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## Bringing the elephant into the room? Enacting conflict in collective prosocial organizing

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### ABSTRACT

Cross-sector partnerships have the capacity to bring together partners from very different backgrounds and circumstances toward collective prosocial efforts. We conducted a longitudinal inductive field study of eight cross-sector partnerships formed as new ventures addressing a variety of fundamental social challenges in the context of deep inequality in post-Apartheid South Africa. This allowed us to develop theory and a process model that explains how some partnerships are able to achieve collective prosocial efforts while others engage in only one-sided efforts or become inactive. The key differences hinge on processes of enacting or failing to enact conflicting material interests among relevant stakeholders. Our results have implications for the inclusion of material interests in theories of cross-sector partnering and for our understanding of entrepreneurship under conditions of inequality. The theory we develop provides a platform for future research on collective prosocial organizing in the contexts that need it most.

### Executive summary

A substantial body of recent research has explored how people with distinctly different background experiences and conflicting perspectives can work together productively in prosocial ventures. Much of this work has focused on collaborations among people from industry, governments, community and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in what are often labeled cross-sector partnerships (CSPs). A primary theme of this research has explored differences in logics and framing and how these might be brought into alignment in ways that allow productive and prosocial joint activities (Le Ber and Branzei, 2010a; Le Ber and Branzei, 2010b; Selsky and Parker, 2005).

Based on this prior research, when we began our exploratory study of the emergence of new prosocial ventures drawing partners from multiple sectors of post-Apartheid South Africa, we expected to find evidence of disagreement and conflict among the founders and subsequent partners. What we discovered early on was that in order to understand and theorize the challenges these ventures faced in achieving collective prosocial efforts, we needed to explore not only conflicting logics, but also the deep conflicts in material interests with which they had to contend (Echeverria, 2000; Gray, 1989).

Material interests conflict when improvements to the socio-economic well-being of one member of a collaboration – or those they represent – occur at the expense of short or long-term deterioration in the socio-economic well-being of another. Although work on cross-sector collaborative activities has explored both discursive and material *practices* (Delmestri, 2009; Lawrence, 2017), it has

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attended much less to the conflicting material *interests* that may precede, contextualize and outlast attempts to work together to pursue prosocial efforts. Such conflicting interests are likely to create important obstacles to collaboration, but we observed that some partnerships seemed to make more headway in dealing with them than others. Our research question therefore became: How do founders of cross sector partnerships achieve collective prosocial efforts in the face of conflicting material interests? To explore this question, we conducted a longitudinal inductive field study and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989) of eight cross-sector partnerships attempting to address complex social challenges.

Our primary discovery demonstrates the importance of the manner in which partners deal with conflicting material interests in shaping the achievement of collective prosocial efforts. This discovery implies that future research and theory building on cross-sector partnerships needs to take into explicit consideration not just conflicting logics and cognitive processes but also the underlying reality of conflicting material interests. The fact that conflicting material interests were so important within the prosocial cross-sector partnerships we studied suggests that they may need to be incorporated more broadly in our theories of prosocial organizing as well. For many particularly challenging social issues in many parts of the world – especially those tied to inequality and social stratification – deeply embedded conflicting material interests are likely to characterize participants in such efforts.

In addition, by bringing an entrepreneurship lens to bear on the creation and ongoing direction of these prosocial organizing processes, we contribute to the increasing interest in the intersection of entrepreneurship and inequality (Baker et al., 2005; Baker and Powell, 2016; Lippmann et al., 2005). The need for research to attend more carefully to conflicting material interests extends from cross-sector partnerships to questions relevant to prosocial entrepreneurship considered more broadly. The theory we develop provides a platform for future research on collective prosocial organizing in the contexts that need it most.

## 1. Introduction

“We were expected to destroy one another and ourselves collectively in the worst racial conflagration. Instead, we as a people chose the path of negotiation, compromise and peaceful settlement. Instead of hatred and revenge we chose reconciliation and nation-building.”

~ Nelson Mandela (Mandela, 2003).

A substantial body of research has recently explored how people with distinctly different background experiences and conflicting perspectives can work together productively in prosocial ventures. Much of this work has focused on collaborations among people from industry, governments, community and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in what are often labeled cross-sector partnerships (CSPs). A primary theme of this research has explored differences in logics and framing and how these might be brought into alignment in ways that allow productive and prosocial joint activities (Le Ber and Branzei, 2010a; Le Ber and Branzei, 2010b; Selsky and Parker, 2005).

Based on this prior research, when we began our exploratory study of the emergence of new prosocial ventures drawing partners from multiple sectors of post-Apartheid South Africa, we expected to find evidence of disagreement and conflict among the founders and subsequent partners. As we conducted field work and interviews, however, it soon became apparent that the prior literature had not prepared us to understand fully the sources of conflict that people brought to the table. The sectors from which founders were drawn included different sides of the structural divides that had long advantaged the minority white population by disadvantaging everyone else. What we discovered early on was that in order to understand and theorize the challenges these ventures faced in achieving collective prosocial efforts, we needed to explore not only conflicting logics, but also the deep conflicts in material interests with which they had to contend (Echeverria, 2000; Gray, 1989).

Material interests conflict when improvements to the socio-economic well-being of one member of a collaboration – or those they represent – occur at the expense of short or long-term deterioration in the socio-economic well-being of another. These situations can be labeled “zero sum” when they resemble sporting events in which, “for every winner there is a loser, and winners can only exist if losers exist” (Thurow, 1980: 23). Although work on cross-sector collaborative activities has explored both discursive and material *practices* (Delmestri, 2009; Lawrence, 2017), it has attended much less to the conflicting material *interests* that may precede, contextualize and outlast attempts to work together to pursue prosocial efforts. Such conflicting interests are likely to create important obstacles to collaboration, but we observed that some partnerships seemed to make more headway in dealing with them than others. Our research question therefore became: How do founders of cross-sector partnerships achieve collective prosocial efforts in the face of conflicting material interests?

To explore this question, we conducted a longitudinal inductive field study and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989) of eight cross-sector partnerships attempting to address complex social challenges. These partnerships were organized as new ventures operating with substantial autonomy from any of the organizations or sectors from which the partners were drawn. Our strategic research setting was South Africa, where the legacy of Apartheid remains an important source of inequality and of historically embedded and conflicting material interests (Kolk and Lenfant, 2016; Rein and Stott, 2009). Indeed, the country has seen a recent history of violence around the very areas of contestation that some of the organizations we studied aimed to address (Alexander, 2013; Chinguno, 2013; Valodia et al., 2015).

Our primary discovery demonstrates the importance of the manner in which partners deal with conflicting material interests in shaping the achievement of collective prosocial efforts. This discovery implies that future research and theory building on cross-sector partnerships needs to take into explicit consideration not just conflicting logics and cognitive processes but also the underlying reality of conflicting material interests. The fact that conflicting material interests were so important within the prosocial cross-sector partnerships we studied suggests that they may need to be incorporated more broadly in our theories of prosocial organizing as well.

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