Collaborations, Partnerships, Networks. Introduction: From the Personal to the Professional. Interorganizational Partnerships and Networks

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Introduction: From the Personal to the Professional

Interorganizational Partnerships and Networks

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Often, when I think about the nature of interorganizational partnerships and networks, I find myself thinking about the broader meaning of relationships, which form an integral part of our lives. What is it about relationships that make them so intricate, unique, mysterious, and full of opportunities? What are the components required for building a successful relationship that allows us to grow and develop in the complex world in which we live? Is it the ability to trust one another? Is it the ability to recognize one another's needs and interests? Or maybe it is the belief that together, we can reach more distant and important places than on our own? I have been pondering these questions for quite a while now, and they have led me to consciously — or maybe unconsciously — connect with the fascinating world of collaborations among communities and organizations, and later to the professional and academic study of interorganizational networks.

For years, as a community social worker, I had the privilege of working with organizations on projects that are founded on the values of my professional world — organizations that advance collaborations between Jews and Arabs living in Israel and between various populations and the establishment. Today, I work mainly with the Haifa Council of Volunteer Organizations (CVO) an umbrella organization in Haifa.

My journey in the world of interorganizational partnerships began about four years ago, when I was invited to take part in a seminar organized by the CVO, which was attended by directors from Haifa and Boston. I still remember the empowering

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experience I felt while attending that seminar in Haifa. As directors of organizations, specifically NGOs, we often find ourselves working alone, under daily pressures, while striving to locate resources and fulfill our organizations' goals. As a young director, the seminar was my first opportunity to meet other directors, to learn from their experience and exchange ideas and, most importantly, that was when my networking activities with other directors from Haifa started. Next I was invited to Boston to take part in another seminar. The trip to Boston was a grand learning experience. It provided me with new ideas and tools as well as new personal and professional relationships, which I use even today in my personal and professional life and which led me to take such a significant part in the Learning Exchange project, and later, in the Lead Haifa program.

The Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Project: A Story of Partnerships, Relationships, and People

The Haifa–Boston Learning Exchange project implements many principles of collaboration development and interorganizational networking. The project comprises a number of elements and levels of partnership:

The first element is the structure of the project's partnership. The project is led by several bodies: the CVO; Shatil (The New Israel Fund's Empowerment and Training Center for Social Change Organizations in Israel); the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston (JCRC); the Boston–Haifa Connection of Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP); and the University of Massachusetts Boston.

The second element is the partnership between organizations working in Haifa. The first group to take part in this project consisted of five women who were directors of NGOs working in Haifa in various fields. The five women participated in Donna Haig-Friedman's research and, during that time, developed close relationships built on mutual trust, support, and learning. Later, ten more directors of NGOs working in Haifa joined the group, and the network widened to include other collaborative activities. In the project's third year, we decided to initiate Lead Haifa — a program for social responsibility and leadership development for directors of NGOs as well as directors of business and governmental organizations.

The third element is the partnership between organizations in Haifa and organizations in Boston. Throughout the project, from the research stage until today's Lead Haifa program, a process of mutual learning between the Haifaim and the Bostonians is taking place. The local network has been growing and expanding to become an international network of interpersonal and professional relationships — of tools and knowledge exchange.

The fourth element is the combination of academic research with social change work. Thanks to Donna Haig Friedman's study and her commitment to the project

as well as Amnon Reichman's involvement in it, the project has grown to become a unique model of combining academic knowledge with concrete practical work, of research in various fields related to participants' work with peer learning. Until now, three seminars have been held at the University of Haifa and at the University of Massachusetts Boston to present this model.

All of the above elements have several common characteristics: they involve establishing partnerships and collaborations between people who view social change work as a mission, forming meaningful professional and interpersonal relationships, and developing a common vision of working toward a better society for us all.

Interorganizational Partnerships and Networks: Current Thoughts

In today's world, collaborations and social networks are everywhere and in all walks of life. Very little, if anything, happens in isolation; most things are interrelated and are formed by and related to many other pieces of the puzzle of humanity. Networks, therefore, have an important role in shaping our lives. Despite the problems and dilemmas we face when we come to establish and form a collaboration, it seems that we are all able to connect and relate with other individuals and organizations. We establish social networks and form interpersonal relationships in order to advance issues and fields that we cannot advance on our own.

In addition to the study of network development and networking as a spontaneous, natural process, much work has been done on the subject of networks and the relations within and between them.[1] In recent years, we have witnessed an increase in the number and dispersal of collaborations and partnerships between organizations in general and among volunteer organizations in.[2] Many volunteer organizations, as well as other types of organizations, have reached the conclusion that social networking can significantly contribute to bring about change and to resolving complex social problems. The extent and complexity of the issues and challenges faced by social change and social services organizations require third-sector leaders to develop new paradigms, tools, and techniques to help them cope successfully with the many demands and needs in the field. Some of these needs are the result of the rise in the extent of services provided and the functions fulfilled by nonprofits in Israel and all over the world.

In recent years, the government has decreased the number and extent of essential social services it provides to the community, while the demand for these services has been rising. Such a state of affairs requires nonprofit organizations to become more involved and to expand their community work in order to answer essential needs.[3] Moreover, the global financial crisis, which caused an abrupt decrease in donations and funding, as well as the fact that many foundations have decided to promote inter organizational collaborations and partnerships in order to make work more efficient

and save on resources, have lead many organizations to start working together toward advancing shared goals.

These phenomena and trends have made volunteer organizations around the world understand that things have changed: instead of focusing on leadership and organizational capabilities, now is the time to start reaching out, to focus on developing inter organizational networks, in order to have more influence and realize more objectives.

Interorganizational Partnerships and Networks: Terminology and Definitions

In professional literature we can find a distinction between three types of interorganizational collaborative relationships: The first type is termed *collaboration*: an array of resources, knowledge, funding, and other components is shared by two or more interested bodies in order to solve issues that cannot be solved alone. Another definition refers to *collaboration* as a relationship between various organizations that mutually commit to working together — with and alongside other organizations — when they share the same vision and interests and when combining resources can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the services they provide and their initiatives.[4] Collaborations usually take time to form, and incorporate mutual development of vision, goals, and resources.

The second type of interorganizational collaborative relationships is *coordination*: mutually planning and defining various functions and responsibilities of each of the parties as well as sharing the resources used for a project.

The third type of interorganizational relationships is termed *cooperation*: inter-organizational relations directed at fulfilling a definite and specific need. In such cases, each of the organizations works separately, and they do not share planning or resources.[5]

One of the ways by which organizations collaborate is to take part in an inter-organizational *network*. In literature and discourse we can find many definitions of the term *network*. Some view networks as collaborations between organizations of various sizes that together form a contexture of interrelationships. Others define a *network* as a group of organizations that are organized in such a way that the autonomy of its members is not harmed, and they voluntarily exchange information and assets, and sometimes even develop collaborative activities. A more updated and detailed definition describes a *network* as a group of organizations actively and collaboratively working together toward fulfilling their needs in a range of fields, while distributing responsibilities and expenses among themselves and, consequently, reducing risks.[6]

Interorganizational Partnerships and Networks in Civil Society

Scholars Chao Guo and Muhittin Acar[7] classify the various forms of collaborations between nonprofit organizations into eight types of collaborative activities and rank them according to their level of formality. Under the category of informal activities they list: sharing information, redirecting "customers," sharing a building or an office, and organizing management services. Under the category of formal activities they list: establishing and coordinating shared programs, sharing resources, mutual initiatives, and merger. In informal collaborations, unlike in formal ones, organizations do not commit to being permanent partners in a partnership, and decisions are made by each of the organizations. Civil society organizations tend to collaborate in other fields, such as attending to other organizations' customers, community planning, and assessment of community needs.[8]

Another form of partnerships by which civil society achieves social goals is interorganizational networks. In a network, relations between organizations as well as other members allow the whole to be more than the sum of its parts and, by that, bring about more significant achievements. Networks are established and maintained for various reasons and serve a wide range of objectives; they can be formal or informal, work in one city or in a limited geographical area, or on a national and even international level. Among nonprofit civic organizations there are several types or categories of interorganizational networks: information networks, networks that provide social services to specific populations (the homeless, impoverished families), social change and advocacy networks, and community of practice networks.

Without regard to the type of network in question, several factors may cause an organization to join or not to join an interorganizational network. Among the motives for joining are the benefits of pooling resources as well as sharing risks and new opportunities. Among the barriers are the complexities of collaborative work, the loss of authority and control, the investment of time, and the sharing of reputation with others.

Stories from the Field

As an umbrella organization for civil society organizations in Haifa, the CVO has taken it upon itself to develop and advance a wide range of interorganizational collaborations. In recent years, the council has promoted roundtable forums, and today it operates three roundtables: one for food distribution organizations, one for young adults in Haifa, and one for special-needs organizations. Each is a little different: each serves a unique audience and conducts special activities. Nevertheless, several elements are similar in all roundtables: they all seek to bring together various organizations and to establish collaborations for achieving common goals. Organizations arrive at the roundtable forums for various reasons and motives: some

are interested in exchanging information and knowledge and in exposing themselves and their activities to a wider audience; others are interested in establishing specific projects that serve their goals.

Establishing roundtable forums requires time and effort in order to build inter organizational relationships. Only after participants know each other personally and professionally are they ready to develop joint initiatives. In addition to roundtable forums, the council, together with Shatil and the Boston–Haifa Connection, also developed the Lead Haifa program, which grew out of the Learning Exchange program and forms a network between various organizations and sectors in the city. The goal of the program is to promote local Haifa leadership with strong social justice awareness as well as to develop a multisectoral network that will work to establish social change partnerships. The first class of the program consisted of directors of civil society and public service organizations operating in the city. This year we widened the program to include business organizations as well.

Shlomo Taylor, director of the Community Outreach Department at Carmel Olefins Ltd., who participated in the second class of the Lead Haifa program, says: "I joined the program as a representative of the business sector in Haifa for two reasons: Firstly, in order to widen the circle of opportunities of my factory, to be active in the field, and to establish more collaborations with organizations and NGOs that need our help; secondly, it was important for me to assist third-sector organizations with my professional experience and to help them establish professional relations with the business sector."

Ferial Basul, who works with Arab residents in the neighborhood of Wadi Nisnas for Shilo, an organization that assists senior and elderly people in Haifa, describes her reasons for joining the second class of the Lead Haifa program: "In my professional as well as my personal life, I have always favored collaborations. Working in the Wadi Nisnas neighborhood committee, I realized that in order to make significant achievements, we have to collaborate with all the organizations working in the neighborhood. These days, when the government is privatizing more and more social services, collaborative work is extremely important. After taking part in the program, I established many collaborations and my work for the organization has improved."

The Lead Haifa program features monthly sessions in which participants meet for lectures and workshops in a range of fields and topics, such as social justice, leadership, multiculturalism, and project development. The program gives special importance to establishing networks and developing formal and informal collaborations among participants. During the first and second classes of the program, one of the issues we addressed was how to choose the type of network participants were interested in establishing. Some participants wanted to establish a network that would help them exchange professional information and develop specific collaborative projects for providing services for various populations. Others wanted to establish a

network that would deal with social change work in Haifa because, according to them, networks provide leaders with significant power.

Hila Maoz Shpitser, director of Beterem (The National Center for Children's Safety and Health), who participated in the first class of the program, tells about her experiences: "As a director of a third-sector organization, I often feel alone. I often feel that nobody really understands what I'm doing and what challenges I'm facing along the way. After taking part in the program, I felt less lonely. Meeting other people who do such important work like the participants in the program is strengthening and inspiring. I have learned something from each of the group members; I made friends who will stay with me. After being in the program, establishing inter organizational collaborations has become a very significant part of my work as a director. Until now I have already established twelve collaborations, which our organization promotes and advances on a national level."

Interorganizational Partnerships and Networks: Reflections and Recommendations

By reviewing professional literature and by examining the actual work carried out by third-sector organizations, we can conclude that establishing and developing interorganizational networks that promote social change is extremely important. Nevertheless, we must ask ourselves what prevents such networks from developing more rapidly. Although there are many collaborations between organizations in Israel, the number of formal interorganizational networks is relatively small. How can we explain this? How can we help organizations develop this field of work? Are we to expect directors to be able to establish collaborative relationships and develop partnerships? What is the role of umbrella organizations, such as the CVO, and organizations that provide organizational consulting services, such as Shatil, in assisting, guiding, and even encouraging organizations to develop networks?

Amnon Reichman's essay in this issue portrays the dilemmas and problems faced by organizations when dealing with collaborations; Yael Abada's essay deals with the same issues from the CVO's perspective. A comprehensive study that examined directors' views on whether to join or not join inter organizational networks would cast more light on the subject of partnerships and their formation, and help us develop practical tools for resolving related issues. Another study that might assist in developing this field would be to examine the interorganizational networks operating in Israel today, what has made them successful, and what challenges are faced by organizations and individuals who want to develop similar networks. In these times, society faces many challenges that require us to develop new and creative strategies in order to successfully achieve our social change goals. Investing time and effort in establishing meaningful relationships between

individuals, communities, and organizations will help us develop significant collaborations and interorganizational networks.

Translated from the Hebrew by Yoram Arnon

Notes

1. Peter Plastrik and M. Taylor, Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits, Barr Foundation 2006 http://www.barrfoundation.org/usr_doc/Plastrik-Taylor-NetworkPowerfor PhilanthropyandNonprofits.pdf

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5. Ibid.

6. Y. C. Chang, "Benefits of Co-operation on Innovative Performance: Evidence from Integrated Circuits and Biotechnology Firms in the UK and Taiwan," *R & D Management* 33, no. 4 (2003): 425–437.

7. Muhittin Acar and Chao Guo, "Understanding Collaboration," 340–361.

8. Shavely and Tracy, "Collaboration in Rural Nonprofit."