

Report to the Laidlaw Foundation

Grounded Qualitative Research on Shared Platforms in the GTA

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Overview:

The Shared Platform model is emerging as an interesting structural innovation in the nonprofit/charitable field in Canada. However, so far there are no detailed studies of the actual operation and/or field experience of these new organizational structures. This report intends to provide a voice into this context by thematically mapping the experience of a range of Toronto area practitioners in the Shared Platform field. The mapping allows us a grounded and field-based understanding of how Shared Platform structures work (or are perceived to work), and the ways that different stakeholders describe and assess the Shared Platform structure in terms of outcomes and goals.

Across the nonprofit and charitable sectors in Canada, there is a broad call for improvements in innovation, effectiveness and accountability. These calls are heard more frequently for program and service-delivering organizations in particular, but they are also widespread for support organizations and for funders. Much of the discussion and development in this field mimics structural and managerial change in the business sector, and is particularly relevant for medium and large sized, professionalized and reasonably stable nonprofit/charitable organizations. A great deal less has been resolved when we look at the community sector, populated as it is by a disproportionately large number of small, informal, fluid and ephemeral organizations. It is in this milieu in particular where Shared Platform ('SP') structures have been considered as a recent and potentially important innovation.

Given the importance of the innovation imperative in the nonprofit sector, it is surprising that the SP organizational form has been given so little attention. A scan of 'the literature' on shared platforms show a scattering of papers, articles and reports looking at the concept of platforms, their policy, legal and legislative contexts, some of their values and areas of importance. However at this point there is not any research on shared platforms based on detailed data from those working in them. This gap in our understanding – how existing and working platforms are actually operating, how they work and what they do –

is the focus of this research. We hope it can be a foundation of future work extending and expanding the platform concept, and improving its application and function.

Background, Terms and Initial Expectations:

What is a ‘shared platform’?

In certain settings, there is considerable discussion and debate regarding the specific definition of a shared platform. While there is merit in such discussions, the role of this research report is not to engage them. Rather, this report is focused on documenting organizations which describe themselves in platform terms and which subscribe in significant ways to the overall characterization of the model.

There are several useful definitions of ‘SP’s in the published literature which can help to provide some overall focus for this report. We note that this is a significantly Canadian evolution of more deeply established (though still somewhat unfamiliar) American models of ‘fiscal sponsorship’ and ‘trusteeship’.

From the Mowat Foundation:

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.

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.

(McIssac and Moody, 2013)

From the Metcalf Foundation:

Shared administrative platform is a term used to describe a charitable, non-profit organization that assumes control and responsibility for projects with charitable purposes initiated by individuals with no prior, formal relationship with the organization. This allows these projects to access: charitable sector financial support, and cost-effective, professional administration expertise ... shared platform will be used as a general term referring to any charitable organization providing unincorporated arts entities governance oversight, legal compliance, financial management, grant administration, human resources, and other supports that may be required.

(Marsland, 2013)

Explanation of terms used in this report

In terms of vocabulary or jargon, there are only three terms which are frequently used that should require explanation – ‘shared platform’, ‘platform’ and ‘project’. The first one, ‘shared platform’ has already been described. In this report, the term will be used to denote the whole system of both the ‘platform’ and the ‘projects’ which the platform supports. The term ‘platform’ will refer specifically to the hub organization at the centre (normally described as primarily administrative and supporting in nature), and the term ‘project’ will refer to the community action satellites (normally described as activity and social development focused) which the platforms support. Other names of projects used by research participants included ‘platformers’, ‘platform projects’, ‘platformed groups’ or ‘collaborators’.

In our interviews, participants used a wide variety of terms, some of which have legal or policy implications or connotations. Some referred to ‘organizational trustee’ and ‘fiscal sponsor’ in their discussions. Some members of projects talked about their own ‘boards’. We note that participant language such as this is not necessarily being used in a technical or legally precise manner and does not necessarily refer to the specific legal or policy

meanings of these terms. In grounded qualitative research as this, we do not assume literal meanings, but rather are looking more importantly for meaning-in-context.

Research expectations:

Every piece of research brings with it expectations and it is only fair that we outline ours. After all, research expectations and assumptions can flavour where and how an investigator searches. Our expectations came from both the literature on SPs as well as from initial discussions among leaders in the field. We had several fairly clear expectations which we were curious to see emerge from the interviews.

First and most importantly, we expected the main story of platforms to be about how they serve as an alternative to the widely-discussed problem of so many separately incorporated and administratively weak small nonprofit organizations and/or charities. This is certainly how much of the writing about SPs frames their central importance (in terms of ‘incorporation avoidance’ and in terms of reducing the administrative burdens of projects).

Second, we expected the platforms themselves to be the bellwether organization here, having considerable power and influence over their projects. The platforms had the more stable and larger budgets, and more experienced and resourced professional staff. The dependence of the projects on the platforms (for an incorporated home, for an ability to manage grantor funds) would, we expected, lead to a situation where platforms significantly influence and perhaps effectively control the projects. We expected this not because of any negative intention or covert agenda on the part of the platforms, but instead more basically because of what is called ‘resource asymmetry’ between the parties.

Our third expectation was that we regarded the SP structure as potentially a transitional form for projects, and a part of a project-to-organization life cycle. Community organizations are widely understood to go through a fairly common trajectory from an informal, relatively ad hoc and loosely structured project to something that is a more formal organizationally structured and incorporated organization. Because of this, we

expected that projects would ‘incubate’ inside a SP and would then grow into more traditional independent community-based organizations.

We note that it both interested and excited us greatly when all three of these expectations were unraveled and reframed even in the earliest stage of our research.

Method of study:

To our knowledge, this research is the first detailed study of the experience of practitioners working in SP organizations. The research approach taken was grounded and qualitative. It was based primarily on in-depth semi-structured and open ended interviews with platform and project staff (and some project participants who would not consider themselves ‘employed’ in any kind of straightforward manner) in a number of organizations ranging from healthy and flourishing to failed and abandoned. The interviews were built around a prepared question guide which was designed to be naturalistic in focus. In a very deliberate way, the focus of the interviews was to access descriptions of the day-to-day operating reality of those working in and around SPs, to understand their experiences in their own terms, to allow participants to describe their own sense of the achievements, the challenges and the question marks of their regular quotidian SP experience.

More than twenty full interviews were conducted with both platform and project members of the GTA shared platform community, as well as numerous other rich and less formal discussions, which occurred in person, by telephone or over email. In addition, we collected textual data from organizational websites and reports.

The intention of this research is to document what is happening ‘on the ground’ in what is a vibrant and innovative GTA SP community. It was important that the research be undertaken with important ethical concerns in mind – after all, it would be both inappropriate and tragic for either a participating individual or organization to face negative outcomes as a result of their voluntary participation in this initiative. This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at Trent University,

Peterborough, Ontario, and is based on the participation in the research (both organizations and individuals) being both anonymous and confidential. Thus, the reports will not name or identify either specific individuals or organizations. Because of the small population of SP organizations, issues of confidentiality and anonymity were particularly challenging in this study. For example, the initial intention was for this report to be based on case studies of SP organizations which had been given a pseudonym. This has proven unworkable given the importance of anonymity because of the small number of platform organizations and the distinctive characteristics of most of them. As a result, our report is organized on the thematic basis which follows. In this way, we can honour the rich and informative discussions we have with members of the SP community while still upholding our commitment to confidentiality and anonymity for participants.

Summary of Findings – Main Themes

Following a grounded qualitative approach, the research team reviewed both interview transcripts and meeting notes extensively to investigate the commonalities and patterns which emerged. Over time, primary research themes naturally emerged. These themes are essentially clusters of data (i.e. observations, quotations, interview notes) which carried a specific and important aspect of the Shared Platform story in the GTA. We present these themes in the following section, to provide a grounded and rich description of the present day operation and experience of the Shared Platform community.

1. Shared platforms are described as working well

This research is not a systematic evaluation of SP organizations, and there are not yet any kinds of clear and/or consistent baselines against which such an activity could occur. However, the overall tone of the participants in the research can be reported. The overall positive assessment of SPs by both those in the projects and those in the platforms is one of the most consistent and broadly based findings in the research. Practitioners working in the projects (i.e. those who the platforms serve) are the voices we listened to most

intently in this regard. We heard deep and consistent regard for the particular platform in which projects are located.

Some project leaders described their explicit consideration of the platform structure as an alternative to incorporation as a small charity in a manner also described in the literature. The following account from a project staff illustrates the thinking and assessment process that we heard in interviews: “Our board did some research on tons of whether to incorporate as a not-for-profit ourselves, whether to pursue status as a social enterprise, so we looked at different structures. When it came down to it, we feel that we have our work cut out for us, so the work we are doing, so for one thing it didn’t make sense to try to handle HR ourselves, that kind of thing. The idea of having someone else do it was very cost effective ... So it was very attractive. In addition, the project with {Shared Platform name} is a membership in a community that’s very impressive, really inspiring, really good network, and then also, there’s the charitable status.”

There were some issues and concerns raised about the function of SPs, though most of these were specific and technical. The only frequently expressed concern or complaint raised by projects was about their funding, describing it in a manner that is common in the sector – as “inadequate” and/or “insufficient” and/or “short term funds and funding”. Funding is not something that platforms normally provide to projects, though there were examples of platforms being given funds from particular funders to regrant to projects. Some projects expressed grumblings that their platform should somehow help them better access funding.

More interesting in terms of this research though, was what the projects valued most about the platforms. While the core back-office administrative support provided by platforms was appreciated, far more positive feedback was centred on 1) how platform staff helped project participants to actually work with funders, and 2) how staff in the platforms provided broader-than-administrative advice (up to an including significant mentorship in some SPs) for projects and for those in them. Both of these themes will be developed in more detail later in the report.

Based on responses from participants, we conclude that participants believe that their Shared Platform experience is a positive one, and that it offers offer a solidly functioning and distinctive organizational model for the kinds of community, social and environmental sector initiatives that most platforms house.

2. The first major role of platforms

When project and platform staff started talking about SPs, most of them started at the same place. Research participants concurred that a basic value of the SP structure is the ability of the platform to provide an incorporated, charitable-status-holding, credible, and administratively stable organizational home for a new and/or emerging project organization or quasi-organization. Funders who look to get funds to emerging actors in the community, whether this is environmental, youth, arts, social inclusion, anti-poverty etc. were described as referring prospective grantees to SP organizations, so that there would be an entity through which funds, administration and governance might be managed to support important activity.

In the words of one platform staffperson:

“So they {funders} have a lot of groups that will come to them and apply and they will say to them like you need to have a charitable partner, you know, with whatever language they use because the {funder name} still uses ‘trustee’, and {other funder name} uses ‘organizational mentor’ and so on. But a lot of the time, it will come through them ... When the {funder name} launches the ... funding program, they provide a list of potential mentors.”

The process was described consistently as working in one of a few ways. One way was that the platform organization was working some of the members of their community and recognized opportunities to get their work funded to both increase scope and to resource the often disadvantaged, marginalized and cash-poor proponents. In one SP, it was described like this: “We saw a lot of great {practitioners} in the {name of SP} community who were at various stages of their careers or their practices if you will, but

the people who were a little bit more on the advanced side of their practice were now looking to now how do I take this further? How do I get funding for my own work?''.

It was precisely this opportunity and need that led this organization in its earlier history to adopt the SP model. They saw it as a way to support important activities in the community and to allow them to grow in scope, substance and resources. A platform admin staff reported that their organization wanted to be “the fiscal sponsor and [provide] support for them to do that work and to use our platform to get grants and to be able to, you know, use our insurance and use our space to roll-out the programs in that community”.

Research participants were quick to point out, however, that while the value of the platform may often start with it being incorporated, credible and charitable home with which a funder could work, it did not stop there. Many, and particularly those in the community development area, viewed the relationship growing significantly beyond an administrative and legal focus. “And that had a lot to do with {project name}, and then we had three other people ... who had gotten funding, or were wanting to apply for funding, but needed a place where they could not only have the money but they wanted more than that. They wanted mentorship as well”.

3. There are two distinct types of platforms

In some of the earlier discussions at the Laidlaw Foundation with a group of SP staff and advocates in Toronto, there was a great deal of deliberation about what a Shared Platform ‘really’ is. Some of the group regarded several of the organizations which use platforming in the GTA as ‘not really true Shared Platforms’. In this project, as field researchers, we did not engage in definitions or definitional debates, but are instead reporting on the state of practice in the organizations from which we have been able to investigate and gather data.

From the perspective of the SP community in this research, the issue was not that some SPs were not ‘true’ SPs. Rather the situation was that there was more than one kind of SP.

Our research has documented two significantly distinct kinds of SPs operating in the GTA community. We consider this finding to be an important contribution to the emerging understanding of Shared Platforms.

The first we call a ‘Primarily Administrative Shared Platform’ (‘PASP’). It is the kind of platform organization that is closely aligned with the literature written about Shared Platforms. PASP is an SP model for at least moderately well-established projects which frequently have (or have the potential for) notable budgets, formal structures and professional paid staff. The platforming function starts with the kinds of administrative support that many describe as a primary value of this structure. In the PASP, the projects which are part of a platform have a real alternative of incorporating on their own as a small nonprofit/charity. This kind of platform, though, appears to be quite uncommon even though it is the one that has been most extensively written about.

The second and more numerous form we call ‘Community Development Shared Platform’ (‘CDSP’). This kind of platform is in many ways quite different from the platforms that have been written about, though it seems clear that it has evolved quite organically from them. The Community Development Shared Platform is particularly situated in on-the-ground community engagement, neighbourhood, social inclusion, youth and arts subsectors. In the CDSP variant of the form, fundamental administrative services of the platform are frequently described as of secondary importance to the processes and tools of community development such as mentorship, support, resource and skill sharing, and broader co-learning and supportive interpersonal relationships. Projects in a CDSP are significantly smaller, more informal, pre-organizational, fluid and ephemeral than those in the Primarily Administrative variant. Some of the ‘projects’ could be more readily described as a single person’s activity, such as that of a nascent community leader. Most organizations with a CDSP locate their platform within a larger community-serving organization that the CDSP both feeds into and flows from. The larger organization necessarily has some major theme related to community development in its overall mission. The CDSP is frequently described as a particular organizational structure that is most important as a broader approach of impactful, grassroots community development (see Theme 6).

4. The surprising role(s) of funders

Most of the literature of SPs describes them first and foremost as a ‘solution’ for the problems of small and low capacity community organizations / nonprofits. Because of this, it was not surprising to hear the role of SPs described as extremely important for those in the projects that they support. It was, however, more surprising to hear how important SPs were described as a vehicle for funders, and particularly for funders looking to work efficiently and innovatively with individuals and groups in the community sector. Participants describe the degree to which SPs were an important funder solution.

Numerous interview participants from both projects and their platform organizations described how SP structures solve an important problem for funders – how they can effectively get funds to activists/practitioners/participants at the community level without creating large and costly local bureaucracies and with managing their own legitimate needs for accountability, credibility and results. Many members of projects were directed to SPs by funders who were keen to find a mode to functionally work with them. (Theme 2 described how funders often directed prospects to platform organizations.) Another platform staffperson noted:

“So {funder} started ... saying okay, well, let’s support this as a platform so you have staff that can support the groups that are emerging on your platform. And a lot of the work we were doing then was to create the financial/legal/programmatic/staffing supports/personal supports/mentorship/leadership, all of the elements needed in order for the groups on our platform to have access to the right skillsets and supports to bring their projects to life and to do it in a responsible way.”

This even extended to the narratives about the founding and evolution of some of the CDSPs. In numerous interviews, we heard stories of the role of major funding bodies as primary supporters and stakeholders in the development of CDSPs, to help the funder with its mandate of effectively supporting action at the community level.

In the literature, SPs are described in positive terms primarily for supporting on-the-ground activity, but the positive value described by participants for funders and funding organizations is an interesting extension of the idea of the Shared Platform value proposition. Given the importance of external funders to the CDSP in particular, it is also clear that innovation-value-for-funders remains a major design issue and design concern for platform leaders.

5. The 'Primarily Administrative Shared Platform' model

Note: This section of the report was a challenge to write, though not because our research participants did not share interesting and important insights with us. Elaborating our learning about the PASP is difficult here because in the GTA we found only one clear example of this organization type, and thus detailed description in this report could potentially undermine the anonymity and confidentiality that was a basic understanding of our research approach. There were only a relatively small number of both platform staff and projects from which our data could have been derived on PASPs. For this section, our quotations and observations will be broader and will include fewer specific details.

Another limitation of this section is its basis on a single organization sample. In the CDSP section, we have multiple distinct case study organizations and could both deepen and corroborate our themes by comparing across samples. In this section, it is not possible to differentiate between this particular PASP and the wider potential options for the PASP structure and operation. With these caveats, we will provide some description of our PASP data, particularly since this form of SP is most similar to the way that platforms have been described in published work to this point.

Our case study of the PASP variant showed both the textbook features of a SP organization as well as considerably more. The fact that those in and around this organization described it as working well and delivering on the multiple needs that a SP is supposed to deliver on did make us wonder about the relative scarcity of this variant of SP. If it works as well as it was described, why aren't there many more of these

organizations? One early concern expressed about the SP form was that it came up against well-intentioned funders who were reluctant to fund ‘the same organization’ more than once per funding round. Participants described this problem in the past tense in most cases, and particularly with the largest and most regular funders. This did not appear to be limiting the PASP model. There was nothing else in our data which would account for the fact that we did not encounter more of this organizational type. Its contributions to the needs of the small nonprofit/charitable organization community were reported as both significant and compelling.

The core model of the PASP was provided in the following extremely articulate description by a research participant.

“My usual description of a shared platform is that we accomplish our work in the world by bringing on projects that meet our charitable mandate. So from our perspective, operating much like a publishing company or a record label ... We understand that there are great ideas out there that are going to help propel our work forward, and so what we do is we absorb those projects into our corporate entity and support them by putting them into an operations apparatus that is essentially ready to go and fully structured.”

This description was resonant with those provided by numerous others in the PASP, and highlights two important features of the structure.

The first is that the projects are taken on by the platform on an explicitly mission-focused basis. The platform organization had a specific pro-social domain of focus; ‘platforming’ was one of its methods, not its mission. They saw taking on these projects and including them in their organization as an excellent way to achieve their own charitable and pro-social objectives. The activities of the projects help the platform organization achieve its basic mission.

The second is that the role of the platform was framed first and foremost in operational and administrative terms. Both platform and project staff described the platform’s role as anchored in administrative support. One staffperson in a PASP project remarked “I have very little personally to do with {platform} other than things like HR matters”. Another noted that about the platform, “they are providing us with our baseline financial work so

we don't have to worry about the rules and regulations around preparing financial statements ... We don't have to, you know, we're not paying an accountant. We are paying {platform}. And when we are hiring, we don't have to concern ourselves with the details, ins and outs of the regulations around that and preparing forms ..., you know, making standardized systems. They are doing all of that. They've got people on staff and they are doing it for everybody. Frankly, it just makes way, way more sense".

These supports covered multiple aspects and were far from limited to routine. Platform staff reported regular reviewing of funding applications by projects (and project staff reported this to be highly useful and important for them), for example, which is a complex and non-standard activity. There were also numerous reasonably standard administrative functions provided by the platform, ranging from hiring templates to invoice processing and cheque requisitions, to human resource policies, to support on reports to funders.

The platform was not described as 'merely' administrative, however. Multiple participants described broader services provided both by platform staff which were more developmental and strategic than a term like 'administrative platform' would connote. However, these services were not described in the interpersonal and relational manner that they were in the CDSP. And while there was some expressed desire to have aspects of the platform operate on more of a network and innovation basis, a participant noted, "I don't feel like we have a good network amongst the projects. So I think that's an opportunity ... I think we could rely on each other as projects and have kind of a closed network". While the PASP was 'primarily administrative' in its focus, it was also a structure with intentional strategic improvement as a secondary theme. This, of course, readily reinforced the mission-fulfilling aspiration of the structure.

The funding and financial model of the PASP was close to that envisioned in some SP publications. A 10% fee was applied relatively standardly and routinely to projects, and was the source of important revenue generation for the platform organization. This revenue stream was significant because of PASP criteria for projects – they needed to be of a more significant size and financial scope than in the Community Development model, and the beyond-administrative basic needs of the projects were considerably less. Projects

reported that the 10% administrative /platform fee was very good value for money. In addition, there was discussion that the 10% project fees could cover or mostly cover the platform service staff and service costs required by the projects. This suggest that there is at least potential for the PASP model to be both significantly financially self sustaining and also potentially scalable.

6. The 'Community Development Shared Platform' model

The fact that the CDSP represents a distinctive variety of SP is an important finding in this study. The CDSP model differs in multiple important manners from the PASP, and the elements of the model reinforce each other to produce a distinctive approach. The approach of the CDSP was built around different goals than those of the PASP. The CDSP was built around community development-related missions, and its distinct approach to platforming was clearly framed as itself a major process of community development. In the CDSP, an approach to platforming was not primarily a tool used in the fulfillment of a distinct organizational mission, but was instead an intimate part of the community development mission itself.

A participant described how the CDSP builds from the foundational model of the SP. “{The traditional platform} is a platform which is more transactional, right. And then there’s a spectrum that gets increasingly more ... transformational, like the {CDSP name} works more intensively with its groups and its partners. So there’s now actually a discussion that’s starting to happen ... so when {funder} uses the language of organizational mentor, what does that mean? It means you have to have that platform function because that is sort of like the bare minimum, but what else does it mean?”.

The CDSP model of platforming was different from the PASP, and therefore also from most of the writing on SPs in a number of different ways. This section of the report will document the differences in areas such as the nature and types of its projects, the situation of the CDSP within a larger organization or/and a larger organizing model, and its distinct financing and financial model.

Fundamentally, the CDSP variant worked in a distinct operating theatre to that of the PASP. We found CDSPs in various confluences of grassroots organizing, social inclusion, anti-poverty, neighbourhood, youth, arts and marginalized populations subsectors. These domains were and are “a bit of a messy sector to work in” said one participant, after documenting numerous large and intractable challenges of target groups that they worked with. CDSP’s are more difficult to characterize than PASPs, as their models are more organic, less formal, more fluid and subject to local contingencies. In this milieu, the need of projects and those who initiated and led them were much broader and more fundamental than the more administrative service context described in the PASP. In terms of results, the CDSP was described as successful at least as much in terms of its role for project participants themselves, as it was for any kind of community transforming activity that these participants produced. In the CDSP, project participants themselves were a major part of the mission rather than a means to serve some other end.

a. CDSP Projects

This approach was specifically focused on working with projects quite different from those in a PASP. These projects were at a much earlier stage of development, and were more fluid and pre-organizational (or non-formal-organizational). They were significantly person-focused and as directed toward the development of those who both led and participated in them as they were towards broader public targets or audiences of their activity. Some did not even aspire to be longer term or scaled up initiatives. As such, the CDSP was based on a more time-and-relationship intensive collaboration between platform staff and projects (which in several cases were primarily high potential individuals and quite ad hoc neighbourhood projects). Even though the basic and routine administrative needs of CDSP projects were relatively low in comparison with those in the PASP model (where some projects had multiple staff and annual budgets in the multi-hundred thousands of dollars), the CDSP platform staff themselves reported a fundamental work intensity¹ with projects which effectively limited the number of

¹ Staff reported phone calls and texts at all hours of the day and night (particularly near grant and report deadlines) and concerns about burnout and long term personal sustainability.

projects that could be served by even a highly motivated and engaged platform staffperson.

One clear way to characterize the difference with the PASP is the comparative irrelevance of the ‘platform as an alternative to charitable incorporating’ story for the CDSP. In the CDSPs, most of the projects were too small, too fluid and too emergent for incorporation to be a relevant option, and their leaders did not necessarily even aspire to what one participant called “the charitable industrial complex”. The budgets of the projects were generally substantially smaller than in the PASP, and in some cases ‘projects’ were simply engaged individuals that the CDSP was supporting who had no actual budget at all. In CDSPs the prospects of growing projects becoming independent incorporated entities and moving ‘off platform’ was not frequently discussed as a normal possibility. This results in small and relatively needy projects remaining ‘on platform’ and having CDSPs scrambling to find external funding to cover the resources required to support them. (Recall in Theme 2 that one consistent function of SPs has been to help independent/unincorporated agents to access relevant funding through the provision of an organizational infrastructure that a funder could work through. But in CDSPs many projects aspired to outcomes other than significant budget growth.)

One research participant framed the smaller and more ad hoc nature of projects in CDSPs in terms of multiple kinds of difference: “I think over time it started to become obvious that well number 1, most of these groups don’t get enough support to be able to actually, you know, grow to that magnitude. And oftentimes ... I think people doing private ... they want to do what they want to do. They are not looking at it from the strategic level of ‘oh, I need to like take this above into something’. It’s like ‘no, I see a need and I feel capable of being able to address that need in this direct way, and that’s what I want to do’. I’m not thinking about starting a thing so I can turn it into a charitable organization and, you know, do audited statements every year or whatever, you know”.

As this kind of statement clearly illustrates, CDSP project outcomes are not based on or limited to dreams of administratively strong and innovative small nonprofits with middle class paid and professional staff in longer term positions. In community development

milieus such as these, a much wider palette of appropriate and valuable outcomes is necessary.

b. CDSP organizing model – ‘platform plus’ or ‘multiservice including platforming’?

While participants described CDSPs in positive terms, most of the platform staff described the platforms themselves as less of an end in themselves and more of a part of a broader and particular approach to community and organizational development.

This theme is complex one and came up in numerous discussions. Essentially, many CDSP staff and project members describe the platform structure as a part of a broader overall approach to community and organizational development that is based on numerous values that contrast with (and in some cases, explicitly opposed to) those of traditional service delivering nonprofit and charitable organizations. This model is based on working with (rather than ‘for’) participants at the community level, in a patient and highly person-centred approach that is fluid, flexible, multi-faceted, and deeply respectful. Note that these elements are not the administrative functions that are central to most descriptions of the SP structure. It is important as well to position this approach in the context of CDSP project participants (or clientele? or partners?) who in many cases came from quite difficult backgrounds and operated in highly challenging milieus far outside the so-called mainstream.

Staff from CDSPs described engaging projects and participants much more widely than organizational administrative support services. One platform staff noted providing a wide array of “ongoing capacity building supports, coaching guidance workshops, network opportunities”. Another echoed this beyond-administrative-platform operation: “So beyond being a fiscal sponsorship platform, we were running trainings, and running leadership development pieces, and helping people with financial literacy, and project management, and budget management, all these things.”

Even the basic platform administrative supports work differently in a community development milieu. One platform staff described how the basic budget and administrative support provided by their platform was much larger in scope and aspiration, and directed at the life and organizing competencies of their project participants. Bookkeeping was neither routine nor basic in a community developing platform milieu. “I will do all the financial stuff. I do all the, so sometimes it means having to literally sit with someone and teach them how to open an Excel sheet, how to put in like everything. Like, literacy is very, very basic, right, if you’re starting there. The person who is, {project} is a good example of that because that person who stepped forward to do that administrative side didn’t even know how to use Excel. Now, they are running spreadsheets, cash flows, like, it’s amazing. They are doing great. So it’s everything from that to, yeah, financial management, budgeting, all that stuff.”

Rather than led by administrative services, the CDSP is much more led by an overall approach that can be characterized as ‘mentorship and partnership’. The mentorship aspect came consistently in reports across CDSP platforms and projects². It meant a kind of whole person / whole situation engagement between platform staff and project participants. This mentorship recognized both the complex needs of those from marginalized community contexts who engaged with CDSPs, as well as the special and important potential contributions that can be made when such aspirants are supported and nurtured.

“There’s that kind of mentorship we provide along the way. We can also, we are also set-up to sort of be more responsive to like critical situations as they emerge. Someone lost their housing a couple of years ago. The system, although they were in the CAMH system, and the welfare, and ODSP system, and had all these social workers, this person could not get any help for moving and there was no, the system just totally let them down ... So we just rented a van. Our crew went down there and we moved him, you know. ... And we just check-in with people to make sure they are emotionally/mentally healthy if

² In our research discussions, we heard of several instances where CDSP staff supported individuals and initiatives that were not even part of the platform organization, but we instead simply connected with and known to the staff and community.

we sense oh, this person is kind of, you know, is isolating into a very bad mental health, let's say. Because again, because that human relationship, it's open ...”

“I guess the key term is really that peer-to-peer sort of dynamic.”

“So we support {group} who live and work on the margins ... and we define the margins in a very broad sense. We don't see a sort of clinical checklist like ‘are you on welfare, do you have mental health issues, do you have addiction issues, have you any experience with the judicial system’, right. We do acknowledge those factors as something that does contribute to marginalization but our spectrum is very broad. So we work with people who are, you know, in and out of let's say the judicial system struggling with varying levels of mental health issues, right ... But you know ... basically the whole initiative is predicated on the idea that some of the most interesting and innovative voices come far outside of the system, because far outside of the system, we can gain this unique perspective,”

Framed these ways, the CDSP may be best understood as part of a larger and more encompassing community development model that believe important results can come from members of marginalized communities when they are engaged and supported in a patient, respectful (i.e., ‘working with rather than working for’, and not ‘service delivery’) and whole person manner.

“This process is very much a part of our high access model which, and a big part of that is simply because we get to know people. When people are really struggling with, if they are like lacking education, if they have a grade 8 education, or if literacy is a huge barrier for people, we can help increase those skills in capacity over the grant writing mentorship period while we are accepting applications, but we also realize that we can't just, we're not going to be able to judge everything from the paper alone, you know. ... so not to be overlooked here is how integral our human connection is with the people that we work with.”

“... We’re really trying to re-brand the margins in the sense that it’s not oh, look at these poor {population name}, this is a charity dedicated to helping them, they just really need a leg-up kind of thing, right. Like, we’re really presenting our {practitioners} as what we feel are some of the most innovative voices that are happening today in the City, you know.”

c. CDSP Financing and financial model

Regarding the financial relationship between platform and project, just about all participants talked about the ‘10% fee’, the reasonable standard charge that platforms charge projects for the administrative and support services that they provide. In some publications, the idea is framed that the fee can help PASP-type organizations become financially self sustaining, that a platform might potentially become fully or nearly-fully funded from its project admin fees. This aspect of platform finance also has impact on their potential scalability, since it would operate on internally generated funds and would need less external funding.

The story was presented quite differently in CDSPs. First, the 10% administrative fee was not applied automatically. Instead, CDSPs applied it much more variably, flexibly and loosely. There were reports of some projects paying no fee at all (because they had basically no funds) and others whose fees had varied significantly over time. Fees depended fundamentally on the project’s ability to pay for their basic existence first, and to support the platform budget second (if at all).

In addition, staff in the platforms described the 10% typical fee in a distinct manner. Because the cash budget of most CDSP projects was so low (in comparison with those in a PASP) and because the interpersonal and organizational need of projects (and their participants) are so comparatively high, staff in CDSPs reported that the admin fees from projects were mostly fairly inconsequential to their broader organizational budget and financial needs, and that the fees were not considered a particularly important part of the funding for platform staff and services.

“The systemic ceilings also apply to us as organizations ... you’ll hear this over and over again, the 10%, the 12%, the 15% doesn’t nearly cover the capacity development that’s involved and what’s involved in platforming in groups. And that’s not to be taken lightly. It’s not belly-aching. It’s like a 10% fee covers like um, you know, some of the bookkeeper’s time, and it covers maybe part of the insurance that you have to ... for these initiatives”.

“... It might cover the cheque writing that you have to do. If you have a few of them, that’s a hell of a lot of cheque writing. It’s a lot of paperwork. It’s a lot of bookkeeping entries. All that stuff. That’s like, you know, if you have a group that has \$25,000, which is a big grant, first time grant for a group, you know, \$2,500 ... And never mind trying to actually meet with somebody on a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basis to teach them how to do books, to teach them how to do strategic planning, to teach them how to do evaluations, to teach them how to do reporting, and never mind teach them how to do work with them on program development and strategic development”.

In the CDSP case, funding for the platform was described as frequently coming from ‘understanding’ external funders who were aligned with the community development model in use.

As reported by a CDSP staffperson, “what do we need to look for outside of our own capacity, outside our own resources to support. But it’s incredibly difficult. And so, I mean sometimes, that 10%, it’s really just pulled out of the air. I think it’s based on that idea that like donors are like I want to know that, you know, only 10% goes to admin”.

Other funding for platform activity was reported as originating with entrepreneurial executive directors from their social enterprise and private fundraising activities. The point here is that in the CDSP model, the stakeholders understood that project administrative fees were both inappropriate and inadequate primary funding sources for the platforms. In addition there was clarity that project revenue meant so much more for the projects than for the platforms that it was counterproductive to require it. The net result was a broad consensus that it made basic sense in this context for platform

organizations to be funded primarily by external bodies. Platform staff also noted some frustration with the variability of funder understanding of this need.

A staffperson at one CDSP remarked how essential external platform funding was for their model to work: “and that’s what makes this work sustainable. Otherwise, we couldn’t take on that group or we couldn’t do that work, and we can’t engage in building more than the administration work, you know, for these groups.”

Since the CDSP centres more on broad community development rather than the core of basic administration, then platforms in this model are faced with a dual situation of projects which have relatively less financial resource to contribute and relatively large support needs from project staff. This was characterized as follows: “if the expectation is that we were just supposed to do admin, that would make sense. But you’re asking us to be mentors. You’re asking us to be like more involved and spend more time with each group that’s being funded to ensure they are successful”

Summary and Going Forward

This report documents what may be the first in-depth field research on Shared Platform organizations, as a way to both describe the ‘state of practice’ in the Toronto area SP community, as well as to provide some kind of field-based information to compare and contrast with the writing-to-date on SPs. We have found and documented a number of ways in which the SPs in operation confirm and extend the existing literature on SPs, particularly in the manner which SPs are described by research participants as functioning well (both from the perspective of platforms and projects), and in the particular description of the Primarily Administrative Shared Platform. This is the ‘classic’ form of platform, which we found most closely resembled the way that SPs have been written about to this point.

The research here also adds to and potentially changes our understanding of SPs. In particular, our finding that the Toronto platform community has two distinct types of platforms, and that the most common kind of platform – called here the Community

Development Shared Platform – operates quite differently from the PASP and yet is significantly more common. The report documents the distinct organizational model of the CDSP (which is constructed more around mentorship and related supports rather than the kinds of administrative supports that are the centre of the PASP) and its distinct financial model. While the PASP is potentially self-funding due to the budgets of its relatively established projects, the CDSP model requires external funding because its much more preliminary and/or low budget projects cannot provide significant funding for the platform itself.