RESEARCH REPORT

The Social Sector Infrastructure

Defining and Understanding the Concept

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Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

This report seeks to deepen understanding of the infrastructure—or support system—for the social sector in the United States. In doing so, it provides broad definitions of the social sector, the supports and services the social sector needs to thrive, and the infrastructure providers that deliver these supports and services. These definitions are intended to reflect the full breadth of the infrastructure for organizations, groups, and individuals advancing social missions in this country.

What is the social sector? The US social sector consists of private organizations (nonprofit, for-profit, and hybrids of the two), groups, and individuals acting to advance social missions as their primary purpose. This definition includes incorporated organizations as well as unincorporated groups and movements, and institutions as well as individuals.

What does the social sector need to thrive? To thrive, the social sector needs: (1) support for its **sustainability**, (2) opportunities for **learning**, (3) strong **relationships**, and (4) **influence** (figure ES.1). Sustainability requires financial resources, along with services that support mission, talent, and operations. Learning opportunities come from education, training, and knowledge development and dissemination. Strong relationships grow through convenings, networks, and leadership development. And influence increases through communications, civic engagement, and advocacy.

The Supports and Services the Social Sector Needs to Thrive
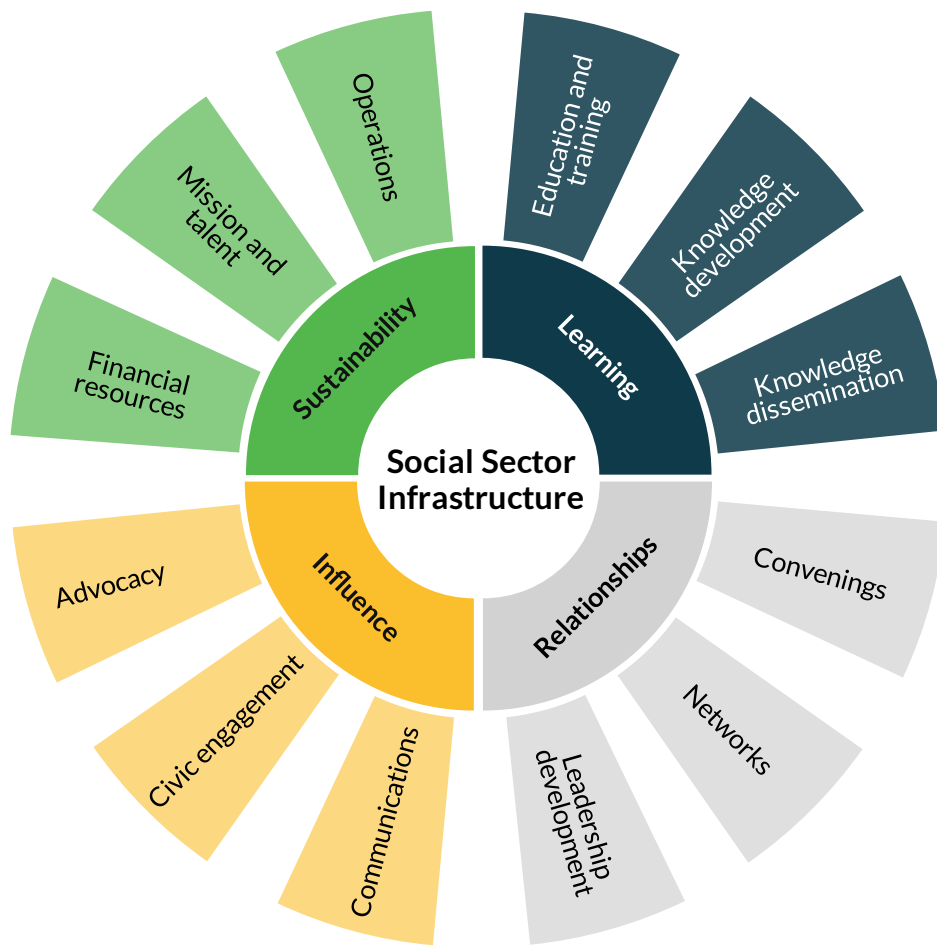
Source: Mobility Labs, for the Urban Institute.

Where does the social sector get this help? The social sector gets this help from social sector infrastructure providers, which serve and support the sustainability, learning, relationships, and influence of at least one of the sector's core constituencies. These infrastructure providers can be part of the social sector or work at for-profit businesses or public sector agencies. They can direct their services and supports to one or multiple social sector organizations, groups, or individuals, or they can serve an entire field.

What is the social sector infrastructure? The social sector infrastructure is the support system that helps the social sector thrive. It is an ecosystem of providers that offer services focused on

sustainability, learning, relationships, and influence to social sector organizations, groups, and individuals.

Why define social sector and social sector infrastructure broadly? The definitions offered here reflect a desire to acknowledge the full breadth of the supports and services for individuals, groups, and organizations that advance social missions in this country. Acknowledging this is essential for a more equitable understanding of both the contributions and needs of the social sector. We recognize that definitions that center the contributions of incorporated, or legally recognized, institutions can overshadow the contributions of unincorporated groups and individuals, at times leading to an overemphasis on large and white-led institutions and a devaluation of the many ways smaller entities and communities—including communities of color—and individuals can support one another. We also recognize the advantages and disadvantages of adopting broad definitions of social sector infrastructure providers, users, and needs for this project. Though our broad definitions make it more difficult to place boundaries around the social sector infrastructure and therefore to measure it quantitatively, we believe it is worth trading some definitional clarity for an expanded analytic scope.

We believe putting forward broad and inclusive definitions of the many supports, services, and actors in the social sector and its infrastructure reflects their diversity, scope, and impact. We grappled with some of the same definitional issues taken up in a recent debate among federal policymakers about how to define national infrastructure, with some arguing for a narrow definition of infrastructure focusing on roads and bridges and similar physical infrastructure, and others wanting also to include social infrastructure, such as child care, home health care, and affordable housing.[1] Similarly, our analysis goes beyond definitions of social sector infrastructure that focus on institutional support to incorporate services that target the well-being of people whose labor, commitment, and passion fuel the social sector.

Though the limits of this project do not allow us to explore all elements of the social sector and its infrastructure, we hope our definition and framework will inspire future research, as well as inform the way we think about, talk about, and support the social sector and its infrastructure.

The Social Sector Infrastructure: Defining and Understanding the Concept

The social sector, which is vital to the functioning of our democratic society, needs an infrastructure, or support system, to help it thrive. We believe in the critical importance of a robust infrastructure to support the social sector because a country that works for all requires a social sector that also works for all, with a strong infrastructure in place to support it. Our Urban Institute / George Mason University social sector infrastructure team includes people who have researched the infrastructure, led and served in infrastructure organizations, funded infrastructure organizations, and received infrastructure services. Our experiences studying and writing about, working within, supporting, and benefiting from the infrastructure affect our perspectives on its value.

In recent years, the social sector infrastructure has received increased attention and efforts have been made to define and analyze important segments of it. The 2002 and 2012 analyses of the national nonprofit infrastructure in the *State of Nonprofit America* volume identified the major components of that infrastructure and discussed its origins and current state (Abramson and McCarthy 2002, 2012). A *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs* article built on those analyses by considering infrastructure organizations that serve local communities and giving special attention to the role of nonprofit academic centers housed in colleges and universities in providing support services to nonprofits and communities (Prentice and Brudney 2018). A 2009 special issue of *Nonprofit Quarterly* described and mapped the national nonprofit and philanthropic infrastructures and discussed important issues related to them (Boris et al. 2009). Similarly, in 2015 and 2018 reports, the Foundation Center (now part of Candid), in partnership with the Hewlett Foundation, analyzed foundation funding for nonprofit and philanthropic infrastructures (Bokoff et al. 2018; Dillon et al. 2015). CF Insights and CFLeads (2017) assessed the existing services and needs of community foundations and identified a typology of needed services. In its work, WINGS, a global network that works to strengthen philanthropy around the world, identified the major components of the philanthropic infrastructure and refined the language used to describe it (WINGS 2014, 2017, 2021).

Focusing on another important segment of social sector infrastructure, the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation described a typology of civic infrastructure in 2020 (Nielsen 2020). Later that year, Cyndi Suarez proposed a civic infrastructure designed to support leaders of color.[2] These and earlier

studies provided valuable insights about the social sector infrastructure and serve as the foundation on which this report builds.

To accompany this report, our team developed an infographic and interactive feature that further explain the project's broad definitions of "social sector" and "social sector infrastructure."[3] Subsequent reports from this study will include an overview of national infrastructure's financing, a look at the state of national infrastructure with recommendations on how it needs to evolve to meet the social sector's needs, and a guide with objectives and action steps for strengthening the national social sector infrastructure.

We hope our exploration of the social sector infrastructure will help funders, social sector infrastructure leaders and staff, and people in the social sector who wish to learn more about its infrastructure. Funders, including private and governmental funders, can use this study to better understand the parts of the social sector infrastructure that have been overlooked and need greater financial support. Social sector infrastructure providers can use it to identify strategic priorities and areas for growth and partnership. And individuals, groups, and institutions in the social sector can learn about a wide array of available infrastructure resources, as well as gaps in such resources that may require collective advocacy to address.

Methodology

To develop our definitions and typologies of "social sector" and "social sector infrastructure," beginning in June 2021 we conducted a literature review of prior definitions of these terms and their synonyms; consulted with two advisory committees that included 23 people; gathered input from four focus groups with 32 participants; and drew on the diverse experiences of our team.

Literature Review

To deepen our understanding of the social sector and social sector infrastructure, we began by reviewing analyses of these topics. In addition to academic papers, we reviewed a broad range of nonacademic writing.

One of our initial tasks was to review literature that uses the terms "social sector" and "social sector infrastructure" and related words and phrases (e.g., "nonprofit support system" or "ecosystem"). This initial review helped us more clearly understand how these key terms have been used. To find relevant

studies, we searched academic and nonacademic sources. Drawing on the definitions we found and the input we received from advisers and focus group members, we developed definitions to use for this study.

In the early stages of our project, we also reviewed literature on aspects of the social sector—including social movements, social enterprises, impact investing, civic engagement, and faith-based organizations—that have not typically been included in studies of the social sector and its infrastructure.

After receiving input from advisers and settling on broad definitions of "social sector" and "social sector infrastructure," we evaluated typologies of the social sector infrastructure. We searched a variety of databases to find relevant classification schemes. In these searches, we found several typologies of parts of the infrastructure. These classifications took a range of approaches; some focused on one component of the infrastructure, such as nonprofit infrastructure, philanthropic infrastructure, or civic engagement infrastructure, and others covered a mix of components. Appendix A includes the full list of infrastructure typologies we referenced.

Consultation with Advisory Groups

As noted above, to provide guidance on our social sector infrastructure study, we established an advisory committee comprising a diverse group of 13 social sector infrastructure leaders (see a list of advisory committee members in appendix B). In addition to consulting with the committee, we received input from the Infrastructure Research Collaborative (IRC) advisory board, a group of funders and practitioners hosted by our funder, New Venture Fund (see a list of IRC members in appendix C). We met with the advisory committee and the IRC advisory board in virtual meetings and further engaged members through email correspondence. The advisory committee and IRC advisory board provided valuable feedback regarding our proposed definitions of social sector and social sector infrastructure, and recommended infrastructure providers to engage in our research.

Focus Groups

To gather new information to supplement our literature review and input from the advisory committee and IRC, our team organized four focus groups in January and February 2022 with members of the social sector and its infrastructure providers. Each focus group had 6 to 10 participants and addressed one area of infrastructure supports and services: sustainability, learning, relationships, or influence. In

advance of meeting, participants received our draft definitions of "social sector" and "social sector infrastructure" as well as a list of activities falling under each area. During the focus groups, we received feedback on our draft definitions and asked participants questions to probe their views of the infrastructure activities and solicit examples of infrastructure providers.

We drew on the feedback from the focus groups, input from the IRC advisory group and advisory committee, the literature, and the expertise of our project staff to finalize our definitions, infographic, interactive feature with examples of infrastructure providers, and this report.

The Social Sector Defined

The US social sector consists of private organizations (nonprofit, for-profit, and hybrids of the two), groups, and individuals acting to advance social missions as their primary purpose. This definition includes incorporated organizations as well as unincorporated groups and movements, and institutions as well as individuals.

Social sector organizations are incorporated entities—nonprofits, for-profits, or hybrids of the two—whose main purpose is to achieve a social mission. Nonprofits include 501(c)(3) charities and other tax-exempt organizations defined by the Internal Revenue Service. For-profits with a primary social mission include cooperatives, third-party certified ventures, traditional corporate forms, and new corporate forms. Hybrids include nonprofit parents with for-profit subsidiaries, for-profit parents with nonprofit subsidiaries, and commercial co-ventures. (See appendix D for a complete list of social sector organizations.)

Social sector groups are groups of individuals united around a common social purpose in the short or long terms that do not have nonprofit, for-profit, or hybrid business status. These can include mutual aid societies, neighborhood associations, faith communities, giving circles, and social movements.

Social sector individuals are people acting in their own capacity to achieve a social mission. These can include organizers, voters, volunteers, and donors.

Reviewing the Literature on "Social Sector," "Civil Society," and "Nonprofit Sector"

We began developing our definition of "social sector" by exploring previous definitions of "social sector," "civil society," and "nonprofit sector." Though sometimes vague and ambiguous, several

definitions of the social sector and its synonyms incorporate language about advancing the public good or a social mission through private action, meaning outside of government.

Markets for Good, an initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, and Liquidnet, describes the social sector as "nonprofit and for-profit entities around the world that are trying to achieve a positive social impact" (Markets for Good 2012, 2). The social sector is "society's way of caring for the people, places, and things that are not addressed by the market or the government" (Markets for Good 2012, 5). Though its definition of the social sector focuses on private organizations "devoted to creating social good" (Markets for Good 2012, 5), it also describes the key role of social sector stakeholders, some of whom, like government, fall outside the private sphere (Markets for Good 2012, 5).

Continuing the focus on private organizations in definitions of the social sector, Candid recently launched its US social sector dashboard to better understand how to describe the social sector and understand data and key facts about it. According to the dashboard, "the social sector is the domain of private action for public good."[4] It includes registered nonprofits, unincorporated community groups, and churches and religious organizations. It also includes some organizations that touch the spheres of business (social businesses, B corporations, and cooperatives) and government (political organizations and quasi-governmental organizations).[5] Though the quasi-governmental organizations in Candid's definition of social sector allow room for organizations that some consider governmental, Candid does not include government in its definition.

Similarly, definitions of civil society also focus outside of government. Dan Cardinali, former president and CEO of Independent Sector, writes that his conception of civil society is grounded in "a notion of *private action in service of the public good*."[6] Other definitions of civil society have stressed its mediating role as a social realm positioned between the individual/family and the state (Ehrenberg 1999).

Unlike "social sector" and "civil society," which are often defined in different ways, we see more similar definitions for the "nonprofit sector," such as those put forth by Lester Salamon (2012) and Elizabeth Boris (Boris, McKeever, and Leydier 2017), in reference to the set of incorporated entities that have qualified for tax-exempt status under the US Internal Revenue Code. Occasional ambiguity about the term "nonprofit sector" still exists, as with "social sector" and "civil society." For the nonprofit sector, uncertainty may concern whether people using the term "nonprofit sector" are referring only to charitable nonprofits exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the tax code; to organizations exempt under other sections, such as more politically oriented nonprofits that may be exempt under sections 501(c)(4) or 527; or to all tax-exempt entities. We include all tax-exempt entities in our definition of nonprofits.

Developing Our Definition of "Social Sector"

Our primary decisions in defining the social sector included whether to include the public sector and whether to broaden our scope beyond charitable nonprofits and other incorporated institutions. In alignment with the abovementioned sources describing "social sector" and "civil society," we chose to focus our definition of social sector on private—specifically, nongovernmental—entities. Excluding governmental agencies from our definition of the social sector recognizes the important differences between government on the one hand and private institutions, like nonprofits and social businesses, on the other. It also reflects widespread attitudes toward sectoral boundaries and relationships in this country.

In focusing our work around the "social sector," with a broad definition that goes beyond the nonprofit sector to include businesses with a primary social mission, unincorporated groups with a social mission, and individuals acting in a mission-oriented way, we attend to all kinds of private organizations, collectives, and people that advance a social mission. This choice of a definition reflects our prioritization of mission-oriented work done outside government, and our understanding that this work exists beyond the province of nonprofit organizations and includes other nongovernmental entities and individuals.

In many ways, the components of the social sector enumerated in our definition closely mirror Candid's categories of the social sector. Our full list of social sector organizations (appendix D) includes the same list of IRS-registered nonprofits, along with types of businesses with a social mission that share attributes with businesses and nonprofits, and hybrids of the two. Like Candid, we include unincorporated groups in our definition of the social sector. Unlike Candid, we include individuals, such as organizers, voters, volunteers, and donors. In including individuals pursuing a social mission, we acknowledge the importance they, whether wealthy or not, play in advancing their notions of a better society; the important role organizers, paid and unpaid, play in social movements around the country; and the important role volunteers and voters play in advancing civic engagement.

The Social Sector Infrastructure Defined

The social sector infrastructure is the support system that helps the social sector thrive. It is an ecosystem of providers that offer services focused on sustainability, learning, relationships, and influence to social sector organizations, groups, and individuals.

Reviewing the Literature on Infrastructure

We developed our definition of "social sector infrastructure" by reflecting on definitions of the broader term "infrastructure" and then looking at uses of "social sector infrastructure" and related terms like "nonprofit infrastructure," "philanthropic infrastructure," and "civic infrastructure."

The English language adopted the word "infrastructure" from French in the 1900s. Originally, infrastructure referred to engineering work completed before the construction of railroad tracks. That definition changed and expanded, and its use broadened beyond engineering. "Infrastructure" appeared in English dictionaries for the first time in the 1960s. It began to be used to refer not only to physical installations but to social organizations. As reported by Carse (2016, 34), by 1982, President Reagan could describe his foreign policy objective "as fostering 'the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way'" (quoted in Batt 1984, 5).

In a recent national debate on infrastructure legislation, some argued for a narrow definition of infrastructure focusing on roads and bridges and similar physical infrastructure (or "tangible projects"), whereas others wanted also to include social infrastructure, such as child care, home health care, and affordable housing. The *New York Times* explained,

> Proponents of considering the bulk of Mr. Biden's proposals—including roads, bridges, broadband access, support for home health aides and even efforts to bolster labor unions—argue that in the 21st century, anything that helps people work and lead productive or fulfilling lives counts as infrastructure. That includes investments in people, like the creation of high-paying union jobs or raising wages for a home health work force that is dominated by women of color.[7]

A multifaceted term, "infrastructure" suggests definitions that converge around an understanding of support and services that represent core or fundamental components of some larger system.

The Siegel Family Endowment highlights the dangers of poorly designed or inadequate infrastructure:

> It serves as the connections that bind us and lift us up, from the aqueducts of Rome to Thomas Edison's telegraph lines to the 5G networks of today. It's cellular networks and satellite arrays. It's also access to the internet, digital commerce, and tools for social interaction. When designed and governed properly, infrastructure is seamless—empowering people, companies, and governments to prosper. But when it's designed poorly, it can literally divide us…To solve issues as urgent as racial injustice, income and wealth inequality, and climate change, we must begin by rethinking our infrastructure. To do this, we must first recognize that our infrastructure is multidimensional.[8]

While some sources discuss "social sector infrastructure," few define the term using those exact words; most other definitions invoke nonprofit, philanthropic, and civic infrastructure (table 1). According to Fidelity Charitable, "There is no clear and widely shared definition of infrastructure for the social sector" (2018, 2). Recently, billionaire philanthropist MacKenzie Scott defined social sector infrastructure in a letter explaining the purpose of a large round of philanthropic giving in 2021:

> Social sector infrastructure organizations empower community leaders, support grassroots organizing and innovation, measure and evaluate what works, and disseminate information so that community leaders, elected officials, volunteers, employees, and donors at every level of income can make informed decisions about how to partner and invest. These organizations, which themselves are historically underfunded, also promote and facilitate service, which in turn inspires more people to serve.[9]

Scott's enumeration of social sector infrastructure organizations echoes definitions that emphasize infrastructure's variety of functions. Scott also underscores the numerous entities aided by infrastructure and the indirect—or sometimes hidden—work of infrastructure which serves its purpose by helping others do their work, as, for example, the infrastructure service organizations Scott cites which inspire others to action.

TABLE 1
Definitions of Nonprofit, Philanthropic, and Civic Infrastructure

	Source	Definition
Nonprofit infrastructure	Gibson, "Why Every Foundation Should Fund Infrastructure"[a]	"A wide and diverse network of intermediary organizations at the local, state, regional, and national levels—that helps the individual nonprofit organizations supported by funders become optimally effective."
	Boris (2009, 7)	"The network of organizations that supports the nonprofit sector."
	Thurman, "What Does the Future Hold for Nonprofit Infrastructure Organizations?"[b]	"As a broad definition, nonprofit infrastructure refers to those organizations (that usually have a membership component) who provide capacity building, technical assistance, consulting, workshops, training, conferences, advocacy and research for the nonprofit and philanthropic sector."
	Abramson and McCarthy (2012, 423)	Infrastructure organizations "support [other nonprofits]…by improving their effectiveness and representing them in the policymaking process."
	Bokoff et al. (2018, 2)	Infrastructure organizations are "support organizations [that] have emerged over time to enable, strengthen, and evolve [the work of civil society organizations]."
	Jayasinghe, "Don't Rebuild, Upbuild!—Reimagining Nonprofit Infrastructure"[c]	"Nonprofit infrastructure means the internal management systems, strategies, and processes that support leadership and leadership pipelines, strategy development, talent management, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, governance, communications, technology, fundraising and risk management, and financial management. It is vital work that nonprofits need to embrace in order to meet their mission and goals."

Source	Definition
Philanthropic infrastructure/ philanthropic ecosystem	
Knight and Ribiero (2017, 11)	The infrastructure is a "positive environment" that "includes a legal framework that empowers [organizations], a tax structure that provides incentives for giving, an accountability system that builds confidence in philanthropy and civil society, sufficient institutional capacity to implement effective activities and sufficient resources to undertake these activities, and a strong culture of giving to grow philanthropy."
Milner, "What is Philanthropy Infrastructure For?"[d]	Philanthropy infrastructure is "the organizations underpinning philanthropy worldwide."
WINGS (2021, 18)	"The community of interacting organisations, functions and activities that assists and enables the achievement of philanthropy's potential by nurturing its capacity, capabilities, connection and credibility."
Civic infrastructure	
Nielsen (2020)	"Civic engagement infrastructure describes the ways collaborating organizations join forces to promote community power, resources, policy shifts, and other desirable social and political outcomes."
Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World"[e]	"Infrastructure is not just physical space or things, but the ability and capacity to be part of what we're building. It is the ability to make power accountable, including ours. It is real access to resource distribution. It is interest and skill in talking across paradigms. It is multi-vocal efforts. It is alignment. It is cultural production. It is the capacity to imagine, and create, something better—and in an exponential fashion, because time is running out."
Independent Sector[f]	"Infrastructure must be about the civic underpinnings of our society—charitable giving, volunteering, national service, advocacy and voting. These are the practices that knit the fabric of our communities and our nation and create the conditions for societal change."
PACE Funders[g]	"Efforts that build tools for engagement, such as building nonprofit or philanthropic capacity for problem solving, open data/transparency, information/journalism."

Notes:

[a] Cynthia Gibson, "Why Every Foundation Should Fund Infrastructure," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, January 25, 2008, https://nonprofit quarterly.org/why-every-foundation-should-fund-infrastructure/.

[b] Rosetta Thurman, "What Does the Future Hold for Nonprofit Infrastructure Organizations?" *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, July 10, 2009, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what_does_the_future_hold_for_nonprofit_infrastructure_organizations.

[c] Tiloma Jayasinghe, "Don't Rebuild, Upbuild!—Reimagining Nonprofit Infrastructure," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, October 19, 2021, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/dont-rebuild-upbuild-reimaging-nonprofit-infrastructure/.

[d] Andrew Milner, "What is Philanthropy Infrastructure For?" *Alliance Magazine*, December 5, 2017, https://www.alliancemagazine.org/analysis/what-is-philanthropy-infrastructure-for/.

[e] Cyndi Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, November 4, 2020, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/infrastructure-for-a-new-world/.

[f] "Civic and Community Infrastructure," Independent Sector, accessed September 2, 2022, https://independentsector.org/policy/nonprofit-policy-issues/civic-and-community-infrastructure/.

[g] "The Civic Engagement Primer," PACE Funders, accessed September 2, 2022, http://www.pacefunders.org/civic-engagement-primer/.

While we see differences between the various definitions, we also see important similarities. Many of the definitions reference aspects of infrastructure providers, services, users, and goals. For example, one can find infrastructure providers in different geographic areas with different service areas: local, state, and national. The infrastructure services mentioned in different definitions include building capacity, organizing workshops, facilitating connections, and building credibility. The definitions often take root in a functional understanding of infrastructure: infrastructure provides key services. In some cases, infrastructure providers direct those services to particular organizations, and in others, to the social sector more generally. This significant distinction hinges on considerations of whose interests the infrastructure serves. The functions provided by social sector infrastructure in these definitions vary but often relate to issues of organizational effectiveness. In these cases, infrastructure helps social sector entities fulfill their purposes and aims, without shaping what those purposes and aims might be. But there are also hints in several of these definitions of a more radical and transformative definition of infrastructure.

As reflected in table 1, some definitions focus on infrastructure users that are nonprofits, whereas others focus on philanthropic or civic users. With reference to these various users, goals of infrastructure include enhancing their ability to pursue their visions, increasing their effectiveness, enhancing transparency, and promoting community power. As described below, we drew on these diverse definitions in developing our own definitions and analysis.

Developing Our Definition of Infrastructure

Once we had a general sense of the ways others have defined social sector infrastructure and related terms, we investigated how typologies (box 1) have described the full breadth of the field.

What Are Typologies?

Typologies are a form of classification defined as "organized systems of types" (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012, 217). A typology is also "any analysis of a particular category of phenomena (e.g., individuals, things) into classes based on common characteristics, such as a typology of personality."[a] A typology "conceptually separates a given set of items" (Smith 2002, 381). By creating a typology of social sector infrastructure, we can deepen understanding of the different components of this infrastructure.

Note:
[a] "APA Dictionary of Typology," American Psychological Association," accessed September 15, 2022, https://dictionary.apa.org/typology.

We first wanted to understand the structures of previous typologies to determine which we wanted to use for our project. We analyzed typologies of social sector infrastructure and found that most had three components—infrastructure functions, providers, and users—often in combination with one another, with the most emphasis on the providers' infrastructure functions. Together, the three components speak to what the infrastructure does, who provides services, and who receives them. Our review of the literature helped us develop our typology of the social sector infrastructure, which uses these three components.

What Does the Social Sector Need to Thrive?

To thrive, the social sector needs: (1) support for its **sustainability**, (2) opportunities for **learning**, (3) strong **relationships**, and (4) **influence** (figure 1). Many in the infrastructure provide services and supports in more than one of these areas, and some of these areas build on and overlap with others, illustrating the interdependency of the social sector infrastructure ecosystem.

FIGURE 1
The Supports and Services the Social Sector Needs to Thrive

Operations

Education and training

Mission and talent

Knowledge development

Financial resources

Sustainability

Learning

Knowledge dissemination

Social Sector Infrastructure

Advocacy

Influence

Relationships

Convenings

Civic engagement

Communications

Leadership development

Networks
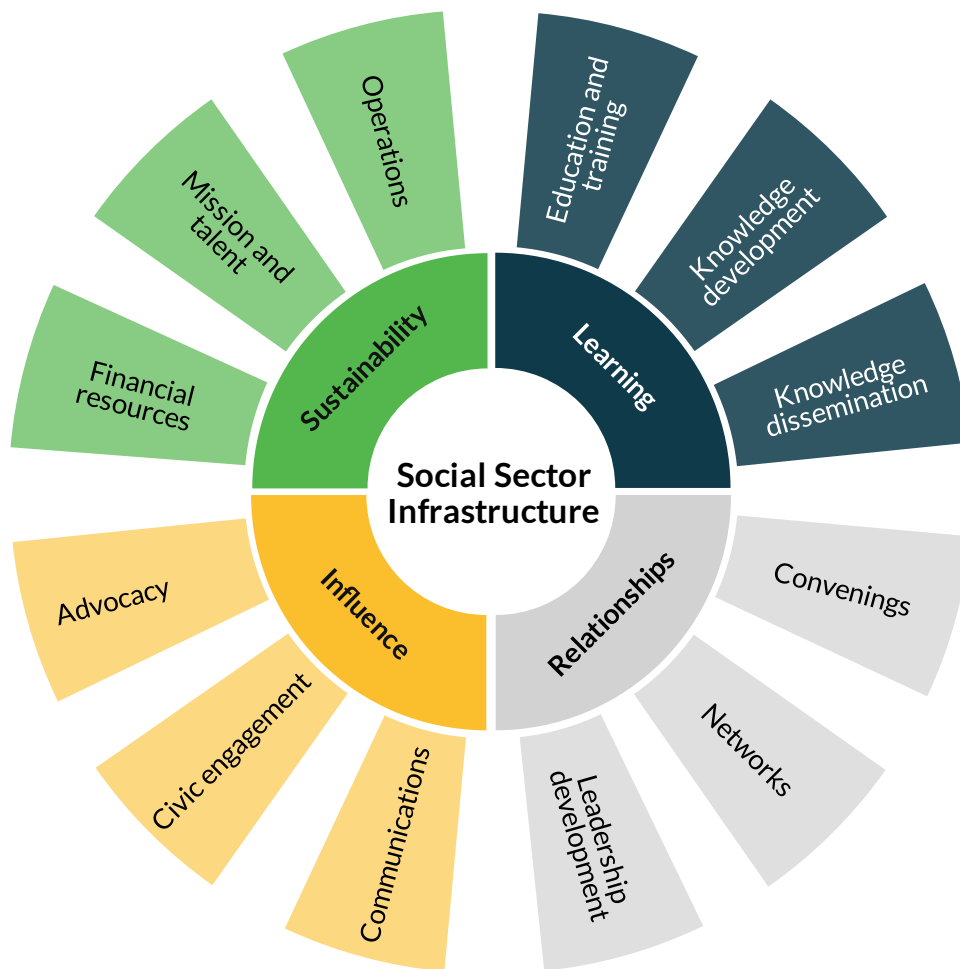
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Source: Mobility Labs, for the Urban Institute.

Our typology, further described in the subsections below (Sustainability, Learning, Relationships, and Influence), shares our understanding of what the social sector needs to thrive. But infrastructure providers do not meet all these needs through their supports and services (figure 2). Relatedly, social sector users do not use all of the infrastructure services and supports that fall into these categories.

FIGURE 2
How Infrastructure Services and Supports Overlap with Social Sector Needs and Aspirations
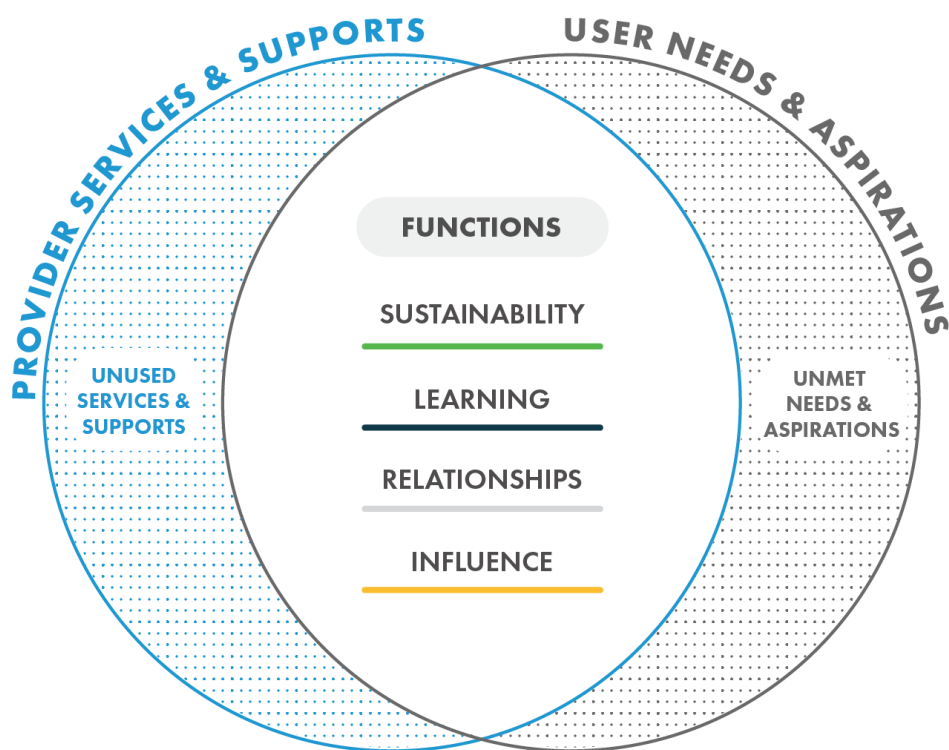
Source: Urban Institute.

Sustainability

Sustainability supports and services fall into three categories: financial resources, mission and talent, and operations. **Financial resources** make it possible for social sector entities to work toward their missions. Examples include individual donations, redistributed funds, corporate and foundation grants, impact investments, donated goods, and government funding. **Mission and talent** services help social sector entities develop and strengthen their purpose and people. Examples include strategic planning; recruitment and retention of staff, leaders, and volunteers; incubators and accelerators; and support that meets the basic needs of people in the social sector and ensures their well-being. **Operations** services help social sector entities with administrative needs. Examples include technology, accounting, fundraising, finance, legal services, information technology, facilities management, and fiscal sponsorship.

These essential supports and services enable social sector entities to survive and function. We label infrastructure services in this category as "sustainability" supports because of their importance in aiding the continued existence of social sector entities.

To develop the three categories that fall under "sustainability," we reviewed sustainability-like functions listed in nonprofit, philanthropic, and civic infrastructure typologies and consulted with our advisers and focus group participants to refine our list. Table 2 shows how the infrastructure typology literature we reviewed matches up with our three types of sustainability supports and services: financial resources, mission and talent, and operations. In some cases, a subcategory shows up twice in this chart if the component parts of its definition fit with more than one of our sustainability supports and services. For example, the definition of "management training and support" in the Abramson and McCarthy (2012, 430) typology includes some components that align with our definition of "mission and talent" and others that align with "operations," so we list "management training and support" in both of those categories. For a full list of the functions for the sources in table 2, please see appendix E.

TABLE 2

Sustainability Functions Included in Infrastructure Typologies

Source	Financial resources	Mission and talent	Operations
Renz (2009, 30–31)	Funding organizations; financial intermediaries	Donor and resource advisers; workforce development and deployment; capacity development and technical assistance	Capacity development and technical assistance
Abramson and McCarthy (2012, 430–32)	Financial intermediaries	Management training and support	Management training and support
CF Insights and CFLeads (2017, 16)		Strategic planning; staff development; board development; business model analysis	Donor prospecting and development; investment advising; communications and technology strategy; legal services
Prentice and Brudney (2018, 44)		Member support; consultation services; management guidance	Member support; consultation services; management guidance
Nielsen (2020, 7)	Funders	Capacity building and technical assistance	
Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World."[a]		Vision; space to replenish	
WINGS (2021, 7–8)		Generating human resources; cocreating and augmenting strategies; anchoring and supporting implementation; enhancing human potential	Generating financial resources; generating digital assets

Note:

[a] Cyndi Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, November 4, 2020, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/infrastructure-for-a-new-world/.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Input from our focus groups and advisers emphasized the importance of infrastructure providers helping social sector entities obtain the financial resources they need. Previous analyses (Abramson and McCarthy 2012; Nielsen 2020; Renz 2009) have highlighted funding organizations and intermediaries as components of infrastructure. In our typology of sustainability supports and services, we split the financial resources that social sector entities receive and the support that helps raise and aggregate resources into the financial resources and operations categories, respectively.

As table 2 shows, four of the seven typologies we studied did not include financial resources among the infrastructure functions they highlight. We include financial resources as a category of sustainability in our typology because we find it essential to sustainability. In describing funding organizations, Renz (2009) names private foundations and individual donors but also refers to nonprofits and some for-profits. According to Nielsen (2020), the trailblazing civic engagement funders have mostly been medium-sized and place-based funders with close ties to grantees and donor collaboratives through which funders cooperate and share resources. In addition to the private funders identified in those two sources, we include government funders because they provide much of the income of social sector entities. For social sector entities looking for loans and equity investments, impact investments provide another important source of revenue. Renz (2009) includes loans in his financial intermediaries and funding organizations categories. While we recognize that including financial resources as a function of infrastructure significantly broadens the definition of who provides infrastructure services and complicates measuring the size of the infrastructure provider field, we believe financial resources are a critical component of what enables the social sector to thrive.

MISSION AND TALENT

In the "mission and talent" section, we include the capacity building, technical assistance, and staff development infrastructure activities included in the other infrastructure typologies (Abramson and McCarthy 2012; CF Insights and CFLeads 2017; Nielsen 2020; Prentice and Brudney 2018; Renz 2009; WINGS 2021).[10] These typologies have covered some forms of support for staff, leaders, and volunteers of social sector organizations, but have focused mostly on talent recruitment and people management and less on the emotional and physical well-being of the people who make the work of social sector organizations possible.

With the exception of Suarez's 2020 *Nonprofit Quarterly* article, our focus on care and well-being support does not appear in most of the typologies described above, but it picks up on additional analyses that we reviewed. In a 2018 article, Sarah Kastelic, executive director of the National Indian

Child Welfare Association and a member of the Alutiiq Indigenous people (and member of our advisory committee; see appendix B), writes about five spheres of well-being that encompass the physical sphere, which includes "ties to homeland" and respect for the natural world; the emotional sphere, which includes faith, humor, and spiritual life; the social sphere, which includes kinship, elders, and the community; the ethical sphere, which includes sharing and trust; and the cognitive sphere, which includes heritage language, "learning by doing, observing, and listening," and traditional arts and skills.[11]

Echoing Kastelic's contribution, the relational worldview developed by Terry Cross builds around the balance between context (or, relationships and environment), the mind (or, intellect and emotions), the body, and spirit within a person (Cross 1995). Cross represents this model as four quadrants in a circle, which symbolizes the circle of one's life. The National Indian Child Welfare Association developed the relational worldview into the Relational Worldview Model. Using this model, the four quadrants can also apply to organizations, which must find a balance between the environment (context), infrastructure (mind), mission (spirit), and resources (body) (Cross and Kastelic 2021).

Drawing on conversations with leaders of color, Suarez discusses the need for "space to replenish," which may involve time away to imagine other possibilities, build trust with one another, mitigate risk, and engage the "head, heart, and spirit."[12] The views of Cross, Kastelic, and Suarez on community support go beyond the technical assistance needs of social sector entities and emphasize the need for mental, spiritual, and personal support that promotes community building and inclusion.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic also makes clear the importance of including support for basic needs as a significant component of support and services that advance "mission and talent." During the first year of the pandemic, many front-line workers throughout the United States had to continue working as usual.[13] Pressure to work in the face of crisis (whether related to the pandemic, racial reckoning, or economic downturn) has harmed workers' mental and physical well-being, contributing to the Great Resignation and Great Reshuffling of workers that has occurred in recent years.[14] Without meeting people's basic and well-being needs, such as by paying a living wage, providing strong health and retirement benefits, offering time off for parenting and other caregiving duties, and prioritizing mental health, or through retreats, sabbaticals, or work cultures that promote rest alongside productivity, people in the social sector may suffer from physical and mental health challenges, including burnout.

As noted, in our description of "mission and talent," we align with Kastelic and Suarez by including activities that provide for basic and well-being needs among the critical functions of what sustains the social sector. People, whether working at social sector institutions, in unincorporated groups, or in their

capacity as individuals, must have their basic needs met to advance their social missions. We therefore include individual care and well-being as part of infrastructure services and supports just as we include the financial and technical assistance that can help organizations grow and thrive.

OPERATIONS

In our three sustainability categories, we chose to separate "operations" from "mission and talent investment," whereas other analyses have combined them. For example, we place services, such as fundraising, financial management and accounting, and information systems, in the operations subfunction, whereas Renz (2009, 31) has these in his broad "capacity development and technical assistance" category. A similar overlap between "operations" and "mission and talent investment" exists in Abramson and McCarthy (2012) and Prentice and Brudney (2018). We separate them because we want to highlight the support people in the social sector need and underscore that infrastructure providers should consider how their offerings support not just the mission development and advancement of social sector entities, but also the health and well-being of the people in the sector. The operations functions we include are critical in the administration of the social sector's "behind-the-scenes" needs, and table 2 shows that many of the studies we examined included versions of operations supports in their typologies.

As noted in the Financial Resources section, we separate the supports and services needed to generate financial resources—such as fundraising and technology, which we include in Operations—from the actual financial resources provided, which we include in Financial Resources. Renz (2009) and Abramson and McCarthy (2012) cite these financial intermediaries as an important infrastructure service.

Learning

The learning category includes supports and services that help social sector organizations, groups, and individuals gain new knowledge through formal and informal educational and training programs; research and other forms of knowledge development; and the broad dissemination of information. **Education and training** help prepare people for their roles in the social sector. Examples include degree and certificate programs, professional development workshops, fellowships, coaching and mentoring, peer exchanges, conference sessions, learning collaboratives, and communities of practice. **Knowledge development** involves creating, gathering, and presenting information relevant to the social sector. Examples include data collection, data analysis, case studies, community-based research, evaluation, and performance measurement. And **knowledge dissemination** involves sharing information widely in

and outside the social sector. Examples include accreditation and standards, publications, social media, podcasts, and webinars. Table 3 shows how the functions related to learning in our literature review line up with our three learning supports and services categories (education and training, knowledge development, and knowledge dissemination).

TABLE 3

Learning Functions Included in Infrastructure Typologies

Source	Education and training	Knowledge development	Knowledge dissemination
Renz (2009, 30–31)	Education and leadership development	Research and knowledge management	Accountability and self-regulation; communication and information dissemination
Abramson and McCarthy (2012, 429-431)	Education; professional development	Research	Provision of information resources
CF Insights and CFLeads (2017, 16)		Evaluation and assessment; data and research	Listservs and forums; national standards
Prentice and Brudney (2018, 48)	Trainings	Knowledge development and sharing; nonprofit sector research; nonprofit management research	Information dissemination; knowledge development and sharing
Nielsen (2020, 7)		Research, experimentation, and assessment	
Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World."[a]		Knowledge creation and evaluation	Accountability
WINGS (2021, 8)	Enhancing human potential	Proving monitoring, learning and evaluation support; creating knowledge, data and ecosystem commons	Enhancing reputation and transparency

Note:

[a] Cyndi Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, November 4, 2020, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/infrastructure-for-a-new-world/.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Previous typologies (Abramson and McCarthy 2012; Renz 2009) feature formal education, which we include alongside the diverse, often informal ways learning occurs, the latter captured by WINGS (2021, 8) through "enhancing human potential" and emphasized by our advisers and focus group participants. Current and future social sector talent learns not only in university classrooms and through fellowships but in these more informal settings, such as peer exchanges, learning collaboratives, and coaching and mentoring. Both the formal and informal represent key aspects of how education and training occurs.

And for both, the pandemic accelerated a shift toward virtual learning and a tremendous expansion of online education and training opportunities, which might become a lasting phenomenon.

KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

Each typology in table 3 includes at least one activity we would categorize under our definition of knowledge development, suggesting some level of consensus that infrastructure activities include research, data, assessment, and evaluation. In our definition, knowledge comes from individuals, communities, and institutions. It comes from individuals such as those who gain knowledge through lived experiences or historians who illuminate the past through case studies; communities that develop norms and ways of interacting; and institutions with community-based researchers who draw on the lived experiences of their neighbors, data scientists who use data analytics to tell stories, and researchers who evaluate and measure performance.

More recent typologies recognize the role new technologies play in knowledge development. Suarez, who highlights "knowledge creation and evaluation" as one of the four components of civic infrastructure for leaders of color, cites studies using geotracking and mapping to assist efforts to promote "spatial justice."[15] Through the Big Data movement, researchers develop increasingly sophisticated means of manipulating large, complex data sets, which in turn benefits the social sector. For example, analyses of large government databases related to education, public assistance, health, and other fields can help social sector entities determine how best to deliver program services (Carttar, Lindquist, and Markham 2015). And studies examining the expanded data on giving patterns yield new insights to inform fundraising practices.

KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

In contrast to knowledge development, which centers on the act of creating knowledge, our definition of knowledge dissemination highlights the varied ways knowledge from the social sector gets out to wide audiences in and outside the social sector. The explosion of social media in recent decades has expanded the options for disseminating knowledge and democratized who can do so. Vehicles such as podcasts, blogs, and webinars offer avenues beyond publications for making information accessible to large audiences.

Past typologies, such as Renz's (2009) and Suarez's, identify accountability services as part of the infrastructure. As Renz notes, organizations providing these services develop and implement standards, codes of conduct, and benchmarking systems that can encourage social sector entities to be more efficient, effective, transparent, and ethical.

Discussing accountability that supports leaders of color, Suarez cites artist and consultant Wesley Days on the importance of decentralizing data so that, for example, "if resources go out, the moment they go out everybody in the ecosystem knows they've gone out…That has to become part of a new transparency that will create a continuity in knowing where the value has gone because you can go back and say, okay, you got this money, what were the results?"[16] New technologies can accelerate the dissemination of this and other kinds of data and research.

Relationships

Relationships include a broad range of activities that involve convenings, network development, and leadership development, all of which make connections, strengthen bonds of shared values and interests, and develop leaders. **Convenings** bring people in the social sector together to share experiences and knowledge and advance a common purpose. Examples include conferences, events, meetings, and peer exchanges. **Networks** connect organizations, groups, and people in the social sector. Examples include associations, coalitions, membership programs, affiliations, and communities of practice. **Leadership development** services help people grow by learning from the experiences of others in the social sector. Examples include fellowships and identity-based networks.

Though several typologies include relationship-building activities among infrastructure supports (table 4), they do not always pull these activities out in a separate category. We separate out relationships to highlight their key role in the infrastructure.

In table 4, the relationship functions from our literature review are organized to show how they connect to our three types of relationship supports and services: convenings, networks, and leadership development.

TABLE 4
Relationship Functions Included in Infrastructure Typologies

Source	Convenings	Networks	Leadership development
Renz (2009, 30–31)		Networks and associations	Education and leadership development
Abramson and McCarthy (2012, 426)			
CF Insights and CFLeads (2017, 16)	Conferences	Listservs and forums	
Prentice and Brudney (2018, 48) Nielsen (2020, 7)	Connecting, convening, bridging		
Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World."[a]	Space to replenish	Space to replenish	
WINGS (2021, 8)	Facilitating interactive and inclusive spaces	Orchestrating collaborations	Enhancing human potential

Note:

[a] Cyndi Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, November 4, 2020, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/infrastructure-for-a-new-world/.

CONVENINGS

We include convenings, ranging from people in the social sector meeting to exchange ideas to elaborately planned large conferences, as a key relationship-building activity. In these spaces, people have a chance to connect, spark creativity, and build bonds. Maria Rosario Jackson has written about what she refers to as "cultural kitchens," which she defines as "spaces and organizations that allow for cultural self-determination."[17] According to Jackson, "the work that happens in cultural kitchens is about repair, nourishment, and evolution, about making and sharing."[18] Suarez similarly writes about the importance of what she refers to as "space to replenish" for leaders of color, which she says can be "a place to be human" and "spaces to build trust with each other."[19] A 2017 CF Insights/CFLeads report lists "conferences" among 17 services supporting community foundations, while WINGS's infrastructure paper (2021) names "facilitating interaction and inclusive spaces" as a component of a broad "connection" function of infrastructure. The increased use of Zoom and move to virtual and hybrid settings during the pandemic has shifted what these convenings look like and how people come together.

NETWORKS

Similar to convenings, which bring people together in common spaces, networks facilitate connections and build ties and bonds. Unlike convenings, they can exist outside the context of in-person or virtual meetings. Renz (2009) points to associations' role in linking organizations to further collective

advancement of interest-based or mission-relevant activities. The National Council of Nonprofits describes communities of practice as peer-to-peer networks that connect social sector individuals with similar interests, jobs, or challenges who come together to learn from one another and not have to "reinvent the wheel."[20] These two definitions emphasize joining together for a common purpose. In the relational worldview, which prioritizes family, culture, and community (Cross 1995); in Kastelic's social sphere, which includes kinship, elders, and the community; and in the ethical sphere, which includes sharing and trust,[21] we see the importance of bonds and community.

As with other infrastructure supports and services, advances in technology have increased the opportunities for strengthening networks. CF Insights and CFLeads (2017) count listservs and forums among infrastructure services for community foundations. Network science has become an academic field with measures for characterizing networks, and engineers have developed software to visualize networks.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Among the seven typologies of infrastructure in table 4, only Renz's (2009) typology names leadership development as a distinctive infrastructure activity. Others incorporate leadership development in other functions with an emphasis on developing leaders to further a mission. For example, Nielsen (2020, 7) includes "leadership and organizational development" as a component of "capacity building and technical assistance." WINGS (2021, 8) refers to "enhancing human potential," which means "training, mentoring and enhancing the learning and development of personnel qualified in philanthropy support practices" and is included in its broader "capability" function. It goes on to identify "fellowships for professionals in philanthropy to enhance their professional growth and experience" (WINGS 2021, 28).

Though leadership development fits into other parts of our infrastructure typology (for example, in the mission and talent supports needed to advance sustainability, and in the education and training supports needed to promote learning), we separate it out within the relationships function to stress the value of connecting and developing bonds with other people at similar places on their leadership journeys. The relationships people gain through these relationship-focused leadership fellowships and related programs can last long after courses or programs end. These leadership programs can especially benefit new, young leaders of color becoming heads of organizations.

Influence

In our influence category, we include services and supports related to broadening awareness about the social sector and its power. We focus on the importance of communications, civic engagement, and advocacy in achieving these goals. **Communications** services help the social sector convey ideas to persuade others in and outside the sector. Examples include messaging toolkits, hashtags, storytelling, narrative change, media engagement, and public education. **Civic engagement** involves individual and community actions to identify and address issues of interest to the social sector and our broader society. Examples include voter registration and mobilization, grassroots and community power building, and social movements. **Advocacy** involves efforts to increase the social sector's influence over government, corporate, and other policies. Examples include issue identification and research, organizing and coalition building, education, lobbying, and litigation.

Table 5 shows how these three types of influence supports and services show up in the literature.

TABLE 5

Influence Functions Included in Infrastructure Typologies

Source	Communications	Civic engagement	Advocacy
Renz (2009, 30–31)	Communication and information dissemination	Advocacy, policy, and government relations	Advocacy, policy, and government relations
Abramson and McCarthy (2012, 426)			Advocacy and public education
CF Insights and CFLeads (2017, 16)	Communications and technology strategy; field spokesperson		Community leadership; issue advancement; policy, advocacy, and lobbying
Prentice and Brudney (2018, 48)	Public education	Advocacy; public education	Advocacy; public education
Nielsen (2020, 7)	Communications; narrative and culture change	Civic technology and digital organizing; people-centered	Policy and issue advocacy
Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World"[a]			Accountability
WINGS (2021, 8)	Building and strengthening narratives	Enhancing public engagement	Influencing policy

Note:

[a] Cyndi Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, November 4, 2020, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/infrastructure-for-a-new-world/.

COMMUNICATIONS

In highlighting communications as an important infrastructure support, we follow the approach in several other infrastructure typologies. Among his 11 major infrastructure functions, Renz (2009, 31)

includes "communication and information dissemination," citing the work of organizations that "provide opportunities and support tools that help individuals and organizations to develop and share information, intelligence, and knowledge." As with other infrastructure functions, we see how the expansion of social media and other technologies enhances the ability to increase the awareness and influence of individual social sector entities and the social sector as a whole.

One aspect of communications is narrative change. Nielsen (2020, 7) highlights "communications" and "narrative and culture change" as two of eight major infrastructure supports. Developing narratives creates "the frames, stories, models, and polemics able to reach, educate, persuade, and activate key audiences" (Nielsen 2020, 17). WINGS (2021) lists "building and strengthening narratives" as a major support. Employing narrative-change approaches benefits those in the social sector who want to use communications not just to share information but to encourage others to adopt new behaviors.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement involves individual and community actions to identify and address issues of interest to the social sector and our broader society. Examples include voter registration and mobilization, grassroots and community power building, and social movements.

Some associate civic engagement with civic infrastructure and consider it more of a partner to the social sector than a component of the sector's infrastructure. We treat it as a component of the sector because we believe social sector groups and individuals, as well as organizations, play a key role in civic engagement activities that identify and address issues of interest to the social sector and broader society. Nielsen (2020) describes in some detail eight broad focus areas of civic infrastructure activity, including a people-centered focus, examples of which include grassroots organizing, identity-based groups, and movements. WINGS (2021, 8, 30) cites "enhancing public engagement: engaging and enhancing citizen participation to drive philanthropy development outcomes" among 14 infrastructure subfunctions, highlighting "mobilising field action, advocacy and lobbying" as one of the ways to advance public engagement. Both definitions stress individuals' roles.

Other infrastructure typologies include civic engagement in their advocacy categories. For example, in describing "advocacy, policy, and governmental relations" infrastructure activities, Renz (2009, 30) refers to organizations that do their work by "engaging with and advocating for external constituencies." Prentice and Brudney (2018) do not separate civic engagement from advocacy and public education.

As noted above, Nielsen (2020) includes movements as a key example of a people-centered focus. Their report describes movements as "individuals engaged in some form of collective action to create social and/or political change. Movements are necessarily disruptive—a push against the status quo and traditional institutions...Movement organizations are able to influence public narrative and discourse through mass actions, protests, and mobilizations. Increasingly, movement organizations are also leveraging their collective structures to engage in elections and politics" (Nielsen 2020, 10–11). Besides movements, Nielsen also discusses grassroots organizing, identity-based groups, faith-based groups, and the service sector as "people-centered" approaches to civic engagement. Just as some might see civic engagement as existing alongside the social sector, we include social movements, which some might see as being outside the social sector, as an activity of social sector infrastructure, to highlight the influence social sector groups and individuals exert participating in and leading social movements. While emphasizing the role social sector groups and individuals play in civic engagement supports, and specifically within social movements, we also recognize that many faith-based organizations and 501(c)(3) organizations with related 501(c)(4) organizations contribute in meaningful ways.

ADVOCACY

All of the infrastructure typologies we cite include advocacy in their analyses. For example, Renz (2009) and Abramson and McCarthy (2012) recognize the importance of advocacy activities intended to strengthen social sector entities and the overall social sector through lobbying and related efforts. Advocates and scholars who study advocacy note the many activities that can advance advocacy besides lobbying, including issue identification and research, organizing and coalition building, education, and litigation (Bass, Abramson, and Dewey 2014). Many of the example advocacy activities we list overlap with activities in our knowledge development, networks, and civic engagement categories, demonstrating the ways in which infrastructure activities build upon one another and do not fit perfectly into distinct categories.

In our definition, we emphasize that infrastructure providers can direct advocacy supports not only at government and public policy but also at corporations, foundations, and other parts of the social sector. In her work, Suarez writes about the value of efforts to influence philanthropic as well as government priorities.[22] This aligns with what we heard from focus group participants, who stressed the significance of initiatives that influence social sector practices, such as increasing pay for social sector staff. Whereas prior typologies have not always recognized infrastructure supports intended to influence targets of advocacy besides government, we wanted to ensure our definition encompasses advocacy efforts targeted at a broad range of decisionmakers.

Additional Considerations Regarding Supports and Services

We recognize our infrastructure typology, like many others, does not perfectly capture the porousness of the boundaries separating its categories. We acknowledge the overlap in the categories. For example, though we separate learning from sustainability supports, we appreciate that the training and professional development programs we place in the learning function may overlap with the training and mission and talent assistance activities in the sustainability function and leadership development in the relationships function. Similarly, the advocacy research activities we include overlap with the knowledge development we situated within learning. As analytic devices, these typologies help us think about the scope of the social sector infrastructure, and the overlap between categories reflects the ways in which, in the real world, infrastructure supports and services blend into one another. We see benefit in highlighting these overlaps because they show powerful points of convergence of different infrastructure supports and services.

Who Provides These Infrastructure Services and Supports?

Social sector infrastructure providers serve and support the sustainability, learning, relationships, and influence of at least one of the sector's core constituencies.

Infrastructure providers can direct their services and supports to one or multiple social sector organizations, groups, or individuals, or they can serve an entire field. They can come from **social sector** organizations or groups or be individuals acting to advance social missions; they can work at **for-profit businesses** that do not have a primary social mission but intentionally serve social sector entities (such as consultants and law firms with social sector practice areas); or they can be **public sector agencies** that provide critical data about and investments in social sector entities (such as the Internal Revenue Service and AmeriCorps).

As their primary purpose, infrastructure providers must serve members of at least one of the social sector's core constituencies, which we define as categories or subcategories of types of social sector organizations, groups, and individuals acting to advance social missions. These core constituencies may or may not focus on specific issue areas. In other words, in our definition, social sector infrastructure providers are providers whose support serves *types* of social sector entities, not specific causes (although those types of social sector entities may advance specific causes). **Social sector organization constituencies** include types of nonprofits as defined by the Internal Revenue Service, for-profits with a

social mission, or hybrids of the two. Examples of organization subcategories include all social enterprises or private foundations focused on health. **Social sector group constituencies** can include types of mutual aid societies, neighborhood associations, giving circles, social movements, and faith communities. Examples of group subcategories include all faith communities or groups counteracting anti-Asian violence. And **social sector individual constituencies** can include types of individual donors, volunteers, voters, and organizers. Examples of subcategories include all volunteers or Generation Z high-net-worth donors.

Appendix D provides a full list of categories that fall within our definition of social sector organizations; however, we do not provide an analogous comprehensive list of categories for social sector groups and individuals because legal definitions for those categories do not exist. Given this, our categories for groups and individuals represent our initial perspective on how to think about these types of social sector entities, which we hope future research efforts will build on to develop a more comprehensive list for measurement and assessment efforts that would benefit from more specificity.

As an example of the criteria we use to define infrastructure providers, we consider Grantmakers in Health a social sector infrastructure provider because it serves philanthropic organizations and philanthropy-serving organizations, both social sector organization constituents. Those that join Grantmakers in Health have a uniting interest in an issue area (health), but not all people and institutions that share that interest can participate in the organization: only philanthropic organizations, advisers, and some philanthropy-serving organizations can.[23] In contrast, we do not consider the American Public Health Association a social sector infrastructure provider. Its membership includes health professionals, career workers in health, and anyone interested in public health.[24] People in or interested in the health profession are not a core constituency of the social sector because they do not represent a type of entity, such as a social sector organization, group, or individual. Rather, they represent an issue area of interest. Social sector organizations may belong to the American Public Health Association, but the primary focus of the American Public Health Association is not to serve health organizations. Instead, it is to advance an issue area (health).

The following sections provide more detail about the three types of infrastructure providers: those in the social sector, for-profit businesses without social missions, and public sector agencies.

The Social Sector

Infrastructure providers coming from the social sector, whether organizations, groups, or individuals, can both provide supports and services to the social sector and receive them. This illustrates the interdependency of actors in the social sector infrastructure ecosystem.

SOCIAL SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

Some earlier studies of infrastructure focused on infrastructure providers incorporated as nonprofit organizations. Abramson and McCarthy (2002, 2012) and Boris and coauthors (2009) fit into this category. The Foundation Center (Dillon et al. 2015) and Hewlett Foundation (Bokoff et al. 2018) analyses, though national and international in scope, concentrate almost entirely on US providers incorporated as nonprofits in order to conduct a grant analysis of foundation funding for infrastructure, which flows almost exclusively to nonprofits. In contrast, the WINGS (2021) and CF Insights/CFLeads (2017) studies include for-profits among their examples of infrastructure providers. We would categorize the for-profits that they list as for-profit businesses (defined in the next section) rather than as for-profit and hybrid organizations with an explicit social mission, which we would categorize as infrastructure providers from social sector organizations along with nonprofits. Our definition of nonprofit social sector organizations includes institutions, often incorporated as 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4), or hybrids of the two.

As noted in the financial resources section, we include all foundations as infrastructure providers because one of their primary purposes is to give grants to core social sector constituencies. We would also include organizations that make grants or impact investments—whether structured as foundations, other nonprofit entities, for-profits with a social mission, or hybrids—as infrastructure providers. We do this because when considering the support the social sector needs to thrive, financial resources (whether in the form of grants, guarantees, loans, or equity investments) play an indispensable role.

SOCIAL SECTOR GROUPS

Groups of individuals united, in the short or long terms, around a common social purpose but that do not have nonprofit, for-profit, or hybrid status can include giving circles, social movements, mutual aid societies, neighborhood associations, and faith communities. Social movements, for example, can help advance civic engagement efforts, while faith communities can facilitate relationship building. The Nielsen (2020) typology includes grassroots and community organizing, identity-based groups, movements, faith-based, and the service sector as infrastructure providers with examples of incorporated nonprofits and unincorporated groups.

Some literature highlights the role of small, at times unincorporated community groups providing support where government and larger charitable organizations are not fulfilling needs. For instance, Marietta Rodriguez, writing for *Nonprofit Quarterly*, advocates making infrastructure investments in community groups, emphasizing the importance of involving the communities that targeted benefits are intended to serve in order to do meaningful and effective work.[25] Community involvement is a way of holding those trying to impact a community from the outside accountable. This accountability helps leadership avoid past mistakes and helps stave off community decline and disinvestment.[26] For those working to improve a community from within, such as membership and organizing groups, community involvement proves essential.

Similarly, Rodriguez describes mutual aid, a form of "self-preservation and political action" that prioritizes "self-organization, egalitarianism, direct action, and the desire for social transition," as complementing, contrasting with, and sometimes opposing the work of government, philanthropy, and large, established nonprofits.[27] In a similar vein, Dean Spade contrasts the effectiveness of mutual aid groups in building solidarity with what he sees as the "anti-solidarity practices" of professionalized nonprofit organizations. Spade suggests that many nonprofit advocates separate the "deserving" from the "undeserving" so as not to threaten the political and philanthropic establishment which is more likely to support the former than the latter.[28]

Mutual aid societies have contributed to the survival of Black and other marginalized communities in the United States for more than two centuries. Since the late 1700s, Black communities have formed mutual aid societies in response to the absence of assistance from the federal government and white-dominated charities.[29] Immigrant communities have formed family associations and created forms of financial support like collective credit.[30] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mexican-American communities created their own mutual aid societies, or *mutualistas*, in the Southwest that continue to help communities.[31]

Whereas mutual aid has persisted in various communities for centuries, some white communities gradually stopped needing this aid after benefiting from government-sponsored social programs, such as those from the New Deal, and have forgotten about these practices.[32] During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, mutual aid has received increased attention from a wide variety of communities, though some have falsely characterized this as a "rebirth."[33] This inaccurate characterization stems in part from the omission of mutual aid and other unincorporated social sector groups from some discussions on vital social sector support systems used by nonwhite communities, including cases when researchers have only studied incorporated nonprofits.

Other community-based infrastructure tools have recently emerged and gained prominence. Time banking, for example, is a currency system where community members provide and receive services using hours rather than cash.[34] And tool libraries enable community members to borrow tools for free or for an annual fee, removing large cost barriers to completing projects.[35] Future research efforts might explore whether and how to incorporate those who provide these services into the category of social sector groups.

SOCIAL SECTOR INDIVIDUALS

We include individuals acting to advance social missions in our definition of the social sector infrastructure because they provide crucial resources, connections, and other supports. Whereas some studies include individuals (Nielsen 2020; WINGS 2021), analyses of infrastructure that focus mainly on nonprofit infrastructure providers (Abramson and McCarthy 2012; Boris et al. 2009; Prentice and Brudney 2018) pay less attention to individuals. In our definition, individuals can include donors, organizers, voters, and volunteers, all of whom make up a part of the support system for the social sector.

For centuries, the financial survival and well-being of the social sector and people in our society have come from the actions of individuals, although at times these actions have been hard to measure.[36] These include large-scale financial support from donors. For example, in the first decades of the twentieth century, in the Black community, Madam C. J. Walker exemplified community giving via gifts to organizations, friends, and family (Freeman 2020). To Walker, these gifts all amounted to philanthropy. Yet smaller-scale contributions have also sustained the social sector. During the coronavirus pandemic, individuals have helped one another through small dollar contributions to online giving platforms, community nonprofits, and bail funds, which have grown into millions of dollars that benefit local organizations and individuals.[37]

We acknowledge that including individuals acting to advance social missions in our definition introduces ambiguity about the criteria for being considered infrastructure providers. For example, does an individual who has made one donation to a social sector organization or group qualify as a social sector infrastructure provider, or do they need to be regular donors and consider this their primary purpose? At what point would we define an individual advocate for a cause an individual organizer? Our study raises, but does not answer, these critical questions. We hope that future research efforts might sharpen the definition of what qualifies as an individual providing infrastructure supports and services.

For-Profit Businesses

Several of the infrastructure studies we reviewed (Abramson and McCarthy 2012; Boris et al. 2009; Prentice and Brudney 2018) focus mainly or entirely on nonprofit infrastructure providers. As infrastructure providers we include profit-oriented businesses, such as banks and consulting, law, accounting, and other firms, whose main or secondary purpose is supporting the social sector. For example, an entire law or consulting firm might not have an explicit social mission, but it might have a practice area focused on a core constituent of the social sector, such as nonprofit organizations. We take an approach similar to the WINGS (2021) and CF Insights/CFLeads (2017) studies, which count as infrastructure profit-oriented businesses that serve philanthropy as a major or minor part of their work. Though we include these for-profit businesses as infrastructure providers, we caution against referring to their entire institutions as providers of infrastructure; rather, we encourage specifying that, for example, their nonprofit practice areas provide infrastructure services.

Public Sector Agencies

We also include as infrastructure providers government agencies that serve social sector entities. Public sector agencies support core constituents of the social sector in a variety of ways. For example, the federal government provides mission and talent resources to nonprofits through agencies like AmeriCorps.[38] At the start of the pandemic, the Paycheck Protection Program provided Small Business Administration–backed loans to nonprofits, which helped them address challenges resulting from the pandemic, the accompanying economic downturn, and the increased demands on nonprofits for services.[39] The Internal Revenue Service provides knowledge development services through its release of Form 990.[40]

Examples of Infrastructure Providers

To illustrate our definition of social sector infrastructure, we developed an interactive feature that includes examples of infrastructure supports and services to give a sense of the breadth and diversity of the infrastructure. In our interactive feature, we include examples of providers of each type of infrastructure supports and services that serve a national audience. These examples of providers are primarily incorporated as nonprofits, with some examples of providers incorporated as for-profits or public agencies. As their primary purpose, they serve at least one of the social sector's core constituencies: organizations (including nonprofits as defined by the Internal Revenue Service, for-profits with a social mission, and hybrids of the two), groups (such as mutual aid societies, neighborhood

associations, giving circles, faith communities, and social movements), and individuals (such as organizers, voters, volunteers, and donors.) Inclusion as an example provider does not indicate an endorsement of quality.

We asked a broad and diverse range of infrastructure providers to select two to three categories of infrastructure supports and services that their work best fits into, recognizing that many infrastructure providers offer more than three of the supports and services outlined in our definition. Through these category tags, we provide a sense of how infrastructure providers work across multiple functions to serve the social sector. To create an opportunity for input from the field, we have requested that users of our interactive feature suggest additional infrastructure activities and providers we can include in the feature to better reflect the broad scope of the field.

Our feature builds on a past effort to map social sector infrastructure. In *Nonprofit Quarterly*'s 2009 report, two maps illustrate the nonprofit and philanthropic infrastructures. The maps place organizations by function and use overlapping boxes to demonstrate that one organization can serve several infrastructure functions (Renz 2009). Our feature provides an interactive visual for exploring the many facets of our social sector infrastructure definition, with examples of infrastructure activities and infrastructure providers to bring to life the definition.

Of note, Renz (2009) included funding organizations (including private foundations, individual donors, and some nonprofits and for-profits as well) as one of the 11 primary functions of infrastructure, but when mapping the infrastructure, does not map examples of providers of funding organizations within the Venn diagram of nonprofit and philanthropic infrastructure. While the Renz (2009) map of the national philanthropic infrastructure includes a box listing leading foundations engaged in funding infrastructure, this box does not appear to represent examples of funding organizations that serve all types of nonprofits, only those focused on funding infrastructure.

We follow Renz's example by including financial resources in our typology of infrastructure services, and therefore, acknowledging that those who provide financial resources would qualify as infrastructure providers. However, the examples of infrastructure providers we list are infrastructure providers that provide financial resources, along with at least one other type of infrastructure support. As a result, we omit private foundations from our list of examples of infrastructure providers who offer financial resources to the social sector.

Who Receives Services and Supports from Social Sector Infrastructure Providers?

Again, in our definition, the US social sector consists of private organizations (nonprofit, for-profit, and hybrids of the two), groups, and individuals whose primary purpose is to advance a social mission. This definition includes incorporated organizations as well as unincorporated groups and movements, and institutions as well as individuals. The US social sector is the intended audience of the supports and services provided by infrastructure providers.

Social sector infrastructure providers offer services focused on sustainability, learning, relationships, and influence to the social sector. A single social sector organization, group, or individual can use infrastructure services, such as through a consulting engagement. Multiple social sector organizations, groups, or individuals can use infrastructure services, such as through member services offerings. Or an entire field of the social sector can use infrastructure services, such as through field-wide advocacy.

In addition to describing infrastructure providers by the kinds of services they provide, as we do in this report, we can also characterize these providers by who they serve, an approach taken in some other studies. For example, Abramson and McCarthy (2012) consider differences between infrastructure providers that support the entire social sector or large parts of it, and those that support single social sector entities, such as particular nonprofits or individuals like nonprofit staff or potential staff. Sector-wide infrastructure providers focus on several kinds of services, including advocacy on sector-wide issues, like the tax deductibility of charitable contributions; public education; and research. Infrastructure providers, such as management support organizations and academic nonprofit-management programs, that support individual nonprofits and staff provide services such as management training, education, and professional development.

Abramson and McCarthy (2012) draw a connection between who receives services and the financing of providers. Providers that serve individuals and single nonprofits may be able to charge fees for their services. Providers that serve the nonprofit sector as a whole, however, often depend more on grants because of the free rider, or collective action, problem that tempts potential fee- or dues-payers *not* to pay because they can "free ride" and enjoy the benefits of sector-wide services, like advocacy, whether they pay dues or not.

In addition to the overall nonprofit sector and individual nonprofits and staff that Abramson and McCarthy differentiate as recipients of infrastructure services, Prentice and Brudney (2018) add the

local community as an additional focus for infrastructure providers concerned with connecting, convening, and bridging.

In the 2018 Foundation Center and Hewlett Foundation report, Bokoff (2018) also distinguishes between infrastructure providers that serve different users. In particular, they identify three kinds of providers: those that mainly serve philanthropy, those that mainly serve nonprofits, and those that serve both but do not focus entirely on them and serve other entities, such as government agencies and businesses.

While we appreciate the important distinctions these studies make between infrastructure users, in this study, we largely focus on differentiating users according to whether they identify as social sector organizations, groups, or individuals.

Summary and Conclusion

In this report, we build on examinations of the infrastructure over two decades and update the field's understanding of that infrastructure through a literature review, consultations with people in the social sector and its infrastructure, and our own team's experiences with that infrastructure. The definitions of "social sector" and "social sector infrastructure" and typologies of infrastructure providers, users, and supports and services we present lay the groundwork for future reports on the state of the US social sector infrastructure and what it needs to thrive. We hope readers will find this report useful as they reflect on the support needed by the organizations, groups, and individuals advancing social missions in this country.

Appendix A: Sources on Infrastructure Typologies

The following are sources on infrastructure typologies we consulted in developing our social sector infrastructure typology.

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We also consulted Cyndi Suarez's 2020 *Nonprofit Quarterly* article "Infrastructure for a New World," available at https://nonprofitquarterly.org/infrastructure-for-a-new-world/.

Appendix B: Project Advisory Committee

We engaged an advisory committee to provide counsel on all aspects of our project and want to thank the committee members for their input and support of the project:

- Ana Marie Argilagos, president and CEO, Hispanics in Philanthropy

- Vanessa Daniel, principal, Vanessa Daniel Consulting, LLC

- James D. Gibbons, founder and president, Forward Impact Enterprises, LLC

- Rahsaan Harris, CEO, Citizens Committee for New York City

- Deth Im, director of faith leadership strategies, Faith in Action

- Sarah Kastelic, executive director, National Indian Child Welfare Organization

- Kathy Ko Chin, CEO, Jasper Inclusion Advisors

- Hanh Le, co-CEO, **if**, A Foundation for Radical Possibility

- Larry McGill, founder and principal, Ambit 360 Consulting

- Jon Pratt, senior research fellow, Minnesota Council of Nonprofits

- Chera Reid, co-executive director, Center for Evaluation Innovation

- Pier Rogers, president, ARNOVA, and director, Axelson Center for Nonprofit Management at North Park University

- Sherece Y. West-Scantlebury, CEO, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

Appendix C: Infrastructure Research Collaborative Advisory Group

The infrastructure research collaborative advisory group, hosted by New Venture Fund, is a coordinated effort of funders and practitioners that supports efforts to better understand the country's social sector infrastructure. Its members are:

- Melanie Audette, Mission Investors Exchange

- Greg Baldwin, VolunteerMatch

- Chris Cardona, Ford Foundation

- Nick Deychakiwsky, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

- Edward Jones, ABFE

- Monisha Kapila, ProInspire

- Frances Kunreuther, Building Movement Project

- Donna Murray-Brown, National Council of Nonprofits

- Urvashi Vaid, the Vaid Group (in memoriam, 1958–2022)

- Victoria Vrana, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Appendix D: Full List of Social Sector Organizations

Nonprofits (source: IRS[41]):

- Charities (tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code)

    » Charitable organizations, including community foundations

    » Churches and religious organizations

    » Private foundations

- Other tax-exempt organizations

    » Social welfare organizations (501(c)(4))

    » Civic leagues (501(c)(4))

    » Labor organizations (501(c)(5))

    » Business leagues (501(c)(6))

    » Social clubs (501(c)(7))

    » Political organizations (527)

For-profits with a primary social mission:

- Cooperatives[42]

    » Worker co-ops

    » Consumer co-ops

    » Purchasing co-ops

- Third-party certified ventures

    » Certified B corporations[43]

- Traditional corporate forms[44]

    » Sole proprietorships

    » Partnerships

    » Limited liability companies

    » Corporations

- New corporate forms[45]

  » Benefit corporations

  » Social purpose corporations

  » Low-profit, limited liability companies (L3Cs)

Hybrids:[46]

- Nonprofit parents with for-profit subsidiaries

- For-profit parents with nonprofit subsidiaries

- Commercial co-ventures

Appendix E: Table of Infrastructure Functions from the Literature

Functions of Social Sector Infrastructure in the Literature

Source	Functions
Renz (2009, 30–31)	1. Accountability and self-regulation; 2. Advocacy, policy, and governmental relations; 3. Financial intermediaries; 4. Funding organizations; 5. Donor and resource advisers; 6. Networks and associations; 7. Workforce development and deployment; 8. Education and leadership development; 9. Capacity development and technical assistance; 10. Research and knowledge management; and 11. Communication and information dissemination
Abramson and McCarthy (2012, 426-432)	1. Advocacy and public education; 2. Research; 3. Education; 4. Management training and support; 5. Professional development; 6. Provision of information resources; 7. Financial intermediaries
CF Insights and CFLeads (2017, 16)	1. Strategic planning; 2. Staff development; 3. Community leadership; 4. Evaluation and assessment; 5. Board development; 6. Issue advancement; 7. Conferences; 8. Donor prospecting and development; 9. Investment advising; 10. Data and research; 11. Communications and technology strategy; 12. Policy, advocacy, lobbying; 13. Legal services; 14. Business model analysis; 15. Listservs and forums; 16. Field spokesperson; 17. National standards
Prentice and Brudney (2018, 44)	1. Strengthen nonprofit sector (advocacy, public education, member support, nonprofit sector research); 2. Build nonprofit capacity and provide professional development (trainings, consultation services, management guidance, information dissemination, knowledge development and sharing, nonprofit management research); 3. Build social capital and increase cross-sector collaboration (connecting, convening, bridging)
Nielsen (2020, 7)	1. Capacity building and technical assistance; 2. Civic technology and digital organizing; 3. Communications; 4. Funders; 5. Narrative and culture change; 6. People-centered; 7. Policy and issue advocacy; 8. Research, experimentation, and assessment
Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World."[a]	1. Accountability; 2. Space to replenish; 3. Knowledge creation and evaluation; 4. Vision
WINGS (2021, 7-8)	1. Capacity (generating human resources; generating financial resources; generating digital assets); 2. Capability (co-creating and augmenting strategies; proving monitoring, learning and evaluation support; anchoring and supporting implementation; creating knowledge, data and ecosystem commons; enhancing human potential); 3. Connection (facilitating interaction and inclusive spaces; orchestrating collaborations; building and strengthening narratives) 4. Credibility (enhancing reputation and transparency; enhancing public engagement; influencing policy)

Note:

[a] Cyndi Suarez, "Infrastructure for a New World," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, November 4, 2020, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/infrastructure-for-a-new-world/.

Notes

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