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Strategic Partnerships, Integrations and Amalgamations in Canada's Nonprofit Sector: Building the Conditions for Strategic Collaboration and Integration

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About the Research

This brief draws primarily on a 2026 Capstone Research Project undertaken in partnership between Cooperation Canada and the School of Public Policy and Administration at Carleton University. Conducted by graduate students in the Master of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership program, the research examined the landscape of Strategic Partnerships, Integrations and Amalgamations in Canada and the factors that enable or inhibit their success. It combined a review of Canadian and international literature with interviews with senior nonprofit leaders with experience of SPIAs (Da Silva et al., 2026).

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Introduction

Canada's nonprofit sector is operating in an increasingly constrained and complex environment. Organizations are navigating financial pressures, rising operating costs, workforce challenges and changing funding conditions, while facing continued expectations to demonstrate impact and make effective use of limited resources (Osman et al., 2026). For international development and humanitarian organizations, these pressures intersect with broader shifts in international cooperation, including localization, evolving partnership models and questions about the roles and comparative advantages of international organizations.

Against this backdrop, Cooperation Canada partnered with Carleton University to examine the landscape of Strategic Partnerships, Integrations and Amalgamations (SPIAs) in Canada and the factors that enable or inhibit their success. The research explored the different forms these arrangements can take, the motivations for pursuing them, the conditions that shape their success or failure, and lessons from Canadian and international experience.

The findings suggest that informal forms of collaboration are well established, while deeper forms of integration were less common among those interviewed and were often considered in response to financial, operational or leadership pressures (Da Silva et al., 2026). They also raise an important question for the sector: **whether organizations have sufficient opportunity, information and support to consider different forms of collaboration and integration before circumstances constrain their choices.**

Understanding SPIAs

Strategic Partnerships, Integrations and Amalgamations (SPIAs) encompass a range of arrangements through which organizations work together, share resources or functions, or combine aspects of their operations and structures. There is no single, consistently applied terminology for these arrangements. Rather, a spectrum exists ranging from relatively informal collaboration to full organizational integration.

At one end are arrangements that allow organizations to collaborate while retaining their independence, including networks and coalitions, joint funding applications, program partnerships and resource sharing. More structured arrangements include strategic alliances, joint ventures and shared services, which entail greater commitments of resources, coordination or joint decision-making. At the most integrated end are mergers, acquisitions and amalgamations, which involve substantial changes to organizational structure, governance or legal identity (Da Silva et al., 2026). Established nonprofit frameworks and Canadian case-based research also distinguish among different forms and degrees of organizational integration (Kohm & La Piana, 2003; Neuhoff et al., 2014; Stauch & Snowdon, 2021).

Important to note is that these arrangements are not necessarily stages in a progression toward amalgamation. A shared-service arrangement or strategic alliance may be the appropriate long-term model; while in other circumstances, greater integration may better serve the organizations involved. The relevant question is **which arrangement, if any, best responds to the strategic objective being pursued.**

Why Organizations Pursue SPIAs

Organizations pursue SPIAs for a range of strategic and organizational reasons. In the capstone research, advancing mission and accessing expertise were among the most frequently identified motivations, alongside financial sustainability, funding pressures, staffing constraints and opportunities to extend organizational reach (Da Silva et al., 2026). Research on nonprofit restructuring has identified a similarly broad range of motivations, including strengthening services, accessing complementary capabilities, improving efficiency and responding to leadership or financial challenges (Kohm & La Piana, 2003).

These motivations frequently overlap. Financial pressure may prompt a structural change that also preserves specialized expertise or programming. Conversely, organizations in a stable position may pursue a partnership or integration because their respective capabilities are complementary or because working together offers opportunities neither could readily achieve independently.

The distinction between reactive and proactive motivations is nevertheless important. Deeper forms of integration described in the research often entered consideration at moments of financial, operational or leadership pressure (Da Silva et al., 2026). This does not mean that arrangements reached under these circumstances are unsuccessful. It does mean that organizations may have fewer options when discussions begin only after significant pressures have emerged.

Timing therefore matters. Organizations are better positioned to assess the merits of different arrangements while they retain meaningful choices about **whether, how and with whom to proceed.**

What Enables or Inhibits SPIAs

A sound strategic rationale does not, on its own, make a SPIA viable. The capstone research identified **trust, leadership, organizational culture, governance, power and control** as important factors in whether discussions progressed or stalled (Da Silva et al., 2026). These issues become more consequential as organizations contemplate sharing decision-making or relinquishing some degree of autonomy.

Leadership and board alignment are particularly important as integration deepens. Decisions about governance, senior roles, organizational identity and control can become difficult even where organizations have compatible missions. Differences in organizational size, financial stability and resources can also shape the balance of power between prospective partners (Da Silva et al., 2026).

Other case-based research on the Canadian nonprofit sector points to organizational readiness, leadership and governance as important considerations alongside the technical requirements of amalgamation (Stauch & Snowdon, 2021). A systematic review of nonprofit collaboration research also identifies trust, commitment, communication and governance as recurring dimensions of collaborative relationships (Gazley & Guo, 2020).

The implication is that **technical expertise is necessary but not sufficient. Legal, financial and due-diligence support become critical** as an arrangement advances, but **organizations first need to determine whether there is sufficient strategic alignment, trust and organizational compatibility to proceed.**

Creating the Conditions for Informed Choices

Exploring a SPIA requires time, resources and access to support before organizations know whether they should proceed. The capstone research identified the value of facilitation, legal and financial expertise, peer learning and opportunities to draw on previous experience. It also found that unsuccessful or discontinued discussions are rarely documented, leaving organizations with limited practical evidence about why some arrangements proceed while others do not (Da Silva et al., 2026).

These are not needs that every organization can or should address independently. **Coalitions, networks and other sector intermediaries can provide shared infrastructure for early-stage exploration**, particularly where they are able to convene organizations from a position of trust and neutrality. Their role can include building awareness of the range of SPIA options; developing practical tools and Canadian case evidence; creating opportunities for peer learning; helping organizations assess readiness; facilitating confidential exploratory conversations; and connecting organizations to specialized legal, financial, governance and human resources expertise where needed.

This intermediary role is distinct from advising organizations on whether they should integrate. **The value lies in creating a trusted space in which organizations can explore their options without a predetermined outcome.** It can also help address a gap identified in the research: much of what the sector learns from SPIA discussions (including those that do not proceed) remains within individual organizations rather than becoming part of a shared body of practice (Da Silva et al., 2026).

Funders have a complementary role. Significant partnerships and integrations can require executive and board time, facilitation, financial analysis, legal advice, due diligence and transition planning. Research on federal funding practices in Canada has documented how restrictions, short funding horizons and administrative requirements can constrain nonprofits' ability to invest in organizational capacity and plan over the longer term (Osman et al., 2026). Research from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on flexible financing similarly points to the value of unearmarked support in giving organizations greater discretion over how resources are deployed (OECD, 2024).

Investment is therefore needed at two levels: in the shared infrastructure that allows organizations to understand and explore SPIAs, and in the organizations themselves when they require resources to assess or implement a particular arrangement. In both cases, funding should support the quality of the process rather than prescribe its outcome.

Conclusion

The evidence does not make a general case for greater consolidation in Canada's nonprofit sector. It points instead to the need for organizations to be able to consider a wider range of partnership and integration options before circumstances narrow those choices.

Creating that capacity is a shared responsibility. Boards and leaders need to be able to consider organizational form strategically; **coalitions and sector intermediaries can provide the knowledge, convening capacity, trusted spaces and connections that make early exploration possible; and funders can invest both in this shared infrastructure and in the organizational costs of exploration and implementation.**

Ultimately, the relevant measure is not whether organizations remain independent or become more integrated, but whether the organizational arrangement chosen provides the strongest platform for advancing mission.

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