

Beating the trolls of competition and control – can we do it?

Author : Cath Blunt

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International non-government organisations (INGOs) operating in the aid and development space are [experiencing pressure](#) from a number of places that will cause “[disruptive](#)” [pdf] change to the way they operate. What are these forces? Can they be countered? Does the INGO operating model need a rethink?

The effects on INGOs of the technological, social and economic changes of the last twenty years include:

- Online giving programs that give the public the opportunity to donate directly to worthy sounding projects with minimal administrative overheads.
- Developing countries are now hosting well-managed and effective organisations, reducing the importance of international intermediaries as capacity building and resource providing partners.
- Internet-based advocacy is high profile, rapid and appears to get “quick wins” in comparison to slower, more methodical approaches.
- Services that were once the sole domain of INGOs are now being tendered out, with for-profit businesses providing cheaper quotes.

So what are some ways forward? Can the values, mission and strengths of the sector be leveraged to try a new program model of development that addresses many of the issues above, and creates the type of impact that is at the heart of INGO missions?

“Collective impact” is an approach that is attracting attention and interest in Australia and internationally as a means of dealing with “wicked” problems such as mental health, child abuse and domestic violence, which have proven remarkably resilient to increased funding, numerous programs and concerted efforts over many years.

The term was [coined](#) by researchers John Kania and Mark Kramer in 2011 after they observed successful place-based education and child development programs in America doing something very different, and achieving systemic social change despite recession and budget cuts.

So how does collective impact work? Essentially, a cross-section of individual stakeholders work collaboratively to solve a complex social problem and collectively seek to create impact.

The [Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance](#) (CTJJA) brings together foundations, city and state law enforcement officials, local government, schools, not-for-profits and advocacy groups to work on systems reform to reduce juvenile incarceration rates. [Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition](#) (GAIN) was established in 2002 and is an alliance of governments, international organisations, the private sector and civil society that collectively works to increase access to fortified foods for people living in poverty. Both initiatives are very different in scale and have achieved impacts that no single organisation could achieve on its own.

The CTJJA project has achieved impressive wins on juvenile justice policy and practice outcomes through the collaborative efforts of more than 200 government departments and organisations to achieve unheard of [impacts](#) [pdf], such as a 40 per cent reduction in recidivism and a 30 per cent reduction in court referrals, among others.

In less than a decade GAIN has created and coordinated the activity of 36 large scale collaborations that include governments, NGOs, multilaterals, universities and more than 60 companies to reduce micronutrient deficiencies by 11-30 per cent in a number of developing countries.

The [PNG Church Partnership Program](#) is a collaboration between seven Christian denominations and DFAT to build the churches' capacity to implement basic services. It is moving from a coordinated approach to one that demonstrates many of the elements of a collective impact approach. The projects have been aligned under a single [program strategy](#), shared governance of the program is being established with a Program Partnership Council, combined monitoring and evaluation is planned, and involvement of broader cross-sectoral stakeholders is anticipated.

Collective impact takes partnership a step further and builds on the existing skills and experience INGOs have in this area. It amplifies them to include a focus on the relationships between cross-sector organisations and groups, while progressing toward the achievement of shared objectives.

The elements of the model include:

- A common agenda – agreement on the primary goals
- Shared measurement systems – collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participating bodies
- Mutually reinforcing activities – coordination of all efforts into an overarching plan
- Continuous communication – to build trust, work out goals, measurement systems and a common vocabulary
- Backbone support organisation – dedicated staff separate from the participating bodies who can coordinate, facilitate, project manage, communicate, manage and report data

So how do INGOs fit in here? What can they do differently?

1) Change from working in partnership to working collaboratively

The type of problems that INGOs largely seek to address are not responsive to technical solutions where we definitely know what is going to work; they need cooperation and coordination on agreed good practice solutions to make a difference.

These are complex social, political and economic problems in which the cause and effect are not always clear in advance. They require interventions that emerge after input from a variety of perspectives and the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders. One organisation working with an in-country partner (or two) cannot create major social change.

Collaboration involves identifying and agreeing on a common mission and goals, mutual identification of solutions, shared decision-making and allocation of resources, and it takes partnership and coordination to the next level of sophistication.

Working in partnership is familiar territory and this is one step along the collaboration continuum. Systematic coordination is demonstrated by the Humanitarian Partnership Agreement (HPA), in which agreements are negotiated between the largest organisations as to who will do what in an emergency response.

2) Work across sectors, involving interested and relevant players such as government, churches, private business, and local civil society organisations

Generally INGOs work with other non-government organisations they are compatible with and don't venture outside of their comfort zone. The solutions generated reflect the skills, perspectives and biases of the organisations involved.

The involvement of an overarching organisation, or "backbone", is a key element distinguishing a collaborative project from collective impact.

3) Stop implementing individual projects directly and fund backbone organisations to coordinate collaborative initiatives

INGOs could seek out communities willing to work together and across sectors and support their work via the mobilisation of funding for a "backbone" organisation whose functions are core to the success of a collective impact approach.

The backbone is an independent body that provides the glue for all the other entities to do the hard work of collaboration – bringing parties together, agreeing on the common agenda, sharing common measurements, keeping up the communication between everyone and making sure learning is shared and acted on.

This is notoriously hard to resource because traditional donors want to fund individual programs with a perceived direct outcome that they can "own", publicise and promote to their stakeholders.

Some organisations have made 360 degree turns in how they work to implement this approach and they are at the cutting edge of the Australian social services sector.

The [ten20 Foundation](#), now a venture philanthropic body, was once an Australian children's charity. It disbanded its role of funding individual projects to achieve better outcomes for children, choosing instead to focus on 20 disadvantaged communities over 10 years that were willing to take a collective approach to solving entrenched issues that impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people, such as unemployment, mental health, school engagement and child protection.

[United Way](#) is a large American-based charity with offices in Australia that in 2000 completely rethought its approach to achieving its mission. It moved from funding individual projects to taking a community collective impact approach and this framework now drives their work nationally and internationally. Their [Community Impact Strategy](#) and accompanying Annual Impact statement honestly detail the complexity of their work, the reasons for their adoption of this approach and their progress.

4) INGOs could also be the backbone organisation within a community

INGOs are ideally placed as "trusted outsiders" to take on the difficult coordinating role of exercising leadership, yet being willing to "let go" of a predetermined agenda, as full participation and ownership of the initiative are critical to their success.

Given the generous support of the Australian community (most Australian INGOs receive [only 20%](#) of their funding from government), INGOs have the flexibility to work outside traditional grant cycles and the ability to be nimble in pursuing opportunities that may not have a predetermined outcome.

So what are the barriers? What might stop INGOs implementing a collective impact approach?

Collaboration confronts many of our notions of how a successful INGO runs, markets and evaluates itself, obtains funding and reports to donors, and represents a game-changer in each of these areas.

The three "trolls"[\[1\]](#) which prevent us crossing the "bridge" of collaboration include commitment, control and competition. Of these, control and competition are the most relevant challenges to INGOs. Most in the sector are comfortable in being committed to change that takes a long time and they generally work in communities for the long haul.

The control aspect is obvious. Not-for-profits are generally very isolated and are used to working on projects and programs that they have identified as playing to their strengths, within their spheres of influence. Getting people and groups together to work out the things they need to do to make collective impact work is enormously challenging to our conventional ways of working.

The collaborative process is generally considered to be very messy. Getting individuals to act outside their comfort zone of always being “competent” is regarded as a [key barrier](#) (p. 145). The issue of accountability to donors and beneficiaries is also a major influence on the traditional cultural need for control over how projects are planned, implemented and reviewed.

The competition aspect is equally obvious. Collective impact involves giving up claiming individual responsibility for the achievement of agreed goals and objectives. Successful outcomes need to be attributed to the actions of the initiative as a whole, not to a single organisation, entity or activity.

INGOs work together remarkably well through their peak industry body, the Australian Council for International Development ([ACFID](#)), yet they need to get donations, government and philanthropic grants. When their missions are similar, competition is strong to maintain brand and market share.

This is a growing area of practice and there is already a [body of knowledge](#) in Australia and internationally around areas such as collaborative governance, adaptive leadership and the personal skills and organisational development needed to address the challenges of crossing the bridge of collaboration.

Working as backbone organisations, funding the administrative infrastructure for a collaborative approach or working as part of an initiative with shared and mutually agreed goals could provide INGOs with a renewed sense of purpose to achieve their mission in a way that is more sophisticated, reflective of what we know is required for addressing complex social problems and that ultimately has a greater chance of success. It is a possible response to disruptive change and a chance to “ride the wave”, with all the thrill and uncertainty that involves.

Cath Blunt is the Principal Consultant at [Quality and Accountability Services](#)

[1] Social Leadership Australia’s Model of Challenges in Collaboration presented at Collective Impact 2014, Sydney.