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policy and practice

Building partnerships through third-party facilitation: best practices from the Community Collaborative Initiative

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Small minority group organisations rarely collaborate with other nonprofits owing to a lack of expertise and resources. Third-party facilitators can help these groups navigate the process of collaboration. However, the literature has largely ignored their role in the process. We address this gap by studying the challenges third-party facilitators face in the collaboration process and best practices they can apply using the Community Collaboration Initiative (CCI), a unique third-party-facilitated collaboration process working with Muslim American nonprofits.

Keywords community organisations • best practices • third-party facilitation • nonprofit collaboration

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Introduction

Effective collaboration among nonprofit and nongovernmental organiations (NGOs) can help the organisations resolve common problems, provide better services, and reduce programme replication (Salamon, 1987; Chen, 2010; DeHoog, 2015; Gazley and Guo, 2020; Tu and Xu, 2020). The aims and nature of these collaborations vary from narrow purposes to instituting permanent socioeconomic changes (Gazley and Brudney, 2007; Kim and Peng, 2018).

According to the Nonprofit Finance Fund, 68% of nonprofits collaborated (formally or informally) with other nonprofits in 2022. However, most nonprofits struggle to find the time, resources, and funding needed to collaborate. In fact, the consensus among researchers is that collaborations, whether interorganisational, intergovernmental, or intersectoral, are challenging to create and manage (O'Leary and Vij, 2012; DeHoog, 2015).

Minority racial and religious nonprofits face even greater collaborative challenges, including a lack of staff and capacity, unclear roles and expectations, and an inability to bring together organisations and leaders with diverse backgrounds and interests. As a result, research suggests that collaboration among these nonprofits is more sporadic compared with collaboration in larger nonprofit organisations (Kim and Peng, 2018). To enhance the collaboration process, nonprofits, with or without the help of funders, are beginning to employ third parties to facilitate the collaboration process. These facilitators can serve as neutral parties, working under backbone organisations or, in the case of large organisations, hiring team members with experience in building partnerships (Jones et al, 2017; Grant et al, 2020).

This study examines the role of third-party facilitation in collaborations, to identify the challenges third-party facilitators face when guiding nonprofits toward common goals, and to propose the best practices to overcome those challenges. We address those challenges and best practices by using the Community Collaboration Initiative (CCI), a three-year, community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) project. Using expert third-party facilitators, CCI built sustainable and trusting collaborations among selected Muslim-led nonprofits based in the Midwest; a significant goal, as Muslim-led nonprofits usually do not engage in collaboration with each other. We interviewed the facilitators who assisted in the meetings with the CCI organisational representatives and asked them about their challenges and best practices used to resolve their problems.

Muslims belong to a highly diverse group comprising Arabs, Asians, African Americans, and an increasing number of Latinos, while no one ethnic group is a majority. With projections that the US will not have an ethnic majority by 2040, learning how Muslim nonprofit organisations hone collaboration helps us understand how managers can build trust in small, highly diverse organisations less likely than larger organisations to collaborate with others. Moreover, Muslim-American nonprofits work with highly vulnerable populations, and studying them can help us better understand how other organisations working with minority populations can collaborate and serve them better (Siddiqui et al, 2023).

Our findings show that several challenges can impact the process of collaboration building, such as different levels of commitment among members, perception of competition among nonprofit partners, and lack of trust between organisations. Moreover, external problems can emerge, such as the onset of COVID-19, which made it impossible for people to meet in person. However, our study shows that several managerial practices improve the process of collaboration building, for instance, building trust between organisations and facilitators; having decentralised leadership, which allows different organisations to take ownership of the process, and for leaders to emerge organically.

Literature review

Collaborative processes, including information sharing, cooperation mechanisms, and clear organisational roles for resource sharing, can substantially improve collaboration (Jang et al, 2016; Reiter et al, 2018; Kim et al, 2022). However, most existing research focuses on antecedents, the causes of collaboration, or outcomes, not on the collaboration process itself (Gazley and Guo, 2020). It is crucial to study the collaboration process from a practitioner's perspective, as a systematic study of

the process can help practitioners apply better practices that can help facilitate the processes. In fact, although many factors for collaboration are beyond practitioners' control, including their organisations' antecedents, they can control collaborative processes to ensure more robust partnerships. By focusing on a good process, practitioners can ensure that collaborations that were more likely to fail are more likely to succeed (Yang and Cheong, 2019).

The process of collaboration

Herein, we focus on the process of forming collaborations, which is often challenging and complex for organisations to sustain (Babiak and Thibault, 2009). The collaboration process is highly complicated, including conflicts, complexity, and adaptation (Thomson and Perry, 2006; Tu and Xu, 2020). Consequently, most collaborations fail to achieve their desired outcomes or fail in the initial planning stage. Failure, however, is not inevitable. Collaborative processes including, but not limited to, cooperation, communication, and organisational role clarity for resource sharing, can improve collaboration substantially (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990).

Third-party role

Third-party facilitators' expertise can enhance all aspects of collaboration. Arenas et al (2013) suggested that third-party facilitator organisations can help direct potentially confrontational relationships toward collaborative relationships. This scenario applies as well to areas such as financial and legal research and analysis, human resource compensations, fundraising feasibility studies, IT platforms and capacity assessments, and rebranding strategies in the case of mergers (Yang and Cheong, 2019). These organisations can serve as neutral third parties, providing industry-level external facilitators to help participating organisations better articulate their aims and find commonalities in their organisational goals (Grant et al, 2020).

The limited research available on third-party facilitators supports their value to collaborative processes, in particular, in building trust between organisations, especially if the facilitators already have relationships with an organisation's leadership (Lambright et al, 2010; Tu and Xu, 2020). However, of this limited research, most studies focus on government–nonprofit collaborations or the business sector (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Austin, 2003).

Moreover, the difficulties are particularly clear when third-party facilitators navigate complex interpersonal and other challenges while simultaneously facilitating the collaboration process (de Bakker and den Hond, 2008; Zietsma and Winn, 2008). Therefore, there is a need to systematically study the issues third-party facilitators face and to better understand the best practices they can employ to resolve those issues.

CCI and third-party facilitators

This study explored the challenges faced by third-party facilitators and the best practices they applied to redress those challenges, using a qualitative research design by focusing on the CCI project. CCI is a three-year community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) project that brought together 22 Muslim-led nonprofits

in January 2020, with the first year focused on trust building, followed by a focus on collaboration in the second year, and a focus on sustainability in the third year. The CCI leadership team comprised three researchers, one practitioner (programme manager), one programme assistant, one major donor, and six facilitators.

The CCI leadership team solicited the 22 nonprofits using a snowball sample, in which the researchers commonly start with a small number of initial contacts who fit the research criteria and who then, in turn, recommend other potential participants, and so on (Parker et al, 2019). The main criterion for selecting these organisations was that Islamic values were instilled in their mission and were organisations with diverse capacities, ranging from large, well-established organisations to small, less organised ones. As Muslim nonprofits are generally under-resourced, the organisations that emerged were those with limited capacity. Additionally, no organisation had a budget of more than $10 million, while nearly a quarter of these organisations (25%) had budgets of less than $250,000 (Siddiqui et al, 2023).

The 22 organisations were divided into five cohorts based on their similarities, mission alignment, and collaborative potential. The five cohorts were classified as: (1) Community Organisations; (2) Community Centers (Mosques); (3) Public Policy and Advocacy Organisations; (4) Health and Wellness Organisations; and (5) Legal Services Organisations. Monthly virtual meetings were held in which representatives from all five cohorts had the opportunity to interact and learn best practices from each other (Siddiqui et al, 2023).

Data collection

We interviewed the facilitators involved in the CCI project to gather related information about their roles, challenges, and the best practices they applied to address those challenges. CCI hired facilitators from the Muslim community who previously had direct personal knowledge of the Muslim community and a positive track record of working in community collaborations. The facilitators were responsible for team building, facilitating meetings, working with participating organisational representatives, and strengthening partnerships among all parties involved.

We collected primary data via semi-structured interviews. It has been shown that interviews are the preferred and major data collection method with researcher–participant relationships partnering to discover and generate knowledge (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). Six facilitators were interviewed via Zoom for this study. To ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research, the researchers checked the accuracy of the findings by triangulating different data sources, and examined evidence from the meeting minutes which provided a consistent justification for the themes (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). In addition to one-on-one interviews, we reviewed the transcripts of all the meetings from year one and year two and generated a thematic framework for our research. All the interviews were conducted between April 2021 and July 2021 and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom.

Data analysis

Transcripts of the interviews and the minutes from monthly meetings were imported into NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software program. First, we read the transcripts

three times, which enabled us to understand the overall data. After reviewing all transcripts thoroughly, we started the coding process. The transcript review helped with the identification of relevant codes. We formed initial codes inductively. Second, we eliminated irrelevant codes (that is, all unrelated codes) and merged all the relevant codes into categories. Third, we created themes to make sense of the overall data for the analysis. Creswell (2009) defined coding as organising the material into text segments before bringing meaning to data. As CBPAR-based research ensures honest feedback from the participants, we shared our findings to solicit their input on our results. Based on this iterative process, we developed our conclusions.

Findings

Our findings show that collaboration building is slow and fragile and that several challenges can affect the process, such as different levels of commitment among members, perception of competition among nonprofit partners, and lack of trust between organisations. Moreover, external problems can emerge, such as COVID-19, which make it impossible for people to meet in person. However, our study shows that several managerial practices improve the process of collaboration building. For instance, building trust between organisations and facilitators helps them to be more open with each other and more able to work together to reach shared goals. Having decentralised leadership can help the process considerably by allowing different organisations to take ownership of the process, and for leaders to emerge organically. Using innovative methods such as Google Docs and Google Sheets to facilitate the exchange of information and Zoom to explore each other's organisations, as we did in our study, can help improve communication and the collaboration process.

Roles and requirements of facilitators

We first asked the facilitators about their roles in the facilitation process. They highlighted the flexibility required during the collaboration process. Their primary role was as coordinators. They led the meetings, disseminated schedules, sent reminders, coordinated all information for the different participants, and brought participants together. They mediated disagreements, mentored participants, and provided meaningful feedback to improve collaboration (Facilitator E).

It was crucial for facilitators to work with participants who showed varying levels of dedication, and to build relationships with less committed members and make them feel essential and valued in the collaboration process. For instance, Facilitator B helped one of the cohorts design a national conference and prepare a conference schedule, when the group decided that they would not be able to finish the task within the projected deadline.

Trust

Most facilitators highlighted the critical role they had to play in order to build trust between themselves and the participants; the same was true among the different participants. The facilitators saw trust building as a stepping stone to initiating positive

relationships that could help speed up the process. For instance, Facilitator A gave the example of Participant N, who often made executive decisions; no one resisted her because she had earned the respect and trust of everyone in the group. However, one of the facilitators noted that trust building was a complicated process and was further hampered by the lack of in-person meetings because of COVID-19 (Facilitator B).

Distrust at the professional level also increased because some people were less committed and worked less than others. Building personal relationships meant talking about their struggles, being authentic, and knowing participants individually (Facilitators B and E). Trust building also demonstrated empathy and ensured that facilitators had participants' best interests at heart; they were the go-to people when anything was needed and used their resources to implement things on behalf of the participants. Fun activities offered another way to connect personally, including ice-breaking sessions that helped build trust (Facilitator B).

Shared leadership

Facilitators highlighted the importance of leading the process rather than people. Participants recognised the need for leaders to step up to the plate informally and steer the groups (Facilitator A). According to Facilitator B, a couple of participants were very active, and everyone in the group recognised them when they took a leadership role. However, they did not mind stepping back and allowing space for others, thereby sharing leadership. Facilitator C noted that some participants were 'natural-born leaders' and that informal leaders were getting the work done. She also noted that participants became more vocal during the year two goals and took more leadership roles.

Avoiding uncertainties on roles and expectations

According to the facilitators, a major issue was the need to avoid uncertainties and have clear roles and expectations. According to Facilitator A, some unclear expectations and roles caused uncertainties among participants at the beginning of the process. Unclear roles also affected commitment and caused rifts between groups. "There are lots of egos, personalities involved, politics, power, things that go unnoticed, if you blink your eye, you will miss, word choices, when the agenda is sent, what you say" (Facilitator C).

Therefore, facilitators highlighted that establishing clear goals was very important for effective planning, execution, transparency, and successful collaboration. Facilitator A agreed and said that setting clear goals helped achieve and define plans and improved the flow of meetings. For example, Excel sheets with the main agenda points were distributed before meetings, and meeting minutes and ideas were distributed via Google Docs, which everyone could access. Scheduling sudden calls and asking people to convene to address issues was another challenge.

Effective communication

Facilitators focused extensively on enhancing communication as a critical component of collaboration. According to Facilitator B, communication and fulfilling roles were

always challenging. For example, if a group were to assign a particular member with the task of finalising details with other organisations to conduct a fast-approaching donation drive and that member was absent for a few weeks, a facilitator would need to take on the responsibility of asking another participant to pick up the slack.

Virtual events

According to Facilitator A, lack of physical meetings because of COVID-19 affected participants' participation as, historically, they had met in person. Facilitator C thought physical sessions might have helped build better bonds, trust, and relationships among participants. However, in general, facilitators thought virtual meetings were not a hindrance. Instead, groups were willing to think outside the box and found innovative ways to interact (Facilitators B and D).

All facilitators shared that specific collaborative skills in a virtual environment are crucial. These skills included adaptability, innovation, and use of technology (for example, Zoom, WhatsApp, FaceTime, Google Docs, Doodle polls, calendar invites, and other web collaboration technologies). Similarly, participants were creative in their use of virtual technology. For instance, different mosques within the community centre cohort scheduled a virtual Zoom tour of their mosques without CCI facilitation. Each participant gave a virtual mosque tour, followed by a presentation about their history, mission, and vision. Facilitator B shared that the whole mosque-visit experience uplifted the group and changed the entire group dynamic.

There were many upsides to virtual trust building, including honest and realistic conversations. For instance, according to Facilitator C, people may be more honest in a virtual setting, as they may not be afraid to say things they would be hesitant to say in person, especially if a confrontation might occur. Facilitator D thought not having in-person meetings may have relaxed the collaboration process's environment. Another point highlighted was pushing people to switch on their devices' cameras, which made people feel like they were talking to humans instead of just a computer (Facilitator D).

Addressing competition between nonprofit organisations

Perceptions of competition between organisations affected the collaboration process, whose purpose was to cooperate rather than compete. For instance, Facilitator B mentioned that it felt like the idea of organisations collaborating on shared programming was excellent, but that historically significant differences in ideology, egos, and mistrust had existed within the Muslim community at large. In particular, the organisations initially were reluctant to share their funding sources. The facilitators suggested several steps that reduced such competition. Mainly, it was necessary to build trust between organisations, after which some organisations were open to sharing their funding sources, indicating a reduced feeling of competitiveness. Moreover, CCI's Muslim Collaboration Prizes enabled competing against a rubric, rather than each other (Muslim Collaboration Prizes are a culmination of an ongoing effort seeking innovative ways to galvanise scarce resources toward meaningful outcomes). Each of the five cohorts in CCI's project had an opportunity to receive a grant of

up to $200,000. Rather than competing against each other, cohorts were evaluated against a set of criteria. These criteria can be used by Muslim Collaboration Prizes selection committee to consider the quality and depth of the collaboration and the long-term impact of the proposed projects.

Discussion and conclusion

This study both contributes to and complements the existing literature on collaborations by revealing the challenges faced by third-party facilitators in managing collaborations and providing best practices that can be used to facilitate collaborative processes, including how third parties help build trust by weaving a sense of partnership into a larger fabric and providing an expanded resource pool (Yang and Cheong, 2019; Tu and Xu, 2020). Third parties can provide services and critical information to nonprofits serving marginalised communities by leveraging organisations with existing plans to access resources (Kim et al, 2022). The study also finds that third parties can provide expertise and facilitation in bridging communication gaps between organisations and in helping to build a sense of shared ownership of projects. Additionally, facilitators can help organisations articulate their goals and then see commonality in the goals of other organisations.

This study is unique as it looks at building collaborations in a virtual environment. It suggests the importance of technology in helping to build trust among organisations and eliminating communication gaps, which is a critical component as more and more meetings go virtual.

Both scholars and practitioners can find these findings helpful, particularly if they want to replicate similar third-party facilitation processes in minority-led organisations. However, these practices are not exclusive to Muslim nonprofits or small organisations and can be replicated by practitioners in other organisations to help kickstart the collaboration process.

It may also be helpful to study facilitation in the context of government–nonprofit collaborations and other similar ventures to form a more universal understanding of the challenges faced by third-party facilitators.

Limitations

This study has three main limitations. One is its small sample size, as it focuses on a specific case study of 22 Muslim-led organisations from the Midwest. Therefore, studying a broader range of Muslim organisations may be helpful. The second limitation relates to environment. Although Muslim-led organisations in the US face their own unique issues, to better understand the collaborative process, it would be helpful to replicate similar models in other marginalised groups and compare similar issues that facilitators may face in those environments. Third, COVID-19 made virtual meetings mandatory, which had both positive and negative aspects. Further research is needed on the supporting role current technologies can play in collaborative processes. Notwithstanding these limitations, the significance of this study is its potential to be a public-spirited platform on which philanthropic entities, academics, practitioners, and researchers, can build.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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