

Listening to the stars: the constellation model and collaborative social change

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Submitted by:

Tonya Surman, Centre for Social Innovation, Toronto
tonya@socialinnovation.ca

Mark Surman, Shuttleworth Foundation, Cape Town
mark.surman@shuttleworthfoundation.org

Abstract

There is much talk about the potential of partnerships and networks to increase collaboration, reach and impact amongst social sector organizations. The 'constellation model' developed for the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and the Environment offers an innovative approach to organizing such collaborative efforts. Inspired by complexity theory, the model emphasizes the role of small, self-selecting action teams of partners working together on a particular task or issue. These constellations are outwardly focused, placing their attention on public awareness or the broader environment rather than on the partnership itself. While serious effort still goes into core partnership governance and management, decision making, resources and collaborative effort are focused in the constellations. The constellations drive and define the partnership. Leadership rotates fluidly amongst partners, with each partner having the freedom to head up a constellation that matches its profile and skills, and to sit back and participate in activities that are of more peripheral interest. The result has been an observable shift from competition to collaboration, both amongst the partners and within the broader children's environmental health space. This article describes the Partnership's experience with the constellation model over the past seven years. It also offers guidance to others who are seeking innovative approaches to collaboration in the social mission sector.

Author bios

Tonya Surman is the founding executive director of the Centre for Social Innovation. Tonya imagines the Centre as space that sparks creativity, connectedness and fun. Before this, she channelled her overzealous optimism into a national coalition of organizations working on children's environmental health, a social enterprise offering e-mail to activists and an edgy online news hub for Canadian progressives.

Mark Surman is in the business of connecting things: people, ideas, everything. A community technology activist for almost 20 years, Mark is currently an open philanthropy fellow at the Shuttleworth Foundation in Cape Town. He serves as senior partnership advisor to telecentre.org, a \$27 million program that invests in grassroots computing networks around the world. When he has time, Mark likes to write and convene conversations about all things 'open' in his hometown of Toronto.

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Introduction

"In spite of current ads and slogans, the world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what's possible."

*Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale
Margaret Wheatly and Deboarh Freize*

In 2000, a small group of Canadian NGOs started talking about issue of children's environmental health. Coming from a variety of backgrounds – childcare, public health, environmentalism – these groups were increasingly worried about the risks posed to children by toxics and other environmental hazards. Yet, no one group on its own had the mandate, skills or resources to fully deal with this complex issue. They realized there was only one way to address this growing issue: working together.

This decision resulted in the creation of the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and the Environment (CPCHE). The founding partners included: the Canadian Childcare Federation; the Canadian Environmental Law Association; Canadian Institute for Child Health; Canadian Physicians for the Environment; Environmental Health Clinic – Women's College Hospital, the Ontario College of Family Physicians; Ontario Public Health Association, Pollution Probe; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada; the South Riverdale Community Health Centre; and Toronto Public Health. These groups formed the partnership with the aim of: "working together to create a healthy environment for children in Canada."

The decision to work together led to quickly to a slate of thorny questions. How would they set collective goals? Would they have to agree on everything? How could they preserve their autonomy and diversity? Who would be 'in charge'? How could they best leverage each others' talents? These questions were daunting, and the some of the possible answers a bit scary. The group knew they wanted to create a flexible, lightweight and adaptable partnership, and not a heavy new umbrella NGO. With this in mind, they developed the 'constellation model' of partnering.

The constellation model is designed to bring together multiple groups or sectors to work toward a joint outcome. The focus is on action rather than dialogue. Public education, service delivery, research and other tangible social change activities are handled by small, self-organizing teams called 'constellations'. These teams are threaded into the overall partnership, which is held together using a complexity-inspired governance and management frameworkⁱⁱ that balances leadership amongst all participating partners. The aim is not to create a new organization to 'hold' the issue, which could end up competing for resources with its members. Rather, the aim

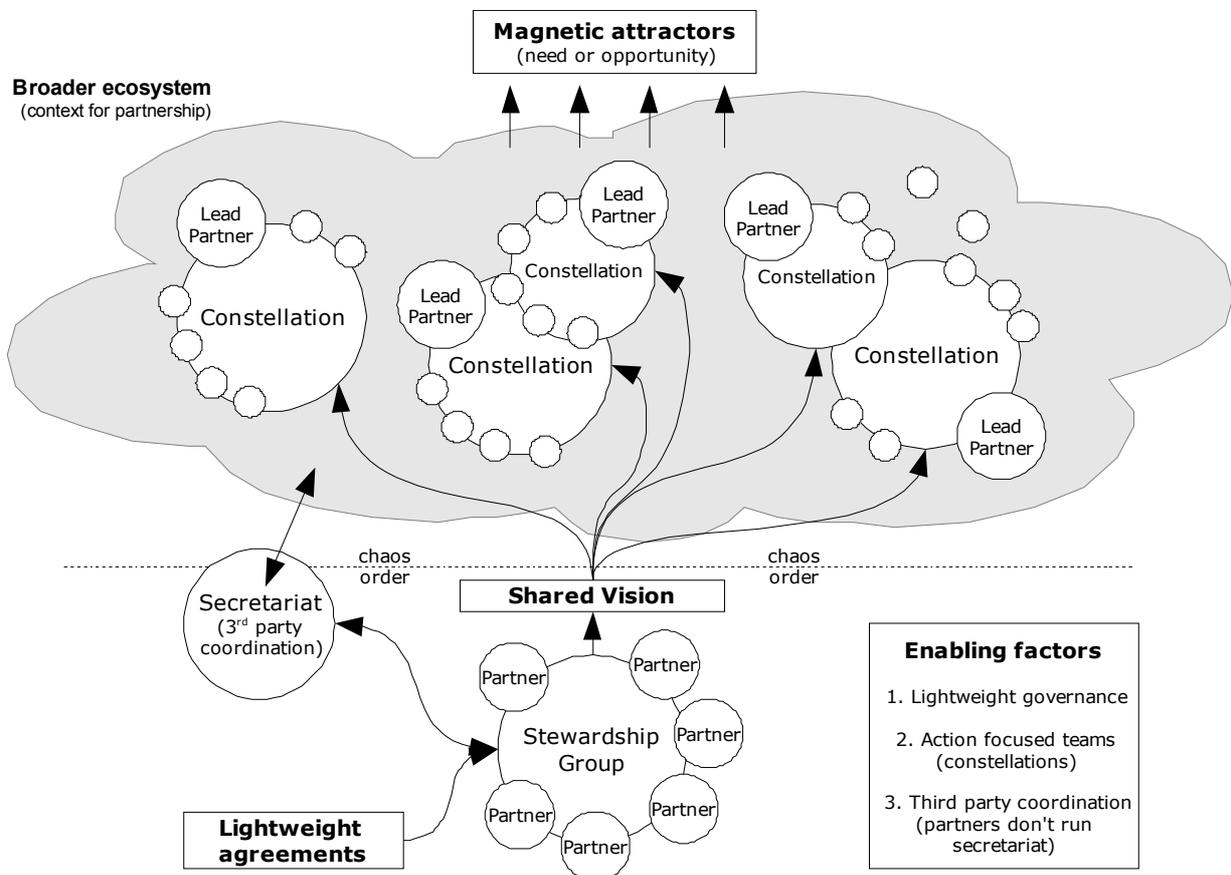
is to get things done in a nimble, high impact manner that responds to the energy and needs of the partners.

Building on seven years of experience from CPCHE, this article provides an overview of the constellation model. It includes an overview of the model and all of its components. It also touches on the results and learning generated by the Partnership.

Model

There is much talk about the potential of partnerships and networks to increase collaboration, reach and impact amongst social sector organizations. The 'constellation model' developed for CPCHE offers an innovative approach to organizing such collaborative efforts. Inspired by complexity theory, the model emphasizes the role of small, self-selecting action teams of partners working together on a particular task or issue. These constellations are outwardly focused, placing their attention on public awareness or the broader policy environment rather than on the partnership itself. While serious effort still goes into core partnership governance and management, decision making, resources and collaborative effort are focused in the constellations. The constellations drive and define the partnership. Leadership rotates fluidly amongst partners, with each partner having the chance to head up a constellation that matches its profile and skills, and to just participate or even opt out of others.

The following diagram provides an overview of the main components within this model as it has been used by the Partnership:



The biggest strength of this model is that it is built around the natural energy flows of a group. With the action-focused work residing in the constellations, these clusters become active and productive when a group of partners decides they have energy to work on the issue at hand. When there is low energy or declining opportunity, a constellation can become inactive or disappear altogether without distracting or taking energy from the overall partnership. Similarly, this emphasis on action teams accommodates the tensions that exist when several groups come together. If one group wants to prioritize research and another wants to work on public health education, they can. They simply start a constellation and other interested partners cluster around them. Organizing the collaboration around energy flows like this makes it possible to balance the interests, needs and whims of each group with the broader goal of highly productive collaboration.

Other major strengths include the ability to respond quickly to new ideas and the preservation of organizational autonomy within the collaborative. Partners apply the principle of 'emergence', listening for new needs and opportunities that related to the primary strategic work of the group. The constellation structure allows them to respond nimbly to these new needs and opportunities. It also makes it possible for groups to only engage with the activities that matter to them and to stay away from activities that don't align with their interests. The constellations are not a monolithic set of integrated projects, but rather 'loosely coupled' coordinated initiatives. This loose coupling is central to maintaining autonomy and nimbleness. The opportunity, chaos and entrepreneurship of independent organizations working in the broader ecosystem is balanced with order provided by a lightweight vision statement, coordination systems and accountability.

To fully grasp these strengths, it is important to understand the major elements of the model: **lightweight governance; action-focused work teams; third party coordination**. The best place to start is to look at the formation of a partnership and the creation of a lightweight governance structure.

Lightweight governance

A constellation-based partnership is created in response to a need or opportunity. This need or opportunity is described as a magnetic attractor. It is the important idea or issue that begs action. When a group of people recognize a common magnetic attractor, a great deal can be gained from forming a partnership to respond to the need or opportunity at hand. This partnership is designed to help them achieve both individual and shared outcomes.

The magnetic attractor is the most important part of the constellation model. Its draw – its magnetism - will determine the level of priority that the partners will give to the work of the partnership. It will determine the level of energy and initiative taking as well as the scope of work and the circle of partners who choose to join in. These things, in turn, drive the success of the partnership.

For CPCHE, the initial magnetic attractors were the need to raise awareness and mobilize action around toxic exposures and children's environmental health. In

particular, the group wanted decision-makers, service providers and caregivers to understand the pressing need to address both well known (lead jewellery aimed at kids) and emerging (PBDEs on plastic baby's bottles) threats. Although organizations were trying to work on these issues individually, it was clear that they were competing with each other for scarce resources and that their actions were uncoordinated. This resulted in confusion and limited impact.

Once the group has formed around a magnetic attractor, they needed to quickly form some sort of stewardship group whose purpose is to serve the broader collective vision of the group. This could be called a coordinating or steering committee. In small partnership, this group can be composed of representatives from each of the partnering organizations. In larger partnerships and networks, it may be made up well-trusted members of the of broader group who voluntarily step forward. However this group is defined, the important point is: these people are stewards of the community interest and the work that is being undertaken in relation to the magnetic attractor, and not representatives of their organization's interests. Each organization will be able to pursue its interests through the constellations.

The stewardship group is responsible for the overall health of the partnership and ensuring constellations are aligned with purpose of the partnership. It's first task is asking: how and why the group should work together? The answers to these questions are then fed into a set of plans and agreements. Once these foundational documents are in place, the group typically turns its energy to the practical matter of supporting early constellations: looking for opportunities; assessing the current assets; listening to partners with constellation ideas. The stewardship group is also responsible for inviting new partners to be a part of the collaboration.

In the case of CPCHE, the first step in this process included the creation of three key documents: guiding principles, a governance terms of reference and a strategic plan for the partnership..

The first document to be created was the CPCHE guiding principlesⁱⁱⁱ. These principles lay out the partners assumptions around the issue itself. For example, the partners agreed that "... all children and adults have the right to know about proven and potential hazards to their environmental health and safety." While, in some ways, this seems like motherhood, it actually serve well as a focusing statement for the group. It defines the magnetic attractor (hazards) and suggests how to focus on the issue should be dealt with (public health education and awareness raising).

The governance terms of reference are more straight forward^{iv}. They serve as a simple partnership agreement and framework to guide how the partners will work together. This agreement stipulated that the day-to-day coordination of the partnership must reside outside the partners (a key constellation model principle) and provided guidelines for decision making, money flows, secretariat services, conflict resolution and adding new partners (all focusing on 'as little process as possible'). The idea was to create plans and agreements that were specific enough to facilitate coordinated action but still loose enough for new initiatives to emerge organically and be seized upon quickly. This is all built around the idea of 'loose coupling', which is central to the constellation model.

Finally, the strategic plan articulated four overarching goals for the partnership. In CPCHE’s case, the goals are to: 1) raise the level of literacy about children’s environmental health in Canada; 2) support partners to engage in the changing policy to be more protective of child health; 3) advocate for more research; and 4) build the capacity of the partners and its burgeoning network to be able to engage more effectively on children’s environmental health issues. This strategic framework has been an essential element in scoping the work of the partnership and of clearly indicating the type of work that CPCHE constellations would likely be doing. While specific constellations and projects have come and gone over the seven year history of the Partnership, these goals have endured.

All of these documents provide a framework to support clear action on behalf of the partners. They enable energy to be more easily and clearly be directed. And, they provide guidance to the secretariat for how to facilitate the work of the partnership.

Action-focused work teams

With a stewardship group and simple, lightweight agreements in place, a foundation of order has been created. This foundation is the foundation on which the action-based chaos can emerge. This takes the form of constellations.

Constellations are self-organizing action teams that operate within the broader strategic vision of the partnership. They take the form of clusters of activity in which a subset of the partners voluntarily participate. Constellations can be formal projects, occasional and opportunistic initiatives or working groups that guide particular aspects of the work of the partnership. While they are focused around practice and the specific interests of members, they must also be consistent with the overall vision and plan of the partnership.

Two elements are needed to create a constellation: a need or opportunity and energetic leadership by one or more partner. In the case of CPCHE, many constellations have emerged, and some have already served out their purpose and disappeared. Amongst other things, there have been constellations on pesticide by-laws; promoting awareness amongst health and child care workers; toxics policy;; monitoring toxic substances; mercury; consumer products;; lead exposures. As the following table illustrates, this quickly created a structure where the partners could cluster around their own areas of interest:

	Pesticides	Health Promotion	Toxics Policy
Lead org	CELA	CCCF	Pollution Probe
Members	CAPE CELA CHEER OCFP PFO Pollution Probe TEA	CCCF EHC OPHA SRCHC TPH	CELA LDAC OPHA OCFP Pollution Probe TPH

Since starting seven years ago, CPCHE has begun over 15 different constellations. More than half of these have been phased out because the goals have been achieved or there is no longer energy. Clearly, this approach has allowed the partners galvanize quickly around a specific issue and then to disband when the issue has been addressed or when the energy of the group dies. All of this rapid change has happened without disrupting the vision or stability of the overall partnership.

When a constellation starts up, the participating partners define terms of reference for the constellation. What are their goals? How do they want to work? The group also discusses who amongst them should provide the energy to play a leadership role, who has the organizational capacity to be the financial lead and what role each of the members will play. Roles and responsibilities are matched with the assets of each group. Leadership moves from partner to partner, as does any potential funding that may be associated with the constellation.

If appropriate, the constellations will seek funding or other resources necessary to support their work. With CPCHE, many of the constellations have involved this sort of joint fundraising. Over \$CDN 3 million has been raised for these constellations over seven years, with funds flowing through at least half a dozen different partners. The advantages of this are obvious: resources are spread around in a manner that is relatively fair, but that also builds on the skills and capabilities of all the partners. Perhaps more importantly, partners have been able to raise considerably more money for children's environmental health together than they would have been able to raise alone.

Of course, some constellations don't need outside funding. For example, the lead constellation worked more like a self-organizing community of practice than a funded project. Partners shared information and strategized action in their joint work to eliminate lead exposures in Canada. In these cases, the constellations are working as a tool to share and leverage existing resources, and to avoid duplication of effort.

It should be noted that this model quite intentionally privileges initiative takers. Money and responsibility are spread around. However, leadership goes to those who step up with an idea and move it ahead. All types of leadership are valued and honoured in this model, as long as the leadership is consistent with the larger vision and goals of the group.

It's also worth highlighting the importance of loose coupling amongst the constellations. Like the stars in the sky, the constellations connect together to create a rough and chaotic whole (this is partly where they get their name). Partners come together based on their own interests and assets, which usually ensures that it's the 'right' partners at the table. This element of self-interest also makes it more likely that there are high levels of contribution and participation by the partners. There is something to be gained in make the constellations you care about work.

When the need or opportunity has been met, constellations can be 'creatively destroyed' or wound down. As each constellation is permeable -- groups can leave or join at will -- there is a natural pressure to remain relevant. When this relevance fades, the group disappears. This solves a common problem in social change efforts:

the desire to keep organizations alive even when their purpose has been served. The constellation makes it possible to 'destroy' the old purpose, releasing energy to feed into new and innovative collaborations.

Third-party coordination

When non-profits set up collaborative projects, they typically house the secretariat function within one of the partners. Usually it's the partner with the most capacity who takes on this role. While this works out sometimes, it is more often a disaster. Placing the coordination function within one of the partners completely and permanently alters the power dynamic of the group. One partner takes power. The others defer responsibility. Many partners lose energy and motivation. This serves no one.

With the constellation model, the secretariat or coordination function resides outside of the core partners. Any staff are either consultants or work for a third party intermediary organization. These people should be familiar and interested in the nature of the collaborative work, but should not have a seat at the table as a content provider. Their job is to support the process of the collaboration – guiding the planning process, facilitating meetings, supporting new constellations, fundraising for joint projects, mediating conflict, helping information to flow and building the overall capacity of the group to work towards their desired outcome.

In the case of CPCHE, the coordination function was initially housed within the Commons Group. This was a private consulting company dedicated to facilitating collaboration and community between social change organizations. Tonya Surman acted as the founding partnership director. A number of years into the project, the secretariat moved with Tonya to the Centre for Social Innovation, a Toronto NGO that incubates cutting edge social change initiatives.

At the core of the secretariat is at least one person committed to helping the group along. This is *not* be a junior 'coordinator' position. What's needed is a highly skilled and discriminating person who embodies collaborative leadership. Effectively, this position is the Executive Director of the partnership, but with a focus on process rather than content. Their purpose is to support to the content experts who are drawn from the organizations that make up the partnership. This person must strike a balance between driving the group process forward with nurturing leaders from the partner organizations.

Partnership and networks using the constellation model should *not* legally incorporate. This would warp the power dynamic of the group, creating an entity that is likely to compete with its own members for public recognition and funding. Despite an intent not to do this in the beginning, many formally incorporated umbrella NGOs end up becoming their members biggest competitors.

As there is no legal entity, fiscal and legal responsibility moves around. Constellations drive the model, leadership and resources for these constellations are constantly coming from different places and going to different organizations. The member managing a particular project takes legal and fiscal responsibility for that particular

set of tasks. This 'in motion' money and power management ensures that the active partners are compensated for their initiative. It also makes it less likely that the money and power will pool in one partner. If one or two partners tend to get all of the resources, the collaboration will become unbalanced and unhealthy. It is the role of the secretariat, in concert with the stewardship group and the funding community that balance the flow of leadership and money. The secretariat must have a commitment to building the capacity and involvement of the less active members.

One challenge with the lack of incorporation is the ability to amass 'core' funding to pay for the secretariat. Most grant funded organizations cover these costs by charging an overhead fee. However, with no grants going directly to the partnership as a whole, there is no overhead fee to serve this purpose. CPCHE got around this by agreeing to allocate a portion of administrative fees from each grant that the partners receive to the running of the secretariat. In a case where standard overhead fees are 15%, 10% was retained by the lead partner and 5% allocated to the running of the partnership itself. This ensured that, over time, some unrestricted income is accumulated to be used at the discretion of the stewardship group to serve the collaboration. Initially these funds were held in trust by one of the partners. Now, the trust fund sits with the Centre for Social Innovation^v in Toronto, an organization that is in the business of providing third-party support services for initiatives like CPCHE.

Finally, it is worth noting that the constellation model would not work – and the third party secretariat could not do its job -- without the Internet. Simple tools like e-mail lists, tracking changes in documents and a shared web site are critical to facilitating collaboration. The secretariat uses these tools to facilitate communication amongst the group. Part of this will happen at meetings, part of it will happen online and over the phone between the meetings. The 'space between' is especially critical in making sure that the group is fully informed and engaged.

Results

There is no question that the CPCHE partners succeeded at implementing the constellation model they dreamed up seven years ago. They have a lightweight governance model. Most of their effort is focused on action focused work teams. They have a stable third party coordination structure. Yet the question remains: what has this model given them? What are the results?

Certainly, there are a number of easy to identify achievements in areas like fundraising and materials production.

The partners have collectively raised \$CDN 3 million for children's environmental health work, and leveraged millions more of in kind resources. This is by all accounts more than any of the partners could have raised alone. Also, the partnership is likely to raise even more in future as new ideas bubble up from the partners and the broader ecosystem.

Similarly, the Partnership has produced a number of important publications on environmental health risks for children, ranging from serious research on the control of toxic substances to accessible plain language guides that help parents and daycare

workers keep children safe. Over a million copies of these publications have been distributed. More importantly, the quality and breadth of the publications has been heralded by both government and health officials, which can be attributed in part to the fact that they are built on the diverse knowledge of so many partners.

Yet, these are not results in themselves. They are simply outputs of from CPCHE's hard work.

The more meaningful – yet harder to measure – results of CPCHE's work are in areas like policy. CPCHE's work has influenced changes to the Pest Control Products Act, the Chemicals Management Plan for Canada and the Mandatory Core Guidelines for Health Promotion in Ontario. It has also helped to shape the debate around the new Canadian Environmental Protection Act and sparked discussions about reopening the Canadian Hazardous Products Act. The breadth of knowledge and diverse constituency represented by CPCHE partners has been central to this success in the realm of policy. CPCHE offers more than just 'one more group' with a position. It offers considered research and analysis based on the diverse expertise of its partners. As one CPCHE partner said in an evaluation interview: "The trust between the partners, the credibility of the partnership and our flexible structure enables us to quickly and strategically mobilize policy advocacy when needed."^{vi}

CPCHE has also had a tremendous impact on improving practices on-the-ground amongst health and day care workers. Over 1500 health and child care workers have attended CPCHE health promotion workshops. Through these workshops, they learn about environmental risks to children and ways to avoid these risks. As a result, more and more people working in health care are paying attention to environmental risk factors for children. This has rippled out to increased awareness about these issues amongst parents and the media. However, as with policy, it is hard to measure these results in a meaningful way, especially at this early stage.

Of course, there is a way in which CPCHE itself is a 'result'. Not in the sense that creating a constellation based partnership is an end in itself, but rather that this complexity-inspired model has created a resilient children's environment ecosystem in Canada. There is now a vibrant network of over 1000 thought leaders and service providers working on children's environmental health issues in Canada, all loosely affiliated to CPCHE. There are provincial collaborations on children's environmental health emerging in Alberta, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. And, there are new links amongst industry, government and NGOs as a result of CPCHE's collaborative approach to policy consultation. While amorphous in many respects, this 'network mesh' represents an important asset for addressing the environmental threats to children in the coming years.

Of course, CPCHE's ability to achieve these results does not mean that the constellation model has worked out perfectly. The group has struggled at times and has had to evolve its approach. The biggest challenges have been around capacity and speed. One partner said: "Building the capacity of the partners to all be able to contribute in a meaningful way is essential."^{vii} Special effort was needed early on to ensure that smaller partners had the ability to play as equals in the group. "There is now an element of group readiness to create constellations. However, it has taken a lot longer than we ever could have imagined to get the group to this point."^{viii}

Conclusion

The Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and the Environment shows that you can get more done together than alone. One partner said: "CPCHE partners have come together to work on projects that they wouldn't have otherwise been involved with. This is a concrete example of our achievement. This partnership is much greater than the sum of its parts."^x What's even more important, this collaboration happened in a high impact, relatively nimble fashion with a minimum of headaches. This is not typical in social mission partnerships.

At the core of this achievement is the simple constellation model formula of lightweight governance, action focused teams and third-party coordination. Others have noted this approach and have started to apply it to their own partnerships and networks. These include the telecentre.org consortium, The Belonging Initiative, the Ontario Nonprofit Network and Ontario Social Economy Initiative. While the details in these other experiments are different, the three part constellation model formula is the same.

The constellation model is far from being a solution for all partnership needs. However, it is helpful for organizations that want to solve concrete problems within the context of a rapidly changing, complex issue ecosystem. This is what led CPCHE to move towards constellations in the first place, and it is what has attracted these other organizations to experiment with constellations. All have understood that they can not achieve their goals alone but rather need to be players within the broader ecosystem.

As Paul Hawken observes in his book *Blessed Unrest*, the world of social change is now one characterized by 100,000s of small NGOs and community groups working on very specific issues. These organizations are increasingly connected to each other. This connectivity offers hope. "What has changed recently, and has offered evidence that hope may be a rational act despite the onslaught of countervailing data, is the use of connectivity. ... The insanity of human destructiveness may be matched by an older grace and intelligence that is fastening us together in ways that we have never before seen or imagined."^x

We are now in the era of networked social change. This is good news. It is also news that underlines the increased complexity within which social change and social innovation happen. It is amidst this background that we must not only transform our organizations but also learn to play well within dynamic ecosystems. The CPCHE constellation example offers one model that can help us do this. It shows that we can maintain organizational independence *and* collaborate nimbly with others. This is the way we need to work this new era.

- i Wheatly, Margaret and and Deboarh Freize. Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale. <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/emergence.html>
- ii Early thinking on the constellation model was inspired by Brenda Zimmerman's teaching on complexity and management. Examples include:
http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgeware/archive/think/main_aides3.html
- iii CPCHE Guiding Principles.
http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/english/about_us/guiding_principles.shtml
- iv CPCHE Governance Terms of Reference.
http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/english/about_us/governance.shtml
- v Centre for Social Innovation web site, 2007. <http://www.socialinnovation.ca>
- vi CPCHE Evaluation, April 2006. Submitted to the Ontario Trillium Foundation.
- vii CPCHE Evaluation, April 2006. Submitted to the Ontario Trillium Foundation.
- viii CPCHE Evaluation, April 2006. Submitted to the Ontario Trillium Foundation.
- ix CPCHE Evaluation, April 2006. Submitted to the Ontario Trillium Foundation.
- x Hawken, Paul. *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*. Viking, 2007. p. 163