Effective Practice for Building Cross Sector Partnerships[1]

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Introduction

The increasing complexity of societal and environmental issues coupled with decreasing public budgets has resulted in an increase in the need for cross sector, collaborative partnerships (Clarke & Fuller, 2010). Successful partnerships mobilize resources, access expertise and ideas outside their organizations, and build political support that enables them to proceed (Diaz, Stallings, Birendra & Seekamp, 2015). One such example exists in central Florida where the University of Florida has partnered with Bok Tower Gardens to develop solutions that address issues related to public health, food accessibility, and community capacity. To be successful in developing a cross sector partnership, it is important to have both a comprehensive understanding and the necessary proficiencies needed to develop a sustainable partnership (Gray, 1985; Melaville & Blank, 1991; Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000). Developing a successful partnership with multiple stakeholders is an emergent process that requires time and effort—collaboration does not happen overnight. A planned and phased approach is needed for partnerships to build the necessary foundation in order for subsequent stages to flourish (Diaz et al., 2015; Duffield, Olson, & Kerzman, 2013; Wildridge, Childs, Cawthra, & Madge, 2004). This article outlines a practical framework built upon best practices that can be used by those considering the development of cross sector partnerships to address environmental and social issues.

Partnership Development Framework

This framework is built upon both examples that exist in the literature and my own extensive experience with cross sector partnerships. There are several best practices that should be considered for the development of specific partnerships, but this article focuses on key practices that any partnership can benefit from. The key framework themes include (1) pre-existing relationships and partner selection; (2) partnership organizational structure; (3) the combination of planning, evaluation, and marketing; (4) consensus-building process design; and (5) internal engagement structure and schedule.

1. **Pre-Existing Relationships and Partner Selection**

The first step in developing a partnership is to bring multiple agencies and organizations together to form a collaborative arrangement. Partnerships based on pre-existing relationships are often more successful because there is already an established level of familiarity and trust that can aid in sustaining the partnership and resolving conflict (Diaz et al., 2015). Additionally, it is important that the right partners are chosen. Criteria to consider for selection include:

- availability of compatible resources;
- expertise;

- reputation among target audience(s) and;
- compatible interests.

Selecting partners based on these criteria may result in increased social capital, collaborative capacity, and public support (Melaville & Blank, 1991; Gray, 1985, Gruber, 2010; Wildridge, Childs, Cawthra & Madge, 2004).

2. Partnership Organizational Structure

Before planning efforts can begin, it is important for a partnership to develop an organizational structure that allows for the integration of interests and ideas in addition to the effective management of the overall partnership (Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000). The structural components that should be considered include:

- partnership manager or coordinator,
- partnership committees (steering and/or advisory committees), and
- implementation workgroups.

While each partnership has the potential to organize itself differently, these are basic structures that can be leveraged across all partnerships.

Since cross sector partnerships typically require agency and organizational representatives to work outside of their normal duties, it is important to hire or appoint a partnership manager at the onset who is predominantly focused on the efforts of the partnership (Diaz et al., 2015; Gray, 1985; Melaville & Blank, 1991; Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000). If the resources are available to hire a partnership manager, this position should be jointly funded by all of the partners to avoid perceptions of organizational loyalty to the funder. Frequently, resources may not always be available to pay for a new position like a partnership manager. In this case, partnerships should find an individual from one of the partnering organizations that has the capacity to serve in a leadership role.

A partnership manager is an effective resource for providing overall guidance and leadership in addition to the coordination of partnership activities to promote collaborative synergy (Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000). When a partnership recruits an individual to serve in such a role, they should be knowledgeable of the environmental and organizational context and have proficiencies in organizational development (i.e., facilitation and planning). If a partnership manager or coordinator is not put in place from the start, the overall lack of guidance and direction may result in an inefficient use of time and money as a

result of needing to redo things and resolve conflict during implementation (Melaville & Blank, 1991; Gruber, 2010; Wildridge et al., 2004; Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000).

Developing the organizational structure of a partnership should also include forming partnership committees and implementation workgroups. Partnership committees typically take the form of a steering or advisory committee. They allow the partners to serve as a link to their own organizations and to have a stake in decision making that typically increases buy-in from leadership of the partnering organizations (Melaville & Blank, 1991; Wildrige et al., 2004; Wondelleck & Yafee, 2000). Partnership committees are frequently cited as a means of increasing social capital; they typically result in increased resources and attention towards partnership projects (Gruber, 2010). Additionally, implementation workgroups serve as an effective extension of a partnership committee that allows for streamlined decision making for time sensitive projects. These workgroups are typically led by a program manager, who brings together a group of partners and collaborators with a specific skillset to develop and implement partnership related projects. While the intention is not to remove the decision making authority from the steering committee, implementation groups provide an opportunity for the partnership to quickly develop projects outside of the formal structure, only engaging the steering committee for final approval.

3. Connection of Planning, Evaluation, and Marketing

Partnerships should begin the strategic planning process directly after the partnership committee has formed and a program manager is in place. If strategic planning is overlooked early on, it has the potential to promote project or organizational silos compromising the ability to create integrative solutions (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Wildredge et al., 2004; Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000). There are many approaches that can be used for strategic planning. A case can be made that the most effective strategies leverage a backwards mapping process (Rockwell & Bennett, 2004). For this process, partnerships outline those outcomes they want to achieve first, which helps them decide what processes and inputs are most useful. If the planning process focuses on only the final goal or outcome the processes and resources leveraged may potentially be inappropriate for the ultimate plans of the partnership.

The planning process should result in a fully developed program theory that includes impact and process models. Frequently, partnerships will leverage the logic model framework to develop their program theory, which outlines

the internal organization of the program, describes the interaction between program staff and participants, and provides a basis for identifying a program's performance measures (Israel, 2001). The logic model framework allows planning committees to identify important outcomes and create a logical sequence of events that takes into consideration external factors that may help or hinder the partnership (Israel, 2001).

While embarking on the strategic planning process, it is important to consider how the partnership will evaluate its work (Diaz, Jayaratne, Bardon, & Hazel, 2014). Program evaluation is a crucial process for any partnership in order to improve its own efforts and demonstrate its success, which will in turn help partnerships attain additional funding and public support (Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000). An approach that brings together program development and performance in the strategic planning process is the Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOP) Model (Rockwell & Bennett, 2004). This model is based on a hierarchy of seven levels that include the following:

- Social, Economic, and Environmental (SEE) Conditions
- Practices
- Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, and Aspirations
- Reaction (Satisfaction with process)
- Participation
- Activities
- Resources

This model utilizes the aforementioned backwards mapping process that structures planning by initially identifying the SEE conditions the partnership intends to create. The planning process progresses down the seven levels, ending with resource needs and capacity. The TOP model provides a mirrored hierarchical structure for development and evaluation that allows for a seamless connection of these two processes (Harder, 2009). As a result, the planning process effectively orients the partnership to understand how it can evaluate success. During this process, a utilization plan should be developed that outlines how the data collected will be used for program improvement in addition to marketing successes.

Additionally, the integration of social marketing and community engagement strategies into planning provides a framework to promote increased behavioral change among priority groups. Cross sectoral partnerships are typically developed to address social issues by promoting behavioral change, so traditional marketing efforts may not be

sufficient (Clarke & Fuller, 2010). This framework helps a partnership more effectively specify the process theory that includes the program organizational plan and the service utilization plan (Israel, 2001). Social marketing as a process theory provides a communication and engagement model that enables a partnership to effectively target resources, select interventions, and develop appropriate products and services (Lefebvre, 2013). Additionally, communications efforts can be developed to enhance the perceived benefits of partnership products and services and the related behavior change through a better understanding of the target audience's needs and motivations (Lefebvre, 2013).

4. Consensus-Building Process Design

Developing a partnership built upon consensus decision-making is critical to alleviating potential partner concerns (Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000). The challenge with leveraging this approach is designing a process that moves the group towards consensus. To design an effective consensus-building process, the partnership should use a facilitator (i.e., the partnership manager) or a group of facilitators that involves the partners. (Burgess & Spangler, 2003). The involvement of the partners may range from simply providing approval for the process to being collaboratively involved in its development. It is important to include ground rules for participant behaviors so that partners better understand how to work within the process. This will result in a more efficient process and a reduction in conflict (Burgess & Spangler, 2003; Gruber, 2010; Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000; Wildridge, 2004). Agenda setting is also a key aspect of process design (Burgess & Spangler, 2003). The process of developing an agenda must be approached carefully and include a timetable for decision-making that does not result in the partners feeling rushed to make decisions (Burgess & Spangler, 2003). In turn, the decision-making process should not be so slow as to delay potential progress.

5. Internal Engagement Structure and Schedule

Increasing opportunities for collaboration allows a partnership to maintain an open line of communication and continue to make progress in joint efforts (Diaz et al., 2015; Duffield, Olson, & Kerzman, 2014; Wondelleck & Yaffee, 2000). Developing a structure that includes face-to-face meetings, teleconferences, and structured email exchanges provides multiple opportunities to strengthen working relationships and build trust among its members. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to regularly put items on the agenda and proactively develop solutions in a timely manner (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006).

While partnerships should develop the aforementioned structure, this structure should be combined with an associated engagement schedule. This will allow the partnership to collaboratively outline the frequency at which they will meet or exchange ideas. Once the overall schedule has been outlined, the partners can begin to confirm an actual schedule for the year to ensure increased participation. This will allow for everyone to mark their calendar in advance so that the partnership does not get lost amidst their busy schedule.

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