Changing Landscapes for the Third Sector
Inter-organisational relationships

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Context

• Collaborative working as a means to achieving efficiency
• And to withstand the effects of the economic recession
• Pressure (especially from funders) to work in ‘partnerships’
• Collaborative working as a means to achieving more and better benefits for beneficiaries
Source material

Recession Watch

• Two year project funded by 6 foundations
• Year one: interviews in 60 small social welfare organisations
• Year two: facilitated conversations between funders and 50 small social welfare organisations
• Questions:
  • What are you here for?
  • Where is the shoe pinching?
  • What does that look and feel like?
  • What could help (especially from trusts and foundations)?
Source material

Collaboration Northern Ireland review

• 10 month project funded by Building Change Trust
• 150 participants (voluntary and community organisations, public agencies, independent funders) through interviews, workshops and online survey)
• Key questions:
  • Is collaboration an issue for you?
  • What does that look and feel like?
  • What gets in the way of it being a good experience?
  • What could help to make it easier and better?
Source material

Building Health Partnerships

• Ongoing programme, entering its third year, partnership with SEUK and funded by NHS England
• Intensive support in 16 local areas
• Working with cross-sector groups of senior practitioners from health, local authorities and VCSE organisations
• Key questions:
  • Why work together?
  • What is difficult about it and what can help?
  • Where do interests and assets intersect?
  • How can that translate into action?
Questions

• Why does your organisation collaborate?
Collaboration between funders

- Multiple reasons to collaborate
- Success factors include:
  - Shared purpose and rationale
  - Delegated authority
  - Trust
  - Balance of similarity and difference
- Challenges include:
  - Egos
  - Reaching consensus
  - Reconciling difference
Collaboration between voluntary organisations

- Policy pressures and problematic assumptions
- The difficulties of merger
- Challenges arising from the drive towards competition
- Enduring practical difficulties
- The need for policy makers and funders to back off
- The need for a wake-up call to VCOs about collaboration
- The idea of “collaboration of the willing for a purpose”
Cross sector collaboration

- History of public agencies being sceptical and stand-offish
- Implementation gap between policy and practice
- Conditions for it to work include:
  - Mutual understanding
  - Open communication channels
  - Shared goals
  - Locally appropriate arrangements
- Critical success factors include:
  - Timing
  - Diverse involvement
  - High level of support
  - Dual focus on relationship building and joint action
What is most difficult about working across organisational and sectoral boundaries?
The problems and challenges of collaborative working in practice

• Developing a shared understanding of the purpose of the collaboration
• Dealing with difference
• Protecting organisational identity and niche
• Balancing individual and collective interests
• Developing appropriate leadership
• Developing appropriate governance structures
• Securing resources and organisational capacity for the collaboration
• How can you overcome some of the difficulties of working across organisational or sectoral boundaries?
Strategies to overcome challenges

- Shared vision
- Collaboration champions
- Collaboration management
- Recognising emotions
- Organisational outlook and mindset
Useful concepts for practitioners

- Exchange
- Superordinate goals
- Emotional work
Implications for future research and support

• Focusing on “collaboration” itself as a phenomenon

• Seeing collaboration as a state of mind as well as a skill

• Developing models to enable deeper collaboration
Concluding reflections

For formal, structured collaboration:

• Vision first, structure second; form follows function
• Needs to be treated with some care and caution as it can be disruptive, risky, unsettling
• An inexact science, requires a leap of faith
• So, burden of proof needs to be on the prize and the offer of things being better
• Despite reservations, can be seen not just as unavoidable but also desirable, responsible and necessary