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Building collaborative relationships in the context of Stronger Families Fund (SFF) projects is both an integral aspect of action research and supported by the key *Agreed Program Principles for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*. This article explores some of the key dimensions of these principles in the context of SFF projects at a community level, and presents a number of tools for negotiating, building and sustaining collaborative relationships.

Building

Collaboration



Simply stated, collaboration means 'working together'. At a community level collaboration is an essential part of achieving project goals, as individuals, agencies, organisations and/or groups rely on the combined effort and resources of others to achieve meaningful and sustainable outcomes. Collaboration, as well as process, can be an outcome in itself, as it can be a key element for creating social infrastructure that is sustainable beyond the duration of the project.

Creating collaborative relationships also builds up social capital that, in turn, facilitates the collaboration. Social capital can be understood as '... features of social organization, such as trust, norms or reciprocity, and networks of civil engagement, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions' (Putman, Leonardi & Nanetti 1993). Social capital and collaborative relationships appear to be interlinked. As Stone states, 'Thus, social capital

can be understood as a resource to collective action, which may lead to a broad range of outcomes' (Stone 2001: 4). So building collaborative relationships requires the resource of social capital, both of which are prerequisites for community action.

The idea of collaboration between agencies, organisations and individuals in the context of the Stronger Families Fund implies moving from an informal to a more formal relationship, in that it requires a conscious effort and processes of continuous negotiation on behalf of all of the stakeholders to achieve the aims or goals of their project.

According to Taylor-Powell and colleagues, collaboration means 'a mechanism for leveraging resources, dealing with scarcities, eliminating duplication, capitalising on individual strengths, and building internal capacities' (Taylor-Powell, Rossing & Geran, 1998). The ability to operationalise these elements, to apply them during

the life-cycle of a project and transfer them to other sections of the community, is in itself capacity building, but because of the complexity of these actions it usually requires ongoing development within agreed structures.

Organisations involved in the Stronger Families Fund projects usually have had a history of working in collaborative partnerships developed for previous joint projects and/or through service development and integration. Often these partnerships arose through networking with other agencies that have come together to share information or discuss issues relevant to their field, community or area of interest. These networks may have been informal and loosely structured, and served the primary purpose of facilitating communication. The move to form a collaborative relationship has usually involved a strengthening of these relationships through a process of negotiation, developing new skills and envisioning



the opportunity to achieve more. Hogue (1994) provides a useful framework to describe the range or stages towards building collaboration:

- **Networking.** Dialogue and common understanding. Clearinghouse for information, create a base for support. No change to the organization.
- **Cooperation.** Matched needs limits duplication, more defined roles, modify activities to ensure that a task gets done.
- **Coordination.** Sharing resources, formalized links group decision making in the central group, focused on the issues.
- **Coalition.** Shared resources from the existing systems, formalised agreements, Shared decision-making and the development of new resources.
- **Multi-sector collaboration.** Shared vision, risks and rewards, highly developed communication. (Hogue 1994)

This framework illustrates the increased level of involvement from networking through to a collaborative relationship, and highlights the need to create partnerships that are based on

mutual benefit, trust and cooperation. As organisations that have been able to achieve a collaborative relationship with other groups will testify, the processes involved take time, are often complex, require good communication and decision-making skills, are dependent on an agreement to share power and, above all, are based on an articulated shared vision.

Strategies for building collaboration

Developing a vision

A vision is at the heart of a collaborative relationship. It is the statement that describes how the common interests and imperatives of the group or partners could be actualised in the future. It is also the glue that holds a group together throughout the duration of a project, which allows them to share both the risks and the rewards.

A vision statement succinctly articulates 'what might be', and is developed through imaging or envisioning a future that will result from the collaborative effort. Embedded in the statement are the core values and principles of the team or group, which have meaning to all of those involved.

The process of developing a vision usually starts with an agreement to seek and foster collaboration. Often this requires an acknowledgement that this is creating something new for all of those concerned, and that it is probably independent of the core business of those involved. However, it offers the potential to grow the social capital and develop capacities that individuals and separate groups would be unable to achieve. This can be initiated by asking the questions: 'Who are we?'; 'What is our collective identity?'; 'What values, experiences and goals do we share?'; and 'Where do our individual agendas intersect and create unity of purpose?'. Developing dialogue around these questions helps to provide a group with a collective identity and a sense that 'we are all in this together'.

Approaches to visioning

One of the exciting prospects for the Stronger Families Fund is the opportunity, through the use of action research, to develop and refine

approaches to developing and documenting a collaborative vision. Many organisations, groups and agencies have experienced the familiar 'strategic planning' process that is designed to develop a vision, mission, aims and objectives. This usually starts with a 'SWOT' analysis that collectively identifies Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT), then works through a process that builds on the strengths and opportunities of the collective group, minimises the weaknesses and neutralises the threats to the stakeholders.

This process has proven to be very useful, particularly in the context of an organisation developing an internal vision. However, multi-sector partners who have come together to undertake a particular project often do not have the same amount of collective experience and reflection to draw on as an individual agency.

Bringing people together who lack a strong collective organisational history to draw on can mean that they need to start by understanding the nature of each participant's relationship with others and articulating this through the development of procedural structures. These could be around how decisions are to be made and how power is to be shared among all of the stakeholders. Often these ground rules are assumed by groups who have had experience in working together successfully. However, it is a useful process to always start with a discussion of:

- how problems can be solved;
- how to appreciate and utilise the diversity of a group;
- how to ensure that a space is created where everyone has an opportunity to be heard; and
- how to ensure that proposals from the group undergo a negotiation process.

Working through these issues builds trust – one of the most essential ingredients of a collaborative relationship. Stone highlights the importance of trust as a cornerstone of social capital and capacity building, defining social capital as '... networks of social relations which are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity' (Stone 2001: 4). ➤



The outcome of this process of mutually working towards an agreement of 'how' a group can work together can be documented in the form of operating principles. Collaborative partnerships can often be complex in terms of shifting group dynamics, processes and structures so the development of a set of principles can provide a constant reference point around which the stakeholders can work. They can provide a structure and direction, and act as guidelines for negotiation processes.

The Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) team has prefaced its principles with, 'As a team we are working together in the following ways in all our interactions and relationships', and have developed principles such as creating and maintaining open and transparent processes. The development and documentation of these principles greatly improves the effectiveness of the group by providing an agreed 'structure of social relations between actors' (Stone 2001: 6).

Appreciative inquiry

Another useful approach for developing collaborative relationships between the stakeholders is the use of *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI). This tool is part of the *action research* family.

AI is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organisations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives

'life' to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practise of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential. (Cooperrider & Whitney 2000: 3)

AI is based around four key stages:

- **Discovery** – What is the best of what exists, and what gives life to the community or system?
- **Dream** – What might be; envisioning the results.
- **Design** – What should be; creating possible propositions.
- **Deliver** – Sustaining and strengthening the system.

At the core of the cycle is the 'Affirmative Topic Choice'. If that topic choice is collaboration, the questioning process throughout the cycle could look something like Figure 1.

For further information about the use of AI, please refer to the reading list.

Is it worth the effort?

For many organisations and individuals involved in existing partnerships, building collaborative relationships has been an ongoing, incremental process. They have developed skills, knowledge and processes in their everyday work. However, the challenge is to broaden these capacities to progressively include the people with whom

they are working – those who it is all for – and to sustain the processes.

As this article stated earlier, social capital and collaboration are inter-linked, and the important aspect of this link is that the collaboration is sustainable. When the project funding has ended, what will remain as an outcome could be a sustainable set of relationships based on multi-sector collaboration; this is one of the most important elements for making collective change happen. If communities have been able to develop these collaborative networks, they will be able to continue to work together to both envision a better future and meet their objectives for a range of opportunities and initiatives.

Hobbs states that 'Social capital can be eroded more quickly than it can be developed' (Hobbs 2000: 2). We need to acknowledge this and understand that collaborative relationships require a process of ongoing maintenance and development if they are to be sustainable. However, the considerable effort and time involved in collaboration is both justified and appropriate, as collaboration is a cornerstone for implementing mutually beneficial social change.

References

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- Hobbs G. (2000), *Economic and Social Research Foundation: What is Social Capital?* <http://www.caledonia.org.uk>, downloaded February, 2003.
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- Putman, Leonardi & Nanetti (1993), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA.
- Stone W. (2001), *Measuring Social Capital*, Research Paper no.24, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Taylor-Powell, E., Rossing, B., Geran, J. (1998), *Evaluating Collaboratives*, University of Wisconsin Extension, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.

Further Reading

Learning Support Materials for Appreciative Inquiry http://geocities.com/dian_marie_hosking/ai.html

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Figure 1 The appreciative inquiry 4-D model

