Evaluating collaborations

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’. When evaluating collaborations, the aim is to assess these relationships and processes and how they facilitate both the collaboration and its outcomes.¹

The effectiveness of a collaboration is not simply seen in traditional outcomes, as any successful collaboration is reliant upon a range of relational and communication aspects. This is not to say 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 developed to assess the overall success of collaborations.²

Collaboration checklist

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 contribute to broader collective goals, and how linking members and their work can mobilise greater forces for change.

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

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### Relationships and processes
- Are there good relationships between the 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, for example:
  - parent organisations
  - powerful stakeholders
  - respected people in the community?
Contributions assessment
This tool helps to uncover and understand the level of contribution and commitment 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, for example, 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’.

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 tool. 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

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Questions that could be considered include:

- Which agencies are linked to each other?
  - Are all relevant organisations participating?
    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.
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