



Why collaborate, and why now?

FACT SHEET 2

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Some of the biggest challenges facing contemporary society involve complex and intractable social problems, such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, illicit drug use and abuse, climate change and environmental degradation. These issues continue to plague many communities despite concerted efforts to address them.

Complex social problems—sometimes referred to as ‘wicked problems’¹—share a number of characteristics.

Wicked problems:

- are socially complex with multiple layers of stakeholders
- are difficult to clearly define, and there is often disagreement about the causes of the problem
- have no clear or correct solution
- are interdependent and are often multi-causal
- defy conventional approaches to problem solving
- are cross-cutting, that is, they do not fit into neat functional, organisational boundaries
- are beyond the capacity of any one organisation or sector to respond to effectively.

Complex problems call for a different approach to problem identification, solution setting and action. In this context collaboration is considered the most appropriate and effective approach. Collaboration has core characteristics that challenge conventional individual and organisational thinking and practice. These characteristics include:

- trusting relationships
- a holistic problem perspective
- pooling of resources
- harnessing collective synergies and expanded skills.

Trust

The higher degree of trust required in collaborative arrangements creates the environment needed to address complex problems. This trust environment permits increased levels of information sharing between collaboration members and the pooling of resources (knowledge, human resources and financial resources) to meet common goals. Stronger relationships between collaboration members also enhance their commitment to actively work together to meet their common objectives.

Create a holistic view of the problem

By bringing together a diverse set of people and perspectives, collaborative approaches enable development of a holistic view of a complex problem. Such ‘big picture’ and inclusive thinking helps to identify the many causes of problems, how those causes are connected and how they build on each

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 Rittel, HWJ and Webber, M M. Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences* 1973;4, 2:155–69

other (are interdependent). By approaching a complex problem with a view to collaboration, members share information and conduct genuine dialogue to develop an understanding of the complexity of the problem and each other's position in relation to the problem. Members are able to consider the problem in a different light so that it can be tackled more effectively through a joint effort.

Collaboration allows member organisations to combine their different views, objectives, philosophies, resources and working practices to address a common challenge. There are also compelling financial reasons for collaboration. Pooling resources enables members to get extra mileage from existing organisational resources.

Synergies

Collaboration draws individual and organisational knowledge, expertise and resources into a 'collective space' that sits between organisations and sectors.

The synergies identified and created from this pooling of resources can be harnessed to create innovative responses and ideas for social change, as well as generate outcomes beyond the members' initial investment. This synergistic process is the real advantage of collaboration, as it creates something that could not have been achieved by any one of the member organisations working in isolation.

Individual and organisational learning

A further benefit of collaboration is capacity-building of participating individuals and organisations, as a result of the expanded skill set brought to the collaborative table, coupled with shared learning and the experience of working together.

Key collaboration advantages

Key advantages of the collaborative approach include:

- a focused application of knowledge and expertise
- more effective use of resources
- a higher level of commitment to action
- more relevant and effective solutions.

Collaboration is a promising means of developing effective responses to many of the problems confronting our communities. Taking the first steps forward requires people and organisations to adjust their ways of thinking and behaving. It also means establishing new systems and processes within our organisations to facilitate and sustain collaborative efforts. We have reached a critical point in how we address the wellbeing of children and young people and a critical mass of knowledge has been established to shape action. The question is whether we are willing to make the changes necessary to establish collaborative practice as a legitimate reform goal and process.

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

Dr Robyn Keast has an extensive background as a practitioner, policy officer and manager within the public and non-government sectors in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. She works with the Queensland University of Technology as a Senior Lecturer with interests including networked arrangements, network analysis and innovation, global trends in business management and government/business relations. In addition to her internationally recognised research, Robyn is a practitioner, having led and consulted on a wide variety of collaboration projects.

Dr Myrna P. Mandell is Professor Emeritus at California State University, Northridge, an Adjunct Faculty at the School of Management at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia and a Visiting Faculty at Southern Cross University in New South Wales, Australia. Her work includes articles and chapters on a number of different facets of networks, including: how to organise and manage networks, performance measures for networks, citizen participation in networks and leadership in networks. She is currently involved in research on networks in the international arena.

enquiries@aracy.org.au

www.aracy.org.au

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

Canberra

Juliana House
10 Bowes Street
Woden ACT 2606
Postal address:
PO Box 25
Woden ACT 2606
Phone: 02 6232 4503

Perth

Dumas House
2 Havelock Street
West Perth WA 6005
Postal address:
PO Box 1360
West Perth WA 6872
Phone: 08 9476 7800

Melbourne

University of Melbourne
Department of Pediatrics
Royal Children's Hospital
Flemington Road
Parkville Vic 3052
Phone: 03 9345 5145

Sydney

Level 9
117 Clarence Street
Sydney NSW 2000
GPO Box 10500
Sydney NSW 2001
Phone: 02 9085 7247