

# Benefits and Risks of NGO Alliances: Balancing Efficiency, Legitimacy, and Autonomy

Dr. Anna Neya Kazanskaia

NEYA Global | NEYA Global Publishing

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5669-1676>

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## **Abstract**

Collaborative alliances among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are widely recognized as essential mechanisms for enhancing effectiveness, influence, and adaptability in a rapidly changing global environment. However, these alliances also introduce significant risks that can compromise autonomy, legitimacy, and accountability. This article offers a critical analysis of the dual nature of NGO alliances, exploring how the benefits of efficiency, innovation, and legitimacy coexist with vulnerabilities such as mission drift, donor capture, and power asymmetries. Efficiency gains emerge from resource pooling and reduced duplication, while innovation and learning are driven by cross-organizational knowledge exchange. Normative benefits—such as solidarity and amplified legitimacy—reinforce NGOs’ collective moral authority. Yet these same structures generate challenges: alliances can incur high transaction costs, reinforce inequality between partners, and weaken grassroots connections. Drawing on theoretical perspectives and empirical examples, this article demonstrates that collaboration is neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental. Rather, its value depends on governance design, balance of power, and the ability of participants to safeguard autonomy while achieving collective goals.

## **Keywords**

NGO alliances; efficiency; legitimacy; mission drift; donor capture; power asymmetries; transaction costs

## **1. Introduction**

In contemporary civil society, alliances among NGOs have become both a survival strategy and a vehicle for influence. Collaborative arrangements allow organizations to pool scarce resources, coordinate advocacy, and engage with donors and governments from a stronger position. These partnerships are often celebrated as engines of efficiency and innovation that enhance the legitimacy of non-profit action. Yet beneath this optimism lies a complex set of

trade-offs. Collaboration can strengthen collective capacity but also introduce dependency, dilute missions, and create internal hierarchies.

Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond celebratory narratives of partnership to assess both structural advantages and potential harms. Alliances exist within ecosystems of power and accountability, where efficiency gains may coexist with legitimacy loss. The central question, therefore, is not whether NGOs should collaborate, but under what conditions alliances generate genuine public value without eroding the independence and ethical foundations of civil society. This article addresses that question by systematically examining the benefits and risks of NGO alliances.

## **2. Benefits of Collaboration**

### **2.1 Efficiency and Resource Sharing**

Efficiency remains one of the most frequently cited advantages of NGO collaboration. By pooling human, financial, and technical resources, alliances reduce duplication of effort and enable collective economies of scale. Provan and Milward (2001) demonstrate that networked organizations can achieve higher performance outcomes than isolated entities because they share infrastructure, data, and administrative capacity. This efficiency extends to service delivery, where coordinated programming minimizes overlap and ensures broader coverage of target populations.

In resource-constrained environments—particularly in humanitarian response or community development—alliances often determine whether organizations can continue to operate at all. Joint procurement systems, shared logistics, and coordinated fundraising lower operational costs and increase resilience against funding volatility. Efficiency, however, should not be conflated with mere cost reduction: effective resource sharing also fosters strategic complementarity, where diverse organizations combine comparative advantages to achieve collective goals.

### **2.2 Innovation and Learning**

Alliances serve as incubators of innovation. By connecting organizations with varied expertise, they enable cross-pollination of ideas and practices. Powell (1990) emphasizes that network structures, unlike hierarchical or market systems, thrive on knowledge exchange rather than competition. Within alliances, NGOs learn new management techniques, advocacy methods, and participatory tools that strengthen adaptive capacity. Knowledge-sharing workshops, joint research projects, and cross-training programs exemplify how collaboration translates into sector-wide learning.

Innovation also arises from exposure to diversity. Partnerships across geographic, thematic, or cultural boundaries challenge assumptions and stimulate experimentation. Smaller NGOs often gain technical capacity from larger partners, while established organizations access grassroots insights and local legitimacy. This dynamic accelerates institutional learning and contributes to collective resilience—a quality increasingly vital in volatile political and funding landscapes.

### 2.3 Solidarity and Legitimacy

Beyond operational benefits, alliances confer normative value through solidarity and enhanced legitimacy. NGOs that speak collectively are perceived as more representative and credible, particularly in policy dialogues where legitimacy depends on inclusivity. Keck and Sikkink (1998) highlight how advocacy networks magnify political impact by presenting unified messages across diverse actors. Collective voice transforms isolated efforts into moral movements capable of shaping agendas and influencing global norms.

Solidarity also reinforces internal cohesion and morale. Collaboration affirms shared identity and collective purpose, building trust that transcends individual organizations. Edwards (2014) notes that legitimacy in civil society derives as much from relational integrity as from technical expertise. When alliances embody cooperation, transparency, and inclusiveness, they enhance not only their external credibility but also the moral authority of the non-profit sector itself.

## 3. Risks and Vulnerabilities

### 3.1 Mission Drift and Donor Capture

The most pervasive risk in NGO alliances is mission drift—the gradual reorientation of priorities to accommodate coalition agendas or donor expectations. Joint initiatives often require consensus, compelling organizations to dilute distinctive goals to maintain cohesion. Jones (2007) and Banks et al. (2015) observe that donor-driven alliances exacerbate this effect by aligning collaboration with funding criteria rather than community needs. Donor capture transforms partnerships into instruments of external influence, undermining grassroots accountability and eroding authenticity.

Such drift is particularly pronounced in global partnerships where Northern donors or international NGOs set agendas that Southern actors must follow to remain eligible for support. While these arrangements may secure short-term funding stability, they can distort local ownership and disconnect programs from beneficiary realities. Maintaining mission integrity thus requires explicit safeguards—such as value charters or independent review mechanisms—to prevent financial incentives from overriding ethical commitments.

### 3.2 Power Asymmetries

Collaboration seldom occurs among equals. Large, resource-rich NGOs often dominate decision-making, agenda-setting, and representation in external forums. Edwards and Hulme (1996) argue that such asymmetries reproduce the very inequalities alliances claim to overcome. Smaller or community-based organizations may find themselves confined to implementation roles, excluded from strategic deliberations or credit-sharing. These imbalances undermine the participatory ethos of collaboration and perpetuate dependency.

Power asymmetries also manifest geographically. Global alliances are frequently structured along North–South lines, where funding and governance remain concentrated in developed-country headquarters. This dynamic risks marginalizing Southern perspectives and reinforcing a form of institutional colonialism within civil society. Equitable governance models—featuring rotational leadership, transparent budgeting, and proportional representation—are essential to counteract such imbalances.

### 3.3 Reputational Risks

While alliances can amplify legitimacy, they can equally endanger it. Partnerships with corporate or governmental actors implicated in unethical practices may compromise NGO credibility. Baur and Schmitz (2012) warn that even indirect association with controversial partners can damage public trust and alienate supporters. In a digital media environment where reputational capital determines influence and funding, perceived complicity can have lasting consequences.

Reputational risk is not limited to external partnerships; it can arise within alliances themselves. Scandals involving one member organization can taint the entire network, especially when governance lacks transparency. Rigorous due diligence, shared ethical standards, and crisis communication protocols are therefore indispensable for protecting legitimacy in collaborative settings.

### 3.4 Transaction Costs and Reduced Autonomy

Building and sustaining alliances entails significant transaction costs. Coordination meetings, joint reporting, and governance processes consume time and financial resources that might otherwise support direct programming. Provan and Kenis (2008) note that while networks enhance efficiency at scale, they also impose administrative burdens that can offset gains. For smaller NGOs, these costs can be disproportionate, diverting scarce staff and funds away from mission activities.

Furthermore, the necessity to maintain coalition unity often requires compromise. To sustain consensus, organizations may moderate advocacy positions or delay decisions, eroding responsiveness. Over time, alliances that prioritize cohesion over diversity risk

homogenization and reduced innovation. As Petras (1997) argues, autonomy is both a moral and strategic asset; once surrendered, it is difficult to reclaim. The art of collaboration lies in maintaining alignment without subordination.

#### **4. Discussion**

NGO alliances embody a complex equilibrium between collective strength and individual vulnerability. Their benefits—efficiency, innovation, solidarity, and legitimacy—derive from cooperation, yet the same interdependence introduces fragility through dependency, mission distortion, and power inequality. The balance between these outcomes depends on contextual factors such as governance structure, donor influence, and political environment. Well-governed alliances mitigate risks through transparency, accountability, and equitable participation; poorly designed ones amplify them.

For practitioners, recognizing collaboration as a strategic instrument rather than a moral imperative is crucial. Alliances should be pursued when they enhance capacity and legitimacy without compromising independence. Governance frameworks must institutionalize fairness and clarity, defining how decisions are made, who benefits, and how accountability is maintained. For scholars, the challenge is to refine analytical tools that capture the interplay between structure, motive, and outcome, enabling a deeper understanding of when alliances strengthen rather than constrain civil society.

#### **5. Conclusion**

NGO alliances represent both opportunity and constraint—vehicles of transformation and potential sources of distortion. They expand reach, foster learning, and amplify moral authority, yet they also risk mission erosion, dependency, and inequity. The ultimate value of collaboration lies not in its form but in its governance: transparency, inclusivity, and balance between autonomy and coordination determine whether alliances empower or entangle their participants.

For practitioners, designing effective alliances means embedding safeguards against mission drift, establishing equitable power-sharing, and maintaining accountability to constituencies rather than donors. For researchers, ongoing evaluation of alliance dynamics will clarify how collaboration interacts with legitimacy and sustainability across contexts. In an era when collective action is indispensable yet fraught with complexity, the measure of an alliance's success is its ability to achieve shared impact without sacrificing independence.

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