



## Nonprofit Collaboration: Finding Common Ground To Accelerate Social Sector Progress

By Kyle Zimmer

In the U.S. alone, there are more than 1.5 million registered nonprofits, addressing issues from affordable housing and poverty to clean water and climate change. And yet in spite of all the efforts, the problems seem bigger and more complex than ever. This lack of progress is catastrophically discouraging to the social sector, which is filled with dedicated people working around the clock to fight these battles. But the real enemy in the sector is scarcity.

Scarcity filters through nearly every aspect of the social sector. The scarcity of consistent funding is the primary problem, and it undermines everything—from the ability to build solutions at the necessary scope, to the ability to recruit top talent. But perhaps the most damaging impact of scarcity is the way it sabotages collaboration. Scarcity turns potential teammates into competitors, and because the sector has been characterized by scarcity throughout its history, nonprofits have not learned the skill of collaboration.

Yet it's clear that collaboration is essential if we are to have any hope of tackling the complex issues confronting us. Today, it's estimated that more than 30 million Americans live in areas without access to safe, clean water; millions of people are struggling to afford housing; and the number of weather and climate disasters is on the rise. And that just scratches the surface. Ingrained racial, economic and educational inequities require systemic innovation to achieve systemic change.

The power of collaboration isn't new—we see examples all around us:

- Special interest groups that join forces to lobby for action on policy/legal issues.
- Community groups that align to combat crime and make neighborhoods safer.
- Public health groups, schools and policymakers who work together to address food insecurity.

The good news is that we're seeing promising examples of funders who are collaborating on issues such as early childhood development and racial equity. There are also a handful of examples of funders trying to incentivize collaboration between nonprofits through large-scale challenges with big-dollar investments.

However, in addition to these large-scale initiatives, the sector critically needs regular and ongoing collaboration at a more manageable scale—with collaborative efforts that are initiated by nonprofits themselves to address common barriers—and supported by the funding community.

Case in point: This past year, our nonprofit worked to organize the Diverse Books for All Coalition, an unprecedented collaboration bringing together over 30 nonprofits and member organizations to address the need for more children's books by and about diverse races and cultures—and to make those books not only more accessible but also more affordable.

We realized that the real opportunity to accelerate change would come from aggregating the collective purchasing power and voice of organizations across the field. The number of books coalition members collectively procure is equivalent to 20% of the retail children's book market. By collaborating, we are building a more powerful and effective market force to drive the kinds of books that we know are needed to support educational and racial equity.

We know that this will not only result in a powerful movement promoting diverse and affordable books but will also lead to additional strategies for the field to build successful collaboration among nonprofits to tackle other common challenges. We are learning together to share failures, experiments and successes because all of us

know that it is urgent to refine and advance our solutions more quickly if we are to make a real and lasting difference.

Collaborations don't happen overnight. They require shared values, an underlying staffing infrastructure, and care and feeding to build trust. They also require real engagement and investment of time by the members.

This type of collaboration, driven by nonprofits and supported by funders, can dramatically unlock field-wide innovation and accelerate positive social impact on issues large and small facing our communities and our world.

As nonprofits, it's up to us to identify opportunities to come together and work collaboratively. We also need to urge the funding community to recognize and support these critical partnerships. The clock is ticking.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2023/04/13/nonprofit-collaboration-finding-common-ground-to-accelerate-social-sector-progress/?sh=728131677e96>