

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS ASSISTING PERSONS EXPERIENCING POVERTY IN THE REGION OF WATERLOO, ONTARIO

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“Poverty is a significant problem in Waterloo Region”¹ (p. 27) and based on statistics, it is not being eliminated, or arguably, adequately addressed². Poverty is “the lack of the lack of human, physical, and financial capital needed to sustain livelihoods, and inequalities in access to, and control of, and benefits from political, social or economic resources”³ (¶ 7). Poverty reduction is “the process of not only relieving, but actually reducing, the depth of people’s poverty by ensuring access to political, social or economic resources by building and engaging community. Poverty reduction attacks the root causes of poverty, not just the symptoms”⁴ (¶ 8).

Initiatives designed to reduce poverty often focus on addressing specific and individual issues related to poverty⁵ such as food, housing, employment and so on. Individualistic approaches to poverty reduction are problematic because they can lead to a decreased collaborative response and less correspondence between the various organizations designed to assist those experiencing poverty and addressing these needs⁶. Individuals experiencing poverty in a variety of social aspects (i.e. food and housing and employment, etc.) can “fall through the cracks” in service by having to navigate many different social service agencies to receive assistance⁷.

Collaboration can bring together individualized responses to poverty⁸ and can augment poverty reduction strategies⁹. Combining services is helpful to providing adequate and appropriate assistance to those experiencing poverty¹⁰. Collaboration can be used to solve societal problems but collaboration is “sufficiently underdeveloped as a field of study”¹¹ (pp. 3-4).

What is Collaboration?

There are numerous ways to understand and define collaboration¹²¹³. The definition of collaboration is used inconsistently and is also overused which makes using as well as evaluating it problematic¹⁴.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of the current study was to build on the existing literature particularly with regard to inter-organizational collaboration¹⁵, understanding “the dynamics and determinants” of inter-organizational collaborations¹⁶ (p. 200), ways to assist those experiencing poverty¹⁷. In other words, the study was designed to answer the question:

how, in Waterloo Region, do Executive Directors from organizations assisting those in poverty experience inter-organizational collaboration? And, can inter-organizational collaboration be useful in addressing societal issues like poverty?

Participants and procedure

Participants included 20 Executive Directors who worked within an organization involved in assisting those experiencing poverty or poverty reduction in Waterloo Region. They were selected based on connection to the issue of poverty: organizations involved in addressing one of the myriad aspects of poverty such as providing food, housing, or employment among others were invited to participate. All organizations were situated in the cities of Kitchener, Waterloo, or Cambridge.

Findings

Types of Collaborators

Participants had both positive and negative experiences with collaboration so collaboration is therefore experienced differently for different people. Participants fell into one of three categories of collaborators: resistant; ambivalent, and; enthusiastic.

Definition of Collaboration

Participants offered numerous definitions for the idea of “collaboration” and no two participants had the same definition. The ideas that participants had regarding what collaboration should be, however, fell under three main themes: collaboration as having an unclear definition; collaboration as having determining qualities which are the qualities that collaboration should encompass, and; collaboration as enhancing services or for helping people in general.

Capacity and Quantity of Collaboration

Participants stated that they collaborate in order to address both social and organizational issues. All participants engage in collaboration often. The majority of participants said collaboration should happen more, should be increased in the community, and should be increased in their own organization.

Aggrandized Collaboration

Participants stated that aggrandized collaboration would be good for their organization, good for people accessing services, and good for addressing the needs of the community for a variety of reasons.

Process of Collaboration

Participants offered a variety of suggestions and challenges for engaging in the process of collaboration as well as for during and ending the process. Their suggestions, they believe, would assist in making the process easier and more successful.

Relationship Building

Participants had suggestions for how to build better relationships in collaborative efforts and also discussed the challenges to expect. Participants stated that successful relationships can drive the desire to further collaborate in the future.

Discussion

Participants felt that collaboration helps address social issues like poverty and helps better identify the needs of individuals in the community. Participants went further to say that collaborative efforts that do not intend this are not considered “collaborations”. Collaboration allows for knowledge and expertise on an issue to be amassed and simply makes sense in addressing community issues like poverty. Participants stated that collaboration should be increased overall. All participants had a different definition of collaboration which shows that in the literature¹⁸ and in practice, there is no consistent understanding of collaboration. Participants believe that collaboration enhances agency services and helps people in the community including those in poverty. Collaboration is used to address social issues and organizational issues such as assisting individuals better access services and can combat larger social issues like poverty. Participants discussed the challenges to collaboration which may give insight into why collaboratives are not always engaged in. Participants also provided suggestions on how to avoid, reduce and overcome challenges, offered suggestions on how to better communicate, resolve conflicts and engage each phase of the collaborative process, and offered suggestions on how to build relationships in collaborations and also the challenges to relationship building. Many felt that more organizations should collaborate and felt that there is much to still learn about collaboration which is why it can be so challenging. Several stressed the need to build a society based on cooperation rather than competition.

It was discovered that inter-organizational collaboration can assist in the reduction of social issues like poverty and the majority of participants stated that collaboration is crucial in addressing social issues regardless of the challenges the process encompasses. It can be argued that through improved collaborative processes and greater relationship building, fewer individuals accessing services will fall through the ‘gaps in service’¹⁹. Moreover, this study provides a foundation with which other studies can build on so that inter-organization in other regions can be explored to address the needs of individuals in regions outside of Waterloo Region, something encouraged by the social work Code of Ethics²⁰. This is certainly a topic worthy of further research.

Any questions or requests for this paper can be forwarded to Morgan Braganza at morganbraganza@hotmail.com.

¹ Leviten-Reid, E. (2001). Opportunities 2000: Multisectoral collaboration for poverty reduction final evaluation report. Retrieved January 20, 2009 from http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/OP_2000_Final_Eval.pdf.

² Leviten-Reid, E. (2007). Reflecting on vibrant communities (2002-2006). Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Retrieved June 6, 2007 from <http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/612ENG.pdf>.

³ Tamarack Community Engagement. (2007). Learning Centre. Retrieved June 8, 2007 from http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s3_3.html.

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- ⁸ Leviten-Reid, E. (2007). Reflecting on vibrant communities (2002-2006). Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Retrieved June 6, 2007 from <http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/612ENG.pdf>.
- ⁹ Mattessich, P.W., Murray-Close, M. & Monsey, B.R. (2001). Collaboration: What makes it work. A review of research literature on factors influencing successful collaboration. (2nd Edition) Minnesota:USA. Fieldstone Alliance.
- ¹⁰ Leviten-Reid, E. (2001). Opportunities 2000: Multisectoral collaboration for poverty reduction final evaluation report. Retrieved January 20, 2009 from http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/OP_2000_Final_Eval.pdf.
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- ¹³ Mattessich, P.W., Murray-Close, M. & Monsey, B.R. (2001). Collaboration: What makes it work. A review of research literature on factors influencing successful collaboration. (2nd Edition) Minnesota:USA. Fieldstone Alliance.
- ¹⁴ Gajda, R. (2004). Utilizing collaboration theory to evaluate strategic alliances. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 25 (1), 65-77.
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- ¹⁶ Rich, M.J., Giles, M.W. & Stern, E. (2001). Collaborating to reduce poverty: Views from city halls and community-based organizations. *Urban Affairs Review*, 37 (2), 184-204.
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- ¹⁹ Leviten-Reid, E. (2001). Opportunities 2000: Multisectoral collaboration for poverty reduction final evaluation report. Retrieved January 20, 2009 from http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/OP_2000_Final_Eval.pdf.
- ²⁰ Canadian Association of Social Workers. (2005). Code of ethics. Ottawa, Ontario: Author.