

Case for Collaboration

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The following is an attempt to outline a case for collaboration for the BC Water Funders Group. It has been developed to be discussed, edited, and rewritten. The idea is not for me to persuade you but for you to persuade yourself that collaboration is worth your time and effort.

Every Collaborative is Unique

There is no single correct model for a funder collaborative. At their essence, collaboratives are about creating structure for effective human relationships to work towards a common purpose. They vary depending on the issue at hand, the size and types of organizations involved, the community being served, and most importantly, the people that are involved.

“Collaboratives aren’t mindless, faceless structures or disembodied entities. They’re fundamentally rooted in human relationships among people who see the possibility of greater impact by working together. From that initial idea, they move on to work out a wide range of details and develop a structure that serves their common purpose.”

Grantcraft, Funder Collaboratives

Yet one thing is true for all collaboratives. In a busy world with tight time constraints, impatient Boards, and overloaded program staff, collaboratives have to be perceived as useful and providing substantial value to the people and organizations involved. If not, they quickly lose energy and participation. As such, it was a prescient suggestion at our gathering in May that we establish a clear case for collaboration. In other words, we need to address the question: *“Why should I invest my most important resource—my time—in this collective effort?”*

What type of Collaborative are we talking about?

As mentioned, there are lots of different models for funder collaboratives, which come in all shapes and sizes. At a high level, GrantCraft has identified three broad categories of collaboratives:

1. **A Learning network** – is a group of funders who come together to hear about what’s happening in a field or issue area, share information, and explore potential strategies for making more effective investments.
2. **A Strategic Alignment Network** – is made up of funders who share a mission, strategize together, and work in concert to obtain publicity, traction, and impact – but who still do all their grantmaking independently.

3. **A Pooled fund** – is a “pot” of money toward which funders contribute and from which grant dollars (or program related) investments are disbursed. Money from the pot is used without distinguishing the original donor.¹

Within these broad categories there are also nuances. For example, in a strategic alignment network, grants may be made independently but in a clearly coordinated fashion, such as several funders making grants to the same project or grantee. And other aspects of the grant making process, such as the due diligence or reporting, may be shared. There is also variation in the ways that pooled funds can be established with different decision-making structures that can allow a greater or lesser degree of flexibility and control for funders. Based on our May meeting, I would suggest that we are currently talking about a collaborative that is somewhere between #1 and #2. There was strong interest in something that is more than just information sharing and closer to aligning efforts in a strategic way but perhaps not yet at the point where funders would invest in a single fund to do that. If strategic alignment is a chief objective, then a critical next step will be to clearly outline the ‘mission’ or ‘purpose’ around which this alignment will revolve. It is important that this purpose allow for a dynamic interplay between unity of strategy and diversity of funder mandates.

Conditions for collaboration—are we ready to collaborate?

In spite of strong interest, sometimes it may not be the right time for funders to collaborate in a formal sense. There may not be enough funders interested in the issue or region, or perhaps the spark or urgency to bring collaboration to the fore is not there. However, based on the interviews of funders for the “Opportunities for Strategic Collaboration” report² and the May funders gathering, there are a number of factors that indicate the ground has been tilled for a collaborative effort.

- **There is a critical mass of diverse water funders who want to collaborate** – eight funding organizations and 15 funder representatives attended the May meeting. During this meeting, each participant identified a strong interest in collaborating with colleagues from other organizations and appeared to have the flexibility within their organizations to engage in collaboration. There was also strength in diversity in the group, with a blend of large, medium and small foundations, supporting a range of work at different scales and with diverse but intersecting reasons for supporting fresh water protection.
- **Common areas of interest** – to begin with, each funder has the broad issue of fresh water protection in common, as well as an interest in the region of British Columbia. The Opportunities report highlighted some more specific areas of interest that appeared to be

Common Interest Buckets

- Water Act Modernization
- Watershed Governance Pilots
- First Nations watershed planning
- Community/grassroots organizing
- Connecting with (or convening) non-traditional actors
- Urban water systems

¹ Grantcraft, *Why and How Funders Work Together* (2011)

² Morris Consulting, *Opportunities for Strategic Collaboration for B.C. Water Funders* (May 2013)

shared in common by funders. The funders meeting deepened this conversation around common interests and some clear themes emerged (see sidebar).

- **Evolving spirit of coordination** – as outlined in the Historical Background section of the Opportunities report, there has been ongoing dialogue and more informal coordination between a core group of B.C. water funders for the past few years.
- **Policy window** – there is a clear opportunity for water policy reform at the provincial level. There is also plenty of local scale activity and First Nations are becoming more assertive around their water rights. This is a dynamic time with realistic opportunities for policy and governance change. This change is likely to occur over a period of at least 5-10 years and would benefit from a long-term strategic focus from the funding community.
- **Leadership** – the Real Estate Foundation of BC has offered leadership to bring funders together and move the ball forward. The Moore Foundation has also been generous with its offer to support coordination capacity of the collaborative.
- **Ongoing conversation with resource people and grantees** – funders have been coming together to hear from resource people and their grantees for the last few years so have a strong understanding of the issues and the different groups and individuals working on the issues.

I believe in a province wide [funders] group. And, I think, the Real Estate Foundation should be a big part of that. And, I think we can provide a lot of value to that."

Jack Wong, Real Estate Foundation B.C.

(Source: Opportunities for Strategic Collaboration)

Benefits of collaboration—is it worth my time?

Most funders deal in the currency of ‘impact’ and a core reason for working with other funders is the potential to exponentially increase the impact that you can achieve as a single organization. Leveraging ones’ own efforts to support or motivate others with common purpose manifests itself in a number of ways:

- **Resources can go further when funders work together** – the most obvious effect of leveraging is increasing the level of financial resources that can be focused on a common priority. This is also achieved by reducing the amount of overlap or redundancy in grant-making (Note: this is not to say that some redundancy isn’t useful and a necessary part of philanthropy).
- **Due diligence** – working more closely with other funders can be very helpful when undertaking due diligence on potential grantees or projects as your colleagues may have valuable knowledge or experience related to that grantee or project.

"We need to fund strategy at scale, which means funders need to get more strategic... [This means] funders are thinking in a collaborative way around strategy, overall, at the provincial level."

Ivan Thompson, Moore Foundation

(Source: Opportunities for Strategic Collaboration)

When supporting something collaboratively, it allows the due diligence to be spread amongst different funding partners.

- **Mutual learning** – fresh water protection is a complex problem and different funders have different levels of expertise and experience with funding fresh water work. For example, some may focus on local level initiatives, others on high level policy. There is a significant opportunity for learning about the issue, the players, and funding strategies in collaborative discussions that will help improve and advance one’s own strategy and approach. In addition to getting together in meeting rooms, there may be considerable benefit (and fun) in funders having shared learning experiences outside conference rooms – especially field trips to affected communities or regions in the case of place-based strategies.

“There is benefit in more regular contact between the various funders of water work in BC. We need to talk more. People need to talk about what they’re funding and why they’re funding it. Finding out who else is working in that area, who the people are that have capacity and who don’t.”

**Anna Warwick Sears,
Okanagan Basin Water Board**

(Source: Opportunities for Strategic Collaboration)

- **Can address gaps and maintain support for the issue** – when funders work together, especially when they work closely with advisors and grantees, it is easier to identify some of the gaps in strategy or activity. It’s also easier to fill those gaps when the resources required to do so can be shared amongst the group. Additionally, in the situation where some funders change priorities and are no longer able to fund water projects in B.C., it is easier for other funders to anticipate the gap left by that funder and attempt to fill it or minimize disruption to grantees and efforts on the ground.

- **Easier for grantees and advisors** – it can make it a lot easier and less time consuming for grantees if they know that funders are working together. Rather than making several different pitches to suit different funders’ priorities, they may be able to make a consistent pitch to those funders or even a single pitch to the collaborative. Reporting can also become much more efficient, especially if some funders can agree to accept the same report from the grantee. In grantee world, time saved in fund-raising equates to more time getting the real work done and having a greater impact. A collaborative can also be a more efficient experience for advisors as they can come and speak to the entire group as opposed to each funder individually.

“Water funders play a critical role here and if they’re at sixes and sevens they lose their impact. Even if they’re partially aligned they’ll be a lot more effective.”

John O’Riordan, SFU & Advisor, POLIS Project

(Source: Opportunities for Strategic Collaboration)

Challenges of collaboration–how might things go wrong?

Collaboratives tend not to be easy endeavours and it is useful to recognize some of the challenges associated with them and anticipate where things could go wrong.

- **Lack of clear goals and purpose** – as much as possible, it must be clear to members of a collaborative what the goals and purpose of working together are. Initially, this may start out a little fuzzy but it is important that a clear purpose crystallize fairly quickly. If this is still unclear to most organizations after several meetings then this may indicate that the situation is not ripe or appropriate for a collaborative.
- **Control and compromise** – when collaboratives move beyond information sharing to work on problems together and engage in strategic alignment or co-funding, there will typically be a need for compromise and potentially the need for organizations to alter a specific approach or strategy to accommodate that level of coordination. Some organizations (or people) find it challenging to give up full control and direction over strategy and approach, which can make true collaboration difficult.
- **Time and energy** – collaboratives do require an investment of time and energy. There is the time involved in formal collaborative meetings but also likely additional time having one-on-one conversations with other funders or meetings with a subset of funders. As mentioned in the previous point, there may also be implications for your organization’s specific approach or strategy. Making adjustments to existing plans to accommodate collaborative opportunities can also take both time and energy to make. The challenge for most funders is that collaboration is typically an add-on or something done on the side of one’s desk. As such, during busy times (which seems to be all times these days), collaboration can be viewed as dispensable when compared to other ‘core’ responsibilities. Managing this time and energy is sometimes the role of a “backbone organization” that facilitates strategy development, clerical support, or pooled grantmaking mechanisms.
- **Grantee suspicion** – while collaboration can make life easier for grantees, it can also breed suspicion in the grantee community if this is strategic disagreement and the effort is perceived as picking winners and losers and involved in games of favouritism. This caution highlights the importance of design and communication to the grantee community.
- **Priority changes** – if the priorities of an organization that has taken a lead role in the collaborative change then that can have a significant impact on the collaborative. Ideally, there are at least two or three leadership organizations so that the collaborative can weather the turbulence that comes when a lead organization or personality leaves.
- **Interpersonal tensions** – sometimes just a clash of personalities is enough to break up or dull the effectiveness of a collaborative. This may be mitigated to some extent through facilitation, transparency and good collaborative decision.
- **Impact measurement** – most organizations, and Boards of organizations, want to be able to demonstrate that their organization is having a significant and discernable impact. This can be

challenging enough with complex issues like fresh water protection. Working in a collaborative can be perceived as adding to this challenge because it becomes harder to identify which impacts have resulted from your organization's specific interventions (on the other hand, some organizations may see working with a collaborative as an indicator of effectiveness).

Summary

To sum up, building on a history of informal coordination, and based on one-on-one funder interviews and the May meeting of BC water funders, there is a clear interest in increasing collaborative activity around water protection in British Columbia. There are substantial benefits to be gained from this effort but also challenges to be overcome. Some key next steps should be:

- Determining clear goals and a purpose for the collaborative.
- Confirming the specific areas of common interest.
- Determining some structure moving forward.
- Identifying some joint projects/grant-making opportunities to focus on.