



Collaboration Case Note

Civic Space

February 2019

TAI seeks to foster collaboration between two or more members around our shared strategic priorities. Collaboration case notes document and assess the utility of such initiatives from the funder perspective.

What Problem(s) Were We Addressing?

Shrinking civic space poses many challenges to meaningful civic engagement. While other actors have done some work to improve understanding and mitigate the threat, TAI members recognized a lack of discrete information with respect to how it affected their work and their grantees, more specifically. TAI members thus identified this as an area of collaboration in order to:

- Better understand the myriad of challenges faced by their grantees and other civil society organizations due to closing civic space; and
- Identify solutions to help mitigate the effect of this worrisome trend.

Despite these intentions, it became clear relatively early on that the term ‘closing civic space’ was framed in different ways by different members and encompassed a variety of concepts.



Who Collaborated and How?

This collaboration has, to date, centered around the generation of original research and curated content. While most members and the Secretariat were involved in key decision points, most acknowledged that the Secretariat largely led the collaboration and that they struggled to have consistent engagement beyond two member organizations. Engagement from the broader membership consisted primarily of feedback at key points in the collaboration: namely, for the concept note, survey development, feedback on the [Civic Space Compendium](#), and reactions to the [survey findings](#) and [research brief](#). Some 200 grantee organizations engaged in this effort as well, responding to a survey, participating in interviews, and attending webinars on the findings resulting from the collaboration.

"I think there was an expectation that we could...quickly come to a consensus on what's viable and what could be done."

What Type of Collaboration Was It?

TAI generally categorizes collaboration into one of four categories: inquiry, exploration, influence, and alignment. Interestingly, stakeholders in this collaboration seemed to have different expectations surrounding the type of collaboration this was intended to be—and therefore differing views on what it ended up yielding. Most believed it fell into the category of inquiry and/or exploration, but others thought the purpose had been to align work between the donors.

"I'm unsure if it was really exploration or collective action we were hoping for."

How Did the Collaboration Evolve?

Below is a table showing initially envisioned activities and their status as of December 2018. While some of the initial activities were indeed carried out (including the survey of TAI member grantees), others seem to have dropped as priorities. Additional items not listed in the concept note, such as attending conferences and workshops to report back to members, were considered to be a crucial part of this collaboration. Similarly, the development of a resource compendium was added to this list—which some (particularly in the Secretariat) saw as driven by a request from members, although others (some members) saw as a response to the lack of engagement and the need to create something to drive the initiative forward.

"[We] didn't have a clear need that it was informing. We didn't know what we'd find and... what we'd do with the information."

As activities shifted over time, so too did communication channels and actors. One of the key funder member champions of this work left their position, and the collaboration began to suffer from a lack of member ownership. While the team originally intended to have a strong working group pushing the initiative forward, the Secretariat increasingly became the driver of the

process; and the 1-2 member institutions who remained engaged largely began pursuing their own activities apart from the TAI work (including their own surveys and pilot efforts).

Generally, stakeholders agreed that while it started out strong, this initiative suffered from a lack of momentum at the early stages, which caused buy-in and ownership issues later on. Further contributing to this issue was the recognition in mid-2018 that different actors were framing the issue of closing civic space differently, and therefore missing opportunities to work together.

Proposed Activity/Product	Status
Selection of learning partner to work with members on design, including sharpening testable hypotheses	Briefing paper developed, though design aspect not completed
Literature review	Completed
Survey of TAI member grantees	Completed
Identification short list of countries for pilot activities	Not formally agreed to; not completed
Hosting of co-design workshop, followed by design workshops in each pilot country	Not formally agreed to; not completed
Identification of 3-4 grantees per country who volunteer to work with resilience	Not formally agreed to; not completed
Sharing existing tools/approaches	Compendium completed

"Hard to see the value-add because it's so nebulous and cross-cuts everything."

"Disaggregated data has been useful to us. We're now flagging civic space issues and those results are feeding into those conversations."

"It was useful to us to learn, but the mechanisms for action are really outside of TAI."

Was the Collaboration Useful to Members?

Generally, stakeholders felt this collaboration was less useful than that of other TAI initiatives, but that there was still room to make it useful moving forward. In categorizing its utility, most believed it was somewhat useful—particularly in enhancing their own learning about the topic, lending credibility or confirmation of trends, and, to some extent, participating in the collaborative process itself. This included finding disaggregated data from the survey to be useful (to place themselves within the broader field/trends) and using the survey as a stronger diagnostic for trends they had seen anecdotally. Some withheld judgment, noting that it has not yet proven useful but they believe it could be in the future. Two respondents noted that it has not been useful, as no tangible changes or actions have emerged from the collaboration.

Barriers to Collaboration Use

Lack of consistent participation and engagement by members	Staff transitions and strategy changes within member organizations
Broad, vague nature of the topic—which lacked sufficient clarity or focus	Differing needs, systems, and context between each member institution
Difficult for members to see the collaboration as relevant and tangible	Differing expectations regarding the collaborative’s final goal/objectives

Enablers of Collaboration Use

Survey was formal, rigorous, and well-designed	Resource compendium was published, ability to make available to a broader audience
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"[Some members] were interested, but weren't connecting well as it seemed we were operating with a different framing of the issue(s)".

"It's become less abstract. [There's a] stronger diagnostic so it's less generic."

"Others were not showing up, [not contributing], or showing up to hear an update but not because it was a priority."

Lessons Learned



Confirm relevance and priority level. Particularly if a key stakeholder or champion drops out, or if it seems as though the topic is less of a collective priority. Stakeholders believe you should call out a lack of participation early and address it head on. Insist on consistent points of contact and establish thresholds or triggers to re-visit the discussion.



Collaboration is easier to make tangible when it is focused. Specific, clear topics with clear end points or outcomes allow for quick momentum and common understanding. When dealing with broad, vague, or cross-cutting topics, need to carefully set expectations and make a collective, conscious examination of whether the collaboration will add enough value to be worth the cost. Similarly, define the concepts and the framing that will be used for the issue. Determine early on whether global or national-level foci are the priority and how key terms are understood. Define clear outcomes or expected results to ensure all are on the same page regarding the intent behind the collaboration. If needed, revisit those throughout the course of the engagement.



Communication channels should be efficient. People appreciate collaboration, but only when they feel it is worth their time. Stakeholders felt that the lack of people present (sometimes due to scheduling) made their participation not worth their time or less efficient than desired. When scheduling is problematic, consider whether emails can be used rather than calls; or have a 3-hour call rather than regular 1-hour ones. Determine key outcomes desired from each discussion to set expectations.



Quick wins stimulate engagement. Stakeholders were frustrated with the lack of initial movement and the "hurry up and wait" mentality. They noted it halted momentum, and that survey took much longer to get mobilized (and get results from) than they had hoped, making it seem less relevant (see #1). Identifying early wins and tangible products helps facilitate engagement and prolong interest in the collaboration.



Don't reinvent the wheel. Take advantage of what other sectors or actors have already done in defining solutions. Try to test those rather than starting from scratch.

Transparency and Accountability Initiative is a collaborative of leading funders of transparency, accountability and participation worldwide. It envisions a world where citizens are informed and empowered; governments are open and responsive; and collective action advances the public good. Toward this end, TAI aims to increase the collective impact of transparency and accountability interventions by strengthening grantmaking practice, learning and collaboration among its members. TAI focuses on the following thematic areas: data use for accountability, strengthening civic space, taxation and tax governance, learning for improved grantmaking.



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