

What Are the Different Ways to Collaborate?

In the nonprofit sector there are various forms of collaboration, ranging in formality, actors and purposes. Some of the most common types of collaboration include networks, coalitions, movements, strategic alliances, strategic co-funding, public private partnerships and collective impact initiatives. It can sometimes be difficult to differentiate among them and know which might be the best fit for certain situations. This piece defines these forms and offers guidance for grantmakers on when to use each, along with examples and considerations.

While not an exhaustive list, the following table breaks down some of the most common forms of collaboration in the nonprofit sector and provides guidance on when to use it, examples and considerations. It is important to note that these types of collaboration are not mutually exclusive — a collaborative effort may include two or more types at once. Also, each of these entails some level of formality, although the degree of formality varies. Usually, less formal collaborations, partnerships and/or intentional relationship building are important precursors to more sustained forms of collaboration to build a baseline of trust and common understanding.

Common Types of Collaboration

Some of the most common types of collaboration, listed in level of formality from low to high and with definitions, are as follows:

- **Networks:** People connected by relationships, which can take on a variety of forms, both formal and informal.¹
 - Example: [Barr Fellows Program](#)
- **Coalitions:** Organizations whose members commit to an agreed-on purpose and shared decision making to influence an external institution or target, while each member organization maintains its own autonomy.²

¹ For more about different types of networks, see [Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide](#), by Diana Searce (Washington, D.C.: GEO and Monitor Institute, 2011).

² TCC Group, "What Makes an Effective Coalition?," 2011.

- Example: [Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions](#)
- **Movements:** Collective action with a common frame and long-term vision for social change, characterized by grassroots mobilization that works to address a power imbalance.
 - Example: [Caring Across Generations](#)
- **Strategic Alliances:** Partnership among organizations working in pursuit of a common goal while maintaining organizational independence. This could mean aligning programs or administrative functions or adopting complementary strategies.³
 - Example: [Arts + Response](#)
- **Strategic Co-Funding:** Partnership among organizations that work in pursuit of a common goal. This could mean aligning programs or administrative functions or adopting complementary strategies.
 - Example: [Home for Good](#)
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Partnerships formed between government and private sector organizations to deliver specific services or benefits.
 - Example: [Cambridge Energy Alliance](#)
- **Collective Impact Initiatives:** Long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.⁴
 - Example: [Shape Up Somerville](#)

³ David La Piana, "Merging Wisely," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2010.

⁴ John Kania & Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2011.

Type	Participants	When to use it	Considerations
Networks	Nonprofits, foundations, government agencies, businesses or individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networks can connect people to allow easy flow of and access to information; align people to develop/ spread ideas; and/or foster joint action for specific outcomes. • Networks can be helpful when you don't have a clear set of outcomes but rather an understanding that linking to the work of others can advance your and their objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networks require long timeframe, lots of flexibility. • The outcomes of the work are not always clear, so funders should be comfortable with contributing to the overall success of the network, not being able to claim credit for discrete results.
Coalitions	Nonprofits, foundations, government agencies, businesses or individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coalitions work well when participants are working to advance discrete outcomes on a single issue, for example a specific policy change • Use a coalition approach when you want to mobilize others to align their work towards the desired outcome. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-sector collaboration is complex. • The issues coalitions focus on often require long timeframes and flexibility.
Movements	Nonprofits, foundations, government or businesses can contribute to social movements, but the people most affected by the issue(s) must drive them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movements can address complex, systemic challenges. • They are often multi-sector or multi-issue initiatives and engage beneficiaries. Funders should not drive but can support efforts already in place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movements require long timeframes and flexibility, must be a bottom-up, not a top-down approach to shaping the agenda.

Type	Participants	When to use it	Considerations
Strategic alliances	Nonprofits or foundations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider strategic alliances for nonprofits or funders with complementary missions, ideally with an established relationship and/or prior history of working together in some way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic alliances will be most likely to succeed when the organizations involved are shaping how the collaboration will work. Funder-driven alliances typically don't work.
Strategic co-funding	Grantmakers, including private philanthropy, corporate funders and/or government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic co-funding structures address the flow of resources to the issue or cause that the grantmaker wants to address. It can be a good option when pursuing a common vision and funding the same grantees, or when a funder wants to tap the wisdom and experience of other funders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic co-funding can vary structurally, with some forms allowing more autonomy than others. In any form, funders should ensure that the structures they are putting in place indeed are reducing the burden on grantees and add significant value beyond funding.
Public-private partnerships	Government agencies partnering with nonprofits, foundations and businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider public-private partnerships as an option to expand impact by aligning public and private resources and programs. or to address local challenges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with government and the private sector adds complexity. These partnerships require a long timeframe and buy-in from leadership within each entity.

Type	Participants	When to use it	Considerations
Collective Impact initiatives	Nonprofits, foundations, government agencies, businesses or individuals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Collective Impact for situations when the issue requires systems change (e.g., changes in policy, changes in public and philanthropic funding, changes in cultural norms). • In addition, Collective Impact efforts require a significant number of both leaders and community members to come together to achieve change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective Impact initiatives must meet five criteria: 1) common agenda; 2) shared measurement system; 3) mutually reinforcing activities; 4) continuous communication; 5) backbone organization. • Collective Impact efforts tend to have at least dozens (if not more) of cross-sector partners coming together, with multiple cascading levels of collaboration.

Conclusion

Collaboration with and among grantees and other key partners is central to the solutions we as grantmakers seek to advance. There are many forms these collaborations can take, ranging from informal to formal. Fostering the right type of partnership at any given moment in time requires reflection and dialogue, as well as attention to relationship building and communication.