

# Much more than the sum of its parts



**Arjun Bahadur** is the lead at Life Skills Collaborative.  
arjun.bahadur@sattva.co.in  
@\_arjunb

**Collaboration has the potential to transform the effectiveness of philanthropy by bringing different skills and resources to bear on one problem. So how do you make it work?**

The past decade has seen a substantial growth in collaboratives formed to solve chronic social challenges. A Bridgespan report on philanthropic collaborations mentions over \$2 billion flowing annually to collaboratives for social, economic and environmental issues. The momentum evidenced in this recent surge signals greater potential for collaboratives in the future. This growth is also seen in India and the Life Skills Collaborative (LSC) is an example. The LSC is focused on championing life skills of India's young people. It has brought together 18 organisations (funders, not-for-profits, for-profits) and four state governments and is working to solve

three key challenges in the life skills space – building a common vocabulary for life skills, developing robust, scientific and contextual assessments and capturing the voices of India's young people on their understanding of life skills.

Our work at the Life Skills Collaborative suggests the potential for collaboratives to increase philanthropic impact in two key areas:

## 1 Solving complex problems.

Collaboratives work well for problems that are large, complex and cut across sectoral, functional and geographic areas. A collaborative allows diverse skills and perspectives to come together and solve the different parts of the problem.

## 2 Bringing about systemic change.

Bringing about systemic change requires conceptual frameworks to be developed or a revamp of existing methods. Building these in a collaborative allows for diverse inputs from partner organisations to be tested and applied to a far broader reach. We have seen strong buy-in from the government, as the collaborative approach adds credibility. We have also seen that the public goods created under a collaborative have more acceptance by different stakeholders in the ecosystem as these goods are seen as an outcome of collective work and not owned by any one organisation.

If collaborative work is the way of the future, then the big question is how does

one set up a successful collaborative? Our experience of building the LSC has highlighted the following as critical elements of a successful collaborative: trust and transparency among all stakeholders; shared ownership of overall objectives; effective and sufficient communication; and the need to maintain momentum. These have been made possible by ensuring a balance of power among collaborative members, a design which ensures collaborative decision-making and a strong backbone agency.

## Balance of power across stakeholders

At LSC, both the funders and the practitioners play an equal role in driving the agenda of the collaborative. All operational and strategic decisions are made by the steering council which has equal representation from the funders and practitioners. This sharing of power has enabled trust-building within the collaborative.

Work at LSC is divided into tracks comprised of multiple organisations. The design of the deliverables involves organisations in each track and these are linked to the payment milestones. This ensures that each organisation takes ownership of all deliverables of that track. Additionally, a rotating leadership allows each practitioner organisation to lead the work of the track at some point. The senior leadership of the track-lead organisation has a seat at the steering council so membership of the steering council is also

rotational and every organisation has the opportunity to be part of the overall decision-making for the LSC. This has facilitated ownership of all aspects of LSC's work by each organisation. Practitioners not only take ownership of their areas of work but also for the overall success of the LSC.

Communication is key to the process. The LSC's design facilitates constant and effective communication through track meetings, cross-track and working group sessions. The flow of information is not only top-down or bottom-up but also cross-sectional because of cross-track discussions. Working groups with members across tracks enables an environment which fosters transparency. The minutes of the steering council meetings are shared with all members of the collaborative, allowing all decisions to be available to everyone.

#### Collaborative design and decision-making

The LSC funders invested in almost a year-long effort, along with practitioner organisations, to define the scope, nature and goals of the collaborative. This ensured that both the funders and practitioners were equally invested in the final project design. This design also allowed for adaptation and modification along the way and permitted the steering council to recommend course correction, when needed, without derailing or halting the work. This flexibility allowed the practitioners to innovate.

#### A strong backbone agency

In a collaborative, the backbone agency plays the role of an executive, facilitator, negotiator and ecosystem builder. It is really the secret sauce. In LSC, the backbone agency ensures that there is clarity of roles for each organisation, establishes and maintains the structure



that allows transparency and trust and keeps the cadence of the steering council rotation to enable ownership building. It is part of all key track, cross-track and working group meetings allowing it to keep the focus on the process as much as the outcome. Visibility of the process maintains alignment among the decision-makers by demonstrating how the outcomes are being achieved. Finally – and crucially – it keeps the momentum going by making sure that each deliverable achieved is celebrated with all members.

All indicators show that the future of social impact is collaborative-driven. If we take away any lessons from life skills, it is that collaboration is a key life skill and that we all need to learn and institutionalise collaborative working. ●



*Collaboratives work well for problems that are large, complex and cut across sectoral, functional and geographic areas.*



**Above:** A collaborative workshop with government and LSC experts in Mizoram state, India.

**Left:** Roundtable discussion at the 2022 India Life Skills Summit, New Delhi.