



# **DONOR COLLABORATIVES:** Keys to Success

A summary of knowledge and insights to guide  
the development of a donor collaborative.

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**PANORAMA**

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## ABOUT PANORAMA

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Panorama is an action tank dedicated to solving local and global problems through audacious thinking and bold action. We bring together diverse perspectives to spark new ideas that create change. We partner with ambitious leaders to strengthen their organizations and achieve their goals, and we initiate projects when we see gaps that need to be filled. Working with our partners, we raise awareness and drive progress on global priorities to maximize the impact of the initiatives we support.

Panorama is a team of strategists, advocates, campaigners, analysts, storytellers, resource mobilizers, and organizational designers with deep experience in foundations, non-governmental organizations, private companies, and public institutions. We are all inspired by a life-long commitment to improve the world.

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## OVERVIEW

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Philanthropy, by its very nature, is about doing good and making an impact. For philanthropic organizations with visions of growing their impact, either through increased influence or through strategic investments, collaboration with other funders is a highly effective option. Creating an organized, managed collaboration between funders—referred to in this report as a “donor collaborative”—has proven to be a powerful mechanism for philanthropies to have greater collective impact than they would otherwise alone.

The following report draws on Panorama’s experience working with donors, including the creation and management of donor collaboratives covering a range of topics such as global nutrition, malaria, and ending violence against children. Panorama gathered additional qualitative learnings through interviews with existing successful donor groups.

Panorama also conducted a landscape review of dozens of articles, reports, and interviews on the opportunities and challenges found in existing donor collaboratives. The majority of these publications focused on collaboration amongst private philanthropies and government donors. Other articles spoke more broadly about coalitions, with donors as one of several stakeholder groups.

At the highest level, Panorama’s review highlights the benefits of collaboration among donors, including:

- Ability to create system-level change by addressing an issue more holistically;
- Opportunity to aggregate capital to scale proven interventions;
- Increased impact with longer-term or larger investments;
- Cost efficiencies due to shared strategy development, due diligence, and evaluation;
- Greater visibility at the national and global levels when multiple voices speak in unison;
- Access to expertise from other organizations and accelerated learning opportunities, which would otherwise not be available to individual donors; and
- A structure for thoughtful decision-making.

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This report provides insights to inform the work of donors as they seek to collaborate with others and increase their impact. These learnings are synthesized here into three “Keys to Success” for developing and sustaining successful donor collaboratives.

### KEY 1

#### **Develop a Collective Mission: What Are We Trying to Achieve Together?**

From the outset, a successful donor collaborative lays out why it exists and what makes it worthwhile for separate organizations to come together, rather than act alone. Founding members need to come together around a shared vision and agreed upon goals that will drive the donor collaborative’s activities.

### KEY 2

#### **Harness Effective Group Dynamics: Who Needs to Be Here and How Will We Work Together?**

Working well together is no small feat. Successful donor collaboratives build membership strategically to get the right people around the table and intentionally develop an environment in which members trust one another and are willing to engage in open, and sometimes uncomfortable, dialogue.

### KEY 3

#### **Create a High-Performance Environment: How Do We Get There?**

A successful donor collaborative will thoughtfully determine the appropriate structure up front to ensure the group can sustain its impact. This includes identifying the most efficient collaboration model, governance structure, and neutral facilitator to create the ideal space for healthy dialogue, debate, and decision-making.

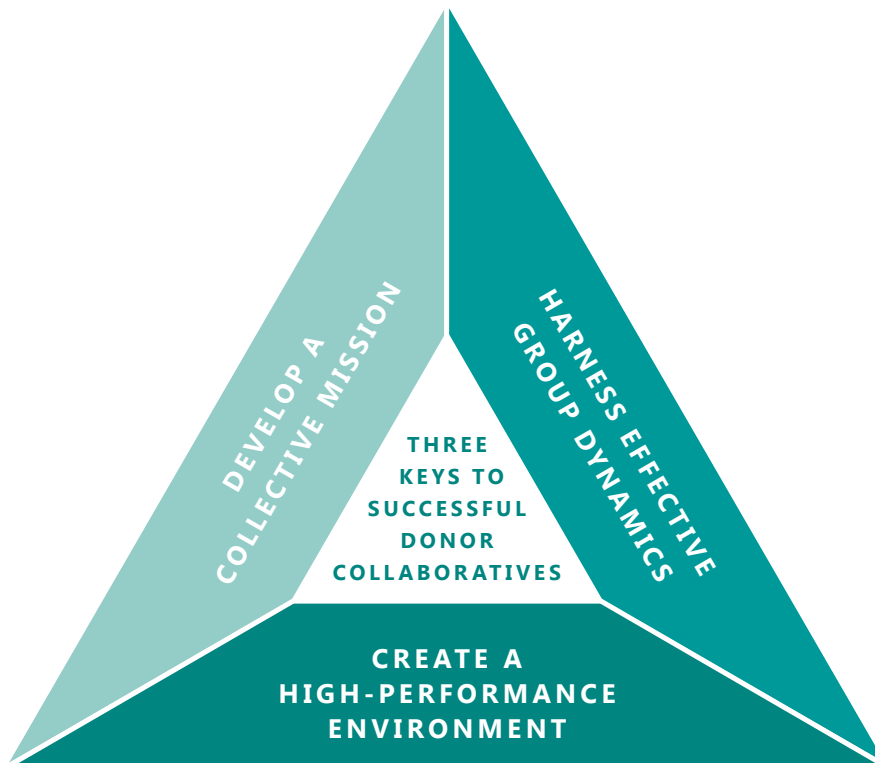


FIGURE 1. THE THREE KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL DONOR COLLABORATIVES

## KEY 1

### DEVELOP A SHARED MISSION: WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO ACHIEVE TOGETHER?

In the early stages of development, successful collaboratives consider critical questions to establish the foundation for future activities, such as: Why is this particular group of donors coming together? What can this group achieve as a unit that it cannot accomplish as individuals? How will this group ensure progress towards its goals?

Answering these questions will lead to alignment around a shared vision and an agreed upon plan of action. These are foundational aspects of effective collaboration and reaching impact.

#### ALIGN AROUND A SHARED VISION

Successful donor collaboratives are intentional about identifying their shared vision and staying true to it over time. A 2014 report from The Bridgespan Group and the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, "Lessons in Funder Collaboration,"<sup>1</sup> studied more than 63 donor collaboratives across various causes and geographies. The report outlines four key questions to ask during the process of developing a shared vision:

- What is our goal?
- Why do we need to collaborate to succeed?
- What are we willing to invest in time and money?
- How do we achieve results?

Answering questions similar to these is an important part of defining a shared vision, mission, and values that will serve as a non-negotiable north star to guide the group's decisions and activities. Successful groups tend to begin with collaboration between organizations that already have a shared strategy or approach—for example around an issue, a geography, or a particular demographic. However, even amongst like-minded individuals, each will bring a different perspective to the table. Thus, it is important to ensure that all participants in a collaborative are aligned around a shared vision for the group.

#### GLOBAL DONOR PLATFORM FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT (GDPRD)

##### Making time for vision

The Global Donor Platform for Rural Development (GDPRD), a 40-member collaborative of government donors, international financing institutions, development agencies, and foundations, devoted nine months to the process of developing a shared vision and strategic plan. This plan included a results framework and target outcomes and outputs for the group within a five-year timeframe. The GDPRD secretariat notes that this strategic plan "serves as the backbone of their collaboration" as it guides all major group decisions and activities.

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## IDENTIFY MEASURABLE GOALS – AND TRACK PROGRESS TOWARD THEM

A successful donor collaborative will be clear about what it wants to achieve in the near- and long-term and will set measurable goals to track progress. A clear set of goals guides activities and offers benchmarks to evaluate the impact of a group of donors. The collaborative should track progress towards these specific, measurable, and time-bound goals to ensure the group is achieving the agreed-upon objectives.

Goals can take different forms depending on the purpose of the group. For example, groups may have targets that are time bound in three- or five-year timeframes or they may have milestones that coincide with historical moments such as the 2030 target of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). For the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development (GDPRD), the SDGs provide an overarching framework for the collaborative's 2016-2020 strategic plan. The GDPRD views the goals of economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the SDGs through a rural lens, with a particular focus on Goal 2 of the SDGs to achieve "zero hunger" by 2030.

## CONSIDER THE STRENGTH OF A COLLECTIVE VOICE

As a collection of funders, there are a variety of ways a donor collaborative can work together related to grant making or funding strategies. These range from knowledge exchange to creating a new funding entity, and are explored in further detail under "Key 3. Create A High-Performance Environment." But there is also an opportunity to look beyond funding and use the group's collective public influence, or voice, to have impact. Many donor collaboratives have a goal to elevate issues and promote solutions through advocacy and consensus building.<sup>2</sup> Enabling a collective voice from a group of donors is appealing to many funders as individual organizations are often unwilling to take a public stance alone. Many funders are more inclined to take a public position in solidarity with their peers.

One donor collaborative focused on advocacy is California Forward, a group that aims to bring about fiscal, structural, and democratic process reforms to reshape the way the California state government operates. The collaborative has successfully helped moved forward three reforms approved by voters: independent redrawing of political districts, "top two" open state primaries, and majority-vote budgets. California Forward was able to bring gravitas and progress to some issues that would not have possible by the individual donors on their own.

## KEY 2

### HARNESS EFFECTIVE GROUP DYNAMICS: WHO NEEDS TO BE HERE AND HOW WILL WE WORK TOGETHER?

Group dynamics are complex in any situation. A donor collaborative has the added nuances of involving interactions between both individuals and organizations, revolving around the use of funds, all with the goal of having positive impact in the organizations' chosen topic area.

Existing successful donor collaboratives are intentional about creating effective group dynamics in these ways: Working to build authentic trust, getting the right people around the table, starting with a small band of highly engaged donors, and establishing an environment that facilitates open discussions between members.

#### BUILD AUTHENTIC TRUST

Hand-in-hand with shared vision alignment is the need to establish trust amongst the group. The Stanford Social Innovation Review found that "The single most important factor behind all successful collaboratives is trust-based relationships among participants. Many collaboratives ultimately fail to reach their full potential because they lack a strong relational foundation."<sup>3</sup>

According to research by Harder+Company and EDGE Research on understanding how foundations access and use knowledge, "[Foundations] rely on their peers and colleagues, as opposed to particular organizations or publications, both as their most trusted knowledge sources and as their preferred means to gather knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

As such, many successful donor groups grow from established working relationships between members prior to creating a formal collaborative. However, when participants are less familiar with each other, it is important to spend time developing a common base of values and agreed-upon approaches. The collaborative may be high-stakes in terms of funds committed and reputational risk, so members must focus on establishing trust by learning about each stakeholder's respective values, work, and communication styles.

This means that the group may not be able to move as quickly to action as some members would like; however, the time taken to build trusting relationships will result in a much more sustainable partnership over the long term.



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## GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE AROUND THE TABLE

In order to achieve a proposed set of goals, it is important for a donor collaborative to get the right people to the table and to understand their roles and decision-making ability. Successful groups carefully consider who needs to be involved and at which seniority or skill level. For example, some groups rely on CEO engagement, especially during the initial phases, to galvanize the collaborative and to provide organizational buy-in. Involving a CEO or other senior leader in the early development of the collaboration can also help increase the credibility of the collaboration and attract additional members. With participation at various programmatic or technical levels, it is important to understand each person's respective role in their organization and their organization's expectations for their role in the collaborative. Roles can include decision maker, influencer, or technical expert, among others.

Donor collaboratives themselves can be comprised of multiple individuals playing different roles within their organization, as is the case with the Global Platform for Rural Development (GDPRD). In this collaborative, each member nominates a senior staff member as their organization's official representative as well as a separate contact point that will receive all official GDPRD communications. Each type of participant has a specific function and expected time commitment for their work with the GDPRD; setting these expectations enables each organization to select the appropriate staff members for participation in the collaborative.

For many donor collaboratives, current members' existing relationships with other donors in their network tends to drive new member recruitment. Successful groups leverage these relationships to their advantage, drawing on members' access to different partnerships that increase the scope and influence of the group as needed.<sup>5</sup>

Successful groups also set protocols for recruiting and onboarding new members. Examples of this come both from Oceans 5, an international funders' collaborative dedicated to protecting the world's five oceans, and from the Global Development Platform for Rural Development (GDPRD). For recruitment, Oceans 5 invites prospective members to board meetings to observe the group's operations and dynamics. For onboarding new members, the GDPRD recognizes its relatively large membership and high turnover and includes protocols for engaging new members within its strategic plan.

### CLIMATE WORKS FUNDERS TABLE

#### Building slowly

For example, the Climate Works Funders Table—a philanthropic donors group focused on increasing investments to solve the global climate crisis—started with a core group of three leading organizations who were aligned around a shared vision. This core group then slowly cultivated a larger group, eventually growing to 16 participants, while maintaining a clear focus and continuing to see strong impact. The Climate Works Funders Table is now replicating this model in India, where three Indian philanthropies are collaborating with a view to eventually creating a larger national donor collaborative on climate change.

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## START SMALL AT FIRST

The initial development of a donor collaborative—identifying a shared vision, setting goals, and implementing activities—requires significant time and attention. This process has proven to be more efficient with a small group of highly engaged donors who can build momentum with small wins. If too many partners join during the initial phase, it is nearly impossible to get everyone on the same page. Donor collaboratives should consider how much time they can spend onboarding and engaging new members.

As a donor collaborative grows and formalizes, it can be beneficial to consider different membership levels. This creates a flexible structure in which donors can choose how they want to engage, depending on their motivations, trust in the group, financial contribution, and risk tolerance levels. For example, Oceans 5 has two tiers of membership: Partners and members. Partners commit to giving \$1 million per year, which comes with a Board of Directors seat. Donors who are new to the cause, interested in learning more before fully committing, or have less to give, can become members by giving \$200,000 per year; this allows them to provide significant support for individual Oceans 5 projects, but does not give them decision-making authority as part of the Board.

## GET COMFORTABLE WITH BEING UNCOMFORTABLE

As Stanley Foundation's publication, "Multistakeholder Coalitions: Innovating or Complicating Global Governance," outlines, "Successful multi-stakeholder coalitions create room for dissent and disagreement."<sup>6</sup> For large or small groups, it is essential to foster a productive and safe environment where debate can take place between members. What this looks like varies by group, but normally requires substantive in-person time together to develop.

One example of creating this environment is within the Climate & Land Use Alliance (CLUA), a collaborative of foundations focused on increasing funding and solutions for sustainable land use to address global climate change. The CLUA has found that pushing members outside their comfort zones and having them challenge one another's approaches has strengthened the group's strategies while contributing to more change than otherwise would have been possible.

The Global Development Platform for Rural Development (GDPRD) takes a similar approach. The GDPRD intentionally created space for donors and their partners to debate and discuss issues related to development assistance, financing instruments, and new business models in the agriculture and food systems sectors.

## KEY 3

# CREATE A HIGH-PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT: HOW DO WE GET THERE?

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In addition to why the group has come together (collective mission) and who will be around the table (effective group dynamics) a donor collaborative must agree on how it will achieve its goals. The structure of successful donor collaboratives typically includes a clear model for achieving a group's goals, a mutually agreed upon governance structure, and the engagement of a neutral facilitator. These components provide the backbone for how the group will make meaningful progress against its core objectives.

## DETERMINE THE COLLABORATION MODEL

Once a shared vision and measurable goals are set, the group must select the right collaboration model, or the method in which they will operate, to best achieve their goals. The collaboration model a donor collaborative takes on depends on the group's primary objectives and how much integration members are willing to take on—that is how much each member is willing to align their strategy and share their decision making with other donors.

The Bridgespan Group and the Packard Foundation summarize five donor collaboration models in their “Lessons in Funder Collaboration” report,<sup>i</sup> each with a different primary objective:

- Exchange knowledge
- Coordinate funding
- Coinvest in existing entity/initiative
- Create a new entity/initiative
- Fund the funder

Figure 2 provides a description of each of these models and where each falls along a range of lower to higher levels of integration with other donors.

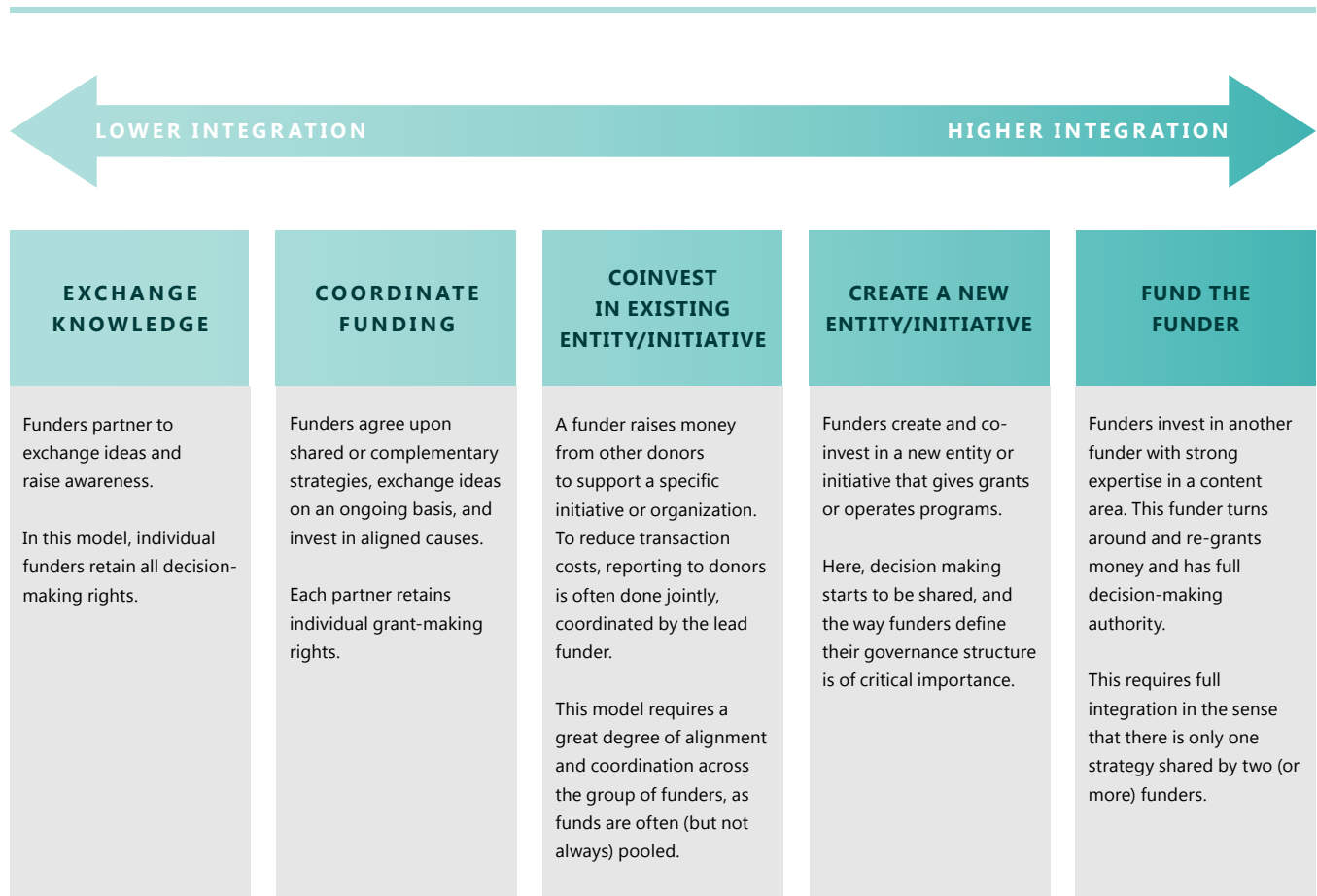


FIGURE 2. DONOR COLLABORATION MODELS

*This chart is based on information from the Bridgespan Group and Packard Foundation's "Lessons in Funder Collaboration" report.<sup>1</sup>*

Of course, the five collaboration models described in Figure 2 are not the only ways in which a donor collaborative might work together. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors outlines other models in "Collaborative Giving,"<sup>7</sup> including:

- **Aggregators:** One expert organization collects funds from various donors, selecting worthwhile projects to fund.
- **Individual donor giving circles:** Members align on specific goals, combine funds to give larger grants, share information such as due diligence reports, and coordinate advocacy efforts for policy change. Donors retain decision-making authority and have reduced organizational burden.
- **Private-public partnerships:** Donors join efforts with governments to scale their vision and impact.

In summary, there are myriad ways for a donor collaborative to operate. The appropriate model for any particular collaborative depends on the specific goals the group wants to achieve and the level of integration and risk they are willing to accept. The group can also evolve over time depending on goals and donor interests.

## DEVELOP A GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE EARLY ON

Along with choosing the collaboration model, successful donor groups establish a clear governance structure early in the process. Figure 3 illustrates how the chosen collaboration model can determine how members will make decisions or relinquish some form of control with their decision-making rights, such as:

## CLIMATE & LAND USE ALLIANCE (CLUA)

### Learning and adapting

Groups who are highly adaptive and willing to evolve become effective most quickly. For example, CLUA initially formed with a rigid governance structure, requiring all members to agree on investment decisions, which proved to be unattractive for reaching new participants. In their second iteration, CLUA chose to loosen these rules for funding requests under a certain dollar amount in order to broaden the group's appeal to additional members.

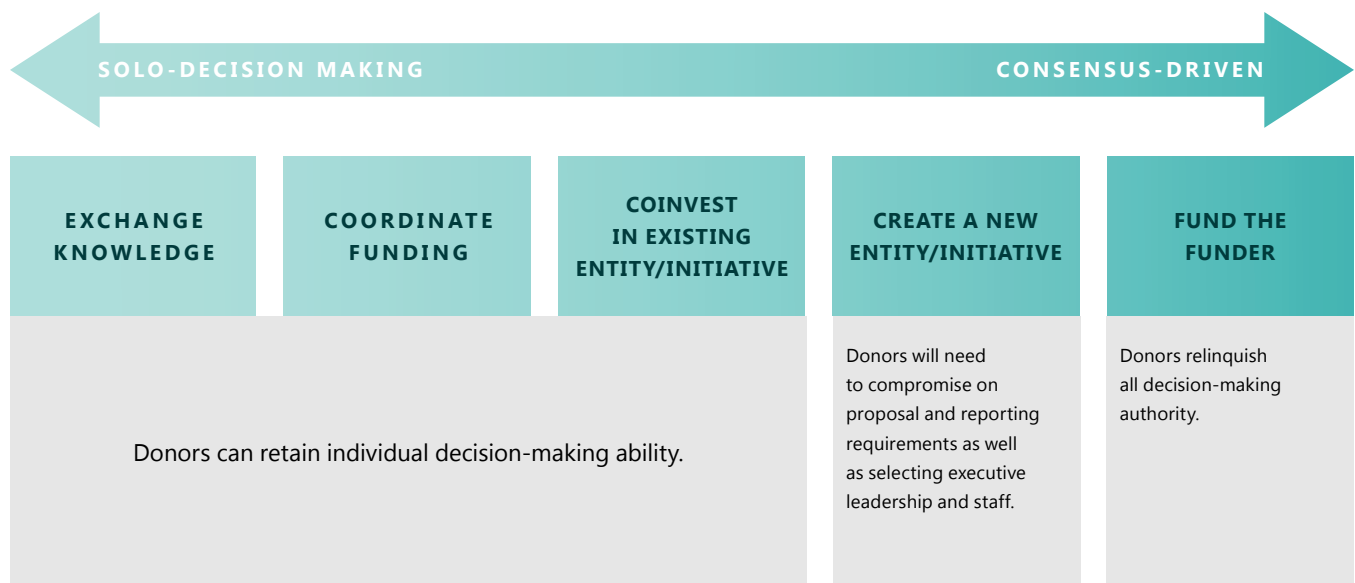


FIGURE 3. DECISION MAKING ACROSS COLLABORATION MODELS

This chart is based on information from the Bridgespan Group and Packard Foundation's "Lessons in Funder Collaboration" report.<sup>1</sup>

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Groups that operate on a consensus-driven model may take longer to make decisions, potentially reducing engagement for foundations with limited resources or capacity. Alternatively, individual donors within a collaborative can take on unique roles depending on their available resources, interests, and expertise. For example, individual funders may take ownership of communication efforts, managing meetings and convenings, leading monitoring and evaluation efforts, etc. When funders have a clear delineation of roles and ownership, the group can be more productive from the onset.

## ENGAGE A NEUTRAL FACILITATOR

A third-party, neutral facilitator can be critical in managing the inevitable differences that arise when bringing together the perspectives, opinions, and priorities of multiple donors.<sup>8</sup> This neutral facilitator role, often designated as the group's secretariat, is filled by an individual or staff that are independent from any of the member organizations, ensuring that no one organization's voice dominates the group.

The facilitator or secretariat serves as the central hub around which a group makes decisions, holds discussions, and takes action. Often this role is a logistical necessity since time constraints and staff capacity can limit donor member participation. In cases where a donor group is working in a highly integrated collaboration model, the group may need to form an entirely new entity to carry out the proposed work. This was the case with CLUA and California Forward, each being new independent non-profit organizations founded to carry out the work of a donor collaborative.

The most effective facilitators are those with significant experience in coalition building. This ensures that they can interact appropriately and effectively with the donor group members, who are often senior decision makers or leaders within their organizations. The facilitator should provide guidance and the necessary tools to carry out the group's strategic plan, as well as provide strategic counsel; however, this should not replace the critical role of the donor collaborative members when it comes to in-depth issue knowledge and strategic decision-making. Keeping the right balance between the roles of the facilitator and the members is critically important to achieving the group's goals.

## CONCLUSION

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Lessons from existing groups inform the successful development of future donor collaboratives. The examples included and the research summarized in this report cover a range of issue areas, membership sizes, and collaboration models. Throughout these examples, Panorama has identified the keys to success that have enabled donors to come together and have more impact as a group than they would otherwise have alone.

The three keys to success—

- (1) Developing a collective mission;
- (2) Harnessing effective group dynamics; and
- (3) Creating a high-performance environment

—work hand in hand to create the ideal conditions for a powerful donor collaborative.

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## APPENDIX B: DONOR COLLABORATIVES REFERENCED

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California Forward

Climate & Land Use Alliance

ClimateWorks Funders Table\*

Global Donor Platform for Rural Development\*

Global Polio Eradication Initiative

Initiative for Smallholder Finance

Oceans 5

*\* Interview held with this donor collaborative to inform this report.*



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