

Shared Platforms as Innovative Support for Small Nonprofit Organizations: Toronto Case Study Evidence

Ray Dart

Trent University

Olakunie Akingbola

Lakehead University

Katie Allen

Guelph University

ABSTRACT

This research examines the structure, organization, and evolution of the shared platform, an innovative organizational structure intended to assist the capacity concerns of small nonprofits. The grounded and exploratory inquiry of multiple participants in a shared platform organizational community in Toronto shows that there are two distinct variants of the shared platform, and that the evolution of an administrative form to a community development form of shared platform occurred through a process of field-level bricolage.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche examine la composition, l'organisation et l'évolution de la plateforme partagée, une structure organisationnelle innovatrice conçue pour aider les petites associations sans but lucratif qui se soucient de leurs limites de capacité. Cette enquête ancrée et exploratoire de participants multiples dans une communauté organisationnelle à plateforme partagée à Toronto montre qu'il y a deux variantes distinctes de la plateforme partagée, et que son évolution d'une forme « administration » vers une forme « développement communautaire » s'est effectuée par un processus de bricolage sur le terrain.

Keywords / Mots clés Small nonprofit; Shared platform; Innovation; Bricolage / Petite association sans but lucratif; Plateforme partagée; Innovation; Bricolage

INTRODUCTION

All nonprofit organizations have to deal with multiple challenges, but the challenges that small nonprofits face are particularly acute (Wollebæk, 2009a, 2009b). Small nonprofit organizations typically have both more significant resource issues than comparable larger nonprofits (Jaskyte, 2013), as well as broader issues of administrative and organizational capacity (Kapucu, Healy, & Arslan, 2011).

Multiple aspects of social innovation can be deployed to help small—and young and less formally structured (Horton Smith, 1997)—nonprofits learn to manage environmental complexity and succeed. The types of social innovation small nonprofits turn to in response to their endemic challenges form a kind of patchwork typically ranging from the transformation of a service delivery model (i.e., how the organization or its agents provide mission-relevant services to clients and to community), to the efficiency and effectiveness of the underlying organizational infrastructure (i.e., the administrative and back-office structures of accounting, finance, funder relations, human resources [HR], management, etc.) (Shier & Handy, 2014). Both of these aspects of social innovation can help small nonprofits to bridge their functional and structural limitations.

One model of structure-focused social innovation that has emerged in recent years in the Canadian nonprofit context is the “shared platform” (SP) (Dart, 2016; Marsland, 2013; McLissac & Moody, 2013; Stevens & Mason, 2010). The shared platform is a multi-organizational structure in which multiple nonprofit organizations that would otherwise be small separate organizations—often called “projects” in the SP context—collectively delegate multiple organizational functions to a central administrative hub—often called a “platform hub” in the SP context—as a way to be free to focus more intensively on mission-related interventions and activities.

In the SP model described in its small literature (e.g., Marsland, 2013), the platform hub becomes large and sophisticated enough to become more efficient than is possible in small nonprofits, where a small number of necessarily generalist staff must perform both service delivery and administrative roles. Administrative efficiency occurs in the SP through the scaling and specialization that comes by providing similar services (e.g., HR, grant administration, bookkeeping) to multiple small organizations. This innovative structure is intended to improve both front-end charitable-mission effectiveness through freeing up focus in the projects and also back-end administrative efficiency through scaling and specialization. It is, therefore, not a surprise that the SP model has been highlighted as a potential innovative solution (Stevens & Mason, 2010), particularly for the problems of small and community-based grassroots nonprofits (Horton Smith, 1997).

Although there is considerable interest in the SP model among practitioner and policy communities, actual detailed research on the nature, dimensions, processes, and outcomes of SP experimentation is limited. Basic empirical research is lacking on the workings of the SP model and the manners in which it adapts to and emerges within applicable contexts.

This article examines the structure, function, adaptation, and emergence of the shared platform structure after it was introduced in the nonprofit organizational community in Toronto, Canada. The article draws on the concept of bricolage (Stinchfield, Nelson, & Wood, 2013) to conceptualize the elements driving the dynamic fit of the initial shared platform concept in the specific settings of Toronto’s nonprofit environment. This research is predicated on the need to understand the functioning, challenges, and evolution of the SP model as a way to develop some clarity about its potential wider value as a capacity-building support for small nonprofit organizations. This research also provides an empirical foundation for future research that would enhance the theoretical underpinning and application of the SP concept.

LITERATURE REVIEW

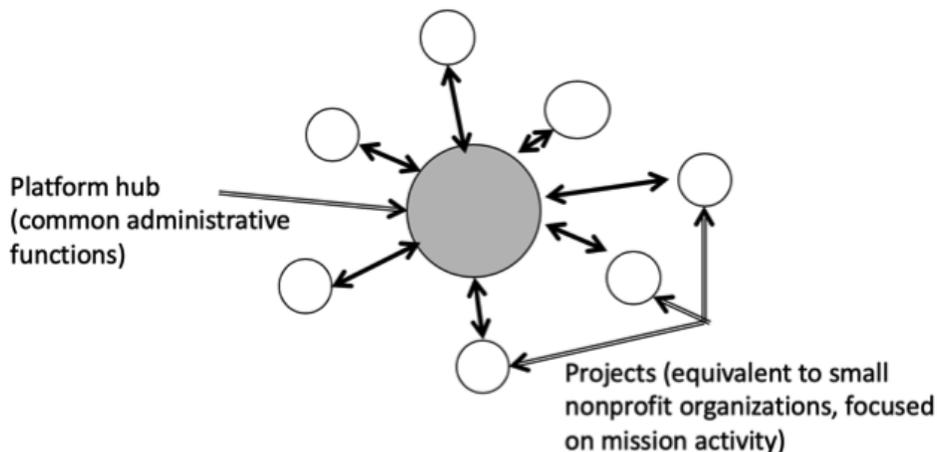
The theoretical foundations of the SP model have multiple connections to organizational and nonprofit theory. Since this study is predicated on the need to understand the structure, function, adaptation, and evolution of SPs, and the potential value that such structural arrangements might have for small nonprofit organizations, the literature on shared platforms, the capacity issues of small nonprofit organizations, and bricolage is particularly relevant. Together, these conceptual backgrounds help to focus on the most salient features of the shared platform narrative. First, this article provides an overview of SPs.

SHARED PLATFORMS

Shared platforms are part of a family of what are regarded as “complex nonprofit structures” (Kerlin & Read, 2010), which are collectively intended to be particularly relevant in small nonprofits, which have limited organizational capacity. There have been multiple innovations intended to improve the capacity of small nonprofits. Studies of “shared services” (Proulx, Hager, & Klein, 2014; Walsh, McGregor-Lowndes, & Newton, 2008) have highlighted examples in which nonprofit organizations integrate functions with varying degrees of formality and intensity. In several jurisdictions, there are reasonably well-established traditions of “fiscal sponsors,” “trusteeships,” and “incubators” in the nonprofit sector (Andersson & Neely, 2017; Essig, 2014). Here, a larger, incorporated, and more established nonprofit with more professionalized administrative systems can typically manage funds and administration and even serve as the formal incorporated charitable entity, for smaller and newer organizations that may or may not be formally incorporated. These arrangements are typically shorter term in duration to help a new organization to develop and stabilize its initial operation.

The shared platform is intended as a type of social innovation for small nonprofit organizations that combines the functions (legal, policy, administrative, mission, strategic, and innovation) of all of the types mentioned above (Jurbala, 2012; Marsland, 2013; McIssac & Moody, 2013; Wright & Witt, 2016). See Figure 1 for a depiction of the typical shared platform.

Figure 1. Shared platform overview



In the Canadian context, the structure has been distinguished from what is regarded as more distinctly American models of fiscal sponsorship and trusteeship (Stevens & Mason 2010). As will be described, the shared platform is a significantly more comprehensive model than others proposed or explored thus far.

While there are several definitions of shared platforms in Canada, underlying them is the description by David Stevens and Margaret Mason (2010) that this structure is intended to be “a new¹ infrastructure model for registered Canadian charities” (p. 98), and particularly for smaller ones. The Ontario Nonprofit Network characterizes the SP structure as one that enables smaller nonprofits to share capacity, to support emergent leadership in the sector, to foster social innovation, and to improve funding outcomes (Wright & Witt, 2016). Similarly Jane Marsland (2013) describes them as “charitable, nonprofit organizations that assume control and responsibility for projects with charitable purposes initiated by individuals with no prior formal relationship with the organizations. This allows these projects to access charitable sector financial support and cost-effective professional administrative expertise” (p. 7). The model is essentially a multifaceted organizational division of labour wherein a shared incorporated entity is a legal and administrative platform or hub for multiple actors and projects, enabling participating actors to better focus on mission-related pro-social action. It is not intended as a short-term or temporary arrangement.

There are a number of fundamental aspects of the shared platform structure. The first is that the core of the shared platform, the “administrative hub,” is a purpose-built entity with an explicit focus on providing the foundational administrative services for multiple and diverse projects. It is also the legally incorporated entity, thus precluding the need for multiple small initiatives to incorporate separately. The second is that “projects” in the SP context, are activity-focused entities that normally begin outside the platform as pre-organizational initiatives and are housed legally and administratively within the overall SP entity. The third is that the purpose of the SP structure is to better enable social and environmental action by taking away much of participants’ administrative burden and allowing them to instead develop their pro-social action. “The exciting thing is that people who are passionate about their cause, can focus on it and don’t have to manage the operations alone” (Witt, quoted in Jurbala, 2012, p. 287). The possibilities for better-quality administrative function and fewer distractions from pro-social action are intended to stand in contrast to the typical experience of small nonprofit organizations.

SMALL NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

The problems that shared platforms are deployed to address are those characteristic of small nonprofit organizations. Small organizations and their challenges have been a longstanding concern in organization theory. Allen Bluedorn (1993) provided the most systematic review of the literature on organizational size, summarizing the research in organizational theory that centred on the work of Peter Blau (1970, 1972). Among other findings, multiple sources demonstrated that compared with larger organizations, smaller organizations are less formalized and systematized, and they need to spend a higher proportion of total resources on administration. In population ecology literature, it has long been noted that organizational mortality rates tend to decline with increased organizational size (Freeman, Carroll, & Hannan, 1983). This research has carried into the nonprofit sector.

It is widely believed that small nonprofit organizations commonly have significant capacity issues (Kapucu, Healy, & Arslan, 2011), similar to those documented in for-profit businesses. Studies (Jaskyte, 2013; Svennson, Andersson, & Faulk, 2018) have found that size increases are related to both capacity and innovation in nonprofit organizations. Studies that focus specifically on small nonprofits (Kapucu, Healy, & Arslan, 2011; Schneider, 2003) describe fundamental capacity issues with these smaller nonprofits. The particular issues described in small nonprofits—inadequate resources, the lack of specialized administrative staff, underdeveloped infrastructure—have been described as the “nonprofit starvation cycle” (Goggins Gregory, & Howard, 2009; Lecy & Searing, 2015). In this reinforcing cycle, fundamental capacity issues undermine an organization’s ability to develop, resulting in a cycle of low capacity and low performance. Given the widespread nature of both this experience and the related concerns, it is not surprising that experimentation is occurring to create structures that help smaller nonprofits with these issues.

BRICOLAGE

Making sense of the particular deployment of SPs requires a concept to focus attention on the processes by which this new innovative structure are specified and enacted in a particular context. The concept of bricolage provides a valuable insight in this regard.

Bricolage is an improvisational process that involves “making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 333). It is based on the notion that whatever resource is at hand could be deployed for new purposes, opportunities, or for future use (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Di Domenico, Haugh, & Tracey, 2010; Levi-Strauss, 1968). Bricolage is characterized by resourcefulness in action (Di Domenico, Haugh, & Tracey, 2010). While it is yet to be explicitly emphasized in the literature, bricolage has multiple connections to institutional entrepreneurship (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004) and the creation of new “proto-institutions” (Lawrence, Hardy, & Philips, 2002). Bricolage includes the conscious attempts of actors to engage the resource limitations and contextual

limitations imposed on them (Baker & Nelson, 2005). Ted Baker and Reed Nelson (2005) suggested that bricoleurs put in substantial effort to challenge the constraints or issues of an existing system. In this article, the particular problem considered in terms of bricolage is the nexus of capacity issues experienced by small nonprofits.

Bricolage is consistent with the core message of the paradox of embedded agency (Sewell, 1992; Seo & Creed, 2002). The organizational actors with a low level of embeddedness are the bricoleurs who see the opportunities to create new institutions or significantly alter current normative practices. This, in effect, triggers a process of mix and match, trial and error, improvisation, do-it-yourself, and an intense creative combination of resources to make something better out of the resources and opportunities at hand (Baker & Nelson, 2005). This process is definitional to bricolage.

This article proposes that the activities of the organizational actors involved in shared platforms are indicative of the creation of an innovative SP structure. This structure deploys bricolage as an improvisational tool for both reorganizing and re-deploying the resources and organizational frameworks required to support its operation and mission. As social entrepreneurs, they are bricoleurs motivated by the goal to address local social needs, i.e., the capacity issues of small nonprofits, within their areas of expertise and that they could acquire resources to solve (Zahra, Gedajlovic, Neubaum, & Shulman, 2009). This analysis will show that the creation and evolution of the SP organizational structure is indicative of the ability of the players to identify opportunities and translate small-scale local opportunities into problem-solving modifications.

METHODS

This study was exploratory (Neuman, 1994) and is part of a larger study looking at various organizational and strategic issues in the shared platform community in and around Toronto. To uncover the enacted and lived experience of working in SP contexts, a grounded qualitative inquiry was designed. Between January and July 2015, a variety of platform and project staff and some other platform participants from a number of Toronto-area platform organizations were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). 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 and the factors driving their structure, function, and evolution. The research intention was that this would allow the creation of an accurate understanding of the SP model in practice.

As described in the literature review, the SP population is small and relatively new. Thus there was a small and finite number of organizations and practitioners to consider for inclusion in this study. Although, there was no official directory or list of SP organizations in Toronto, there was an informal network of many of the practitioners and affiliated organizations. Snowball sampling allowed for the creation of a working list of potential participants. Some of the platform-containing organizations had budgets of over CDN\$1 million per year, though most of the SP units were based around two to three full-time staff in the administrative hub itself and 10 to 20 projects supported by each platform. The number of paid staff and/or participants in the projects was highly variable between platform organizations, and highly changeable even within a particular platform.

Participation in this research was voluntary and was solicited through network connection with the active SP “community of practice” (Brown & Duguid 1991), including present and former staff and project participants, funders, policy actors, researchers, et cetera, in Toronto. The organizational population—approximately 10 organizations at the time of research, including one that was defunct but had participants still involved in the network—was also contacted by email for annual reports or anything that might give an overall description of the organizations and their projects. Websites were also used to assist with this familiarization.

Twenty-one interviews (covering fifteen separate participants) and multiple less-formal conversations were conducted with members from eight different SP organizations. The transcripts from these interviews were combined with notes from the print and web materials that were collected, and notes from site visits and informal conversations. These produced

the textual foundation for the data analysis. Data analysis was undertaken using N-Vivo, a qualitative data analysis software tool used for data management, coding, sorting, and retrieval. Open coding was carried out inductively as a means to develop theoretical/conceptual models on an endogenous basis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). An inductive approach was used and as a result of the open-ended and endogenous coding and theory building, patterns emerged from the analysis that proved analytically relevant. Given the purposes of this research, coding paid particular attention to issues relating to platform structure, function, and change.

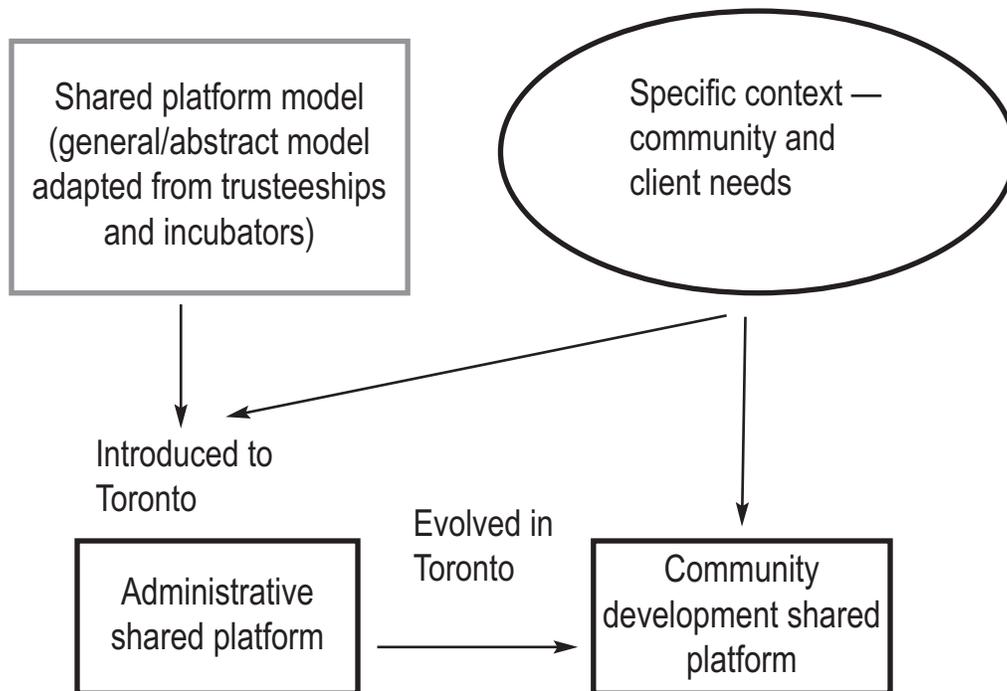
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The data analysis suggests that there are four major themes relevant to the research objectives: a) there are, in fact, two distinct varieties of SP united by a consistent underlying model; b) the Administrative Shared Platform (ASP) variety of SP is designed to support projects that behave in the manner of small and innovative nonprofit organizations. These projects are supported by the hub based on the belief that the projects are the means through which the whole organization achieves its mission; c) the Community Development Shared Platform (CDSP) variety of SP is designed to support much more preliminary, informal, and transient projects, and the hub regards these projects and their participants as a mission ends in themselves; and d) the CDSP model evolved from the ASP model in the Toronto nonprofit environment through a process of staff and information mobility and improvisation, and a networked community of practice.

Two varieties of shared platform

The data analysis suggests that there are two distinct varieties of SP in the Toronto organizational community united by a common underlying model. Figure 2 illustrates the elements of the underlying model.

Figure 2. Shared platform structure and evolution



The particular variations of the model evidenced in the ASP and CDSP are described in Table 1 and developed through eight separate categories.

Table 1. Shared platform models: Characteristics, structure, and relationships

Characteristics	Administrative SP model	Community development SP model
Main goal	Provide primarily administrative support to projects.	Provide primarily mentorship and developmental support to participants and their projects.
Desired outcomes	Support projects to have social and environmental impact in line with platform mission.	Support projects and their participants to develop higher capacity as they develop new community activities and interventions.
Typical project (at start)	Well-established early stage project. Some funding. Small emerging nonprofit.	A start-up or pre start-up. An emerging community project or intent to create one, or even an interested high-potential individual
Organization structure of projects	Relatively formalized and professionalized, similar to an unincorporated small nonprofit or an organization department.	Relatively informal, fluid, or proto-organizational, a project, a group, an initiative, a work-in-progress.
Project staff/participants	Social innovators, aspiring to be full-time employees. Project staff are often from formally educated, professional, and organizational perspectives.	Prospective community leaders, social innovators, new voices, and practitioners “from the margins.” Participants are often from non-formal and nonprofessional perspective.
Budget of individual project	Relatively large compared to CDSP, e.g., \$100,000 annual minimum budget.	Relatively small compared to ASP, often one small short-term grant, frequently \$10,000 or less.
Relationship modality between platform hub and project	Administrative and functional, transactional, relatively routine.	Multifaceted mentorship and interpersonal support, as well as administrative. Less routine.
Financial model of platform	Fees from projects can potentially cover most/all ASP hub costs. Projects pay platform 10 percent of total budget. External funding is potentially not necessary.	Fees from projects amount to marginal/nominal contribution to CDSP hub costs. Projects normally pay platform 10 percent of total budget. External funding is necessary and ongoing.

Note: Each platform variety is comprised of a distinct pattern of platform hub/project relationships, structure, and activities, and a financing structure/funding model.

Differentiating the two varieties of platforms was the single-most surprising finding from the empirical research and was not anticipated from pre-research meetings and discussions with the practitioner community. The first version of SP documented in the data is described as an ASP. This kind of platform organization is mostly consistent with the descriptions of SPs in the literature and is what previous literature would have referred to simply as a shared platform.

The second version of SP is described as a CDSP; it is more common in Toronto. A CDSP has goals, structures, and behaviour that differentiate from an ASP in many ways, though it is still clearly recognizable as a shared platform structure. The ASP was the earlier model in the Toronto organizational community. The data show that the CDSP evolved as a variant of it when deployed in a distinct organizational context.

Table 1 describes the two SP varieties as organized collections of structures, practices, and relationships along eight separate categories. These varieties are derived from the awareness of a specific mission focus, target client groups, and idiosyncratic environments.

In the broadest terms, data from the interviews indicate that the task of the ASP is to support relatively professionalized and relatively sophisticated smaller organizations that have the potential for a wide scope. In contrast, the task of CDSP

organizations is more focused on less formal grassroots and local neighbourhood settings, with an emphasis on individuals and small groups in the social and economic margins. Here, the environment is much more geared to social inclusion and social engagement projects.

The data also show that while the two models share a focus on project service and support, they differ on what that means in operational terms. This is because the types of projects they serve are quite different. The ASP is primarily focused on administrative services for more established projects as a way to allow the projects the time and opportunity to focus on their own social and environmental mission and interventions. The ASP focus is centred on high-quality administrative support. In contrast, the CDSP is described as much more “hands on” with its projects, which are at an earlier stage and initiated by individuals and groups more outside of the nonprofit and professional mainstreams. Its primary modality would be described as multifaceted and foundational support, including administrative services, that broadens to help with a wide array of elements of project, personal, and interpersonal development.

The Administrative Shared Platform model

As shown in Table 1, the overall model of the ASP was built around the specific characteristics and needs of the particular “clientele” it was established to serve.

The thick description of the ASP model in this section came from one single example in the Toronto SP community. The scarcity of ASPs was surprising, given the research implicitly sought this particular model and it is the model the literature describes. Members of the informal SP network were not aware of other platforms in Toronto that operated in the manner of an ASP.

The target client of the ASP model is explicit and specific. The ASP model was created to benefit and serve the projects of emerging leaders and professionals who seek to create important large-scale impacts on compelling social and/or environmental issues. Most project leaders had formal postsecondary educational experience, and many had professional nonprofit organizational experience. One research participant differentiated the focal client groups from nonprofit “start-ups.”

I wouldn't call them start-ups but sort of early stage social change projects ... so projects that are maybe coming off of a first grant that sort of established their work ... [Our role is to help with] re-thinking those projects and supporting them into a system whereby they are able to become more sustainable and scale their work.
(Interviewee G)

The kinds of projects found in an ASP structure were those that could in another context be good examples of highly capable small nonprofits with committed, longer-term professional staff. Projects were designed and intended for longer-term sustainability, and the aspirational language of “scaling” activity and impact was widespread. Administrative Shared Platform projects described their intentions to develop significant funding for their activities and described having at least initial grant funding already secured. They had a minimum (floor) annual budget of \$100,000 per annum as a precondition for participating in the ASP.

The platform of the ASP is constructed to deliver the primary goal of the ASP hub model, which is to provide professional and cost-effective administrative support to projects, so the projects themselves can focus on achieving the compelling social or environmental outcomes for which they have been created. This model was in part premised on a division of labour between platform and project, and it delineated the principal characteristic of the platform in the ASP (see “Relationship modality” in Table 1). One participant from an ASP project noted that they “have very little personally to do with the platform other than things like HR matters” (Interviewee C). The platform/project relationship was described as

“quite transactional” (Interviewee K). Human resources, accounting, and funding applications/reporting were the most common administrative task areas that were described as important service provision roles of the platform hub.

The division of labour between the platform hub and the project in the ASP is unconventional outside of the SP community. One participant described the distinctive and uncommon organizational model through an analogy, as “operating much like a publishing company or a record label” (Interviewee G). This describes the manner in which a record label, for example, covers many of the important professional administrative and back-office functions, while the “talent” in the projects focuses on whatever area it is they are motivated to.

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 ... we understand that there are great ideas out there that are going to help to 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. (Interviewee G)

The “operations apparatus” that served and supported the projects of the ASP was described as somewhat standardized across projects to enable simplicity, for example, an online accounting and HR form submission. The platform hub staff were organized both horizontally (i.e., project officers who provided multiple services and liaison with multiple projects) and vertically (i.e., some specialist staff who focused on distinct administrative functional areas). This structure led to a day-to-day operating context that was frequently described as relatively smooth and satisfactory. Consider the following description of how an ASP platform hub supported a project’s grant application and reporting functions.

[ASPA] takes it on and they do a lot of stuff around grant applications, which frankly is absolutely fantastic, honestly. That is just an awesome thing for them to do because then I’m not doing the same thing over and over again when I have 400 other things to do. Instead, people there whose job it is to do that, do it. They make sure all the attachments are there and that all the Ts are crossed and the Is are dotted. (Interviewee N)

Given the structures of ASP projects, the relatively routine relationship modality, and the relatively modest and specific project needs, research participants described the financial model of the ASP as is in line with published work on shared platforms. Staff in the projects described a 10 percent fee levied on their grants/funding that was paid to the platform hub. This was considered acceptable value-for-money by almost all of those in the projects. Staff in the platform hubs noted that there has not yet been a detailed cost accounting for the overall fee of the platforming functions in the ASP because most staff performed other roles in the organization. For example, staff that specialize in HR support for the platforms also run the HR function for the platform hub and the wider host organization. Despite this, however, staff indicated relative confidence that the platform function was mostly funded by the fees paid by the projects.

The Community Development SP model

The clientele or “target” of the CDSP was distinct from that of the ASP (see “Desired outcomes” and “Project staff” in Table 1). This type of platform had a distinct environment or milieu it needed to adapt to. The CDSP project organizations were different from those described in the ASP in a number of basic ways. They focused on a set of local issues at the nexus of immigration and settlement, youth, anti-poverty, social engagement, arts, and employment issues.

Platform hub staff did not describe the participants in the projects simply as a means to achieve the organizational mission. Rather, supporting the participants/projects was much of the organizational mission itself (see “Main goal” in Table 1). While the external outcomes of the projects were considered important, the activity and development inside the projects/participants themselves was considered to have higher prominence and centrality compared to the ASP. Unlike

project participants in ASP organizations, which were fairly typical to the nonprofit sector, the participants in CDSP projects were themselves from the margins. They were subject to the multiple social and economic ills the organizations were purposed to intervene in.

The CDSP hub and project organizations were mostly located in local environments where issues of poverty, immigration, unemployment, youth engagement, mental health, and addiction were heightened. As one research participant said in a tongue-in-cheek way, this context was “a bit of a messy sector to work in” (Interviewee C). The population was deemed to be high potential, but also with large, structural, and often intractable problems. Importantly, these issues were not simply those that the projects were focused on; they were also the home environments of the staff, volunteers, and participants of the CDSP projects. This differed significantly from the more commonly professional, formally educated, and comparatively mainstream background of many in the ASP context.

This variation in background helps to explain a number of the differences observed between ASP and CDSP models.

Someone [a project staff/participant] lost their housing a couple of years ago ... Although they were in the [mental health] system, and the welfare ... system, and had all these social workers, this person could not get any help for moving, the system just totally let them down. He ... called me shaking and almost crying and said “my stuff is going to be out on my front lawn. I have no idea how to move all my stuff.” So we just rented a van. Our crew went down there and we moved him. (Interviewee D)

With project staff and participants coming from these contexts, the distinct nature of the CDSP projects themselves is not surprising. Projects were reported as much smaller and more prospective than those in the ASP. Some platform staff even reported having participants who did not have a specific project but rather were considering or prospecting several options. These differences in the nature of CDSP projects provided direct contrasts to what they regarded as the more traditional nonprofit organization models of the ASP. One CDSP project participant noted that:

I [don't] need to ... take this above into something [beyond an informal project]. 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 do audited statements every year or whatever. (Interviewee E)

A CDSP staff person who supported projects such as this critiqued the implicit full-time, permanent middle-class staff assumptions of “the nonprofit industrial complex” (Interviewee H), and another noted that it was inappropriate that “the language of capacity building has an assumption that they [i.e., project participants] will become EDs [executive directors] some day” (Interviewee B).

The characteristics of the CDSP provided a number of contrasts to those of the ASP, commensurate with the differences between the clientele or target groups of the two platforms. One participant who had worked in both versions of SP described the CDSP hub role as much broader than that of the ASP, widening into mentorship.

The [ASPA] is a platform, which is more transactional, right? And then there's a spectrum that gets increasingly more ... transformational, like the [CDSPD], which works more intensively with its groups and its partners. So there's now actually a discussion that's starting to happen ... so when [funder B] 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? (Interviewee B)

The multiple functions and activities in the CDSP reflected its target group, which had administrative needs but multiple other important needs as well, both for the projects as well as for the individuals involved in them. The inclusion of mentorship and leadership development as major foci of the CDSP function means that the relatively simple division of labour observed in the ASP structures, i.e., administrative activity separate from mission activity, was not observed in nearly the same manner in the CDSP.

The scope of platform activities in the CDSP was frequently remarked on during the research. Most simplistically, this was reflected in a much wider range of platform service-like² activities. One participant noted that beyond the basics of ASP platform services such as bookkeeping, “we were running trainings, and running leadership development pieces, and helping people with financial literacy, and project management, and budget management, all these things” (Interviewee M). The platform role was both intensive and extensive, organizational/technical, and interpersonal. Consider, for example, the administrative function of platform hub involvement in project budgets. Unlike the ASP, where skills and experience in this area were common in platform projects, even the most basic rudiments were commonly described in the CDSP as areas where the platform itself needed to provide extensive support, skill building, and training.

I will do all the financial stuff ... sometimes it means having to literally sit with someone and teach them how to open an Excel sheet, how to put in everything. Like, literacy is very, very basic ... [Project J] is a good example of that because the person who stepped forward to do that administrative side didn't even know how to use Excel. (Interviewee M)

In the CDSP, the platform function was described as extending beyond the formal and the organizational, to deal with the difficult and compelling needs of some of the participants. Thus, supporting even relatively small projects or relatively small numbers of project participants was work intensive for platform staff.

Superficially, the financial models of the ASP and CDSP were quite similar. The same 10 percent administrative fee was generally levied on CDSP projects to fund hub expenses. Because of the nature of CDSP projects, however, the underlying financial model was considerably different from that of the ASP. On one hand, the non-routine and intensive nature of the relationship between platform staff and projects highlight the significant staff resource needs of the CDSP projects. On the other hand, the small and often short-term budgets of the projects meant that the 10 percent fee levied by ASP platforms on projects would not produce anything close to the revenue observed in the other model.

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 [CDSP] 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. (Interviewee B)

In addition, staff of several CDSP hubs noted that some projects had basically no budget and others had so few funds or had staff with such major needs for what little was available that the 10 percent fee was thought of as a general model rather than a rule.

The evolution of the CDSP from the ASP

The ASP preceded the CDSP as a shared platform structure in the Toronto nonprofit organization community. Multiple CDSPs evolved based on modifications of the ASP model and based on modifications of the emerging CDSP approaches. This section documents how the organizational model transferred across niches and into a community development environment. Three relevant elements emerged from the data.

First, there was evidence that the platform prototype of the single ASP was relatively high profile in Toronto. The ASP described its function and model in significant detail on the organization's website. The staff of the organization made numerous presentations about this innovative structure in workshops, at local universities, and in meetings and professional learning settings. One of the practitioners in a CDSP reported that "[ASP A] has been really great in terms of networking and just providing us with opportunities to get better exposure [to the idea of the SP] as a social innovation" (Interviewee C). This establishes the presence of a high-profile reference model of a shared platform in the Toronto nonprofit community.

Second, there was evidence in the data of a tight network of a relatively small number of practitioners among the platforms and major funders. Several of these practitioners also described their own job mobility between organizations in this network. There were staff who had worked in an ASP context and then moved to a CDSP, and staff who moved between funders and ASP-based work and CDSP-based work. This clearly suggests that staff transfer and the relationships between staff working in different platform organizational contexts formed an informal shared platform community of practice. These participants described the relationships and communications, as well as the transfer of ideas from platform to platform. The evidence indicates that there was ample opportunity for the ASP model and its ideas to transfer into a different context, one where it could evolve to fit the specifications of a community development environment.

The data showed both the visibility of the initial model of shared platform, which is now designated as the ASP, and the staff networks linking the whole platform community. It highlighted how the ASP model could have evolved in other settings that had a kind of natural affinity for platform-like structures.

Third, the data also indicated that members of the Toronto SP community were actually unaware that they had created a distinct new form of SP from their local improvisational work. They had not deliberately intended to, and were actually puzzled at how to characterize the Toronto platform population. In meetings with a semi-formalized shared platform group convened by a key funder, some participants commented that it was "tricky" to promote the platform structure more widely in the Ontario nonprofit community because most of their organizations were "not real shared platforms." It was only as a result of an initial research report (Dart, 2016) that members of the community understood that they had, in fact, developed a new and distinct variety of shared platform: the CDSP.

DISCUSSION

This article offers descriptions of the structure and function of two different varieties of shared platform. One variety of shared platform, the ASP, is consistent with the description of shared platforms in the literature (i.e., Jurbala, 2012), while the other variety of platform, the CDSP, is not yet documented. This article also presents documentation of how a novel organizational form primarily created to address capacity issues in small nonprofits evolved into contexts with a different purpose. In contexts with community development goals of solidarity, mentorship, and support, there emerged a significantly different variety of essentially the same underlying organizational type. The shared platform, introduced as a new type of nonprofit organizational structure, became a type with two distinct variants, each of which were adapted to a distinct purpose and context.

The literature describes the SP as an innovative structure to address capacity issues of small nonprofit organizations (Wollebæk, 2009a), primarily through the provision of high-quality administrative services that simultaneously support the small organization and allow its principals to focus on their pro-social programs and interventions (Jurbala, 2012). While this exploratory study does not allow for any kind of systematic assessment of the quality or impact of this novel structure, it does contribute several elements to its further consideration. First, the ASP type is documented as functioning as per the description in the literature. Most of the projects of the ASP were those that, in a different context, would have been small nonprofits or charities. Instead, these projects reported advantages to the ASP structure, which made their

participation make sense. “We don’t have to worry about the rules and regulations ... They [the administrative hub] are doing all that ... Frankly it just makes way, way more sense” (Interviewee L). Thus, there is at least a preliminary basis for the further consideration of the ASP as a structure that assists with capacity issues of small nonprofit organizations.

In contrast to the limited data on the ASP, which corroborates what has been written thus far regarding shared platforms, this study provides more data and conceptual development regarding an alternative to the shared platform structure as it has been understood to this point. Specifically, the CDSP variant documented in this study provides evidence of a structure that is intended less for small nonprofits than for pre- and proto-organizational activity³ in community and grass-roots contexts. This frames the CDSP more in terms of community development, social inclusion, and mentorship than small organizational support. This purpose of an SP structure is not yet described in the literature.

The process by which the ASP was transformed into the CDSP variant has important connections to the bricolage literature (Baker & Nelson, 2005), but one which the data shows to be unintentional in many ways. The community was unaware a new form of platform had been created. They simply “made it work” through iterative processes of change in a specific context. Documentation of bricolage normally acknowledges it as an incremental and iterative process (Di Domenico, Hough, & Tracey, 2010). In this case, the findings show it occurring through a diffuse network of individuals and organizations, rather than being led by a specific institutional entrepreneur. In this way, it is similar to the “social bricolage” process (Di Domenico, Hough & Tracey, 2010), though the data here describe an even more diffuse process. In the shared platform example, bricolage is seen as a field-level process rather than merely an individual one. The process was also unintentional and/or implicit in important ways. The CDSP practitioners did not set out to create a new variety of platform, so much as make the platform model “work” in their context. These are a new set of emphases to bring to the bricolage aspect of institutional entrepreneurship studies. Cumulative bricolage (i.e., iterative experimentation, adaptation, and sense making) may result in something quite far from its beginnings, even if that is not an explicit intention.

The literature typically frames social innovation as a process to create a new form, scalable in different contexts (Phills et al., 2008). Instead, this study documents the evolution of a socially innovative organizational structure into a new variety due to the needs, constraints, opportunities, and benefits of a distinct context. This suggests that it is also important to understand that with social innovation, local specification and flexibility may be a relevant and competitive priority.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In the context of the well-documented difficulties of small nonprofit organizations (Wollebæk, 2009a), the shared platform organizational structure has emerged as one social innovation that offers an opportunity to address many of their efficiency and effectiveness concerns. This article documents the organization and operation of shared platforms in Toronto and has shown more than the expected incremental adaptation that such a proto-institution might be expected to demonstrate in a new setting. The processes of bricolage operating at a network or field level have not simply adapted the new nonprofit organizational form but actually created a new and distinct variety of shared platform intended to support community development rather than small organizational concerns.

It is relevant, however, to highlight the study’s limitations. First, the findings are based on a detailed exploratory analysis of multiple organizational participants from as many shared platform organizations in Toronto as could be identified from a thorough search and through referral. While there seem to be no initial reasons to suspect the accuracy of the major findings—such as the relative scarcity of the ASP version of the platform and the relative robustness of the CDSP version—the findings are based on an initial inquiry and are not a comprehensive population census. Second, this study was based on cross-sectional research and did not have the ability to document the longitudinal processes of change over time as the founding shared platform model diffused and changed in the Toronto nonprofit organizational community.

Regardless, the findings offer considerable value to organizational research and practice communities. This is the first empirical academic study that examines the function and evolution of shared platform organizations. It describes the transformation from one version of shared platform, the Administrative Shared Platform created to solve capacity issues for small nonprofits organizations, into a distinct variety of organizational innovation, the Community Development Shared Platform. This latter type of shared platform provides a distinct organizational and social function, using an evolved variation of the underlying shared platform organizational model. Further research, however, is needed to better document the varieties of shared platform, better evaluate their potential as a kind of social innovation in the nonprofit sector, and assess the processes of evolution as organizational innovations adapt and vary in multiple contexts.

NOTES

1. Stevens and Mason (2010) focus on the Tides Canada platform, which is regarded as the first and best-known shared platform in Canada. It has been in existence since 2008.
2. "Service" was a problematic term in the CDSP context. Several CDSP participants explicitly problematized the term as one from traditional nonprofit/charitable contexts at odds with peer-to-peer community development practices and perspectives.
3. Some in the study would caution us that this is primarily informal activity and did not aspire to more formal organizational status. Many CDSP participants did, however, aspire to more stable and funded operational status.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS / LES AUTEURS

Ray Dart is Associate Professor in the Trent School of Business at Trent University. Email: rdart@trentu.ca .

Olakunle Akingbola is an Associate Professor of Business Administration at Lakehead University. Email: oakingbo@lakeheadu.ca .

Katie Allen is a PhD student at the University of Guelph and a graduate of the Master of Arts program in Sustainability at Trent University. Email: kallen17@uoguelph.ca .