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Collaboration

Seeding the Ground for Tri-Sector Alliances Before the Crisis Hits

COVID-19 has forced business, government, and philanthropy to combine forces quickly to respond to community needs. Here are five principles for making organic, public-private alliances an ongoing force for change.

By [Nancy Rauch Douzinas](#) | Sep. 15, 2020



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As with any crisis, COVID-19 has fostered resourcefulness, creativity, and activism in unexpected places. One clear area has been organically formed collaboration across business, government, and philanthropy, not just in traditionally crafted public-private partnerships, but collaborations sprouting from the grassroots, region by region, to respond to urgent community needs like supply chains for hospitals and

food distribution to low-income, out-of-school students. One organic alliance involved the governor of Massachusetts enlisting the New England Patriots to scramble their jet to pick up protective gear for state-based hospitals from China. And on Long Island, we saw a regional convener of human service providers team up with an international nonprofit addressing hunger and local restaurants in the area to **deliver meals to people in need.**

Organic, tri-sector alliances—where stakeholders can come together to nimbly solve community problems without the weight of formal structures—can have unique efficacy, crisis or no crisis. But in our experience at [the Rauch Foundation](#), as the hub of one such alliance on Long Island, it isn't well understood how to grow these kinds of collaboration from seed to germination to fruit. It begins by tending the soil, building relationships between leaders across sectors with potentially common interests, but without any formal agenda, so that friendships and trust undergird organic initiatives when they sprout. Regional foundations, as neutral players, are well-positioned to do this. But healthy

systems are also open, and build on their innate assets, which means they keep evolving so that their properties keep emerging through interaction with their environment, finding new sweet spots for growth. Keeping a system open calls for pollinators—to transfer ideas and strategies across a region—and (metaphoric) fertilizer to create those sweet spots. These are also roles that regional foundations are well-suited to play.

When we began thinking about how to build these kinds of alliances in the 1990s the Long Island region was totally blocked, with leaders and the public unable to interact purposefully. In gardening terms, Long Island had too many species competing for limited resources, stuck in an 18th-century labyrinth of distinct towns, villages, and districts. The governmental structure had become so diffuse that most leaders rarely interacted and there was no effective “decider system” to self-regulate the region. However, there were under-fertilized assets to be tapped: basic transportation infrastructure, historic town centers, educational institutions like SUNY Stony Brook and educated residents, plus two world-class research laboratories.

Our foundation took on the role of pollinator to create interaction among leaders, to convene representatives from all sectors and populations of the Island, including people the Foundation had known and respected through its previous decade of work on Long Island. The themes of cross-pollination in our first regional convenings were broad: what could we learn from other regions that were successful in establishing cross-sector alliances and improving their regions? These first meetings created buy-in from the participants and seeded the process of building trust, the first step in unblocking a closed system.

Next, we played the role of fertilizer, enriching the perspective of leaders who were beginning to trust each other, with new information about the region’s assets, including its residents. Developing a common and credible fact base further opens the system, altering assumptions that can change patterns of behavior and putting nutrients in civic soil that can germinate common cause.

Tended well, an open system can give rise to an organic network, with both cohesiveness and resources to address immediate and long-standing challenges. Indeed, our Long Island alliance involving ourselves, a major business association, labor unions, and civic groups, recently united our famously fractioned region to enable approval of a **\$2.6 billion rail project** that will create employment and access to jobs, a regional goal once thought unattainable because of opposition from a handful of local communities.

In the spirit of seeding public-private response to the next crisis, and as an ongoing force for change, we offer the following five principles for pollinating and fertilizing organic alliances.

1. Listen Without an Agenda

The first element that enables alliances to sprout organically across sectors is listening to, and acknowledging, social ferment.

Jobs in Long Island's aviation industry once supported a middle-class, suburban lifestyle, but the sector's decline by the 1990s had plunged the region into economic downturn. The foundation itself experienced a string of failed public-private efforts, including the shuttering of a proven, philanthropically seeded model for early childhood education in Long Island's most segregated school districts. Private interests that had little need to collaborate with local government in boom times faced working with 655 local government entities (counties, cities, towns, villages, school districts and separate sewer, water, fire, and library districts with discreet tax authority) to reinvent the island's economy. The best of plans failed to fly.

To understand what it would take to transform disillusionment to solutions, our foundation began listening with no agenda. We reached out to people from varied sectors, asking for ideas, sharing our own, and gauging interest. Permission to listen is an easy ask, but it comes with a powerful effect: It validates a speaker's dissatisfaction (the beginning of change) and gives listeners a running start at building element two of organic, regional collaborations: a web of civic relationships.

2. Build Relationships Before Plans

Authentic cross-sector relationships grease the wheels of good policy and practice. But they take time to develop and work best woven before a crisis hits.

We built our web of civic relationships across a series of learning trips to other regions—Silicon Valley, Louisville, and Charlotte—to meet leaders moving their regions forward via tri-sector collaboration. On each trip we invited along a small group of those we'd listened to—different stakeholders each time—and learned together. One early trip included the editorial page editor of our major news outlet, [Newsday](#), the head of the tri-state [Regional Plan Association](#), and the then-CEO of [United Way of Long Island](#).

These road trips surfaced vital information, but, just as important, they built trust among participants and kindled enthusiasm for our own region's prospects. Back home, we enlisted road trippers as

advisors. We looked for participation from the widest range of sectors—not-for-profits, business, labor, academia, and the arts. We sought not “leaders” in the conventional sense, but individuals with interesting perspectives, imagination, and wisdom. One of our earliest and closest advisors was a retired businessman, a turnaround expert; another was the head of an area public library system working to define the libraries of tomorrow. The only people disqualified were elected officials, to avoid political agendas.

Since our advisors collaborated without a defined destination, no difference of opinion felt threatening, nor did brainstorming devolve into task-mindedness. Instead, the organics of personal friendships, often between individuals with competing interests (for instance, between developers and environmentalists) created resilient bonds, nestled in a joint will to work with each other and make Long Island better.

3. Gather Data Before Votes

With any group of smart, civic-minded actors, it’s tempting to converge quickly on a problem to solve. But preparing the soil for organic collaboration involves looking across a system of problems and recognizing patterns of dysfunction, before agreeing on an issue ripe to tackle. As “gardener” of the network, we fertilized this process with data.

Our field studies of regional change led us to sponsor an *indicators project*, which for the first time would compile data on the Long Island region, including its economy, demographics, education and health care. Dubbed **The Long Island Index**, we hoped it would surface the Island’s assets and weaknesses in comparison with other regions, raise awareness of the most important challenges, and promote cross-sector efforts to address them. The two phrases that the Long Island Index used as tag lines for its annual reports were: “Working together in new ways” and “Good information presented in a neutral manner can move policy.” These two precepts encapsulate what the effort achieved.

Beginning in 2004, we published annual studies on special topics, such as housing costs or educational equity—always in keeping with the goal of forging a regional mindset. We compared the Island with other regions to show room for improvement and the shape of success. Surveys, in particular, influenced public officials and enabled us to identify projects that could move *with* the tide of public sentiment, that is, to natural sweet spots for change.

We learned quickly that research can surface problems hidden in a complex system and show which issues are best able to catalyze public concern. For instance, the indicators in our first report found that Long Islanders aged 18-34 were moving out of the region at a rate five times the national average. The

exodus was depriving the regional economy of an important asset, young talent needed for innovation and growth, and separating families. News of the “Brain Drain” became a top story regionally and in *The New York Times*. This drew in a range of stakeholders across towns and villages and amplified our communications efforts.

4. Form a Hub, Not a Backbone

Much has been written about the need for place-based initiatives to form **backbone organizations** that can marshal plans and measure progress. But organic alliances are more open and flourish around a hub that allies can join from any angle of interest, not a spine, which is less flexible and connects stakeholders in a specific support structure. As a regional grantmaker since 1992, we saw our potential to serve as a neutral hub without partisanship or economic stakes and with the agility to dig into whatever issue the research surfaced.

The release of the annual indicator studies became regional events, attracting commentary and feedback, as well as proposals from top leaders in business, academia, government, and the non-profit community. Our job at the hub was to ensure research continued and findings kept circulating. Meanwhile, our earliest advisors had become the Index’s Advisory Committee, consulting on what directions the research should take and which issues were, indeed, sweet spots, ripe for bringing forward for policy action. Committee engagement grew with informal phone calls to poll individual advisors and scheduled meetings for all advisors to have free-wheeling discussions.

Along with growing public understanding of Long Island’s regional challenges, our organic alliance’s most important germination was this network of advisors, which grew to more than three dozen, including Bruce Stillman, President of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, Kevin Law, President of the Long Island Association, Jeffrey Kraut, Executive VP at Northwell Health and Elaine Gross, President of ERASE Racism. Never officially constituted or tethered to a specific goal, the advisory committee had the robust resources to get things done, a first such network for Long Island, and an impressive confederation undefined in the literature of social change.

5. Sprout Issue-Based Collaborations

With the vital advantage of participants knowing and trusting each other, we found that collaborations around specific issues organically sprouted from our loose confederation.

For example, the president of Molloy College, a founding member of the advisory committee, urged the creation of a leadership academy, **Energeia Partnership**, which over more than ten years brought

upwards of 500 leaders from diverse sectors to network on regional issues.

Another initiative, inspired by visits to North Carolina's Research Triangle and Boston's Route 128 Corridor, saw Rauch, business interests like Jove Equity Partners, and research institutions, including **Brookhaven** and **Cold Spring Harbor** labs, create **Accelerate Long Island**, a venture marketplace for next-generation science.

Then, in 2016, Rauch led a coalition to win state approval for a third track on a critical 10-mile segment of the Long Island Rail Road. The addition had long been sought to reduce congestion into New York City and to enable reverse commuting to Long Island businesses, but repeated efforts had derailed on organized opposition from communities near the tracks. We thought this issue would be the ultimate test of what a newly cohesive Long Island could accomplish, and we produced an **economic analysis** showing that a third track would substantially increase employment opportunities, incomes, and tax revenues.

Through our advisory network we secured support from business, labor, civic groups and municipal governments, many of whom had sat out previous battles for expansion but were persuaded by both the new information and a growing consensus. The **Right Track for Long Island** coalition landed a meeting with Governor Andrew Cuomo and presented the economic-impact data while assuring him of broad regional support. The governor was receptive, and the coalition got to work leading petition drives and showing up at public meetings. In 2018, New York legislators voted in the \$2.6 billion project, which *Newsday* called a “**can-do blueprint for the region**.” Today, the project continues ahead of schedule and under budget.

After that victory, we have been working with our partners to find the next sweet spot as the region moves into a post-pandemic mode. We are at an inflection point and the completion of the Long Island Rail Road project will significantly improve employment opportunities in both directions between New York City and on Long Island. Since our historic downtowns are the heart of our communities, we are interested in how the pandemic has affected these assets and which new opportunities—in housing, energy, education and health care, among others—will present themselves.

Read more stories by [Nancy Rauch Douzinas](#).

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