



Boundary Spanning in Cross-Sector Collaboration: Sensemaking and Framing in a Civil Society Public Partnership Beyond the Crossroads

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Abstract

Boundary spanners and boundary spanning activities have been established as key to enabling cross-sector collaboration. By means of a longitudinal study and a process approach to collaboration, the paper offers a novel perspective on interrelated acts of sensemaking and framing whereby boundary spanners representing different organisations and sectors deal with organisational and institutional differences when collaborating. The study focuses on Crossroads, an initiative aimed at addressing an emerging societal problem through cross-sector collaboration including the establishment of a Civil Society Public Partnership (CSPP). To establish and develop the CSPP, multiple boundary spanners representing different organisations and roles interact in a process of continuous negotiation of frames and meaning. The paper elucidates the implications of successive boundary spanning in cross-sector collaboration by highlighting the importance of reticulation, interactive framing, shared commitment, reflexivity, and adaptability.

Practical Relevance

- Cross-sector partnerships can address multifaceted and challenging societal problems, even within contested institutional contexts, but requires efficient boundary spanning and competent boundary spanners.
- The Civil Society Public Partnership (CSPP) is introduced and framed as a collaboration format aiming for more equitable partnerships. However, agreeing to collaborate marks just the initial step. Establishing a partnership of equals requires continuous dialogue, reflexivity, and adaptability.
- In cross-sector partnerships, boundary spanners may paradoxically need to highlight rather than tone down differences between organisations and sectors to establish a partnership on equal terms. Adept reticulist skills are crucial for boundary spanners to bridge the sectoral differences via sensemaking and framing.
- The involvement of politicians and senior managers in the role of boundary spanners emerges as a critical factor in establishing innovative cross-sector solutions in a situation of uncertainty.

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Introduction

The roles and responsibilities of public, private, and civil society organisations are in a continuous state of negotiation, as are the boundaries that delineate these organisations across different sectors. The significance of cross-sector collaboration in addressing complex societal problems was recognised in the 1980s (Gray, 1985). In the 35 years since, there has been a notable increase in partnerships dedicated at tackling societal issues (cf. Bode & Brandsen, 2014; Selsky & Parker, 2005). However, the sheer volume of collaborations does not necessarily simplify the process. Researchers and practitioners generally agree that collaborating across organisational and sectoral boundaries is a complex and

challenging endeavour. Competing institutional logics and power differences has been identified as key constraints and challenges to cross-sector collaboration (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006).

Complex and interconnected challenges that traverse various types of boundaries necessitate boundary spanning (Williams, 2012). Boundary spanning involves addressing coordination and collaboration challenges across these boundaries (Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018; Williams, 2012). In the context of cross-sector partnerships, boundary spanning has been described as “a battle on two fronts” (Ryan & O’Malley, 2016, p. 3), where boundary spanners must adeptly resolve various emergent tensions, simultaneously representing their own organisation faithfully while developing empathetic relationships within their counterparts in partner organisations. Cross-sector collaborative efforts can be frustrating and tiresome if boundary spanners rely solely on diverging frames of reference. Research suggests that predicting where common ground will emerge is difficult due to the complex nature of partnerships that involve conflicting institutional logics (Andersson, 2010; Högberg & Sköld, 2023; Pache & Santos, 2013).

While research has highlighted the importance of boundary spanning activities in addressing societal challenges, our understanding of how boundary spanners operate across different contexts remains in its infancy (Carey et al., 2018). Given the increasing interdependence between organisations representing different sectors, it is crucial to emphasise the role of those engaged in actual boundary spanning in cross-sector partnerships (O’Leary, Choi, & Gerard, 2012; Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018).

Crossroads was initiated as a cross-sector partnership between civil society organisations and the municipality in a Swedish city. It aimed to support a new and vulnerable group of EU citizens who had come to Sweden with limited means of supporting themselves. Support for these individuals proved challenging due to unclear legislation and a tendency among government bodies on national and local levels to look to each other for initiative (Spehar, Hinnfors, & Bucken-Knapp, 2017). The case of Crossroads sheds light on the continuous challenges faced and overcome during the establishment of a “partnership of equals” in the format of a Civil Society Public Partnership (CSPP; in Swedish “IOP” or “Idéburet Offentligt Partnerskap”). The CSPP was originally suggested as a format for collaboration by interest organisation Forum (2010) to establish a more equal form for collaboration between public and civil society organisations compared to public procurement. It is not a legal entity of its own but a concept and format for collaboration. The CSPP matches the definition of a collaborative governance arrangement (Ansell & Gash, 2008) but differs in that the CSPP must be initiated by the civil society organisation (CSOs), not the public agency, to avoid falling under public procurement legislation. There is no specific legislation supporting the CSPP format and given the lack of experience based on court rulings, the field is institutionally contested and still developing, making it an uncertain terrain for the organisations and boundary spanners involved.

Cross-sector partnerships, such as CSPPs, are complex arrangements due to differing institutional logics and norms in various sectors (Gray & Purdy, 2014). The organisations involved in the Crossroads partnership – mainly the municipality, the City Mission, and their member organisations, including The Church of Sweden and thirty independent church parishes – represent different sectors and institutional domains. The public sector typically emphasises bureaucratic logic of efficiency and fairness, while the civil society domain prioritises community logic, focusing on universal rights and the common good (Gray & Purdy, 2014).

This paper aims to explore boundary spanning in the context of cross-sector partnerships, where public and civil society organisations collaborate. Of particular interest is understanding how boundary spanners navigate diverging institutional and organisational prerequisites when collaborating across borders. Based on a longitudinal case study of Crossroads and the evolution of a “partnership of equals” in the format of a Civil Society Public Partnership (CSPP), the paper examines boundary spanning as a dynamic process. While some research on boundary spanners and boundary spanning has adopted a process perspective (e.g. Leung, 2013), this paper provides a more dynamic portrayal. It explores the intricate ways in which boundary spanners engage in sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and framing (Purdy, Ansari, & Gray, 2019) their joint efforts to address challenges and opportunities in cross-sector collaboration. The process perspective contributes to understanding how boundary spanning evolves over time in a partnership. Longitudinal studies of boundary spanning are scarce but needed (Van Meerkerk

& Edelenbos, 2018), and hence the paper contributes to the research field by addressing the dynamics of boundary spanners' interactions over time.

The role of individual agents has often been overlooked in collaboration research involving the public sector (Williams, 2012). This paper addresses this gap by examining boundary spanners engaged in a public-civil society partnership in the Swedish context. Given that most existing research focuses on Anglo-Saxon contexts (Noble & Jones, 2006; Williams, 2012), this paper offers insights specific to Sweden's unique societal contract and role divisions of public and civil society organisations (Lundström & Wijkström, 1997). While research from Anglo-Saxon countries portrays cross-sector relationships marked by power imbalances, where the public sector tends to exploit non-profit organisations for their purposes, Sweden's social-democratic civil society regime has led to different dynamics (Milbourne & Cushman, 2013; eg. Reuter, Wijkström, & von Essen, 2012; Selsky & Parker, 2005). The paper highlights the intricacies of boundary spanning in cross-sector public-civil society collaboration within this context.

In the following section, the theoretical framework on boundary spanning is presented, drawing upon previous research on boundary spanning and incorporating theories of sensemaking and framing. Subsequently, the methodological approach is outlined, and details of the empirical material and analytical steps are provided. The results of the analysis are then presented chronologically, highlighting sensemaking and framing efforts involved in the boundary spanning activities throughout the process. Following this, the discussion section elucidates crucial insights into how boundary spanners enact sensemaking and framing to navigate differences across sectors when collaborating, analysing their implications for the evolution of the partnership. The paper concludes with key findings, contributions, and suggestions for further research.

Theoretical Framework

Research into boundary spanners focuses on individuals who operate at the interface of different organisations (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2014). These boundary spanners have been defined as “people who proactively scan the organisational environment, employ activities to cross organisational or institutional boundaries, generate and mediate the information flow and coordinate between their ‘home’ organisation or organisational unit and its environment, and connect processes and actors across these boundaries” (Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018, p. 5). The identification of boundary spanners is based on their actions and activities rather than their formal organisational roles (Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018). As a result, boundary spanning can be carried out by individuals with diverse positions within an organisation and at different hierarchical levels. They might assume a designated role for boundary spanning or take on this function informally (Williams, 2012). Boundary spanners can be affiliated with public, private, or civil society organisations, or they may even emerge from within a community (Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018). Recent research in the public sector has also highlighted the role of politicians as boundary spanners (Sørensen, Hendriks, Hertting, & Edelenbos, 2020).

A competent boundary spanner is someone capable of bridging the gap between their organisation and its external environment (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Key capabilities of boundary spanners include building networks, brokering trust, and managing through influence and negotiation (Williams, 2002). Essential skills for most boundary spanners encompass effective communication, coordination, entrepreneurship, and reticulism (Williams, 2013), which involves empathy and an awareness of the goals and objectives of the organisations they engage with. Boundary spanners are adept at leveraging the tensions between disparate fields and capitalising on opportunities presented by navigating different domains to develop innovative practices that may not conform to established norms and rules (Carey et al., 2018).

Boundary spanners play a pivotal role in establishing trust between organisations, particularly during the initial phases of collaborative efforts (Schilke & Cook, 2013; Vanneste, 2016), because they serve as primary representatives of their respective organisations in interorganisational relationships (Oomsels & Bouckaert, 2014). Research on boundary spanning also highlights the complexities of building trust in cross-sector interorganisational

relationships, where conflicting institutional logics can create uncertainty for the involved boundary spanners (Högberg & Sköld, 2023). By emphasising the role of embedded agency, boundary spanners have been recognised as influential figures in both driving institutional change and maintaining stability (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). There is also a growing interest in exploring the potential darker aspects of boundary spanning, shedding light on various motives that boundary spanners may harbour, which may not always be altruistic, as commonly assumed (Carey et al., 2018).

Empirical studies on boundary spanning have offered a wide range of perspectives. Some focus on specific organisational contexts, such as private social services (Grell, 2022), public-private partnerships (Noble & Jones, 2006) or Triple Helix partnerships (Lundberg, 2013). Others explore boundary work undertaken by particular professional groups, like dietitians (Wikström, 2008).

Boundary spanning as a process of sensemaking and framing

The theoretical framework devised to analyse boundary spanning within cross-sector collaboration is influenced by Williams's (2012) framework. Apart from examining the interplay between structure and agency, Williams introduces "ideas" as a crucial element in understanding boundary spanning dynamics. This paper builds upon this framework by integrating theories of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and framing (Purdy et al., 2019), thus enriching the exploration of the relationship between structure, agency, and ideas.

Sensemaking is an integral part of organising and boundary spanning (Noble & Jones, 2006), making it a suitable approach for examining how boundary spanners interact and make sense of what is going on in a particular situation. In sensemaking, reality is seen as an ongoing construct that emerges from efforts to create order and retrospective understanding of events (Weick, 1993). Sensemaking involves people relating their identity to others in their social context as they attempt to establish a plausible understanding of their surroundings and bring order to the situation (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

When engaging in sensemaking, individuals draw upon frames of reference, including vocabularies of meaning and institutional logics. Sensemaking is constrained by the discursive field within which actors operate (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005). This is why boundary spanners with prior experience and knowledge gained from diverse roles, organisations, and sectors are considered especially valuable for making a difference in partnerships (Williams, 2012). Overlapping frames and knowledge repositories enable collective understanding, whereas when frames do not align, actors may attempt to influence each other's perspectives, a process known as framing (Williams, 2012).

Framing involves shaping how different audiences interpret reality (Snow, Rochford Jr, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Frames serve as structured interpretations that aid in understanding different ideas (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005). This meaning-assignment process is often contentious, with interested parties and advocates presenting specific versions of reality to gain support from potential backers, onlookers, the media, and those they seek to influence. Research that connects framing and sensemaking highlights the role of structural contexts, including economic and political structures, where framing activities take place, in order to understand why some frames are contested while others are adopted (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005). Given that framing is bidirectional, it becomes a potent tool for connecting top-down and bottom-up sensemaking processes (Purdy et al., 2019).

The process perspective on collaborative boundary spanning devised in this paper recognises the dynamic interplay between structure, agency, and ideas (Williams, 2012) and targets boundary spanning as a sensemaking and framing process in the ongoing interactions embedded in its specific context.

Method and Materials

The role division and interdependence between public and civil society organisations varies not only over time but also with context. The Crossroads case does not aim to represent a typical cross-sector partnership in Sweden but serves as an illustrative case (Siggelkow, 2007),

addressing a novel and pressing challenge that garnered considerable attention from various stakeholders due to the lack of clear responsibilities (Spehar et al., 2017). The situation enhanced the need for collective sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and interactive framing (Purdy et al., 2019), making it relevant as a case in point to analyse the dynamics of cross-sector boundary spanning.

Longitudinal studies of cross-sector partnerships are instrumental in capturing their development and understanding the complex, emergent processes (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos). Cross-sector partnerships has been adeptly described as relationships that undergo dynamic evolution (Henry, Rasche, & Möllering, 2022). Therefore, a longitudinal case study capturing the establishment and evolution of Crossroads was relevant as a design for forming an understanding of boundary spanning as a process.

Qualitative methods, including interviews, document analysis, and observations of meetings and daily operations, were employed to gather comprehensive and longitudinal data on the case. For the interviews, and in accordance with Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos (2018), boundary spanners were identified based on their active engagement in the partnership, rather than formal organisational roles. The first interviews targeted individuals directly involved in Crossroads. A snowballing technique was employed to identify boundary spanners recognised by the participants themselves as crucial to the partnership, regardless of whether the organisations they represented were formally or informally involved in Crossroads. Starting with the core boundary spanners representing Crossroads and the formal partners, i.e. the City Mission and the municipality, the scope was broadened to include boundary spanners representing informal partners, i.e. several parishes, the region, local companies, and SALAR (the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions – a national member and employer organisation for all the municipalities and regions in Sweden). Interviews were semi structured and open ended, with the aim of eliciting experiences and reflections on the collaborative efforts. In the interviews, respondents were asked to illuminate their own role, as well as the roles of their fellow boundary spanners in partner organisations, and to share their experiences from the ongoing interactions within the developing partnership. The interviews lasted between 70 and 120 minutes. Interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2018 spanned a five-year period.

Table 1: Interviews in the study

Organisation (sector)	No	Position in organisation
City Mission (civil society)	1/15	Director of the City mission (interviewed twice)
	2	Unit manager
	3	Project manager Crossroads, phase 1
	4	Project manager Crossroads, phase 2
Municipality (public)	5	Chairman of the social welfare committee, phase 1
	6	Chairman of the social welfare committee, phase 2
	7	Civil servant municipality social welfare department
	8	Civil servant municipality social welfare department
	9	Civil servant municipality executive committee office
Church of Sweden (civil society)	10	Priest, Church of Sweden
City Church parish (civil society)	11	Deacon, independent church
Region (public)	12	Health strategist, Region management staff
Bakery (private)	13	Owner manager
SALAR Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions	14	Senior adviser, investigator, expert

To complement insights from interviews, official documents, decisions, contracts, and media coverage were analysed to create a timeline. Additionally, informal meetings and participant observations of formal meetings and daily activities at Crossroads enriched the case data.

The analysis was conducted in several steps. Interview transcripts were coded systematically. Initial coding organised activities and events in chronological order to provide an overview of the process and actors involved. The result was presented to and discussed with study

participants in workshops and local conferences for to ensure validation. Subsequently, boundary spanning activities were examined in detail, exploring their interrelationships to gain an understanding of the diverse roles performed by boundary spanners from different partner organisations at different points in time. Special attention was given to the interplay between agency, structural conditions, and the framing of ideas, in accordance with the theoretical framework. The analysis of sensemaking and framing was developed iteratively, with data analysis and theory application proceeding in tandem (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) to elucidate boundary spanning as a dynamic process situated within a cross-sector collaboration context.

Research on cross-sector partnerships typically emphasise that the process consists of several phases (Selsky & Parker, 2005), including problem definition, goal setting, implementation (Gray, 1989), and the continued development of the partnership (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Gray (2007) adds institutionalisation to capture the structuring and standardisation among stakeholders, as well as the replication of partnerships in other contexts. Given the iterative nature of this research, the division into episodes, serving to describe the process of establishing Crossroads and the CSPP, was informed by prior research and tailored to the unique characteristics of the case.

Results

The Crossroads case is divided into three episodes, focusing on initiation and implementation, continued development, and reflexivity as central themes. The narrative captures the activities of boundary spanners and the challenges they encounter while attempting to make sense of and frame an emerging social issue, collectively bringing their partnership into action. Figures 1-3 visually depict the organisations involved, both formally and informally, in each episode.

Initiation and implementation: Problem identification and temporary solutions

It was around Christmas time that city residents noticed individuals begging on their streets. Their identities, origins, and intended durations of stay were shrouded in mystery. These beggars were revealed to be EU citizens hailing from impoverished rural communities in Eastern Europe, leaving questions about their social entitlements and who should assume responsibility for their well-being unanswered. Local churches, the City Mission, and the municipal authorities all became aware of this new vulnerable group, fearing that the harsh winter would jeopardise their health and lives. Media coverage shed light on the issue, garnering public attention and awareness.

A City Mission employee, referred to as “the initiator”, took the initiative to investigate the matter further. Notably, there was no designated societal authority responsible for this group. While researching how City Missions in other cities had addressed similar challenges, she found an initiative called Crossroads that had commenced a year earlier. Due to perceived political delicacy of the issue, the City Mission’s director initially hesitated to endorse the City Mission’s involvement with the group of vulnerable EU citizens. By pointing to the experiences of other City Missions, the initiator managed convinced the director. Informal discussions were initiated with representatives of the municipal social welfare committee and department, to gain their perspectives on the issue. They unanimously agreed that having people begging on the city’s streets was a problem.

A formal meeting convened with the municipal executive committee, where the City Mission’s initiator and director, supported by representatives from the Church of Sweden, presented the Crossroads concept. Drawing on their prior experience of collaborating with the municipality, the initiator and director adeptly articulated their proposals. The initiative was framed as a public interest matter, engaging multiple organisations and sponsors.

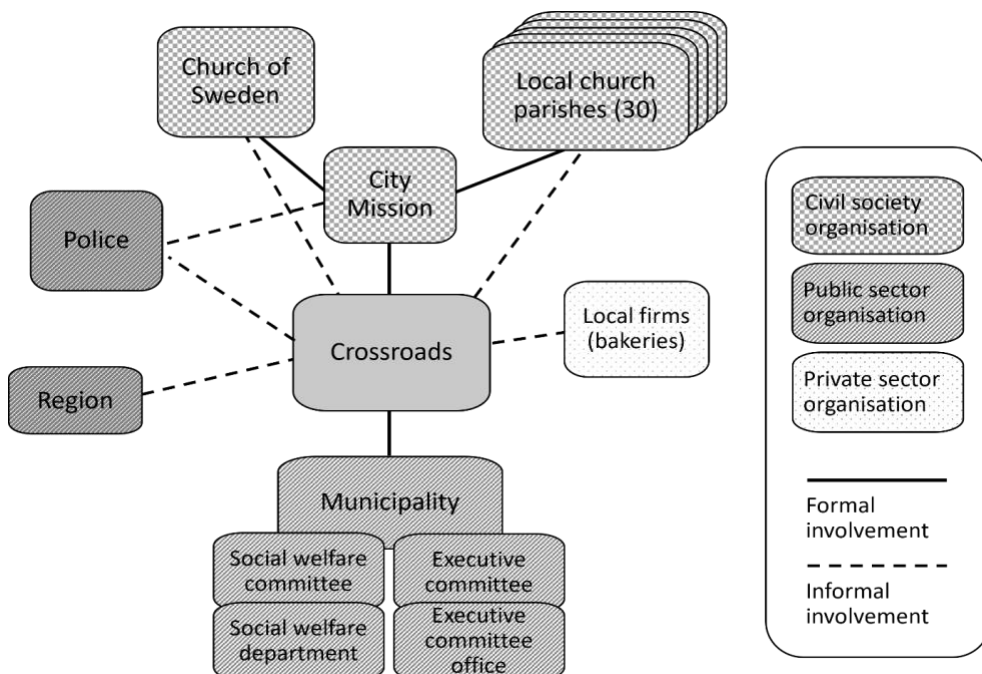
In a public gathering, prompted by local news media due to heightened public interest, the chairman of the social welfare committee formally declared the municipality’s commitment to back the Crossroads initiative.

Gradually, the Crossroads initiative took shape. Initially organised as a project to be renewed annually, the City Mission charged the initiator with setting up and managing Crossroads. Crossroads operated under a council representing its partners, serving as the formal platform for

partnership discussions. The forum was not a conventional board but rather a means of convening stakeholders to incorporate diverse perspectives. The City Mission was represented by the project manager and the director, the Church of Sweden by one of its priests, and the independent churches by one of their deacons. Following the director's suggestion, the municipality was represented by a municipal councillor with the authority to support the partnership strategically within the municipality. The inclusion of a municipal councillor in the partnership's governing council marked a departure from the customary approach where operational matters are typically overseen by municipal officers. However, the unique demands of Crossroads necessitated political initiative, leveraging the councillor's role for swift action and direct insights into local society. While political representation provided valuable influence, the drawback, as highlighted by the councillor, was the exclusion of municipal officers from regular interactions with the civil society organisations.

Crossroads' activities targeted vulnerable EU citizens by means of counselling services, a daily soup kitchen, and wintertime shelter accommodations. All partners, both formal and informal (figure 1), pooled their resources to support the activities. One church parish offered its premises for the kitchen at a reduced rent, while others provided staff. Another church provided free premises for the shelter. Numerous volunteers contributed to the support efforts, including interpretation services. Nurses and doctors employed by the region volunteered to provide medical advice. The municipality provided financial backing to cover rent, food, supplies, laundry, cleaning, and the salaries of the project manager and employed staff. Local bakeries regularly donated leftover goods. The police informally supported Crossroads, aiding when needed and educating the target group about Swedish laws, ensuring compliance. Due to the urgency of the situation, especially with winter approaching rapidly, all parties prioritised the initiative, still allowing the project manager a relatively autonomous role.

Figure 1: Crossroads initiation and implementation – episode 1



Continued development: Building a sustainable partnership

Amid a citizen's lawsuit against the municipality for funding a shelter for EU citizens, collaborators realised their divergent motivations. The municipality, bound by the Social Act, focused on emergency support for all residents, while the City Mission prioritised long-term integration solutions. The court ruled in favour of the municipality, affirming its perspective.

This legal validation not only solidified the decision to aid EU citizens but also boosted the partnership's legitimacy in the public's eyes. Simultaneously it cemented the contrasting perspectives of the partners regarding their motivations.

A joint trip to Eastern Europe, involving the Crossroads partners as well as spokespersons from both public and civil society organisations, was undertaken to gain insight into the actual living conditions of the EU citizens who had come to Sweden to beg. Participants all agreed that the journey was vital to their commitment to the target group and to the partnership.

The influx of vulnerable EU citizens to Sweden continued to rise, with Crossroads encountering up to 200 people on the streets, 70 of whom sought shelter. The issue gained national attention, prompting additional knowledge-sharing initiatives including a national conference. A municipal strategy for dealing with vulnerable EU citizens was developed by a development strategist placed with the executive committee, but the politically sensitive nature of the matter hindered the adoption of a joint set of ideas. Instead, each municipal committee was tasked with addressing the matter within their respective domains.

The Crossroads partnership faced a challenge in establishing a collaborative format to sustain their work beyond the project phase. Despite the commitment of all parties, public procurement regulations posed an obstacle. To expediate the process, the City Mission's director assumed a more hands-on role than customary in collaborative efforts. Chairing the national network of City Missions had provided him with insights into a new collaboration format between municipalities and civil society organisations known as Civil Society Public Partnership (CSPP). The CSPP offered an alternative to the buyer-seller relationship, where the municipality engages in a partnership with the civil society organisation, by leveraging its resources. The format is applicable only in specific circumstances, when there is neither an established market nor interest from private companies to bid for the job (Forum, 2010).

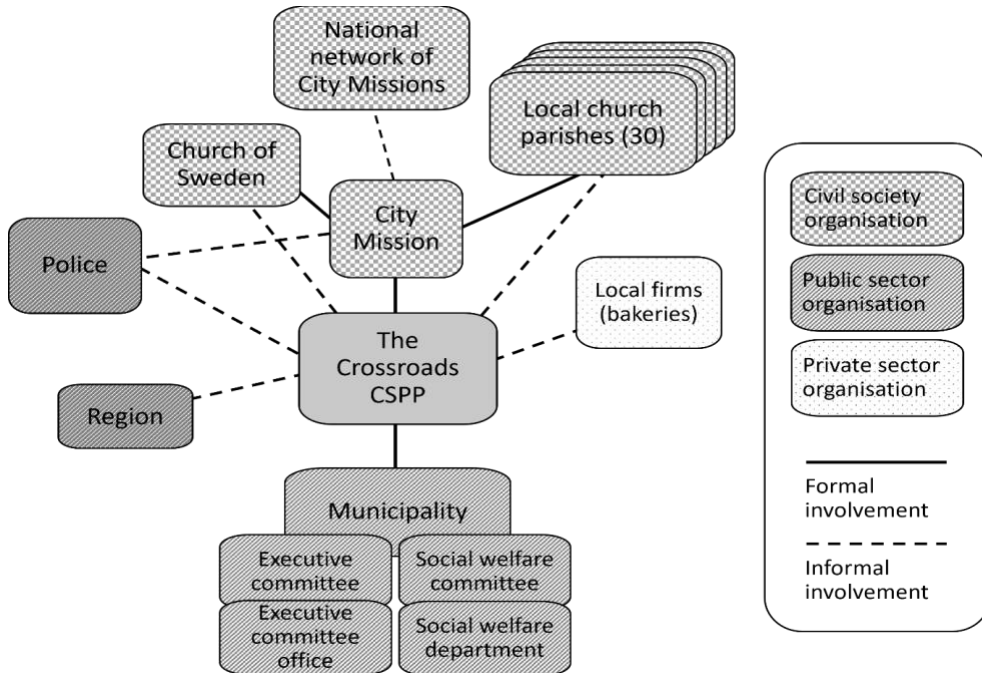
The conditions for establishing a CSPP were, according to the director, in place for Crossroads. The director framed the idea of transforming Crossroads into a CSPP to the municipality as a more sustainable approach. As the concept was novel and had limited practical testing, the legal uncertainties initially made the municipality hesitant to explore such a path. Unlike the public procurement procedures, with which both parties were familiar, CSPP represented a departure from established market logics, moving towards logics of community, including dialogue and mutual trust. The municipal authorities expressed reservations regarding the CSPP's uncertainty, lacking specific acts, rules, and established routines. The absence of a defined framework raised concerns, particularly in relation to compliance with acts governing municipal interorganisational relationships, including the Local Government Act, procurement legislation, and EU regulations concerning state aid. The municipal legal department struggled to provide clear guidance.

As the Crossroads project neared its renewal period, the director successfully persuaded the manager of the social welfare department to consider the CSPP format. Together, they developed an argumentation in favour of the CSPP. Two key arguments were presented. Firstly, it highlighted the City Mission's significant backing as an organisation. Backed by its 30 member churches and their congregants, the City Mission garnered support from a significant portion of the city's population, embodying the primary stakeholders of the municipality. The second argument emphasised the economic perspective, aligning with market logic and public interest. Quantifying volunteer hours in monetary terms as contributions from the City Mission and its members to the partnership, the argument demonstrated that implementing a CSPP would incur at least one million SEK less in costs for the municipality compared to conducting a procurement procedure. This way of framing highlighted potential cost savings for the municipality through the adoption of the CSPP format as opposed to adhering to traditional procurement procedures.

The municipal welfare services committee, swayed by the presented arguments, endorsed the CSPP agreement between the municipality and the City Mission (figure 2). The decision was relatively straightforward due to the economic argument in combination with the long-standing collaboration between the municipality and the City Mission based on mutual understanding and respect, argued the committee chairman. To the chairman, the CSPP signified

a sense of community and common purpose within the municipality, and the CSOs “brought an invaluable commitment which could not be quantified in monetary terms”.

Figure 2: *Crossroads is developed into a CSPP – episode 2*



Reflexivity: Adapting the CSPP for equality

Establishing a CSPP formally was one thing; ensuring genuine equality in the partnership was quite another. Despite their good intentions, partners realised that their traditional contract-focused approach had led to a typical contract agreement rather than a CSPP grounded in shared values. In retrospect, it became evident that the agreement deviated substantially from the original CSPP concept. Instead, it resembled a conventional service procurement, albeit at a reduced rate due to the provider’s status as a civil society organisation, as noted by the municipal councillor. This realisation was echoed by the municipal development strategist responsible for drafting guidelines for CSPP agreements in the municipality. The need for guidelines stemmed from the principle of equal treatment in the public sphere. However, the development strategist identified a paradox: while a CSPP should ideally be forged through dialogue and not follow a fixed template, the challenge of avoiding conflicts with procurement legislation was too great to forgo the need for a policy document.

The question of CSPPs was not only on the local agenda; it had gained national recognition. Municipal officials and civil society representatives joined a development network organised by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR). The network aimed to support the establishment of CSPPs on a legal basis and facilitate knowledge exchange among municipalities. In this network, participants learned to identify language and terms that resembled a conventional contract rather than a partnership. Participants in the network adopted the idea of quantifying the value of civil society organisations’ contributions to the partnership. By converting volunteer hours into monetary terms, the alternative costs that the municipality would incur without their involvement became apparent.

Some five years after the inception of Crossroads, the councillor emphasised that municipal support for activities targeting EU citizens would decline, as it was no longer considered emergency aid. Instead, the councillor supported a reassessment of the partnership and its purpose, to a broader perspective. Learning from past experiences, the councillor looked to civil society organisations to take the lead, rather than suggesting a particular target group or format.

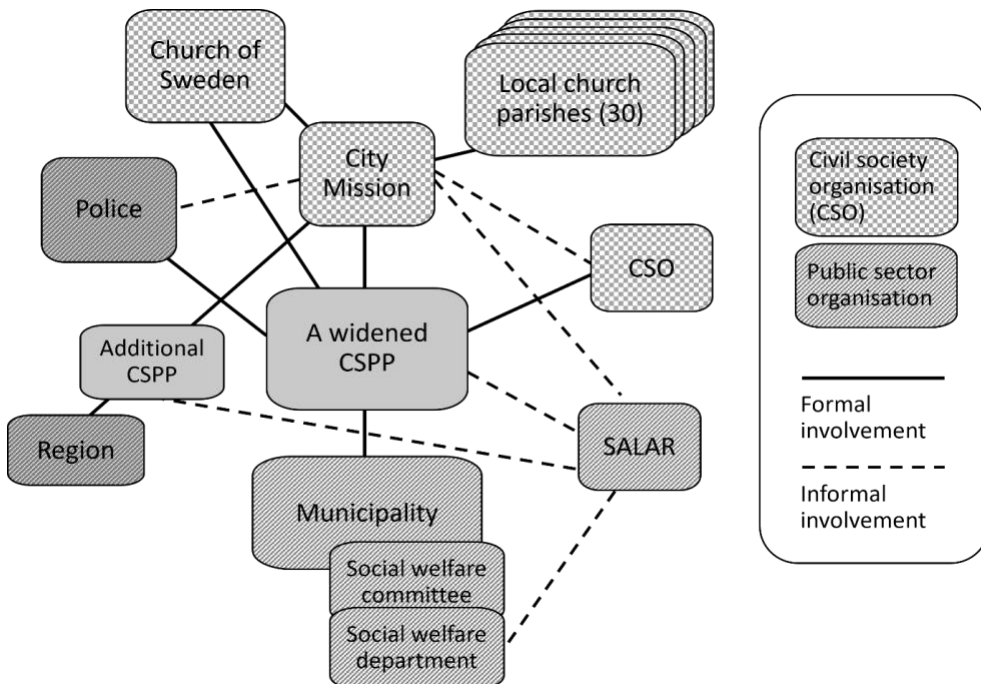
This marked the beginning of a creative and open-ended phase in the partnership, where everything was up for discussion. While participating in Crossroads and serving on its governing council, the municipal councillor had recognised the trustworthiness of civil society organisations (CSOs) in engaging with the local community. The CSOs held valuable knowledge about vulnerable city residents, extending the municipality’s vision of a sustainable city. The turn resonated well with CSOs who had been trying to influence the municipality in broadening the scope for quite some time.

In this episode, municipal officers played a more active role in coordinating the dialogue. The renewed dialogue extended invitations to all organisations working with vulnerable individuals in the city, expanding the network. In this phase, additional civil society organisations, the Church of Sweden, and the Police were invited as formal partners (figure 3). The renewed partnership aimed to address a broader group of individuals who were not integrated into the formal society. The new focus was to gather knowledge about individuals who were not included in the municipality’s existing activities, their circumstances, and potential forms of support and assistance. The common ground was identified as their shared commitment to upholding basic human rights principles. A new CSPP agreement was jointly drafted through extensive interactions and dialogue. The goal was to establish a platform for knowledge sharing and dialogue with a more flexible approach toward the target group.

To the involved municipal officers, establishing a CSPP resembled an “experimental workshop” where working with civil society organisation was all about building trust. For the City Mission representative, the new form of dialogue was an opportunity to make the CSPP a little wider and “less contractual”.

Ultimately, after a municipal due process, the municipal executive committee approved the extended CSPP covering a three-year period, recognising the value of collaborative efforts. Crossroads served as a pioneering example, illustrating the challenges and benefits of establishing CSPPs as a new form of partnerships of equals between public organisations and civil society organisations. Over time, others would follow suit, including other municipal departments and regional authorities.

Figure 3: The CSPP scope is widened – episode 3



Discussion

This paper aims to elucidate the processual dynamics of boundary spanning within a contested institutional context, i.e. how boundary spanners navigate divergent prerequisites when engaged in a cross-sector partnership. To achieve this, a process-oriented perspective was developed to trace the evolution of boundary spanning over time, shedding light on its impact on partnership development. In this discussion, key topics emerging from the analysis are discussed and related to existing research on boundary spanning, sensemaking and framing.

Boundary spanning as a process embedded in a cross-sector context

Boundary spanning unfolds as a dynamic process involving sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and framing (Purdy et al., 2019) initiatives within the context of institutional and organisational constraints. It constitutes an interplay between actors navigating diverse perspectives and organisational prerequisites while shaping interpretations of reality and influencing different audiences. The process is characterised by continuous negotiation of roles and responsibilities, as well as the boundaries that separate organisations across various sectors. Throughout the process, boundary spanners engage in dialogue, fostering understanding and collaboration.

The first episode, initiation, is characterised by sensemaking (Weick, 1995) regarding the emerging problem of vulnerable EU citizens, where boundary spanners frame (Purdy et al., 2019) the issue as a matter of urgency and shared interest, involving multiple organisations from different sectors. The emergence of EU citizens begging in the city prompts various actors, including the City Mission, local churches, and the municipality, to take notice of the situation and make sense of what is happening. The City Mission's "Initiator" plays a critical boundary spanning role here. Upon discovering the Crossroads initiative in another city, the Initiator identifies the concept as relevant to their own mission and begins to explore its potential. Together with the City Mission Director, the Initiator starts to translate (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) and frame the concept to fit the local circumstances (Fiss & Zajac, 2006). Informal and formal meetings and negotiations involving different actors, including municipal politicians, advance the local translation process and lead to the decision to establish the Crossroads initiative. Implementation is characterised by a pooling of resources where several stakeholders contribute to establish Crossroads. A sense of urgency characterises this part of the process.

In the second episode, the partners face the challenge of establishing a more sustainable partnership format. The municipality's commitment is constrained by the structural circumstances and thus framed in legal terms related to its responsibility under the Social Act (cf. Fiss & Hirsch, 2005). A joint trip to Eastern Europe contributes to collective sensemaking (Ericson, 2001) and further commitment to the target group, enabling the boundary spanners involved to build a stronger relationship. The idea of a CSPP is framed by the City Mission's director as a more sustainable format than traditional procurement procedures. However, the unfamiliarity with the CSPP format and legal uncertainties initially make the municipal representatives hesitant. By framing the CSPP as a more economically advantageous solution to the municipality, along with strong public support, the City Mission's director manages to convince their municipal counterparts to try the new CSPP format. The involvement of political representatives with personal commitment, particularly the municipal councillor, is crucial to take this step.

In the third episode, partners recognise the need to reframe the CSPP to achieve a more equal partnership (cf. Purdy et al., 2019). They acknowledge that the initial agreement resembles a traditional service purchase contract. This recognition prompts them to reconsider the purpose of their collaboration. A broader focus on knowledge sharing and dialogue, targeting vulnerable individuals excluded from formal society, becomes the new objective. Municipal officials actively engage in coordinating the partners, and the collaboration expands to include additional CSOs, the Church of Sweden, and the police. The new CSPP agreement is characterised by a more open-ended approach, framed as a joint commitment to basic human rights.

Throughout the process, boundary spanners engage in sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and framing (Purdy et al., 2019) efforts to navigate the evolving landscape of the partnership. Structural constraints, such as legal uncertainties and the need to adhere to procurement legislation, pose challenges to the partnership at various stages. Structural constraints are mainly

found within the municipal partner' boundaries, whereas the CSOs initiate and drive the process forward. The municipality's rather complex set of responsibilities is circumscribed by several different regulations that need to be attended to, whereas the CSOs are freer to act if they are backed by their member congregations. Yet, the CSOs cannot carry out Crossroads alone and are dependent on the municipality for financing and legitimacy. They, therefore, have strong incentives to engage actively in framing efforts (Purdy et al., 2019) to convince the municipal partner to commit to the agenda and dare to enter the new territory of supporting EU citizens as well as entering a CSPP. Political interest and commitment to the cause are crucial, spurred by public interest and media exposure, as well as national attention to the issue. The problem was on everyone's agenda, and most could relate to it as a problem. Sensemaking was hence spurred by all the attention to the problem but also by the complexity and uncertainty involved (Weick, 1995), as no one knew much about how to deal with it. Frames made available by others in the format of concepts such as Crossroads and the CSPP hence helped a lot in communicating alternative solutions, taking the form of travelling ideas that could be translated to the local circumstances (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

Research from Anglo-Saxon countries has characterised the relationship between public and civil society organisations as one marked by power imbalances, where the public sector tends to take advantage of non-profit organisations to serve their own purposes (Milbourne & Cushman, 2013; Reuter et al., 2012; Selsky & Parker, 2005). In Sweden, with its tradition as a "social-democratic civil society regime" (Lundström & Wijkström, 1997), civil society organisations long played an important role as a carer for the most vulnerable. The relationship between the municipality and the City Mission was formed during this era. But reforms in the name of New Public Management (NPM) markedly increased the dependency on economic and market logics (Christensen & Laegreid, 2001; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011) and changed the forms of contracts for collaboration between the state and the civil society in Sweden (Johansson, Arvidson, & Johansson, 2015). The relationship between the municipality and the City Mission changed in a similar way. Based on their habitual roles of purchaser and provider, entertained for some decades at the time of Crossroads inception, it was easy for the representatives of the City Mission and municipality both to adopt the economic logics and language in use when framing the argument to establish a CSPP, paradoxically serving as a means of balancing the partnership (Purdy et al., 2019). The developed CSPP frame, established in dialogue and reflexivity, was made sense of by City Mission representatives as a means of rebalancing the status difference. Full equality is, however, difficult to reach as long as one partner controls the funds needed to do something together. When the municipality regarded the emergency of the EU citizen issue as overcome, there was little the City Mission could do to convince them otherwise. They had to choose between finding another partner or solution or turn their attention to other problems of shared interest. Not withholding this, the process that ultimately led to the establishment of the CSPP served as an example to others and broke new ground for collaborative efforts across different institutional settings, thus supporting the institutionalisation of collaborative forms of governance in the format of CSPPs.

Interactive framing of ideas top-down and bottom-up

Framing is of fundamental importance in the context of collaboration, where boundary spanners need to surface and articulate different understandings of an idea (Williams, 2012). Boundary spanning in the establishment of Crossroads and the CSPP involved both bottom-up and top-down processes of framing (Purdy et al., 2019). Bottom-up framing is involved as boundary spanners interact to make sense of what is going on and, as a result, produce frames that are available for replication in subsequent interactions. Top-down framing is involved where ideas have achieved a status of concept available to actors within a field to adopt or modify to fit their local circumstances (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Some of the ideas that take hold with the partnership are available frames based on the experiences and knowledge generated by similar organisations in other cities. These ideas are framed as concepts, including Crossroads which was established in two other cities as it was recognised by the Initiator trying to find information about how to make sense of the City Mission's role in relation to vulnerable EU citizens.

The CSPP idea was made available as a concept by the interest organisation Forum (2010), but its uncertain legal foundation meant that it had not been tested to a large extent. To make sense of the CSPP, the boundary spanners tried to frame “what it was not”, i.e., they ensured that the format *avoided* various legislative domains of procurement. This complexity engaged additional boundary spanners in the municipal organisation, supporting the process to help make sense of and frame the CSPP in a bureaucratically feasible way.

The role of outsiders to the partnership was important in terms of top-down framing, as exemplified by the SALAR network. In network meetings, boundary spanners met with national experts and representatives of other municipalities to learn from them, interactively sharing their meaning and experiences of challenges and opportunities related to the CSPP format. Instead of downplaying differences, which is regarded as key to be able to collaborate (Quick & Feldman, 2014), the boundary spanners learned that they should demarcate and highlight differences and the specific reasons for the municipality to partner with the City Mission in Crossroads and no other actor. For the partnership to be able to establish a CSPP, the involved boundary spanners had to highlight each of the contributions made by the partners involved, in order not to fall into the legislative domain of public purchasing. Demonstrating the unique contributions of CSOs, distinguishing them from public and private actors, was hence paradoxically a key framing strategy to enable the forming of the “partnership of equals”.

In sum, the CSPP idea constituted a frame to which actors involved in Crossroads could relate their sensemaking and arguments in negotiation. As Crossroads enacted the CSPP frame it became interactive (Purdy et al., 2019) and available to make sense of by additional boundary spanners, forming yet another piece of the puzzle in the institutionalisation of the CSPP idea.

Meetings as arenas for cross-sector boundary spanning

Meetings constitute the place where the sensemaking involved in cross-sector boundary spanning is most salient. Informal and formal meetings, including the Crossroads governing council, conferences, networks such as the SALAR knowledge-sharing network on CSPPs, are arenas where frames are communicated and made available for others to make sense of. Following Schwartzman (1989) and Weick (1995), we can conceive of meetings as the very setting where most of the sensemaking in the form of argumentation takes place. Meetings define and represent the collective organising effort, such as a partnership, by focusing the interaction and making it substantial (Schwartzman, 1989). The cross-sector collaborative efforts are not as apparent in the daily interactions and operations of Crossroads, as these activities are mainly carried out by Crossroads staff in interaction with the target group. Rather, it is in meetings organised as arenas that information can be shared, arguments tested, and actions sanctioned or contested by the other partners. Meetings are a phenomenon that we tend to take for granted but they constitute the very arenas where an organisation comes into existence (Weick, 1995).

Most steps taken to initiate, implement, and develop the partnership are referred to by boundary spanners as having been taken in meetings where partners come together and discuss matters of importance. Meetings have symbolic meaning in framing an issue as important to those compiling the agenda, but also as a site for creating shared experience and sensemaking (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Weick, 1995). Meetings are occasions that boundary spanners tend to remember in hindsight when making sense of what led them to a certain decision or action. Thus, they become material for both sensemaking and framing in subsequent steps of the process.

Meetings are also important arenas for networking and face-to-face conversations that enhance personal exchanges between boundary spanners (Williams, 2012). Taking part in the national network on CSPP organising arranged by SALAR help the boundary spanners make sense of and frame their joint efforts. In such network arrangements, boundary spanners develop their reticulist skills (Williams, 2012), increasing their empathy and an awareness of the goals and objectives of the organisations they engage with (Williams, 2013). By explicitly discussing ideas and information of shared interest with others in the network representing different organisations and sectors, their reticulist competencies are strengthened. Learning from others is arguably an important tool for boundary spanners (Williams, 2012), and a salient trait in both

the public and the civil society sectors is the notion of transparency. When organisations do not compete, boundary spanners can be open with their experiences and share information. The logic of sharing knowledge is key to the partnership strategy and the ways in which boundary spanners deal with the problem that they are looking to address.

Successive boundary spanning involving various boundary spanners

Boundary spanners involved in Crossroads represent a wide variety of actors in both the municipality and the CSOs, and their involvement varies throughout the process. Thanks to the longitudinal process approach taken in the analysis, we can trace the different boundary spanner roles involved in the cross-sector partnership over time. In the initial phase, key boundary spanners participate out of commitment to the emerging problem, driven by the cause to find ways of dealing with the issue and to engage in dialogue and collaborative solutions. Subsequently, strategic actors in their respective organisations are engaged in boundary spanning roles to a larger extent than would be expected in public sector interorganisational relationships, such as when the municipality purchases a service from a CSO or company. Involving senior decision-makers from each partner is strategic for the partnership to be able to act swiftly and deal with the acute problem. By placing himself in a more central role in the process than normal, the City Mission director can target speaking partners at high organisational levels in the municipality, including both politicians and managers, and engage them in direct boundary spanning activities compared to working from a sponsor role at a distance (Noble & Jones, 2006).

Noble and Jones (2006) present what they consider to be stark differences between “project champions” and “boundary spanners” involved in public—private partnership constellations. In contrast, our findings in the Crossroads case reveal the pivotal role of politicians and senior managers as active boundary spanners, engaging in various stages of the process to contribute to the sensemaking and framing of Crossroads and the CSPP. The continuous involvement of senior managers and politicians with direct influence over the budget legitimised the joint efforts. With the vocabulary of Sørensen et al. (2020), the committee chairman enacted a “hands-on political boundary spanning” type of role in order to advance Crossroads and develop the CSPP. With time, and as the partnership evolved, both politicians and senior managers took a step back and left more room for municipal officers and CSO employees to enact key boundary spanning roles, hence engaging a “hands-off political boundary spanning” type of role (Sørensen et al., 2020).

It has been recognised in much of the boundary spanning literature that boundary spanners require certain qualities and skills to be successful (Williams, 2002). The boundary spanners involved in Crossroads demonstrate skills in communication and coordination, building networks and negotiation, but also entrepreneurial skills as they develop new operations and new ways of working. Provided the cross-sector context in which boundary spanners enact the Crossroads partnership, reticulism (Williams, 2013) was of particular importance in their interactions as they met across sectoral borders and came to the table with different perspectives and motives. In this kind of situation, it can be easier to share a view of what action to take than to establish shared meaning (Andersson, 2010; Weick, 1995). Instead of convincing the partners to think in the same way about what was most important, they expressed respect in each other’s objectives and focused on how to take joint action despite the differences (Andersson, 2010; Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986).

Conclusion and Research Impact

Existing research into boundary spanning has yielded valuable insights into boundary spanners and their activities, but it has tended to provide snapshots of boundary spanner activities and qualities. This paper, through a longitudinal study of a cross-sector partnership established to deal with a new societal challenge, facilitates an understanding of boundary spanning activities carried out in several episodes. It demonstrates how boundary spanners continuously navigate challenges and facilitate collaboration to address a complex societal issue.

To tackle the intricate challenge of supporting vulnerable EU citizens in need, boundary spanners engaged in ongoing sensemaking and framing when establishing Crossroads and developing the partnership into a Civil Society Public Partnership. Framing was identified as an interactive process, where actors jointly make sense of what is going on by creating shared frames and draw on ideas available externally and adapt them to fit local circumstances. Meetings are important facilitators of boundary spanning, constituting sites for collective sensemaking regarding issues of common interest, enabling frames to be communicated and shared. The boundary spanners' ability to reframe the partnership's purpose and structure in response to changing circumstances and evolving goals was pivotal to its success. The process approach underscores the necessity for reflexivity and continual adaptation to ensure the ongoing relevance of the partnership.

The process encompassed many boundary spanners, with different roles and capacities in their organisations. The novelty and urgency of the issue drove senior managers and politicians into unusual boundary spanning roles to enable the collaborative efforts. By exercising their reticulist competencies (Williams, 2013), boundary spanners were able to make sense of and frame the situation and the evolving partnership in a way that enabled partner organisations to keep their diverging motives whilst contributing to dealing with the complex situation. Ultimately, Crossroads served as a pioneering example of how collaborative efforts involving organisations from different institutional settings could address pressing social challenges, even in the absence of clear legal foundations, thereby contributing to the institutionalisation of the CSPP.

There are inherent limitations to a case study in terms of generalisation, but even a single case study cannot provide a comprehensive account of the complexity of a partnership and all the boundary spanners involved. This limitation arises from necessary simplification and reflects the sensemaking and framing efforts on the part of the author, acknowledging that plausibility, hopefully, suffices to make sense (Weick, 1995).

The case is drawn from Sweden and depicts boundary spanning embedded in cross-sector collaboration in the Swedish context, but there are important implications and lessons related to sensemaking and framing to be drawn from the study for other contexts as well. To deepen our understanding of boundary spanning and the diverse conditions influencing it, stemming from varied contextual constraints and facilitators, future research on boundary spanning in cross-sector partnerships could derive valuable insights from a comparative approach that includes cases from various welfare regimes.

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