SHARED
PLATFORMS

TOOLKIT

About Ontario Nonprofit Network

ONN's work, and the work of our network, take place on traditional Indigenous territories all around Ontario. The ONN office is located at Foundation House on the traditional territory of the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. This territory is part of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty, an agreement between the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. This territory is also covered by the Upper Canada Treaties. ONN's full land acknowledgement is available here.

Vision

A strong and resilient nonprofit sector. Thriving communities. A dynamic province

Mission

To engage, advocate, and lead with - and for - nonprofit and charitable organizations that work for the public benefit of Ontario.

Values

Courage to take risks and do things differently. Diversity of perspectives, creativity and expertise to get stuff done. Optimism and determination. Solutions created by the sector, with the sector, for the sector. Celebrating our successes and learning from our experiences. Strength that comes from working together.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Shared Platform Toolkit builds on research of the first phase of ONN's shared platform project. It follows extensive consultations with nonprofit and charitable organizations, unincorporated groups and funders, through research, focus groups, and surveys, including initiatives of Black, Indigenous and racialized grassroots groups.

In particular, we heard how important clear expectations and shared understanding are for trusteeship/shared platforms to thrive.

Toolkit content has been legally reviewed to align with existing legal and regulatory framework. ONN continues to advocate for formal recognition and regulatory support of shared platforms at the federal level.

These tools augment existing resources (like the Shared Platform Guidebook, and Shared Platforms: An Introduction) and are available on the ONN Resource Centre.

Shared platforms in service of racial justice, truth and reconciliation, and equity

Shared platforms can play a role in supporting Black and Indigenous-led groups by providing critical infrastructure to grow and access funding. Shared platforms can support a wide range of projects and community-led initiatives to efficiently share capacity, support emergent leadership to grow, foster social innovation, and improve funding outcomes. We hope an expansion of shared platforms means more opportunities for groups and projects to connect to supports.

However, it is important to recognize that systems of oppression, structural inequities, and legacies of settler colonialism exist in the nonprofit sector, including the history of nonprofit governance being grounded in colonial systems and perspectives. These realities mean careful consideration of any model of infrastructure support, including shared platforms. Reciprocity should be at the centre of relationships between partnerships.

About the term "shared platform"

ONN has decided to use the term shared platform rather than trusteeship for this toolkit for a few reasons:

- Trusteeship has many meanings within the community. Some funders and organizations use trusteeship to describe several arrangements, including agent agreements and service contracts, which are more limited in scope than a shared platform relationship. We wanted to be clear that these tools are specifically designed for the shared platform approach.

- Language matters. The term trusteeship focuses on a transaction rather than the relationship. We heard that for many, the term trusteeship doesn't resonate and perpetuates the systems and processes that limit what groups and organizations are trusted with funding. We want to emphasize the shared nature of shared platforms and encourage sharing resources, learning, and support for everyone in the sector.
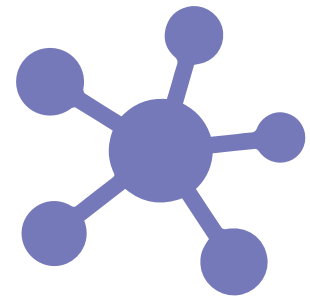
Tell us what you think!

Your insights will be very helpful in making sure they are valuable and practical. Please tell us what resonates with you, what, may be missing the mark or needs refinement. Email us at info@theonn.ca.

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What is a shared platform?

Almost every nonprofit got started when a community identified a need and did something about it. However, it has become harder to start, operate and sustain an organization over time. This is why some grassroots projects do not incorporate as organizations, but continue their informal structure. Incorporated nonprofits and charities can support these and emerging grassroots projects through shared platforms. Some of these projects may grow into new organizations, some will be time-limited, while others will remain as "projects" of a shared platform.

Benefits of shared platforms

Efficiently SHARE capacity

SUPPORT emergent leadership

FOSTER social innovation

IMPROVE funding outcomes

Definition

The term shared platform is commonly used to describe a situation where an organization hosts and provides a legal home for a project or initiative that is unincorporated and does not have its own legal status.

At minimum, the host organization provides administrative support and oversight, assuming all legal and financial responsibility for the activities of the project. For some, mentoring, learning opportunities and community connections are part of that role. At its best, it offers a mutual exchange of learning, networks and opportunities.

Why choose a shared platform?

For an unincorporated project, it's a way to tap into existing support and infrastructure (e.g. policies and procedures, human resources, finance, insurance) and offers an alternative to incorporating or obtaining charitable registration to access funds.

For an organization acting as a shared platform, it's a way of working with communities and adapting to meet changing needs. It allows the host organization to share its capacity, nurture and learn with emerging leaders.

For a funder, it's one way to increase access to funds for community driven initiatives and emerging groups who are addressing service gaps or testing new ideas, but are not independently incorporated.*

For the nonprofit sector, shared platforms are an essential building block in creating a more supportive environment for nonprofits and community members to lead the way and assist their neighbours and communities, particularly in the post-pandemic era.

For examples and success stories, see ONN's Shared Platforms: An Introduction.

*See Philanthropic Foundation Canada's Primer for Working with Non-qualified Donees to learn more about the variety of options to fund these groups.

Language

There is no single, common term for this work in Canada. While ONN uses the term shared platform, there are other commonly used terms to describe it:

Trusteeship, organizational mentor/mentee, incubator, intermediary can be used in similar ways as shared platform.

The group that rests on a shared platform might be called: grassroots group, emerging group, unincorporated group, community group or project, among other terms.

Shared platforms are not:

- **A "flow through"**
  Shared platforms are not simply a way to flow money to an unincorporated group. The host organization must provide oversight to the project as its legal home.

- **Service contract or agent agreement**
  In a shared platform, the project becomes part of the host organization and all activities happen as part of that host organization. In a service contract or agent agreement, the host organization and project/group agree to a contract where the group carries out very specific activities with a timeline and deliverables on behalf of the organization. See **PFC's Primer for Working with Non-qualified Donees** (page 8) for more information on these agreements.

- **Organization-initiated program**
  In most cases, what makes a shared platform different from other programs of the host organization is that the project's day-to-day activities and decision-making about priorities and activities are led by the members of the grassroots project. However, this would be in their capacity as agents or employees of the shared platform and subject to the shared platform's Board and possibly management.

Are you ready to be a shared platform?
For the host organization

Here are a few things for your organization to consider before deciding to become a shared platform:

Why do we want to become a shared platform?

Get clear on the purpose of offering a shared platform. This will help guide further decisions about what types of projects you take on and what supports you will offer.

Most importantly, the shared platform approach and the projects must extend your organization's mission. For more information on building a strong foundation for a shared platform, see pages 14-18 of the Shared Platform Guidebook.

Are we ready to work in this way?

Shared platforms are not for everyone. They require adapting organizational practices, ongoing relationship and trust building, sharing decision-making while holding the legal and due diligence responsibilities. Check out the Shared Platform Guidebook's detailed assessment on page 21 for more information on good practices for implementing a shared platform in an organization.

Is everyone ready?

The board of directors, management and staff need to understand what it means for them. Shared platforms work best when everyone understands the risks and the benefits.

Do we have the right skills and capacity?

A shared platform is administratively complex and requires dedicated staff time and expertise to be successful. Assessing organizational capacity and setting up a dedicated staff or team to focus on supporting the shared platform is key to success.

> "At CEE, we are committed to strengthening the leadership and growth of Black focused, Black led and/or Black serving (B3) nonprofits and grassroots organizations in Toronto. Becoming a trustee/shared platform to B3 groups is one of the ways we support B3 groups to thrive."
>
> **Joyann Smith**
> ***CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals***

Why do we want to be part of a shared platform? *For the project*

Get clear on the purpose of joining a shared platform. How could it benefit your work? What do you need for this relationship to be successful? This will also help guide further decisions about what type of shared platform will be a fit for you.

Most importantly, be sure that being part of a shared platform will help you realize your goals and vision for the project.

> "As a grassroots organization, we initially sought a trustee/organizational mentor to be eligible for certain grants, but we gained mentorship, administrative support, and much more through the experience. When deciding on a trustee, we chose an organization with a strong reputation among community leaders/professionals."
>
> **Teshyla Bailey,** *Sis to Sis Toronto*

Possible benefits to working with a shared platform	Reasons to avoid or carefully consider
Community impact Working alongside an incorporated host organization could help both the project and the shared platform reach the community served in new and better ways.	**Saving money** Although the shared platform model can create efficiencies, there are likely costs. Make sure to understand what it will cost now and in the future to be a part of the shared platform.
Access to existing administrative systems and expertise Shared platforms have policies and procedures, HR supports, finance, insurance, and other administrative supports, allowing the project to focus on the day-to-day project activities with the community.	**Responding to a funding opportunity** While it can be tempting to rush into a shared platform relationship when a funding opportunity arises, take the time to make sure it's a fit.
Access to additional supports offered by the shared platform Some shared platforms provide mentorship, workshops, networking and/or office space as part of their offerings.	**Out of a sense of obligation** There may be funders or community partners that are encouraging you to use a shared platform. Make sure it's a fit with your project's vision and needs.

Are we ready to work in this way?

Shared platforms are not for everyone. They require working with an existing host organization's policies and practices, sharing decision-making and investing in the relationship. Will working in this collaborative way work for your team?

Is everyone ready?

Does your team understand the benefits and risks of working on a shared platform? Are there any key stakeholders to consult before moving ahead (e.g. community members, funders)?

Do we have the right skills and capacity?

A shared platform should outline what responsibilities will be required of its projects. Is your team able, willing and ready to take those responsibilities on? Common responsibilities include leading project activities, submitting invoices and receipts, completing reporting for funders, reviewing contractor agreements, etc.

LEADING PROJECT ACTIVITIES

SUBMITTING INVOICES & RECEIPTS

COMPLETING REPORTING FOR FUNDERS

REVIEWING CONTRACTOR AGREEMENTS

Selecting a project – is this a fit?

Successful shared platforms have so much to do with relationships and trust. Both the shared platform and the projects are sharing decision-making and taking risks by working together. Making sure everyone understands one another's vision, values, expectations and responsibilities will help ensure a positive experience.

Here are a few things to keep in mind before taking on a project:

Mission alignment: Do the project's values and vision fit with your organization's mission and values? Do our activities and/or are the communities we serve aligned?

Legal status: Do the project's activities fit with your legal status? E.g. for a registered charity, are the project's activities charitable?

Size and budget: Does the shared platform have the capacity to support projects of this size and budget?

Administration and operations: Does the shared platform have the knowledge and capacity to meet the project's needs? Are you able to meet the project's insurance coverage and human resource needs?

Communications, digital infrastructure, and IT: Are the systems in place to communicate and manage project data?

Funders: Who are the project's current and potential funders? Does this have any implications for the host organization?

Cost: Is there funding or a revenue strategy in place to cover the cost of supporting this project?

Agreement: Is there a shared platform agreement with clear roles and responsibilities? (see Shared Platform Agreements for templates and good practices for an agreement)

Learning and mentorship: What are the project's learning goals and needs? Is the shared platform able to provide this type of support? What is the project hoping to learn from us? Is this something the shared platform is willing to share?

Additional offerings: Are there other project needs? Is this something you can offer? E.g. shared space, access to photocopiers, digital tools and memberships.

Sample questions to ask projects:

- Tell us about your group. How many members do you have? What is your experience of working together? What are the different roles that your members play?

- Tell us about your work.

- What kind of partnership would you like to have if we work together?

- Can you share your past experiences working with a shared platform?

- What type of support are you looking for as you implement your project idea and plan for the future?

- Are there any specific areas of your project that you would like our expertise in?

- What expertise or knowledge do you want to share with our team?

Adapted from the Ontario Trillium Foundation and its Youth Opportunity Fund's resources.

Selecting a shared platform - Is this a fit?

Successful shared platforms have so much to do with relationships and trust. Both the shared platform and the projects are sharing decision-making and taking risks by working together. Making sure everyone understands one another's vision, values, expectations and responsibilities will help ensure a positive experience.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when looking for a shared platform:

Mission alignment: Do the host organization's mission and values align with what you want to achieve? Do your activities and/or are the communities you serve aligned?

Legal status: What are the details of the shared platform's non-profit status? Are they a registered charity*? Find out how that might impact what funds you can apply for and if there are any other considerations.

Size and budget: Does the shared platform have projects of your size and budget? Are there requirements around size and budget?

Administration and operations: A shared platform will need to sign all of your grants and contracts. Who is in charge of these things? Is the shared platform able to meet your insurance and human resource needs? (E.g. employee contracts and training, HR policies)

Communications, digital infrastructure, and IT: How will you communicate with the shared platform staff? Are there any online systems you might need to use?

Funders: What is the process for communicating with funders? Are there any opportunities or barriers to raising funds as part of the shared platform?

Cost: How much does it cost to be part of the shared platform? What does it include? Are there additional fees? See below: *"Why do shared platforms cost money?"*

Agreement: Is there a shared platform agreement with clear roles and responsibilities? (see Shared Platform Agreements for templates and good practices for an agreement)

Learning and mentorship: What skills or support would help your project grow? Is the shared platform able to provide this type of support? What is the shared platform hoping to learn from your project?

Additional offerings: Are there other project needs? Is this something the shared platform can offer? E.g. shared space, access to photocopiers, digital tools and memberships.

Sample questions to ask the shared platform:

- Why are you interested in mentoring and working with groups like ours?

- What do you need from us to make this partnership positive and productive?

- Can you share what you've learned from past experiences working with other groups?

- What type of support can your host organization offer as we implement our project idea?

- Would you be able to provide us with feedback as we deliver our project?

- What are the ways we can share lessons learned and problem-solve as we enter into this partnership?

- What process will you use to administer funds?

- What will the funds reconciliation process look like?

- Will there be an opportunity to access space, resources, and/or tools from your host organization?

- Do you provide a specific contact person that has the time and resources to support our project? What is their role and how will we work together?

- How do we reach your team in the case of an absence, emergency, or change in staffing?

- How frequently would you like to have meetings and check-ins? What is the frequency of the reporting, meetings, and check-ins that you would anticipate?

- Is there a process for resolving disagreements?

*A registered charity refers to a charitable organization, public foundation, or private foundation registered with the Canada Revenue Agency. A registered charity is exempt from paying income tax, and can issue tax receipts for donations it receives. A charity must comply with the requirements of the Income Tax Act.

This means that charitable status will allow the host organization and its project to access charitable funds and donations but also may have implications regarding what activities your project can carry out.

Why do shared platforms cost money?

Shared platforms provide administrative support and dedicated staff time to their projects. This requires funds to pay for staff and resources (eg. software, insurance, legal advice, bookkeeping). Every shared platform is different in how it financially sustains itself. Often a percentage of a project's revenue is allocated to cover some of these costs. Sometimes the host organization is able to access additional grants or donations to cover these costs. Make sure it is clear how the shared platform sustains itself and any costs that your project may need to consider.

Shared platform agreement

A shared platform agreement helps to make sure everyone is on the same page. It should clearly outline the roles and responsibilities for everyone including the board of directors, management, staff and project leadership.

Key ingredients for the agreement:

- A description of the project goals within the host organization's mission and vision

- Clear roles and responsibilities for:
  - the board of directors
  - management
  - shared platform staff
  - project team

- Description of the project activities and a project budget.

- Communications and conflict resolution process

- How funds will be used and managed

- Funder and donor reporting and communication

- Any project costs that will be allocated to the shared platform such as a percentage of revenue for administration, fee for insurance, etc.

- Ownership of project assets and work product (including intellectual property)

- Project termination process

When you sit down to review the agreement, this is a great time to:

- Identify the main points of contact for both your group and the shared platform

- Set realistic goals for the kinds of support the shared platform can offer

- Identify the frequency of formal meetings, check-ins, and reporting

- Understand the financial and project reporting tools the shared platform uses

- Develop a schedule for the release of funds and reconciliation of project expenses

- Develop a mechanism for problem-solving and giving/receiving feedback

- Develop a process for managing and reconciling funds

Adapted from the Ontario Trillium Foundation and its Youth Opportunity Fund's resources.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to the agreement.
Here is an example from Toronto Neighbourhood Group:

cognitoforms.com/StStephensCommunityHouse/trusteeshipagreement

Good practices for shared platforms

Here are some good practices to help ensure processes are in place for host organizations and projects to thrive.

- Ensure you have dedicated staff to support projects.

- Put a clear agreement in place so that everyone understands their roles and responsibilities.

- Develop a schedule for regular meetings, problem-solving and checking in.

- Invest in the relationship so that everyone is learning, issues are identified early on and there is a shared understanding of how to work together.

- Ensure your processes reflect project needs. Are the processes accessible for project leaders to follow? Are there places to simplify or shift what you do? Build in ways to receive and integrate feedback.

- Learn from other organizations who are developing their shared platform practice to share resources and troubleshoot issues.

> Sharing an organization's infrastructure looks different for every organization. ONN's Shared Platform Guidebook provides a detailed breakdown of good practices.

These key areas will require clear processes for host organization staff and project leads:

FINANCE
- Budgeting, tracking, reporting
- Accounts payable/receivable (including donations)

GRANTS MANAGEMENT
- Submitting proposals, reviewing agreements, reporting to funders

HUMAN RESOURCES
- Recruitment, employee handbook, payroll

CONTRACT MANAGEMENT
- Leases, vendor agreements

COMMUNICATIONS
- Use of names and logos

INSURANCE
- Adding activities (when necessary)

MENTORSHIP AND CAPACITY BUILDING
- Identifying needs and interests, opportunities available

Shared Platforms:
information for boards of directors

What is a shared platform?

The term trusteeship or shared platform is commonly used to describe a situation where an organization adopts and provides a legal home for a project or initiative that is unincorporated and does not have its own legal status.

There are great benefits to working in this way. For examples and success stories, see ONN's Shared Platforms: An Introduction.

What is the role of the board?

It's important that the board understands the implications of being a shared platform so that it can provide the right support and oversight.

Here are a few areas for boards to consider when an organization is deciding if/how to be a shared platform.

Impact
Understand the potential impact of offering a shared platform. How can it help you meet your organization's mission, impact and the needs and aspirations of your community?

Liability
The organization is taking on legal and fiduciary responsibility for projects. Make sure the board understands projects' activities to understand where there might be risks (and mitigate where you can). If you are a registered charity, ensure that the activities fit within your charitable objects and follow relevant legislation.

Operational systems
Make sure the organization has the resources, capacity and infrastructure to direct and support projects. This includes adequate staff to support projects, clear roles and responsibilities, financial/HR/administrative capacity and expertise, etc.

Oversight
Put processes in place to regularly review projects, their activities and assess the relationship.

Cost
There are several approaches to covering the cost of a shared platform. Discuss what approach makes sense for your organization and projects.

Shared platform communication tips

Developing strong communication processes and clear expectations can help ensure any conflicts can be resolved quickly and smoothly.

A few tips:

- Invest time in the relationship early on. Take time to get to know each other and make sure the project and shared platform are a good fit to work together in this way.

- Build a clear and accessible agreement so that expectations, roles and responsibilities are clear.

- Include a communications section in your agreement that identifies key contacts for the shared platform and project, regular check-ins and ways to share information and address concerns. If appropriate, include information about the communication process and expectation with funders, such as check-ins and reporting.

- Create a conflict resolution process. Anticipate that conflict may happen and be prepared.

See this helpful example from The Toronto Neighbourhod Group, in the sections for "Communications" and "Complaints and Conflict Resolution Procedure".

Evaluating the relationship for continuous improvement

In addition to regular check-ins, set a time every six months or year for reflection and shared learning.

Conversation guide

- What is working well that we should continue?

- What are some tensions or challenges coming up that we should address?

- What new goals or opportunities are coming up? How can we support each other?

- Are there any changes to what is needed to support the project? Can the shared platform support these needs or connect the project to resources?

- How are the processes we have in place working (e.g. communication, payments, grant review, etc.)? What, if anything, is missing or could be improved?

- Review the shared platform agreement. Do the roles and responsibilities outlined in the shared platform agreement still make sense for us? Are any changes needed to better reflect how we are working together?

Ending the shared platform relationship

There are a range of reasons why a project may no longer be part of a shared platform. Some projects are time limited or wind down; others may become their own separate organization or move to another host organization.

One of the reasons for developing shared platforms is to create the opportunity to implement time-limited initiatives and test an idea without creating (or closing) a whole organization. Having a good plan in place in your shared platform agreement will help ensure a smooth process.

Here are a few processes to put into place:

- A clear process for project termination in your agreement.

- A way to track physical assets (e.g. furniture, computers) and work products (e.g. reports, digital tools) and a plan for how these assets are dealt with in the case of a project leaving a shared platform. For charities, the assets will likely have to be transferred to another charity or a qualified donee*.

- A way to track all project commitments and obligations to make sure they are addressed when a project winds down, sets up a new entity or moves to another host organization.

    Obligations may include:

    - Employment contracts
    - Leases
    - Service contracts
    - Other third party contracts
    - Grant agreements
      (note: funders may have requirements regarding how/if funds can be transferred)

- A communication plan to inform stakeholders, partners and funders when a project leaves or closes.

Donor contact information requires special consideration when a project leaves an organization and moves to another entity. Be sure to review Canada's Anti-Spam Legislation and The Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA or the PIPED Act) with your legal counsel.

*Under the Income Tax Act, qualified donees are organizations that can issue official donation receipts for gifts they receive from individuals and corporations. Registered charities can also make gifts to them.