously evolve direction to stay relevant and effective
- Operating models that enable multiple stakeholders to mutually engage with decision-making
- Conscious creation of public goods, resources and other ways to build the field

The Indian Context

The latest fundamental examples of multi-stakeholder partnerships include the COVID-19 Action Collaborative which aims to support various stakeholders- civil society, private sector, academics, networks, foundations and governments. Some of the similar initiatives to have gained prominence include The India Climate Collaborative, The Education Alliance, the Collective Impact Partnership (Rise Up), Bhavishya Alliance and Dasra's 10 to 19 Adolescents Collaborative.

These collaboratives have achieved success by effectively leveraging each partner's strength for problem solving and adaptive management. However, in certain cases this remains difficult due to the internal and external tensions inherent in running a complex multistakeholder partnership.

¹ How Philanthropic Collaborations Succeed, and Why They Fail, Stanford Social Innovation Review ([Link](#))

² Philanthropic Collaboratives in India: The Power of Many, Bridgespan ([Link](#))

³ Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors: Scaling Solutions Toward Shifting Systems: Approaches For Impact, Approaches For Learning ([Link](#))

⁴ Dasra: Collaborative Action (10 to19) ([Link](#))

According to a Bridgespan report, challenges faced by a collaborative in India can be classified across three sections of 'coming together', 'working together' and 'reinventing and/or exiting'.⁵ Classifying the challenges enlisted by Bridgespan as internal or external, they are as follows:

Internally, tensions arise from team dynamics and governance systems within the collaborative are:

- Lack of trust, leading to excessive control from core partners
- Siloed approach by partners leading to difficulty in balancing organisational priorities with the collaborative's agenda
- Inability of stakeholders to adapt to disruption due to transition from the collaborative model

Certain tensions lie very much outside the control of a collaborative but must be accounted for when planning a mitigation strategy:

- Low investment due to no clear measure of the effectiveness of initiatives
- Difficulty in obtaining long-term and unrestricted funding
- Issues in bringing anchor funders on board and harbouring buy-in from additional funders

What does it take to run a successful collaborative?

According to a GrantCrafts report, collaborations can be daunting, given the complexity of issues and range of stakeholders involved. However, these issues have now 'begun to fall by the wayside' due to a growing necessity (e.g. falling economy, complexity of social problems) for having a collaborative.⁶

Sattva over the years, has brought together players from across the ecosystem and forged multi-donor/ stakeholder collaboratives⁷ to address myriad developmental challenges across themes. From this experience, Sattva has identified a series of best practices that allow collaboratives to mitigate unforeseen risks/ challenges within collaborations:

Step 1: During set-up^{8,9,10,11}

- **Align on resources and knowledge:** It is important to align resources and knowledge of multiple stakeholders through reflective visioning exercises during joint meetings and be aware of individual/ collective ownership and responsibilities.

⁵ Philanthropic Collaboratives in India: The Power of Many, Bridgespan ([Link](#))

⁶ Grantcraft:Funder Collaboratives - Why and How Funders Work Together ([Link](#))

⁷ Sattva's experience has been across thematic areas with building collaboratives. Examples include: orchestrating a multi-stakeholder consortium to reduce the prevalence of forced labour in India's construction supply chain with the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery; developing a network of think tanks in property rights with Omidyar Network; setting up a multi stakeholder partnership to catalyse government action around life skills in India, Life Skills Collaborative with the Omidyar Network, Porticus, Children Investment Fund Foundation, Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, Echidna Giving; etc.

⁸ Philanthropic Collaboratives in India: The Power of Many, Bridgespan ([Link](#))

⁹ Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors: Scaling Solutions Toward Shifting Systems: Approaches For Impact, Approaches For Learning ([Link](#))

¹⁰ Grantcraft:Funder Collaboratives - Why and How Funders Work Together ([Link](#))

¹¹ Sattva primary experience

- **Clarify Investment Themes:** Establish primary investment fields to channel funds as per the allocated budget from the donor. These themes must be in alignment with strategic focus areas and scope of program implementation.
- **Identify funding:** Identify multiple anchor funders. This is critical when ensuring that the collaborative functions with enough financial security while accounting for dynamic external changes as risk factors.
- **Build communication channels:** Create communication channels for tracking outcomes, learnings and activities by multiple stakeholders designed to ensure effective internal governance.
- **Conduct Impact Assessment:** Design an agile solution framework to measure and manage on-ground outputs, outcomes and success metrics in a holistic manner, co-created through collective inputs of all stakeholders within the consortium.

Step 2: Actioning the collaborative

According to a Bridgespan article, a collaborative further requires **dedicated staff time** for supporting communication among stakeholders, analysing data, and providing administrative support.¹² Exemplar models within a Rockefeller PA report also highlight how **stakeholder equality** is an important characteristic of collaborations,¹³ while GrantCrafts states ‘**flexibility and nimbleness** when opportunities arise’ a measure of success.¹⁴ Additionally, **agility** is another key ingredient for projects - which along with the depth of collaboration may vary as per partner dynamics and strengths.¹⁵

While it is necessary to have definitive **roles and responsibilities** of stakeholders during the different stages of a project, what might also be worth taking into account is the tricky dynamic amongst partners.¹⁶ In certain experiences at Sattva, where roles were not clear, there was a consequent lack of transparency and accountability.

Step 3: Sustaining the collaborative

To enable collective learning and effective coordination within a collaborative, partners must ensure robust governance mechanisms, add to the strength of a multi-stakeholder partnership and ensure it's longevity. Some key measures for this include¹⁷:

- Continued mechanisms of periodic communication and governance systems with openness and transparency within workstreams
- Measures for maintaining financial stability to flag in case of need for further funding and/ or need for onboarding further partners
- Regular tracking common metrics of success for incorporating learnings and improvements over time

¹² Bridgespan: Collective Impact Collaborations ([Link](#))

¹³ Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors: Scaling Solutions Toward Shifting Systems: Approaches For Impact, Approaches For Learning ([Link](#))

¹⁴ Grantcraft:Funder Collaboratives - Why and How Funders Work Together ([Link](#))

¹⁵ Dasra: Collaborative Action (10 to19) ([Link](#))

¹⁶ Grantcraft:Funder Collaboratives - Why and How Funders Work Together ([Link](#))

¹⁷ Bridgespan: Collective Impact Collaborations ([Link](#))