11. Perspectives of community organisations: The Smith Family experience

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In the past decade, governments have chosen to transfer the delivery of services and policy provision from the public sector to the non-government sector, involving private firms, community organisations and a range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). For governments, this process of devolving implementation to the non-government sector has many advantages: it allows them to focus on policy formulation and core policy issues, while delivering services for pre-stipulated costs, allowing customisation of services and better quality assurance. For the non-government sector, this transfer of responsibilities places considerable strain on those organisations and the staff they employ or volunteers on whom they often rely.

From the vantage point of community organisations, therefore, there is a real need to examine this process and its impact on policy outcomes and the players involved. How does collaboration affect these organisations—and, in particular, their intended purposes, traditional roles and distinct cultures? Do contractual relationships and delivery partnerships affect the way in which these community organisations are able to fulfil their own missions, or do they displace such endeavours in exchange for government agendas and priorities? Also, how do community organisations affect the policy process—engaging deliberatively with government in the consultation process over policy design and policy implementation? This chapter addresses these questions about collaboration from the perspective of a practitioner organisation.

In 1998, The Smith Family (TSF) embarked on a journey to put its own house in order to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century—an era that would see Australia characterised as a ‘knowledge society’. In March 1999, we began with a classic John Kotter comprehensive transformation from which we emerged as a national, independent, social enterprise focused on children and education. For TSF, there is value in having a national structure (which is fairly rare in the non-profit world), but to advance collaboration we found it necessary to recruit leaders or influencers at the state and territory levels, nonetheless keeping our national operational matrix.

Our attention as a charitable community organisation was on the 700 000 or so children living in jobless and often lone-parent families. We adopted a set of eight guiding principles as a working framework, among which was the idea

that ‘We should work with and through other organisations and individuals’—a simple phrase but one that, when brought to life, was in itself transforming. As part of our transformation, and to be able to achieve the outcomes we were seeking, we decided we also had to become champions of sectoral change in our areas of policy interest and indeed of societal change more broadly.

TSF’s treasured independence as an NGO had often equated with insularity but now it had to be exercised through collaboration. We took notice of one of our governors at the time, Martin Stewart Weeks, who observed in 2000 that ‘[w]e are on an irreversible path away from traditional notions of government to a more complex notion of governance, one of whose defining characteristics is a reliance on networks and alliances’. The emergence of paradigms such as network governance has allowed agencies and people to work together differently across systems and, over time, it is hoped, to make significant gains in overcoming seemingly intractable social problems.

Putting such lofty ideals into practice means first and foremost treating relationships as strategic assets and managing them as such. Considine (2001) highlighted the fact that the source of rationality in network governance models was relationships. Non-profit-making or community organisations have always believed that this is their core competency and maybe this is why Considine found them more willing to embrace the model, more so than for-profit or business organisations, with governments still less ready.

I outline below examples of government–community collaboration and corporate–community collaboration, which touch on the subject of social innovation in which true collaboration between the three sectors of government, community and business might take us to the next stage.

Stronger families and communities strategy (government–community collaboration)

In 2000, I was invited by the then minister Senator Jocelyn Newman to chair the Stronger Families and Communities Partnership. It seemed to me the contemporary way of affecting social policy. I saw the strategy as an exciting empowerment model with local communities having a say in local solutions. It was apparent as time went on, however, that without an overarching framework from which local activity could be additive and produce measurable impact, no discernible difference would result. Underlying all this was a subtle but real change in the way government and community interrelated. Departmental staff saw their role as assisting with capacity building and network creation, the sharing of information and setting common standards.

We started what we called ‘strategic conversations’ to move collaboration beyond government and community to between different government agencies. We found that, unsurprisingly, they had arrived at the same place at the same time

and were merely duplicating one another's work. Little wonder that some communities became weary of 'fly-in/fly-out clipboard research'. When the focus changed to partnerships with business, it was apparent that there was a steep learning curve ahead of us if we were to capitalise on the potential. Business was well and truly down the track of a more entrepreneurial, integrated structure to replace the old 'command-and-control' system. Government officials were in uncharted water.

TSF was ready for the challenge, but it was put on hold when a new minister and new staff put greater emphasis on managing the uncertainty and the risks than on developing the relationships. A change in tactics saw the chairs of four relevant advisory committees realise that we had a common point of reference—children—and, through collaborative effort predominantly outside government, the agenda was refocused. Papers were written and presentations given; in April 2004, phase two of Stronger Families and Communities emerged, building on the strengths of phase one and with the innovative Communities for Children (C4C) initiative as its centrepiece.

This time around government was to be even more hands-off, playing the role of enabler, with community organisations that had the necessary back-office capability taking on the role of facilitating partner. They were to be responsible for the stewardship of the government's investment in 45 disadvantaged communities, for brokering services with local providers and for leveraging the investment to garner greater resources, in an asset-building, whole-of-community approach, addressing the development needs of children from birth to five years of age.

Had the necessary cultural change started in phase one permeated community organisations sufficiently for them to adopt such new roles? More than one academic was critical of the capacity of community organisations to deliver. Therein lies a major prerequisite: true commitment to collaboration requires organisational change and tenacity. We are all aware that collaboration is not something that organisations should enter into lightly; it demands the cultivation of new resources and skill sets within community organisations and government entities if both are to come together in an effective manner, and collaboration needs to be driven from the top.

In April 2007, three years after the announcement of C4C, 44 of the 45 chief executive officers (CEOs) of facilitating partner organisations came together to workshop the various attributes of the model. The recurring theme was the positive cultural change occurring in the organisations themselves, leading to sectoral change, which had been precipitated by participation in the initiative. This was a far cry from the atmosphere on the first occasion we met. At that time, there was criticism of the burdensome contractual arrangements that were necessary for accountability purposes, the inflexibility of the funding model

particularly in relation to roll-overs when implementation couldn't be rushed, and the dogged adherence to terminology and scope requiring organisations to focus rather than be all things to all people. Previous experience when community members had been relegated to the role of passive recipients rather than active collaborators had to be overcome. It took time for some to realise the potential opportunities.

Government officials had to be seen to be valuing the views of those in the practitioner community, while creating common standards and taxonomy; the community players needed resilience to challenge other perspectives and practices but in a constructive way; and both needed to question, reflect on and suggest possible alternatives. The first seven facilitating partners shared their findings with the other 38 and cooperated in overcoming the perceived power imbalance. All the players coming together periodically to share information and experiences has been invaluable.

With time, the closer relationships cultivated between the government and facilitating partners have been strengthened by numerous collaborations with other community NGOs. Of course, balancing and/or reconciling the priorities and needs of these diverse collaborators has also been challenging, but ultimately rewarding in terms of understanding how the relative strengths and weaknesses of stakeholders along the chain can interact to create a sustainable whole-of-community approach.

The engagement of the business sector is now proving extremely important for all the C4C sites around Australia, given that the political nature of government collaboration naturally generates concerns about sustainability. This is also the reason why, for example, TSF is working harder than ever to attract national and local stakeholders from the business sector to the collaboration table. Yet another major prerequisite for sustainable collaboration, then, is multi-sectoral engagement (Allen Consulting Group 2006).

The Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership (corporate–community collaboration)

A parallel endeavour with which I have been associated is the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership (PMCBP), resulting in an increase in corporate community investment that is part of the wider issue of corporate social responsibility. A recent report by the Allen Consulting Group in conjunction with the Business Council of Australia showed the great strides that had been made since the first report on corporate community investment came out in 2000. TSF alone has more than 70 corporate partners at the national level and more than 500 business–community relationships regionally. Our business partners are major stakeholders and we use the model constructed by Austin (2000), which shows the depth of their corporate community investment: some

players are still in the philanthropic mode, others have migrated to the transactional mode, while the more enlightened companies are in the integrative mode or, in other words, are into strategic investment.

The role government plays here is that of an enabler or facilitator. In particular, taxation changes have been the catalyst for accelerating the culture of giving (or giving back), which is becoming a feature of our landscape. Pre-tax payroll deductions have set up a virtuous circle of giving in the workplace involving employees and employers. Changed rules have encouraged the setting up of private prescribed funds (PPFs) that now total more than 500 and assist wealthy individuals in their endeavours. The agenda-setting role of government provides a credible backdrop to facilitate corporate–community partnerships; the skill here is not to fracture or interfere with this process, but to ensure that the activity that is engendered has some meaningful outcome. In a nutshell, we want new relationships to inspire new solutions to social problems. As we all know, these relationships take time and require nurturing. Moreover, to be successful, they require a shared vision, objectives and methodology, utilising the skills and expertise of all parties. A further prerequisite for collaboration is therefore a shared identity, which in turn requires a common language, common ground and commonsense.

Network governance (government–corporate–community collaboration)

According to Albert Einstein, ‘Today’s significant problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking we were at when we first created them.’ To put it another way, we now know from the ever-increasing evidence base of human development that it is no longer enough to carry on doing what we have been doing; we need to innovate as we collaborate.

It could be argued that because of the political implications of government investment strategies, governments tend to be reluctant to embrace innovation due to the potential risk involved in trying something new. Innovation, however, need not necessarily be equated with risk, particularly if it involves collaboration with credible, trusted and experienced stakeholders.

A prime example of innovative government collaboration is the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), a large, multi-sectoral network incorporating organisational and individual members, the board of which comprises predominantly businesspeople. This collaboration originated with the express intention of building and consolidating one large national network of stakeholders focused on the wellbeing of children and youth throughout Australia. The Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) is the largest source of funding for this initiative and also an active contributing partner in the network.

The governance and successful performance of ARACY depend on its capacity to promote and activate collaboration across a variety of organisational forms, across relevant knowledge domains and across the triangle of stakeholders in program delivery, research and policy development. Like many start-ups, it was initially treated with suspicion, but after a long and difficult gestation building the framework of shared principles and goals among its members, ARACY has amassed an impressive capacity and status, and is now ready to move to the next stage of its development.

Importantly, ARACY is one of the agents that have contributed to the creation of a sociopolitical climate in Australia in which collaboration can occur and be supported. At the end of 2003, it set out to develop models of best collaborative practice (ARACY 2004) and to provide advice on success factors for collaboration and the infrastructure required to support such practice (Head 2006). Because collaboration does not come naturally to organisations, we need examples such as ARACY to identify the returns to collaboration and to create incentives for collaboration rather than competition. As a member of the ARACY network, TSF has benefited from and continues to benefit from the range of resources that ARACY produces, and has access to a broader-based national collaboration in research, policy and practice than would otherwise be possible.

Finally, I would like to share a glimpse of the latest innovative form of collaboration currently being explored by TSF. While it has now been acknowledged in Australia that human-capital development is a priority in the early years of the twenty-first century, the need to accelerate social innovation to overcome in a more timely fashion seemingly intractable social issues is now emerging. Throughout 2006, the Boston Consulting Group conducted, on a pro bono basis, a feasibility study to investigate the need, and subsequently the applicable model, for a more integrative collaboration to develop innovative solutions to a number of social issues. A social incubator emerged as a possible vehicle for these collaborative outcomes.

A social incubator seeks to foster collaboration between individuals with different skill sets and backgrounds, from a range of sectors (including government) to search for innovative solutions for existing problems. It essentially provides an intensive environment in which research combines with practice to create practical initiatives and solutions, leveraging individual skills and expertise from diverse, multidisciplinary teams working together. This team environment is supported by:

- physical co-location, encouraging daily interactions between team members and the building of informal as well as formal bonds
- facilitation of teams by a project manager with responsibilities to manage interactions and promote collaboration

- a strong project process with accountabilities throughout to ensure milestones and outcomes are achieved.

Consideration is being given to developing social incubators for three areas: early childhood, youth and Indigenous people. Governments will play an important role in the design and implementation of these social incubators, but they will require collaboration from all sectors—including academia, non-profit and business—if they are to successfully develop solutions to the intractable social issues we are currently facing. Initiatives such as these therefore illustrate how collaborative efforts in the future will require increasing innovation if they are to remain relevant and effective mechanisms of support for the wellbeing of all Australians.

From a community organisation point of view, TSF is perceived as the underdog in most collaborations with governments or with business, as the last two have the money and therefore initially the power. I am inclined to say to my non-profit colleagues that we need to reject this view. We have what government and business need: local knowledge, implementation know-how and a foundation built on relationships. I counsel community organisations to know their value and not be intimidated. For collaborations with the public sector to work, we need: a) heads of departments to believe in partnerships; and b) to cultivate this as the predominant culture.

Key lessons

It was essential for TSF to address the question of our own corporate governance early in our transformation process so we could facilitate and enhance our capacity to meet the challenges and complexities of collaborating across systems and sectors. We also recognised the need to make staff changes within the organisation that built our internal capacity to initiate, manage and grow cross-sectoral relationships as a twenty-first-century currency and strategic asset for effectiveness and impact. In the case of TSF, this has meant restructuring staff responsibilities in a number of instances and recruiting leaders at the state and territory level in order to advance collaboration.

In addition to building our organisational capacity for collaboration, we have had to recognise and have the courage to grasp opportunities that we have become aware of in our environment. ‘Strategic opportunism’ is how we often described this particular experience of collaboration, which required us to become nimble in aligning resources to respond to emerging opportunities. We also, however, had to ‘stick to strategy’—that is, clarify what we would do and would not do as collaboration partners. This lesson can be understood as the other side of the coin of strategic opportunism and is a prerequisite to ensure that we consistently increase our capacity for societal impact.

Another important lesson has been that a serious commitment to collaboration can facilitate the leveraging of resources to strengthen policy impact through demonstration and innovation. The diverse skill sets and perspectives of cross-sectoral players, who are open to doing things differently, can be powerful drivers for policy and social innovation to break through previously intractable social problems.

In summary, in order to foster successful collaboration, it is imperative that your own house is in order. The relationships that are fostered should be treated as strategic assets to be managed and to provide understanding of the needs of the various collaborators. In order to do so, a collaborating body has to be prepared to devote energy and resources to making it a success and be prepared for the long haul. A true commitment to collaboration requires innovation and organisational development, change and tenacity. It is more than simply intra-agency cooperation, and the learning experience should be shared between all partners with a touch of humility.

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