Why collaborate, and why now?

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’—share a number of characteristics.¹ 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

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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.
The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is a national, non-government organisation which focuses on bringing together researchers, policymakers and practitioners, to turn the best evidence on ‘what works’ for child and youth wellbeing into practical, preventative action to benefit all young Australians. We are making this happen by creating collaborative opportunities, through our Networks, events, state convenor activities and regular publications, that work to break down traditional barriers in addressing the major problems affecting our young people.

About the authors of this fact sheet

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