



Cross-sector Collaboration by Endowed Foundations: Organizational Identity Matters

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The article explores why Dutch endowed philanthropic foundations, despite their financial independence and unique potential for impact, rarely engage in cross-sector collaboration with government, corporations, or nonprofits. Using organizational identity theory, the authors show that these foundations' sense of autonomy and founder-related values often leads them to prioritize independent action over collaboration, even when partnerships could enhance their impact.

Understanding these identity-driven barriers can help foundations reflect on their societal roles and make more strategic choices about partnering to address complex problems collaboratively. It also allows potential partners to approach these foundations more effectively for partnership purposes.

[#Dutchfoundations](#) [#Cross-sectorcollaboration](#) [#Organizationalidentity](#)

Background & Context



- The Netherlands has 4,500–6,000 philanthropic foundations, a **self-regulated sector with little government oversight and significant tax privileges**. They also face little regulatory or societal pressure to collaborate.
- Dutch endowed foundations **rarely engage in cross-sector collaboration**, missing opportunities for greater social impact. Dutch foundations often **prefer to act alone or collaborate only with other foundations**, rather than with government or business.
- Organizational identity, particularly a **perceived independence** from others, plays a major role in a foundation's willingness to collaborate with other sectors
- The authors work with the following **definition of cross-sector collaboration** to investigate how foundations approach and make decisions about collaboration when dealing with complex social issues: "linking and sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors that aim to address social problems and jointly learn to achieve a result that cannot otherwise be achieved."

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Take aways & Learnings



- Foundations often **focus on independent action**, but this can limit their ability to achieve critical mass or address the full complexity of social problems, which often require multi-sector approaches.
- How a foundation understands and manages the founder's legacy lead leaders in this study to believe they **must adopt frugality as a leading principle** and funnel as many resources as possible directly to causes. This can lead to underinvesting in internal operations that could foster cross-sector collaboration, such as organizational learning or building strategic network, which can have a **negative impact on the effectiveness** of the organization.
- **Any motivation to work with other sectors must come from within the foundation itself.** The main internal reason for collaborating is the belief that a social issue needs to be addressed, which is central to all foundations in this study. Other internal drivers include the founder's wishes and current leaders who value collaboration.
- Foundation leaders can learn that **actively seeking outside perspectives** helps them better understand their own strengths, roles, and how much they rely on parties from other sectors —such as governments, corporations, or nonprofit institutions— to solve complex social problems. By becoming more aware of what makes cross-sector collaboration possible, foundations can **develop a shared understanding of how working with other sectors can help them achieve greater social impact.**

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