

Case Studies of Collaborative Strategies in the Non-Profit Sector: Global, Regional, and Local Perspectives

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Abstract

Case studies provide a vital means of understanding how collaboration operates across scales—global, regional, and local—and how governance mechanisms shape outcomes. This article analyzes selected examples of advocacy networks, federations, and grassroots alliances to illustrate how NGOs balance inclusivity, autonomy, and coordination. At the global level, networks such as the Climate Action Network (CAN) and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) demonstrate that decentralized governance can achieve both legitimacy and policy impact when coupled with strong accountability and consensus mechanisms. At the regional level, federations like the African Union’s Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) and the European Civic Forum highlight the opportunities and constraints of institutional access, where political proximity to states or donors can enable policy influence but risk bureaucratization and dependency. At the local level, community coalitions in Brazil and women’s self-help groups in South Asia show the power of trust-based, participatory governance while exposing sustainability challenges. Comparative analysis reveals that outcomes depend less on shared objectives than on the governance processes—accountability, participation, and conflict resolution—that sustain cooperation. Ultimately, effective collaboration is as much about how alliances are governed as about what they achieve.

Keywords

advocacy networks; federations; grassroots alliances; governance; inclusivity; accountability; civil society

1. Introduction

Collaboration across the non-profit sector occurs within a diverse range of political, economic, and institutional settings. While theoretical discussions often emphasize motivations and structures, case-based analysis reveals how these dynamics manifest in practice. Real-world examples of alliances at global, regional, and local levels show how networks balance autonomy and coordination, inclusivity and efficiency, and legitimacy and

adaptability. Through such empirical exploration, we can better understand how governance design determines both the success and sustainability of collaboration.

This article examines illustrative cases across three scales—global advocacy networks, regional federations, and local alliances—to identify common governance patterns and divergent challenges. Global networks demonstrate the capacity for decentralized coordination; regional federations show how institutionalization enables policy access but introduces hierarchy; and local coalitions reveal how trust-based governance sustains participation under resource constraints. Together, these cases illustrate that collaboration's effectiveness cannot be measured by advocacy victories alone but must also consider the governance arrangements that maintain trust, accountability, and shared ownership.

2. Global Advocacy Networks

Global advocacy networks are among the most visible expressions of transnational civil society collaboration. The Climate Action Network (CAN), a coalition of more than 1,900 NGOs across 130 countries, coordinates climate policy advocacy within United Nations negotiations. CAN's governance combines decentralized regional hubs with global coordination mechanisms, allowing diverse organizations to participate while maintaining unified messaging (Fisher & Green, 2004). Decision-making through consensus and rotating leadership positions ensures representativeness and mitigates domination by large Northern NGOs. This governance model exemplifies how distributed coordination fosters inclusivity without sacrificing strategic coherence.

Similarly, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) demonstrates the transformative potential of collaborative governance. Formed in the early 1990s, ICBL united humanitarian organizations, human rights advocates, and sympathetic governments to achieve the 1997 Ottawa Treaty prohibiting landmines (Price, 1998). Its governance relied on open participation, shared communication platforms, and flexible leadership structures that maintained accountability across more than 1,000 member organizations. Both CAN and ICBL illustrate how legitimacy and impact in global networks depend not on formal hierarchy but on transparent governance processes that enable coordination and trust across heterogeneous actors.

3. Regional Federations

Regional federations serve as institutionalized mechanisms for representation and policy engagement. In Africa, the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) provides a structured interface between civil society and continental

governance institutions. Established in 2004, ECOSOCC allows NGOs to contribute to policy deliberations within the African Union, signaling a formal recognition of civil society's role in continental development (Mashele, 2006). However, its proximity to state structures has also generated tensions: bureaucratic procedures and state oversight have limited the participation of smaller grassroots organizations (Murithi, 2008). The challenge for ECOSOCC lies in maintaining both institutional legitimacy and democratic inclusivity. In Europe, the European Civic Forum (ECF) offers another model of regional collaboration. Established in 2005, ECF unites over 100 organizations across 30 countries to promote civic participation and defend democratic freedoms (Saurugger, 2010). Its governance structure combines a small executive secretariat with participatory assemblies, balancing coordination and member autonomy. However, ECF's reliance on EU funding introduces a dependency dynamic similar to that observed in ECOSOCC. Financial reliance on institutional donors can constrain advocacy independence and shift priorities toward bureaucratic compliance rather than civic mobilization. These federations underscore that access to policymaking often entails a trade-off between institutional integration and grassroots accountability.

4. Local Alliances

Local-level collaborations represent the most intimate and context-sensitive expressions of collective action. In Brazil, community health coalitions have become crucial vehicles for improving access to primary care and promoting social accountability. Cornwall and Shankland (2013) document how these alliances, composed of neighborhood associations, clinics, and local NGOs, rely on informal governance structures grounded in trust, reciprocity, and rotating leadership. Their success lies in participatory engagement and local ownership, which enhance legitimacy and responsiveness. However, sustainability remains precarious, as such networks often lack stable funding and institutional support.

In South Asia, women's self-help groups (SHGs) exemplify grassroots collaboration that merges economic empowerment with social advocacy. Emerging from microfinance initiatives, SHGs in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal have evolved into platforms for collective bargaining on issues ranging from domestic violence to land rights (Kabeer, 2005). Their governance is participatory and horizontal, ensuring inclusivity and social cohesion. Nevertheless, scaling these initiatives introduces new governance dilemmas: as networks expand, maintaining accountability and local control becomes increasingly challenging. These cases demonstrate how grassroots collaborations thrive on interpersonal trust but struggle to institutionalize without compromising authenticity.

5. Comparative Analysis

The comparative lens reveals recurring governance tensions that transcend scale. Global networks such as CAN and ICBL balance inclusivity and coordination through distributed authority and clear communication mechanisms. Their success depends on procedural transparency and accountability rather than centralized control. Regional federations like ECOSOCC and the ECF institutionalize representation and policy access but risk bureaucratic drift and donor dependency, which can erode autonomy. Local alliances, conversely, exemplify participatory governance rooted in social trust but often face fragility due to resource scarcity and limited external recognition.

Effectiveness across all levels is thus contingent on governance rather than aspiration. Failures typically arise not from weak commitment to shared goals but from governance breakdowns—opaque decision-making, inequitable participation, or donor-driven distortions. The cases highlight that power asymmetries and accountability gaps are the most persistent challenges across contexts. Whether global or local, alliances succeed when governance mechanisms align incentives, preserve autonomy, and institutionalize mutual accountability.

6. Conclusion

Case studies across global, regional, and local levels underscore that NGO collaboration is a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by governance design. Global advocacy networks demonstrate the potential of decentralized coordination for achieving policy impact; regional federations reveal both the promise and pitfalls of institutional integration; and grassroots alliances illustrate the strength of participatory governance and its fragility in the absence of resources. Across these levels, success is determined not solely by advocacy outcomes but by the quality of internal governance—how decisions are made, conflicts managed, and accountability upheld.

For practitioners, these lessons reinforce that effective collaboration requires attention to both process and structure. Networks that neglect participatory governance or rely excessively on external funding risk losing legitimacy and cohesion. For scholars, comparative analysis provides a framework for understanding how governance mediates the relationship between autonomy and coordination in civil society. Ultimately, collaborative strategies endure when they balance inclusivity with efficiency and institutional legitimacy with grassroots authenticity.

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