



THE CO-ORDINATION CONUNDRUM

With so many organisations working for a public purpose, arguments are often made for greater collaboration, but the issue is complex and the ideal remains difficult to achieve.
By **TAMARA OBERHOLSTER**

According to the Department of Social Development, there are currently 126 294 registered non-profit organisations (NPOs) in South Africa, and a further 1 696 registration applications in process. These figures exclude community organisations, which may not be registered, but often provide many of the same services as NPOs, on a smaller, grassroots level.

Given this vast network, what are the potential benefits of collaboration?

“Collaboration is great in terms of sharing knowledge and avoiding duplication of effort, whether it is for the non-governmental organisation

(NGO) sector or funders,” says Tracey Henry, CEO of Tshikululu Social Investments, an adviser to funders and manager of corporate social investment (CSI) funds. “Through collaboration, resources are optimised and we avoid reinventing past practices. Collaboration also spawns innovation when ideas are shared, failures are openly discussed and new ideas emerge to enhance our work.”

Henry points out, however, that grand-scale collaboration among the various role-players is an ideal that is not always achievable.

Michelle Matthews, content manager at Trialogue, a consulting and publishing company that facilitates networking and knowledge sharing in the CSI

sector, notes that sustainable collaboration requires a commitment of resources. “Often, opportunities for collaboration are affected by funding patterns,” she says. “Grant-makers are drivers of collaboration and can either pull different NPOs together or make the environment a competitive one instead.”

She says there are organisations making some headway in facilitating collaboration, including the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), an organisation dedicated to strengthening partnerships among business, civil society, government and labour in order to achieve the education goals of the National Development Plan. Another example is Bridge, an education-focused NPO that links innovators in education, including representatives from civil society, government, funders, practitioners, teachers, learners, principals, parents, research organisations and unions. Similarly, the South African Business Coalition on HIV & Aids (SABCOHA) owes its success to creating partnerships with organisations within government, the private sector, development sector and international funders, all working together towards a shared goal.

Yet Matthews notes that most of these collaborations are loose, knowledge-sharing platforms. In order to co-ordinate successfully, with different NPOs actually working together, side-by-side, towards a shared goal and accessing more funding, she believes the sector needs visionary leaders who are able to analyse and map a path, convince various stakeholders to get on board and articulate a clear purpose.

“It’s a big ask,” she says, although the pay-off is worth it. “Co-ordination makes for more effective development practice and use of resources, and the potential for more systemic change.”

FACTORS STANDING IN THE WAY

“Twenty years into democracy, the landscape has changed, but the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector still has a critical role to play in working with other key stakeholders, such as business and the government, to fight poverty, inequality and unemployment,” says Henry.

“All of this is taking place against a background of tough economic times. NGOs are underresourced in terms of staff, and have to ‘keep the ship afloat’ amidst dwindling international funding and a competitive fundraising environment. This makes co-ordination or collaboration among NGOs all the more difficult to achieve, given that the key focus is on the ground support and interventions. It is sometimes difficult to create space to step back and consider ways in which NGOs can work together towards societal transformation.”

Triologue, through its CSI Matters platform,

offers CSI practitioner forums and an annual conference aimed at providing this kind of space for sharing knowledge and learnings, whether successes or failures.

However, according to Jimmy Gotyana, president of the South Africa National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO), the NPO sector is under more pressure than ever before, due to increased difficulty in accessing government funds. In part, this is caused by ever-more stringent compliance requirements.

“Accessing government funding has become more and more difficult, and these constraints have seen numerous NPOs closing down,” says Gotyana. “The sector is no longer as strong as it once was. A new, different funding model needs to be developed. We need to relook the mandate of the National Development Agency (NDA) and make sure it is still acting in the interests of NPOs.”

SANGOCO is advocating for a more enabling environment for NPOs. “The NGO sector is →

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essentially an extension of government services,” Gotyana says. “We are not in competition with government. We are striving to assist government. It’s a partnership and government must see that. We are appealing to government and funders to engage with us and work more closely together.”

COLLABORATIONS THAT WORK

Despite the many challenges facing NPOs, there are examples of effective collaborations within the sector. “For many grassroots community-based organisations (CBOs), co-ordination of effort often happens by default, given the often-shoestring budgets that they have,” says Henry. “By the very nature of their limited resources, they have to co-ordinate community resources such as faith-based structures, local government clinics or school feeding schemes in order to support those in need in rural areas, such as orphaned children or child-headed households.”

For example, the Keiskamma Trust operates in the remote region of Hamburg in the Eastern Cape, addressing the challenges of widespread poverty and disease through holistic and creative programmes and partnerships. “It is this spirit of tenacity, resilience and determination which is evident among many other NGOs, as well as transformational business leaders, which lays the

foundation for building a prosperous and more equitable South Africa,” Henry says.

Matthews believes many NPOs can learn from this example. “NPOs can look at others that are successful and seek to coordinate efforts with them, offering complementary services,” she says. “Instead of waiting for funders, they could begin to see building productive partnerships with other NPOs as a potential fundraising strategy. Several NPOs working together to create a comprehensive package can be appealing to donors.”

Where NPOs are able to offer complementary services, working in partnership, impact can be maximised, resources optimised, and projects are more likely to be sustainable. An example of this is Qhubeka, an NPO that mobilises people with bicycles, distributing bicycles in return for work done to improve communities, the environment or academic results. By partnering with large, credible NGOs such as the Wildlands Conservation Trust, World Vision and World Bicycle Relief, the organisation is able to leverage its partners’ geographic reach, monitoring and evaluation, infrastructure and funding to make a greater impact and ensure its resources are most effectively deployed.

TOWARDS IMPROVED CO-ORDINATION

Henry points out that it would be impossible to create one coordinated effort in a sector as big and diverse as the NGO environment, but any initiative that is effective in bringing together parties with a mutual interest should be encouraged.

“Collaboration is built on a foundation that creates a win-win situation for everyone,” she says. “This means the relationship should translate into tangible outcomes that promote societal transformation. So while there is a place for coming together and understanding who is engaged in what, if it doesn’t translate into improved delivery on the ground or building the capacity of organisations, these efforts eventually fizzle out.”

Matthews adds that effective collaboration is also a “give and take” process. “It’s not about simply accessing more money,” she says. “Effective co-ordination means committing time, money

and resources. It requires clear objectives and accountability.”

Henry believes NPOs also need to learn to communicate their work more effectively. “The sector is generally associated with phrases such as ‘charitable’, ‘welfare’, ‘giving’ or ‘hand-outs’. Sadly, what is often not clearly communicated is the deeper intrinsic value of the work of these organisations,” she says.

“I am not advocating for NGOs to hire a spin-doctor to rebrand their image. Rather, I would urge NGOs always to remain focused on their vision, but also to develop a deep understanding of their funders’ business needs and how the NGO can partner with business to achieve their strategic goals. This takes time, a lot of networking, relationship-building and a clear body of evidence that backs up the value of the work of the NGO.”

In terms of corporate funding, co-ordination also yields benefits by ensuring funds are used responsibly and there’s no “double-dipping” (when organisations access funding for the same project from more than one funder).

Tshikululu supports the business sector and other funders to maximise their social spend by partnering with NGOs and organisations that focus on reducing inequality and poverty in all of its forms (be it education, health, unemployment or social development). The company takes into account each funder’s strategy, as well as the development environment and compliance requirements, and puts forward funding recommendations based on its understanding and ability to demonstrate the impact of each NGO’s work.

“We have partnered with over 30 000 civil society organisations across the country, corporates in the mining sector, government, renewable energy sector, health and insurance industry, BBBEE trusts, financial sector, manufacturing, charitable trusts and retail, which provides us with a helicopter view of development initiatives in the country, and which enables us to facilitate co-ordination and funding partnerships,” says Henry. ■