

Sustainable NGO Business Models

and the role of Cross Sector Partnerships

Executive Summary

Global environmental, economic, and societal forces are impacting the business models, funding landscape and value delivered by many Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). The opportunity may exist for NGOs to engineer resilience and sustainability into their business models through leveraging cross-sector partnerships (CSPs).

This environmental scan aims to explore at a strategic level what NGOs broadly refer to as 'new business', referring to business model transformations that deviate from legacy funding sources, delivery mechanisms, and value propositions – in response to emerging global conditions, with a focus on cross-sector partnerships.

Our literature review, along with interviews with C-suite executives of a cross-section of NGOs (primarily focused on international development based in Australia), provide deep insight into NGO responses to recent global volatility, the role cross-sector partnerships can play in business model sustainability, and lead to recommendations for individual NGOs, and the sector to better leverage cross-sector partnership benefits.

We found that:

- Key business model innovation characteristics, such as *Resilient Purpose*, *Dynamic Ambidexterity*, *Modularisation* for reconfiguration, *Ecosystems as agents of change* and *Extra-generative cognition* play a strong role in NGOs being able to transform effectively where required in response to global volatility
- Cross-sector partnerships can play a role in business model sustainability, however to enhance access to this benefit, NGOs may need to overcome *Misaligned Partnership Interests*, *Governance challenges*, and *Organisation Culture and Leadership challenges*
- Individually, NGO cross-sector partnerships can be enhanced through the early detection of unnecessary/unviable partnering efforts, ensuring partner relations are transparent from the start and communicate effectively, making structural changes where necessary, coordinating to avoid duplication of costs, ensuring effective organisational leadership and culture, and encourage progressive philanthropic donors to invest in cross-sector partnerships
- As a sector, cross-sector partnerships can be enhanced through a central partnership facilitation body, promoting progressive and innovative organisational leadership and culture, encouraging progressive philanthropic donors to invest in CSPs.

Thank you to the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), Non-Government Organisation executives, and industry specialists for your support and contribution to this research.



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Why, What and How

Opportunity Context:

Global environmental, economic, and societal forces are impacting the business models, funding landscape and value delivered by many Non-Government Organisations (NGOs).

Organisations reliant upon legacy business model assumptions, such as those reliant on grant funding and donations, may experience greater adverse impact on value delivery and volatility in times of such change.

The opportunity may exist for NGOs to engineer resilience and sustainability into their business models through leveraging cross-sector partnerships. For the purposes of this environmental scan, cross-sector partnerships includes partnership between businesses, government, philanthropy, private capital, academia, health and research sectors.

Aims and desired outcomes:

This project aims to advance the knowledge base of NGO business models through collating and synthesising an understanding of:

- Sustainable business model transformations of NGOs in response to global conditions, and;
- The role of cross-sector partnerships in NGO sustainable business model transformations.

Desired project outcomes include:

- A contribution to improving the effectiveness and de-risking of both current and future NGO business models through the assessment and potential adoption of sustainable NGO business model insights; and
- An enhanced understanding across the business, government, philanthropy/private capital and academia/health/research sectors of the role Cross Sector Partnerships can play in NGO business model transformation and sustainability.

Our approach:

This environmental scan explores at a strategic level what NGOs broadly refer to as 'new business.' This refers to business model transformations that deviate from legacy funding sources, delivery mechanisms, and value propositions – in response to emerging global conditions, or other.

This asset combines academic literature and thought leadership with current, real world case studies based on interviews with senior NGO executives based in Australia, and subject matter experts.

Non-Government Organisation business models are seeking opportunities to remain viable in response to global conditions

The challenge NGOs face

Traditional funding sources for Non-Government Organisations such as government grants and philanthropic donations, particularly across the International Development sector, are becoming less reliable and sustainable.¹ This trend is decades in the making, and recent global events including the COVID-19 crisis have only further challenged organisational resilience.²

For recently formed NGOs who's business models are less reliant on traditional revenue sources, rapid income growth experienced over many years had plateaued and started to drop pre-COVID-19, and post-COVID-19 this drop is expected to accelerate.²

Pre-COVID-19 trends saw the risk of some collapsing over 5-10 years, with COVID-19 now shrinking that timeline.²

1. Income source overdependence

NGOs are often reliant on one or two significant income generating members for a substantial portion of revenue (between ~20% to ~65%),² and are largely dependent on individual supporters & state development cooperation donors from the same member countries. Ups and downs in one member's home market are exacerbated by this dependency (51% of official development assistance comes from 3 countries).²

2. Grant funding is less accessible

Grant funding to NGOs began its decline in the 1990s, and the sector has been facing issues related to this to varying degrees since. Funding tightened further particularly due to donor govt. austerity programmes in the 2010s.³

Australia's primary international development funding agency is changing both what, and the way they fund – with a large portion of funding now going directly to Managing Contractors – competing against NGOs.

3. NGO proliferation

NGOs face growing competition for limited funding from donations, grants and philanthropic initiatives due to the numbers of competing charities, NGOs, and not-for-profits increasing.⁴

NGOs, particular International NGOs (INGOs) are being founded at a rate with a large portion tapping into common revenue sources, aiming to address common issues.



more INGOs were founded from 2000-2009 compared to 1990 - 1999⁵



INGOs were founded from 1990 - 2009⁵

Non-Government Organisation business models are seeking opportunities to remain viable in response to global conditions

4. Donors are donating differently

Millennial generations have tended towards 'joining issues, not organisations'; the cost of acquisition of individual donors has increased; mainstream markets have saturated; NGOs find difficulty in keeping up with, and maximising, digital channels; and there is less grassroots engagement.²

5. Questioning legitimacy

NGOs have faced a legitimacy crisis themselves – with claims of failure to deliver sustainable solutions to poverty and aid – while this issue is separate from financing, it can be seen to negatively influence funding.³

6. Causes are scaling in size and complexity

Social issues are becoming increasingly more demanding, leading to more complex challenges for NFPs. In parallel, relevant functions from govt. and public authorities have been reduced and a lack of skills and competence causing issues which have largely been transferred to the private and non-profit sectors has increased the burden on NGOs over the last 20 years.⁶

What we heard:

"It's now not only about what NGOs have to respond to, but also dealing with the increasingly degrading resilience of the communities that we work with due to challenges such as the impacts of climate change and growing inequality. This is increasing the scale of need"





2 Burning platform

Pressure is building for Non-Government Organisations to shift towards sustainable funding models

Non-Government Organisations are faced with challenges that threaten their ability to remain financially viable, and the pressure to find new, resilient ways of doing business has been further tested since the arrival of the COVID-19 crisis. Three avenues exist for NGOs facing this pressure – (1) to transform into a new fit-for-purpose model, (2) to ‘die well’, such as through a merger or acquisition with an NGO with shared objectives, or (3) to ‘die badly’, when the former options are unachievable.² The preference must be for NGOs to transform. Re-occurring NGO responses to business model sustainability pressures include:

- i. **Extending existing business** - such as driving existing public fundraising through new channels, or to new donor groups
- ii. **Diversifying grant portfolio** – through accessing various grant types and organisations, and receiving new accreditations to enable access to new funding (such as the Green Climate Fund, for example)
- iii. **Social enterprise** – to decouple a primary reliance on grants for many NGOs, and enable a commercial model
- iv. **Commercial contracting** – pursuing a managing contractor type model, with greater accountability for delivering outputs than with traditional grant funding
- v. **Impact Investing** – such as social impact bonds, enabling NGOs to share the financial benefits with investors of achieving specific outcomes, and/or NGOs establishing investing mechanisms themselves
- vi. **New partnerships, and cross-sector-partnerships** – as an alternative approach to both existing and new business models, diverse partnerships are being explored

The ability for NGOs to move towards more sustainable and resilient models has been mixed, and those who have been successful harbour the organisational characteristics required for business model innovation, explained further in this environmental scan.

3 Business model sustainability

Organisational characteristics that enable Business Model Innovation are core to enabling business model sustainability

Modern Non-Government Organisation (NGO) business model sustainability can often be seen as synonymous with business model innovation – when the pace of change is high and revenue sources are volatile. To remain sustainable, NGO business models must have the ability to explore, detect, realise, and transition towards new ways to fund, and deliver value, in an agile and flexible way to the pace of change.

Our research suggests that NGOs capable of business model innovation in response to global volatility identify with five key characteristics:

1 Resilient Purpose

An aligned and shared sense of purpose throughout the NGO from leadership to the front-line supports even the most complex organisations to move with agility when necessary.⁷

In a recent survey by Accenture, half of the C-suite executives surveyed indicated that articulating a sense of purpose across the workforce was their top priority to help improve agility and drive transformation.⁷

2 Dynamic Ambidexterity

The ability to manipulate resource configuration, be flexible and agile to react and enact change is critical to enabling business model transformation.⁹

Seamlessly accessing people, processes, systems and assets from anywhere supports the ability to draw in outside capability across partners, supplies, and adjacent organisations.⁸

3 Modularisation for reconfiguration

Modularisation, interchangeability of components, and co-opting the use of a function for a different purpose than what it was originally created for reduces the barrier to entry for business model change, and enables organisations to respond faster, and effectively partner with the wider external ecosystem.⁹

4 Ecosystems as agents of change

Strategic direction towards alliances and partnerships to enable the access and sharing of resources, risks and capabilities can significantly alleviate the challenges created through NGO income fluctuation and global condition volatility.⁹

The pandemic has emphasised the importance of choosing partners wisely. 94% of Fortune 1000 companies experienced supply chain disruptions from COVID-19, highlighting the dangers of over-reliance on third parties and a lack of due diligence when it came to selecting strategic partners.⁷

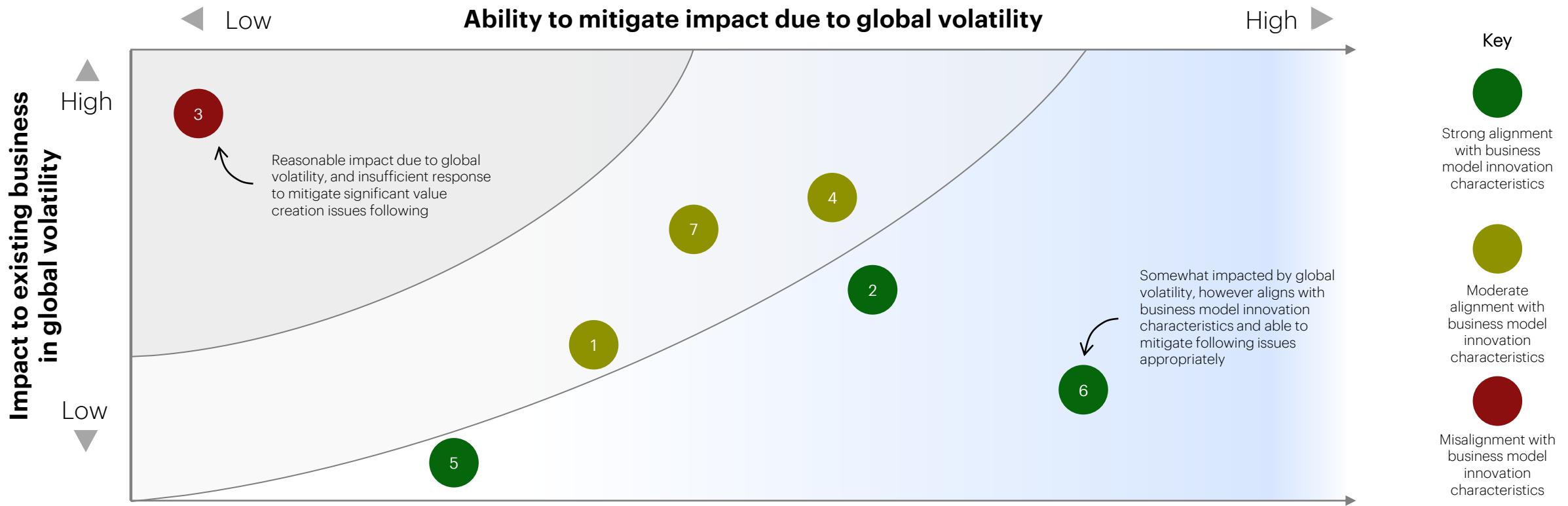
5 Extra-generative cognition

Holistic feedback loops are critical to overcoming the disorientation that can occur through business model innovation⁹.

Benefits management in such transformations can be complex - transparency and measurable feedback can provide input to guide organisation's business model innovation efforts to create new and flexible structures that enable business model adaption.⁸

3 Business model sustainability

Organisations with business model innovation characteristics are better positioned to enhance their sustainability throughout periods of volatility when required.



Insights from interviews with executives from a cross-section of Australian based NGO and industry subject matter experts indicate that true business model innovation is occasional – with limited examples at scale existing only with a few NGOs. Most innovations are still variations on the theme of ‘traditional’ fundraising, even if from private sector partners.

Cross-Sector Partnerships are an innovative approach that can be considered a primary business model sustainability lever...

NGO Cross Sector Partnerships

Cross-sector partnerships — by which we mean relatively intensive, long-term interactions between organisations from at least two sectors (across business, government, philanthropy/private capital and academia /health/research) aimed at addressing a social or environmental problem— are now a fixture in management research and practice.¹⁰

Consensus exists on the merits of cross-sector collaboration, with partnerships ranging from philanthropic projects to high-level partnerships with strategic, transformational potential.¹¹ Their potential to create and deliver both social and economic value can be mutually reinforcing.¹²

According to Kania and Kramer in Collective Impact, large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, yet the social sector remains focused on the isolated intervention of individual organisations.¹³ Holistic, system wide approaches need to be taken in order to achieve meaningful progress and improvements, with no single organisation could accomplish these goals alone.

Cross Sector Partnerships are shaping sustainable business models, and they are on the rise

The way that businesses and NGOs talk about mutual engagement is shifting from a predominantly fundraising and/or conflict relationship to one that is considerably more complex & engaged³. Cross-sector partnerships can play an important role for the transition to new business models given that value creation, delivery, and measurement by organisations are intimately related to the collaborative ties with their stakeholders.¹⁴

Sustainable alternatives to conventional business models tend to adopt a more holistic perspective of business by broadening the spectrum of solutions and stakeholders and, when aligned with cross-sector partnerships, can contribute new ways of addressing the wicked sustainability problems humanity faces.¹⁵

Cross-sector partnerships are increasingly being adopted by many civil society organisations in preference to a confrontational approach toward firms and governments, sometimes seen as developing novel solutions to old problems, thereby aiming to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their activities.¹⁶

... providing resilience through periods of volatility, whilst amplifying impact

How do CSPs enable business model sustainability?

Efficiency: If built effectively, Cross Sector partnerships can save costs and create efficiencies by sharing infrastructure and administrative expenses.

Access to funding: Shrinking funding schemes have resulted in NGOs needing to look at creating value in other ways – Cross-sector partnership's enable this. Collaborative strategies are an effective solution to mitigating financial stress, and there has been accelerated interdependence across the public, private and not-for-profit (NFP) sectors due to this.⁶

Funding diversification: Engaging in cross sector partnerships can provide a solution to diversify sources of funding required for physical & financial resources, as well as technical and human capital that are specialised for an NGO's specific needs.⁴

Sharing risk: Cross-sector partnerships can be highly productive and low in risk, as they take place between actors who are not in direct competition with each other.¹⁴ The function of the partnership is intended to handle uncertainty and risks associated with entering and creating new markets.¹⁶

Who benefits from CSPs, and how?

Dissemination of capabilities to increase competency: Cross-sectoral collaboration can help improve the effectiveness of humanitarian and international development logistics by facilitating the transfer of competency-orientated drivers²⁰ such as resources, financials, products, knowledge, skills and expertise from the business sector to the NGO sector.¹⁷ Generally, harnessing corporate partners' skills and assets can allow them to make more of an impact in delivering their missions than cash-based relationship.¹⁸

Realising sector specific benefits: Within a Cross-sector partnership, the impact benefits are bilateral - the NGO benefits through higher levels of funding, with the corporation also benefitting through diversification of revenue streams, ESG value and higher social acceptance (social license to operate)⁴ – and combined, cross-sector partners can have the potential to deliver greater impact towards the Sustainable Development Goals than either organisation in isolation. Through creating greater impact, the Cross-sector partnership model also allows NGOs to address legitimacy-orientated drivers such as building reputation and social license.²⁰

4 Cross-sector partnerships

Cross-Sector Partnerships can have broad or focused incentives, with varying degrees and types of impact

At a high level, partnerships can usually be recognised as having at least one of these objectives³:

1. Awareness raising
2. Information sharing
3. Resource contribution
4. Resource pooling

It can be reflected from this that there are two key 'enabling priorities' for NGOs in pursuing partnerships, that being a focus on quality sustainable funding, and on a more central role for local actors and affected communities.¹⁹

Literature suggests that within the above grouping, Cross-sector partnerships can be identified as one of the 6 types shown in this table on the right, each portraying its own unique characteristics and limitations.²²

Partnership formation can also support early corrective plans to avoid risking scarce financial and non-financial resources.²¹

Type	Example	Characteristics
Sponsorship	Donations of: Cash Products/gifts-in-kind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on effective marketing • Builds on senior-level relationships • Based on moral imperative/emotional response to issue etc
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cause-related marketing • Employee fundraising/payroll giving • Product licensing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building public perception • Widening message reach (i.e. to new donors) • Diversified income stream
Capacity building & impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity building (internal or external) • Institution-building partnerships • Seen as operational partnerships seeking social gains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jointly designed projects/ programmes • Seeks to bring about changes in behaviour and systems through provision of goods or services • Essentially about empowerment
Brokering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating large scale initiatives and local partnerships • Matching product donations/expertise to projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NGO bringing together/ coordinating a range of players • Built on principle of more 'transformational' activities • Primary focus is sustainability of outcomes
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues driven partnerships/ campaigns • Changing business practice(s) through raising awareness • Strategic partnerships aiming to change policy and standard setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convincing 'voice for change' • Built on attempts to: reach policy makers/ leaders; have influence and change mindsets/behaviour • Has the potential to focus on causes rather than symptoms
Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisory services to improve business practices • Social enterprise development • Product development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Joint venture' • Uses core business priorities as prompt • Accepts the business need to be profit-making

In practice, Cross-sector partnerships must overcome important governance challenges and diverging interests

Misaligned Partnership Interests

- Diverging interests between Cross-sector partners create various tensions¹¹
- “the relationships between donor and implementer, aid provider and recipient, remain controlling and asymmetrical, and partnerships and interactions remain transactional and competitive, rather than reciprocal and collective.”²⁴
- Cross-sector partnerships can generate coordination problems - partners’ actions should reinforce each other, but they can also conflict²⁵

Governance challenges²⁴

- Being clear about who is responsible for different parts of the partnership, and the varying constraints (and opportunities) of accountability
- Governance structures within organisations may differ a great deal, leading to some challenges in aligning on governance methodology
- Assumptions of power can differ across organisations and can be misinterpreted if not made clear from the start of a partnership
- There can be trade-offs considered between valuing relationships and “getting the job done” if conflict regarding priorities and values arises

Organisation Culture and Leadership

Culture and leadership change is seen by some to be holding back NGOs willingness and ability to embrace cross sector partnerships.

Furthermore, in the initial planning stage of a partnership as well as various time throughout, NGOs may find that they feel pressured by a partner to step outside of the field of work they feel comfortable in, stretching the boundaries of what they had initially agreed to do as part of the partnership.¹³

What we heard:

“Working with commercial organisations who have differences in values can make it difficult to align interests without compromise”

What we heard:

“Ensure that the output of the partnership is greater than the cost [for sustainability]”

What we heard:

“Don’t be uncomfortable with failing fast, or not getting the most out of a partnership”

In practice, cross-sector partnerships can face inhibitors to realising effective change

Financial barriers

The costs to kickstart a partnership can often be seen as a barrier to entry for some NGOs. In fact, some of today's most successful 'sustainable' partnerships were highly dependent on underlying philanthropic donations to get to the point where they could sustain themselves.

Funder's prefer short-term solutions and are reluctant to pay for infrastructure - these initiatives requires the funders to be more 'hands-off' and patient.¹³

Procedural barriers

Some NGOs, particularly smaller ones with less resources may find the administrative challenges and requirements challenging to commit time and resources to.

This includes the organisational requirements that a partner may insist on for monitoring and evaluation purposes of the partnership, as well as time-consuming processes related to measuring impact.

Approach to creating impact

System-wide progress to complex social problems is often tackled in a piecemeal way with NGOs each contributing independent solutions, which can lead to isolated improvements that may work at odds with each other rather than collaborating for more effective outcomes.¹³

Funders and non-profits are usually focused on independent action as the primary vehicle for social change as they are incentivised to achieve this when competing for funds.¹³

What we heard:

"Some partners they have worked with from particular industries expected an amount of evaluative work to measure their impact that was unrealistic for the budget and resources they were working with.

Other partners worked to very different timeframes which created other challenges"

What we heard:

"If the common interest between partners isn't aligned closely enough, the greater the risk of failure, and the greater the philanthropic glue to hold it together."

In practice, partnering with organisations from different sectors **may present some industry-specific challenges**

Across the 6 key types of partnerships below, grouped for their incentive to partner, specific characteristics may arise that could become challenges to overcome²²



Sponsorship



Advocacy



Capacity building



Business



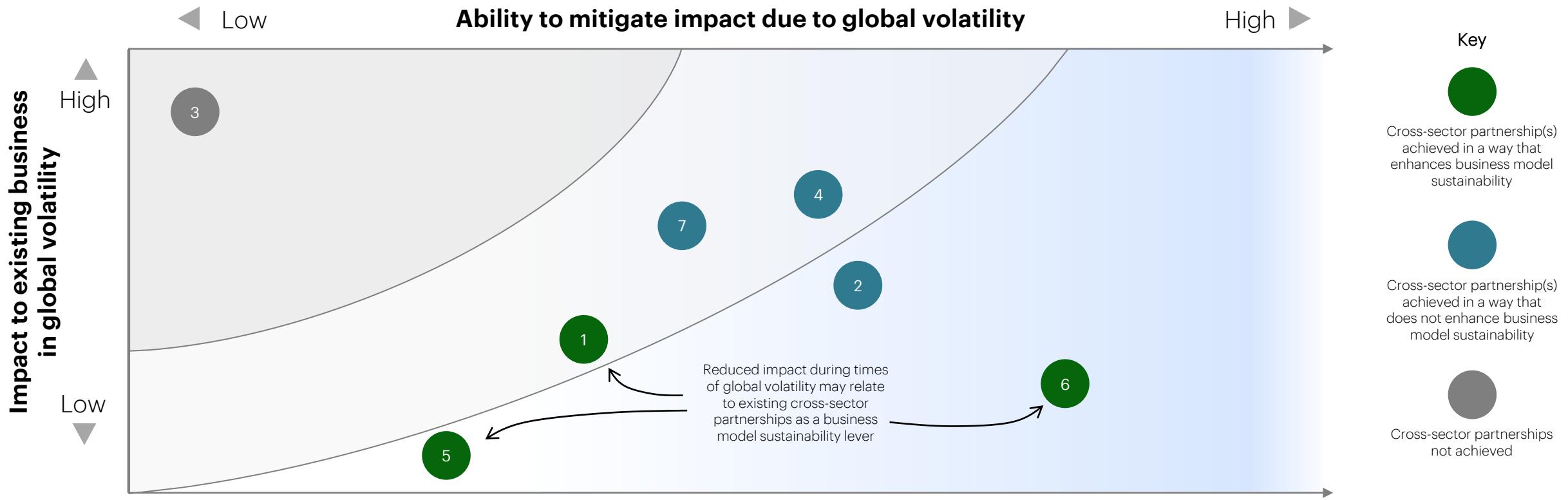
Brokering



Marketing

- Donor fatigue partly due to partner's lack of connection with the work
- Partnerships that can be described as pure sponsorship generally result in a dependent rather than interdependent model, and are also less in line with new generation thinking
- Potential conflicts of interest with corporate partners who contribute to the problem being addressed.²⁸
- May subsequently take focus away from operations/ direct interventions
- Difficult to track direct impact and therefore justifying investment of resources is complex
- Sometimes high transaction costs
- Intangible returns/ value added
- Highly interdependent (individual organisations may lose sole control)
- NGO mission creep while making compromises with companies to appease them
- May require very different skills / competencies
- Moving towards a 'purchaser-provider' procurement arrangement/ outsourcing
- The work of NGOs, if effective, may be 'invisible' to outsiders
- May be reliant on sustaining collaboration over time
- May be reliant on a supportive external context
- Still largely transactional
- Employee/business change of priority
- Potential for too strong an alignment with a product

Cross-sector partnerships are commonly achieved by Non-Government Organisations, however often not in a way that promotes business model sustainability



Through engagement with a cross-section of international development Non-Government Organisations, we determined that Cross-sector partnerships can be achieved in a way that supports business model sustainability, leading to greater resilience during times of global volatility.

Note: Scoring indicative based on interviews, and responses not exhaustive

5 Recommendations

Non-Government Organisations can better leverage cross-sector partnerships for business model sustainability through **maximising the value of co-creation**

1

Mobilise competencies effectively

The more both partners can integrate their resources conjointly and mobilise distinctive competencies, the greater the potential for value creation. Similarly, the greater the resource complementarity and organisational compatibility between the partners, the greater the potential for co-creation of value.²⁶

2

Perceiving mutual benefit

The more collaborators perceive their self-interests as linked to the value they create for each other and for the larger social good, and the greater the perceived fairness in the sharing of that value, the greater the potential for co-creating value.²⁶

3

Do not view compromise as defeat

There is no doubt that in many circumstances, partners need to make compromises to reach their common goal. Move away from treating the tensions between the multiple partners as problems requiring trade-offs, and instead view tensions as a source for transformational innovation for all organisations in the partnership.¹¹

By focusing on pursuing shared goals, open acknowledgement of differing incentives, and the reduction of hierarchy and centralised strategy, organisations can build stronger partnerships with an emphasis on action²⁷

Non-Government Organisations can better leverage cross-sector partnerships for business model sustainability **through proactive action**

Aid early detection of unnecessary/unviable partnering efforts

²¹ by considering the below critical factors

1. Organisational characteristics - indicate level of transformative capacity
2. Organisational motives - indicate level of transformative intention
3. History of partner interactions - indicate level of transformative experience.

Ensure partner relations are transparent from the start and communicate effectively

- Identify what cannot be compromised on, is there red tape, ensure understanding of each others motives and priorities.²³ Utilise regulatory frameworks in setting the priorities and the respective accountabilities that will accrue.

Coordinate to not duplicate costs - Managed well, and with early investment in partnership-building, costs can be shared and reduced by coordinating not duplicating efforts.²⁴

Ensure effective organisational leadership and culture - Leaders are going to need to have the culture and mindset to fail fast, take risks and think about business models progressively, and not fall back on traditional means.

Make structural changes where necessary

for getting the most from partnering and allowing for effective organisation for achieving outcomes.²⁰ Failures of coordination arising from issues with strategy, process and assessment of what's required.

5 Recommendations

What can the NFP sector as a whole do to better leverage cross-sector partnerships for business model sustainability?

Facilitate the initiation and growth of effective cross sector partnerships

Demand for partnerships has increased recently within government and private enterprises.

It will add value for the sector to have a centrally funded body to facilitate cross sector partnerships with that progressive leadership mindset, and be a catalyst for bringing partners together in the right way with the right mindset.

Support partnerships to mobilise their distinctive competencies and integrate their resources conjointly to achieve greater potential for value creation.

Promote progressive and innovative organisational leadership and culture

Encourage leaders of NGOs to invest in a culture and mindset to fail fast, take risks and think about business models progressively, helping them to not fall back on traditional means of donor aid and siloed development work.

Foster these 5 principles of partnerships to aid success: equality, transparency, result-orientated, responsibility, complementarity.²⁴

Encourage progressive philanthropic donors to invest in CSPs

Facilitate the more progressive donors to invest in cross-sector partnerships, fostering and growing their support and belief in the need for innovation and a certain degree of risk-taking in further pursuing sustainable business models that respond to today's pressures.

What we heard:

"NGOs need to link funding to donors' motivations, creating programs that are mutually beneficial for partners. Funding plus augmenting capacity is how NGO engagement with the private sector has to move forward"

Thank you to the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), Non-Government Organisation executives, and industry specialists for your support and contribution to this research.

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