



Evaluating collaborations

FACT SHEET 10

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Collaborations are a different way of working and thus require a different approach to evaluation. The focus in collaborations is building relationships and processes that enable organisations to work together in different ways to produce creative or innovative solutions to 'wicked' problems. Hence, when evaluating collaborations, the aim is to assess these relationships and processes and how they facilitate both the collaboration and its outcomes¹.

This is not to say that traditional performance measures should not be used to measure product-related outcomes. But there should be an emphasis on using relational or non-traditional performance measures to assess:

- the relationships and processes that enable collaboration
- the level of participation and engagement of collaboration members
- how well the structure of the collaboration allows participants to contribute to and influence the collaboration's work and outcomes

This fact sheet provides some examples of evaluation tools that have been developed² to assess the overall success of collaborations.

Collaboration check list

This is a guide to assess the overall functioning of the collaboration, including how it fosters participation by its members, how the interactions add value to the work of participants and contributes to broader collective goals, and how linking members and their work can mobilise greater forces for change.

The collaboration check list should include questions about relationships and processes, participation and structure and control, such as those in the table overleaf.

The Advancing Collaboration Practice program has been established to support ARACY's work building cross-sector collaborations capable of implementing action that addresses the complex problems impacting the wellbeing of children and young people in Australia. The program builds stakeholder capabilities to establish and manage long-term joint working relationships and collaborative efforts. **For more information please contact ARACY on 08 9476 7800**

- 1 Mandel, M and Keast, R (2007). Evaluating Network Arrangements: Toward Revised Performance Measures, *Public Performance & Management Review* 30(4):574–597.
- 2 Church, Madeline et al (2003). *Participation, Relationships and Dynamic Change: New Thinking on Evaluating the Work of International Networks*. UCL-DFID.

Relationships and processes

- Are there good relations between members?
- What is the trust level?
- Is time spent on members getting to know each other and their problems/limitations?
- Do members feel a strong or weak bond, or commitment, to each other?
- Are there processes in place to enable these bonds?
- Is relationship building (internal and external) an accepted part of the work program?
- Do members communicate openly and frequently?
- Do members have a sense of commitment to the collaboration as well as their own organisation? What are the power relations?
 - Is power shared or does it appear to rest with specific members of the collaboration?
- Are there mechanisms to resolve conflict?
- Is there a culture of learning?

Participation level

- Do all members participate in the collaboration, in terms of decision-making and resource provision?
- Are there barriers to participation?
- Are there processes in place to check 'engagement level'?
- Are people participating as much as they can/wish?

Structure and control

- Is the way the collaboration is set up appropriate for the aims? (See Fact Sheet 1)
 - Is the structure too tight (strangling), too loose (lacks cohesion) or just right (facilitates action)?
 - Where/how are most decisions made?
 - Democratically or centralised?
 - Is there support for the collaboration by key actors outside the collaboration, eg:
 - parent organisations
 - powerful stakeholders
 - respected people in the community?
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Contributions assessment

This tool helps to uncover and understand the level of contribution and commitment that members make to the collaboration, what resources (financial, skill, expertise, knowledge and materials) are available to the collaboration, and where (or with whom) they are located and how they can be used. The tool:

- identifies the contributors to the collaboration, e.g. the individual members of the collaboration, their parent organisation or stakeholder groups
- specifies the aims of the collaboration and the types of contributions/resources required
- asks members to indicate their actual and potential contributions and how they will deliver on this e.g. by participation or funding
- considers how easily the collaboration facilitator has been able to shift resources around the collaboration or leverage from resources to generate added value

Assessment can then be done to evaluate:

- whether the collaboration has generated the appropriate resources (time, money, participation of key people, staff time, support of the parent organisation)
- whether the collaboration has been successful in facilitating the sharing of these resources between members

Participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation involves collaboration members more directly through a process of self-reflection on actions and behaviours as well as uncovering the critical stages and events of the collaboration. Members are asked to reflect on issues such as:

- how far strategies and understandings of the collaboration context are shared
- how far the information, ideas, documents and resources and analysis circulating within the collaboration have been distributed and their impact on critical moments
- how members have been able to work creatively and collaboratively
- how connected members are to others in the collaboration 'network'

This process also helps to show what added benefit can be reasonably assumed from the collaborative effort.

Social Network Analysis (SNA)

SNA is an observational tool that maps and measures the various types of relationships within collaborations in terms of their strength, frequency and quality. In this way, it uncovers and specifies the 'intangible' relationship outcomes of collaborative performance. The graphical 'maps' produced also provide a way for collaboration members to shift from basing their evaluation on what they *think* is happening to identifying what is actually happening within the collaboration.

SNA can be used to assess the degree to which a collaboration has achieved its goals for more joined-up approaches to their work and whether it has built stronger and more durable relationships. It can track the changes in the nature and types of exchanges between collaboration members over time.

SNA has particular benefit as a collaboration diagnostic tool³. Collaboration managers and practitioners can look at the network maps produced (figure 1) and immediately see the connection patterns and flows between members and identify the collaboration's structure as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the relationships. These insights will help to inform collaboration design, structure and processes as well as enable members to strengthen relationships to better meet their purpose.

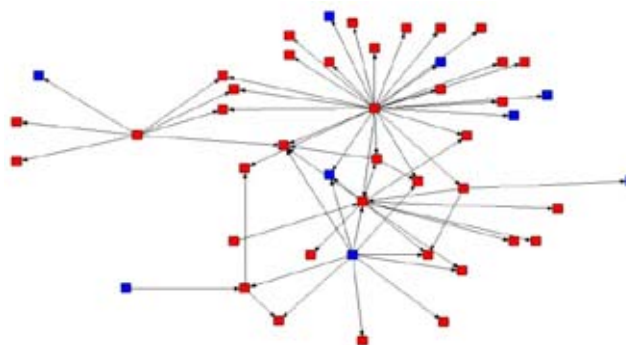


Figure 1: Example of a Social Network Analysis map

³ Provan, K et al (2005). The use of Network Analysis to Strengthen Community Partnerships, *Public Administration Review* 65(5):603–614.

Questions that could be considered include:

- Which agencies are linked to each other?
 - Are all relevant organisations? If not, who should be included?
- Which agencies are the more central and which are peripheral?
 - Is this appropriate to meet the collaboration's goals?
- Have relationships been strengthened over time?
- What strategies could be employed to 'ramp up' relationships?
- Are there tenuous links/relationships between core organisations?
 - What are the implications for this?
- What is the resource flow (between which organisations)?
 - Who has links to important resources/information?
 - Are there bottlenecks and how might they be removed?

Implications

Collaborative evaluation is not without its challenges, including the need to change expectations of how it should be done. The value of alternative performance measures needs to be accepted by all involved in collaborations including funding bodies. A more flexible and longer-term approach to evaluation outcomes is required. This can be difficult because we often work in short-term accountability and reporting cycles.

Collaborative evaluation also changes the roles of sponsoring agencies. In conventional projects sponsors are able to dictate the types of outcomes to be accomplished. In collaborative evaluation processes they are no longer solely 'in control' of setting the evaluation agenda and must be willing to step back and share this task with the collaboration participants.

Conclusions

When evaluating the effectiveness of collaboration the question is not so much whether by working through them participants are able to do a better job of delivering services. Instead it is whether by working through collaboration participants can build the new capacities and relationships needed to work in different ways. Collaborative evaluation involves assessing the achievement of intangible outcomes, and thus new approaches are required. Robyn

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

ARACY is a national non-profit organisation working to create better futures for all Australia's children and young people. Despite Australia being a wealthy, developed country, many aspects of the health and wellbeing of our young people have been declining. ARACY was formed to reverse these trends, by preventing and addressing the major problems affecting our children and young people. ARACY tackles these complex issues through building collaborations with researchers, policy makers and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines. We share knowledge and foster evidence-based solutions.

About the authors of this fact sheet

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