

Ensuring equal voice at a tilted table? An explorative study among partnership conveners about their role and practices in addressing power dynamics

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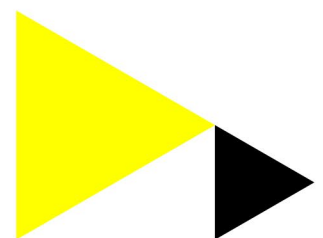
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RESEARCH ABSTRACT (Maximum 1000 words excluding references)

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Title: Ensuring equal voice at a tilted table? An explorative study among partnership conveners about their role and practices in addressing power dynamics

Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) have reached a paradigmatic status as an organizational form in addressing grand societal challenges (Austin, 2000; Ferraro et al., 2015), and research on CSPs has flourished over the past decades (Henry et al., 2022; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2023). However, “critical voices have started to rise” (Louche et al., 2021, p. 1165), because evidence on the actual impact of CSPs on sustainability is lacking, at least beyond anecdotal case studies (Gray & Stites, 2013; van Tulder et al., 2016), and many partnerships fall short in realizing their envisioned impact objectives (Louche et al., 2021). Moreover, CSPs are increasingly criticized for maintaining unequal power relations in the domain in which they operate (Carmagnac et al., 2022; MSI Integrity, 2020). In effect, Gray et al. (2022) suggest that asymmetric power relations are a key explanatory factor in low impact CSPs, and argue that the issue of power has been overlooked for too long by scholars studying CSPs and grand challenges.

Power, here defined as “the relational capacity that enables certain actors to asymmetrically influence the decisions of other actors in ways that favor the empowered actors’ will, interests, and values” (Castells, 2016, p. 2), can influence CSPs in every stage: affecting who is invited to participate, how the implementation unfolds and who benefits most from the realized outcomes of the collaboration (Gray et al., 2022). Examples of power imbalances between stakeholders are the Northern versus Southern partners (Bitzer & Schouten, 2023), lead firms versus other supply chain actors (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014), and mainstream versus niche players (DiVito et al., 2021). Inequality between CSP partners may lead to attempts to shape collective decision making processes in ways that benefit the more powerful stakeholders (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018). Whereas Gray et al. (2022) argue that CSPs may not necessarily be the best course of action in organizational fields with substantial power differences, we contend that power inequalities between partners are an



CSSI 2024

Power and Inclusion
in Cross-Sector
Social Interactions

Cape Town | 3-6 April 2024

University of Cape Town
Graduate School of Business



inherent aspect of CSPs. Therefore, it is important to understand if and how power imbalances can be managed within CSPs, because “they are a foundational barrier to progress on grand challenges” (Gray et al., 2022, p. 16).

In this paper, we address this scholarly call by exploring how conveners deal with power imbalances in the CSP they govern. Conveners are actors with specific experience and capacity in instigating and driving CSPs (van Hille et al., 2019).¹ They have a unique position (Stadtler & Karakulak, 2020) and skillset (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Hamann & April, 2013; Wood & Gray, 1991) to mediate conflicting interests or value frames of CSP partners (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010), to navigate tensions (Stadtler & Probst, 2012) and build trust (Gray & Stites, 2013), and are therefore well suited as object of study for understanding power dynamics in the context of CSPs. By studying how conveners experience power dynamics in their CSPs and how they approach power asymmetries in their convening work in terms of the practices they use, we aim to shed light on the extent to which power asymmetries can be purposefully managed and mitigated to create positive change. This is relevant if CSPs are indeed “to empower voiceless actors [...] by providing them with a platform and through consensus-based deliberative processes” (Carmagnac et al., 2022, p. 59).

Because CSPs progress in a messy, nonlinear manner, navigating tensions including power imbalances in CSPs requires continuous efforts from conveners. Conveners need to have “the adaptive capacity to be both purposive and pragmatic, goal-oriented and flexible, knowledgeable and simultaneously open to surprise and innovations” (van Hille, 2020) to balance these dualities. Our main questions in exploring asymmetric power relations are *how do conveners experience power dynamics in the CSPs they convene, and what strategies and practices do they devise to mitigate power asymmetry in CSPs?* We aim to provide insights on the mechanisms that conveners use to assure equal voice at a tilted table, to leverage tensions to be productive and advantageous, and ultimately realize impact in unbalanced, unequal partnerships.

Empirically, however, studying power in CSPs is challenging. Conveners are reluctant to talk explicitly and ‘on-the-record’ about power imbalances in ongoing CSPs. Therefore, we take an explorative approach and build on our professional contacts from prior research on partnerships. We will purposefully sample a group of 10-12 experienced conveners, and conduct (informal) interviews aimed at reflecting on their convening practice and experiences. In these conversations, we focus on two main questions: (1) whether they are aware of power imbalances in CSPs, also related to their own position in the CSP, and if so,

¹ Conveners can be both organizational and individual actors, and are also referred to as, among others, intermediary organizations (Hamann & April, 2013; Sunday & Wilson-Prangley, 2018), broker organizations (Stadtler & Karakulak, 2020), or interveners (Gray & Purdy, 2018).



CSSI 2024

Power and Inclusion
in Cross-Sector
Social Interactions

Cape Town | 3-6 April 2024

University of Cape Town
Graduate School of Business



(2) how they have dealt with power imbalances. Our aim is to identify patterns of convening behavior related to power imbalances in CSPs, and understand convening strategies to overcome these imbalances.

We are currently approaching conveners in our network to explore power relations in CSPs and expect to present preliminary insights from these interviews at the CSSI 2024 Symposium. Our aim is to provide useful and practical lessons for conveners. Furthermore, we intend to contribute to the literature on CSPs and power by explaining how conveners assess and navigate power dynamics in CSPs.

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CSSI 2024

Power and Inclusion
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Social Interactions

Cape Town | 3-6 April 2024

University of Cape Town
Graduate School of Business



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