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Title
The role of backbone organisation in attaining collective impact: organised cross-sector collaboration in rural revitalization

Abstract

While researchers and policymakers have increasingly recognised the potential of rural communities to serve as a repertoire of ecological and cultural diversity, efforts made to pursue rural sustainability are often compromised by highly complex problems. In order to tackle these problems, the corresponding solutions must be derived through collaborative efforts between actors with different areas of expertise and local stakeholders. Therefore, collaborative governance has often been regarded as a more desirable alternative to traditional forms of institutional arrangements, such as government regulation or marketized systems. This has incited growing research and policy interests on what makes collaborative governance work.

Recently, the normative concept of collective impact has been proposed as a more organised and focused collaborative approach to resolving a specific social problem. This concept emphasises the need for “a centralised infrastructure, a dedicated staff and a structured process” to ensure “a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants” (Kania and Kramer, 2011). Proponents of this concept have argued that collaborative governance has often failed to produce significant results due to the lack of a supporting infrastructure. Such infrastructure can be provided by what scholars call “backbone support organisations or backbone organisation”. By conducting an in-depth case analysis on the Lai Chi Wo rural revitalization project in Hong Kong, this paper explains the ways in which the presence of a backbone organisation has been important in channelling significant efforts and contributions from other sectors towards a commonly desired outcome.
The case study project, recognised by the UNDP as a successful example of collaborative governance for rural sustainability, was originally initiated by a handful of policy entrepreneurs from the non-state sector. Build on cross-sector partnership, the project was launched and steered by a public university, with financial support from a corporate foundation. The support of environmental non-profits, local villagers, and the Hong Kong government has also been substantial. Adopting the methodology of process-tracing, empirical evidence are gathered from archival records and in-depth interviews with the extensive range of actors involved. In this case study, the public university served as the backbone in the collaboration process, persuading and facilitating actors from different sectors to make their specific contributions to the collective goal. Empirical evidence from this case study demonstrates that the backbone organisation had conducted these activities by offering important administrative, communication and coordination support to direct cross-sectoral efforts towards building an exemplary case of rural revitalisation.

**Keyword**

collaborative governance, collective impact, rural sustainability, cross-sector collaboration