

Lessons in Collaboration: A Tool for Convenors

“Collaboration is vital to sustain what we call profound or really deep change, because without it, organizations are just overwhelmed by the forces of the status quo.”

~Peter Senge, Director of the Center for Organizational Learning at the MIT Sloan School of Management

Background ¹

The Connect U.S. Fund was founded in 2003, with the first grant cycle beginning in the late summer of 2004. Throughout its eight years of operations, it worked on the cusp of the philanthropic and the non-profit community, advocating for, convening and supporting collaborations to advance more responsible U.S. leadership in meeting today’s complex global challenges. Its role as a grantmaker and as a driver of collaboration and high-impact advocacy strengthened the foreign policy community as a whole. As a result, the organization has many best practices for how to build an effective donor collaborative, conduct rapid response grantmaking, and build advocacy collaborations. While the Connect U.S. Fund decided to wind down its operations and grantmaking by February 2013, we hope that insights from its experience can continue to shape the foreign policy field.

Collaboration is not a science. To be successful, one needs to be in a constant learning mode, sharing best practices with others, reflecting deeply on one’s own methodologies and constantly striving to define impact. The following insights and reflections are offered to assist others as they strive to drive their missions forward through collaborations.

The comments in this paper reflect only the views of the Connect U.S. fund staff, based on their collective experience working on collaborative projects. The field of collaboration deserves broader, deeper, and more rigorous analysis and review. We hope this paper will help spur interested funders to take up that task.²

Defining Collaboration

Collaboration simply means two or more organizations or individuals working together to achieve a common goal(s). Sounds simple, but the reality is far more complex.

Many of us have participated in onerous collaborative processes, protracted meetings and engagement efforts without clear goals or success metrics. While these types of processes are unfortunately widespread, the Connect U.S. Fund maintains that collaboration can be highly effective if executed skillfully – engaging the right people, at the right time, for the right reasons.

Individuals and institutions – when working in silos – often find themselves unable to surmount immensely complex challenges or to see their work as part of a larger whole. Collaboration is the evolution of our systems of leadership commensurate with the complexity of the problems we face. Collaboration is not required in every situation. It is not self-sustaining. Its goal is not to survive. Its players should not always

¹ See the appendices for more information about the Connect U.S. Fund and its experimentation with different tactics to drive and bolster collaboration.

² For more information on Connect U.S. Fund best practices, please see our “Rapid Response Grantmaking: A Tool for Grantmakers” and “Best Practices for Effective Donor Collaboratives” papers at www.connectusfund.org.

agree. Rather, done right, collaboration can be a powerful tool that can break boundaries and ignite profound change.

The individual or organization driven to convene collaborations is tasked with a complex, mind-bending, and oftentimes thankless job. Those of us who do it are committed to that sweat investment and believe that the power of multiple voices can change the nature of U.S. foreign policy. We hope that the lessons we have learned in our time at the Connect U.S. Fund will help to illuminate some of the science behind this art of convening and that many will adopt them to enhance their impact.

Why Collaborate?

At its best, collaboration results in progress towards deep change. It can accomplish this because:

- The diversity and number of actors involved turns up the volume on the “ask” in the media and with policymakers, which can dramatically increase the impact of advocacy;
- The diversity of actors involved allows the “right” person to step up at the right time (e.g., the “expert” may not be the best person to communicate that message). Few organizations have strong lobbying, research, media and grassroots capacities in-house. Instead, they tend to specialize in one or two areas. Ensuring that these strengths are combined as part of a coordinated campaign increases the chances of success;
- Funders are exposed to a diverse grouping of players trying to achieve complementary goals. This exposure allows them to witness first-hand the macro-needs in the sector. This in turn produces more targeted and increased funding that meets real needs and the relevant solutions;
- The potential for innovation is increased, which is particularly needed on complex global issues like climate change, where traditional advocacy approaches – while important – have not been sufficient to reach the advocacy community’s overall goals; and
- The risks of experimenting with a new approach are mitigated in collaborations (much like a diversified investment portfolio decreases risk), as it is no longer one organization branding/funding/running the initiative. In contrast, if a single organization were to pursue the same project alone, it would need to devote a larger portion of its resources, staff time, and overall brand to achieve the same goals— potentially institutionalizing a new approach that doesn’t work, risking the organizations’ reputation, and increasing opportunity costs (fewer resources devoted to other campaigns).

The Connect U.S. Fund: Experiments in Collaboration

The Connect U.S. Fund was launched to facilitate effective collaboration and help organizations working in the foreign policy arena become better policy advocates. Its original mission was to connect non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in a mutually supportive network and strengthen efforts to connect the U.S. to the world as a responsible global citizen. Over eight years, it experimented with three types of collaboration: network weaving, grantmaking, and working groups (see Appendix A for details). As advocacy opportunities arose, especially in the Obama administration, the focus shifted to promoting specific collaborative policy goals with senior U.S. officials.

The organization used grants and staff time to spur policy progress and to encourage collaboration. Over the course of its existence, it made annual grants to 242 organizations, totaling \$10.8 million, most of which were collaborative in nature. Staff and capacity-building trainings, as well as networking meetings, were key to spurring collaboration. Over the course of eight years, our total operating costs, including staff,

community meetings, trainings, and administrative costs was \$6 million. While not linked to collaborations, Connect U.S. Fund provided rapid response grants to 90 organization, totaling \$1.7 million.

Our experience provides a menu for collaboration, which can be tailored to an organization's goals. From 2004 to 2008, the Connect U.S. Fund developed a network of NGOs to share ideas and information, pool resources, and coordinate strategies, driven by opposition to the Bush administration's unilateralism. The deeper, richer connections, across issue areas and coupled with capacity-building trainings, can help prepare the community for faster, stronger policy action as opportunities arise, as well as to identify gaps and otherwise unforeseen opportunities for collaborative advocacy. In 2009, we energized our network to take advantage of President Obama's election to office and the policy opportunities this change afforded the community. A more detailed account of one of our most current collaborative methods – our three Working Groups (Fissile Materials Working Group, Human Rights Working Group, and the U.S. Climate Leadership Group) – is in Appendix B.

Best Practices of Collaboration

Over its years of experience, the Connect U.S. Fund gleaned lessons for when and how collaboration works best at different stages of the collaboration lifecycle: launch, growth/sustenance/crossroads, and success/dissolution. While one may be able to extrapolate that an imminent policy opportunity or threat is most effective at rallying individuals around a shared issue, collaborations may succeed even if that imminent need is not present. At the core of great collaborations is that they consistently add value to their members and that the time investment feels worth the opportunity cost of participating in the process.

Consider carefully whether your goal will be enhanced by collaboration and whether you have the resources – including funding and staff – to do it right. Is the goal to create a broader community among which to share information? Or is it to move forward specific policy goals? Also, consider the elements below before you embark on a collaboration and take the long-view. Some collaborations can be quick – a campaign to ratify a treaty – while others take years to develop, especially when behavioral changes need to change.

One of the key ingredients before launching a collaborative – especially when you engage in a more long-term collaborative process – is not to rush the relationship-building stage. Choose your participants carefully. It may take a year or more to set the key relationships up for success, but it will be worth it. Finally, do not force collaborations; not all situations will benefit from them. Know the difference.

Here are some of the most vital best practices that convenors may find useful as they build, grow, and wind down or spin off collaborations.

LAUNCH

1. Clarify Expectations About the Group's Purpose

Collaborations can only be successfully launched when there is a clear communication of need from critical stakeholders. Collaboration for collaboration's sake can be a waste of time, but through mapping and careful consideration of the field, it can be a powerful tool for advocacy. The Connect U.S. Fund's collaborative efforts were established for three primary reasons:

- An external advocacy opportunity or threat demanded collective voice and action.

- Policy-related work across a sector was being hampered by the lack of information-sharing amongst organizations. This manifested in a redundancy of resources/efforts and/or simply less effective initiatives across the sector.
- Individuals perceived a critical gap or neglected issue that the sector was not sufficiently addressing.
- Recognition on groups working on similar or related goals that their work would be enhanced through collective sharing of information or advocacy.

Because the Connect U.S. Fund staff was so close to its stakeholder community, they understood well what the existent gaps were. Once the need has been established and the group is launched, what tends to hamper these groups is a lack of transparency in communicating the goals and the necessary strategies needed to drive those goals. When individuals have vastly different reasons for participating in a collaborative process, the group will invariably experience significant member drop-out. For example, if members of a collaboration expect the group to decide on a policy ask and then drive towards this ask, meetings comprised only of “information sharing” will quickly lose their interest. This clarification of expectations is not a one-time communication - it must take place repeatedly throughout the group’s lifecycle, particularly in the beginning and at significant crossroads in the group’s decision-making (see Best Practice #9, “Communicate the Value of Collaboration”).

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Conduct a mapping exercise of all stakeholders prior to the group’s launch and, once the group has been created, of its members in order to thoroughly understanding their needs.
- ✓ Create a shared “mission statement” at the onset of the group, establishing benchmarks and success metrics for the group’s work that can be checked against over time.
- ✓ Intentionally and regularly inquire about the value of the group’s work at key milestones, making substantive changes in the group’s direction (or existence), if necessary.
- ✓ Outline how often the group will meet based on the group’s goals and success benchmarks.
- ✓ Define triggers that would call the group’s existence into question.

2. Get the Right People in the Room

Curating the “right” people is critical to the success or failure of a collaborative process. In the Connect U.S. Fund’s experience, harnessing the power of diversity was critical to success. Different groups have different goals, so the “right” people will depend on the goals of the group. This entailed creating collaborative groups comprised of the following menu of options:

- Funders – to fund efforts/projects generated in the collaborative and to offer philanthropic perspectives on issues;
- Issue experts – to lead the idea-generation and make specific policy recommendations;
- Process experts – to lead strategic planning and see the forest from the expert-specific trees;
- Those with senior Executive Branch and legislative/Hill connections – to offer close tracking of emerging opportunities, targeted educational opportunities, garnering meetings with policymakers;
- Media capacity – to make sure experts are talking in a way that non-experts understand, to conduct outreach, develop talking points/framing of issues, etc.;

- Representatives of grassroots groups – to bring citizen action to bear and give perspective from the field; and
- Representatives from diverse constituencies – to bring alternative viewpoints on the same issue (e.g., faith or youth perspective on climate change).

The diversity of the group (i.e., diversity of tactics, expertise, constituencies), combined with the selection of high-level, externally-respected leaders, is critical to the collaboration’s success.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Tie the selection of coalition members to the group’s goals. Identify the roles that you need to fill to achieve these goals.
- ✓ Assess the utility of a broad base versus a targeted core group of participants. If a collaboration is focused on a targeted or time-bound issue, it may be prudent to more narrowly define the group. The more people, the stronger the collective voice, but the more invariably messy the process.
- ✓ Keep in mind the level of seniority you need in the room to achieve the group’s goals. If you do require senior level people, you likely will want to narrow the group across the board to senior level representation and limit the quantity of meetings. You can also weave in more senior people at tactical moments in the group’s strategic plan/campaign.
- ✓ Select your “ambassadors” early and strategically. These are individuals who will convey respect and gravitas for the importance of the group and will be important figures in recruiting future members. These people can be included in a Steering or Executive Committee.
- ✓ Assess early the need for the participation of large institutions early on in the process as they may be hesitant to join these collaborative groups. This may be because they do not have the same needs as smaller organizations (i.e., they may already have a “seat at the policy table”) or because their internal processes make it challenging to align with the goals and outputs of a diverse collaboration. If so, elicit their buy-in at an early stage and/or identify what would compel them to join.
- ✓ Identify any key “validators” (diverse voices) that may add to the group’s effectiveness.

3. Staff Up

The biggest mistake deep collaborations make is not recognizing the depth of support that a collaborative body needs to thrive. By adding convening and other responsibilities onto an already overworked staff member, the collaboration will likely suffer. At least one full-time staff person is often necessary to sustain a collaboration; this greatly reduces the time burden of collaboration for members and supports the work of the governance body (e.g., the Steering Committee). This staff person will act to support and to drive forward the group’s work. This includes significant time invested in meeting preparation, creating agendas and ensuring the buy-in and follow through of critical stakeholders. This may also include creating unique opportunities to amplify the voices of members (e.g., draft op-eds, press releases highlighting members, coordinate meetings with policymakers, set up panels). Such staff work will greatly reduce the criticism that meetings – and the collaboration – are a waste of time.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Ensure that the staffing supports the needs of the group. Do you need a facilitator? Do you need an implementer to support members in pursuing the group’s initiatives? Do you need a coordinator?

- ✓ Engage in a conversation with group members at the launch of the group about what the role of the coalition staff will – and won't – be. Make it clear that the staffer is tasked to provide value-added but is not meant to replace work that coalition partners themselves would otherwise be doing.
- ✓ Create a job description that addresses competencies and tasks for the staff person. Ensure that this job description accurately reflects what one person can accomplish (e.g., oftentimes, the facilitator and the coordinator are two different people).
- ✓ Be clear on to whom your staff person reports and how s/he will be supervised, including the relationship with the governing body. Don't put this individual in a potential crossfire situation with multiple bosses.
- ✓ Think about the time commitment that everyone will need to make and ensure sure you have staff resources to pick up the slack. Demonstrate to the governance body that being a leader is not a heavy lift, but rather value-added to their work. The coordinator will do the brunt of administrative work and take guidance from leadership.
- ✓ If other members (e.g., the co-chairs) are playing substantive convening roles that are very time-intensive, you may consider paying for a percentage of their time.

4. Create Decision-Making Vehicles Early and Communicate Them Clearly

If a decision-making body is not structured and appointed early on, simple decisions can turn into opaque and unclear processes. This, in turn, will quickly dissolve the trust of coalition members.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Clarify the governance structures early in the process and differentiate between the roles of the convenor and the decision-making body.
- ✓ Governance should represent those that comprise the network and/or well respected players in the field. When serving, these individuals should be explicitly held accountable to the collaborative group and not their respective organizations. Efforts should be made to limit the voice of the biggest/most recognizable organizations wielding the lion's share of the power.
- ✓ Convene a strong governance structure, like a Steering Committee. The larger your collaboration, the stronger your Steering Committee needs to be. Once empowered by the larger group, the Steering Committee (oftentimes a microcosm of the diverse expertise of the larger group) can create the strategic plan and direct the coordinator on implementation of the work plan. This structure allows for moving forward with decisions provided they do not deviate from the work plan. This adds a feeling of productivity to the group without blindly consolidating the power within the governance structure.
- ✓ Demonstrate to the governance body that being a leader is not a heavy lift, but rather value-added to their work. The coordinator will do the brunt of administrative work and take their guidance from leadership.
- ✓ If the group is one which will transcend a time-limited engagement, a variant on a "charter" should be documented, offering process expectations for rotating governance structures and how decisions are made, the longevity of the group, etc.

GROWTH, SUSTENANCE & CROSSROADS

5. Be Prepared to Fund Key Capacity Gaps in Collaboration

In building a coalition, make sure to match tactics to the resources necessary to achieve the group's goals. Are you planning an advocacy campaign? What (media, stakeholder) outreach, networking or capacity-building is necessary to bolster the chances of the group successfully attaining its goals? Collaboration isn't just about ideas; rather, it is about selling them to make sure they get implemented. That can require new staff and new capacities for organizations that are already over-stretched. Plan for them and make sure funds are available.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Conduct a "SWOT" (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis early on to help you identify the capacities and gaps among the coalition members; fundraise to fill these gaps. Funders are more likely to fund a collaborative effort – especially when you can point out the specific gaps – because it has been validated by several organizations and adds-value to ongoing efforts.
- ✓ Provide capacity-building trainings to bolster the coalition and invest in long-term improvement of the NGOs working on an issue area. In our experience, NGOs continued to want and need trainings on media and messaging; fundraising; recruiting key validators; fundraising; strategic planning; lobbying guidelines (i.e., what you can and cannot do as a 501(c)3 organization); and stakeholder analysis.
- ✓ Offer additional support to grow the size of the organization, if there is a need.
- ✓ If your resources do not match the needs or goals, are there other organizations with which to partner, either entirely or on specific projects? For instance, are there groups that could help with writing talking points and devising media strategies in exchange for access to a vast grassroots network?

6. Pre-empt Competition

In an area where the groups you are collaborating with are competing for relatively scarce resources, tension and suspicion can emerge between group members. There is no science for how to pre-empt this natural human response, but ensuring that the convenor is perceived as neutral, a distinct value add, and in it for the success of the collaboration is key.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Ensure that funders are included in some way in the collaboration - as members, as observers, as informants - so they can see the value of collaboration around particular issues. This may illustrate the need for available funding for collective/collaborative work.
- ✓ Demonstrate the value of the collaboration by bringing new funders to the table who believe in the power of collaboration on the particular issue or in general. This can also be enhanced by the convenor bringing funding to the table and using the resources to support the work of the group.
- ✓ Communicate transparently how funding is utilized to support the collaboration's work. Staff-time for collaboration should be covered by funders. Proposals and budgetary information, projects and budgets should be developed openly and collaboratively, with opportunity for all to have their voices heard. Emphasize that funding to the collaboration should not come at the expense of grants to specific members.

- ✓ Focus the collaboration on content that is in addition to (not in competition with) work that members are already doing – to amplify existing work and increase its impact.
- ✓ Ensure that members of the group are first and foremost showcased. Support staff (e.g., coordinator, convenor) should do what they can to stay in the background, ensuring a consistency of offering credit to the group rather than highlighting the convening organization.
- ✓ Use “large group bargaining power” to secure higher-level meetings than individual advocates and organizations would normally be able to get on their own.
- ✓ Take the time to develop consensus policy recommendations and a collective “ask,” a process that can take months. This will facilitate an ongoing dialogue with senior policymakers.

7. Strategically Weather External Opportunities/Threats/Crossroads

In the world of foreign policy, there are inevitable shifts in the changing landscape that “derail” a group’s goals and projected trajectory. This is a natural course of events, but even the most experienced convenor can feel challenged when identifying the best way to maximize the opportunity and/or keep the group engaged and effective during these emerging situations.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Constantly challenge the assumptions on which your goals are based; even though it may have taken months or even years to develop these, political circumstances change rapidly, and so should your goals adapt to these changes.
- ✓ Confidently identify the “derailment” early on and guide the group through an efficient decision-making process about how to engage with this situation.
- ✓ Identify early in the group’s formation what “off-ramps” are acceptable to the group in the face of external developments (e.g., temporary functional shift, shut down) and how the group will address those situations.
- ✓ Nimble shift from one role of the group (e.g., campaign development) to another function (e.g., information sharing) when the group members are occupied with another – more timely or important – opportunity, such as occurred with the Arab Spring.

8. Navigating Stakeholder Diversity

Dynamic and successful collaborations are often deeply mired in differences of opinion. In that diversity can be a collaborative group’s greatest asset; it can equally be its downfall. Differences of opinion must somehow coexist alongside a shared platform from which the group advances its work and problem solves around complex issues.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Name early on in the group’s lifecycle the challenges and benefits of the group’s diversity. Discuss with the group how to navigate those challenges in order to not be encumbered by excessive process and discussion. As a group, come to agreement about how decisions will be made (e.g., by consensus, negative polling, via email or in person, etc.).
- ✓ In a group that both benefits and suffers from its diversity, form sub-groups that allow for like-minded individuals or organizations to naturally collaborate. Focus the greater power of the entire group on the overarching goal.

- ✓ During difficult discussions, it is sometimes worth hiring a professional facilitator to help the group navigate sticky decisions.
- ✓ Check-in early and pre-emptively. Hopefully, when there are tough decisions to be made, the convenor will be savvy enough to know which individuals need to be bought-in early or have extra attention paid to their views so that when the decision is actually made, there are no insurmountable roadblocks. Those who want to stay in the group but don't agree with a certain decision can be noted in the minutes.
- ✓ Remember that since collaborations are voluntary, members who don't agree with the consensus can simply leave the group. There are times when this is necessary for the group's effectiveness and cohesion.

9. Communicate the Value of the Collaboration

Collaborations often dissolve when members no longer experience their value. Sometimes, this simply happens as the need evolves, while other times, this is simply a failure on the part of the convenors to communicate transparently and provide value to members. This “value” must invariably be tied to the goals of the collaborative body.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Identify and document early-on what the members will need to feel the effort invested will be “worth” their time. Are they seeking an advocacy soapbox? Collaboration opportunities? Increased access to expert opinion/information? Use an intake form to document these needs.
- ✓ Check in on the group's success milestones over time, communicating internally and externally about the group's progress.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to admit the collaboration is no longer needed or must shift dramatically.

SUCCESS and DISSOLUTION

10. Clarify and Communicate Collaboration Success

Shifting policy is at best a nebulous and meandering process. It often feels like one step forward, one step back, non-linearly circling the goal. Success is about buy-in from unlikely parties, shifting the communal language around an issue, mainstreaming talking points, and much more. This winding process invariably hinders easy articulation of “success.” Identifying how to talk about progress and milestones in the context of long-term change is critical to the buy-in of group members, funders, and other stakeholders investing in the existence of this body. Connect U.S. Fund grantees utilized the Aspen Institute's Advocacy Progress Planner – a free online tool – to create a strategic plan with quantifiable goals and identifiable benchmarks; this helped the grantees measure progress towards their ultimate advocacy goals, which allowed their collaboratives to thrive and empowered them when reporting to supporters (coalition members, funders, policymakers).³

Regularly evaluate whether the collaboration can stand on its own and evolve into its own organization. When the answer is yes – in terms of long-term purpose, staff capacity and funding – try to spin it off.

³ For further detail see the Aspen Institute's *Advocacy Progress Planner* (<http://planning.continuousprogress.org>) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation's “A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy” (2007): <http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/DA3622H5000.pdf>.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ Articulate your “theory of change” around policy change. While this theory of change may not be linear, there are certain ingredients that are critical towards the eventual adoption of a policy shift and its resulting impact.
- ✓ Spell out to critical stakeholders how collaboration shifts the ability to attain these outcomes.
- ✓ Develop clear, measurable outcomes and communicate “celebratory” milestones to internal and external stakeholders.
- ✓ Regularly evaluate whether collaborations are ready to be spun off as independent organizations, including with the prospect of multi-year funding, if needed.

11. When It's Time, Dissolve

Collaboration for its own sake is not worth the opportunity cost. It can burn bridges among allies, force resource-intensive investments that can sour funders and participating organizations, and limit collaboration potential in the future when the need is critical. Signals of the time to dissolve may be obvious from the outside, but for the insider – both for participating members and the convenor – this can sometimes be a challenging decision. Despite the group’s past successes, when a group decides to dissolve, there can be a tendency for the time investment to feel like a “waste,” to allow concern about where the next iteration of funding will come from to influence the decision, and for egos to obfuscate what the sector really needs. It is at this time when the convenor must hold strong to her/his role – to “zoom out” and do what is best for the group – and for the sector.

Tips for the convenor:

- ✓ The convenor and leaders of the group must regularly assess if there is still a need for the goals of the group and a “demand” from participating members, particularly in times of heightened conflict and/or group sluggishness.
- ✓ You may want to find an outside facilitator to help with the dissolution process, as sometimes those on the inside have too much skin in the game to play an objective role navigating this decision.
- ✓ Inquire, throughout this assessment process, whether the external resources available for funding this type of work have shifted since the group’s launch and if this impacts the potential for the group’s success. This may manifest itself in increased feelings of competition and territoriality amongst group members.
- ✓ Pre-empt the loss of trust and dissolve early. Once you lose the trust of your members, it can have profound consequences, both for your relationship with participating organizations and for members’ relationships with each other.
- ✓ When the collaboration becomes self-sufficient, step out. However, such instances are difficult to achieve, as most collaboratives will need continued support.
- ✓ If there is funding tied to the collaborative, give plenty of notice of a dissolution to those receiving funds so they have time to secure other sources of funding.

Conclusion

Collaborations demand the convenor invest tirelessly in their success. A convenor must employ the best of her/his faculties: intelligence, rigor, psychological acuity, enthusiasm, confidence, humility, and humor. Collaborations thrive when the convenor can identify a deep need, significant buy-in from participants, be forward thinking about the terrain ahead, and thoughtfully balance staying the strategic course while gracefully adapting to external landscape shifts. Convenors should feel confident asking the tough questions, setting the structures in place to position the group for long-term success, directing the group when it gets stuck, highlighting its impact, and naming (and meeting) challenges as they arise.

The Connect U.S. Fund’s role in driving collaborations made the foreign policy community stronger and more skilled than it was eight years ago. Weaving a network of those advocating for policy change has proven that the sum is greater than the parts, and that connecting key voices can make significant change – a legacy we hope will live for years to come.

To aid in this process, below are key questions that convenors should consistently ask themselves over the lifecycle of a collaboration.

Critical Questions for Convenors

Pre-Launch	Is there a need for this collaboration? Does it duplicate others’ work? Would it be seen as competitive or value-added?
	Do I have buy-in from respected individuals and organizations that will be key to making this collaboration a success?
	Do I have or can I get sufficient staffing to make this group successful?
	Does my list of participants align with the goals of the group? Do we have the roles and the gravitas that we will need to accomplish our work? Is the group too big?
	Have I conducted a mapping exercise to better understand prospective members’ needs and expectations?
	Will the collaboration be significantly aided by adding a funding component to spur the products of its work? Will it be an asset or a liability to have funders participate in this group?
	Am I rushing the pre-launch stage? Do I need to do more relationship building before we launch?
Launch	Have we created a shared “mission statement” that outlines the group’s purpose?
	Have I worked rigorously enough with the group to outline its theory of change, success metrics/milestones, and outcomes for its work?
	Have we as a group discussed what kind of decision-making will enable us to be the most productive? What kind of governance structure will be most effective for this type of group?
	Do we need a charter to outline how often we should meet, how decisions will be made, how our governance structure will rotate, etc.? Or can we achieve our goals through more a more informal or “loose” collaboration?

	Have we decided as a group what our off-ramps are? When will we shut down? When has our work been accomplished? What external triggers would make it prudent to shut down?
	Have I transparently conveyed and shared in documentation (e.g., budgets) how this collaboration is being funded?
Growth, Sustenance, & Crossroads	Have I recently and consistently inquired about the value of the group's work?
	Have I checked in against our key milestones? Have I done enough to communicate the group's successes – internally and to external stakeholders?
	Do I still feel confident that this group is an added-value to work that members are already doing, rather than in competition with their work? Do others share these views?
	Is there more I or others can do to bring additional funders to the table to support the group's work?
	Am I doing everything I can to showcase members' work and successes? Am I (or my organization) taking credit for too much?
	Would "x" (tricky) conversation benefit from a professional facilitator? If not, is there work I need to be doing behind the scenes to ensure buy-in of the potential detractors to the process?
	Are there some members who should not be part of this group? Do I need to address this situation for the benefit of the group?
Am I doing enough to support the productivity of the group (e.g., by offering additional capacity building, coordination assistance, etc.)?	
Dissolution	Is it time for this group to dissolve or spin off? Is there still a need and a demand for the group? Has there been a significant shift in work portfolios or resource allocations that makes this group no longer added value to members' organizational responsibilities?
	Do I need an outside facilitator to assist in guiding the group through this decision-making process?
	How do I set individual members up for long-term collaborations with each other? Is there anything I can do to help position them for success while this formal collaborative structure is in place?

Appendix A: Collaborations at the Connect U.S. Fund

Staffing Levels: As this document makes clear, adequate staffing is critical to successful collaborations. During the Connect U.S. Fund's lifespan, there were different experiments on staffing levels. The first two occurred during the Bush administration, while the higher level of staffing for the working groups was added during President Barack Obama's first term:

1. Minimal Staff: The 2004-2006 era involved grantmaking to spur collaboration and build a network among grantees with one part time staff. This level proved wholly inadequate to the task.

2. Networking Staff: During the 2007-2008 period, the Connect U.S. Fund increased its staff to three full time staff to launch a new, issue-focused grantmaking strategy, build a broad-based network in the foreign policy community, and support cross-issue advocacy initiatives. This level was adequate to build a network but not intensive advocacy.

3. Working Group Staff: In order to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the Obama administration's more cooperative approach, the 2009-2012 era of the Connect U.S. Fund involved a model focused on targeted, high-level, collaborative advocacy, largely implemented through working groups. We also shifted from cross-issue advocacy initiatives (e.g., security and human rights, climate and development) to focusing on policy asks that fell within more traditional issue areas. We continued to support a broad network of advocates through capacity-building trainings, ad hoc networking opportunities, and community-wide meetings with senior U.S. officials (e.g., UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Senator John Kerry, Deputy Secretary of Defense William Lynn). This higher level of operational activities, both working groups and high level advocacy, led to the hiring of six staff.

Collaborative Models: The Connect U.S. Fund experimented with several collaborative models, tailored to the advocacy opportunities of different presidential administrations and to the relative maturity of the involved advocacy networks.

1. Broad Advocacy Network: One of the key goals of the organization was to develop a network of NGOs to share ideas, obtain information, pool resources, and coordinate strategies. Starting early in its existence, the Connect U.S. Fund built up a loose advocacy network around multiple issues of shared concern (human rights, climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and development) and offered capacity-building trainings to help augment the strength of network members. We believe in the idea that deeper and richer connections among people working on the same or similar goals make their efforts stronger over the long run. It can help build a stronger, more cohesive network.

The Connect U.S. Fund provided an important, safe, neutral space for people to network and share information. The network can also be useful in introducing members of the community to each other who may not otherwise meet and facilitating a broader perspective of their work. For instance, progress in one policy area can sidetrack or speed progress in others. We offered our community an active website updating the members on key events and a space to share information. In order to build the capacity of community members, the Connect U.S. Fund organized and hosted a variety of training sessions and educational briefings, including a monthly capacity building workshops as part of a "Third Thursday" training series. We also hosted "U.S. in the World" updates on key communications tools in the community. Our annual community meetings help NGOs see

themselves as part of a larger whole and were especially valued for the networking opportunities they afforded.

2. Grantmaking: The Connect U.S. Fund disbursed \$12.5 million through its rapid response and collaborative initiative grants, supporting organizations to promote responsible U.S. leadership on human rights, climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and development issues.

The large percentage of grants the Connect U.S. Fund provided were collaborative, meaning one grant was provided to one or more organizations for a specific purpose. These grants were useful in encouraging organizations to work together where they lacked certain capacities. For instance, grassroots organizations may not have regular, direct access to policymakers; D.C.-based think tanks may lack grassroots constituents; both may need a more sophisticated media strategy.

It is important, however, to choose carefully when it makes sense to link grants to collaborations. Grants per se are insufficient to “force marriages” among parties that do not see a benefit in collaboration. It is also important to note that NGOs are often more willing to collaborate in opposition to an issue (i.e., Bush’s unilateralism) than to agree on specific policy asks (i.e., whether to advocate for a cap and trade system).

The field would benefit from further study of the impact of grants in incentivizing collaboration. In our experience, the prospect of grants raised the profile of the Connect U.S. Fund, thus increasing the prospects that members of our community would come to meetings, build relationships and collaborate – with or without our funding. Grants helped strengthen existing partnerships and often helped build new partnerships around specific constituencies or capacities. But ongoing collaboration required other factors in the long term, such as well-structured meetings, high-level advocacy, and a galvanizing policy goal.

3. Working Groups: As collaborative needs and policy opportunities evolved, the Connect U.S. Fund supplemented its broad-based advocacy network-building by employing a strategy of convening “Working Groups” around specific issue areas. These Working Groups brought together 360 experts, representing 140 organizations, which shared common goals and priorities in each of the Connect U.S. Fund’s issue areas – nuclear nonproliferation and security, human rights, development, and climate change – to advance U.S. foreign policy. As a convenor and grantmaker, the Connect U.S. Fund established these groups for multiple purposes: to share information, to identify resource and advocacy gaps within core issue areas, to drive policy change, and to fill identified funding gaps.

See Appendix B for more details on the Working Groups.

Appendix B: Snapshots of the Connect U.S. Fund's Working Groups

FISSILE MATERIALS WORKING GROUP (FMWG)

Number of participating organizations: initially formed with 20 U.S.-based organizations which grew to include 35 U.S.-based and 36 internationally-based organizations (71 total).

Reason for launch: formed to enhance coordination of experts working on nuclear security (and, specifically, between think tank/academic/research-oriented entities and advocacy/grassroots groups), and facilitate action in support of common policy goals. Coordination among those working on nuclear security filled a gap in the peace and security/arms control field.

Goals:

- To come to agreement on a common set of policy recommendations on fissile material security for the then-new Obama administration; and
- To host a parallel “NGO Summit” to Obama’s Nuclear Security Summit (NSS).

Once the FMWG achieved success on these goals and demonstrated its ability to collaborate, succeed in influencing policy, and attract funding, the FMWG adjusted the goals accordingly to:

- To raise awareness on nuclear security issues and the NSS process; and
- To implement the FMWG’s policy recommendations, which were expanded prior to the 2012 Summit.

Governance structure: a Steering Committee of approximately nine of the top experts in the field (representing various sectors), operating through consensus.

Example outputs:

- The FMWG’s [original 2009 recommendations](#) & [updated recommendations](#) for the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit;
- Organizing a [parallel NGO Summit](#) for nuclear experts around the 2010 NSS and regional conferences in [Cairo](#), [Vienna](#) and [Seoul](#); and
- Successful media engagement surrounding the 2012 NSS that included more than 1,100 quotes from FMWG members and 20 op-eds placed in ten countries. Op-ed placements included the [New York Times](#), [International Herald Tribune](#), [Huffington Post](#), and [McClatchy](#).

Example outcomes:

- Greater collaboration among experts focused on nuclear security issues – both in the U.S. and internationally;
- Media adoption of the FMWG’s frame surrounding the 2012 NSS;
- Enhanced support for nuclear security programs in Congress; and
- Increased interest – particularly from representatives of the South Korean government – in addressing gaps in nuclear security governance (enhancing standards of protection for nuclear materials and transparency on implementation).

For more information on the group, visit www.fmwg.org.

HUMAN RIGHTS WORKING GROUP (HRWG)

Number of participating organizations: 47, of which over half were active members.

Reason for launch: initially established because of a need for coordination of human rights advocacy groups and think tanks around concrete policy opportunities and later reconstituted as an information sharing body to identify challenges and resource gaps within the human rights community.⁴

Goals:

- To share information and build relationships between organizations working on international and domestic human rights issues, including NGOs, foundations, think tanks, and advocacy groups;
- To build an agreement on a common set of human rights priorities for collaborative action, targeting primarily the U.S. administration; and
- To use its large-group “bargaining power” and leverage to meet with key policymakers to push targeted issues.

Governance structure: Two co-chairs who worked closely with Connect U.S. Fund staff to set priorities and agendas for meetings. Decisions were made by large-group consensus.

Example outputs:

- A “Human Rights Executive Order Memo” that advocated for what foreign policy issues should be included and addressed in the Human Rights Executive Order;
- [Ten Critical Human Rights Challenges for the Next American President](#). A policy paper put together by members of the HRWG and coordinated by Freedom House; and
- The Defense Assistance Working Group. A sub-working group of the HRWG which will produce a mapping of Pentagon policy and on security assistance and drones.

Example outcome:

- Shifted perspective of the human rights community in engaging with the Pentagon as an instrument for integrating human rights into U.S. government policy.
- Increased partnership between human rights organizations.

⁴ The possible reconstitution of the Interagency Working Group on Human Rights and the initial Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review.

U.S. CLIMATE LEADERSHIP GROUP (USCLG)

Number of participating organizations: approximately 75 organizations, of which approximately 25 individuals were regularly involved in large-group meetings and working group projects.

Reason for launch: in March 2011, the USCLG was launched to promote a stronger U.S. role in international climate policy by coordinating civil society action on U.S. international climate policy and to provide resources, both staff and financial, to drive that work. It specifically reached out to diverse and powerful constituencies to help build a stronger climate community, such as faith, development, experts on business and financial communities' engagement, and national security experts.

Goals:

- To build agreement on a common set of U.S. international climate policy priorities for collaborative action;
- To educate, engage, and build the support of policymakers in the Executive Branch and Congress around a set of consensus policy priorities identified by the largest possible group of stakeholders; and
- To serve as an important forum for member organizations to share information and best practices.

Governance structure: two coalition partners co-chaired the group, with decision-making made by consensus (with an allowance made for “constructive abstentions”).

Example outputs:

- High-level meetings with key policymakers;
- Input on a bipartisan statement on the importance of innovative climate finance to be released by coalition partner Partnership for a Secure America in 2013;
- Draft language and signatories to a presidential priorities letter, outlining guideposts of success on international climate policy for a second Obama term; and
- Policy recommendations to Treasury on the Transitional Committee of the Green Climate Fund.

Example outcomes:

- The buy-in and activation of national security groups and bipartisan leaders who would otherwise not be working on climate finance;
- Spin-off of the Climate and Security Working Group as an independent coalition in 2012;
- Alignment of priorities of the national security community with the community of organizations promoting climate finance;
- Increased engagement with the advocacy community by the Obama administration on climate finance; and
- Incorporation of the USCLG's recommendations by the Transitional Committee of the Green Climate Fund.

Appendix C: The Connect U.S. Fund – A Brief History

The Connect U.S. Fund was founded in 2003 in response to the unilateralism of the George W. Bush administration. Its first grant cycle began in the late summer of 2004 and – for eight years – it worked on the cusp of the philanthropic and the non-profit community, advocating for, convening and supporting collaborations to advance more responsible U.S. leadership in meeting today’s complex global challenges. It was created by collaborating foundations that represented diverse fields – peace and security, human rights, environment, development and global health – and were facing similar challenges to advancing their policy objectives.⁵

The power of the collective voice, grantmaking, and advocacy drove the Connect U.S. Fund’s work. Through leveraging resources and skills, exchanging lessons learned, developing complementary strategies, sharing information, conducting and funding capacity trainings, crafting mutually reinforcing messages and taking collective advocacy action, the Connect U.S. Fund helped build and strengthen an advocacy community better positioned for policy wins in promoting U.S. leadership. The organization used grants and staff time to spur policy progress and to encourage collaboration.

Network Weaver: The Connect U.S. Fund developed a robust network of community members poised for policy action. By 2012, its working groups were made up of 140 organizations, represented by 360 working group members. The website had 19,237 unique visitors. The Connect U.S. Fund’s bi-weekly newsletter was opened by 7,011 people. To build the capacity of the community, we hosted a variety of training sessions and educational briefings. Many of the organizations involved in some aspect of the Connect U.S. Fund – in turn – connect to millions of people in the U.S. and internationally.

Grantmaking: During its tenure, the Connect U.S. Fund disbursed \$12.5 million through its annual initiative grants and rapid response, supporting organizations to promote responsible U.S. leadership on human rights climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and development.

Annual Grants: From 2004-2012, the Connect U.S. Fund made 178 annual grants, totalling \$10.8 million, 71 percent of which were in partnership to organizations that would collaborate. The grant sizes ranged from \$20,000 to 80,000 per organization, with an average of \$60,500 per organization. Staff found the larger sized grants to be much more effective in promoting true collaborations.

Rapid Response Grants: From 2006 – 2012, the Connect U.S. Fund made 90 rapid response grants totalling \$1.7 million (an average of \$19,200 per project). The majority of the grants (57%) were to human rights-related projects. Since 2007, roughly 430 proposals were submitted for review.

Staffing and Operations: Over the course of eight years, our total operating costs, including staff, community meetings, trainings, and administrative costs was \$6 million. The initial staffing of a part-time individual proved wholly inadequate to the task and additional staff was added as the operational and advocacy programs increased. In 2012, staff totaled six.

In mid-2012, the Connect U.S. Fund decided to wind down its operations and grant-making by February 2013.⁶ During its eight years of operation, the Connect U.S. Fund helped build a stronger network of organizations committed to advancing U.S. leadership in today’s global challenges. We hope that the connections built will continue to strengthen through continued support of forward looking foundations.

⁵ Donors to the Connect U.S. Fund over the years have included the Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The Connect U.S. Fund also received project-specific support from the Energy Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, New Ventures Fund, Nuclear Threat Initiative, and Skoll Global Threats Fund. The Connect U.S. Fund is a project of the Tides Center and its grant distribution is managed by the Tides Foundation.

⁶ Please see www.connectusfund.org/next-steps-connect-us-fund for more information.