

Collaboration and Civil Society post COVID-19

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Project description:

This project aims to explore the role of inter-organizational collaboration in rebuilding civil society following COVID-19.

The full impact and ramifications of COVID-19 on societies across the globe are uncertain and unknown. As we move beyond COVID-19, the challenges facing society in the UK and elsewhere are undoubtedly unprecedented, complex and multi-faceted in nature. They are the kind of challenges that Trist (1983) classified as located in the inter-organizational domain beyond the scope of any single organization to tackle effectively on its own. Collaborative working arrangements between independent public, private and voluntary organizations, are essential in addressing such challenges (e. g. Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Quick and Feldman, 2014; Thomson and Perry, 2006; Weber and Khademanian, 2008). It would seem inevitable therefore that collaboration spanning professional, organizational and national boundaries will continue to play a major role for individual and institutional actors seeking to make a difference. Indeed, across numerous problem domains - be it wealth inequality, migration, health or climate change – current actors highlight the importance of collaboration in addressing the challenges associated with COVID-19 (see e.g. Kokudo and Sugiyama, 2020; Parker et al, 2020; Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs, 2019; WHO, 2020).

Yet we know from research spanning three decades that inter-organizational collaboration is not a panacea to cure all ills. Researchers have repeatedly concluded that collaborations are complex, slow to produce outputs, and by no means guaranteed to deliver synergies and advantage (e.g. Huxham and Vangen, 2005; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; O’Leary and Bingham, 2009; Saz-Carranza, 2012). As organizing phenomena, collaborations are inherently paradoxical yielding numerous governance, leadership and management tensions (Connelly, et al., 2006; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2010; Vangen, 2017; Zeng and Chen, 2003).

Voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organizations play a crucial role in addressing society’s most challenging issues. And while the UK government pledged £750 million for VCSEs to continue to support the UK through the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak (Office for Civil Society, 2020), more than a decade of austerity policy by successive UK governments has left many voluntary organizations struggling to survive (Loyds Bank Foundation, 2017; NCVO, 2020). In public policy, if not in practice, collaboration has become synonymous with ‘doing more with less’. There is however no evidence that collaboration can be an efficient way of addressing society’s most challenging issues. On the contrary, the lack of financial backing has been shown to effectively stifle the possibility of innovation via collaboration (Diamond and Vangen, 2017). As we look to the future post COVID-19, it is likely that austerity policies will continue to have profound and devastating effects on the most vulnerable people in society (United Nations Human Rights, 2018).

Notwithstanding the challenges inherent in collaboration, the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership's (CVSL) continuous engagement with voluntary sector organizations suggests that actors see collaboration as crucial in moving forward post COVID-19. We therefore invite candidates to submit proposals which engages with the role of inter-organizational collaboration in rebuilding civil society post COVID-19. Questions may include, but are not limited to:

- If collaboration is seen as essential post COVID-19, what forms should such collaboration take and why?
- How can individuals and organizations prepare themselves for the challenges that working collaboratively will entail?
- How do the assumptions inherent in the view of collaboration as a solution to societal issues play out in practice?

Proposed methodology:

Candidates are invited to develop a proposal that focuses on the practice of collaboration in the UK voluntary sector. Theoretically, the proposal should build on practice-based theory of collaboration including the theory of collaborative advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). An engaged form of research, including for example interventionist and action research is likely to be most appropriate.

About the supervisors:

Professor Siv Vangen's research focuses on the governance, leadership and management of inter-organizational collaboration spanning the public, voluntary and private sectors. Her methodological expertise includes Research-Oriented-Action-Research and other types of engaged research that generate practice-based theory and knowledge relevant to the practice of collaboration.

Daniel Haslam's research focuses on the voluntary sector. This includes an interest in the role of voluntary sector organisations in cross-sector collaborations with the NHS. He has adopted engaged research approaches informed by traditions in both action research and ethnography that focus on developing insights from practice.

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