

# Government, Private Sector and Civil Society for Sustainable Development:

Toward a Collaborative Synergy  
in Latin America



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This report presents an overview of a research project undertaken by the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA), the AVINA Foundation and independent scholars in Colombia and Brazil about collaborations among public, private and nonprofit actors. The researchers find that commitment to a common cause and mobilization to advance it in the public agenda; the pivotal role of the convening leader; recognition and respect of differences in ideologies, values, interests and practices among partners; and the design and implementation of governance structures are crucial elements of building and sustaining cross-sector collaborations. This report highlights initial practical recommendations that emerged from the collaborations studied on building trust and commitment among partners that contribute to the sustainability of cross-sector collaborations.

## **Background on the Project**

RCLA led a team of AVINA representatives and local researchers in Colombia and Brazil to investigate the nature of the relationship among the public, private and nonprofit sectors, and the extent to which, from the perspective of the local actors, these collaborations can be associated with the creation of public spaces where public value is developed and democracy strengthened.

The research design included two methodologies: Cooperative Inquiry (CI) and the Extended Case Study (ECS). These two methodologies and research processes are complementary in various ways. First, the methodologies provide different perspectives and types of data that may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of cross-sector collaboration and the factors that affect their sustainability. On the one hand, Cooperative Inquiry provides an inside-out perspective; the CI process engaged actors from the three sectors in structured conversations to reflect on their practice and produce collective knowledge about building and sustaining cross-sector collaborations. On the other hand, the ECS provides an outside-inside perspective, generating a broader understanding of the contextual factors that shape the nature and evolution of cross-sector collaborations.

Second, the process was designed to start simultaneously in Brazil and Colombia. This multi-site research process facilitated dialogue and preliminary comparison of emerging themes not only across initiatives but also across countries.

The two Cooperative Inquiry processes and six case studies were conducted for approximately a year and a half. The CI process in each country involved four meetings with leaders from each sector participating in the collaborations. These meetings took place in Bogotá and Belo Horizonte between August 2007 and April 2008. CI meetings seek to generate structured conversations around both day-to-day challenges of work and more systemic issues of concern to these participants. This space offered an important opportunity for these leaders to engage in reflection, foster action and produce practice-grounded knowledge.

The field work for the case studies started in December 2007 and generally finished in August 2008. The local research team conducted field research in several cities in Brazil and Colombia, including Brasília, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Feira de Santana, Bogotá and Medellín. This case studies research process included a) secondary data collection through document review (organizations' own written material, newspapers and relevant literature about the social problems addressed by other authors); b) semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders; c) participant observation; and d) data analysis and writing of the final report.

The initiatives explored in this binational process include:

### *Colombia*

1. **Bogotá Cómo Vamos (BCV):** This initiative started as a collaboration among the Chamber of Commerce of Bogotá, the Corona Foundation and the newspaper *El Tiempo* in Bogotá, Colombia. The initiative seeks to engage civil society in monitoring and evaluating public policies in the city. More specifically, BCV aims to increase citizen control over public policymaking and results from various development plans and governmental administrations. Currently, a national network of similar initiatives is under construction. The initiative has already been implemented in large Colombian cities including Medellín, Cali and Cartagena, and soon will be in place in smaller cities such as Santa Marta, Barranquilla y Pereira.
2. **Alianza por la Equidad:** Initiated by the Governor's Office of Antioquia in 2004, this collaboration convenes private sector actors and civil society organizations to combat existing levels of inequality in this Department. It seeks to collectively deliberate and work to reduce territorial, social and population inequality and alleviate poverty in Antioquia. The initiative designs and implements control systems to monitor governmental performance, promotes and strengthens social participation in policymaking, and implements corporate social responsibility projects.
3. **Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá, ARB:** This collaboration has been led by a group of recycling workers in Bogotá for more than 20 years and has gotten support from private firms and governmental authorities. The initiative seeks to create a public agenda at both the local and national levels that will increase the access of recycling organizations and workers to state services and recycling value chains.

## *Brazil*

1. **A Rede Além das Letras:** The objective of the initiative is to improve primary education by enhancing the reading and writing skills of public education agents. This collaborative project was established in 2004 with assistance from the AVINA Foundation. Today, the project Rede Além das Letras is facilitated by Instituto Avisa Lá, in partnership with Instituto Razão Social and Grupo Gerdau. The partnership with Instituto Razão Social is based on the production of a technological base for long-distance learning by IBM. Grupo Gerdau has been the only financial sponsor of the project. Além das Letras also has institutional support from Ashoka, UNICEF, UNDIME and UNESCO. This initiative focus on learning activities for technical teams at departments of education in 49 municipalities. The initiative covers 1,080 schools; 1,958 principals; 6,561 teachers and 182,000 students.
2. **Novas Alianças:** The project Novas Alianças seeks to promote the development of capacities of public management councils and local communities to monitor and evaluate public budgets and to build partnerships with the legislature and the media to effectively implement the principles established in the Statute for Children and Adolescents in several municipalities. The collaborative project of Instituto Telemig Celular, Instituto Ágora, Agência de Notícias dos Direitos da Infância, the Oficina de Imagens and the Fundação Vale do Rio Doce formally began in 2006. The project's methodology focuses on three central points: formation, mobilization and communication. The starting point of the initiative in a municipality is the mobilization and formation of social actors – especially public administration advisors – in ways that influence and control public budgets, with emphasis on participation in public budgeting, monitoring of budget execution, and partnering with the legislature and the media.
3. **Program One Million Cisterns:** The initiative was formed during the Presidential administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and consolidated during President Lula's administration. This collaboration seeks to ensure access to water for families in Brazil's desert region. This is achieved by constructing cisterns to capture and process rainfall to be ready for human consumption. The main principle of the initiative is civil society ownership, since local communities are in charge of constructing the cisterns. Families are trained to build and manage the water cisterns. Between 2003 and 2007, 2,000 cisterns were built in 1,000 municipalities in Brazil, all exclusively using local labor. This program is coordinated by Articulação do Semi-Árido (ASA), which congregates 62 civil society organizations. The Fundação Esquel is a key partner in this initiative, as is FEBRABAN (Federação Brasileira de Bancos), the financing actor. The program is financed by the Brazilian Federal government (70%), FEBRABAN (10%) and beneficiary famílias (20%).

## Perspectives on the Construction and Sustainability of Collaborative Projects among Actors from the Public, Private and Nonprofit Sectors

The collective research project based on Cooperative Inquiry (CI) techniques and the Extended Case Studies (ECS) in Brazil and Colombia provide insights into the factors that contribute to establishing and sustaining commitment that results in more effective collaborative actions.

This report presents a discussion of emerging findings from using both CI and ECS methodologies in this research project. Although the associated research reports from each type of methodology offer additional details that shed light into the nature of cross-sector collaborations, in this report we feature highlights that emerged from the two research efforts.

The research teams involved in the ECS in both countries worked over a year to answer the following question, which was formulated collectively:

*How do the various relationships between the public, private and social sectors promote social transformations that strengthen the public sphere?*

Some broad common themes found in the two reports from the ECS in Brazil and Colombia emerged as key factors in the construction of cross-sector collaborations. In fact, the narratives in these reports share the same point of departure: the fundamental idea that collaborations are a means to achieve a social objective. Thus, cross-sector collaborations are in permanent construction and, as stated by social actors interviewed in Brazil, “sailing is done sailing,” that is, “partnerships are built partnering.”

In the context of action research from the CIs, it is worth noting that participants in both countries emphasized independently the same concern with the creation and functioning of cross-sector collaborations, developing essentially the same research question as the axis of the action research process.

The CI team in Colombia posed the following question:

*How is commitment for action constructed and what factors enable sustainable cross-sector collaborations?*

Likewise, the CI team in Brazil worked on answering the following question:

*How do you achieve and maintain greater commitment and synergy among partners in cross-sector collaborations to achieve more effective results?*

This is an unexpected coincidence since research questions in CIs emerge from pressing concerns of participants that have arisen from their practice or work. This coincidence shows the concern that exists – independent from the country or type of initiative – about *commitment* as a crucial aspect in the sustainability of collaborative relationships among sectors. To answer questions about commitment, the CI teams in Brazil and Colombia identified common factors of importance to the sustainability of cross-sector collaborations.

### *The Construction of Relationships and the Role of Leadership*

The ECS in Brazil and Colombia show that the relationship among sectors to address social problems emerges from the mobilization of actors from the private or public sphere, most often from personal relationships or interactions based on individuals' concerns about specific social problems. Cross-sector relationships usually begin without clear proposals or guidelines for construction and implementation and they evolve through various partners' interactions over time.

A key aspect in this sense is the clear and precise understanding of the partners throughout the relationship process. The prolonged interaction among partners requires a greater understanding of the capacities and limitations of each actor engaged in the collaborations. Even though actors in the various sectors have a differentiated understanding, or introduce superposed or opposed conceptions about the social problem to be addressed, these differences do not inhibit the collaboration.

According to the CIs' findings - and linked to the importance of cross-sector collaborations - one key factor for the emergence and sustainability of the collaborative initiative is the leadership of a convening actor. In the words of the co-researchers in Colombia:

One of the first factors that emerged in the [CI] group for the existence of collaborations was the role of those actors that convene to construct the partnership. Aspects such as the legitimacy of the convening actor, their role in the organization they represent, and their defined functions in the construction of cross-sector partnerships were highlighted in the CI process.

In the cases explored in Brazil and Colombia, the leader is characterized by the degree to which he or she is perceived to represent the community and his or her ability to cultivate and develop collaborative relationships. The convening leaders also exhibit consistency with the ideals and values underpinning the mission of the initiative, and use this spirit to craft collaborative relationships. Likewise, leaders persevere in convening actors, achieving agreement among partners and advancing the initiative's mission in the public arena. The use of a convening language is fundamental to encourage commitment among partners.

### *The “Common Cause” in Cross-sector Collaborations*

The two CIs found that having a common cause among actors from partnering sectors is an essential condition for the emergence and sustainability of cross-sector collaborations. The common theme among partners emerges from the social, economic and political context and problems affecting a country and the need to act to solve those problems. The team in Colombia raises an interesting idea regarding the emergence of common causes as an ethical reaction to social problems. This is the case of la Alianza para la Equidad in Antioquia, Colombia, where various sectors in the society thought the level of inequality in the Department was unacceptable.

Additionally, findings from the ECS confirm that actors that engage in collaborative efforts must have the commitment to combat a social problem. This is similar to the CIs’ common cause. However, the identification of a common cause, as shown by the Colombian experience, must be a deliberative process, more political and technical in nature.

The ECS suggest, however, that although there is a desire among partners to engage in collaborations, they also fear distortion of each organization’s identity. In this sense, according to the experience of Brazil, “there is a desire to work collectively, yet partners work in parallel to maintain their own particularities, identities and capacities.”

The cases in Brazil explore tentatively how the adherence and commitment to the common cause and the potential for conflict among partners stemming from different ideologies and interests can shape the collaborative efforts. In brief, Alem das Letras shows the greatest level of adherence to the theme addressed by the initiative. By contrast, Un Millón de Cisternas Rurales (also known as P1MC) exhibits a medium level of adherence, while Novas Alianzas shows just a low level. Similarly, there is low conflict among partners in Alem das Letras, medium in P1MC and medium-low in Novas Alianzas.

This differentiated level of adherence among partnerships to a common cause suggests that resistance to change within initiatives is relevant to the collaborative process. More importantly, these diverse experiences also suggest that actors are able to develop dynamics that overcome such differences among partners and thereby operationalize their partnerships. The differences in ideologies seem to have greater relevance to and impact on the sustainability of collaborative programs and projects in the long term, especially when considering the engagement of governmental actors, who are subject to political alternation. This political factor may result in changes in the ideological conceptions that guide public policymaking.

The findings from the CI process suggest that even though the common theme engages partners, the preoccupation, interest and commitment with the cause is not

necessarily shared homogeneously among them. For example, in the case of P1MC, the issue of access to water in the Brazilian desert regions does not mean the same thing to the Articulação do Semi-Arido (ASA), the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) or the Brazilian Federation of Banking institutions (FEBRABAN). In fact, for MSD access to potable water is a central issue. For ASA, it is important but more critical is the community engagement and mobilization to build the cisterns in their municipalities. Finally, for FEBRABAN neither of these two issues have complete relevance for its mission as a financial corporation.

The CI in Brazil provides evidence of the dynamic nature of the relationship among the three sectors. The CI report states that cross-sector partnerships represent “stable dynamic equilibriums,” reaffirming the notion that relationships across sectors are permanently evolving, given that during their lifetime some partners leave while others join. The experience of Novas Alianzas shows how this dynamic happens in specific moments depending on external situation and internal dynamics affecting each actor. In this case, the departure of INESC as a partner in Novas Alianzas due to an ideological incompatibility with the Vale Foundation, a new partner in the collaboration, altered significantly the orientation and functioning of this initiative. Therefore, the adherence to a common cause is a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure the sustainability of cross-sector collaborations.

### *The Construction of a Public Agenda as a Focal Factor*

The findings from the CI in Colombia suggest that a crucial aspect of the emergence of a collaborative effort and the achievement of greater commitment by partners is the need to make the social problem visible in the city or region. Generating interest, resources and a commitment to action from civil society, the public sector and the corporate world is fundamental. Therefore, an important step in the construction and sustainability of this type of relationships is the creation of public agenda, in which the presence of the State is essential for giving the collaborative initiative broader legitimacy. This is the case of the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá in Colombia and P1MC in Brazil.

This idea is supported by findings from the ECS, which identify three mechanisms that can reduce the risk of conflict among participants from various sectors. The report from Brazil highlights again the idea of mobilization of partners around a common social problem, yet now related to the desire to *construct public goods*. Likewise, the ECS report from Colombia describes three mechanisms used in producing public goods.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These mechanisms follow the guidelines suggested by Rabontnikov regarding visibility, openness and accessibility.

The first mechanism is the mobilization of actors to make the social problem visible to civil society and to elevate it in the public agenda. This is the experience of Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá and Alianza para la Equidad en Antioquia.

The second mechanism is the creation of spaces for open debate with the participation of various actors from diverse perspectives in civil society. Nonetheless, the report from Brazil indicates that none of the three initiatives explored in the country was a part of the public agenda at the local level. This has resulted, in the cases studied, in a greater risk of imposing external agendas and the consequent resistance of local actors to the involvement of the actors from the private sector in the collective effort to address social problems.

In regard to the participation of beneficiary communities, the case studies in Brazil find that a greater activism exists in periods of greater resource availability or greater engagement by actors who are consistently the same. Similarly, there is a significantly greater degree of community participation in operational activities than planning activities for the initiatives. As stated in the ECS report from Brazil, “This reality imposes important limitations on the expansion of the programs and projects analyzed, their sustainability through public policy and their social construction in terms of social rights by the beneficiaries.” This unequal and limited participation of local actors and beneficiaries imposes obstacles to the consolidation of new ways of constructing social relationships in the public sphere, which is the primary objective of cross-sector partnerships. Ultimately, according to the ECS report from Brazil, the participation of a broader public “would generate gains in terms of citizenship and access to social rights, creating more advanced forms of coexistence in the public sphere.”

Moreover, the ECS report from Colombia finds that the State has strong limitations to prolonged participation in the production of public goods. In the experience of Alianza para la Equidad, the report finds that the pace of state bureaucracy usually does not follow the pace of social needs. Also, the excessive formalism and permanent fear of breaking the law delay operations substantially. With respect to the private sector, its participation is limited by marked pragmatism and a short-term perspective on actions, which ultimately constrains public debate – public debate in a democracy is a value and achievement in itself.

The third mechanism to produce public goods is the ongoing production of new knowledge about the problems to be addressed by the initiative. This knowledge feeds the public debate in several cases such as the Alianza por la Equidad and Bogotá Cómo Vamos, and served as a means for identification and differentiation for ARB.

Finally, with respect to evaluating the management of collaborations – a critical aspect emphasized in the literature on cross-sector collaborations – the ECS in Brazil

highlight that evaluations tend to be strictly quantitative in nature. These evaluations are less focused on dimensions of public policy that are difficult to measure and are subject to different interpretations by various actors. Thus, evaluations of cross-sector collaborations tend to concentrate in measuring efficiency and efficacy and less on the effectiveness and impact on beneficiaries. In this way, the accountability is to financing institutions, usually the private and public sectors, rather than to affected communities. As the report states, “Process factors in the evaluation of programs and projects are privileged over more relevant elements related to the impact on communities.”

### *Recognition and Respect of Differences among Partners*

A central element in the sustainability of relationships among sectors identified in the CI process is the clear identification and understanding of the benefits and disadvantages for each partner of engaging in the partnership. The starting point of collaborations is the acceptance and respect of differences among partners, as well as the clear understanding of the interdependencies that attract partners to the collaboration.

According to the case studies in Colombia, a critical factor in establishing collaborations is a conviction about the need to engage with other partners, provided that social problems are too complex to be addressed by each sector independently. In Colombia, one actor provided an answer to the question of why to work jointly with other partners by saying, “because our individual strength is not sufficient.” The experience of Alianza para la Equidad exemplifies the inability of just one sector to address the social and economic problems affecting the Antioquia Region. “The starting point for Alianza para la Equidad is that the State alone cannot solve acute social problems such as inequality and poverty.”

The initiatives examined in Brazil and Colombia, and particularly described in the ECS from Brazil, lead researchers to conclude that the desire to construction collaborative relationships is commonly based on the conscious and unconscious need to capture resources and find complementarities with partners.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the research teams in Brazil and Colombia highlight the need to overcome prejudices and to recognize each partner’s singularities, logics, rationales, values, rhythms and expectations. In the CI report from Colombia, this need is emphasized as the importance of understanding diversity and the delicate balance between the autonomy of each partner and their interests in belonging to the initiative. Recognizing different actors’ interests demands great effort from each

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<sup>2</sup> This rationale follows the idea of a “resource dependence platform” suggested by Selsky and Parker del.

partner and attention throughout time. Similarly, partners should be aware not only of what unifies them but also of what separates them. It is essential to recognize conflicts within these collaborative relationships to build trust among partners. (There is more on trust and factors that facilitate its construction below.)

According to the case studies report, some initiatives in Brazil use intermediary organizations to manage the relationships among sectors. This is the case of P1MC and Alem das Letras, with their respective organizations, APARL and IRS. These organizations are responsible for facilitating and moving forward collaborative efforts and managing negotiations among sectors as well as reducing the risk of conflict among different logics of action.

One way identified in Colombia to mitigate potential conflict in collaborative efforts is the construction of trust. The ECS report in this country suggests that this can be achieved in two ways. First, through the engagement of a convening leader, whose characteristics were described above. This was the particular case of the Governor of Antioquia and Silvio Ruiz in building trust in Alianza para la Equidad and ARB, respectively. Second, through the creation of clear rules for decisionmaking and conflict resolution – topics developed in the next section.

#### *Governance Structures and Trust among Partners*

The CI reports suggest that investing time developing a system for negotiation and cooperation and explicit and clear rules for interactions among partners are fundamental conditions for building confidence within a partnership. This governance system should provide clear guidelines, procedures and processes to make collective decisions, achieve consensus and plan actions. This implies a clear definition of how decisions will be made, the roles and responsibilities of each partners, the mechanisms for coordinating actions and the accountability lines within the initiative.

Moreover, the research teams find, it is essential to develop a communications mechanism for information flow within and outside the initiatives. One of the participants from collaborative efforts examined in Brazil offered a testimony about the importance of communication among partners and with external actors: “A failure of our program is that I think people barely communicate with our publics, with our partners, teachers, principals, the community, parents. We are too technical and less communicators.”

The agreement on rules and principles, according the experience in Brazil, must be formally written in a legal document in order to enforce adherence and respect. Nonetheless, there are informal mechanisms that are even more critical than formal ones, such as trust, transparency and respect of differences and disagreements. In fact, some researchers suggest that these factors could substitute for formal decision-making structures such as committees, with the ideal being the avoidance of too

many bureaucratic processes. In case these factors did not exist previously, it is essential for partners to create and institutionalize governance structures for deliberation, planning, decision-making and formalization of agreements. As stated in the CI report from Brazil:

An important finding related to the issue of trust is that if this does not exist beforehand and is not based primarily in knowledge and affection among partners, the effectiveness of partnerships depends on structures and processes for decision-making, planning and deliberation that allow them to update agreements, produce recognition, institutionalize processes and functions, accept cooperative actions among entities and between these and the community. The rationale for the existence of these new governance spaces and forms is the search to create and broaden the convergence areas among partners in terms of interests, perceptions and shared goals.

In brief, the lack of trust is the main obstacle to sustainable collaborative relationships. The respect and fulfillment of agreements, the establishment of a clear agenda in which partners' interests are explicit, and the creation of a work space and schedule can contribute to improve the trust among partners.

In conclusion, the factors identified through two methodologies, the CI and ECS, such as the role of a convening leader in engaging partners and mobilizing resources to affect the public agenda; the commitment to a common cause; the identification and respect to the different logics and motivations among partners; and the governance structures for decision-making, deliberation, cooperation and trust are all key for the construction and sustainability of collaborative efforts. These factors deserve further, more in-depth study in the future.

In the meantime, based on the reported findings, and facing the risk of simplifying reality, we offer a set of practices guidelines to assure sustainability of cross-sector collaborations. (Please see the next page.)

## Practical Guidelines for Constructing Trust and Commitment for Sustainable Cross-sector Collaborations among the Public, Private and Nonprofit Sectors

- Remember that partnerships are built partnering. These relationships are dynamic in nature and are in permanent development, with instances in which partners leave and others in which they move closer, depending on contextual factors. These changes in the level of commitment by partners are not necessarily bad for the collaboration, if they are addressed with careful attention.
- Make sure that there is clarity about the common cause and spend time to formulate it in a way that has visibility within and outside the collaboration.
- Dedicate effort to creating a public agenda that makes the social problem visible and mobilizes resources, efforts and interest in the three sectors beyond participants in the partnership.
- Ensure the presence of the State in the collaborative effort to provide legitimacy to the initiative and the presence of the beneficiary communities to ensure sustainability and ownership.
- Value and respect diversity; recognize singularities, logics, values and rationales of various partners; and understand different actors' interests and the associated benefits and disadvantages for them of engaging in the collaboration.
- Spend time during the collaborative effort to conduct a systematic dialogue about partners' motivations, their assumptions on the social problem to be addressed and its solutions, their resource needs and their expectations.
- Propose to create a governance structure with clear and explicit rules to achieve consensus, make decisions, plan collective actions and define unambiguous responsibilities and roles among partners. The fulfillment of these agreements is an essential factor to improve trust, coordination and accountability in the initiative.
- If there are diverse logics of actions in the collaborative effort, consider the possibility of creating or hiring a "neutral" organization committed to the goals of the partnership to manage the relationships between the partnering sectors.
- Develop communications mechanisms both within the initiative to partners and outside it to communities.
- Contribute time, resources and attention to producing new knowledge about the problems to be addressed by the partnership, and use this knowledge to construct a public agenda.
- Inquire constantly about the impact of the collaboration on the beneficiaries and use this information to guide actions and as a focal point to resolve conflicts among participants.
- Begin developing evaluation efforts that go beyond efficiency and efficacy criteria to include effectiveness and impact on the beneficiary populations.

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## About the AVINA Foundation

The mission of the AVINA Foundation is to contribute to sustainable development in Latin America by encouraging productive alliances based on trust among social and business leaders and by brokering consensus around agendas for action.

The AVINA Foundation seeks a prosperous, integrated, and democratic Latin America, inspired in its diversity, built in solidarity by its citizens, and known globally for its own model of sustainable and inclusive development. The Foundation wants to be recognized as an effective and innovative organization that contributes to the sustainable development of Latin America.

More information at: <http://www.avina.net>

## About the Research Center for Leadership in Action

As the leadership research and development hub for the field of public service, the Research Center for Leadership in Action fosters leadership that transforms society.

Founded in 2003 at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, a top-ranked school for public service, the Center's unique approach integrates research with practice, bridges individual pursuits and collective endeavors, and connects local efforts with global trends. RCLA scholars use innovative social science methodologies to address ambitious questions that advance big ideas in leadership.

Public service leaders rely on RCLA to create customized leadership development and capacity-building programs that facilitate critical reflection, peer-to-peer learning and transformation at the individual, organizational and systems levels.

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