

ABSTRACT

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Collective impact strategies and philanthropic foundations

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Abstract:

Background

Recently there has been a significant rise in efforts by philanthropic foundations to facilitate greater integration amongst actors within fields with similar espoused objectives (e.g. Kania & Kramer, 2011; Porter & Kramer, 1999) and this literature has been widely cited and discussed by practitioners despite the absence of rigorous research to underpin these recommendations. In the wider nonprofit practice literature, aligning limited available resources to address social problems is often assumed to be desirable. There is a need for research which explores how actors interpret what the priority problems are within fields and effective strategies to address these problems and how they perceive efforts by funders to collectively organising to address these problems. This article draws on institutional theory to study multiple cases of efforts to construct collective action and contrasts the findings with the practice literature which emanates from the strategic management theory.

Research question

How do the institutionalized beliefs and practices prevalent in organisational fields influence efforts by philanthropic foundations to construct collective action?

Data analysis

Two fields of nonprofit organisations are studied, one in South Africa and the other in the Republic of Ireland, to explore empirically how individuals within these fields interpreted and framed efforts to construct collective action by an international foundation which espoused a strategic philanthropic approach. The concept of institutional logics is used to explore the extent to which coherent systems of shared beliefs and practices are prevalent amongst actors within the fields.

Five cases of efforts to construct collective action across these two fields are studied. 39 interviews with non-profit leaders, foundation staff and consultants were carried out. These interviews were transcribed and evaluation reports, meeting minutes and archival documents are currently being analysed in NVIVO, using a grounded approach.

Emerging Themes

The analysis to date suggests that foundations are not social engineers in organisational fields with the capacity to broker compromises and forge collaborations. Rather, collective action tends to happen when the organizations themselves see a compelling need. Even then, these collective efforts are fragile. The institutional logics which are prevalent in fields shape how actors perceive foundation strategies.

Most important references:

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective Impact. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter, 36-41.

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