

# CO-CREATION:

## Viewing Partnerships Through A New Lens

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CASE STUDY OF THE

*Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*

*A project of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*



## ABSTRACT

Collaboration remains an on-going discourse throughout the funder community, but little has been written about explorations or innovations into different ways of working collectively, beyond what was established decades ago.

The Connecticut legislation calling for a greater coordination of efforts to improve early childhood outcomes explicitly invited “philanthropic organizations” to partner in the development of new policies and a systematic approach for supporting young children and families. The *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* emerged as the platform for philanthropy to do this work.

Similar to other funder collective endeavors, the Collaborative and the state can claim short-term success. They not only had tangible results, but each valued their ability to coalesce to achieve those results. The difference in this effort was the melding of knowledge, networks and funding in a new paradigm. The more difficult question is whether the short-term endeavor creates the necessary conditions to sustain their efforts long enough to realize true systems change and improved outcomes for children and families.

For large-scale systems change, co-creation may be a more fitting approach; it acknowledges self-interest, existing alongside shared goals and purpose, as necessary to sustain voluntary efforts. Co-creation is predicated on the notion that traditional top-down planning or decision-making should give way

to a more flexible participatory structure, where diverse constituencies are invited in to collectively solve problems.

Co-creation doesn't give priority to the group or the individual, but instead supports and encourages both simultaneously. In co-created endeavors, a shared identity isn't needed; members continue to work toward their own goals in pursuit of the common result. Co-creation enables individuals to work side by side, gaining an understanding of the goals, resources, and constraints that drive the behaviors of others, and adjusting accordingly to maintain a mutually beneficial gain.

The partnership of the *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, the State, and the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy* was not originally structured to be an example of co-creation. It does, though, possess many of the attributes of successful co-creation endeavors. Recognizing these similarities in structure and purpose holds much promise to help the public and private sectors understand not only what to sustain, but how best to organize and continue working to achieve the long-term goal.

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The Collaborative comprises 14 funders from around the state who bring many years of experience in supporting and operating programs that serve the needs of children and families.

*American Savings Foundation*

*A Family Foundation*

*Children's Fund of Connecticut*

*The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven*

*Community Foundation of Greater New Britain*

*Connecticut Community Foundation*

*Fairfield County's Community Foundation*

*The Fund for Greater Hartford*

*William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund*

*The Grossman Family Foundation*

*Hartford Foundation for Public Giving*

*Liberty Bank Foundation*

*United Way of Connecticut*

*Viking Global Foundation*

## CO-CREATION:

### Viewing Partnerships through a New Lens.

Those of us who work to improve the human condition have long realized that we must respond collectively to address the interrelatedness and complexity of today's social and economic problems. Partnerships, alliances, and cooperation are vital to ensuring that all individuals have equitable access to opportunities to thrive.

We have also long acknowledged that these collective endeavors require new ways of working together—new structures, new social processes, and new practices for individuals and organizations and for the larger systems of which they are a part.

While it is easy to gain collective agreement on the futility of 'going it alone' in responding to today's complexities, we have historically tended to share very little of our exploration and testing of experimental new structures, processes, and practices that might improve our various systems.

**Legislation adopted in the State of Connecticut mandating improved coordination among all state public agencies touching the lives of young children provided a long-awaited opportunity for creating systemic improvements in the early care, education, health, and well-being of Connecticut's children.**

In a somewhat unusual recognition of the private sector's role in these areas, the legislation included an invitation to the philanthropic community to partner with state government during the two years allocated for designing the longer-term new approach.

In response, funders throughout Connecticut established the *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder*

*Collaborative*. Between June 2011 and June 2013, the funder-and-state partnership led to the creation by executive order of a new and independent *Office of Early Childhood*, which was formally approved by the Connecticut State Legislature the following May. The Collaborative documented the partnership process and its results in *Greater than the Sum of Its Parts* in July of 2014 (Bohen, 2014), which details the roles, factors, events, and sequence of actions during the effort. By capturing what actually took place—not relying on assumptions or aspirational accounts—the document illustrated the group norms and processes that 'stuck' with the participants. These actions, emerging over time, were key to their success in the short term.

The collective aim was not solely to launch an *Office of Early Childhood*, however. The ultimate goal was and is to improve the outcomes of children and families in Connecticut, and the Collaborative remains determined to ensure that this goal is actually achieved.

The *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* was originally formed by a group of 14 Funders who had been participating in a larger early childhood funder affinity group. Hosted by the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*, the affinity group had been convening for nearly a decade sharing information, providing input to state agencies and successfully spawning several collaborative ventures among individual funder members.

## FINDING THE WAY FORWARD

By offering a new paradigm with which to view and critique this effort, the Collaborative seeks to understand how individuals and organizations function collaboratively for short-term success, and how those same processes could be used to sustain their efforts. By taking the longer view, the Collaborative is further defining and deepening the discourse about new ways of organizing and sustaining public/private ventures.

Accepting Einstein’s view that “problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that created them,” we can apply this adage to how we organize our work. We then can look for opportunities to adjust our organizational structures and work practices, ultimately leading to different and better results.

Members of the philanthropic sector are uniquely positioned to test new partnership opportunities and ways of working, as they are “unregulated and do not compete with one another” (Kramer, 2014). But even with myriad examples of successful funder collaborations, funder hesitancy in this regard is still prevalent (Bartzak, 2015).

Because of this hesitancy, it is no surprise that most of what has been written about funder partnerships and collaborations are success stories, largely focused on time-limited projects involving discrete tasks. Documenting these successes has certainly been helpful, both in inspiring more involvement in collaborative ventures and in mitigating concerns about entering into them. However, though these studies are useful in spreading existing ideas, the discussion about different types of collaborative ventures has remained relatively static.

### THERE ARE A RANGE OF WAYS TO COLLABORATE

← LOWER INTEGRATION ————— HIGHER INTEGRATION →

Exchange knowledge	Coordinate funding	Coinvest in existing entity/initiative	Create a new entity-initiative	Fund the funder
<p>Funders partner to exchange ideas and raise awareness.</p> <p>In this model, individual funders retain all decision-making rights.</p>	<p>Funders agree upon shared or complementary strategies, exchange ideas on an ongoing basis, and invest in aligned causes.</p> <p>Each partner retains individual grant-making rights.</p>	<p>A funder raises money from other donors to support a specific initiative or organization.</p> <p>To reduce transaction costs, reporting to donors is often done jointly, coordinated by the lead funder.</p> <p>This model requires a great degree of alignment and coordination across the group of funders, as funds are often (but not always) pooled.</p>	<p>Funders create and co-invest in a new entity or initiative that gives grants or operates programs.</p> <p>Here, decision making starts to be shared, and the way funders define their governance structure is of critical importance.</p>	<p>Funders invest in another funder with strong expertise in a content area.</p> <p>This funder turns around and re-grants money and has full decision-making authority.</p> <p>This requires full integration in the sense that there is only one strategy shared by two (or more) funders.</p>

Graphic: The Bridgespan Group, Lessons in Funder Collaborations, 2014

Collaboration remains a common point of discourse throughout the funder community, but little has been written about explorations or innovations into different ways of working collectively, beyond what was

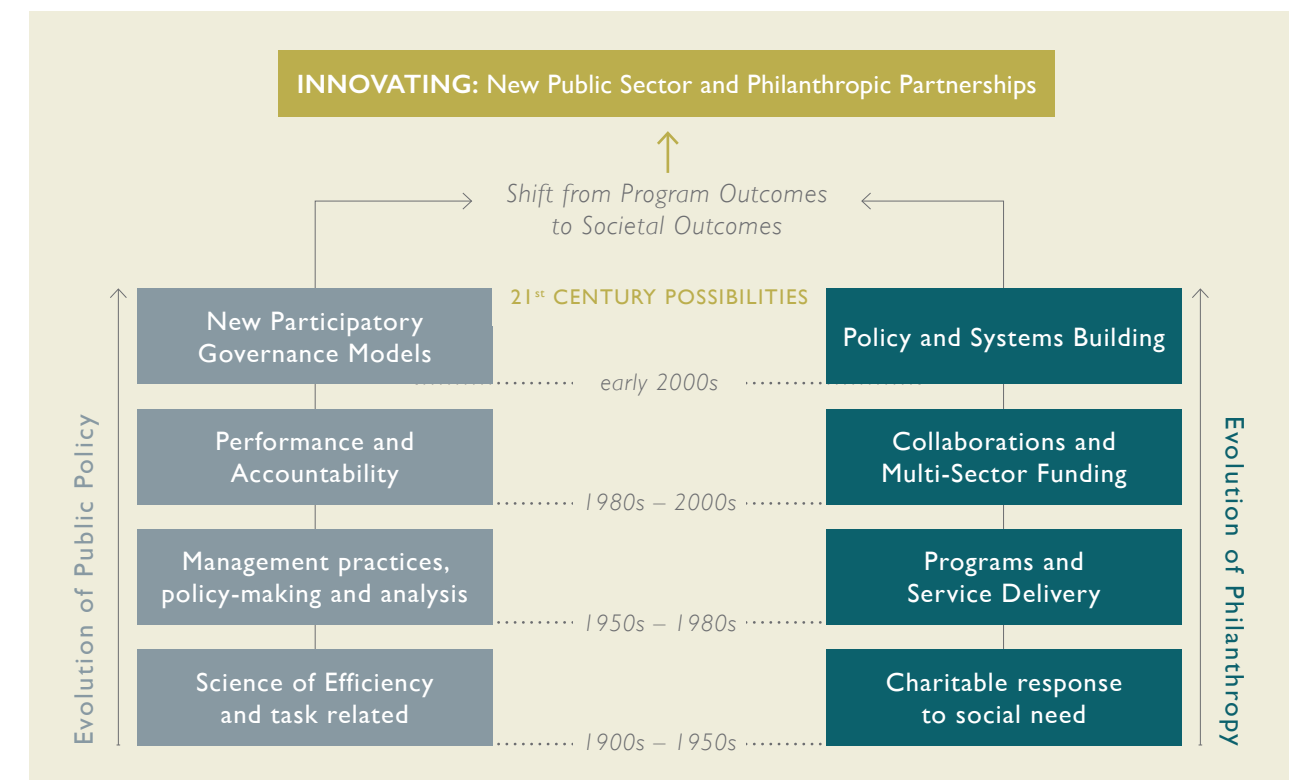
established decades ago. Clearly, more reflection and learning about the new ways funder groups (and others) have structured and attempted collective work is warranted.

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY POSSIBILITIES

Considering the historical evolution of the philanthropic and public sectors, it is not surprising both have evolved to a similar point of recognizing the need for new levels of response and partnerships to address the complexity of today’s problems.

More often than not, however, the relationship between philanthropy and the public sector remains transactional. Because philanthropy has historically been tapped by the public sector to fill gaps in public spending, both entities tend to see philanthropy as

funder. New perspectives on the roles of government and philanthropy provide additional approaches for public/philanthropic ventures and offer different strategies for funders participating in policy and systems change.



## Co-creation as a New Paradigm

Co-creation has emerged as a promising response to many of today's challenges. Defined simply, co-creation is any act of collective creativity that is experienced jointly by two or more people or entities, with the intent of creating something that is not known in advance.

But the co-creation process itself can result in important transformations within the entities involved. As partners begin to capitalize on one another's skills, experiences, and assets, and as values begin to cross-pollinate, internal leadership styles and organizational structures evolve (Mourot & Jefferson, 2014); co-creation can bring about powerful internal culture change. The concept has had a broad range of applications, but as yet its application to public and philanthropic partnerships has not been fully considered.

**Co-creation is predicated on the notion that traditional top-down planning or decision-making should give way to a more flexible participatory structure, where diverse constituencies are invited in to collectively solve problems.**

One example of co-creation is the *Collaborative Innovation Networks* (COINs). As described by Peter Gloor, Research Scientist at the *Center for Collective Intelligence at MIT's Sloan School of Management*, COINs are self-organizing groups of highly motivated individuals who work together toward a common goal not because of orders from superiors, but because they share the same objective and are committed to their common cause (Gloor, 2005). COIN participants come from different professional

disciplines, organizations, and organizational standings, and their success requires individuals within each group to contribute their diversity of expertise and knowledge.

Gloor identified transparency, consistency, and rationality as the underlying principles needed to be successful in endeavors with these characteristics. COINs use a code of ethics to guide group members in these underlying principles and allow them to self-regulate, thus establishing and maintaining the trust, cooperation, and participation needed to achieve results. The promise of COIN is quite familiar to us—it was the action of a group of individuals within a COIN that launched the Internet. Gloor also refers to Benjamin Franklin's use of COIN techniques in the development of the first post office, town library, and fire-fighting brigade (Brown, 2014).

In her Nobel Prize-winning work, Elinor Ostrom identified **eight design principles that affect a community's ability to cooperate in an effective manner** (Ostrom, 1990, 2010). She recognized that when it comes to cooperative behavior, maintaining and monitoring behaviors (as with the COIN code of ethics) evolves both from explicit formal rules as well as from a tacit understanding of group norms and expectations.

Evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson recognized that these design principles follow from our own evolutionary history as a highly cooperative species. Initially derived for groups attempting to manage common-pool resources such as water or grazing rights, the principles were adapted by Wilson, working with Ostrom, to apply to a much broader range of human groups. These adapted principles can serve as a practical framework for improving the efficacy of many kinds of groups working towards a common purpose (Wilson et al. 2013).

### APPLYING THE EIGHT DESIGN PRINCIPLES

- 1 Strong group identity and understanding of purpose.
- 2 Fair distribution of costs and benefits.
- 3 Fair and inclusive decision-making.
- 4 Monitoring agreed-upon behaviors.
- 5 Graduated sanctions for misbehaviors.
- 6 Fast and fair conflict resolution.
- 7 Authority to self-govern.
- 8 Appropriate relations with other groups.

#### 1 Strong group identity and understanding of purpose.

*Previously we met and discussed programs. We were rather limited in our thinking and scope. We recognized that to achieve lasting outcomes, we needed to build systems, take on a role in policy. We were becoming more strategic in what we hoped to accomplish. Early childhood presented as the first vehicle.*

— Richard Sussman, *Hartford Foundation for Public Giving*

The Connecticut legislation calling for a greater coordination of efforts to improve early childhood outcomes explicitly invited “philanthropic organizations” to participate in the planning and development of new policies and a systematic approach for young children and families throughout the state. The *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* became the identified platform for philanthropy to do this work, providing sufficient structure to partner with a team from the Governor's Office. An initial two-year timeline laid out a clear calendar goal for the Funder Collaborative to test its own resolve to work collectively and, more specifically, to work on policy and systems change with the State team.

The State team and the Collaborative shared an overall commitment to improving outcomes for young children and their families, and to the task at hand. Through their experience in local Connecticut communities, funders had a nuanced understanding of how policy and practice play out in reality for children and families, and were also keenly interested in the community and family “voice” being part of policy planning and development. The State team had the authority to make changes in public structures and processes. They brought expertise on policy development and regulation, as well as first-hand experience with state politics. Both agreed this was not to be just a partnership of dollars, but a partnership involving the sharing of knowledge, relationships, and influence.

#### 2 Fair distribution of costs and benefits.

*We didn't want to just be an ATM.*  
— Sarah Fabish, *Community Foundation for Greater New Haven*

The view of philanthropy as the ‘flexible pocketbook’ is not easily overcome. With the State constrained by policy, regulation, and politics, the availability and flexibility of funder resources was a direct benefit

to the State—assets that could be deployed quickly and strategically to seize opportunities to further the State’s interests. For example, the Collaborative contracted for and financially supported an organizational assessment that was completed within a few months. State contracting processes would have been much more complicated and taken considerably longer.

It was not lost on the funders that their contribution of financial resources created a seat for them at the planning table, thus establishing the benefit of moving beyond being perceived solely as financial contributors to joining in as co-designers of a new system for early childhood. As mentioned, funders were able to use their collective understanding of the impact of policy decisions on children, families, and local communities, as well as their knowledge of research and trends outside of Connecticut.

For the Collaborative, the primary good distributed among the members was timely access to information, new relationships with individuals in the public sector, and the opportunity to directly inform policy and state government. Although collective action benefited all Collaborative members, the smaller foundations reaped more advantage in terms of access and influence relative to their size and contribution. The Collaborative benefited by having a larger and more diverse membership, thus strengthening its overall standing and legitimacy—and, ultimately, its ability to reach the shared goal.

### 3 Fair and inclusive decision-making.

If the collective is dominated by a few, it defeats the purpose of working with a collaborative.

— Myra Jones-Taylor, State of Connecticut Office of Early Childhood

The Collaborative came to consensus on two key decisions for funder participation: a minimum contribution for entry, and decision-making being one vote per funder. This shared and equal authority

was viewed by all as crucial to their functioning. At the same time, it did not preclude funder members from relying more heavily on those colleagues with higher levels of authority within their organizations and greater skills, experience, and content knowledge when working with and negotiating agreements with the State.

### Agreements on decision-making between the Collaborative and the State team raised concerns about control from both the public sector and the funders.

The State was wary of giving away decision-making authority to an unelected body; funders were cautious about making financial contributions with limited accountability. Using the traditional approach to solve mistrust between partners, the Collaborative and the State tried to establish a contractual agreement. They were, however, unable to do so—a circumstance that served only to reinforce concerns among the parties. The Collaborative and State continued to move forward using time-limited agreements to facilitate joint action, ultimately realizing they had at least temporarily mitigated their respective unease and also gaining a greater understanding that collaboration and trust cannot be forced through a contract.

#### 4 Monitoring agreed-upon behaviors.

#### 5 Graduated sanctions for misbehaviors.

#### 6 Fast and fair conflict resolution.

As much practice as we’ve had, it’s not native for anyone—sharing leadership, welcoming diversity of opinion around the table—it’s still really hard work even if you know it’s the right way to go.

— Nancy Leonard, William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

Collaborative members were conscious of the potential tensions in a group with varying levels of skill, expertise, content knowledge, organizational authority, and influence. Yet they also recognized the benefits of diversity and of some funders having

more flexibility. Group agreements—like one vote per organization and setting a minimum contribution for participation—were intended to mediate any inherent power imbalances and areas of conflict, but also maximize the diversity within the group.

The state association of grantmakers, the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*, served as the group’s fiscal sponsor. This arrangement was codified through a memorandum of understanding, with the Council being responsible for supporting group meetings and operations. By documenting discussions and recording decisions, a Council staff member (later a part time, contractual Collaborative Manager) reminded members of the group agreements, particularly if members felt an individual’s actions were not congruent with earlier agreements. As with many groups, this was a sufficient level of sanction to remedy misbehaviors. The Collaborative Manager also created opportunities for the group to revisit and adapt individual roles and group agreements accordingly.

### 7 Authority to self-govern.

It can be a little bit frustrating, but you have to step back and appreciate that in the end we want to think hard about the decision and come up with something that everyone can live with.

— Sue Murphy, Liberty Bank Foundation

The *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* functioned as a group within the larger public-private partnership. It made a number of its own decisions, including the minimum contribution for participation and how pooled funds would be allocated, as well as determinations regarding the working relationship with the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*.

The Funder Collaborative and the Council established a working agreement that included rules for membership, voting and decision-making authority, and fundraising; it also defined the administrative support role. In fact, the group more than once

took the time to refine the original agreement to be responsive to changing conditions and the constraints of the participating entities.

The Funder Collaborative and the Council developed good working relationships with both the Governor’s Office and the Early Childhood State Planning Team; individuals found they could function more freely outside the confines of their own organizations. However, the relative ease with which the group was able to identify a common purpose, foster group identity, and establish operating agreements masked the inherent limitations of the individual players’ abilities to function independently from their originating organizations. The *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy’s* ability to translate between the different organizational needs and culture of the State and funders served all parties well. The Council mediated misunderstandings and areas of conflict between the State actors and funders, as well as built an understanding of the constraints and limitations of all involved.

### 8 Appropriate relations with other groups.

It helps to have a governor who cares and is knowledgeable about your issue area, and a state administration that cares.

— Karen Brown, Fairfield County’s Community Foundation

The Governor publicly expressed both his commitment to early childhood and his interest in partnering with the philanthropic community. Given that explicit invitation by the Governor, very few of the funders had a problem gaining approval from their boards to work within the Funder Collaborative. But challenges remained for both the State team and the funders in navigating their authority.

The State team was under incredible pressure not to show preferences or allow for the undue influence of funders within a public sector endeavor. Their lack of follow-through on some decisions and hesitancy in raising the visibility of the funders’ contributions to

the joint endeavor resulted in the funders questioning whether or not they were considered a legitimate constituency and a representative voice for the needs of children and local communities within the State. A few needed to receive public recognition from the State to bolster their donors' and boards' continued

interest in funding the larger partnership goals. Beyond their financial contributions, though, funders also sought acknowledgment from the State of the value of their knowledge, experience, and connection to community.

## AIMING FOR THE LONG TERM

By all accounts, improving outcomes for children and families throughout any state is a long-term endeavor. The Connecticut legislation marked both a beginning point and a benchmark from which to assess progress towards large-scale systems change. As with other funder collaborative endeavors, the Collaborative and the State can claim short-term success. They not only had tangible results, but each valued their ability to coalesce to achieve those results.

Over short periods, people who are asked to perform discrete useful tasks with a minimum of formal authority—aided by a collaborative environment filled with people who have the ability to commit to the tasks at hand—can successfully achieve their intended result (Zolli & Healey, 2012). In most cases, it is these short-term wins that are key to providing the impetus for pursuing a longer-term goal (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

**The more difficult question is whether the short-term endeavor creates the necessary conditions for the group to sustain their efforts long enough to realize the intended purpose.**

By focusing only on near-term results, we tend to give too much credit or blame to the most immediate actions. We are more likely to attribute a result to the traits or personalities of a given person. We often fail to think about the influences that shaped

those actions, and think even less about whether the circumstances shaping short-term actions are those most helpful in achieving large-scale systems change.

Offering a new paradigm or shift in perspective on how things can or should work is a powerful lever for systems change (Meadows & Wright, 2009). Larry Kramer, president of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, has advocated for just this type of shift. To address the complexity of the problems before us, Kramer believes that philanthropy needs to work cooperatively across organizations and sectors, and that to do so more effectively requires a shift from the prevailing norm of direct reciprocity—or expecting a direct benefit from specific actions—toward a new norm of diffuse reciprocity. Referencing international relations theory, Kramer writes, “diffuse reciprocity is more like a cultural norm within a community: I do things with and for others without demanding or expecting an immediate payback or return, knowing that you and others will do the same later and that we'll all be better off in the long run as a

result. Diffuse reciprocity is an attitude, a willingness to give without demanding a precise accounting of equivalent benefits for each action, albeit because others in the community do so as well” (Kramer, 2014).

Co-creation offers a new paradigm for cooperative work; COINs give us working examples of co-creation. The eight design principles offer a general guide for operating a successful COIN; using them as a way to assess and critique group processes and rules of engagement can have the positive effect of facilitating and sustaining collective action. If individual and organizational actions are properly aligned in a way that reinforces shared perceptions of trust and norms of reciprocity, then the group is more likely to succeed in its collectively defined tasks. At the same time, misaligned or inappropriate sets of rules can make sustained management toward longer-term goals virtually impossible.

### Conditions most helpful for the long term.

While not generally considered co-creation, local groups managing common pooled resources establish governance structures that are by intention ongoing. The most successful groups are those that defend diffuse reciprocity by protecting themselves from actions that benefit an individual at the expense of others within the group.

Ostrom's design principles were not necessarily known to groups in advance, but were often arrived at by trial and error. Groups ended up doing the right thing without necessarily knowing *why* it was right (Wilson et al., 2013).

The eight design principles make no reference to strengthening relationships or building trust among members of the group. Rather, the principles recognize trust not as a fixed asset but as a situational construct based on behaviors consistent with the expectations of the group. Negative actions affect us more and

last longer than positive ones (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Thus, processes must be in place to manage those times when individuals or organizations either inadvertently or intentionally violate the group norms – effectively undermining trust.

**Participants who model commitment to a shared goal with no signs of gaining undue benefit enable a group to sustain collective work.**

Otherwise, although the group may achieve its short-term win, the willingness of individuals to continue to contribute to the longer-term goals can be negatively affected. In effect, the group cannot simply designate diffuse reciprocity as a norm. It must manage toward it.

For the Collaborative, establishing a shared goal and rules for engagement were collectively done rather easily. It was originally the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*, followed by the Collaborative Manager, who played a key role in maintaining and confirming group norms and momentum. With the support of the group and its co-chairs, this role moved beyond the typical program management and administrative support to include partner engagement and group management. Yet, when describing this role the Collaborative members primarily focused on the functional tasks of attending to administrative details, tracking and documenting the group's progress. By assessing the group's functioning using the design principles, it is clear that the role the Collaborative Manager played, in managing adherence to group norms was just as critical—if not more so—to establishing the conditions necessary for long-term results.

Failing to acknowledge this necessary role and function decreases the likelihood that a group will assume a member-managed self-regulatory approach. The assessment of the need for this role and the

resource allocations to support it can overemphasize administrative functions and neglect the need to support the efficacy of the group itself. This can result in this critical function happening by default rather than by design.

### Was there evidence of behavior change?

In employing co-creation, a group must establish a structure and adopt processes that enable a diverse group of individuals to voluntarily contribute their skills, expertise, and resources to create a new response to an intractable problem that they all care about. As demonstrated by successful COINs, diffuse reciprocity must be a functional norm, thus undergirding a culture of cooperation and contribution that is sustained long enough either for the group to achieve its goal or for its results to be acknowledged sufficiently outside of the group that another organizational structure evolves to adopt and sustain the effort (Gloor, 2005).

**At its best, co-creation shifts the working norms of those involved and influences the practices of their organizations, reminding us that we too are players within the systems we attempt to create or change.**

It is these changes in the behaviors and practices of the actors within the system that alter the system's overall results. (Thankfully, it is also far easier to change our own behaviors than to convince others to change theirs.)

By introducing a policy and systems lens, funders were better able to recognize how local players and actions were nested within the larger systems, and in what ways their investments could contribute to the larger systems outcomes. The funders gained a deeper understanding as to how programs and regulations

had different ramifications in different parts of the state, in rural and urban areas, and even how two urban communities might experience policy impacts differently (Bohen, 2014). This was particularly beneficial to place based funders. In fact, some of the funders introduced new processes and criteria to evaluate grant requests, enabling them to maintain both a local and larger systems perspective. Thus, recognizing at times it is sufficient to go it alone, while other opportunities offer a potential leverage point for larger systems change and thus be more impactful as a collective endeavor.

The Collaborative and *The Connecticut Council for Philanthropy* also established a new working relationship; ultimately shifting the role the Council had traditionally played. Moving beyond fiscal management and administrative support, the Council gained the ability to bring forth a different perspective and strategy in order to strengthen philanthropy's contribution to systems change. The Council was an active partner helping to define the role of Collaborative Manager and forging positive relationships between the Collaborative and State teams.

### Will this effort alter early childhood outcomes in Connecticut?

The purpose of a system is not achieved through stated goals or rhetoric, but instead through actual shifts in behavior of the individual components or elements of the system and how they function collectively. There is no doubt that changing the manner in which public sector agencies with responsibility for improving the lives of young children convene and plan together has the potential for achieving the intended results. However, our tendency is to rely on structural change as the key driver of success. While a new structure may make it easier for change to happen, the structure itself is insufficient.

Collaborative members recognized this and expressed concern about the value of establishing an Office for Early Childhood if it only added to the State bureaucracy (Bohen, 2014). As is evident

from viewing the work of the Funder Collaborative and the State team, introducing a new structure for collaboration is not enough. What is also needed is a shift in context.

Shifting the context involves shifting goals, resources, and constraints. These shifts and the subsequent changes in individual behaviors are what bring change to systems—in this case, a system for improving early childhood outcomes. If the context shifts the behaviors of the individuals and entities involved toward cooperation and diffuse reciprocity, achieving better results from the overall system is much more likely.

Working within a collaborative such as the Funder Collaborative, or even a combined agency structure such as the Office of Early Childhood, can certainly reduce isolated actions and help create a collaborative working environment. Collaboration gives priority

to the group over the individual, and encourages members to adopt a joint identity that unites them around their shared goal.

Co-creation, on the other hand, doesn't give priority to the group or the individual, but instead supports and encourages both simultaneously. In co-created endeavors, a shared identity isn't needed; members continue to work toward their own goals in pursuit of the common result.

**Co-creation enables individuals to work side by side, gaining an understanding of the goals, resources, and constraints that drive the behaviors of others, and adjusting accordingly to maintain a mutually beneficial gain.**

## CHALLENGES AHEAD

The Collaborative is not immune to the struggle of continued participation. When attributable results are hard to identify, there are real limits to the time and capacity people have to maintain their respective responsibilities and persevere over the long term.

Also, staff and board transitions, as well as changing funder and public sector priorities, are the norm, continuously affecting individual priorities, participation, and overall membership. Tolerance and patience with process also differs among individuals and organizations, many times resulting in the group defaulting to more familiar ways of working.

Participation in any collective endeavor comes with real costs in resources, be they the participating individual's time, financial contribution, or provision of other tangible assets. These costs and benefits can be individually as well as organizationally ascribed; rarely are costs equal among participating members. At the same time, our sense of fairness is too strong to

continue with groups where certain individuals benefit in ways considered unequal to their contributions. We constantly balance the risks and rewards of participation. The Collaborative recognized and publicly valued proper credit and proper rewards. An individual's contributions continuously evolve, and credit always matters.

No one way exists to resolve any of these dilemmas. The right response is context dependent and known to the group—depending, of course, on the group's willingness to name and manage its own dilemmas. To get along for the common good, individuals must articulate difficult issues, disagreements, or lingering resentments. Ironically, collaboration can



unintentionally mask true cooperation when the emphasis on working together to achieve a common goal supersedes individual interests.

**For co-creation & cooperation to hold, recognizing your dependence on others to achieve your goal is key.**

If you are self-reliant and have no need for anyone else to get results, you have no need for cooperation. If you don't cooperate, it is because the goals, resources, and context of cooperation do not present you with a better solution (Morieux & Tollman, 2014).

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## FINAL COMMENTS

The easiest thing is to react. The second easiest thing is to respond. But the hardest thing is to initiate. — *Seth Godin, Entrepreneur and Author*

As we examine the efforts of the *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, Godin's words rings true, albeit with one caveat: *sustaining* one's efforts may actually be hardest of all.

Individual funders did move from simply reacting to State policies and programs affecting children and families as a *fait accompli*. In response to the State's invitation to collectively design a new early childhood system, they formed a Collaborative. However, in the absence of a specific project or opportunity, that Collaborative still struggles with initiating the next set of actions, and continues to question its own viability as an instrument for large-scale systems change.

Improving the lives of children and families is not an easy endeavor. How to better the systems we have in place to support this goal is certainly a problem worth solving. Changes in systems come about through processes involving resilience, adaptation, and innovation. This is not easy and certainly not quick. Yet we continue to expect to see results at every crossroad, overlooking the crux of what actually generates system change. *Changes in context are responsible for changes in behavior*. Ultimately, these behavior changes are what drive system improvements and better outcomes.

We need a better understanding of the why and how of change and improvement. By understanding

how context influences behavior, we can continuously "learn our way forward." It isn't enough to simply present another example of a successful collaborative effort. We need to offer new ways of organizing and assessing our collective work.

For large-scale systems change, co-creation may be an apt approach; it fully acknowledges self-interest, existing alongside shared goals and purpose, as necessary to sustain voluntary efforts. By looking to examples of co-creation such as COIN, we recognize that system changes can occur through new working structures. In fact, countless levels of interdependence and cooperation are already at work in which individual member goals intersect to sustain each other and create larger, unpredictable, and beneficial results and transformation.

The partnership of the *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, the State, and the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy* was not originally structured to be an example of co-creation. It does, though, possess many of the attributes of successful co-creation endeavors. Recognizing these similarities in structure and purpose holds much promise to help the group understand not only what to sustain, but how best to organize and continue working to achieve its long-term goal.

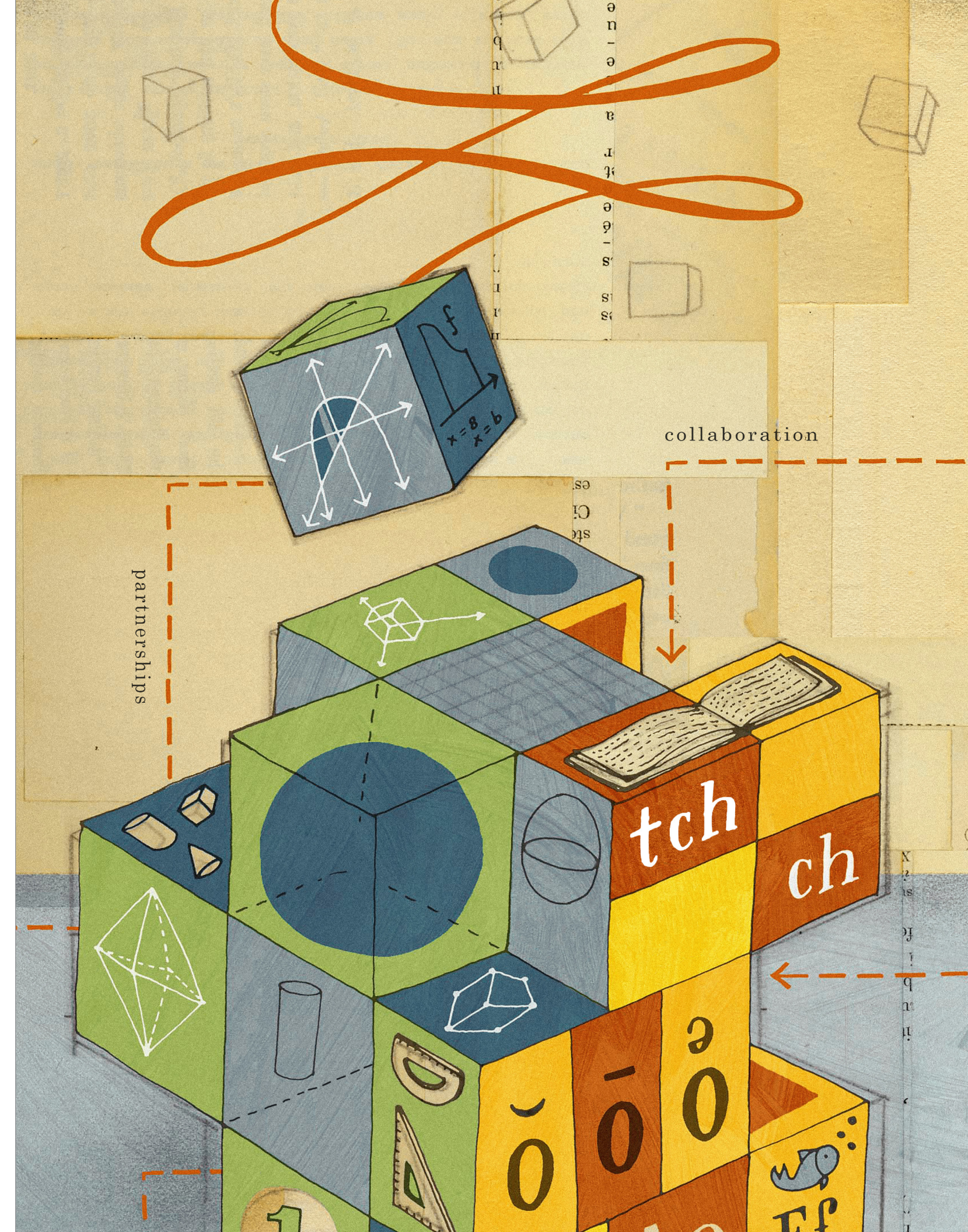
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Patricia Bowie** has been working with organizations, community-based initiatives, and community groups to develop new ways to improve their work while sustaining their viability and commitment to their missions. Her commitment to continuous study of contemporary research allows her to provide a unique opportunity for organizational learning and guidance on using proven theories to improve organizational practice, improve systems and work towards population level outcomes. Currently affiliated with *UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families, and Communities*, Ms. Bowie holds a Masters in Public Health from UCLA and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Vermont.

The author would like to acknowledge the financial support of the *CT Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* (ECFC) in producing this document. She particularly would like to thank the members of the Collaborative's Case Study Work Group who reviewed several versions and provided critical insight into the ECFC's creation and evolution. They include: Sarah Fabish (*Community Foundation for Greater New Haven*), Linda Franciscovich (*Grossman Family Foundation*), Nancy Leonard (*William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund*) and Richard Sussman (*Hartford Foundation for Public Giving*). Also, Maggie Osborn, *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy* and Carol O'Donnell, ECFC Collaborative executive director. Finally, the research of Kim Bohan in developing the source document, "Greater than the Sum of its Parts" was essential to the preparation of this case study.

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