Collective Identity in Cross Sector Partnerships
Research Brief

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The Alignment Challenge in Cross Sector Partnerships

Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs), as collaborations between companies, governments and civil society organisations with the purpose of addressing social issues, are a development mechanism whose effectiveness and impact is very much dependent on the proper management of highly diverse resources, interests, goals and objectives. These partnerships aim to create value for the organisations involved and for their target group. CSPs are a special type of inter-organisational relationship (IOR) in that they bring together organisations from different societal sectors (private, public and civil) in addressing a social problem. As such they are characterized by a diversity of attributes across partners such as frameworks, expectations, methodologies, values and priorities.

Cross-sector partnerships are believed to bring together organisational partners in efforts to co-create social value. Its value proposition and rationale thus relies on the level of organisational diversity, since by leveraging different yet complementary resources and core capabilities, CSPs are able to produce synergistic value which in turn helps achieve collaborative advantage in addressing society-wide issues. However, CSPs' inherent diversity is also what has led to one of its main criticisms: an inability to align oftentimes contrasting logics and expectations, conflicting value structures, and diverse missions and interests into a common framework for thought and action. This might lead to conflict between partners and partnership fragmentation, which in turn challenges any type of value generation and results in inefficiently invested resources. For highly diverse organisations, the inability to share interests and

attributes can hamper success in addressing the meta-objective of collaborative value creation.

Partnerships can address this alignment challenge by achieving a degree of mutuality[i] – the mutual commitment to partnership wide and interdependent attributes such as objectives and approaches – and internal unity[ii] – the 'oneness' of a partnership that regards it as an identifiable unit and provides it with a 'collective sense of itself'[iii]. In order to achieve higher levels of mutuality and internal unity, the development of a partnership collective identity becomes attractive since this is understood as the 'glue' that binds partners together, creating an attachment to a set of shared partnership attributes and providing partners with a common feeling of 'togetherness'[iv]. By stimulating organisations to self-identify as part of a larger entity, collective identity garners higher levels of commitment, guides behaviours of individual organisations in favour of partnership-wide success, and confines an organisation's choices to a set of higher-order values and norms. In turn, this enables partnerships to gain legitimacy and social capital as an identifiable agent in society. Gaining insights into the process of collective identity formation in CSPs and the building blocks of such process can provide partners with the opportunity to influence the development of a collective identity. As a result, this will allow them to overcome the alignment challenge.

Inter-organisational Identity vs. Organisational Identity

Research on collective identity is mostly based on the study of the concept at the individual organisational level and founded on organisational theory. While organisational identity theory provides valuable starting ground for the understanding of collective identity at the higher abstraction level of inter-organisational collaboration, it is still necessary to highlight the particularities of IORs that call for a separate exploration of collective identity in this setting. Organisational identity theory has been originally developed for relatively more simplistic social constructs, rendering them too narrow-sighted and falling short in efforts to fully comprehend the reality of more complex interactions at the inter-organisational level.

For instance, inter-organisational relationships, and in particular CSPs, are predominantly constructed within defined timeframes, providing them with a characteristic temporality. CSPs rarely consist of continuous and intense working relationships between the partner organisations beyond the duration of projects. Although this does not necessarily mean that partners will permanently end their relationship, it does imply a degree of intermittent participation of the CSP in society as identifiable agent. As opposed to the organisational identity notion of 'enduring and distinctive qualities'[v], a CSP's collective identity tends to accommodate variability in order to allow further redefinitions by members who desire to re-initiate intense collaborations.

Moreover, in organisations, individuals identify themselves as members, and adjust their behaviours and choices to the collective, motivated by hierarchical or market incentives. Inter-organisational collaboration however entails that member organisations willingly and voluntarily align their behaviours to the collective in the absence of strict hierarchical forces or market pressures, making it more complicated for CSPs to ensure continued collaboration. Similarly, CSPs lack the tangible instruments such as physical resources (e.g. buildings) and legal structures (e.g. enforced contracts) that generally allow individual organisations' existence to be easily recognized[vi]. In fact, CSPs depend on relationships based on good faith and agreements.

Finally, the coming into existence of an organisational form can be seen as a result of 'distanciation'[vii]. That is, attributes, mechanisms and texts become distanced from the individual members that created them. This allows them to consolidate into an organisational form that extends its influence or authority over its members. CSPs require an additional layer of distanciation than traditional organisations. They seek to not only bring together their direct member organisations but also these organisations' individual members who ultimately make decisions, take actions and engage in conversations. This double layer results in a more complex and abstract development of CSPs into identifiable entities.

Exploring Collective Identity in Cross Sector Partnerships

Based on the exploratory study of a successful cross-sector partnership case in Nariño, Colombia, I take a following step from recent studies on collective identity formation in IORs (see Koschmann, 2012). In doing so, I propose a process model to gain further understanding about collective identity formation by zooming into the particularities of the interactions between CSP's members. The partnership case was aimed at improving the living conditions of the small coffee growing families in the region, in view of their vulnerability against poor market entry opportunities and persistent armed conflict. This case study was approached from a narrative analysis methodology[viii] and follows three main assumptions based on insights from previously conducted research on CSPs.

Firstly, collective identity is the product of a communication process in which partners hold conversations about their partnership and themselves as members of this collective. As such, I adopt a communicative view on the development of collective identity by nesting its formation in the conversations that take place as the partnership unfolds[ix]. This also builds the main rationale behind opting for a narrative analysis methodology. Based on the communicative nature of collective identity the most suitable source of data are the stories (or narratives) that are communicated by the partners of the case.

Secondly, collective identity results from the interactions and development of individual organisational identities throughout the partnership process. I particularly looked into the conversations that ensue in direct interactions and negotiations between individual identities within the distinct partnership formation phases, and take a process perspective aligned to the partnership development process[x].

Thirdly, as individual identities interact through conversations held by partners in their communications within and about the partnership, collective identity emerges as a property of the partnership at a higher level than any of its individual organisational members. As such, this collective identity is understood as an *authoritative text* that dictates how the partnership acts and thinks as an

entity in its own right. My study of collective identity in CSPs thus focused on how a common framework for the partnership as a whole was created, developed and established as an inter-organisational mechanism.

Proposing a Process for Collective Identity Formation

Based on these considerations, findings of my research allow me to propose a four-stage process for collective identity formation (Figure 1), whereby individual identities' interactions evolve from one stage to the other and enable an inter-organisational collective identity to emerge. The first stage *Building a Common Framework* is characterized by the communication of individual interests and expectations, and negotiations of possible individual identity compromises. The result of this stage is then an authoritative text which will try to accommodate individual identities and which will be the starting point for a common framework. Later, *the Individual Internalisation and Adjustment* stage refers to adjustments that individual organisations make in an effort to internalize the new common 'text'. In doing so, they build internal legitimacy for the new collective.
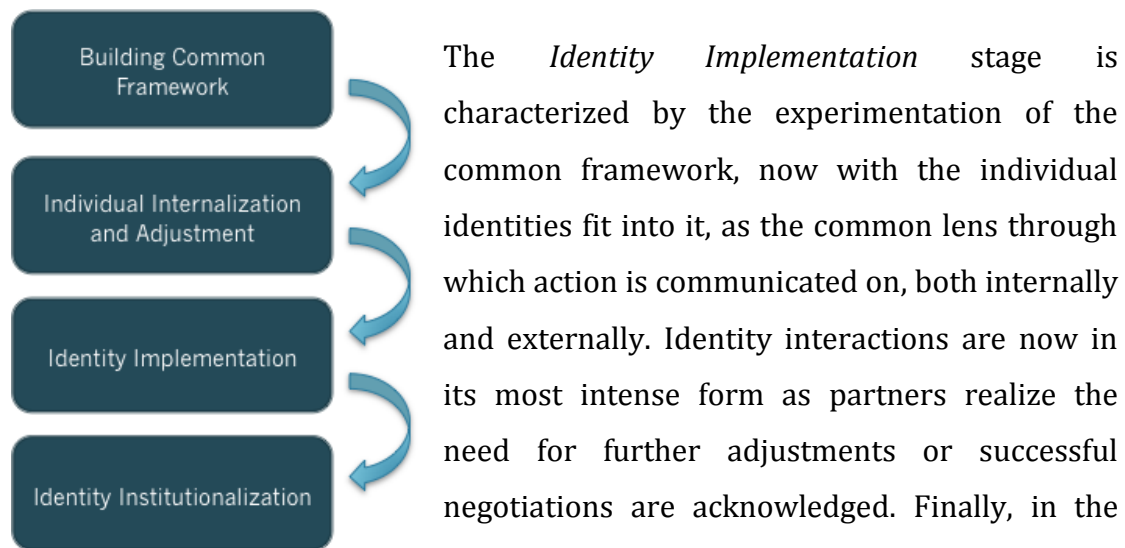
Figure 1: four-stage CI formation process

The *Identity Implementation* stage is characterized by the experimentation of the common framework, now with the individual identities fit into it, as the common lens through which action is communicated on, both internally and externally. Identity interactions are now in its most intense form as partners realize the need for further adjustments or successful negotiations are acknowledged. Finally, in the *Identity Institutionalization* stage, the common framework is consolidated, providing the partnership with its own agency, i.e. 'ability' to act and interact with other organisations. Individual organisational identities are now no longer seen to interact with each other but there seems to be interaction with the partnership as an identifiable entity as well: lessons are recognized as being provided by the partnership, value is attributed to the partnership and support is sought for the partnership.

Looking at collective identity formation from this process perspective, allows breaking down a seemingly abstract concept into identifiable stages. Partners can now evaluate which actionable steps can be taken to aid the transition between these stages. Findings of the case study continue to suggest that such steps are related to how partners make use of two key process components, explained in the following section.

Building Blocks of a Collective Identity Formation Process

The process of collective identity formation does not happen on its own, but rather requires the presence of two components for it to advance from stage to stage, and are directly manipulated by the partners. Firstly, a series of interrelated mechanisms that are jointly designed, agreed upon, formalized and established facilitate the conversations and guide the interactions between partners (Figure 2). The exact combination of these particular mechanisms, and

1) **Formal Mechanisms:** diversity in instruments formally established for information sharing, relational interactions and partner contact opportunities. E.g. partnership agreements, committee structures, feedback schemes

2) **Identity Entrepreneur:** designated partner to manage relationship, guide interactions and lead the externalisation of the collective framework

3) **Common Collective Goal:** provides the general direction for collective identity formation as the axis around which the authoritative text is built.

4) **Names:** as discursive elements they represent the linguistic tools that facilitate conversations about the partnership as a collective and the partners as its members

Figure 2: CI Facilitating Mechanisms

the salience of one above the other, vary throughout the formation process since each stage entails different types of interaction and are thus facilitated by different types of mechanisms.

On the other hand, considering that collective identity is communicative in nature, its process is a discursive dynamic. As such, conversations are to be systematized to allow interactions to evolve along the process. Two types of conversations, linked in a cyclical manner by coordinated action, are recognized as enabling a constant movement through the stages: (a) consultative/planning conversations about future coordination and (b) reflective conversations about

past coordination. The extent to which one particular individual identity is involved in this dynamic communicative cycle will dictate in how far it develops a strong collective identification with the partnership. It becomes clear at this point that, despite agreeing on the facilitating mechanisms, not all partners are equally involved in these communicative dynamic, and in some cases this may be necessary for the proper functioning of a partnership or the important conservation of individual organisational identities.

In summary, the collective identity formation process is rooted in the communicative dynamics, which in turn are enabled by facilitating mechanisms (Figure 3). The proper functioning of both building blocks allows for a collective identity to emerge as an attribute of the collective as a whole, yet the degree of collective identification will depend on the extent to which individual identities are involved in them.
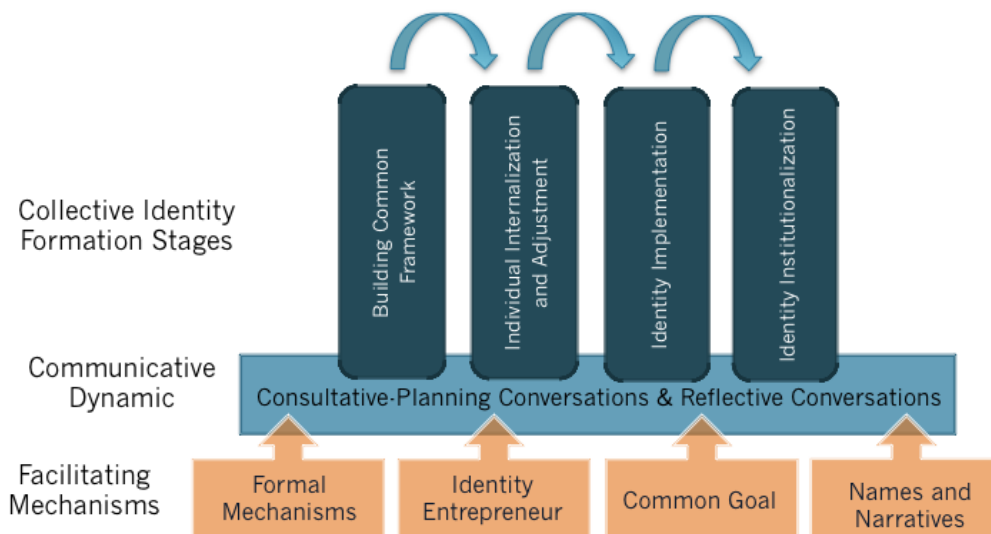

Figure 3: CI Formation Process Model and Building Blocks

What Does this Mean for Partners?
Based on these initial understandings on the process of collective identity formation, organisations involved in collaborative value-creation within CSPs who seek to increase mutuality and internal unity of their partnership (thereby addressing the alignment challenge) can derive the following insights for practice:

- Collective Identity (CI) needs to be taken into account when addressing the alignment challenge due to its potential for manifesting mutuality and internal unity.

- A systematized conversation dynamic and facilitating mechanisms need to be functioning at the same time as building blocks for CI formation.

- Conversations need to be systematized in cycles of consultation and reflection about coordinated action to enable evolution of identity interactions.

- Mechanisms need to be put in place formally to facilitate the flow of conversations that result in CI.

- Mechanisms may be seen as portfolio of options for each phase to encourage different dialogues as process unfolds.

- Partners should be clear that CI formation as a property of the partnership is not the same as **equal** identification with the collective. Flexibility should be exercised to accommodate for necessary variety in degrees of collective identification.

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