

# Taking on New Roles to Address 21<sup>st</sup> Century Problems

by *Patricia Bowie*



COMPANION PIECE TO

## Co-Creations: Viewing Partnerships Through a New Lens

*A case study of the Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative  
A project of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*

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“We are aiming to change the context in which regional associations seed and support philanthropic partnerships leading to meaningful systems change.”

*Maggie Gunther Osborn, President, Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*

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**Co-creation: Viewing Partnerships through a New Lens**, provided a fresh look at public private partnerships and the collective work forged by the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy (CCP)*, the *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, and the State of Connecticut (Bowie, 2016). The partnership offered the opportunity to explore co-creation as a new paradigm and lens with which to design and assess collective work, particularly when trying to achieve large-scale systems change.

In employing co-creation, the partnership established new structures and adopted processes that enabled a diverse group of individuals and entities to voluntarily contribute their skills, expertise, and resources to create a state level early childhood systems approach in Connecticut. This co-creation process also resulted in important transformations within the entities involved.

For CCP, it was an opportunity to explore and test a new role and working structure in direct response to the evolving needs and desires within Connecticut's philanthropic community. Over the last 47 years, CCP has

functioned as a network of various types of philanthropic organizations. CCP connects grantmakers to address issues both individually and collectively, is a resource for grantmaking where funders can access critical information and services, and is a voice for philanthropy representing the philanthropic sector to key audiences (Strategic Plan, Connecticut Council for Philanthropy, 2014).

Within the public-private partnership, CCP established a new working relationship with the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative and with state government, which ultimately shifted the role of CCP. This new role moved beyond offering the typical program management and administrative support and in doing so gained the ability to bring forth different perspectives and new strategies in order to strengthen philanthropy's contribution to systems change. This shift was also in alignment with, and furthered, the mission of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy to promote and support effective philanthropy for the public good.

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“*Hartford Foundation for Public Giving* recognized the integrative role CCP needed to play in advancing philanthropic involvement in systems change providing critical funding to build CCP's capacity, document the learning and develop a model for future collaborative efforts.”

*Maggie Gunther Osborn, President, Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*

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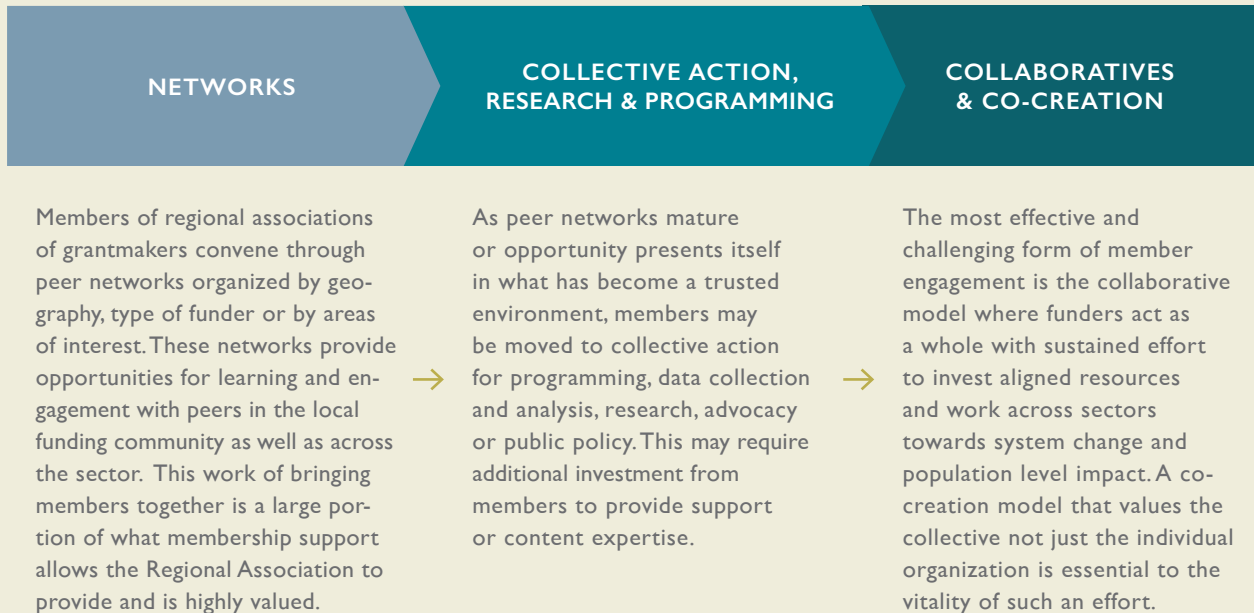
## PROGRESS DOES NOT ALWAYS FOLLOW A STRAIGHT LINE

The *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy* began by investing time and energy in seeding the efforts to understanding early childhood systems and collaborative investments for its members. Over time it became clear the collective effort had reached a level of maturity and needed a sustainable infrastructure. A system of investment in this co-creation model needed to be established to maintain key administrative functions and financial stability. This included the need for engaging content expertise in order for the work to continue to grow and evolve.

While the role of a regional association is not to provide deep subject or content expertise from core staff, it does act as a conduit from which areas of issue interest and opportunities could be explored and evolve through a subset of members. Specific expertise was sought out and supported by members of the group creating a sustainable and more agile platform for evolving the overall work of the regional association and its members.

### CONTINUUM OF REGIONAL ASSOCIATION MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

TRUST / LEARNING / ACTION / LEADERSHIP / CHANGE



**In effect this moved CCP from an organization whose sole function was in service to its members to being a member driven organization providing leadership and advocacy on key issues in order to drive systems change.**

This role shift did not come about in one easy, clearly defined step, but rather emerged from a little confusion, some consternation, and a lot of discussion among the members of the CCP board, members at-large, those involved in the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, and the CCP staff. Most of the discussion was to discern who, when and how the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, CCP staff, or CCP board members would, or even could, take on public policy issues and advocacy.

While there was general agreement that informing and influencing public policy was a powerful lever for systems change, there was a lack of clarity in who would engage and how to participate in direct policy and advocacy. As an example, in an effort to better understand the role public foundations could play in public policy, the *CCP Community Foundation CEO Network* formed and funded a public policy committee. The committee's initial focus was

early childhood policy and advocacy, working in concert with the efforts of the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*. However, this effort was mostly stymied due to confusion about roles and the ability to engage in this work by the various institutions and their trustees. The confusion was not solely on the part of the philanthropic organizations, the CCP staff and board also had to deal with their own confusion related to a changing work agenda. At times, this meant resolving the disparate expectations related to the work of CCP and its respective role within it.

The CCP staff and board had to grapple with the practical issues related to power, leadership, and sustainability. Questions of power and leadership were mostly tied to whether the raising of the profile and positioning CCP as a separate partner and player, within the process of working with state government and other political entities, would diminish or subvert individual philanthropic institutions. CCP staff had to continuously engage with everyone, the CCP Board, the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, and other CCP members, to constantly ensure all were on the same journey. Also, assuming this new role surfaced the need to agree to new allocations of both monetary resources and new staff in order to sustain these efforts for a sufficient enough period to create meaningful change.

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## Aiming for Alignment

Our society consists of countless spheres of activity. To optimize the results of all of this activity, these spheres must be appropriately coordinated with each other. "Polycentric" connotes many centers of decision making that are formally independent of each other to the extent that they take each other into account in competitive relationships, enter into various contractual and cooperative undertakings, or have recourse to central mechanisms to resolve conflicts (Ostrom, 2010).

A polycentric system enables participants to take advantage of local knowledge, to instill a shared sense of trustworthiness, and better adapt to changing conditions.

Many spheres of activity that are currently being managed at a large scale would be better managed at a smaller scale. But smaller scale units often rely critically on the conditions or policies that get set, or on services that can only be provided, at a larger scale (Aligica, 2014).

For example, those who live within a neighborhood directly influence neighborhood conditions and culture. Yet neighborhood residents may ultimately have to rely on city policies or resources if individuals do not adhere to collective social norms, such as the caring and upkeep of one's property, adhering to acceptable noise levels, or not engaging in illegal activities. Similarly, the actions taken at the city level can be greatly improved if they are supported and align with the conditions set at the regional

or state level and the state by conditions set again at the national level. Yet it is at the smaller scale, in this case the neighborhood level that is best able to determine the impact of policies and interventions on the opportunities, and the impediments, to realize positive change.

The public-private partnership of the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy*, the *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, and the State of Connecticut is functioning within a polycentric system. In this case, the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* had the role of, and an expressed interest in, representing the local context and conveying the impact of policies set at the higher state level. CCP served as a regional platform supporting the coordination of the *Early Childhood Funders Collaborative* and providing a neutral voice when working through conflicts with the State team.

While some of the members have described CCP's role as more administrative, others clearly understood the power of linking to CCP. The *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy* enabled the group to enhance its collective reputation and provided a vehicle with which the Collaborative partners could navigate the challenges of entering into public policy and advocacy among a group with varying levels of authority and ability to play this role directly.

Because of its position as a conduit between its members working at the local level and its peers at the national level, CCP also provides a natural platform where

ideas are exchanged, research is disseminated, lessons learned are examined, and best practices are showcased and promoted.

**Connecticut's philanthropic community has success stories to share, policy positions to advance, and ideas to promote, and CCP is its vehicle to elevate them to the national stage as well as disperse them throughout the state, regional, and local networks and organizations.**

The *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy* is one of 33 regional philanthropy associations dedicated to promoting the growth and effectiveness of philanthropy to improve lives in their communities. These regional associations have also self-organized leading to the formation of *The Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers*. The Forum is currently the largest network serving philanthropy in America. With deep regional roots and a broad nationwide reach, the Forum Network fills an important role in the philanthropic sector by improving the effectiveness of foundations and expanding their capacity to advance the common good and helping regional associations advance both individual and collaborative policy priorities at the local, state, and federal levels.

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## Redefining the Support Role

With co-creation you cannot know the full structure of the operating system from the beginning. You need to construct it gradually. It is a process of trial and error of how best to assemble the various pieces or players, as it is the interplay of the individual players and the specificity of their local context that is most relevant to creating a functioning system. The process of design is not unlike putting together a jigsaw puzzle where pieces are joined slowly by virtue of matching their color, shape, and fit in order to identify the emerging patterns

necessary to further develop, or unearth, a coherent well-functioning whole.

In the newest parlance for cross sector collective undertakings within the public sector and foundation community over the last few years, a backbone organization is posited as the necessary organizational support structure for collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Albeit more recently, some have slightly modified this by replacing the term backbone organization with backbone functions (Edmonson, 2013). However, it may be the use of the word backbone itself that is having undue

influence on our mental models, having the unintended effect of limiting our approaches to collective work and maintaining the status quo.

If we think about the backbone, an organizational structure may be supported by a backbone or the backbone functions. Yet, you cannot move, and more importantly progress, with a backbone alone. It is the interactivity of the parts of the organization or structure, more akin to a neural system, that allows for movement. It is cooperation that drives the interactivity of a neural system and thus creates the conditions necessary for adaptation and innovation needed for progress (Shah, 2014).

Fostering this cooperation and interactivity is different than a typical engagement and centralized planning process. Failing to acknowledge this decreases the likelihood that a group will assume a member-managed, self-regulatory approach. Ironically, bringing us right back to justifying the need for accountability and compliance structures, which unfortunately we already know have not proven to be sufficiently agile to continuously foster adaptation, innovation, and improvement (Gray & Vander Wal, 2012).

**So while the role and functions of the backbone will continue to exist, it is the nervous system of cooperation that we should look to.**

The assessment of the need for this backbone role or the functional tasks can overemphasize administrative functions and neglect the need to support the efficacy of the group itself. It was by assessing the group's functioning using Elinor Ostrom's eight design principles, that the role played in managing adherence to group norms was identified as just as critical—if not more so—to establishing the conditions necessary for long-term results (Bowie, 2016).

The efforts of the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* were successful in helping pass legislation forming the *Office of Early Childhood*. Yet, when the legislation passed the group became somewhat rudderless. The Collaborative's work essentially paused for about a year. The group's leadership struggled in bringing members back to a focus on the long-term goal.

As the group was without a clear set of activities or a measure of their progress towards their collective systems change work, some of the funders felt the need to move on to projects that reflected their individual interests and issues, feeling the pressure to convey the impact of their investments to their respective institutions and trustees. CCP, seeing the need to reaffirm the direction of the work and member's collective understanding, assisted by facilitating a planning process that outlined an approach for how best to proceed. This assisted in re-engaging the Collaborative members and has helped to sustain forward momentum.

In considering the role of CCP in the public-private partnership work with the *Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* and the State of Connecticut, the more apt and helpful description of the organizing structure may be the integrative institution.

Integrative institutions combine selected aspects of private, public, voluntary, and community sectors into a single working system (Ostrom, 1990). They reinforce socialization of new members to the emerging structure, support the exchange of information, knowledge, skills, expertise and resources, as well as facilitate the monitoring and implementation of collective agreements. At the same time, as CCP has demonstrated, this also requires an adaptive capacity as the structure and functions of the integrative institution are both context and time dependent.



## CLOSING We look forward to the day when governance consists of optimizing and coordinating among the many spheres of activity. — Elinor Ostrom

We have long realized that a collective response is in order to both address the interrelatedness and complexity of today's problems and to enable equitable access to the opportunities needed to thrive given today's possibilities. We also have long acknowledged that these collective endeavors require new ways of working, which includes new structures, social processes and practices from the individuals, organizations, and the larger systems of which they are a part.

Elinor Ostrom offered eight design principles that assist any group in managing a collective effort aimed at a common goal (Ostrom, 2010). The key being the effort must be managed towards diffuse reciprocity. Diffuse reciprocity is a willingness to give without demanding a precise accounting of equivalent benefits for each action." (Kramer, 2014). It is these types of shifts and changes in individual behaviors that bring change to systems. If the shift of behaviors of the individuals and entities involved is toward cooperation and diffuse reciprocity, achieving better results from the overall system is much more likely. If cooperation is dispersed across the organizational structure, it fosters the formation of new connections, losing old ones and creating new ones. Within the Connecticut early childhood systems work, CCP remains an active partner in helping to continuously adapt and evolve the role of the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* Executive Director and forge positive relationships between

the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative* and State teams. It was through the work with the *Early Childhood Funder Collaborative*, the Governor's Office got to know and identify CCP as a trusted resource. The Governor's Office has continued to reach out to CCP as a resource or partner for issues such as disaster relief, immigration and other areas of interest to the state.

**Overall, this work has forced CCP to re-examine its role in government relations and policy. It led to the renaming of the board committee, garnering legal opinions to guide this work going forward, and creating a platform and approach for future collaborative efforts supported by CCP.**

Recognizing the changing field of philanthropy, CCP continues to evolve how it works as it reaches out to engage and support all types of philanthropists. In the process, CCP is providing us with a new example of the integrative institution. As such, the *Connecticut Council for Philanthropy* is not only demonstrating how to support collective work, but also how to be adaptive in engaging and sustaining philanthropy's participation and contribution to large scale systems change.

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The **Connecticut Council for Philanthropy** is an association of grantmakers committed to promoting and supporting effective philanthropy for the public good.

## 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*.

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