

PART OF THE  
**SECTOR  
SIGNALS**  
SERIES

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**P** **L** **A** **T** **F** **O** **R** **M**  
**FOR** **C** **H** **A** **N** **G** **E**



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## SECTOR SIGNALS

Sector Signals are a product of Mowat NFP. They are short descriptions and analyses of early warning signs that should be on the not-for-profit (NFP) sector's radar. They may be innovative ideas or challenges facing the sector. Topics are identified through sector engagement and are developed through collaboration. The goal of the Sector Signals series is to provide recommendations for action and suggestions for future research.

## ABOUT MOWAT NFP

Mowat NFP undertakes collaborative applied policy research on the not-for-profit sector. As part of an independent think tank with strong partnerships with government and the sector, Mowat NFP brings a balanced perspective through which to examine the challenges facing today's sector and to support its future direction. Mowat NFP works in partnership with the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) to ensure our research and policy recommendations are timely and relevant to the sector and reflect its values.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the subject matter experts, including platform and project practitioners, researchers, funders, and policy makers who generously gave their time to share their insights and experience, and to help us understand the breadth and scope of this issue. In particular, we would like to thank Margaret Dickson, Arti Freeman, Daniela Kortan, and Leslie Wright who provided critical feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. Any errors and shortcomings remain ours. At Mowat, Matthew Mendelsohn, Reuven Shlozberg, and Elaine Stam provided valuable feedback and design for this paper. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Mowat NFP funders:



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September 2013

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# INTRODUCTION

Change makers, social entrepreneurs, artists and arts collaborations, and other groups looking to make a difference in their communities, have a limited menu of options to organize their work in order to secure funding and deliver on their vision.

The “not-for-profit” corporation has been the lone organizational model that has driven the shape of community activity in Canada. There is a long history of charitable organizations finding options within existing regulatory guidelines to fund new projects and ideas. Providing organizational support to new ideas, creative enterprises, and community initiatives has sometimes been called trusteeship. More recently, this practice has evolved into something called shared platforms.

In a trusteeship, an organization undertakes a stewardship role in response to the needs of its partners and the community, and also to the needs of funders to find ways to support new and innovative work. Shared platforms are organizations that have been established with the purpose of providing shared governance and organizational support to projects that are aligned with their mission. For the purposes of this report, the term “shared platform” will be used for simplicity.

Shared platforms offer change makers an alternative organizational model to enable greater efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness. They are incorporated organizations made up of community-led and mission-aligned projects or initiatives. The shared platform provides a governance structure, financial and risk management, human resources, and a range of administrative supports to projects.

Shared platforms “provide administrative support and an organizational home to initiatives that would otherwise be unincorporated”<sup>1</sup> or would have to incorporate as a new standalone entity.

These organizations offer a holistic approach that delivers on governance and accountability. They reduce administrative burden, enhance leadership and impact, develop capacity, and create space for innovation. However, as a model, the shared platform is a new concept and practice, and there is a learning curve for community innovators and funders alike.

This *Sector Signal* looks at the emergence of shared platforms as an organizational option for the sector. It explores early learnings, and considers the path forward to expand and deepen this opportunity. The objective of this report is to highlight shared platforms as a model and to act as a catalyst for a more strategic conversation among funders, policy makers, practitioners and researchers about how to continue the evolution of this model of governance.

<sup>1</sup> Shared Platforms Community of Practice Working Sessions Report. 2012. Ontario Nonprofit Network, Toronto.

# SECTION I

## THE SIGNAL

Shared platforms have recently received attention as a potential organizational option in the not-for-profit sector. Early practitioners have been developing platform models and advancing the dialogue to bring funders and new actors into the field. Early experiments in shared platforms are being documented, and funders have begun to take notice as a number of shared platforms are offering reliable and useful alternatives for projects, groups and ideas that make a difference in their communities.

In the last few years, practitioners and funders together have begun to discuss issues related to shared platforms and to develop a common language and practice in an effort to evolve the concept. In 2010, a Learning Circle was developed to facilitate a conversation on how to advance shared platforms as an alternative organizational model in the not-for-profit sector<sup>1</sup>. In 2011, a shared platform community of practise was created, and by 2012 the Ontario Nonprofit Network created a Shared Platforms Constellation to support and grow the ongoing discussion.

Research and writing on shared platforms in Canada is relatively recent. In 2010, two publications were written on Canada's most familiar shared platform: Tides Canada Initiatives Society (TCI). The first, a context piece by Leslie Wright, outlined the potential of shared platforms to deliver on a number of capacity and sustainability challenges in the not-for-profit sector. The second article, by David Stevens and Margaret Mason, focused on the legal framework in which shared platforms operate in Canada and the challenges a shared platform faces related to compliance. More recently there has been interest in how shared platforms can serve particular sub-sectors, including the arts. Earlier this year, the Metcalf Foundation published a report by Jane Marsland entitled "Shared Platforms and Charitable Venture Organizations: A Powerful Possibility for a More Resilient Arts Sector"<sup>2</sup>.

Just as other forms of coordination and organizing, like shared services and service delivery hubs, are responding to a funding environment of doing more with less, shared platforms offer an approach to enabling greater funder reach to innovative projects without investing in organizational infrastructure. Within a funding economy that is driving new and varied forms of integration, shared platforms offer a range of potential benefits to amplify the work of change makers and social entrepreneurs.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://funderslearningcircle.weebly.com/funders-circle.html>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://metcalfoundation.com/publications-resources/view/shared-platforms-and-charitable-venture-organizations/>

# SECTION II

## DEFINING THE CHALLENGE

Traditionally, incorporation (charitable/not-for-profit) has been the singular organizational model available to the sector. In fact, the identifying descriptor of the sector is the legal definition of the organizational model: not-for-profit. Those wanting to make community change through the sector have had to incorporate, develop and manage standalone organizations, spending significant time and resources on governance and administration. In Ontario there are more than 46,000 individual not-for-profit corporations, each with its own board of directors, and each obligated to meet legal, reporting and compliance requirements.

Not-for-profit corporations require significant governance and administration; much of this responsibility falls to the organizational leader, or executive director. In small not-for-profit organizations, many executive directors juggle the roles of both management and leadership, and take on a wide range of activities.

In a recent survey of not-for-profit leaders in Ontario<sup>3</sup>, executive directors and CEOs held primary responsibility for a wide array of management and leadership functions:

### PERCENTAGE OF EDS/CEOS WHO HOLD PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR:



NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS: 810

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth McIsaac, Stella Park and Lynne Toupin. 2013. "Shaping the Future: Leadership in Ontario's Nonprofit Labour Force, Summary of Findings." Ontario Nonprofit Network & The Mowat Centre.

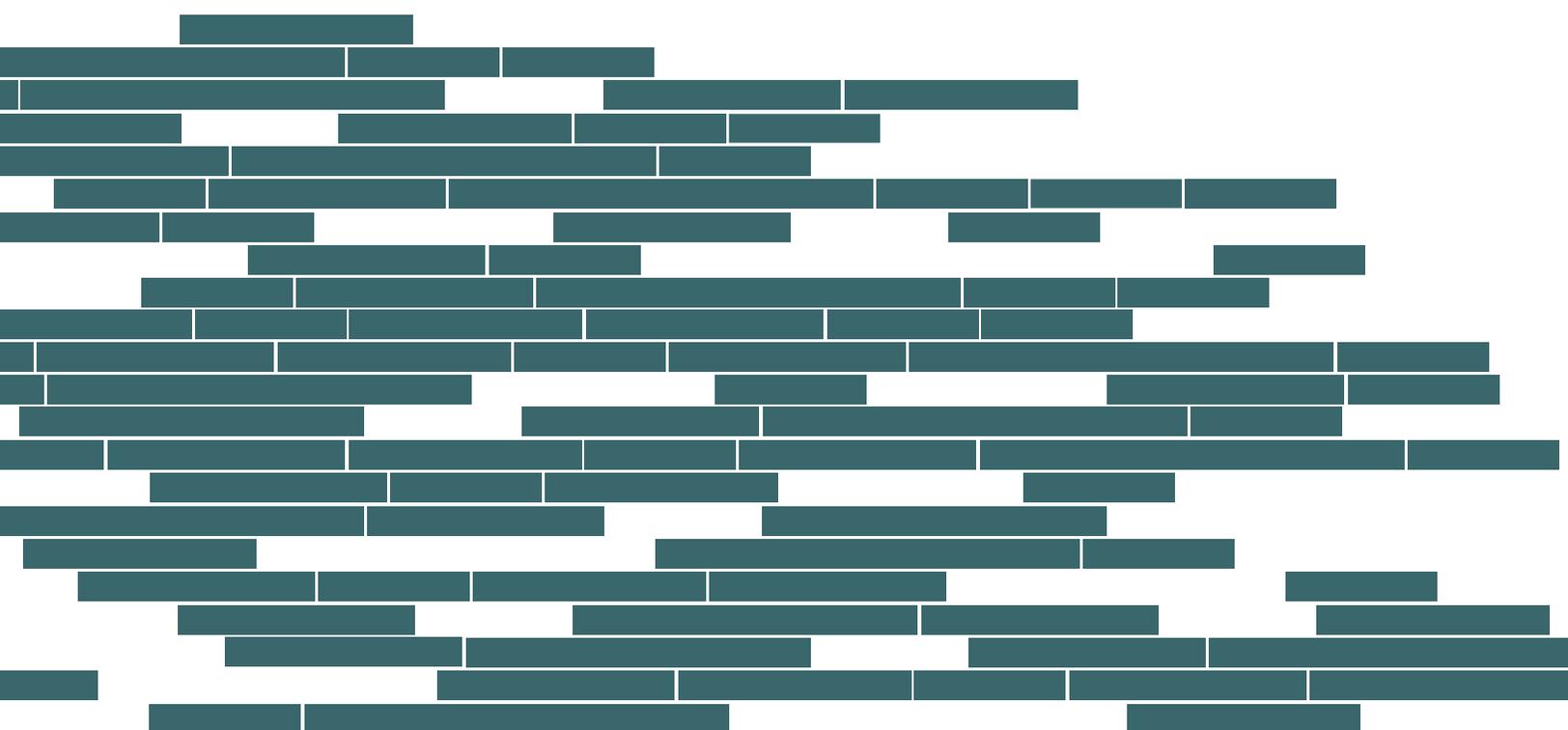
The reality, especially for small organizations, is that the role of the executive director/CEO, as it is currently shaped, is untenable and disconnects these leaders from their vision and practice of leadership. As a result, there is growing disinterest among emerging leaders and change makers in creating and building organizations, which consumes time and resources that could otherwise be focused on mission.

As new ideas, innovations and creative visions come to the fore, leaders are looking for nimble mechanisms to support their vision. Regardless of organizational model, governance and administration are essential to the life of any project. If managed poorly, they can have negative impacts on the success of projects and on communities. Alternative governance and administrative models provide an opportunity to redirect the energy of the sector to its mission.

## SECTION III

### IMAGINING THE SOLUTION

There is an opportunity for the not-for-profit sector to organize around mission and ideas rather than corporate and administrative functions. Creating a landscape that provides alternative options in governance and organizational support could allow community and creative leaders to spend time fulfilling and realizing their vision rather than focusing time and resources on governance and administration. The sector could be defined not by organizational structures but by innovation, ideas and creative solutions to the challenges faced in communities and the sector.



# SECTION IV

## PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

Through a series of in-depth interviews<sup>4</sup>, shared platforms were identified as having a number of areas of potential and significant benefit to leaders looking for a place to cultivate their ideas: governance, funding, administrative support, innovation, mentorship and leadership development, and impact.

### GOVERNANCE

Governance refers to the creation and oversight of policies, processes and decision making structures in an organization. It is through governance that risk is managed and compliance is met. Traditional not-for-profit governance involves a board of directors governing a single incorporated organization with an executive director/CEO reporting directly to the board. Establishing and maintaining a competent volunteer board of directors, and meeting the reporting requirements of effective board governance, consume a significant amount of time and energy, potentially diverting attention away from fulfilling the mission of the organization. This is especially true for very small and new organizations.

Shared platforms offer an alternative governance structure. A single board of directors governs multiple projects housed on the shared platform which are components of the same single, legal entity. Projects have steering committees or advisory groups to guide the strategic direction and day to day operations, but the shared platform's board of directors is ultimately responsible for the risk management, accountability and compliance of all projects on the shared platform. The platform and the projects work collaboratively as a single organization.

### EXAMPLE: TIDES CANADA

Tides Canada Initiatives Society (TCI) is a shared administrative platform that provides common governance and administrative supports to nearly 40 projects of varying size. The mission of TCI is to lead and support projects that “foster a healthy environment and just Canadian society”. TCI supports mission-aligned projects by providing organizational infrastructure including an experienced board of directors and senior management, charity regulatory compliance, financial management, human resources, contract and legal oversight, grant administration and the Tides Canada community. The goal of TCI is to enhance social change by creating space for change makers and enabling them to direct their time to the work rather than governance and administration. To govern the relationship between TCI and the platform projects, clear terms of reference have been developed to guide decision making, outline roles and responsibilities, and delegate accountability.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews were held with 17 subject matter experts, including platform and project practitioners, researchers, funders, and policy makers.

## EXAMPLE: CAPACITY WATERLOO

Capacity Waterloo brings together the people, tools and resources needed to support innovation in local communities in the Waterloo, Ontario area. They began as a project on the TCI shared platform, to test the project's viability. TCI provided governance and administrative support to Capacity Waterloo, managed all legal documents, and employed the Project Director. After three years, Capacity Waterloo decided to incorporate as a separate legal entity with its own registered charitable number. Capacity Waterloo has strong local support and their mission is grounded in building local capacity, including their own. The leadership felt that governance would be best managed at the local level, and so independence from TCI was part of the path to maturity for Capacity Waterloo.

With respect to accountability, the shared platform model functions as any other not-for-profit/charitable organization. Platform projects are accountable for their deliverables and funding obligations, and the corporation is accountable for oversight of these activities as per funding agreements and contracts. The relationship between platform and project is managed through terms of reference and memoranda of understanding.

An inherent tension for shared platforms is the degree of autonomy and sense of identity that projects seek. Not all projects will want to be part of a shared platform. For some, the limits on autonomy and the desire for an independent identity outweigh the value offered by a shared platform. Even where a steering/advisory committee provides the direction and informs the identity of the project, and where the roles and responsibilities between the project and the platform are clearly delineated, it may not be enough. There may be times when projects are deeply connected to their community, and ownership and accountability to the community are seen as important parts of the project's vision.

## FUNDING

Some funders have been early adopters, and have been supporters and champions of shared platforms, seeing the potential they offer. Funders like The Laidlaw Foundation have been advancing shared platforms since the beginning of the dialogue in Ontario. Other funders have come to the table as the potential of the model became evident.

Between 2006 and 2011, the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) and the Toronto Community Foundation increased funding through shared platforms. The number of grants made by OTF through shared platforms doubled between 2011 and 2012 alone, and the amount granted increased by 40 percent. Recently, increases in applications from projects on shared platforms prompted OTF to rethink their granting policy of one grant to one organization. OTF changed its granting policy to enable multiple projects on a shared platform to receive funding at the same time.

The City of Toronto was also an early funder and champion of shared platforms. Recently, they have taken further steps to support shared platforms by funding a group of immigrant-serving organizations to explore opportunities to share a platform. The objective is to reduce the collective administrative burden on the organizations, and enable them to concentrate their efforts on mission and fundraising.

Shared platforms will need support from funders and government. Evidence-based evaluations that demonstrate the results of shared platforms as an effective and efficient organizational model and vehicle for funding will help funders understand the value. As well, a common lexicon with clear definitions will help funders understand the organizational structure, including governance and accountability.

## ADMINISTRATION

A significant benefit that shared platforms offer is administrative support. The administrative burden of running a not-for-profit organization can be overwhelming, particularly for a new initiative or a new leader who lacks experience in organizational management, human resources, or financial systems. Even an experienced leader may welcome the opportunity to offload these responsibilities, in order to free them up to focus on implementing the project and vision.

All projects on a shared platform contribute to the costs of operating the platform. This administrative allocation is generally derived as a percentage of the total project revenues, usually between 10 and 15 percent. By providing professional expertise, the shared platform ensures that funding and reporting requirements are met, human resource issues are managed, and the project is supported in maintaining budgets and developing new funding opportunities. Access to administrative support provides enhanced capacity, especially for emerging leaders who may not be familiar with the nuances of funding proposals and reporting, other contractual commitments and regulatory compliance.

### EXAMPLE: ST. STEPHEN'S COMMUNITY HOUSE

In some cases, being or becoming a platform is part of an evolution in an existing organization's life cycle. St. Stephen's Community House is a multi-service agency that began supporting projects in the community as an extension of their core business. Over the last 15 years, mission-aligned projects have come to St. Stephen's organically through its network of community relationships. Projects at St. Stephen's are supervised by senior staff and require written agreements and monthly supervision to ensure accountability. But decisions about strategic directions for the projects are made by project-specific steering committees. As St. Stephen's goes forward, providing a platform for projects has been identified as part of its strategic path, to strengthen its own base and fulfill its mission.

Projects on shared platforms function much like departments within a large organization. How decisions are made and how relationships are managed can be defined by the project. Project leads however, are ultimately accountable to the platform, to its board, and to funders. As with any organizational structure and culture, there is potential for power dynamics to affect operational functions and relationships, both positively and negatively. Well designed terms of reference or memoranda of understanding with explicit roles and responsibilities can mitigate some of these challenges and dynamics.

## ENABLING MENTORSHIP AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Some shared platforms offer a deeper level of support for new and emerging leaders. These shared platforms provide mentorship and leadership development, in addition to administrative support, and have a higher degree of collaboration between project and platform staff. Projects are supported in developing strategy and capacity, including guidance in reporting and managing systems, and introduction to and support with new funding options. The capacity of the project is developed through administrative support while capacity of project leads is developed through mentorship.

Shared platforms that provide deliberate leadership development and mentorship allow for some initiatives and/or leaders to develop on a path toward independence; in effect, they incubate ideas and help social entrepreneurs launch their vision. However, this is not the inevitable trajectory, as many initiatives may never need an independent organizational structure, and in fact will continue to thrive in their mission as projects on a shared platform.

### EXAMPLE: CUE

CUE is a project on SKETCH's shared platform. CUE processes small grants and support to young Toronto artists at the margins, who don't have access to mainstream arts funding. When CUE began, project leads were ready to work on their own initiatives but still needed some supports and assistance. The result is a highly collaborative relationship in which SKETCH provides organizational, program and administrative capacity and mentorship to CUE, and CUE makes ground level connections to artists, enhancing SKETCH's mission. As CUE's project co-lead Jason Samilski explains, "Our goal is to grow this initiative into a long-term citywide opportunity. We'd like to see the scope of the program commensurate with about \$500,000 per year. But if we incorporated right now, we'd have to invest so much more resources in back-end management, and the capacity of our programming would no doubt suffer, and become less efficient in achieving our mandate. There is a stability and leverage in working with SKETCH, and it's not only beneficial to both groups, but is also a highly efficient model of delivering not-for-profit programming."

Shared platforms also offer the possibility of creating a community of leaders, providing an in-house peer group that can discuss issues and bounce ideas around to develop solutions to the challenges they face within their projects. In practice, however, this is not always the case. Some projects describe their relationship to the shared platform as more “transactional” and less “relational.”

## INNOVATION

Shared platforms are an effective tool for fostering local and grassroots innovation. By taking care of organizational structures and administrative needs, change makers and community leaders are freed up to spend more time developing networks and building trust with communities. It is this kind of reach into communities and the resulting relationships that create untapped opportunities for creativity and community development. And where ideas emerge, it is the shared platform that provides an opportunity to breathe life into a new idea.

Some shared platforms are deliberately developed around the needs of a particular community. Projects are brought onto the shared platform because they serve a specific need or are compatible with other projects, creating synergies and opportunities for greater impact. The Neighbourhood Trust at the East Scarborough Storefront (The Storefront) is an excellent example of this. The Storefront was created as a service hub responding to the needs of the community, and evolved to include a shared platform that enabled community leadership and input.

Similarly, The Base is a project within the TCI platform that serves grassroots and youth-led projects and is committed to building capacity and leadership in the sector. Its goal is to amplify the work of change makers with a specific commitment to groups that can benefit from being part of the platform. By operating as an initiative of The Base, people leading grassroots projects further their ideas without getting stalled by the need to set up a separate corporate entity. In addition, The Base works directly with change makers to develop their initiatives, build their management skills, and support their leadership development.

## EXAMPLE: THE STOREFRONT

The Storefront, a TCI project, plays the dual role of being both a project on the TCI platform and a platform provider to the Neighbourhood Trust, which has been developed to respond to resident-led initiatives. The result has been a wide range of community-engaged projects, including a community festival market, KGO Kicks (a local soccer club for children), The Reading Parent Partnership, and Healthy Living Arts, among many others.

## IMPACT

Although shared platforms are understood anecdotally as being successful, to date there has been little evaluation of the model. A better understanding of results is needed in order to continue developing the model(s) and make the case for growth. Evaluating impact will help funders see the potential of shared platforms.

CUE makes deep connections with artists by meeting them where they live and do their work. The relationship to young artists on the margins enables them to engage and make community connections through SKETCH. CUE allows SKETCH to extend its reach further into the community in partnership with young art makers thereby making greater impact.

An inspiring story of impact from CUE is the experience of a young artist who was living in isolation, and navigating significant mental and physical health issues. After being funded through CUE, the artist became a paid project lead with CUE, and has since spring-boarded to starting up a successful arts micro-enterprise. The artist now engages in a wide array of professional arts opportunities, providing her with income, as well as a widened arena of personal capacity and creative freedom.

Understanding the full and potential impact of shared platforms may require an evaluative framework that takes into account not only the outcomes and impacts of individual projects, but also accounts for the impact of the shared platform as a whole. Collective impact is an emerging framework that looks at how multiple actors can create greater results because of a common and coordinated agenda. Shared platforms are well positioned as a “backbone” organization that generates the common agenda, shared measures, mutually reinforcing activities and communications - the core elements of collective impact.<sup>5</sup> But collective impact as an approach is intentional in design, with a determined theory of change. Where a platform is developed and operated in this way, it could provide a powerful mechanism for impact.

Overall, shared platforms offer a wide array of potential benefits to projects. Their membership on the shared platform itself provides an opportunity to connect with funders and the sector more broadly. As one of a number of projects on a platform, each is well positioned to expand their networks, partnerships, and opportunities for knowledge exchange, thereby growing their potential impact. However, all of these benefits are only possible when there is deliberate effort to make connections and create opportunities.

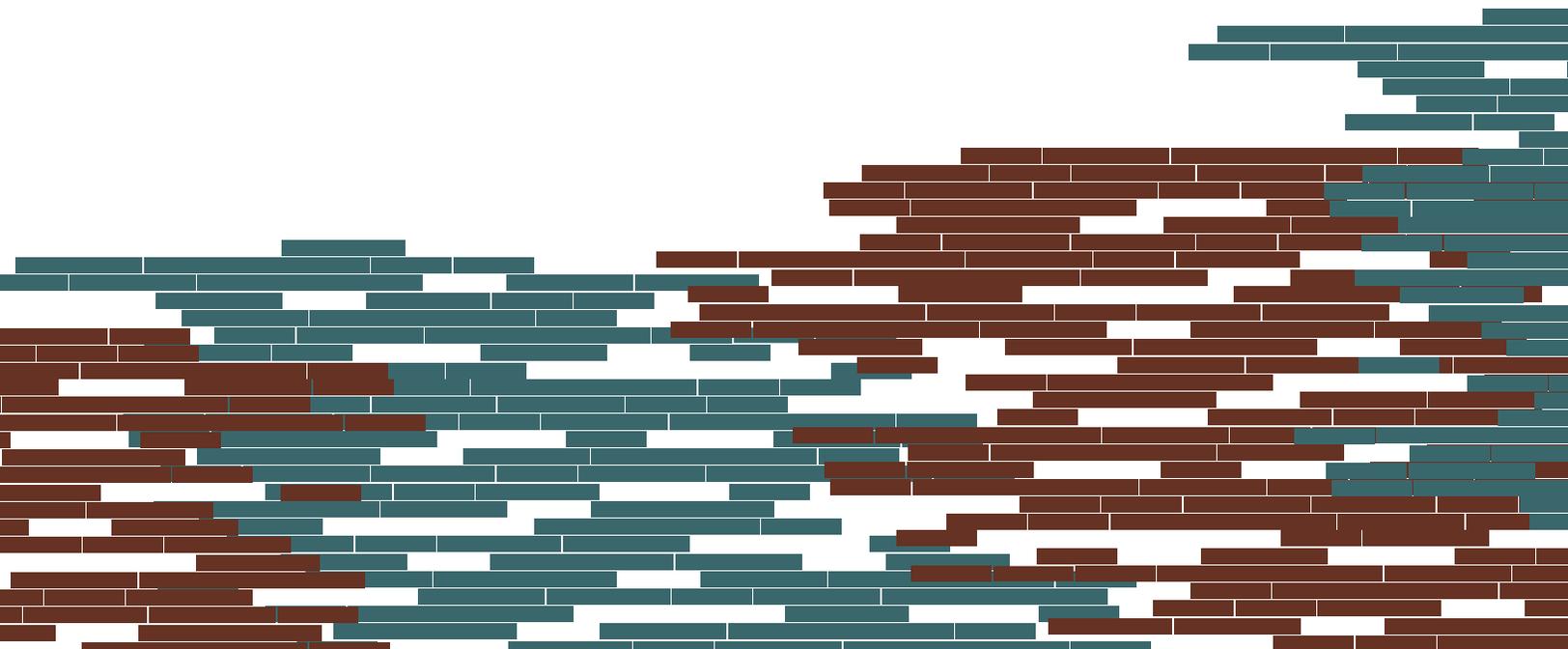
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# SECTION V

## THE WAY FORWARD

Shared platforms offer a model of governance and administrative support that meets the emerging needs of the sector and of communities. Currently, there are limited options to accommodate the range of projects that might benefit from this model - not all projects will be the right fit for a particular platform. As new shared platforms develop, the needs of various kinds of communities (geographic, social, interest) should be reflected. Shared platforms will need to offer particular expertise and capacity in order to be responsive to the unique challenges.

The shared platforms that do exist have either been intentionally launched as an enabling structure for aligned projects, ideas and innovations (i.e. TCI), or have grown organically from the mission of anchor agencies in the community (i.e. SKETCH, St Stephen's). Developing new shared platforms to meet the needs of communities will require commitment by both the sector and funders to shape the purpose, design and structure so that resulting models offer the full array of benefits promised by shared platforms. Finding common language across approaches and a shared definition will be important steps both to deepening and broadening the concept.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## I. EVALUATE

- Collect evidence about the demand for and results of shared platforms. This will help define the scope of further development, and build continuous improvement in the delivery and design of shared platforms.
- Identify and develop appropriate metrics that capture the story of impact and change. Identify what success looks like for projects that are on shared platforms, and for shared platforms themselves. This will require practitioner leadership and funder support.

## II. DEVELOP THE CONCEPT

- Define the minimum viable components that make a shared platform a shared platform.
- Experiment with a variety of approaches to platform models (by size, purpose, duration of project, etc.). As an organizational model that responds to community needs, this will require a community-led process to shape the design and purpose of new shared platforms, and a commitment by funders to invest in the process of development.

## III. INVEST

- Invest in shared platforms as shared platforms, recognizing the contribution they make and the value they provide: supporting innovation, ideas and creative solutions in communities.
- Evolve the model of shared platforms through investment, both to build new shared platforms and also to develop existing platforms to better serve their projects.

## IV. ENGAGE FUNDERS

- Convene a funders' table with an agenda that challenges funders to evaluate their objectives, criteria, and delivery options. Funders with experience with shared platforms should take leadership in this and reach out to funders from all sectors and levels of government to engage in the development and delivery of the concept.

## V. CONTINUE THE LEARNING

- Continue the dialogue among practitioners, funders, policy makers and researchers, sharing learnings, creating networks, and building an agenda for research and development.

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## ABOUT MOWAT

The Mowat Centre is an independent public policy research centre located at the School of Public Policy & Governance at the University of Toronto. The Mowat Centre is Ontario's non-partisan, evidence-based voice on public policy. It undertakes collaborative applied policy research, proposes innovative research-driven recommendations, and engages in public dialogue on Canada's most important national issues.

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