

4 Making inroads: funder collaborations in multi-stakeholder partnerships

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Introduction

This article will explore TICZA's multi-sector collaboration against the background of diverse philanthropic models of partnerships, sound principles for collaboration, the risks and possible failures, and strategies to unlock/leverage future funding for the TICZA collaboration. Historically, philanthropic organisations have preferred to work in silos, for various reasons. Susan Wolf Ditkoff (2018, 1) outlines the difficulty of finding partners with common objectives and the complexity and costs associated with collaborations as possible motivators for philanthropies to go at it alone.

Catalysing the partnership

The seeds for the Teacher Internship Collaboration South Africa (TICZA) were planted by Trialogue, JET Education Services (JET) and the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, University of Cape Town, in 2017. The focus of the collaboration is extended student teacher internships (ESTIs) and it is based on long-standing relationships. JET brokered the discussions with the Maitri Trust, the Standard Bank Tutuwa Community Foundation and the Zenex Foundation. The established relationships among the organisations, and particularly with JET, helped build trust and facilitated the formation of this funding partnership.

TICZA operates as a multi-sector partnership, employing the collective impact model to guide it. This model, with its emphasis on shared agendas and strategies, has been vital in managing the complex relationships among the various stakeholders, including higher education institutions, teacher unions, non-governmental organisations, government departments and funders. The presence of government officials and policymakers in the collaboration is crucial for achieving systemic and policy change. Recognising the challenges in initial teacher education (ITE), such as a poor practice component in the production of new teachers, the insufficient production of quality teachers and teachers' low confidence levels in subject knowledge, TICZA presents an opportunity to enhance the practice component of ITE.

As funders, we share a clear intent: to institutionalise extended student teacher internships (ESTIs), make them a viable option for universities and advocate for government funding. With around 40% of new teachers emerging from distance education, where practical experience is limited, the internship model provides an important avenue for workplace integrated learning (WIL) for student teachers. TICZA's stakeholders believe that ESTIs could significantly improve the quality of new teachers entering the profession.

Pooling resources: The new era of philanthropy

Philanthropic organisations pooling their resources have the potential to 'increase the power of the collective to influence education practices and policies' (Zenex Foundation, 2024, 21). The world's gravest problems can be solved when organisations with feasible and adaptable projects are connected with the required financial support to get interventions off the ground (Leland, 2017). There are also benefits to coordinating the skills and strengths of a range of partners to enable sustainable and practical impact (Driver, 2024).

Historically, philanthropies have operated in silos due to the absence of natural accountability forces, the difficulty of finding partners with shared objectives and the complexity of collaborations. However, as funding has become scarcer, there has been a shift toward collaboration among philanthropies. This is increasingly evident in South Africa, where the potential to scale projects and address socio-economic challenges makes partnerships more desirable. By pooling resources, philanthropies amplify their impact, enable more productive use of resources, share risks and develop innovative funding strategies.

TICZA is a prime example of how such collaborations can lead to sustainable and impactful outcomes. The three funders share risks, knowing that our collective effort would mitigate the challenges of working at a systems level on such a complex multi-stakeholder project.

The collective impact model employed by TICZA has guided the partnership; however, other models in the philanthropic sector also offer valuable insights. For instance, the Zenex Foundation and the Maitri Trust have experience in multiple forms of collaboration, from information sharing to coordinating processes in jointly funded projects and pooling funding for systemic impact.

Drawing on our complementary expertise as funders and leveraging each other's strengths to keep the project grounded and focused strengthens the TICZA collaboration. TICZA funders quickly organised themselves to share initial due diligence and identify our core strengths and skills to engage in workstreams and agreed to streamline administrative burdens through common reporting. Most importantly, we mutually agreed to align the key priorities for TICZA, underpinning all funders' discussions and focus.

Both the Zenex Foundation and the Maitri Trust had previous experience with ESTIs and could build on that knowledge. Engagements with multiple funders often lead

to different funder requirements, multiple varying reports, overlapping due diligence processes and endless meetings. Instead, Zenex drew on Maitri's extensive expertise in managing the due diligence processes and providing oversight of project deliverables, while Zenex's monitoring and evaluation experience guided the research and evaluation agenda.

Balancing collaboration with deliverables

Managing the tension between collaboration and tangible deliverables is a constant challenge in multi-stakeholder partnerships. We faced the challenge of mitigating the power dynamics inherent in being funders while working in partnership with other stakeholders. We recognise the importance of being perceived as equal partners rather than using our funding status to unduly influence the project's direction. This balance is critical in maintaining trust and ensuring that the focus remains on achieving policy change.

There were moments of doubt, particularly regarding the focus on collaboration over tangible outcomes. The funders had to navigate the tension between supporting the collaboration and being accountable to our respective boards for the deliverables. There were also questions about whether we had been too ambitious in our expectations for policy change at the start of the project. However, these challenges have provided valuable learning experiences, contributing to our understanding not only of what success looks like for TICZA but also the time and cost of driving collaborative endeavours.

Funder coordination

Funding leads meet regularly to discuss progress and check-in with one another and, more recently, have included additional team members to challenge our thinking on the project – questioning our perspectives to ensure a well-rounded view. We support each other, share responsibilities, respect differing opinions and maintain mutual trust. This foundation allows for robust discussions, and when we face moments of despair, we help keep each other grounded and motivated.

Leveraging partnerships and contributing to learning

TICZA's success in bringing together a larger group of donors in the ITE space is a testament to the power of leveraging existing partnerships. TICZA has been a valuable network opportunity across all the different stakeholders. The scope of TICZA draws on detailed expertise and knowledge from the project management office led by JET, working together with Trialogue, Bertha, Bridge, Southern Hemisphere and Reos. The funders benefit significantly, gaining valuable insights and learning from our collective engagement.

The collaboration has deepened the partners' own understanding of ITE in general and specifically internships. A strong case has been made for the value of internships, challenging the perception among some donors that they are too expensive. By advancing discussions and advocating for internships, TICZA has opened doors for further collaboration and funding.

The experience has also helped the funders to develop a deeper understanding of working at a system level and the time it takes to achieve meaningful change. We have to continuously remind ourselves that TICZA is working across the system – changing behaviours, attitudes, relationships, services and policy; and all this takes time, a lot of time. ‘We only get out as much as we put in’. Through participating in TICZA activities such as communities of practice or contributing to this Digest, we can start to codify/ conclude elements of funder collaboration and/or individual approaches which will be valuable for future projects.

Unlocking future potential

The principles required for sustainable collaborations are now in place for TICZA, and the funders continue to build on their strengths. We have deepened our understanding of collaborative efforts toward systemic change and are committed to advocating for TICZA within the donor community. The collaboration’s future potential lies in its ability to adapt and evolve, drawing on the collective expertise and commitment of its partners.

James Keey from JET often reminds the funders that the collective does not necessarily need to be a space where everyone agrees on everything, ‘sometimes it’s good to sit in the messiness.’ TICZA correlates to Adam Kahane’s (2017) concept of ‘stretch collaboration’, which emphasises the need for flexibility, openness and willingness to engage in disputes to find creative solutions.

TICZA’s journey underscores the importance of robust partnerships in addressing complex educational challenges. While the road has not been easy, the collaboration has laid a strong foundation for future impact in the ITE sector. Through continued communication, trust-building and strategic alignment, TICZA is well-positioned to make significant inroads in ITE.

References

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