

► Executive Summary

Community-based development organizations cannot work in isolation. The interconnected nature of community challenges requires collaborative responses that bring together complementary expertise, resources, and constituencies. Yet partnerships are simultaneously essential and difficult, requiring operational capacity, sustained resources, and careful navigation of power dynamics that many organizations struggle to maintain.

Through interviews with organizational leaders and staff across three contexts, we found that successful partnerships require specific conditions often absent in the current funding and policy environment.

Partnerships form in response to critical needs, gaps, and opportunities.

Organizations described partnerships emerging from immediate threats requiring collective response, recognition of gaps that no single organization can fill, and strategic opportunities to accomplish shared goals. The most durable partnerships combined crisis-driven urgency with longer-term strategic alignment.

Mutual benefit requires both operational and financial alignment.

As one leader stated, “Foundations want every nonprofit to partner with everybody, but boards

want people to execute the mission, and so it has to be mutually beneficial.” Organizations described partnerships failing not because of bad intentions but because capacity mismatches made execution impossible. A capacity mismatch occurs when one partner cannot deliver what they promise due to staffing limitations, system constraints, or expertise gaps. As an example, a service organization may lack sufficient staff to keep pace with referrals from a housing partner. Organizations described instances of partnerships faltering when expected grant funding for staffing expansion didn’t materialize, making continued collaboration unsustainable despite conceptual alignment.

Infrastructure enables partnerships to function effectively.

Successful partnerships require regular convening spaces, coordinated staff time, shared data systems, and relationship-building resources. However, this infrastructure competes with service delivery for scarce resources, and funding structures rarely support the coordination work that makes partnerships possible. Funding for this infrastructure typically comes from three sources: dedicated collaborative grants that explicitly fund coordination work, organizational general operating funds that subsidize partnership participation, or resource savings generated through collaboration that offset coordination costs. Yet most partnerships struggle to secure consistent funding from any of these sources.

Power dynamics shape partnership experiences.

Size differences, racial dynamics, and resource disparities affect partnership functioning in ways requiring explicit structural attention, not just goodwill. Structural attention means creating concrete mechanisms to address power imbalances—such as providing stipends so smaller organizations can afford partnership participation, rotating meeting facilitation and decision-making authority, establishing explicit protocols for how funding gets distributed among partners, and creating accountability mechanisms when larger partners fail to honor commitments. Without these structural interventions, partnerships reproduce existing inequities even when all parties hold good intentions.

Resource scarcity is both a barrier and motivator.

Financial constraints prevent adequate partnership coordination while simultaneously motivating collaboration by clarifying that no single organization can address comprehensive community needs alone. The pandemic illustrated this tension: Organizations scaled back collaborative work to survive financially but also formed new coalitions to collectively advocate for resources.

Strategic discipline about partnership focus matters.

Organizations successfully managing multiple partnerships had clear frameworks for deciding which partnership opportunities to pursue and which to decline, recognizing that not every collaboration opportunity serves their mission or community.