

Understanding Collaboration in the Global Sisterhood

*A Study of Collaborative Approaches
in the Catholic Sisters Initiative Portfolio*



“Give aid to... the sisters, who devote their love and life’s work for the good of mankind, for they appeal especially to me as deserving help from the Foundation.... It is my wish... to have the largest part of your benefactions dedicated to the sisters in all parts of the world.”

— Last will and testament of Conrad N. Hilton

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USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture
for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

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Executive Summary

Collaboration continues to be a cornerstone of the Catholic Sisters Initiative Strategy as it moves from Phase II to Strategy 25. The USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) undertook a qualitative study on the role collaboration plays in the Initiative's portfolio in order to understand how sisters and their organizations use collaboration and to identify ways that the Catholic Sisters Initiative can support collaborative efforts among sisters. CRCC staff reviewed the body of literature on collaboration, conducted observational fieldwork and in-depth interviews with key informants, and reviewed grantee reports and supporting documents. Five key learnings emerged from the study:

1. Definitional clarity on collaboration helps align activities, resources and goals.
2. Moving along the collaboration continuum requires increasing amounts of trust, time and turf to be shared. While sisters might be doing more than one of these at a given time, they require very different capacities and commitments in order for these partnerships to deliver intended outcomes.
3. Networking does not necessarily result in collaboration or produce shared identity/global sisterhood. In order to achieve the ambitious goals of visibility and legitimacy, more commitments, resources, leadership development, coalition-building, and time are required.
4. Coalitions elevate sisters' voices and increase visibility and recognition in the public sphere.
5. Leadership, autonomy and trust are prerequisites for collaboration and networking.

The study and its learnings provide a useful collaboration framework for the Catholic Sisters Initiative staff to use in developing grants and successfully implementing Strategy 25.

Overview

The USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) has engaged in a series of studies focused on understanding key areas of investment by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters Initiative. Collaboration and associated terms such as networking, partnerships and the idea of global sisterhood have been recurring themes throughout the life course of the Catholic Sisters Initiative. In particular, the Catholic Sisters Initiative has demonstrated an interest in supporting collaboration between congregations and religious conferences, and especially between women religious and secular entities, including government, civil society organizations, philanthropies, news media organizations, international development agencies and local as well as global advocacy bodies.

In the Catholic Sisters Initiative's Strategy 2.0 (2018-2020), both partnership and collaboration are prominently highlighted as key cross-cutting approaches to the way the Catholic Sisters Initiative anticipates maximizing the impact of its funding portfolio.¹ At the Foundation level, collaboration also prominently figures into the overall philanthropic approach. Indeed, the Catholic Sisters Initiative articulates this priority through its strategy-level efforts, particularly by focusing on strengthening sisters' collaboration within the broader ecosystem of public and private human development.

The Catholic Sisters Initiative's Strategy 2.0 specified one of its goals as "increasing the number of sisters participating in networks" with the aim of "increasing the leadership capacity and visibility of sisters in human development." Based on this target, CRCC developed in its blueprint for MEL work in 2019 a set of learning questions to frame the Catholic Sisters Initiative's approach to funding collaboration and networking. The 2019 MEL blueprint also highlighted four assumptions in the theory of change (TOC) that this study is testing under the cross-cutting portfolio:

LEARNING QUESTIONS

- How can the Catholic Sisters Initiative more effectively support cross-congregation and cross-conference collaborations?
- Do partnership, network development and collaboration result in the sharing of best practices?
- What prevents and facilitates collaboration on a larger scale?

ASSUMPTIONS

- The development of networks will result in increased visibility of sisters in the NGO sector.
- Networks will result in sisters' taking on active leadership roles.
- Collaboration results in the sharing of best practice models.
- Collaboration results in co-funding and the leveraging of resources.

The Catholic Sisters Initiative's Strategy 25 continues to prioritize the elevation of sisters' leadership roles and the deepening of partnerships, networks and collaboration with the church and lay leadership.

The Catholic Sisters Initiative's ongoing partnerships with the Vatican and regional Church leadership are particularly relevant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on sisters and their ministries during the past year. The Catholic Sisters Initiative is working extensively with the Vatican and its networks to address real-time critical issues on access to vaccines and personal protective equipment while also addressing the increasing incidence of human trafficking and the need for additional child protection and safety measures in the wake of the pandemic. The learnings from this study, therefore, remain critical to the Catholic Sisters Initiative's continued efforts to support sisters.



Study Objective and Methodology

In order to gain a deeper understanding of these associated questions and assumptions, CRCC proposed in its 2019 MEL blueprint to undertake a qualitative study of Catholic Sisters Initiative-funded collaborative efforts focusing on different types of collaboration. This study investigates what the Catholic Sisters Initiative is already doing around collaboration and networks and what lessons can be learned from this work.

First, CRCC staff undertook a literature review in the field of collaboration and inter-organizational partnership. We looked at the general (secular) field of organizational management to derive conceptual clarity around the idea of collaboration. Networking, partnership, collaboration and cooperation are terms that are often used interchangeably without careful assessment of their respective attributes, uses and challenges. The literature in the field of organizational management and community-based development offers a framework for thinking about collaboration as a continuum of different inter-organizational models, each of which has distinctive attributes and requirements in terms of institutional capacities and supports.

We also consulted research specific to Catholic Sisters that shed light on the extent to which sisters themselves value, desire or pursue collaboration and networking. This body of research encompassed CRCC's Measurement, Evaluation and Learning work, including several landscape studies in Africa and North America.



The primary data collection methodology for the study consisted of interviews conducted by CRCC staff with sisters involved in Catholic Sisters Initiative-funded programs that entail some form of inter-organizational linkage. For this, we drew upon a set of 24 interviews that CRCC staff conducted with sisters and their partners in-person before the pandemic, as well as additional interviews conducted virtually using the Zoom platform after travel restrictions were implemented. Interlocutors for this study were based in the United States, Kenya, Zambia, Nigeria, India and Mexico, and included sisters and their partners who interacted with the following Catholic Sisters Initiative grantees: African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC), Sisters Leadership Development Initiative-Latin America (SLDI-Latin America), US Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking (USCSAHT), Zambia Association of Sisters (ZAS), the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), Catholic Health Association of India (CHAI), African Faith and Justice Network (AFJN), and the Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa (ACWECA).

From November 2019 through February 2020, CRCC staff carried out fieldwork in Mexico and India with sisters and other individuals directly involved with SLDI-Latin America and CHAI. These interviews and observations provided an overview of the various existing forms of partnership and networking that sisters have participated in, as well as the various factors that facilitate and impede these engagements. Of particular importance in these interviews was the lived reality, conditions, and experiences expressed by Catholic Sisters.”

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented us from conducting in-depth qualitative research after February 2020. In particular, travel restrictions by the university as well as IRB restrictions on doing in-person interviews—both of which still are in effect as of July 2021—have restricted the ability to travel to various grantee sites and conduct in-person meetings and participant observation.

In the following pages, we have outlined key conceptual frameworks around collaboration and networks that emerged from the literature review of research on sisters’ work and the field of organizational management. The body of the report then centers on a discussion of the major four learnings from the research and reflections on the theory of change (TOC) assumptions in the cross-cutting portfolio of collaboration. The report concludes with key takeaways from the research and recommendations for the Catholic Sisters Initiative to take into consideration in its funding of collaboration and networks.

A Framework for Collaboration



Sisters Working Together



ollaboration and networking have recently emerged as important themes that communities of women religious have emphasized as necessary in their ministries to improve the systems and conditions that affect the poor and the vulnerable. While no comprehensive study has been conducted to explore this development, over the past decade sisters and scholars alike have observed a shift in perspective among sisters, who increasingly place collaboration at the center of what they do.

In particular, while sisters may have formerly been reluctant to reach beyond their own communities to support their ministries, there are new aspirations to develop collaborative initiatives to meet the growing needs of the people whom sisters serve.

In a study of sisters in North America, based on focus group discussion of sisters' ministries and the work of women religious, Fischer and Murphy observe the prioritizing of collaboration over competition as one of eight themes that prominently feature in sisters' discussion of the unique approach that women religious take in ministering to their communities.² Fischer and Bai also note in a study of women religious organizations in the Cleveland, Ohio area that sisters identify collaboration as something that helps them serve clients better, access complementary skills/knowledge and ensure the long-term sustainability of their ministries.³ Less frequently cited benefits included access to new funding sources, in-kind donations and recipient referrals.

Among women religious in the global south, observers have also noted a similar increase in the number of women religious speaking about the need for collaboration in ministry.⁴ For instance, collaboration has been an important goal of initiatives to develop and deliver educational programs that strengthen the capacity of women religious in Africa, with collaborative decision-making and the empowerment of others figuring centrally in the development of leadership programs.⁵

Of late, therefore, collaboration has gained prominence in the work and life of sisters, with sisters recognizing the added value that collaboration brings to their objectives. As one sister quoted in Fischer and Murphy put it:

I think out of our needs comes the goal of collaborating.... We can't answer all those needs, and so because of that we want to work together to make things better for children, make things better for families or life in general.... [R]ather than "Well it's nice to work together." No, it's very real and purposeful.⁶

The key point here is not that collaboration is inherently good or beneficial; rather, it is that the commitments of sisters, particularly related to doing their ministry work better, drives the use of collaboration or networking as a method or a tool for sisters' empowerment.

Empowerment here can be conceived as the practical advantages that sisters can gain as a result of collaboration, such as gaining legitimacy, efficiency or financial benefit from acting in collaboration with another group, rather than alone. Empowerment can also involve processes in which key organizations, including organizations of women religious, contribute their expertise and participate in decision-making to support common goals. This can entail the sister's fully participating in a collaborative process, or simply consulting on a program or in the management of an initiative. Empowerment can also have a moral imperative, wherein sisters tackle major societal problems by involving communities and other stakeholders in problem-solving, thereby empowering the communities as well as the sisters in those communities.

Because collaboration and networking have emerged as key factors in the empowerment of sisters and their ministries, a more robust understanding of collaboration and networking is needed in order to better develop processes that benefit the work and lives of sisters.

There is a body of related terminology used by sisters and their counterparts—including funders, researchers and partners—to describe the various inter-organizational structures that sisters are involved in. For example, as well as “collaboration,” the terms “cooperation,” “coordination,” “coalition,” “network,” “alliance,” “association,” “conference,” “partnership” and “bridge” are all in fairly common usage. At the same time, multiple interpretations of the term “collaboration” exist, each of which presumes various levels of involvement around shared resources and capacities.

For example, sisters coming together as a network to exchange information during a workshop, convening or training through a grant-funded program like SLDI or CHAI is a very different enterprise from what is undertaken when a group of sisters come together to engage in a conflict-resolution process, or when they pool their resources to meet a shared objective, such as an initiative organized by AFJN. While networks can help produce connections between individual sisters, it won't produce the kind of public visibility and leadership that a coalition like AFJN can create.

The problem of slippage in meaning around collaboration is not limited to the culture of women religious. This multiplicity of usages and interpretations also manifests among secular organizations in describing positive forms of inter-organizational relationship. Indeed, in common parlance, the term collaboration serves as a handy label to talk about working relationships between individuals, institutions or organizations. Yet, underlying the term are varying levels of commitments in terms of time, trust and resources.

Indeed, individual Catholic sisters and their congregations are usually involved at any given time in more than one inter-organizational form of engagement, although they may not perceive distinctive differences among them. However, those seeking to foster sisters' collaborative engagements must understand what capacities and supports these engagements require and adopt realistic expectations around anticipated outcomes.

The Collaboration Continuum Model

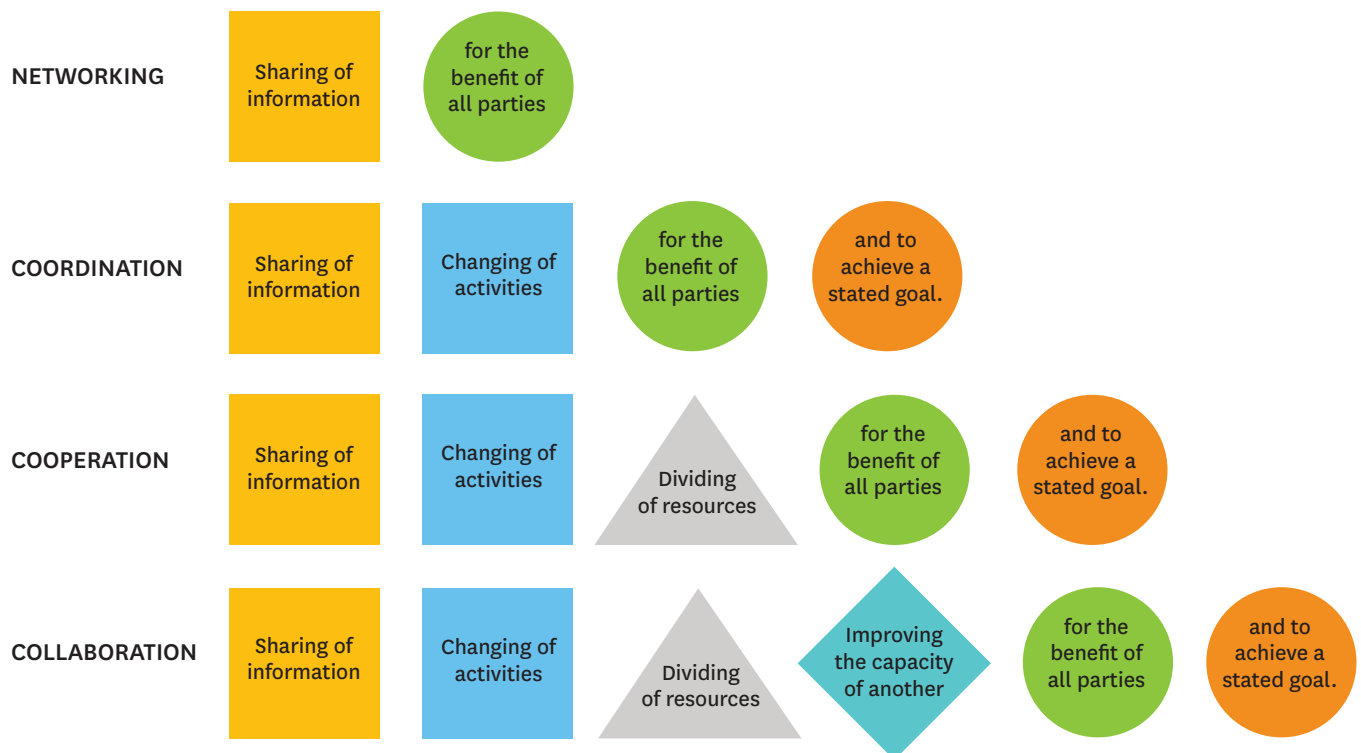
Experts in the field of organizational behavior have attempted to make sense of the complexity of different forms of collaboration. Specifically, we turn to literature that understands “collaboration as a working relationship [that] actually lies on a continuum of inter-organizational models, each of which has identifiable attributes and requires specific capacities and inter-institutional supports.”⁷ A typology articulated by Arthur T. Himmelman considers collaboration in relation to three other common change strategies—networking, coordination and cooperation—that build upon each other along a continuum of complexity and commitment.⁸ As Himmelman says, “It is important to emphasize that each of these four strategies can be appropriate for particular circumstances depending on the degree to which three limitations to working together—time, trust and turf—can be overcome and a common vision, commitments to share power and responsible and accountable actions are agreed upon.”⁹ Each of these strategies also requires different degrees of autonomy and leadership to be successful.

NETWORKING

Exchanging information for mutual benefit

As the most informal level of inter-organizational linkage in the collaboration continuum, networking can include activities that entail the sharing of internal information (missions, charism, goals, major programs or ministries, and intended beneficiaries) as well as external information about resources or trainings for the mutual benefit of all parties. Networks are often formed at the level of the individual—for example, with a single sister connecting and exchanging information with another sister or layperson at a workshop or

Collaboration Continuum¹⁰



training. Such networking activities can offer sisters exposure to common challenges, alleviate feelings of isolation and offer a broader view of a given problem. Time, turf and trust are the three most basic limitations to working together in any way, which means that networking activities play a hugely important role in helping to forge an initial level of inter-personal linkage. Through communication and the sharing of knowledge, an initial and necessary foundation of trust is built, upon which other linkages can be established.

As detailed in the next section, a sizable number of grantees supported by the Catholic Sisters Initiative are involved in networking engagements. Such networking engagements are particularly noteworthy when placed in relation to historically normative values in sisters' communities, where insularity can create resistance to sisters' forging commitments outside of their religious communities. Such engagements require boldness and confidence to establish new relationships, as well as open-mindedness about the kinds of outcomes that such relationships can produce.

COORDINATION

Exchanging information and altering activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose

More than networking—which connects individuals—coordination involves inter-organizational engagement, in which it is necessary to have intentional planning and programming between organizations in order to achieve a common goal or bring added value to each organization's efforts. This, for example, may consist of two or more religious orders, or a religious order and a non-profit organization, sharing information about their respective ministerial activities and needs, then deciding to change their program content and schedules to better serve their beneficiaries or even themselves.

Such coordination of activities requires greater time commitment and sharing of responsibilities than networking, and therefore entails deeper levels of trust, communication and openness in order to achieve a common purpose. Coordination, however, does not necessarily entail a long-term engagement, partnership or commitment, and can be limited to common effort around an event or a series of activities. Moreover, coordination of activities does not always involve the sharing of resources.



COOPERATION

Exchanging information, changing programming and sharing resources for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose

Cooperation can be distinguished from coordination in that it entails not only exchanging information and altering activities, but also the sharing of resources for mutual benefit and self-enhancement. Resources shared can be broadly defined and can include the contribution of human resources (i.e., labor), financial and technical capacities, physical property or space, access to people, and personal or organizational credibility, for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Sharing resources through cooperation can result in tension over power within the partnership. For instance, when resources are shared, questions over the equality of value between contributed resources can arise. Ideally, therefore, a larger contribution of financial resources by one partner should not create a power imbalance and should be understood as equal to other contributions. Given that organizational resources are being shared, cooperation would ideally entail a longer-term relationship, with a shared strategy between organizations to support common goals.

Because of the need for greater organizational commitments, cooperation may also involve legal arrangements.¹¹ For example, in Zambia, a local lawyer familiar with ZAS suggested that fiduciary

relationships could be more clearly defined and set out in writing from the beginning so that sisters and their congregations are not taken advantage of, whether through under-compensation by a local diocese or in an exploitative partnership with an unscrupulous NGO.

In addition, certain types of partnerships might also involve the congregations being accountable to external groups, adding a further challenge to these extra-congregational commitments. Together, these can become significant factors in forestalling sisters from engaging in cooperative pursuits, which the Catholic Sisters Initiative needs to keep in mind.

Apart from the issues of trust and mutual understanding, there may also arise for religious communities a fear of losing their identity as sisters. This can occur in the context of inter-congregational cooperation, as well as when sisters cooperate with lay entities. A sister-leader's fellow sisters or superiors may ask: "What will happen if we collaborate more and more with these institutions? Will we lose our identity?" In light of such concerns, sisters at the forefront of cooperative initiatives need to clearly communicate with their communities about the costs, benefits and challenges of such an undertaking. We explore this need in detail under the section, "Leadership."

COLLABORATION

Sharing risks, responsibilities, resources and rewards to help partners become better

Collaboration is a relationship in which each organization plays a role based on its unique capabilities, needs and interests, and comes together with other organizations in order to help the other partner become better at what they do. Collaboration is therefore not primarily for self-enhancement. It includes the characteristics of the other three forms of inter-

organizational linkages, and thus requires an underlying basis of trust and sharing of turf, and takes the most time to achieve. In an ideal collaboration, the “actors are bound together by the mutually supportive pursuit of individual and collective benefit.”¹²

The distinguishing characteristic of this relationship is that it produces something innovative for the benefit of all parties and helps each organization achieve its own objectives better than it could alone. Moreover, this “collaborative advantage” entails a holistic approach, in which the different aims of each party intersect. This intersection of differing aims offers legitimacy to the project. Cross-sector collaborative advantage thus can occur, for example, when congregations of women religious, governments, citizens and NGOs work together to achieve more than each could when working alone, thereby creating public value, i.e., achieving higher-level objectives for society as a whole rather than just for the participating organizations.¹³ We explore such a collaborative undertaking by sisters in Ghana through the report of Rita Ann Kusi.¹⁴





Implications for Strategy 25





The collaboration continuum framework provides definitional clarity about collaboration. It also helps us think about the investments of time, trust and turf that need to be taken into consideration when determining whether certain activities align with their intended goals.

Thinking specifically about the Catholic Sisters Initiative's investments, this model helps in understanding how investment in networking activities, for example, may not automatically or necessarily result in collaboration. Creating collaboration requires a significant investment in time, trust and turf on the part of sisters and their partners. Thus, while the Catholic Sisters Initiative may push sisters to undertake a collaborative effort, sisters' doing so will require the building of adequate trust among all stakeholders, a willingness to carve out enough time in their already busy schedules, and the vulnerability to share portions of their turf with one another. At the same time, there are many things specific to the culture of religious sisters that can affect the degree to which trust, time and turf shape sisters' engagement in collaboration.

In the next section, we discuss the various types of collaborative engagements detailed by sisters in our interviews. Several key themes emerged from our interviews, including:

1. Sister networks as learning communities
2. The coalitional power of sisters
3. Partnerships beyond the sisterhood
4. Leadership

In the concluding section, we utilize the findings from the interviews with sisters to address assumptions in the Catholic Sisters Initiative's strategy that relate to encouraging collaboration among sisters. Drawing on that discussion, we then present specific recommendations related to how the Catholic Sisters Initiative team might think about funding strategies.

Sister Networks as Learning Communities

In the secular cultures of business and organizational development, it is an often-stressed fact that in order for an organization to innovate and grow, networking as a learning community is a necessary component. Underlying this understanding is the idea that although an organization can have an intimate knowledge of its own realities and construct unique perspectives on its environment, this insularity can often result in a myopic view of a given opportunity or challenge that can forestall innovation and creative problem-solving.

Networking between individuals in different organizations enables the development of new knowledge and insights which would otherwise not be available to an individual organization on its own. Organizations can be effective learners when individuals participate in various communities of practice, and when actors from different areas of expertise come together around common interest in a problem or simply to share ideas and exchange information.¹⁵

A related theory on the importance of networking emphasizes its ability to harness resources held in the wider social context by diverse actors and to mobilize these actors to increase the flow of information in a network.¹⁶ Thus, the main benefit of networking is the creation of social capital, through which the network can span “structural holes,” where information or capacity to tackle problems is lacking.¹⁷

These gains from networking particularly relevant for sisters and their congregations—specifically in a network’s ability to harness resources and increase the flow of

information and best practices across its nodes. For example, Sisters Rosalind and Ranjana, who are both women religious in India and who are active members of the National Steering Committee of the Catholic Health Association of India (CHAI), reflect in similar ways on their participation in networking engagements via CHAI:

“When we come together, we talk, we discuss and we share what are the difficulties in our congregation we are facing, what they’re facing, what kind of ministries which they are doing, and what we can do.”

— Sr. Rosalind

“This network is really helping us [women religious] to come out because we are exposed to all these things. We got more knowledge. We are enriched with different congregations, charisms, we get more knowledge.”

— Sr. Ranjana

These sisters are not alone in their articulation of the value they find in meeting as a network of sisters from different congregations that are all involved in health care ministry. Events that link sisters together as a network can offer, at minimum, opportunities to be exposed to new ideas, exchange information, discuss mutual challenges, and share programs and ministerial activities.

Yet, another factor that makes networking particularly noteworthy for sisters is that this knowledge-sharing can seem at odds with the values of their communities, where traditional insularity can create resistance to moving beyond what some sisters called their “comfort zone.” For instance, although congregations of women religious are intimately involved through their ministries with the people in the communities they serve, in their devotional lives as sisters they tend to be more insular and inward-looking. This in part is because of the way congregational life is structured and religious formation is practiced, wherein a sister’s identity is tightly woven into the particular vocation and unique charism of her individual congregation.

As one sister from Zambia observes:

“We as sisters, start as individual congregations and they get grounded as individual congregations.... [Sisters] are committed in their own congregation to attend to the aim of their congregation and also their vision.”

— *Zambian Sister*



Yet, it is clear that sisters are finding networking opportunities, especially those that bring sisters from different congregations together to encounter and share with one another their internal struggles and needs. The Catholic Sisters Initiative has been responsive to this development and funded manifold opportunities for sisters to network across congregations to form communities of practice. Many of these opportunities have emerged as an outcome of programs related to capacity-building and leadership training for sisters, wherein attendees not only acquire specific skills to advance their ministerial work, but also interact with sisters from other congregations in ways that are not always possible in their day-to-day lives.

Take, for instance, the training programs of the African Sisters Education Collaborative’s (ASEC) Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI). While the programs’ central aim is to deliver training that enhances sisters’ leadership skills in their ministries, these gatherings also offer sisters exposure to the shared concerns, needs, challenges and solutions that women religious and congregations encounter, as well as opportunities to build friendships and professional ties with other sisters.

This process also serves as a form of personal and professional development. As one sister put it, based on her observation of sisters trained through SLDI whom she interacts with through a national association of women religious: “I have seen what ASEC has contributed. ASEC allows sisters to come from their comfort zone to learn together to make friendships.”

An instructor for trainees who has observed this transformation describes what sisters' moving out of their "comfort zone" entails:

Within time participants were transformed in their way of thinking, perceptions and applied leadership skills... one thing which I am very sure is that of removing them from the cocoon to even sit with others from different congregations... being together helped them to stop blushing to interact with other people. At the beginning they were very timid, aloof and only interacted with the familiar people, but there was a huge change at the end of the course. The whole process was a transformational one to become more confident, and readiness to learn from each other. Now they are professionals and relate in professional ways and bring change into the community and society.

These encounters continue to be cultivated through alumnae meetings. One sister from Kenya, for example, described attending alumnae meetings of the SLDI program: "I was able to get skills on how to network, being able to share ideas and gain ideas from other people. That has also facilitated in me growing as a person."

Another training initiative that has produced networking opportunities is the Strengthening the Capacity of Religious Women in Early Childhood Development (SCORE-ECD) program through the Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Women (COSUDOW). As CRCC noted in our 2018 Zambia report, the benefits that sisters obtained from SCORE-ECD included not only gaining technical background and a framework for their ministries with young

children, but also connecting sisters who were working in the same sector and had little knowledge of what sisters in other congregations were doing in early childhood development.

While the main objective of programs such as SLDI and SCORE-ECD is capacity-building and skill development for individual sisters, these programs have in the process fostered learning communities of practice that have become a critical resource for individual sisters and their communities. Such a learning community of practice is particularly important for sisters whose work places them in very isolating circumstances, far from their communities as well as broader professional fields.

This issue came into sharp relief when talking to a sister involved in health care in India. This sister described how, working in remote settings often far from their communities, sisters tended to feel detached from a wider community of professional practice through which they might learn and grow. A survey conducted by CHAI in collaboration with the Sister Doctor Forum of India (SDFI) found a lot of sister doctors feeling professionally isolated and having few opportunities for updating their clinical skills and other necessary knowledge. In response to these findings, CHAI initiated training programs specifically for sister doctors and nurses. As another sister from India put it, "You usually operate as a frog in the well when you operate in the rural area," using a metaphor to describe the limited worldview someone might have from operating within a very narrowly circumscribed context. By meeting other sisters working as nurses and doctors at CHAI's training workshops, she gained practical knowledge. In her case, this meant acquiring an awareness of new laws that pertain to her health care ministry, and how she can successfully operate within state regulations.

Seeing the benefits of networking, congregations and their leadership can broaden their horizons and social networks. For sisters to participate in networking activities, sisters and their superiors need to be willing to sacrifice time, resources and effort in order to be present for the events. Sisters live busy lives and manage their ministries and their communities with limited resources.

Thus, in order for these networking activities to be worthwhile, congregational leadership must see tangible benefits resulting from their sisters' participation in these communities of practice. Moreover, sisters' engagement in networking activities can be sustained over the long term when they and their communities see that there is value to be gained from being involved in professional learning relationships with diverse stakeholders, both secular and religious.

Because networking and relationship-building beyond congregational community life is a relatively new experience for some congregations, some have found it easier to establish collaborative relationships with other communities that share the same denomination or charism (at least initially, Franciscans might more easily collaborate with Dominicans, for example). These "spiritual families" are potential sites for building greater trust and greater willingness to share responsibilities, resources and rewards through collaborative enterprises. For example, in North America, CRCC has encountered several instances in which communities in completion, looking toward the future governance of their aging congregations, have established a covenant with other denominational communities that share the sisters' charism. The covenant between such communities addresses the management of day-to-day affairs as well as the continuation of the sisters'

legacy through handling the community's trusts. To facilitate the building of this covenantal relationship, communities may hire a mediator to lead the process of discussion and discernment—a strategy that is becoming common among congregations that are contemplating a merger with other communities or partnerships with lay organizations that will preserve the legacy of their charism.



What results from the formation of a learning community?

- Fosters an understanding of common experience
- Overcomes experiences of social and professional isolation
- Resists the myopia of a congregation's comfort with its standards of practice
- Creates opportunity for experimentation with new practices



A Learning Community Hub

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or sisters to take advantage of networks, such networks must be grounded or centered in an institution that facilitates connections and information exchange across the partners of the network in an equitable manner. Such a “learning community hub,” as we term them, also plays an important role in trust-building among the various sister partners in a given network.

For example, commenting about the experience of coming together as sisters working in health care as doctors and administrators, one Indian sister doctor described CHAI as the “motherhouse” for sister doctors. She said: “I feel this is a motherhouse that we can tell and talk things out openly and share.”

This sister’s regard for CHAI as the “motherhouse” for sister doctors points out how sisters working in particular ministerial areas can find it valuable to have an institutional center, or a learning community hub, to support specialized work outside of their home communities. Given this, institutions such as CHAI, which are forged around an area of ministerial expertise, play an important role as a learning community hub by developing solutions and addressing the particular challenges of sisters who work in specialized ministerial areas in ways that their communities cannot do alone.

CHAI, as a learning community hub, also develops initiatives that have tangible direct benefits for sisters in health care ministry by engaging with other non-profit organizations (Catholic and non-Catholic) to develop innovative solutions to meet sisters’ needs in the health care field. These include the Common Procurement Portal, Medigate, CHAI Academy and the Helpdesk, each of which are technical interventions that enable CHAI members (i.e., Catholic sisters’ ministries) to enhance their service delivery, administration and financial sustainability.

In addition to the personal and professional development that networks enable for sisters, an underappreciated aspect of such learning community hubs is that they allow for the cultivation of mutual respect and basic trust-building between sisters and other partners. In appreciating their mutual commitments and struggles, sisters come to appreciate and respect one another, which becomes the basis for trust between sisters from different congregations. As Fr. Mathew Abraham from CHAI said, through the network meetings, “[Sisters] develop a little bit of trust with it and they realize that, okay, the same problems we are facing, they are also facing.” For CHAI, an important element of cultivating trust and mutuality when engaging

with sisters is that spirituality informs the programming. For example, Fr. Mathew explains how CHAI instills trust into its programming:

We also built trust by bringing a little bit of spirituality into this. This is not just business. So we celebrate mass with them, share a homily. Make it very relevant for them rather than splitting up. And also even during the sessions, we thought we will link ministry and life and spirituality. It's an integrated thing.

Trust is a necessary element if sisters and their congregations are to undertake partnerships with other congregations in order to share resources and advance common goals.

United States Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking (USCSAHT), like CHAI, plays a similar role as a learning community hub for sisters involved in human trafficking ministries. USCSAHT, which consists of about 145 members—including coalition groups, individual sisters and member congregations—primarily engages with its network by sharing valuable resources through newsletters and the USCSAHT website. Most recently, USCSAHT has developed webinars for members focused on education, advocacy and communication, and through these offerings, members working on different issues areas can meet. In addition, paying members of USCSAHT also have the option to receive other benefits, such as access to a members-only chat group and message boards, where sisters can turn to one another in the network to answer questions, navigate problems, share best practices and get resources as they engage in their anti-trafficking work. USCSAHT enables these conversations and helps direct and move resources between parties within the network.

As the most informal mode of inter-organizational linkage, networks such as ASEC, CHAI and USCSAHT reflect an initial level of trust and commitment among sister organizations. Frequently, networks are formed at the level of the individual, with a single sister connecting and exchanging information with another sister or layperson. This degree of interpersonal linkage is therefore important for building a basis of trust for scaling up to do other forms of partnership.

In Mexico, alumnae sisters of SLDI-Latin American discussed a need for this type of institutional center that could assist them in leveraging resources from outside entities and sharing information across the network. While sisters benefitted from their training, and their communities and ministries were impacted positively, some sisters discussed a need for an institution that was external to their individual communities to help implement human development programs that were beneficial to the people they served. In particular, they identified a need for an organization with a nonprofit or non-governmental status that has the capacity to maintain accountability and transparency measures in keeping with state laws and regulations. Such institutions can be modeled on similar organizations, such as CHAI or USCSAHT, which have the institutional capacity and management systems to absorb funds. Such institutions can also be nimble enough to develop customized solutions that respond to ongoing needs of sisters, address sector-specific development challenges and make strategic connections with entities outside the Catholic Church in order to bring resources and benefits to congregations.

Coalitional Power of Sisters

In the secular organizational management literature, the “collaborative advantage” is conceived as a process of transforming power relations through coalition-building, wherein less powerful elements of society develop a voice in policy-making or advocacy issues.¹⁹ Such collective coalition strategies involve entities’ reaching agreements about how to implement a shared vision, and determining where creative solutions are needed that exceed the limited perspectives of each individual stakeholder.

Sisters, too, have found coalition-building to be a particularly effective modality in transforming the power relations of sisters, especially in the area of advocacy work. Advocacy work has increased sisters’ organizational power, authority and responsibility relative to other players in the arena by advocating for an issue of interest for sisters. Yet, while many communities see their religious calling as uplifting the poor and serving the vulnerable, social justice-related advocacy work and policy-making have often been controversial for women religious. Specifically, these undertakings might be viewed by some sisters as beyond their religious mandate, crossing what in their minds is the threshold of the religious-secular divide. Moreover, within the Church itself, there is a degree of controversy around social justice-related advocacy work. The apostolic visitation made to US sisters in 2010, for instance, in part had to do with sisters’ increased engagement in political advocacy. In the past, conservative Catholic groups in the US also have sought to discredit Catholic organizations seeking

to engage in policy and justice-related work, pointing to secular partners in coalitions that may not abide by Catholic teachings on sexuality and abortion.²⁰ Therefore, to negotiate these challenges within the sisterhood and the Church, a fair degree of accompaniment of sisters in coalition-building is necessary.

A notable example of this form of collaboration is the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN), which has been developing capacity-building programs to help sisters enter the public square as advocates for some of the most marginalized members of their communities. This training has helped sisters to realize their prophetic potential in several instances. Issues that sisters have tackled range from human trafficking of girls and men, land and water rights of farmers and villagers, and more recently addressing public health concerns around COVID-19.

Key to AFJN’s successes is that the training uses Catholic social teachings to unify the different charisms and vocations of the sisters who participate in AFJN programs. Because sisters work at the margins of society, individual sisters sometimes can find their capacity to address issues at the systemic level limited. In addition, the particular charism of their congregations can at times limit sisters’ perspective on the broader social justice-related issues impacting the communities they serve. In order to cultivate sisters’ collective vision, AFJN grounds the training of sisters in an education about the

relationship between their particular ministerial concerns and Catholic social teachings. Brother Aniedi Okure describes the process:

I link their own religious vocation to the Gospel of Jesus saying, “I am sent to fight injustice, to bring freedom, to bring down the structures that deprive God’s children from living the fullness of life.” Then linking that to the fact that whatever else we do, whether we are school teachers, whether we are working in hospitals, whether we are serving lepers, whatever we do, we must seek it in the context of working to change the prevailing unjust structures.

Having established this foundation, the training then asks sisters to identify various structures of injustice they encounter and to identify a key issue that they would like to address. Key to this approach to advocacy with sisters is that AFJN empowers sisters as field experts to identify the issues to be addressed, giving them agency over the direction of their advocacy and equipping them with knowledge and training to perform advocacy work at national, state and local levels of power.

The AFJN training process has made an exceptional impact on sisters’ capacity in the field of advocacy. Examples of sisters’ successes are numerous and well documented in the reporting of *Global Sisters Report*, as well as CRCC’s own Africa landscape reports. The following highlights are some of the key ways in which sisters cooperate with one another to pursue their common goals and enhance their power as a group by working together.

In developing relationships with journalists and media networks, AFJN-trained sisters have leveraged these connections to raise awareness of social justice issues through public messaging campaigns. Such activities have received significant attention from the public, at times resulting

in village leaders, women’s groups and school teachers reaching out to sisters to work with them to spotlight problems and design local interventions.

It is noteworthy that by advocating for laws and rights as a collective voice calling for action, rather than a single congregation of sisters advocating for change, sisters protect themselves and their congregations from being singled out and persecuted for taking an active stance against injustices. This is particularly important in instances where powerful corrupt agents within the state and their business ties have vested interests in maintaining the status quo and may view sisters as a formidable threat.

On the flip side, those individuals in positions of leadership within the government who seek to implement change and advocate for positive action in ways that align with the social justice goals of sisters, also find the collective voice of the sisters offers moral justification and legitimacy to underscore the goals they are pursuing. Such coalitional support can be particularly important under circumstances where corrupt forces in power have vested interest in the systems sisters and their allies seek to dismantle. In such instances, the perception of sisters as “not political”—in the sense that they are not politically motivated state actors or bureaucrats—but rather as motivated by spiritual convictions, enables the allies of sisters who are in power to build on the sisters’ moral reputation to bring attention to social problems.

In the United States, too, where the number of Catholic sisters is decreasing, CRCC has also seen more inter-congregational coalitions and ministries that are focused on specific social issues of concern to communities of women religious. Sisters working in the area of human trafficking have created the most extensive network, which connects US Catholic Sisters Against

Human Trafficking with Talitha Kum, a global network of consecrated women and men undertaking ministries in this area. As a transnational issue, human trafficking has spurred collaborations both locally and internationally.

While the impetus for these coalitions of sisters has been the pressure of their diminishing numbers in the US, many sisters have recognized this exigency as a blessing. Networking can allow for the creation of ministries that no one congregation could lead on its own. For instance, many congregations in the US collaborate on houses of hospitality for immigrants released from detention. In addition to creating ministries, many of these coalitions also push for systemic change through advocacy and activism. Savvy sisters know that their voices, images and presences can bring light to key social issues, change policies or hold the powers-that-be accountable. Examples of this prophetic activism include inter-congregational coalitions that engage in impact investing, US Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking and NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice—especially NETWORK’s Nuns on the Bus tour.

At a global level, the partnership between the Catholic Sisters Initiative and the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) has been particularly fruitful for

empowering women religious both within and outside of the Church. As CRCC noted in the 2019 MEL report, the Catholic Sisters Initiative funded four women religious canon lawyers to provide protection and canonical consultations to other congregational leaders at the UISG Plenary Assembly in Rome, raising the visibility of these experts within the Vatican and providing a critical in-house resource to women religious around the globe. In the same year, Sr. Patricia Murray, the executive secretary of UISG, was nominated by the Pope to be on the Pontifical Council for Culture, and Sr. Gabriella Bottani of UISG was doubly honored for her anti-human trafficking work with Talitha Kum by the US Department of State and the President of Italy.



What values do coalitions provide sisters?

- Shift from service providers to systems-change advocates
- Increased authority, legitimacy and visibility
- Safety in numbers

Partnerships Beyond the Sisterhood

As networking and collaboration have emerged as prominent concerns for women religious, they have also undertaken partnerships with entities beyond the Catholic sisterhood. These include linkages they have formed with lay individuals with particular expertise or financial resources, nonprofits and NGOs that are both Catholic and non-Catholic, corporations and businesses, as well as government agencies at the local, national and international levels. These entities possess useful expertise that sisters can leverage to amplify their impact and extend their own apostolic work.

As Fischer and Murphy find, “[Sisters] see a natural relationship between the manifestation of charisma and the call to be collaborative, and that these work together. This call however is one that the authors find is hastened by the needs of today’s environment (fewer sisters, constrained resources, and growing needs), turning many sisters to firmly root their commitments to, and confidence, in collaboration.”²¹

In research on factors promoting cooperation and prosocial behavior in the last decade, no mechanism has received as much attention as reputation.²² Reputational judgments are mostly associated with moral content, specifically judgments of a person’s cooperativeness, trustworthiness or generosity. The credibility that a congregation or coalition of sisters can bring to a collaborative endeavor can be a valuable resource that is equal to or greater than the financial contributions of other partners.

Indeed, the reputational capital that sisters bring to a collaborative endeavor might be most relevant in the context of resolving conflict and allowing for transparent communication across different stakeholders in a collaboration. In a Catholic Sisters Initiative-funded study by Rita Kusi at Georgetown University, Kusi highlights a project undertaken by Catholic sisters in Ghana to intervene around issues of sanitation for vulnerable populations living in Accra. The researchers found the sisters played a pivotal role in resolving conflict that emerged as a result of long-standing turf wars between the municipality and slum occupants involved in the project. Similarly, their survey data showed that the “presence of a Catholic sister conveyed the message that this was a non-political, public interest effort, thus building trust in the community” and “that their presence contributed to dispersing the turf wars and mistrust that had existed among stakeholders.”²³ This view of sisters as non-political—i.e., not invested in political gain in the secular sphere—was also noted by individuals in the Nigerian government who participated in anti-trafficking advocacy work with sisters trained by AFJN. At the same time, sisters’ reputational capital as moral authorities can be misused by other stakeholders; therefore, sisters need to deploy their capital cautiously.

Another characteristic of sisters that can be an intangible resource in a collaboration is the capacity of some sisters to recognize the gifts of individuals and to build relationships at all levels—a quality that can make them more effective at collaboration. Fischer and Murphy note:

“[Sisters’] willingness to engage in collaboration stems in part from their selfless view of the work, with a focus on the end goals and making use of whatever means available to get the job done. They note the value of ‘figuring it out together’ in order to work around barriers.”²⁴

In interviews with lay community members in Mexico who collaborate with sisters in community programs, the lay members similarly noted how sisters were motivational, helping them channel their own experience into practical action through ministry work and building a spirit of teamwork that counteracted the individualism they often encountered elsewhere. They also appreciated the trust that sisters have in them to execute the work.



Identifying and appreciating the gifts of others is a crucial skill for sisters to foster and develop, and sisters have a spiritual framework to support these values. Take, for instance, one sister from Zambia describing how she came to develop her own leadership skills:

The most important thing that I think I got from being a secretary general is to learn and to be silent and to learn from others. So you cannot work alone in that office. I needed all the congregation to contribute to whatever we are doing. We came up with policies like in the human resource policy, financial policy, administration, policing. It was not a work of one person.... We need to appreciate other people's gifts. And for me, I believe that the wisdom God gave, that He shared. So as long as you cannot tap on the wisdom of other people, you will not know what they have and what God has in them.... So we need to listen, to be able to participate in different workshops that are going to open our minds.... We can be as a congregation, but we don't have to remain there. So, for me, it's understanding as a leader.

At the same time, sisters who are working in collaborative pursuits for the first time might also not fully grasp how to best engage or use the expertise of laypeople. As Fr. Mathew of CHAI notes: “Even if a layperson comes to them, where a highly skilled committed person comes to them, they sometimes don't know how to utilize that person.”

Moreover, despite robust collaborative endeavors taking place between sisters and lay partners, many sisters are reluctant to partner with non-Catholic entities. Such

distrust exists to a greater extent among sisters in the global south, for whom the need to collaborate with partners beyond the sisterhood has emerged more recently. Fr. Mathew, for example, observed about the Indian context: “[Sisters] are not very comfortable when it comes to lay collaboration, many of them, because of their past experience of getting cheated and all those things, they’re not very comfortable.” Sisters in other contexts, too, have made similar observations.

In CRCC’s research in Zambia, we noted that sisters perceive NGOs as entities having monetary and material resources but no moral vision.²⁵ Here, we also noted that sisters also are wary of simply being service implementers for NGOs rather than fully engaged partners. Sisters gave examples of past collaborative projects in which they felt that their congregations were merely asked to provide frontline services instead of being involved in the design, management and evaluation of projects. According to some sisters, secular NGOs also perceive sisters as rich with resources because of their links to international congregations. According to some sisters, NGOs often expect sisters to pay high fees for the programs or workshops that NGOs offer.

From the other side, NGO leaders in Zambia, for example, report that they are aware of the presence of sisters in the regions where they work, and many have interacted with sisters at some basic level. Sisters may have stopped by an NGO’s office to discuss working on a project, or sisters were implementing a part of a project developed by a particular NGO. Still, very few NGOs reported interacting with sisters in a truly meaningful and collaborative way. Even the NGOs that work with sisters have little understanding of the cultural and political dynamics of congregations and religious conferences. Indeed, congregations and the Catholic Church are unknown

cultures to many NGOs. Some NGOs have tried unsuccessfully to recruit sisters for positions on projects, receiving little response to their overtures from conferences and congregations.

Notwithstanding these issues, sisters and NGOs each have expertise and resources that can be complementary to their pursuit of shared goals. Sisters have in-depth grassroots knowledge of the complex, micro-level conditions faced by the vulnerable populations they serve. NGOs, on the other hand, generally possess macro-level expertise, with the best of them having technical know-how in development models that would be useful for crafting the kinds of interventions that many sisters would be eager to undertake. Furthermore, most in-country NGOs possess broad-based networks with their international counterparts, which could also prove useful for sisters.

Sisters who have received training through the SLDI-Latin America program have focused, as part of their learning, on establishing linkages and relationships with lay entities beyond the sisterhood and the Church, recognizing them as having a significant role in the success and effectiveness of their ministry work. Civic organizations, corporations and universities were some of the partners that sisters engaged with. Notably, sisters remarked on this as coinciding with a shift in mindset on their part—from seeing non-Catholic partners simply as a source of monetary resources to seeing them as reservoirs of human resources and expertise, which allowed sisters to build trust in other people to carry out their work.

The expertise and resources that the corporate world can contribute to the betterment of women religious is an area to which Sr. Dr. Beena Madhavath has paid

significant attention during her tenure as president of the Sister Doctor Forum of India (SDFI). Previously, SDFI operated on a small budget, and their meeting costs were kept to a bare minimum. As a result, the overall experience of meetings was not as high-quality as she felt the sisters deserved, and she saw that sisters were less motivated to attend the meetings. To revitalize interest in the meetings, Sr. Dr. Beena sought external resources and collaborators, including other corporate social responsibility partners. She reached out to her contacts as a physician to a pharmaceutical company to fund the event, and in exchange she facilitated programming where company doctors shared a program on anemia with the sister doctors. Similar resource persons have been instrumental for her revitalization of SDFI, including their partnership in programs carried out by CHAI. Indeed, it is through the pursuit of such collaborative engagements that strong ties now exist between SDFI and CHAI.

In such ways, lay engagement in the apostolic programs of sisters is now increasingly recognized as critical for the sustainability of their programs. In Mexico, sisters going through the SLDI-Latin America training pointed out how laypeople were also important for the longevity of their programs. For example, they recognized lay associates as important partners who could continue the work, on the occasion that they were to be transferred to a different diocese or parish. Sisters also find laypeople who are the beneficiaries of their services to be important sources of insight and expertise related to their experience. USCSAHT, for instance, involves trafficking victims and survivors as important members of their coalitions who provide critical input to the rest of the

network in the anti-trafficking efforts.

Finally, an important factor for sisters and their potential collaborators to consider is that collaboration is inherently more time-consuming—and hence resource-consuming and costly—than non-collaborative activities. As organizational management scholar Christ Huxley points out, the time required is of two sorts: “actual time invested in achieving mutual understanding, gaining goodwill, negotiating bases for action and coordination (all of which are related to creating trust) and lapsed time to cope with accountability issues and other organizational priorities.” Huxley points out that “while none of these is an insurmountable block, they do tend to be demotivating, particularly if, as is usually the case, the need for this kind of time has not been recognized and hence not budgeted for.”²⁶



How do sisters benefit and what do they leverage through partnerships?

- Reputational capital
- Grassroots knowledge
- Lay engagement resulting in long-term sustainability

Leadership

Finally, a cross-cutting theme that emerged from this research is the significant role that leadership plays in advancing sister-led networking, coalition building and collaboration. The strategy, too, recognizes the interconnectedness of these undertakings in one of the four assumptions underlying strategy goals: “Networks will result in sisters taking on active leadership roles.”

These findings also complicate this assumption, suggesting an inverse relationship wherein leadership is actually a prerequisite for fostering any of the types of partnership we have just described. In other words, while leadership is an important attribute to develop in a sister, sisters also need the support of their leaders in order to fully realize any of the opportunities or overcome any of the challenges that these types of inter-organizational linkages present.

Thus, the relationship between autonomy and leadership is an important factor to consider in understanding the capacity of sisters to be involved in inter-organizational linkages. That is, in order for a sister to pursue opportunities with other institutions, it is necessary for sisters to have the support of their leaders as well as a certain degree of autonomy in order to make progress.

Autonomy, however, poses several challenges for sisters in relation to the culture of religious life. First, as a part of their religious formation and vow of obedience, sisters are taught to have deference to the religious superiors of their community and the Church. Indeed, the authority to act independently has to be continuously negotiated with leadership.

Yet, many cooperative endeavors,

especially between lay/secular entities, rest on the presumption that individuals who are directly involved in collaborative activities have a fair degree of autonomy from their organizations in order to make progress.²⁷ At the same time, such collaborative endeavors do often affect the “parent” organization, and in the case of sisters, they are accountable to various levels of hierarchy within the Church (their congregation, the order, provincials, the diocese, etc.). Sisters might often be restricted at various levels of the hierarchy in their ability to make the kinds of commitments needed to pursue collaboration. Indeed, they must be accountable to their collaborators, as well as their community, repeatedly checking back with their superiors before action is taken.

All that said, a distinction is apparent when comparing sisters in the global north and global south. In North America, with the number of women in religious life declining, there has been an increasing number of sisters living independently to attend to their ministerial work. With such independence, sisters have also had a degree of autonomy from their larger congregations to pursue partnerships and build close relationships with entities from outside of their community, including lay partners, other non-profits and other inter-congregational partnerships on issues ranging from human trafficking, immigration, climate action, and other social justice-related issues.

In comparison, sisters in the global south have a lesser degree of autonomy from the authority of their religious community and superiors because often these sisters live communally and under the supervision of their superiors. Their capacity to act independently and pursue collaborative pursuits outside of the community can be curtailed by their superiors, and without active support and encouragement, they might be limited in the degree of involvement they can pursue in terms of extra-congregational or extra-ministerial engagements, or they may not be fully empowered by their religious community to make judgements about what they may commit to. However, sisters who live in remote areas for their apostolic missions, or those who have ascended to positions of power and authority through other professional avenues, may have a greater degree of independence than fellow sisters who live with their community.

A related issue is sister leaders having the capacity to envision a community that

is bigger than their own religious communities. Indeed, a key characteristic of congregational life is that sisters are enculturated with a strong sense of identity, belonging and faithfulness to their particular religious community and its charism. This sense of belonging is nurtured through the formation process of a congregation. At the same time, this powerful sense of identity can at times be a critical impediment to a sister's ability to forge strong ties with sisters or other parties outside of her community. As one sister involved in a regional African association explains: "Religious life has been kind of closed up.... What I learned is people are not committed to the work of the Association, to the work of working together.... You have to appeal to them to talk about it to say, 'It's about all of us together and therefore work together. We are going to attain something bigger that one congregation cannot.'" Another sister in India makes a similar observation: "We can sometimes lack a broader vision and fail to see the bigger picture."



The success of networks and collaborative endeavors is in many ways dependent on sisters' having an appreciation of this "bigger picture," wherein they can recognize the value of belonging to a broader community of practice—which can include sisters, as well as laypeople, both within the Church and beyond it. As one sister from Zambia put it:

My understanding as a leader in religious life is paramount. If I don't understand, I'm not going to inspire, but if I understand, I'm going to inspire, and I'm going to inform my sisters, discuss the need of belonging to the wider network and also even working, like say with the government, and open up. So as a leader, I should be able to bring the sisters together, to realize why we are there and what is our focus and why we belong to the larger network and that we have to be part of it.... We can be as a congregation, but we don't have to remain there. So for me, that's my understanding as a leader.

In *Conversations at the Well*, sociologist Jung Park notes a similar point in her discussion of collaboration, networking and intercultural living of sisters: "When connecting with other congregations, leaders should remember the mission or passion of the other communities, in dreaming about other possibilities for collaborating with them. Moreover, the leader must be skilled and committed to communication *with her own community members*, as well as with other communities" (emphasis added).²⁸

Park's observation about networking and inter-cultural living of sisters speaks directly to the significance of effective leadership in the success of networking endeavors and collaborations. Leaders play an important role in understanding the collective purpose of a partnership, appreciating and being attuned to the

needs of all parties, as well as being able to communicate the overall purpose of having a partnership to their home community and to others in the network. It is noteworthy that this structure is built into SLDI training, wherein many sisters noted that they often would bring back knowledge gained from capacity training and share it with their fellow sisters. In doing so, superiors of the congregation learn about the overall benefit and advantage of being part of a network.

Overcoming resistance from congregational leadership can require personal fortitude and risk on the part of individual sisters. As Sr. Beena, president of the Sister Doctor Forum of India, views it:

It is also a personal responsibility. I need to push and get my things done because once you are in your congregation, the congregation has got a set of rules. Communities like uniformity. They like all the sisters to dress up like this. All the sisters pray like this. All the sisters move like this. I think that is the biggest challenge of being a sister who thinks differently. I think when you are in a community you have to be open to the community. You say that, "I am doing this and this and this," initially I had a little bit of struggle to speak it out, that, "I need to travel. I need to organize this. I need to...." I think one or two of my superiors were very, very supportive. They were happy that I'm doing other than whatever is expected of me or given to me, something extra, and reaching out to people. They were very supportive.... I was also kept free of certain community, mundane routines so that I can put my time and invest my time in this kind of things, like arranging, organizing, coordinating. That kind of thing. Lot of community activities, I was freed of.

Here we also see the imperative of internal support and comradery, and even financial assistance of fellow sisters to empower leaders to emerge from their communities. For Sr. Beena, her community was able to empower her with room and flexibility to develop her personal and professional self outside of the community. Another sister from Zambia emphasized also that the spirit of collaboration and networking is one that needs to be cultivated within the formation process. As she puts it:

You start talking about collaboration at a very early age as religious, which means in the formation. As sisters in the association, we talked about that. We said there is need to start informing the young sisters that they belong to a wider sisterhood. When they get to that level, they will be open. The other one is a sister and a congregation participate in what is happening on the national level and other forums that are provided. Now they are more for us that are calling sisters to learn, and to listen and to collaborate with others.

She finds forums such as ASEC playing a critical role in introducing the spirit of collaboration to sisters in their formation process. For young sisters to pursue such opportunities requires leaders who are also willing to having sisters open their community doors wider to the world. Responsive to such needs, ASEC has created workshops for superiors of congregations in order to generate institutional buy-in for leadership development of sisters.

“If I’m a leader that is not open,” she said, “I’m blocking the whole lot of people in my congregation not to access the information and not to participate. But if I’m open, I’m opening wide the doors to allow sisters to be part of what is happening and to be more open and more outgoing and to contribute positively.”

Such exposure to collaboration and development of leadership skills during early formation is, however, not without risk. Indeed, there is the possibility that a sister will leave her congregation as a result of broadened exposure to other life possibilities. Yet, as Sr. Beena puts it, “As young sisters, they too have taken a risk.” Therefore, in order for a congregation to minimize the risk, leaders must be committed to “identifying the right talent” within a cohort of sisters and “spending or investing on that talent.”



What are the attributes of leadership that foster collaboration?

- Ability to understand, inspire and mobilize
- Trust, listen and give time
- Possess skills of communication in both directions
- Develop these attributes in religious formation

Key Learnings

Based on the review of literature, fieldwork, interviews, grantee reports and supporting documents, five key learnings emerged from the study of collaborations in the Catholic Sisters Initiatives portfolio:

1. Definitional clarity helps align activities, resources and goals.
2. Moving along the collaboration continuum requires increasing amounts of trust, time and turf to be shared. While sisters might be doing more than one of these at a given time, they require very different capacities and commitments in order for these partnerships to deliver intended outcomes.
3. Networking does not necessarily result in collaboration or produce shared identity/global sisterhood. In order to achieve the ambitious goals of visibility and legitimacy, more commitments, resources, leadership development, coalition-building and time are required.
4. Coalitions elevate sisters' voices and increase visibility and recognition in the public sphere.
5. Leadership, autonomy and trust are prerequisites for collaboration and networking.

Challenging Assumptions in the Theory of Change





The research presented here corroborates, to a certain degree, the four assumptions in the theory of change (TOC) outlined for the cross-cutting portfolio of collaboration. However, these assumptions need to be further nuanced or complicated in order to offer insights that advance the funding strategy of the Catholic Sisters Initiative. The following presents an analysis of each of the assumptions:

1. *The development of networks will result in increased visibility of sisters in the NGO sector.*

The research for this study and CRCC's ongoing interaction with sisters as MEL partner suggest the need to reframe the above assumption with further definitional clarity. In particular, these findings suggest that the development of coalitions of sisters, especially around a set of defined issue areas, can increase sisters' influence, authority and legitimacy in relation to other powerful actors, including the NGO sector and government entities as well as the Catholic Church. In short, the Catholic Sisters Initiative might consider reframing the assumption as: The development of sister coalitions results in transforming the power of sisters in relation to other players in the arena.

The current assumptions and goals are too general in scope and do not adequately address such possibilities. Networks consist of the most informal level of inter-organizational linkages in the collaboration continuum. They are optimally useful for sharing information and learnings across

entities, and do not need to rely on achieving a common purpose or stated goal. This is easy to do, as it requires a low level of trust, limited time availability and no sharing of turf.

In order, however, for sisters to achieve more ambitious goals, such as to increase sisters' influence and authority (i.e., visibility) in the NGO sector, or even within the Catholic Church, other strategies of inter-organizational linkages along the collaboration continuum are needed. Placing sisters in such a process through coalition development allows sisters to raise questions about or take direct action on issues of power inequalities in the contexts of their apostolic work. It can serve as a bridge from sisters working mainly in the field of social service to that of social justice, and even having a voice in policy-making. Of value, too, in such coalitions is that joining with others also provides protection. There is safety in numbers for sisters raising politically charged issues in sites of power.

Such coalitional arrangements rely on a foundation of trust-building among sisters, and an investment of their time and other in-kind resources toward this process. This, therefore, entails a realistic outlook on the part of sisters and their supporters (i.e. funders such as the Catholic Sisters Initiative) which acknowledges that the outcomes of coalition development are to be achieved in the long-term and not immediately.

2.

Networks will result in sisters taking on active leadership roles.

Indeed, the development of coalitions of sisters can help foster an environment in which sisters will take on active leadership roles, in the Catholic Church as well as in broader spheres of government and the NGO sector.

The findings from the research also, however, complicate the second assumption, in that both the evidence and literature suggest that leadership is an important prerequisite for fostering collaboration and the development of networks within the sisterhood. This suggests an inverse relationship between leadership and networks as they are currently framed by the assumption.

It is clear that the Catholic Sisters Initiative has already developed learnings around this fact. For example, one of the learnings that emerged from ASEC's SLDI programming is the importance of support on the part of leaders of congregations for training that sisters receive through SLDI. This is why ASEC now runs workshops for superiors to generate buy-in for the programming, so that they can understand, encourage and support collaborative endeavors that SLDI-trained sisters may bring to their communities. Thus, it is important that sisters become leaders in order to pursue collaborative engagements, and that they are supported and empowered by their superiors to achieve such potential.

In addition to leadership, the degree of autonomy or independence a sister may have to pursue partnership opportunities outside of her community is shaped significantly by the leadership culture of her community. This is particularly apparent when comparing sisters in the global north and global south. Therefore, while leadership is a necessary component for fostering collaboration, it is also essential to understand the cultural contexts within which sisters operate, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach to collaboration is unlikely to succeed.

3.

Collaboration results in the sharing of best-practice models.

The examples presented by sisters in this report suggest that collaboration can result in the sharing of best-practice models (and co-funding opportunities) most optimally when there is some institutional structure through which information is channeled. In this report, we have described this kind of structure as a "learning community hub," a site for communication across a network, which also plays an important role in trust-building among the various sister-partners in a network. Optimally, such hubs will provide customized solutions and innovations to sisters working within a particular ministry area.

There are also smaller ad-hoc organizing bodies and coalitions of sisters that emerge organically as sisters respond to a particular problem. For example, a number of sisters working in the health care ministries have independently begun to meet after having forged connections through the Association of Religious in Uganda. These smaller groups can be ideal ways to share best-practice models and innovations across a tight network; yet, they may not



yet have the institutional capacity or structures in place to absorb funding. Moreover, these groups might consist of collaborations between smaller congregations that are less well resourced, and have had fewer opportunities for networking and capacity-training than their better resourced counterparts. Attention to such networks could be a way to build equity and support innovation from those sisters operating on the margins of larger institutions of women religious.

4. *Collaboration results in the co-funding and leveraging of resources.*

Co-funding and leveraging of resources are two means for congregations to achieve sustainability. It should also be noted that while collaboration results in co-funding, funding and other in-kind resources are also necessary components for supporting collaborations. Ideally, different stakeholders in a collaboration need to pool their resources, and they may need external funding in order to sustain an alliance that benefits all stakeholders. Sisters with strong leadership skills have found that in-kind contributions and resources can be equally critical to support their work. Again, learning community hubs can be an important nexus where these kinds of resources can be disseminated across collaborating sisters.

Recommendations

How can the Catholic Sisters Initiative more effectively support cross-congregation and cross-conference collaborations?



1.
Incorporate a nuanced understanding of “collaboration” into the Catholic Sisters Initiative’s strategic grantmaking.

Defining what collaboration, networking, coordination and cooperation mean for Strategy25 is important internally and externally. The definitions and examples in this study provide a useful framework for Catholic Sisters Initiative staff to discuss how current or potential grants might use a more nuanced understanding of collaboration to “move the needle” on strategic objectives using one of the key areas along the collaboration continuum (see Figure 1). This study provides definitions along the collaboration continuum to enable discussion of grant-specific objectives and activities with grantees. This will allow the Catholic Sisters Initiative and its grantees to develop a mutual understanding of what is needed programmatically, such as networking for an alumnae convening versus coordination, or coalition-building for a specific cause (e.g., Talitha Kum and its anti-human trafficking work).

2.

Accompany sisters and their organizations along the collaboration continuum.

Sisters and their organizations need support—financial, technical and emotional—to network, coordinate, cooperate and collaborate. This support and the benefits that flow from it help to amplify sisters’ voices, increase the impact of their work and sustain their congregations and missions over the long-term. The Catholic Sisters Initiative could become the premier supportive and bridging hub of resources and knowledge for the global sisterhood. Sisters and their organizations tend to be siloed, and the Catholic Sisters Initiative team plays a crucial role in connecting them within and outside the Catholic world to support their vitality and advance their apostolic work. In the most recent MEL report, we showed that the Catholic Sisters Initiative team is already doing this vital connective-tissue work among sisters and between sisters and the non-Catholic world. This work should be rewarded and given extra support within the Catholic Sisters Initiative team. This can include leveraging internal capabilities within the Foundation itself, such as the SLED or communications teams, for sharing knowledge resources, best practices and lessons learned. For example, this can take the form of an online website or platform where these various aspects are shared with stakeholders—such as sisters, congregation, conferences, NGOs,

funders and governments. Accompaniment should be seen as a necessary component of grant-making to advance collaboration and achieve strategic goals.

3.

Support coalitions to help place sisters in meaningful leadership positions.

One of the underlying assumptions framing the development of networks is that these networks will increase the visibility, voice and legitimacy of sisters. In order to do so, the Catholic Sisters Initiative could support coalition development as a way to place sisters in meaningful leadership positions. Coalition development relies on a process of accompaniment of sisters that grounds social justice-related work in Catholic social teachings and spirituality.

Such coalitional arrangements also rely on a foundation of trust-building among sisters, and an investment of their time and other in-kind resources toward this process. It therefore entails a realistic outlook on the part of sisters and their supporters (i.e. funders such as the Foundation) that acknowledges that the outcomes of coalition development are to be achieved in the long-term and not immediately.

4.

Make investments that encourage leaders to get on board with collaboration and promote the identification and cultivation of leaders in congregational formation.

Because leadership is an important prerequisite for collaboration and networking, it is essential to support programs where congregational leadership can understand and absorb the collaborative capacities that sisters gain from being part of learning communities. Leaders need to be attentive to developing their people into the best they can be based on their abilities and callings. Similarly, the Catholic Sisters Initiative might encourage and support leadership development formation programs, where young leaders are identified and given opportunities to grow in their collaborative capacities. This will help build and routinize leadership development within congregations.

5.

Document and share best practices and lessons learned around the collaboration continuum.

As Strategy25 evolves, the Catholic Sisters Initiative should use its meetings, convenings and conversations with sisters and their organizations to document how they network, cooperate and collaborate with Catholic and non-Catholic organizations on issues pertaining to sisters—formation, elder care, finances—and their ministries. Such documentation includes paying attention to the amount of time, trust and turf these efforts involve.

6.

Continue investing in learning community hubs.

For sisters to take advantage of networks, it is also important that such networks be grounded in an organization that takes the central responsibility for facilitating connections and information exchange across partners of a network in an equitable manner. Such a “learning community hub” can be an important site for communication across the network, but also plays an important role in building trust among the various sister-partners in a network.

The Catholic Sisters Initiative currently provides robust support to organizations such as UISG and ACWECA. These have the institutional capacity and management systems to absorb funds and deliver programs on a wide scale, supporting regional and national religious conferences.

It is also equally important to support learning community hubs, such as USCSAHT or CHAI, that engage sisters more regularly, paying closer attention to their day-to-day needs for their specific human development-related ministry work. As smaller organizations, they are nimble enough to develop customized solutions that respond to ongoing needs of sisters, address sector-specific development challenges and make strategic connections with entities outside the Catholic Church to bring resources and benefits to congregations. The Catholic Sisters Initiative’s goals will be advanced by continuing to support these types of partnerships through direct grantee support, co-funding with other funders and intentionally bringing together key stakeholders in a mission area around critical issues, such as post-COVID-19 pandemic planning and recovery for sisters in the health sector.

Conclusion

CRCC's research findings have highlighted the importance of understanding:

- Sister networks as learning communities;
- Partnerships among sisters as a means for transforming power relations;
- Partnerships beyond the sisterhood as a robust area of development; and
- The importance of leadership development for collaboration work.

Literature in the field of organizational management emphasizes the need to understand collaboration in relation to other common strategies—such as networking, coordination and cooperation. This definitional clarity can help the Catholic Sisters Initiative align its activities, resources and goals to foster networking and collaboration between sisters, the Church and non-Catholic partners. Networking activities do not automatically result in collaboration, or produce a shared identity such as the global sisterhood. They require increasing levels of trust and time to develop. So while sisters might be doing more than one of these types of activities at a given time, they may actually require very different capacities and commitments so that these partnerships can deliver their intended outcomes.

Currently, the strategy thinks about investments in networks as a means of increasing the visibility, voice and legitimacy of sisters. What the above research suggests is that it is through the development of coalitions of sisters, especially around a set of defined issue areas, that sisters gain influence. Indeed, it is also here that values of a global sisterhood become prominent.

Finally, a key learning that the study emphasizes is that leadership, autonomy and trust are interconnected components and should be considered as necessary prerequisites for promoting collaboration and networking.

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Notes

- 1 The Sisters Education funding portfolio, for instance, specified that strengthening collaboration among sister organizations will contribute to the sharing of best practices for use by congregations globally in the future. In the Human Development Services portfolio, it is also stated that the development of networks will result in increased visibility of sisters in the NGO sector. Collaboration and networking are further characterized as a key to the success of sisters in their ministries, and as creating “opportunities for sisters to be recognized as global advocates for disadvantaged people, and position them within the ecosystem of humanitarian organizations.” Finally, the importance the Catholic Sisters Initiative gives to enhancing the collaborative dimension in its grant-making is demonstrated by the Strategy 2.0 target: “Increase in the number of sisters participating in NGO human development/data networks and the number of sisters taking active leadership roles in NGOs.” This was one of 18 target areas prioritized for Strategy 2.0.
- 2 Fischer, Murphy, “The Harvest of Ministry.”
- 3 Fischer, Bai, “Ministries of Catholic Sisters.”
- 4 Park, “Conversations at the Well.”
- 5 Akruvala, et al., “Promoting Social Justice in Africa.”
- 6 Fischer, Murphy, “The Harvest of Ministry.”
- 7 Mashek, “Collaboration Continuum Capacities and Supports Needed.”
- 8 Himmelman, “On the Theory and Practice of Transformational Collaboration.”
- 9 Himmelman. “On the Theory and Practice,” 27.
- 10 Visualization by Wasco, “Commitment to Collaborate.”
- 11 Himmelman, “On the Theory and Practice.”
- 12 Cropper 1996, “Collaborative Working and the Issue of Sustainability,” 82.
- 13 Bryson et al., “The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations.”
- 14 Kusi, “Building Bridges Between Municipal Government and Urban Slum.”
- 15 Muijs, “Why network?” p. 10. See also Borgatti, Foster, “The network paradigm.”
- 16 Lin, “Building a network theory” p.30.
- 17 Burt, “Structural holes.”
- 18 Wakahiu et al., Voices of Courage.
- 19 Eden, “The stakeholder/collaborator strategy workshop.”
- 20 McClory, “The Fight Over Fighting Poverty.”
- 21 Fischer, Murphy, “The Harvest of Ministry,” p. 9.
- 22 Simpson, Willer, “Beyond Altruism.”
- 23 Kusi, “Building bridges between municipal government and urban slum,” p. 473.
- 24 Fischer, Murphy, “The Harvest of Ministry,” p. 9.
- 25 Center for Religion and Civic Culture, A Case Study: Catholic Sisters in Zambia.
- 26 Huxley, Creating Collaborative Advantage, p.6.
- 27 Huxley, Creating Collaborative Advantage, p. 5
- 28 Park, “Conversations at the Well.”

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