THREADS
WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

MIAMI HIGHLIGHTS
HIGHLIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Event held at Coral Gables Museum
May 29, 2015
OVERVIEW OF THREADS

At the start of 2015, Independent Sector launched a series of community conversations called “Threads” in cities across the nation. The purpose was to convene leaders from nonprofits and foundations, and our other allies to explore the impact of society-wide trends on our sector today and in years to come. Threads are designed to engage over one thousand leaders in over a dozen cities to generate thousands of data points about (1) practices that are limiting the effectiveness of sector organizations and (2) innovative ideas for how to increase our impact. Each three-hour Thread featured:

- **Part I – Trends:** An overview of 9 global and national trends shaping our sector’s work, followed by a full group discussion to solicit feedback and generate additional insight about the trends;
- **Part II – Challenges and Solutions:** Small group discussions at which participants identify challenges they face at the organizational, sector, and societal level, then generate solutions for a particular challenge;
- **Part III – Bright Spots:** More small group discussions to brainstorm solutions that have moved the needle on a particular social/environmental issue (what we call “bright spots”);
- **Part IV – Feedback:** A large group discussion of potential roles that national organizations like Independent Sector can play to help the sector better accomplish its important work.

Input from each Thread is coded separately, and then analyzed alongside data from other events to create a national picture of challenges and bright spots. While these findings are not scientific per se, we believe they represent important perspectives from the field that can help drive our sector forward.

THREADS MIAMI – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

89 Attendees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>36% CEO</th>
<th>64% NON-CEO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Organization Type**
- 76% Nonprofit
- 16% Foundation
- 6% For-profit
- 1% Corporate
- 1% Government

**Organization Size**
- 48% < $1M
- 29% $1M - $10M
- 11% $10M - $50M
- 12% > $50M
TRENDS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE CHARITABLE SECTOR

Threads Miami kicked off with a presentation by Diana Aviv, President and CEO of Independent Sector, on nine trends shaping the world and our work. She did not make value judgments about the trends. Instead she sought to (1) make people aware of how the trends are shaping our world and therefore our work; and (2) encourage people to respond to the trends in light of their own organization's practices and particular circumstances. After this presentation, she encouraged participants to share their reactions to the trends. The following themes emerged.

Major Themes

1. **New Models** – Miami participants repeatedly mentioned the need to upend the status quo in the sector. They described the existing landscape as full of “stovepipes” and called for new models of operating together in a more collaborative way. They also discussed “blurring lines” between the business community and the sector, labeling it a “good thing.” The intersection, they said, represented a new space with potential.

2. **Swarms** – A lively conversation unfolded around massive virtual networks. Some stated that corporations “listened” to swarms but our sector generally did not. One participant spoke at length about swarms and, throughout the 3-hour program, others often referred back to the comments. She said swarms are capable of “cohesion and creating sustainable change” and establishment organizations don’t see their impact because swarms flow around them. She cited Black Lives Matter as an example, noting “growing cohesion, learning and transfer of knowledge.” “They are making real strides,” she said, “learning how to harness this energy – but you cannot look in the traditional places [for it].”

3. **Reflection** – The idea that we “need time to think” surfaced multiple times during Threads Miami. People talked about being so focused on “competing for the next dollar,” that they don’t have time to step back and take stock. “We have to think about the systemic pivot we need to make,” said one individual, “it won’t happen naturally.” He applauded IS for convening the session for “these types of conversations.”

4. **Inclusion & Information Sharing** – The final theme that surfaced in Miami involved the sector’s lack of diversity along racial/generational lines as well as the difficulties of transmitting information to all levels of an organization. Regarding the latter, one person asked, “How do we get this knowledge into the trenches? How do we get those voices to the table? They are not here. Too many [people] are missing from the table when we have important conversations like this.”
CHALLENGES

ORGANIZATION & SECTOR LEVELS

At Threads Miami, we asked people to respond to the following two questions. What are the most significant challenges your organization is facing? What challenges are holding back the sector at large? Here are the top themes that emerged, followed by quotes from the field.

Major Themes

1. **Financial Sustainability** – This theme, the need for more financial support, has transcended every Threads program thus far. Miami was no different. Participants also mentioned the challenges associated with competing for funding in a fiscally constrained environment. They criticized funders for “asking for too much, not taking risks, and being too transactional.” Exact quotes follow below.

2. **Governance and Operations** – Attendees argued for greater capacity regarding operations. In addition, they cited various shortcomings of their boards of directors, such as a lack of information on community needs and boards that prioritize the preservation of the organization over impact.

3. **Relationships among Sector Organizations** – Like previous Threads, people commented on the pervasive lack of collaboration within the sector. They acknowledged the value of forming effective partnerships to solve problems, but had witnessed a lack of connections/networks in their community. One individual summed up by commenting on the “proliferation of nonprofits” yet describing existing collaboration among organizations (even those with similar missions) as “paltry.”

4. **Community Engagement** – Community engagement was another dominant theme during discussions. Attendees used language like “civic disengagement” and “tribalism” to describe the status quo. Others noted the “failure to build sustainable community leadership” and asked, “How do we engage people to become involved and see value” in what our organizations are trying to accomplish?

Other critical themes surfaced at Threads Miami. They included talent and workforce development (a theme echoed at previous gatherings) and concerns about measuring qualitative impact.

Voices from the Field

- “Funders want you to do a lot with very little.”
- “Funders not taking risks in their funding.”
- “Helping funders understand work and pay for indirect costs and talent.”
- “Competition for funding [is a problem].”
“Meeting contract deliverables vs. responding to present conclusions.”

“Board only thinking of one organization, protecting organizational interest.”

“Helping board members to advocate (and understand) needs of organization.”

“Paucity of info on community needs among boards.”

“Need for greater capacity.”

“Resistance to merger [is a problem].”

“Proliferation, of nonprofits yet lack of collaboration between orgs with similar missions.”

“Reluctance of the sector in how we work together.”

“Lack of connections within and without the sector, difficulty work[ing] together.”

**SOCIETAL LEVEL**

At Threads Miami, we asked participants to look beyond challenges at the organizational- and sector-level by thinking about broader difficulties they faced. Here are the top societal challenges they mentioned.

**Major Themes**

1. **Government-Related** – Participants at the Threads Miami talked in depth about their concerns regarding government at the federal, state, and local levels. The political environment, some said, is tainted by widespread partisanship and the influence of big money in politics. Others brought up voter apathy and citizens completely ‘disconnected’ from the political process. One individual summed up the general sentiment saying, “Democracy is under attack. A few control the masses.” Several participants expressed disappointment and anger about the state of affairs in our current political landscape.

2. **Inequality** – The prevalence of racial inequality surfaced again in Miami. Attendees talked about a widening economic gap, symptoms of poverty, and the resulting strain on communities. They were exceedingly concerned about the depth public apathy on the subject of racial and economic inequalities. Said one participant, it’s “too easy to ignore it … it doesn’t affect me, it’s over there.”

Participants raised two additional themes: societal trends and the media. The former involved subject-specific conversations around education, healthcare, economics, and immigration. The latter theme involved a perception about the lack of “honest information available through the media.”
Voices from the Field

- “Political environment → partisanship”
- “Money (Citizen's United)”
- Civic engagement is characterized by “Apathy/lack of power, disconnection”
- “Democracy is under attack. A few control the masses. Political level-factions that are in control.”
- “Washington/Gridlock [is a problem] … Government isn't always making the best investments. Legislators have pet projects, not looking at the commonality.”
- “Loss of confidence in political leadership and ill-informed electorate … more and more polarized.”
- “[We are] frustrated with leadership in Tallahassee.’
- “[A challenge is the] increasing economic gap: poverty symptoms/impacts on communities.”
- “Economic disparity [is a problem]: despite our knowledge of it, causes disruption, pain, destruction.”
- “Too easy to ignore it; it doesn’t affect me, it’s over there.”

SOLUTIONS

At Threads Miami, we asked participants to work with small groups to select challenges they face in their own work— whether from among the problems and objectives raised in the previous segment, from the trends, or from their own experience. We then asked groups to propose solutions to these issues in their own words. Below are their responses aggregated broadly by the most common challenges chosen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge:</th>
<th>Solutions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Collaboration within the nonprofit community and across the government and business sectors. Several groups addressed this same problem. | - “It starts with social capital. Bring the right people to the table.”
- “Capture energy around news headlines.”
- “Large scale community conversations at individual and organizational level.”
- “Bring people together at learning and problem solving.”
- “Action-oriented: must be action oriented to keep people engaged.”
- Senior leadership alignment.” |
### Challenge:
Improve the governance of sector organizations by making boards better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solutions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>° “Higher standards for board members.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° “Training of board members.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° “Boards of professional and board of community members.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° “Funders could come together to scrutinize boards.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° “A state AG has a lot of control over nonprofit boards.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Challenge:
Difficulty measuring qualitative impact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solutions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>° “Educate funders on what they should be asking for: typically a panel of funders telling nonprofits what needs to be done to receive funding but a better alternative to have a panel of nonprofit leaders educating funders on how they can be measured better.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° “Opportunities for funders and nonprofit organizations to be in spaces with one another communicating, getting to know one another and having open dialogue.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° “Utilizing social media to display impact.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Challenge:
Promoting and providing civics education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solutions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>° “Bringing programs around civics into the schools.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° “Increase civic engagement - evidence based programming, 20 hours community service. Simple solution to a massive problem.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° “Verbalizing where our country is at [with regard to the state of our] democracy.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BRIGHT SPOTS

“Bright spots” are solutions to social/environmental problems that have moved the needle or had significant, systematic impact at the societal level. They often tackle a problem from a holistic perspective and therefore involve multiple players. Participants shared these bright spots during table discussions:

Major Themes

1. **Partnerships Within Sector** – Attendees underscored the importance of joining forces with others in our community, particularly those working on the same issue. They also emphasized the value of tapping into university research and other resources.

2. **Strategic Approaches** – As with other Thread audiences, members at the Miami gathering talked about developing a holistic solution to a single problem. In other words, many applauded efforts to attend to the ecosystem around individuals being served. One example raised was a childhood development program called “Success by Six,” which is outlined below.

3. **Collaboration with Government** – Many social and environmental issues are so challenging, massive, or complex, they can’t be corrected without government assistance. This theme was discussed at length during the Threads program. Several bright spot examples demonstrate the value of partnering with government agencies.

Voices from the Field

**The Problem:** Childhood obesity in the Miami-Dade public school district.

**The Solution:** The Plant a Thousand Gardens Collaborative Nutrition Initiative (CNI), a program of The Education Fund, formed in 2007 to encourage students to plant gardens on school grounds and educate them on healthy eating. Another component of the program integrates homegrown food into school cafeterias. According to an individual at Threads Miami, participating organizations include the Department of Food and Nutrition, principals and public schools, as well as low-income families. CNI began in 5 schools and has now spread to 48. It currently reaches some [9,000 students](#).

**In Their Words:** An individual knowledgeable about CNI said that, since it began, test scores have gone “through the roof.” She praised its “hands on approach” and stated that it “tracks the right measurements.” It has raised awareness among children/families of where food comes from, she added, “and has helped correct bad eating habits.”
2

The Problem: A fragmented approach in serving immigrant communities, ending racism, and correcting other social injustices.

The Solution: In February 2015, Alleghany Franciscan Ministries launched the Social Justice Table Initiative, a gathering that welcomed all actors involved in social justice issues. According to their website, the convening included some 350 organizations with broad representation from education, government, and the nonprofit/foundation community. Topics discussed ranged from early childhood development to voter registration to immigrants’ rights to minimum wage.

In Their Words: The Social Justice Table put the “goal at the center,” noted Threads one participant. They created a welcoming environment that helped to get multiple players focusing on a single cause, she said. The result was a more holistic approach that improved the lives of immigrants, poor people, and disenfranchised communities.

3

The Problem: Chronic and family homelessness in central Florida.

The Solution: Last year, the Central Florida Foundation (in partnership with the Central Commission on Homelessness, a leading nonprofit in this field) created the Homeless Impact Fund to attack this growing problem. This collective fund brought together different organizations working on the same issue. On their website, the Foundation describes their approach as offering “wrap around” services and emphasized “evidence-based” funding and strategic planning.

In Their Words: The Homeless Impact Fund used a “holistic approach” to move the needle on homelessness, said one individual. By bringing together groups with “different perspectives,” they built a much more effective outreach program.

4

The Problem: Throughout Florida, children (ages 5 or less) were entering school ill prepared to learn.

The Solution: Florida Success by Six is a nation-wide initiative of United Way, which serves as a “neutral convener” to solve this problem and bring to bear resources from many different sources. The participant at our event identified the following partners in her local program: private contributions (Royal Caribbean), foundations, nonprofits (YMCA, United Way), and higher education (University of Miami).

In Their Words: Thanks to this program, she said, “Students now enter school ready to learn.” She lauded the way that Florida Success by Six has “enhanced the capacity of parents and teachers” and kept “students in school longer.”
The Problem: No large-scale platform existed for entrepreneurs from North America, Europe, and Latin America to exchange ideas/network.

The Solution: eMerge Americas holds an annual conference in Miami Beach that brings together people from all sectors. At its core, the convening focuses on the many ways that technology is a positive, innovative disruptive force. The four founding partners represent foundations, government, and business: the Knight Foundation, Miami Dade County, Medina Capital, and Greenberg Traurig. The 2015 gathering of eMerge Americas featured 10,000 attendees from 50 countries.

In Their Words: “This collaboration of different actors,” said one participant, “is “creating new commerce and [a] talent hub in Miami.”

ROLES

We wrapped up Threads Miami by asking participants to tell us what roles national organizations could play to help local and regional organizations better achieve their missions. Common themes follow.

Major Themes

1. Public Policy - Attendees in Miami encouraged IS to continue its public policy work and “fight in Washington” on behalf of the nonprofit and philanthropic sector. This theme has resonated with audiences in other Thread cities as well.

2. Collaboration – The general consensus was that collaboration among nonprofits was not a prolific as it should be; IS should step up and help connect like-minded organizations around shared goals.

3. Inclusion - There was concern about the lack of diversity in the sector’s workforce and a lack of inclusion in our approach. Some suggested that IS could help fix this problem by “throwing a wider net” to engage in multiple ways those being served. One person said we need to “get the opinions of those who are under-represented, otherwise we are talking in an echo chamber.”

4. Lead Us to Action – Finally, members of the audience mentioned the “sea of information” in which they operate. Because there is so much data and material, they hoped IS could curate the information and, more importantly, “lead us to action.”