



Collaboration Case Note

Organizational Effectiveness Working Group

March 2020

Transparency and Accountability Initiative (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?

Investing in the organizational effectiveness (OE) of grant recipients is an essential but often under-prioritized grantmaking practice, and institutions have differing understandings of what constitutes OE. Several TAI funder members identified a need to exchange experiences and learn from each other's OE approaches, and some members had specific learning goals for their own institutions, but there was no clearly defined purpose or desired change for the group as a whole.

“Having TAI as a platform helped us up our own game when we saw how good [others were] at [OE]. So these ongoing learning calls are very successful.”

– Funder stakeholder

Who Collaborated and How?

All of TAI's core members participated in a series of group phone calls between 2018-2019, which most respondents did not see as a cohesive working group.¹ The member-led calls were for TAI members to share experiences and best practices on OE. One respondent noted that these exchanges were “like light-touch OE webinars,” with an emphasis on learning, and “no expectations or obligations to do anything differently.”

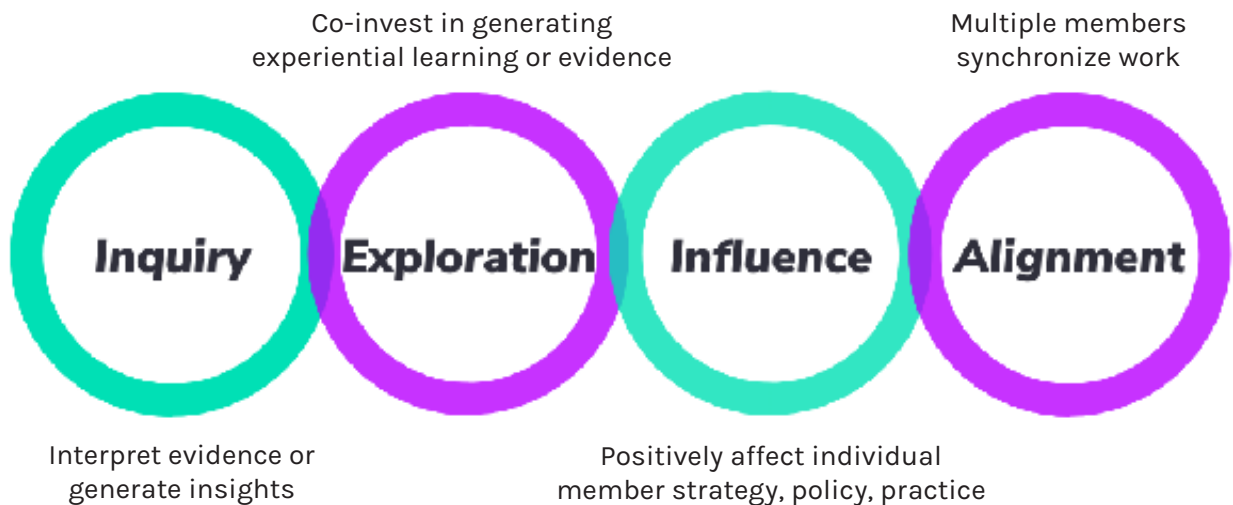
The group looked at several problems within the rubric of OE, including effective grantmaking, sequencing, leadership transition, and funder exits. Respondents were unclear on the exact number of conference calls held, and attendance was not consistent, but rather, as

1. Open Society Foundation (OSF), Luminate, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Hewlett), MacArthur Foundation (MacArthur), and the Ford Foundation (Ford). TAI associate member the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) did not participate.

one funder respondent put it, “as needs and interest dictated.” While some respondents noted that Luminate coordinated several calls, there were differing perspectives on whether or not Luminate led the process. The TAI Secretariat organized and facilitated three learning calls for TAI members in parallel to the member-convened calls; some of the same participants joined both strands of learning calls. Some members also held bilateral in-person meetings and shared relevant documents.

What Type of Collaboration Was It?

There are differing perspectives from respondents as to whether or not this loosely structured working group should be defined as a collaboration. If it is, there may have been an implicit intention to pursue collaboration to influence. The need-driven range of topics covered suggest an element of inquiry as well. In general, this collaboration seems to have settled into an ad hoc OE affinity grouping pursuing peer experience and evidence to inform their own practice.

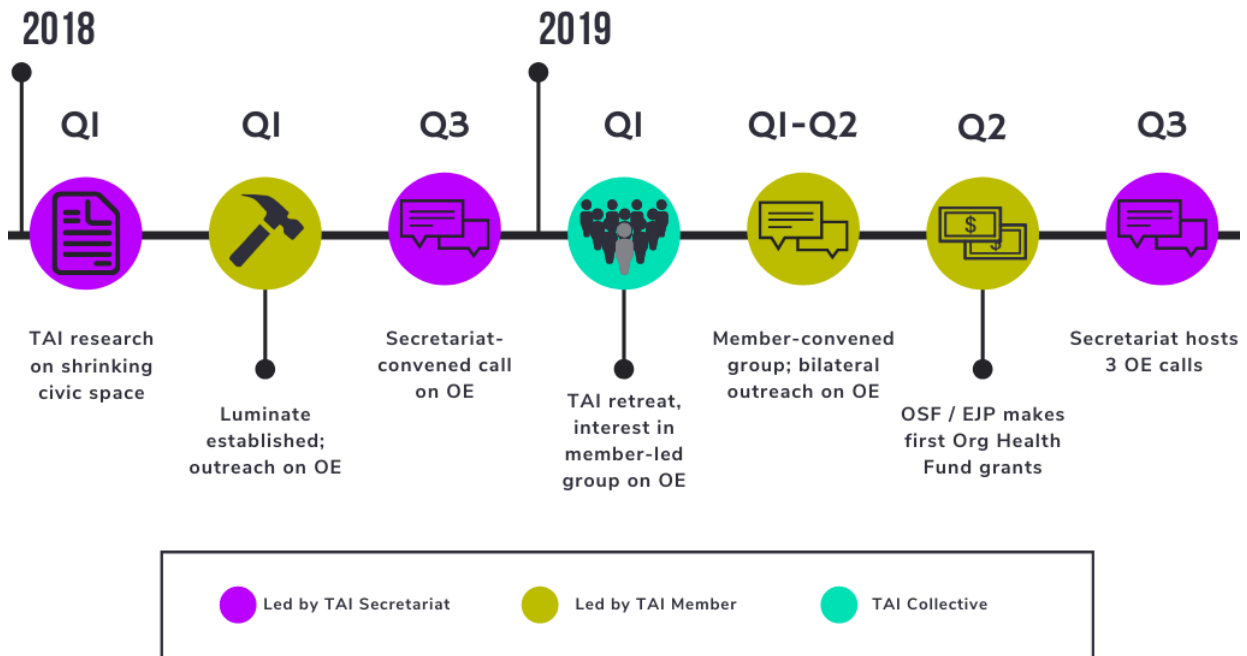


How Did the Collaboration Evolve?

Prior to 2019, TAI members had identified investment in institutional strengthening as one way to strengthen CSOs against the challenge of closing space and mounting attacks. At the same time, members identified a need to tackle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues in a more cohesive way. Members felt they could learn from each other in both areas.

When Luminate began exploring how to implement more formal OE practices to shape its then-nascent Partner Support strategy, this piqued the interest of OSF’s Economic Justice Program (EJP) staff focused on organizational health. After Luminate had some initial bilateral conversations with Hewlett, which has a more robust OE practice area, and Ford’s Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) team, the TAI members discussed OE at the February 2019 member retreat.

Timeline



TAI's 2019 retreat included a full day dedicated to DEI practices and a session to review past smarter grantmaking practice work. Organizational health and effectiveness emerged as an area of member interest, and a working group focused broadly on OE emerged organically from this desire for peer learning. Concern that the TAI Secretariat was overstretched contributed to the group being member-led.

Perceiving unmet member needs, the Secretariat hosted a series of OE calls on organizational health and capacity in 2018; and in 2019 on organizational capacity and resilience; funder policies and practices around exiting a field or grant; and OSF's work on holistic grantee security. The call on funder exits, which one funder respondent called "one of the most enthusiastic TAI calls I've been in," generated interest for a subsequent call in 2020. Most respondents agree that the process, while not well-defined, is ongoing.

What Have We Achieved?

Most respondents agree that the primary achievement of this process was learning and experience sharing. Members with less OE experience were able to use positive practice from other funders to set standards within their own institutions. One respondent noted the "ability to get information from trusted sources and ask questions that might be too sensitive to ask in public forums" as an accomplishment.

Luminate developed a strategy that explicitly refers to Hewlett and Ford's OE work (among others) as inspiration for how they shaped their nascent partner support and organizational practice area. Inspired by OSF-funded holistic security work shared on a TAI Secretariat-hosted call, Luminate included within their strategy a set of holistic security workshops

3 Transparency and Accountability Initiative

for grantees. Luminate also noted that, due in part to this process, funder exits became a major part of their midterm review.

OSF / EJP staff drew on other funder practices to shape the emergent Organizational Health Fund and to explain these decisions to other OSF colleagues.

Was the Collaboration Useful to Members?

The collaboration was very useful for some members who were establishing or exploring new OE policies, and not useful to those who had more established practices.

Barriers to Collaboration Use

A gap in communication between the TAI Secretariat and members created lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities, and the trajectory of the collaboration.

Coordinating schedules was more challenging than usual because the process was self-led, i.e., the TAI Secretariat was not organizing the calls.

Different institutional cultures meant not everyone had as much time or human resources to dedicate to the process.

Differing levels of expertise around OE created disparity in incentives, priorities, timelines, and ultimately how much each participant benefitted from the collaboration.

Different organizational structures posed a challenge for clear and consistent counterparts to be identified.

Enablers of Collaboration Use

Since OE is an emergent practice for many in the TA field, there was energy and interest around the issue.

Beyond a larger collective good, Luminate's individual incentive to leverage learning to action pushed the process forward.

Luminate's willingness to coordinate most of the member-convened calls.

Lessons Learned

Set clear expectations from the start. Several respondents did not see this as a collaboration, or even a working group, particularly because there were no specific donor collaborative actions such as joint research, advocacy, or blogs. Another stated, "experience sharing is great, but there has to be something in addition to that...TAI's strategic priorities should be something none of the members can do on their own."

It may take some external capital to keep things moving, at least until participants are ready to continue on their own. The expectation that a member-led group would sustain itself and lead to joint action or coordination may have been unrealistic, particularly as there was no clearly defined or agreed-upon leader.

In this sense, **establishing clear roles and counterparts** – both for the Secretariat, and more generally for the group – is important. One respondent expressed confusion about whether and who they could ask within the Secretariat for help establishing priorities and organizing calls. Another noted frustration around who within each institution they should be in touch with for what purpose, although this is in part related to different institutional structures among TAI members. One respondent noted that establishing a leader might have resulted in a more rigorous, thoughtful process.

"If we go back to this idea that if this is to become the pathway for TAI to contribute to closing civic space then we have to be clearer on what it is we expect."

– Funder stakeholder

Related to this, several respondents wanted to **think more about the appetite for and feasibility of a member-led initiative**, and what that means for TAI's collective and respective strengths, weaknesses, and value-add. While funders have expertise and practice in an area such as OE, the Secretariat identifies bridges and facilitates connections between funders.

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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