



Australian Research Alliance
for Children & Youth

Effective Collaboration

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ABOUT ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was founded by a group of eminent experts and organisations in reaction to increasingly worrying trends in the wellbeing of Australia's young people.

ARACY is a national organisation with members based across Australia.

ARACY asserts that by working together, rather than working in isolation, we are more likely to uncover solutions to the problems affecting children and young people.

ARACY is a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia's future generation.

ARACY has two primary goals:

1. To promote collaborative research and agenda setting for children and young people
2. To promote the application of research to policy and practice for children and young people.

This paper is one of a series commissioned by ARACY to translate knowledge into action. This series of papers aims to convert research findings into practical key messages for people working in policy and service delivery areas.

The ARACY topical papers may also be the focus of workshops or seminars, including electronic mediums.

Developed for the Facilitating Partners of the Australian Government Communities for Children initiative, this paper is now being made available to a wider audience via the ARACY website www.aracy.org.au

SUMMARY

In recent years, governments and communities have tried to tackle complex linked problems in new ways. These have usually involved greater levels of collaboration and community engagement. More traditional approaches to service delivery have increasingly been supplemented by detailed stakeholder consultation, and new ways of partnering across sectors (e.g., between government – NGOs – business).

This more collaborative approach has often been accompanied by the rhetoric of:

- devolution to communities
- joined-up services
- networks linking stakeholders

But what makes for greater success with these more collaborative approaches? And can this approach be used successfully for all activities or is it best reserved for certain types of activity?

This overview argues that:

- Different challenges and tasks arise in each contextual setting.
- It is therefore likely that different responses are needed in each setting.
- Big issues, like integrated service delivery across several policy fields, might require long-term collaboration and formal agreements.



- Joint activities are likely to be more effective if the stakeholders pay close attention to some basic organisational elements of collaboration.
- These elements include determining clear objectives; agreeing on roles and responsibilities for planning, implementation and funding; good leadership; teamwork, trust, and a learning orientation for adjusting and improving joint programs.
- Stakeholders need to be involved in the process of evaluating the joint activities in order to maximise the learning opportunities and program improvements.



Figure 1 – Basic Forms of Joint Action

(adapted from Brown & Keast 2003)

	Duration	Goals & processes	Member behaviour
Cooperation	Short term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> independent goals of participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> movement in and out by members loose flexible links
Coordination	Medium term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> joint planning and programming contracts likely for some tasks but members remain autonomous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> some stability of members often a central hub for direction & funding
Collaboration	Longer Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> new systems and processes formal agreements high interdependence with sharing of power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> members need to move outside their traditional functional areas



NETWORKS AND COLLABORATION

Networks can link stakeholders in a variety of cooperative settings.

- Networks may operate within one sector (e.g. firms within the business sector) or operate across sectors (e.g. NGOs – community – business – government – research).
- Networks of stakeholders can form cooperative relations within one policy field (e.g. health) or across several linked policy fields (e.g. childcare, disability services, housing, education etc).
- As outlined in Figure 1, it is useful to develop some conceptual distinctions between networks that are fairly informal and those that are more intensive and formalised. One way of approaching this is to distinguish between simple cooperation, more formalised types of coordination, and fully developed collaborations based on interdependence and shared long-term commitment.

One approach cannot deal effectively with every problem:

- Sometimes casual and informal cooperation is enough to raise awareness and to allow useful discussion of issues as a basis for specific joint actions. Such cooperation is often short-term and is tactical rather than strategic.
- At other times a more formal arrangement, with a higher level of coordination, is needed to undertake joint priority-setting and more focussed actions in the medium-term.



This paper focuses on collaboration, rather than the other forms of joint activity. Collaboration is distinctive, because:

- (i) it is complex;
- (ii) it requires higher levels of energy and resources;
- (iii) it depends on long-term commitment; and
- (iv) it requires a strategic orientation to address major issues.

It is therefore not suited to all problems and occasions.

Some of the factors critical for the success of collaboration are summarised in Figure 2, and some of the main points are outlined below. These success factors are emergent features of a good collaboration rather than prior starting-points or pre-requisites existing before the commencement of joint activities.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Collaboration requires trust and a learning orientation. These are indeed features of most “healthy relationships”.

- Trust and learning are fundamental factors for successful collaborations.
- Respect and trust are fundamental to building long-term partnerships. But treating potential partners as equals is very difficult for many organisations and individuals.
- This is more difficult if there is insufficient time for building these relationships and the associated participatory processes for joint activities.



- Respect and trust assist in building partners' capacities for managing diversity of views and forging compromises.

Collaboration requires leadership and agreement on common objectives:

- Leadership that is facilitative and “enabling” is more appropriate than directive leadership. The leadership function can be more broadly shared over time as trust is developed.
- The partners need to create and promote a common sense of vision/purpose around a well-defined major issue with clearly defined objectives, strategies and outcomes.
- If the partners are drawn together primarily through monetary incentives or legal obligations (rather than a shared vision) , the relationship might not survive changes in these financial or legal arrangements.
- Collaborative partners need to consider carefully where the collaboration can create most value, i.e. what activities ought to be the core focus and what should be excluded?
- Attention is needed to ensure there are real benefits for the partners to collaborate (e.g. helping them achieve their own mission), and to address any impediments that should be overcome (e.g. lack of authorisation for decision-making).
- Agreement is needed on how to monitor, review and adjust the agreed common goals, directions and strategies in the light of experience.



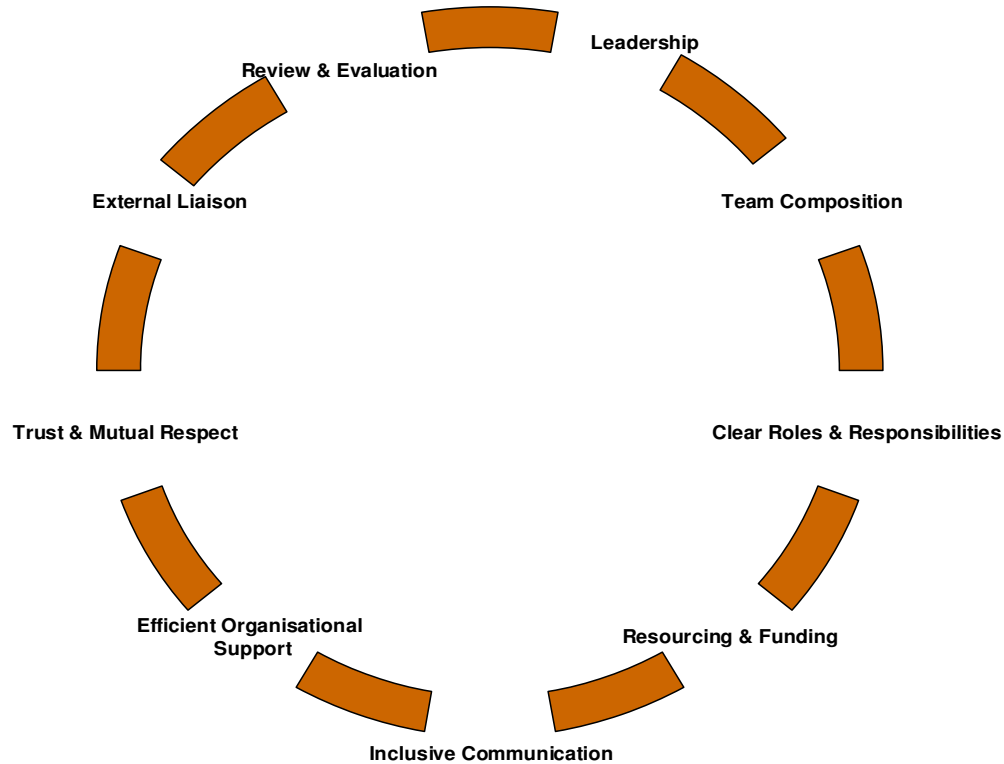
Collaboration requires clear roles and responsibilities:

- Learning to work through a clear “business model” is vital. This provides clarity about how decisions are to be made and implemented, how funds are to be spent, and how accountability is to be ensured.
- Partners and stakeholders need to be clear about their respective roles. This is the basis of their effective commitment to decision-making processes, project management, and accountability for results.
- Responsibilities cascade down from the partnership level to the specific contributions required from each member to achieve the agreed outcomes.
- The business model should specify what are the minimum “deliverables”, and “who will deliver what”: some tasks will involve collective responsibilities, and others may require individual responsibility for achievement.
- Responsibilities include collecting and sharing the information required for tracking and recording progress.



Elements of effective collaboration

FIGURE 2 – (source: Brian Head 2004)



Collaboration requires teamwork and sharing:

- It is necessary to identify, and clearly address, possible impediments to open communication among the partners and stakeholders. and any obstacles to joint problem-solving.
- Collaboration depends on ensuring that stakeholders keep in touch with each other and that important information of all kinds is regularly shared.
- At the organisational and team levels, methods need to be found for both managing and valuing/protecting the diversity of perspectives, skills and knowledge.

Collaboration requires building partnerships. This is not a simple matter.

- Finding the right partners can be crucial - where do we look? who can help?
- Involving all relevant stakeholders is important if the collaboration is to be most effective.
- There are many complications arising from working with three levels of government (local, federal and state levels). Often, no-one seems to be responsible for negotiating satisfactory working relations between these levels.
- Many problems and complexities arise from working with multiple agencies within each government (horizontal links and integration across portfolios (e.g. health, education, community services, justice, etc).



- Within each of the partnering organisations, there can be difficulties in ensuring strong support for “network” business to be regarded as “core business”.
- Building local capacities and social capital in the community itself is vital. The collaborative challenge goes beyond the relationships among the partnering and sponsoring organisations.

THE ARACY EXAMPLE

Collaborations are fundamental to ARACY (see Figure 3), because they help us to:

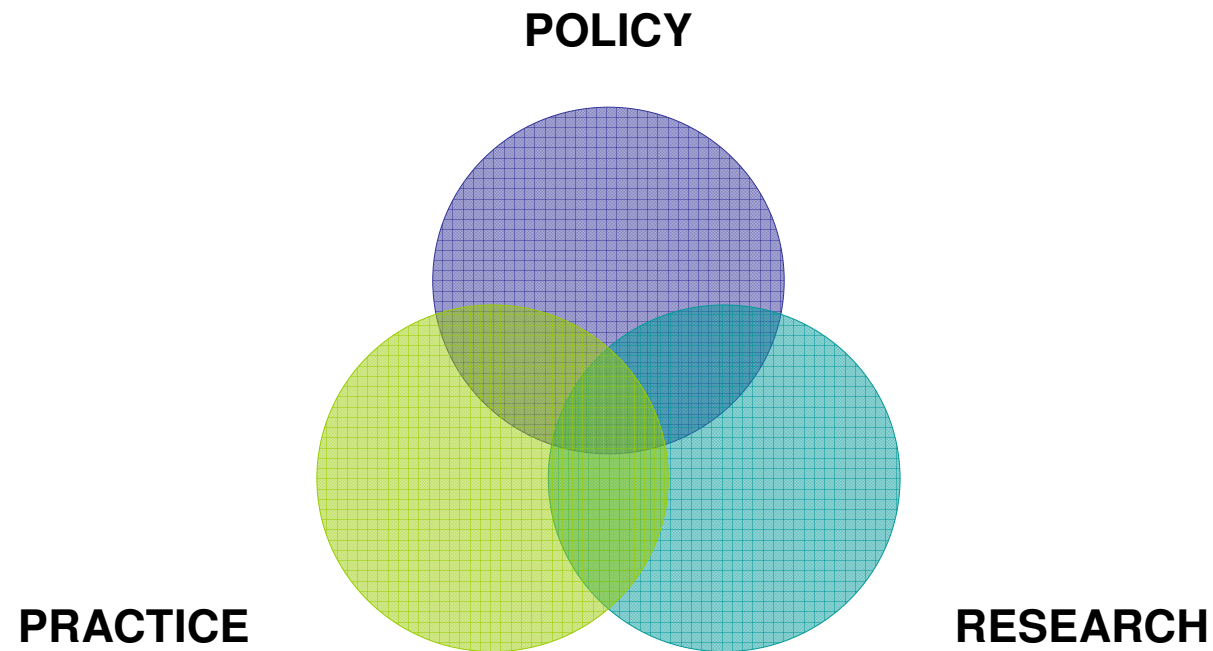
- Define important complex problems that have eluded past attempts
- Focus energy on the top priorities and set agendas
- Create momentum by bringing together all stakeholders
- Draw on wide expertise and diverse sources of knowledge
- Value the practical experience of those working in the field
- Learn from and further refine effective practice models
- Mobilise potential champions, sponsors, donors and funders
- Help with mentoring and information-sharing.

ARACY attempts to address the challenges of a collaborative approach through a strong emphasis on communications, joint priority-setting, drawing on the knowledge of diverse groups, cross-sectoral teamwork, and addressing multiple audiences in policy, practice and research.



Interaction for better outcomes

Figure 3 – The Example of ARACY



ASSESSING PERFORMANCE

How do we know if collaboration is working? The criteria for success need to be thoroughly discussed both before and during the joint programs.

- Discussion is needed about what is being measured and reported – this will usually include the processes, the program activities, and the medium- and long-term outcomes for clients.
- Particular attention is required for ensuring that the learnings are shared and publicised. Honest discussion of what didn't work well is also important.
- Consideration is needed as to how the commitment may be sustained for the life of the program and beyond.
- What measures are necessary to evaluate the different contributions of the collective itself and individual partners or participants in a network? What is required of individuals to ensure commitment to a partnership culture and collaborative behaviour?
- Individuals may be hindered by their own organisations from participating fully and frankly in the collaboration. However, where this is not a problem, individual contributions could be evaluated through an appropriate form of peer review and discussion.

Some relevant questions could include whether a person or team-member:

- contributes to discussion and debate on key issues
- openly shares knowledge and experience with others



- listens carefully and non-defensively to various views
- acts reasonably in seeking resolution to conflicts
- follows through on commitments made
- acts with integrity and does not mis-use sensitive information
- fosters collaboration and teamwork between their own organisation and the broader collective.

Assessing complex systems:

- “Communities for Children”, and other social programs of the federal and state governments, are about collective joined-up action focussing at the community level.
- Such programs place initial emphasis on identifying needs and strengths; building new capacities; improving communications and linkages; and ultimately better participatory planning and better services.
- Establishing new forums and hubs is often vital for producing innovative and responsive programs. Creating such forums may be vital for sustainability of efforts in the long-term.
- Comparative experience across locations is very useful, although a single “best practice” model is problematic across divergent communities.
- Programs in their early stages may not produce quick end-results (e.g. measurable improvements in service coverage and outcomes).



- Over time, and after some experience of “what works”, a focus on medium-term targets and ultimate goals becomes more meaningful.

Stakeholders and program evaluation:

- Stakeholders have to make the new processes work, so their perceptions of issues, risks and opportunities are crucial for understanding and measuring success.
- The development of trust and alignment; the productive resolution of conflict; and the emergence of effective local leadership; are all essentially based on stakeholder perceptions and should be assessed as such.
- Stakeholders should be appropriately involved in establishing, conducting and assessing the implications of evaluation (interviews, focus groups, forums).
- This means involving all relevant sectors – funders, regulators, researchers, business, service delivery groups, community and cultural groups.
- This builds understanding and commitment by all, hence more likelihood of improvements over time.
- Sustainability of improvements is the key.



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