

## Metrics and Strategies for Funders to Consider in Incentivizing and Strengthening Ecosystem Collaboratives

### Final Recommendations of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) Model Ecosystem Restoration and Conservation Collaboratives Project

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27 June 2019

This document presents a high-level synthesis of several characteristics of “ecosystem collaboratives” that may be important metrics—or factors—of success in terms of predicting, measuring, and building capacity to produce on-the-ground ecological and restoration outcomes over time. These recommendations were developed through a qualitative research study conducted between December 2018 and June 2019. The study involved four methods, each of which generated a more refined understanding of the factors that may underscore the success of ecosystem collaboratives:

1. Secondary literature review
2. Interviews with subject matter experts working in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and in other ecosystems nationally
3. Workshop with Chesapeake Bay conservation and restoration funders and practitioners
4. Online survey of representatives of ecosystem collaboratives in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and in other ecosystems nationally

In the pages that follow we present metrics, ranked in order of significance, which NFWF may wish to consider building into its grantmaking selection or competitive criteria. We also provide “most promising” strategies that funders may wish to consider in order to strengthen ecosystem collaboratives in relation to these metrics. Ideas are grouped within four broad areas, listed below in order of importance based on analysis completed for this study:

- I. **MOTIVATION:** Factors that inspire and sustain engagement
- II. **CAPACITY:** Factors that empower collaboratives
- III. **EFFECTIVE PROCESS:** Factors that facilitate collaboration
- IV. **EVALUATION:** Factors that advance effectiveness and impact over time

## MOTIVATION

### *Factors that Inspire and Sustain Engagement*

*People and relationships* typically matter more than structures or processes when it comes to why ecosystem collaboratives are able to sustain engagement, build on successes, and ultimately achieve on-the-ground outcomes. Funders can help collaboratives harvest the passion and expertise of stakeholders by funding basic coordination.

#### **TOP METRICS: MOTIVATION**

1. **Vision / Mission:** Collaborative has articulated a strong Vision and Mission.
2. **Relationships:** Collaborative prioritizes building strong relationships among members and stakeholders (with attention to attracting and retaining the “right stakeholders” to address local/regional needs and opportunities).
3. **Leadership:** Collaborative has effective and dynamic leaders.
4. **Communications:** Collaborative actively communicates benefits of collaboration, success stories, and lessons learned.
5. **Strategic Planning:** Collaborative undertakes strategic planning.

#### **MOST PROMISING FUNDER STRATEGIES: MOTIVATION**

1. Provide funding to assist collaboratives in hosting meetings, outreach events, and/or networking events that build relationships and sustain momentum.
2. Fund a Collaborative Coordinator staff position to absorb day-to-day responsibilities and ensure forward progress.
3. Provide “pass through” funding that collaboratives can manage themselves to incentivize and reward members and stakeholders to participate.
4. Provide long-term and flexible operations funding to give collaboratives time to establish a strong foundation according to evolving needs and opportunities.

## CAPACITY

### *Factors that Empower Collaboratives*

While it is generally good for collaboratives to remain as lean and flexible as possible in light of local and regional contexts, they do need to reach a certain level of capacity in order to sustain engagement and ultimately achieve results. The most efficient way to boost collaborative capacity may be to fund a full or part-time staff position dedicated to coordination of core operating functions (e.g. meetings, communications, fundraising, and evaluation).

#### TOP METRICS: CAPACITY

1. **Coordinator Staff:** Collaborative has at least one paid staff position dedicated to coordination (could be full or part-time depending on scope of collaborative's work).
2. **Operating Resources:** Collaborative has resources to support coordination, meetings, communications, fundraising, and other core operating activities.
3. **Technical Staff:** Collaborative has at least one paid staff position that provides technical expertise that fills a gap and does not duplicate resources provided by other organizations in the region served (could be full or part-time depending on scope).
4. **Fundraising Strategy:** Collaborative has a diversified fundraising strategy that is not solely reliant on grants from one sponsor, or which outlines a path towards greater sustainability over time.

#### MOST PROMISING FUNDER STRATEGIES: CAPACITY

1. Fund a Collaborative Coordinator staff position to absorb day-to-day responsibilities and ensure forward progress; as a secondary priority fund a technical position.
2. Provide support for staff and leaders to undertake professional development and around managing collaboration (e.g. facilitation, evaluation, fundraising).
3. Provide long-term, stable, and flexible operations funding in recognition that it takes time to build capacity and develop talent in response to evolving needs and opportunities.
4. Provide pilot / innovation funding to allow collaboratives to test new ideas.

## EFFECTIVE PROCESS

### *Factors that Facilitate Collaboration*

Collaborative processes do not have to be complicated, but successful collaboratives define and document an approach to decision making, leadership, relevant policies, and key plans.

#### TOP METRICS: EFFECTIVE PROCESS

1. **Effective Meetings:** Collaborative conducts regular, effective meetings, including face-to-face meetings. Note that *frequency* of meeting depends on particular needs of stakeholders, but consistency and quality of meetings are important.
2. **Decision-Making Protocol:** Collaborative has defined and conveyed to members a clear approach to decision-making (e.g. consensus, Robert's Rules of Order).
3. **Governance Structure:** Collaborative has defined a clear governance structure. Note that the structure does not have to be rigid or formal, but should be legible.
4. **Defined Policies:** Collaborative has codified policies that guide operations. Note that policies do not need to be extensive or overly formal, but should be transparent.
5. **Communications Plan:** Collaborative has a communications plan.

#### MOST PROMISING FUNDER STRATEGIES: EFFECTIVE PROCESS

1. Develop and share recommendations, tools, case studies, replicable models, and best practices in effective process, management, fundraising, etc.
2. Provide funding for collaboratives to retain facilitators and consultants to assist at key points, as well as linking collaboratives to vetted resources around collaborative process.
3. Provide or fund trainings for collaborative leaders and staff to gain key organizational and process skills (e.g. facilitation, communications, evaluation, fundraising).
4. Assist with strategic planning by funding retreats, providing hands on technical assistance around goal setting and implementation planning.
5. Require evidence of strategic and operational planning in funding applications.

## EVALUATION

### *Factors that Advance Effectiveness and Impact Over Time*

Instituting and normalizing evaluation fosters a culture of learning and growth in relation to changing needs and opportunities. In its early phase, a collaborative should place greater focus on establishing and evaluating *processes* and *structures* while also tracking programmatic / ecological metrics. As effective processes take root, evaluation can shift its focus from process indicators towards ecological outcomes, a transition which may realistically require five or more years of a collaborative's development.

#### **TOP METRICS: EVALUATION**

1. **Programmatic Evaluation:** The collaborative has defined indicators, goals, and ecological outcomes for its on-the-ground projects and programs.
2. **Process Evaluation:** The collaborative has defined indicators, milestones, and goals for the development of its capacity and effective processes.
3. **Evaluation Plan:** The collaborative has developed a system / plan for evaluation that includes both programmatic and process metrics. This system / plan could involve using internal capacity to undertake self-evaluation, a plan for developing this capacity, and/or a plan for engaging an outside evaluator.

#### **MOST PROMISING FUNDER STRATEGIES: EVALUATION**

1. Provide or fund training for collaborative leaders and staff to learn why and how to undertake better evaluation of processes and programs.
2. Develop and provide free, easy-to-use templates, models, guides, and tools to support collaboratives in undertaking self-evaluation and associated planning.
3. Require grant applicants to include an evaluation plan – including both programmatic and process indicators – in grant applications. Be available as a resource to help less experienced applicants design / refine their evaluation plans during the application process and / or post-award.