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Cross-Sector Partnership Research from a Civil Society Perspective: Two Current Trends

It is conspicuous that research on cross-sector collaboration is increasingly dedicating attention to assessing the perspective of civil society, a sector that comprises a wide array of organizations that are independent from the government, pursue a social or environmental cause, and have no profit-centric motives¹. Proponents of this perspective claim that “model[s] framed by theories of the public and private sectors often lack sufficient appreciation for the exigent circumstances of nonprofit partnerships (p. 2)”². Therefore, the aim of this essay is to provide an overview of research that has emerged since 2017 which focuses primarily on the perspective of civil society organizations (CSOs) as a key actor in cross-sector partnership (CSP). Yet, the focus is made only on studies that consider the CSOs as the core research theme or where the CSO is considered as the main unit of analysis. Interestingly, examining this body of literature has indicated two salient research trends: the effect of CSP on CSOs performance and the impact of CSOs on the effectiveness of CSP.

Examining this body of literature has indicated two salient research trends: the effect of cross-sector partnership on civil society organizations performance and the impact of civil society organisations on the effectiveness of cross-sector partnerships.

Regarding the first trend, there is an increasing interest in assessing the extent to which CSOs can actually benefit from the involvement in CSPs. In fact, this interest is driven by the assumption that value generated from CSPs is ‘multifaceted’³, which mirrors the view that CSPs can create value at different levels inducing macro (society) and meso (organization). While the macro-level relates to the co-creation of societal value, which is the impact of conjoined actions of the collaborators to enact powerful solutions to enduring socioeconomic problems, the meso-level concerns collaborators’ ability to capture and retain value from their collaborating activity⁴. Research comprising this latter perspective examines how the CSP can become instrumental in delivering organizational advantages to the partners involved. For CSOs, a value can be derived by attaining tangible and intangible assets, achieving higher visibility, and building organizational capacity, which all are fundamental for their survival and growth⁵. Examples of this value (or advantages) include increasing the transparency of CSOs operations⁶, enhancing organizational learning⁷, and building internal capacity in environmental management aspects⁸. Despite these expected advantages to CSOs, researchers recently started to question the extent to which these expectations can actually materialize⁹, and also to identify the factors and understand the mechanisms that might enhance or restrict their potential to capture value. For example, a recent study examines the actual effect of CSPs on the management capacities of nonprofits¹⁰. Interestingly, the authors found that engaging in CSPs is not necessarily useful in building organizational capacity (e.g., financial management, strategic planning, and board leadership).



Yet the duration of the relationship emerged as a strong moderator (i.e. a more enduring relationship can systematically yield better capacity building). Other researchers sought to understand how CSOs can capture value from CSPs using the alliance management capability view¹¹. They identify a set of capabilities (including pre, post, and hybrid) that are essential for CSOs to embrace CSPs as a strategic option to support their survival. Together, this stream of research emphasizes the need to differentiate between value created for society and value captured by the individual collaborators. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of reconciling the potentially contradictory self-interests of each partner vis-a-vis the overall CSP agenda. Ignoring such issues is likely to complicate CSP implementation by generating tensions and opportunistic claims following the establishment of the relationship¹². This can open the door for new research directions to explore the conditions that can enable a change in CSOs practice from being opportunistic (or reacting to business offering) to targeting strategically prospect partners. In fact, the challenging environment in which CSOs operate, uncertainty over government funding and the rise of competition within the sector, provide support for this direction.

The second research trend concerns studies that investigate the role of CSOs in enhancing the potential of the collaborating entities to co-create societal value¹³. As one example, Chapman and Varda¹⁴ empirically demonstrate how the inclusion of CSOs is influential in yielding better CSP outcomes. This result has been attributed to the resource uniqueness of nonprofit partners, and the strong alignment between their mission and the CSP aim which enhance the mutual trust across all relevant stakeholders. Focusing on social enterprises (SEs), Huybrechts et al.¹⁵ reveal that SEs have developed three different patterns to manage the paradox of being 'in and against the market'; and strategies to manage inter-organizational market collaborations. Specifically, these enterprises could be against CSPs, welcoming CSPs, or cautious towards CSPs. Importantly, how these enterprises envision their social mission emerged as fundamental in determining the enterprise collaboration strategy. Other researchers took a broader perspective by investigating CSOs when participating as a network. For instance, by using social network analysis, Jones et al.¹⁶ and Jones et al.¹⁷ examine the role of a network of sports nonprofits when collaborating with the public and private sectors. Importantly, they reveal that a lack of balance and coordination between these

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nonprofits is negatively affecting the potential to create collective value from the collaboration. In sum, this research trend sheds light on the role of CSOs as a vital player in the CSP. To be specific, it signals that the effectiveness of these initiatives depends, in addition to other factors, on the careful consideration of CSOs as distinct organizational actors and also on the alignment of their objectives with the overall aim of the CSP. Accordingly, this indicates the need to examine in greater detail the perspective of CSOs as a key success factor to CSPs.

In conclusion, this editorial demonstrates that the perspective of CSOs is gaining more attention and becoming a distinct research direction in the CSP literature. As in the identified trends, researchers are seeking to examine the relationship between CSOs and CSP as instrumental to two ways directions. However, the limited and incomplete evidence on this topic suggests that we still lack a comprehensive understanding of the contingencies that can control the realization of the expected value created (how CSOs can drive CSP effectiveness) or captured (how CSOs can derive benefits from CSPs). In turn, this highlights important research directions that are necessary to complement our understanding of the cross-sector collaboration phenomenon.

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