



Building Pathways for a Better World

# *The Landscape of Cross Sector Partnerships:*

## *Understanding the Potential for Coordinated Multi-Institutional Partnerships*

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2007*

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In pondering the great issues confronting our contemporary global society, strategies to address them will require widespread engagement. While we are witnessing increasing worldwide agreement that multiple and varying institutions and industries will have to be intimately involved in building pathways for a better world, few have truly determined how to create the kinds of productive partnerships that will lead to noticeable societal improvements. Few have figured out how to create the kinds of collaborative initiatives that genuinely engage the most vulnerable populations in our communities. Many have faced great challenges in creating mutually beneficial and sustained partnerships that transcend brief, episodic pursuits.

Marga Incorporated, a consulting and research firm, plays the role of a *partnership catalyst* - an outside, informed, neutral mediator providing the research, facilitation, and assessment required to convene multiple institutional partners, bring them to a common strategic vision and concrete action plan. The experience of this work, primarily with foundations, universities, corporations, government, and civil society (organizations and individuals) has led to a range of lessons, particularly with respect to the unique assets each of these differing entities can bring to strategic partnerships. Overall, a common understanding of the respective assets of various types of partners can go a long way in enhancing the potential for successful cross sector/industry partnerships.

Marga Incorporated originally grew out of research, which initially focused on higher education, as reflected in *Beyond the Campus: How Colleges and Universities Form Partnerships with Their Communities*, the first book published by David Maurrasse. This book was the culmination of a U.S.-wide scan of how different institutions of higher education were engaging in partnerships with their surrounding communities. The lessons and challenges facing university/community partnerships, discussed in *Beyond the Campus*, were more broadly applied in understanding how other types of institutions consider their role in society through the work of Columbia University's *Center for Innovation*

*in Social Responsibility*, which incubated Marga Incorporated. Marga was created in order to provide guidance to various institutions around how to engage in external strategic partnerships in ways particularly suited to their industries. This approach has also been geared toward ensuring that institutions collaborate with community-based formations and institutions in genuine ways, which emphasize the simultaneous gains that can be secured for institutions and communities.

## THE PARTNERSHIP INFRASTRUCTURE

Traveling around the United States and world, one can see the range of partnerships that are being formed - some semblance of a framework for partnerships has been emerging and taking shape. However, the impact of these partnerships beyond the act of crossing new boundaries between sectors and industries and communities is less evident, particularly with respect to concrete improvements in the lives of vulnerable populations. Despite the challenges confronting partnerships, the development of a collaborative infrastructure provides potential vehicles that can be harnessed toward greater ends.

A few observations on the state of this infrastructure can be instructive to future efforts to build upon recent attempts to coordinate the resources of various institutions and industries. First of all, this infrastructure is generally undercapitalized. Groups of corporations and universities and other institutions can agree to work collaboratively, however, these institutions generally have not allocated resources specifically to engage in partnerships. At times, partnerships are convened due to the availability of outside resources. Indeed, the more partnerships feed the core missions or bottom lines of these institutions, the more likely core resources will be applied toward such external engagements. However, it takes time for institutional representatives directly involved in partnerships to sell the idea of such external involvement inside of their institutions.

The nuances of building an internal case to engage in partnerships suggest a second



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key observation - that the benefits to involvement of each institutional partner are not always clarified at the outset. Many burgeoning cross sector and/or community-based partnerships demonstrate differential levels of investment among participating institutions. Additionally, uniform understanding of the respective motivation of partners around the table is often difficult to achieve. This unearthing of vested interests is especially challenging to ascertain without the assistance of a neutral, outside entity. It is important to create an atmosphere in partnerships to communicate some of the respective selfish interests among collaborating institutions. Particular attention to the work required inside of collaborating institutions to secure the commitment of leadership and the business case for engaging in partnership is also critical to the potential success of cross sector, multi-institutional partnerships.

A third key observation is the difficulty partnerships encounter in determining exactly what to do and how. This is true with respect to actual programs and initiatives (What issue should the partnership address and how?) as well as form (What operational or administrative form should a partnership create?). Because the very act of convening partners that may have never worked together before can be labor intensive, the very development of a common vision among partners can feel like victory in itself. At times, the process of partnership development requires intensive relationship and trust building, not to mention translation across institutional cultures and practices. Unless specific projects with clear and achievable outcomes ("signature projects") can be designed quickly in the wake of the establishment of a broad common purpose, it is challenging to actually activate partnerships beyond their mere form and idea. Partners lose interest quickly after they have agreed to work together if there is nothing specific to demonstrate what their collaboration can actually achieve - solving particular problems. Moreover, a partnership's future can be determined by its form. Should the partnership create an organization? Get a fiscal sponsor and remain a partnership? Who should sit at

the table (leadership or those who implement or both)?

Whatever the range of solutions to the complexity and inertia likely to confront cross sector partnerships, it often feels as if the transaction costs of creating partnerships might be a bit steep. Are partnerships worth it? The value of partnerships might be more apparent when the transaction price tag goes on sale. How to create such discounts is at the very core of *partnership catalyzing*. One important early step toward expediting some aspects of partnership development is to peruse the landscape of potential partners and identify the unique value that different types of institutions and industries can bring to cross sector collaborations.

## RECOGNIZING INSTITUTIONAL VALUE

The range of types of institutions varies tremendously. With a sector lens, one can begin with government, the private sector, and civil society. The very notion of these three sectors sheds some light on the respective roles of different types of institutions and industries. However, they oversimplify reality, and overlook the unique culture and significance of particular industries, such as higher education, which is technically a part of civil society, but often government financed (or even controlled in many instances, especially outside of the U.S.), or increasingly privatized.

When the initial driver of partnerships is to solve critical social problems, what is required? Indeed, money is always essential, along with knowledge, often policy, engagement of affected parties, and various types of resources that can bring legitimacy, visibility, or some other form of capital. With these needs, which partners would be required? Which institutions or industries bring the value toward fighting poverty, improving education or the environment or health? What would be the appropriate roles for different institutions and industries to play charged with such complex tasks?

Marga Incorporated's experience suggests critical roles for higher education,



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corporations, government, civil society organizations (essentially community based nonprofits and informal community associations), and foundations (philanthropic giving institutions). A clear understanding of the unique value and roles that these entities can play in cross sector partnerships can go a long way in strengthening complex collaborative efforts and, most of all, enhancing their ability to make a visible dent in seemingly intractable social concerns.

### *Higher Education*

Higher education brings a range of types of capital - intellectual, human, economic, physical. Most of all, higher education's commitment to intellectual capital is generally not fully tapped to its potential. Institutions of higher education are often rooted in geographical spaces, binding them to the range of issues facing localities in, often, unique ways. A contemporary movement of higher education/community partnerships has only enhanced the ways in which tertiary educational institutions can develop communities, address health challenges, and improve primary and secondary schooling.

### *Corporations*

Large corporations bring a significant range of capital as well, from financial resources to technology and infrastructure that often escape other types of institutions. Corporations have become increasingly aware of the need to integrate socially responsible goals into their core business strategies. These decisions can not only provide services to communities, but enhance employee morale and strengthen loyalty in existing and emerging markets.

### *Government*

Government occupies the unique ability to set policy agendas that can provide incentives for all types of institutions to be involved in partnerships with public ends. This power of policy creates a unique position to convene entities across boundaries they do not ordinarily cross. The public/private mix in

societies around the world is more diverse than ever, raising the expectations of the involvement of the private sector in addressing public concerns and the role of governments in seeking private partners for their efforts.

### *Civil Society*

The perspectives of those who are most adversely affected by social challenges in communities bring everyone closer to an understanding of what it actually takes to bring about change. Nonprofit organizations or nongovernmental organizations often carry the unique voices of civil society in public and private arenas. The increased influence of such organizations in holding government, corporations, and other major institutions accountable and encouraging cross sector partnerships around social needs is quite evident. It is also important to note that most of civil society is not necessarily represented by incorporated entities, making informal associations of individuals, particularly at the grassroots level, essential, but overlooked partners in the landscape of cross sector partnerships.

### *Philanthropy*

While not considered a sector in itself, the unique role of individual and institutional philanthropic efforts can be critical to the furtherance and enhancement of cross sector partnerships. Private foundations and individual philanthropists are well situated to finance partnerships, given that sustainable capital has been one of the more salient barriers to the ability of partnerships to achieve noticeable ends. Since philanthropic efforts tend to begin with lofty aims to tackle social problems, such intentions can be greatly aided through collaboration with other institutions. Philanthropic investments in partnerships bring the potential for significant ripple effects - joining the resources of multiple parties around common goals. Ultimately, partnerships will be most effective when all partners prioritize their involvement in collaborations enough to invest their own resources more significantly. However, foundations and philanthropists can provide infusions of financial capital during



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moments when partnerships are under-financed.

A deliberate approach to partnership formation, with greater initial analysis of the respective roles and value of potential collaborators can begin to reduce the transaction costs of partnerships. The truth of the matter is that many partnerships start randomly, and do not benefit from outside assistance in thinking through possibilities. A greater sense of the respective roles and contributions of different institutions and sectors can help assess the potential for successful collaborations.

### NEW APPROACHES TO FORGING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Given that lessons have been emerging around the potential and pitfalls of partnerships, our understanding of what it takes to enhance cross sector collaborative efforts is increasingly. The range of conversations, conferences, books, and papers on partnerships continues to expand. How can this knowledge be applied in the formation of new partnerships and the strengthening of existing ones?

Marga Incorporated's role as a *partnership catalyst*, while in need of its own refinement, is continually unearthing various ways to assist partnerships in deliberately being strategic at the outset about respective roles and potential matches among partners. Whatever approaches are taken to harness the gradual development of a partnership infrastructure and the increased base of knowledge about what it takes to be successful in these collaborative frameworks, the necessity for partnerships in solving global challenges will only become more evident. Efforts to refine the development, design, strengthening, and impact of cross sector partnerships will be among the most important investments in increasing the likelihood of improvements among all of the major social concerns of this generation.



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