

# LISTENING TO THE STARS: **THE CONSTELLATION MODEL OF COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL CHANGE**

There has been much talk about social sector partnerships and networks. Tonya Surman and Mark Surman explain how the ‘constellation model’, developed for the Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and the Environment, offers an innovative approach to organising such collaborative efforts.



In 2000, a small group of Canadian NGOs started talking about the issue of children's environmental health. Encompassing the childcare, health, and environmentalism fields, these groups were worried about the risks posed to children by environmental hazards. Yet, no group, on its own, had the mandate or resources to deal with this complex issue. They realised the only way to address this growing issue was to work together.

This realisation led to the creation of the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and the Environment: a collective that included Canadian childcare agencies, community health groups, women's hospitals and physicians. Their vision: 'working together to create a healthy environment for children in Canada'.

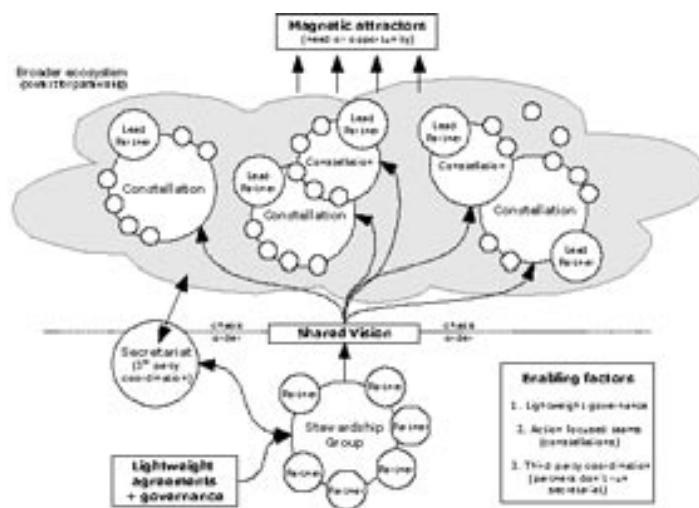
For the individual agencies, the creation of this new organisation immediately raised several thorny questions. How would collective goals be set? Would they have to agree on everything? How could autonomy and diversity be preserved? Who would be 'in charge'? How could they best leverage each others' talents? These questions were daunting, as were the possible answers. The group knew it wanted to keep the partners at the forefront and to stay focused on action. They needed a flexible, lightweight partnership, not a heavy umbrella NGO.

With this in mind, the 'constellation model' of partnering was developed. Bringing together groups from multiple sectors to work toward a joint outcome, the focus is on action. Public education, service delivery, research and other tangible social change activities are handled by 'constellations' or small, self-organising teams. These teams thread into an overall partnership, which is held together with a framework that shares leadership between the partners.

Model partnerships and networks have the potential to increase collaboration, reach and impact amongst social sector organisations. Inspired by complexity theory<sup>1</sup>, the Canadian Partnership's 'constellation model' emphasises

the role of small, self-organising action teams of partners working together on a particular task or issue. These constellations are outwardly focused on public awareness or the broader policy environment rather than on the partnership itself. While serious effort still goes into core partnership governance and management, decision-making authority and resources are concentrated in the constellations which drive and define the partnership. Leadership rotates fluidly amongst partners, with each partner having the chance to lead a constellation that matches its profile and skills, participate or even opt out.

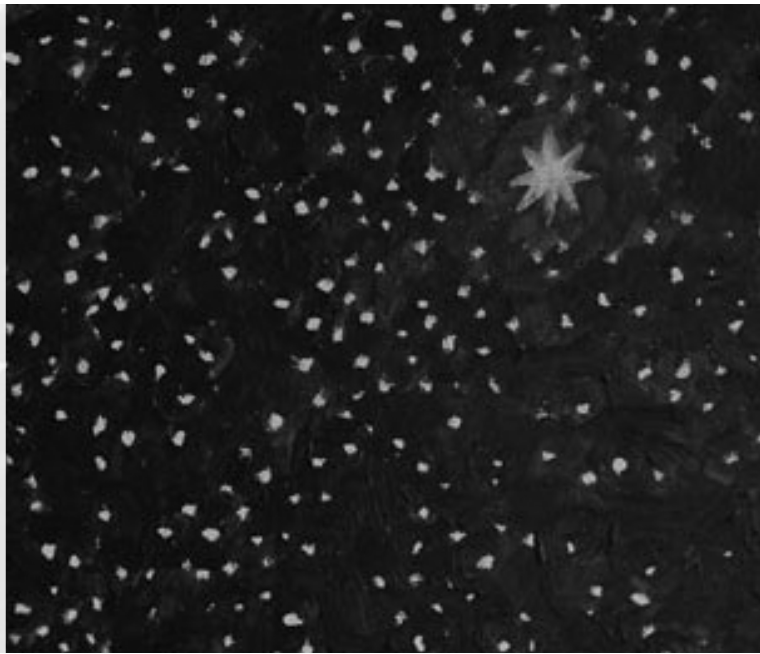
As the diagram shows, the model's biggest strength is that it is built around the natural



energy flows of a group. With the action-focused work residing in the constellations, these clusters become active when a group of partners decides to work on a particular issue. When there is low energy or declining opportunity, a constellation can become inactive or disappear altogether without impacting negatively on the overall partnership.

This emphasis on action teams accommodates the tensions around priorities that naturally exist when several groups come together. If one group wants to prioritise research and another wants to work on public health education, they can. They simply start a constellation and other interested partners cluster around them. Constellations flow from opportunism, not from a rigid strategic plan. This makes it possible to balance the interests and needs of each group within the broader goal of highly productive collaboration.

Partners come together based on their own interests and assets, which usually ensures that the 'right' partners are at the table.



The model also helps to preserve the partners' organisational autonomy. Groups only engage in issues that align with their interests.

These benefits flow from three major elements within the constellation model:

#### Lightweight Governance

A constellation-based partnership is created in response to a need or opportunity, or a magnetic attractor. When a group of people recognise a magnetic attractor, much can be gained from forming a partnership to respond to the need or opportunity at hand.

For Canadian Partnership, the magnetic attractor was the need to raise awareness (and mobilise responsive action) of the impact of toxic elements on children's health. In particular, the group wanted decision-makers, service providers and caregivers to understand the pressing need to address both well-known (leaded jewellery and products) and emerging (Bisphenol A in plastic baby's bottles) threats. Although organisations were trying to work on these issues individually, they were competing with each other for scarce resources. Their uncoordinated actions resulted in confusion and limited impact.

Once a group forms around a magnetic attractor, it needs to quickly form a stewardship group whose purpose is to serve the group's broader collective vision. In small partnerships, this group can comprise representatives from each partner organisation. In larger partnerships and networks, it may comprise trusted members of the broader group who voluntarily step forward. These people are stewards of the community interest and the work that is being undertaken

in relation to the magnetic attractor; they are not representative of their organisation's interests. But each organisation can pursue its interests through individual constellations.

The stewardship sets strategic direction, monitors the partnership's overall health and aligns constellations with the partnership's purpose. It first asks: how and why should the group work together? The answers are then fed into a set of plans. The group then typically turns its energy to the practical matter of supporting constellations: looking for opportunities; assessing the current assets; listening to ideas.

Canadian Partnership's stewards, called the 'coordinating committee', created three key documents: guiding principles, a governance terms of reference and a strategic plan.

The guiding principles<sup>2</sup> lay out the partners' assumptions including the agreement that "... all children and adults have the right to a healthy environment free from potential hazards to their environmental health and safety." While this may seem like a motherhood statement, it defined both the magnetic attractor (hazards) and who the partners should be (organisations dealing with children, health or the environment).

The governance terms of reference<sup>3</sup> focus on how the partners will work together; the rule is 'as little process as possible'. They stipulate that the day-to-day coordination of the partnership must reside outside the partners (a key constellation model principle) and provide guidelines for decision-making, money flows, secretariat services, conflict resolution and adding new partners. Unlike most non-profit organisation

bylaws, this agreement was kept lightweight and short so that most authority and decision making was left with the constellations themselves. Only strategic and framework level decisions were left with the coordinating committee.

Finally, the strategic plan articulated the partnership's overarching goals. These included raising the level of literacy about Canadian children's environmental health; support changing policies to be more protective of child health; and advocate for more research. Unlike typical strategic plans, the focus here was only on long-term goals. Individual action plans were left up to whatever constellations might emerge within this strategic framework. As constellations have come and gone over the Canadian Partnership's seven year history, these goals have endured.

#### Action-focused Work Teams

With a stewardship group, a clear vision and simple agreements in place, a foundation was laid for the formation of constellations.

Within the broader strategic vision of the partnership, constellations take the form of clusters of activity in which a subset of the partners voluntarily participate. They can be formal projects, opportunistic initiatives or working groups. They must however act consistently with the partnership's overall vision.

Two elements are needed to create a constellation: a need or opportunity, and energetic leadership by one or more partner.

Since 2000, the Canadian Partnership has created over 15 constellations. More than half have been phased out because the goals have been achieved or there is no longer energy. This approach has allowed the partners to galvanise quickly around a specific issue and then disband when the issue has been addressed. This rapid change happens without disrupting the vision or stability of the overall partnership.

Like the stars in the sky, constellations are 'loosely coupled' together to create a rough and chaotic whole (this is partly where they get their name). Partners come together based on their own interests and assets, which usually ensures that the 'right' partners are at the table. This element of self-interest also makes it more likely that there are high levels of contribution and participation. There is something to be gained in making the constellations you care about work.

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This model intentionally benefits initiative takers. Money and responsibility are spread around. However, leadership goes to those who step up with an idea and move it ahead. All types of leadership are valued and honoured as long as the leadership is consistent with the group's larger vision and goals.

If appropriate, constellations seek funding or other resources to support their work. With the Canadian Partnership, many constellations have been involved in joint fundraising. Over CDN\$2.5m has been raised over seven years, with funds flowing through at least half a dozen different partners. The advantages of this are obvious: resources are spread around in a manner that is relatively fair, but that also builds on the skills and capabilities of all the partners.

More importantly, because of reduced competition, partners are able to raise considerably more money for children's environmental health together than they would have individually.

In the past, many of the partners approached the same funders with similar projects. Within the partnership, they were able to go to the funders together. The coordinated funding pitches allowed for bigger tasks and a higher success rate than individual proposals. Also, funders readily appreciated the strategic benefits of working with all of the partners together.

Working together not only decreased competition, but it also increased impact and credibility. This can be seen most in the area of policy and health promotion where the Canadian Partnership partners have influenced changes to the pest

control products and chemical management legislation. They have also helped to shape the debate around the new Canadian Environmental Protection Act and sparked discussions about reopening the Canadian Hazardous Products Act. The breadth of knowledge, and diverse constituency and expertise represented by the partners has been key.

Of course, focusing the majority of effort and resources on partner-led constellations also comes with challenges. The biggest issue is partner capacity. A partner may have the drive and interest to lead a constellation on a particular issue, but it may not have the staff or experience needed to run a collaborative, cross-organisational team. In some cases, these capacity challenges have led partners to ask the secretariat to hire and manage staff to run a constellation. While this can be effective from

Ideally, it is housed in an intermediary organisation with experience in guiding the planning process, facilitating meetings, supporting new constellations, fundraising for joint projects, mediating conflict, helping information to flow and building the overall capacity of the group to work towards its desired outcome. In the case of the Canadian Partnership, the coordination function was initially housed within the Commons Group, a private consulting company dedicated to facilitating collaboration and community between social change organisations. It has since moved to the Centre for Social Innovation, a Toronto NGO that incubates cutting-edge social change initiatives.

At the core of the secretariat is at least one highly skilled, senior person committed to helping the group move along well together. Effectively, this position is the 'executive director' of the partnership, who supports the content experts who are drawn from the partner organisations. This person must strike a balance between driving the group process forward while nurturing leaders from the partner organisations. In the Canadian Partnership, this position was called a Partnership Director.

One of the biggest challenges facing the partnership director is managing what is effectively a 'virtual organisation'. As constellation-based partnerships exist only through lightweight agreements between members, they are not themselves a legally incorporated entity. As a result, fiscal and legal responsibility moves around depending on which partner is leading a particular constellation. The partnership director supports the partners in this work and ensures that all initiatives managed by different organisations work as a cohesive whole.

The partnership director also balances power amongst the members. The 'in-motion' nature of money and constellation management helps with this, making it less likely that power will pool in one partner. If one or two partners tend to get all of the resources, the collaboration will become unbalanced. The partnership director, working with the stewardship group, has to regularly ensure that all interested partners get the chance to lead a constellation. In some cases, this requires actively building the capacity and encouraging the involvement of less active members.

Finally, the partnership director plays a critical role in managing changes and growth. Part of this is orienting new members within the partnership.

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a work perspective, it undermines the 'spread funding around' goal, as money flows to the secretariat rather than the partners.

### Third-party Coordination

All collaborative projects need some sort of coordination team to manage overall efforts and troubleshoot problems. When non-profits set up collaborative projects, they typically address this need by creating a secretariat within the partner who has the most capacity. This is seldom an ideal solution. Placing the coordination function within one of the partners permanently alters the power dynamic of the group. One partner takes power. The others defer responsibility and lose energy.

With the constellation model, the coordination function resides outside of the core partners.

As one Canadian Partnership partner noted: “This model is constantly having to bring new partners, and even new personnel from existing partners, up to speed. The old model of distrust is so embedded in the voluntary sector that it is difficult to truly believe in the freedom of collaboration until you have personally experienced it.” Unless the partnership director spends time with new people as they come in, there is a risk that they will act in the zero sum manner than many non-profits bring to collaborative work.

There is a flip side: if there is ‘too much trust’, partners can become resistant to bringing in new members. Trust amongst the Canadian Partnership’s members was so deep that they became quite cautious about membership growth. In this case, the partnership director’s role is to monitor opportunities for growth and to bring these opportunities to the attention of the stewardship group. With the Canadian Partnership, these opportunities have not only included adding new partners but also supporting emerging children’s environmental health coalitions, and engaging the broader and more informal network of people working on children’s environmental health across Canada.

### Organisational Independence

The Canadian Partnership shows that you can get more done together than alone. Importantly, this collaboration happened in a high impact, nimble fashion with a minimum of headaches. This is not typical in social mission partnerships.

Beyond the partnership itself, it has organically enriched the overall children’s environment ecosystem in Canada. There is now, throughout Canada, a vibrant network of over 1,000 thought leaders and service providers working on children’s environmental health issues; all are loosely affiliated to the Canadian Partnership. There are also new links amongst industry, government and NGOs as a result of the Partnership’s collaborative approach to policy consultation.

Of course, the members of the Canadian Partnership have achieved far more than just creating a resilient network. They have increased awareness of children’s environmental health issues amongst the media and the public; trained 1500 health and daycare workers to protect children from toxic exposure; developed publications for everyone from parents to policy makers; conducted research on the control of toxic substances; and driven policy changes that will reduce risk of toxic exposure for all Canadians.

## The ‘constellation model’ of partnering brings together groups from multiple sectors to work toward a joint outcome. The focus is on action.

At the core of this achievement is the simple constellation model of lightweight governance, action focused teams and third-party coordination. While this model was clear from the beginning, it took at least five years for the partners to fully grow into it and understand it. With this understanding comes a certain sense of pride in the model amongst the partners.

The constellation model is far from being a solution for all partnership needs. However, it is helpful for organisations that want to solve concrete problems within the context of a rapidly changing, complex ecosystem. This is what led the Canadian Partnership to move towards constellations in the first place, and it is what has attracted other Canadian organisations like the Ontario Non-profit Network and Ontario Social Economy Initiative to experiment with constellations. All understand they cannot achieve their goals alone but, rather, need to be players within the broader ecosystem.

We are now in the era of networked social change. This is good news. It is also news that underlines the increased complexity within which modern social change and social innovation happen. It is amidst this background that we must not only transform our organisations, but also learn to play well within dynamic ecosystems. The example provided by Canadian Partnership offers one model that can help achieve this goal. It shows that we can maintain organisational independence and collaborate nimbly with others. In the new millennium, this is the way we need to work. ☐

<sup>1</sup> Early thinking on the constellation model was inspired by Brenda Zimmerman’s teaching on complexity and management. See Brenda Zimmerman, “Ralph Stacey’s Agreement and Certainty Matrix”, *Edgewise Aids* <[www.plexusinstitute.org/edgewise/archive/think/main\\_aides3.html](http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgewise/archive/think/main_aides3.html)> [accessed 22 April 2008]

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment, CPCHE, “Guiding Principles” <[www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/english/about\\_us/guiding\\_principles.shtml](http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/english/about_us/guiding_principles.shtml)> [accessed 22 April 2008]

<sup>3</sup> CPCHCE, “Governance”, <[www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/english/about\\_us/governance.shtml](http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/english/about_us/governance.shtml)> [accessed 22 April 2008]



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