



Australian Government  
Department of Family and Community Services



# **Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004**

## **Networks and Partnerships**

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Networks and Partnerships

**Written by:**

Mr Bob Williams  
Ms Meenakshi Sankar  
Associate Professor Patricia Rogers

**With the assistance of:**

Mrs Roslyn Humble  
Ms Sue Kimberley  
Ms Jenni Leigh  
Mr John Scougall

# 1 Summary

There is increasing emphasis on developing relationships between organisations to work together to improve the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. In this paper we discuss three important factors that influence the establishment and maintenance of effective networks and partnerships between organisations.

Firstly, we distinguish between four different types of relationships, each focusing on a particular activity:

- communication;
- cooperation,
- coordination;
- collaboration.

Effective relationships match the purpose, structure, processes and availability of resources over time with the type of relationship.

Secondly we discuss the particular and specialised skills needed for participating in and managing networks and partnerships. People managing networks and partnerships need time, skills and other resources for:

- influencing members to participate;
- securing commitment from members;
- creating a favourable environment for productive work.

Thirdly, we discuss how the context of a network or partnership can either help or hinder the formation of a network relationship, particularly in terms of:

- history of relationships among members;
- relative power of members and non-members of the group;
- extent of political and cultural control;
- complexity of issues being addressed;
- culture of members;
- age of the network.

This paper has been developed as part of the evaluation of the Australian Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which is helping build family and community capacity to deal with challenges and take advantages of opportunities. One of the principles underpinning the Strategy is the importance of partnerships and networks among organisations working to strengthen families and communities.

The paper is being distributed widely to organisations managing Strategy projects, to staff in the Department of Family and Community Services, and to other interested individuals and organisations to guide the implementation of current projects, to inform future policy and project development, and to guide the evaluation. Feedback on this paper is most welcome, and can be sent to the Evaluation Project Director Dr Patricia Rogers, CIRCLE at RMIT University, 124 Latrobe Street Melbourne VIC 3000, fax (03) 9925 2998, email [Patricia.Rogers@rmit.edu.au](mailto:Patricia.Rogers@rmit.edu.au).

## 2 Overview of networks and partnerships

### 2.1 Defining terms

Various terms are used to describe relationships between organisations.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy glossary distinguishes between networks and partnerships in a way which indicates a longer term and more extensive commitment in a partnership:

*Network: A group of people with a common interest who interact and cooperate with each other for mutual assistance or support in relation to that common interest.*

*Partnership: A relationship between organisations or groups that is characterised by mutual co-operation and responsibility to achieve a common goal, with the involvement of all parties to the partnership (the partners). It can be formal, semi-formal, or informal. Partnerships can involve a variety of different actions by the partners, including: Joint funding; pooling of resources; consultation and agreement to work together; in kind support e.g. provision of premises, staff and other resources.*

These definitions have been developed to cover a range of relationships:

- Between organisations;
- Between the Australian Government and the organisation(s) running a funded project;
- Between individuals and families in the community.

This paper focuses on the first of these – the relationships between organisations. For this reason, we have found it useful to distinguish between *four* different types of relationships, on the basis of their activity, level of formality and governance, drawing on some research in this area. (Hogue, 1994; Mandell & Steelman, 2003; Keast, 1998; University of Wisconsin, 1998)

**Table 1 Four types of relationships between organisations**

Level of the network	Communication	Cooperation	Coordination	Collaboration
Key Descriptor	Shared information	Shared information and mutual support	Common tasks and compatible goals	Integrated strategies and collective purpose

In very broad terms, the terms ‘cooperation’ cover what the Strategy glossary calls ‘network’, and the term ‘collaboration’ cover what the glossary calls ‘partnership’. We believe the additional two categories are useful descriptions of the types of relationships that organisations might have, might plan to have, and might move through as relationships develop.

**Table 2 Comparison between definitions of types of relationships between organisations**

<b>Level of the network</b>	Communication	Cooperation	Coordination	Collaboration
<b>FaCS Definitions</b>		Network		Partnerships

While we make distinctions between different kinds of relationships on the basis of their activity, level of formality and governance and accountability arrangements, the distinction isn’t always clear in practice. Different parts of the same network can operate in different ways, and the nature of a particular relationship can change over time (Ministry of Social Development, NZ, 2003). However, the distinctions are useful to understand the strengths and weaknesses of particular networks.

In this paper, we use the term ‘network’ in a neutral sense, to cover the broad range of relationships between organisations. However, when dealing specifically with SFCS material we use the words ‘network’ and ‘partnership’ according to SFCS definitions.

## **2.2 Research evidence about networks**

Interestingly, most of the research literature exploring partnerships between government agencies and community-based organisations, is descriptive rather than reflective. They also have serious and substantial methodological problems:

*...it is widely acknowledged that the international literature on partnerships is characterised by ‘methodological anarchy and definitional chaos.* (Larner & Butler, 2003).

Thus identifying critical features and factors that have been tested rather than asserted is rather difficult. Some of the best material on what helps and hinders successful working relationships between organisations comes from research that focuses on relationships described as ‘networks’.

The research into networks has identified three key factors that help determine how well a network operates.<sup>1</sup> These factors and their characteristics are listed below, and discussed in more detail in the following sections of the paper:

- The 'alignment' of a network – the correct alignment of purpose, structure, processes and resources;
- The way in which the network is managed;
- The 'fit' between the network and the context.

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<sup>1</sup> These 3 factors, and some of the material that follows, are drawn from reviews commissioned by the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission, and the New Zealand Department of Child Youth and Family. The material here is used with their permission.

## 3 The 'alignment' of a network

### 3.1 Key issues raised in the research

One of the most significant lessons from the network literature is the need to align the **purpose, structure, processes** and **resources** of networks. Lack of understanding of the implications of this is a major cause of networks failing to live up to expectations. A number of related issues associated with alignment have been identified.

- Different kinds of networks are best for different kinds of tasks, and need different kinds of strategies. In particular, the strategies for establishing and supporting networks that primarily share information are very different from those that undertake joint projects and work. (Hogue, 1994; Mandell & Steelman, 2003)
- There are considerable differences in developing and supporting working relationships that are focussed on communication, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. (Hogue, 1994; Mandell & Steelman, 2003); Butterfoss *et al*, 1993)
- One of the big challenges in establishing networks is to move them beyond information sharing (Creech & Willard, 2001) . A critical part of building more ambitious networks is the articulation of a clear mission or guiding purpose. (Butterfoss *et al*, 1993)
- All forms of networks usually take longer than expected to establish themselves; sponsoring agencies frequently back out of supporting the development networks too soon. (Bernard, 1996).
- Networks are not institutions; they cannot be expected to do what institutions do. (Bernard, 1996).
- Diverse networks are likely to be more creative than homogeneous networks. (Bernard, 1996; Eoyang, 2000)
- A critical part of building a network is positive expectation of the network. (Butterfoss *et al*, 1993)
- Networks tasks must reflect their constituency.
- Networks are most effective dealing with local issues, local agendas and local priorities. Local networks cannot be expected to deal with national issues, agendas or priorities, unless they have local relevance.

## **3.2 Considering purpose, structure, process and resources**

### **Purpose**

As a network gets more complex most of the literature stresses that the purpose of the network needs to become clearer. However, many evaluations of networks highlight how unclear network purposes are for those involved. For instance, one study concluded

*...there is a surprising amount of real confusion among participants about what the network they are involved with is for, or what the point of being in a network actually amounts to. (Church et al, 2003)*

### **Structure**

Networks vary in their complexity. It follows then that the structures used to bring the partners together need to be appropriate for the complexity of the tasks they are to address. Successful large-scale cooperation is dependent on creating and maintaining structures and processes to support collaboration. (Walker, 2000; Lendrum 1998; Spar, 1994)

### **Processes**

In any collaboration the various partners must develop a shared understanding of the problems that are to be solved and the goals to be achieved. Shared understanding of the problem and goals, accompanied by a commitment to proceed with the process of joint work, are fundamentally important. It lays out the decision-making processes to be adopted by the 'network' and a set of openly agreed rules for 'fair play'. (DeHoog, 1990)

### **Resources**

Resources must be adequate to the task at hand. This is a particular issue for social service networks, where there are considerable limitations of time, money or previous experience. (Anderson et al, 2002). Time is a resource, and many sources stress that networks take time to develop; especially when the networking role is commonly placed on top of all the other task people are expected to conduct. In the public sector, the alignment of inter-agency priorities is particularly time consuming. (NZ Ministry of Health, 2001)

*'Not enough time' and 'too heavy a workload' were frequently mentioned when respondents were asked to list barriers to inter-agency collaboration in the evaluation of New Zealand's Strengthening Families initiative. (Visser, 2000)*

*We did have networks happening ... a few years ago, but resources and finances just meant that we had to cut them back.*

Organisation that applied for Strategy funding

Furthermore, the time consumed can be very frustrating to those in government who perceive an emphasis on relationships at the expense of outcomes. (Brown & Keast, 2002)

This issue is excellently illustrated in a progress report of the Networking the Networks Initiative, a project funded through the Strategy. The report cautions that:

*Participation in networks are voluntary and it is all too easy for a full time workload to emerge. The networks are currently facing this issue and working out where their boundaries and limitations are.*

### **3.3 Aligning purpose, structure, process and resources**

Maintaining the balance between the purpose, structures, processes and resources is key to the success of any collaborative activity. A particular network arrangement is more likely to be stable and successful if there is the correct match of characteristics. For instance, a network that is attempting to solve complex problems will need much higher levels of structure and leadership than an occasional information-sharing network. Although this seems self evident, government agencies often appear to establish or promote networks that have structures and resources appropriate to 'communication' or 'cooperation', but with expectations more akin to 'coordination' or 'collaboration'.

The challenge in maintaining this delicate balance across purpose, structure, process and resources has also been found in Strategy funded projects. In some instances there was little interaction with similar projects in other regions, except for occasional meetings at seminars and conference. This was not because the projects didn't value external sources of information or networks, but lacked the time and money needed to maintain these relationships at that level.

### **3.4 Examples of the four types of relationships**

Earlier in this paper we introduced the idea of a continuum of network types; communication; cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. What distinguishes each step of the continuum are difference in the purpose, structures, processes and resources. (Hogue,1994; Mandell & Steelman, 2003; Keast, 1998; Himmelman, 1998; Gajda, 2003)

In this section we describe each of these in more detail and illustrate them where appropriate with Strategy-funded projects. This classification is based on available data from these projects. Their relationships with other organisations may well have included other elements, or have changed since the time of reporting. They are included in this issue paper as illustrations, not as conclusions about these projects.

## Communication

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Resources</b> <b>(for network development and maintenance)</b>
<p>Provide dialogue and common understanding</p> <p>Mutual exchange to support each others' efforts</p> <p>Clearing house for information</p> <p>Create base of support</p>	<p>Non-hierarchical</p> <p>Loose/flexible links</p> <p>Roles are loosely defined</p> <p>Community action is primary link among members</p>	<p>Low-key leadership</p> <p>Minimal group decision making</p> <p>Little conflict</p> <p>Informal communication</p> <p>Few defined tasks</p>	<p>Variable time</p> <p>Minimal skill</p> <p>Minimal support</p> <p>Minimal finance</p>
<p><b>Illustration from the Strategy</b></p> <p>An ethnic Association of Victoria Incorporated (the community) project is an example of a network that was (at the time of reporting) in its developmental stage, and focused on communication. The project was set up to provide a common forum for dialogue and exchange of information to support the efforts of different groups working with the particular ethnic community. It was funded under the 'Early Intervention, Parenting, and Family Relationship' Initiative.</p> <p>The first step was to recruit and increase the pool of volunteer parent/family support research people in 'the community'.</p> <p>In order to achieve this goal, they established networks with local 'community' Welfare workers and multicultural school aides, 'community' groups, the local Community Health Centre, 'community' Workers action group and local primary school and college to seek support and promote their project. These networks were formed to create a base of support for the program.</p>			

## Cooperation

Purpose	Structure	Process	Resources (for network development and maintenance)
<p>Match needs</p> <p>Fulfil mutual needs but retain separate identities</p> <p>Limit duplication of services</p> <p>Working together to ensure that tasks are done</p> <p>Limited joint problem solving</p>	<p>Central team acts as communication hub</p> <p>Semi-formal links</p> <p>Links are advisory</p> <p>Group seeks to influence decision making</p>	<p>Leaders who facilitate</p> <p>Low stakes.</p> <p>Perhaps some conflict</p> <p>Formal communication within the central team</p>	<p>Variable time</p> <p>Medium skill</p> <p>Medium support</p> <p>Variable finance</p>
<p><b>Illustration from the Strategy</b></p> <p>A project of a State Council of Social Services is an initiative that describes a network at the level of cooperation.</p> <p>This project formed 6 networks in the region with other groups working in related areas to facilitate exchange of information and support one another's efforts. It acted as a communications hub and was set up to minimise duplication of services in the region.</p> <p>The 6 networks that were part of the hub were subsequently being invited to take initiative towards their own development with advice and input from it. This process had been rather slow, as local leadership had yet to emerge within these individual networks. However, the establishment of these co-operative networks was the first step to any sort of collaboration between local community residents and group.</p>			

## Coordination

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Resources (for network development and maintenance)</b>
<p>Share resources to address common issues</p> <p>Link resources to achieve joint goals</p> <p>More complex problem solving</p>	<p>Central team consists of decision makers</p> <p>Roles are defined</p> <p>Links are formalised</p> <p>Group participates in decision making</p> <p>Decision making structures established</p>	<p>Autonomous leadership focused on issue</p> <p>Central and subgroup decision making</p> <p>Frequent and clear communication</p> <p>Equal and shared decision taking</p>	<p>Medium to high time</p> <p>Some skills at high level</p> <p>High support</p> <p>Variable finance</p> <p>Merge resource base to create something new</p>
<p><b><u>Illustrations from the Strategy</u></b></p> <p>Two regional projects with a major focus on coordination between organisations discuss in their reports what it takes to make coordination happen on the ground.</p> <p>Successful regional coordination relies on open exchange of good information among members and stakeholders and having meaningful feedback loops. These two projects demonstrate how distributing information and establishing processes for members to work together to resolve issues contributes to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improving organisation knowledge and understanding;</li> <li>• creating a culture of trust and responsibility;</li> <li>• creating a culture of information sharing;</li> <li>• developing provider/member agency capacity.</li> </ul>			

## Collaboration

Purpose	Structure	Process	Resources <b>(for network development and maintenance)</b>
<p>Shared vision and goals</p> <p>Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities</p> <p>Complex problem solving</p>	<p>Consensus is used in shared decision making</p> <p>Roles, time, and evaluation are formalised, and delegated</p> <p>Links are formal and written into agreements</p> <p>Group has a decision making structure</p>	<p>Strong leadership, trust level, and productivity</p> <p>Ideas and decisions equally shared</p> <p>Highly developed communication</p> <p>Medium to high potential for internal conflict</p> <p>Extensive problem solving activities</p>	<p>Resources committed for a long time period</p> <p>Complex skills at high level</p> <p>High levels of support</p> <p>Variable finance</p>

### Illustration from the Strategy

A local Community Garden project is an excellent illustration of a collaborative relationship. In the process of developing and implementing the community garden project, relationships were formed with multiple partners. Significant links were established with local indigenous groups, various community agencies and businesses to facilitate the planning of the garden.

The project emerged from the community who saw the potential for doing something productive with the car park to strengthen links between local residents, the services around the campus and local government (a shared vision). Broad objectives focused on promoting cultural awareness, building community capacity and improving social interaction and connectedness.

The project had highly developed processes for group decision-making and open communication, and attention to identifying and resolving differences. Allowing sufficient time for planning, the formation of partnerships and community mobilisation were identified as critical ingredients in the achievement of intended outcomes.

## 4 The way in which networks are managed

### 4.1 Key issues raised in the research

Active, effective management of networks is essential. The research on networks strongly suggests that pulling people together and hoping for the best is not a good way to establish a sustainable network.

A number of related issues associated with network management have been identified.

- Local networks do what networks do, and there is very little a central agency can do about that without destroying the vibrancy of that network. (Brown & Keast, 2002) In fact, networks tend to do better when the goals are set by its members rather than external bodies. (Bernard, 1996) Whilst the needs and support of 'central' or 'external' agencies are often important in the establishment of 'local' networks, these central needs can significantly inhibit local networks if applied too inflexibly. (Bernard, 1996; Creech & Willard, 2001)
- Network participants need the active support of the organisations they represent, especially when the network starts taking decisions about projects and resources. Indeed they rarely operate effectively when its participants do not have the active support of their own agencies. (Mandell & Steelman, 2003; Williams, 1997; Bernard, 1996; Creech & Willard, 2001)
- The role of network coordinators is complex and demanding. The skills required depend on the kind of network that is envisaged. The more ambitious the network aims, the more demanding the skills. (Hogue, 1994; Mandell & Steelman, 2003)
- Networks tend to have core and peripheral members, who participate in different levels of task. (Creech & Willard, 2001; Williams, 1997) In fact, recent developments in network theory suggest that this is not a weakness but a valuable feature, and attempt to include everyone into the 'core' is unlikely to be worthwhile. (Barabasi, 2002)
- The tasks necessary at an early stage of coalition building are different from those later in the development. Indeed 'late' stage tasks applied too early can delay coalition building, 'early' stage tasks and processes applied later can inhibit the coalition. (Barabasi, 2002)

It is quite apparent from the above that quite particular and specialised skills are needed for participating in and managing networks. People need to be appointed to 'co-ordinate' networks on the basis of their skills to do so, or access to appropriate training, rather than their general availability in an organisation. As the network gets more ambitious, the skill requirements increase.

Does your project have the time, skills and other resources to manage the network?

## **4.2 Three key areas where resources are needed**

Previous research into networks has shown that people managing networks need to have the time, skills and other resources in three key areas (Mandell & Steelman, 2003; Williams, 1997):

- influencing members to participate;
- securing commitment from members;
- creating a favourable environment for productive work.

### **Influencing members to participate**

There are two dimensions to this theme. The first has to do with the need to secure the support of participants who can sustain and build legitimacy for the network. This has been reflected in the idea of securing **champions** (participants who provide energy for the work to be done in the new arrangement) and **sponsors** (participants who have the ability to legitimise the network through persuasion and influence).

The second dimension refers to influencing rules, procedures, values and norms. This has to do with altering perceptions of participants and includes exploring similarities and differences in perceptions leading to goal congruence; framing (changing perceptions by influencing prevailing values and norms); developing a shared purpose or program rationale and developing a vision whereby attention can be focused on synergistic purposes.

There is also the question of who needs to participate and to what extent. Networks tend to have 'core' members and 'peripheral' members. Until relatively recently, network theory promoted the idea that maximising 'core' membership and reducing 'peripheral' membership was important to network sustainability and effectiveness. However, more recent research suggests the opposite – that the most effective networks have relatively few 'core' members. It is important to ensure that these 'core' members have extensive connections of their own into *different* networks. (Barabasi, 2002)

### **Securing commitment from members**

This is about the ability to develop obligations from the participants to take joint action and the ability to develop cooperation and collaboration among a diverse group that might not ordinarily cooperate with each other. It involves promoting the gathering of resources, building coalitions, forging agreements, and developing a view of the whole to promote a set of common objectives.

### **Creating a favourable environment for productive interaction**

This is about minimising the costs to participants. It includes blending many different cultures, needs and goals to facilitate interaction among participants; securing a working consensus on behalf of the whole (perhaps via a collective set of objectives, goals or visions), but allowing participants to contribute based on their own reasons; and fostering effective communication among participants. It involves building management skills in which the role of a network coordinator is changed from someone who is 'in charge' to a multi-lateral broker role, or facilitator.

Formal and informal rules can serve to help managers (including those not directly responsible for the network) in their ability to create a favourable environment or they can become barriers. In simpler networks the rules can be restrictive and still allow for the purposes to be achieved. In more complex networks, managers will need to focus their efforts on legitimising the purpose of the network, securing a commitment to it and establishing a working consensus. In these circumstances, the rules should be as flexible as possible to allow the members to be able to work out needed adjustments and to be able to manoeuvre as much as possible to deal with the complexities that will be encountered.

The role of informal rules and/or guidelines are important. Regardless of whether there are formal rules, an astute manager will be able to use informal relationships to influence the prevailing values and norms and build a sense of obligation from participants to take joint action. If the goals allow for the use of the simpler types of networks, then the need to rely on these strategies will be limited to the ability to get buy-in from members who insist on maintaining their independence. For more complex networks and purposes, the manager will also need to focus on securing support and legitimacy for the goals by developing buy-in of sponsors and also building coalitions and agreements even before the network is formed.

The issue of trust is usually seen either as a prerequisite of successful networks (discussed in the following section) or as a product of successful networks. It is also commonly assumed that time, communications and working relationships build up trust. However in situations where people have different world views, increased communication may actually serve to increase differences and erode trust. (Newell & Swan, 2002)

### **Illustration from the Strategy**

A regional Shire Council recognised the need for skills in network participation and they sought funding under the Strategy to provide leadership training and networking assistance to participants involved in community planning activities in the Shire. Their aim was to use this training to (a) enable local communities to acquire new skills to address local problems and (b) provide organisational skills to members to develop working networks and relationships with external sources and groups.

## 5 The 'fit' between the network and the context

### 5.1 Key issues raised in the research

The context of a network, the environment in which the network is operating, can also help and hinder the formation of a network relationship (Mandell & Steelman, 2003). Establishment of networks – of all kinds – requires a delicate balance of features, and careful matching of management styles, skills and contextual responses. There is not one best way to set up networks for all situations:

*...to insist on one type of arrangement over another without considering the characteristics of the arrangement as well as the context in which they will operate is foolish, at best. (Mandell & Steelman, 2003)*

It may well be appropriate to change the type of relationship over time as resources, skills, managerial skills and context allow:

*...where conditions are very restrictive, managers might do well to develop a [network] in stages, starting with simple issues that will allow members to buy into the new arrangement and form positive relationships with each other first, and then they can move to more complex [networks] based on these established relationships. (Mandell & Steelman, 2003)*

There is a range of contextual factors, each with particular management implications:

- History of relationships;
- Relative power of members and non-members;
- Impact of political or cultural context;
- Type of issue;
- Culture of members.

#### History of relationships

If there is a poor history of relations among members and the goal is to deal with complex problems, managers will need to focus more strongly on blending the different cultures, needs and goals than if members have a history of good relations. This can often be made easier if managers can build strong support and legitimacy for the network so that a well-respected sponsor can serve to convince members of the worth of maintaining it. In less complex types of network (eg cooperation) managers can probably rely more on personal persuasion, often on a problem-by-problem basis.

How would you describe the history of relations among the members in your network?

### Relative power of members and non-members

Because of the intense feelings and conflicts that can arise as a result of power issues, management techniques must be adapted to allow members to secure a working consensus rather than imposing traditional controls or coordinating mechanisms.

In simpler types of networks (eg communication), the power dimensions that allow members to maintain their current point of view, will mean that management techniques will need to be adapted in order to focus on two elements:

- securing commitment from members to take joint action; and
- the ability to create a favourable environment for productive interaction.

Since simpler networks are expected to accomplish only a limited purpose, managers do not need to focus as much on securing commitment, but they would do well to ensure there is strong support and legitimacy for the innovation at the outset.

In the more complex types of networks, the emphasis will need to be on the ability to secure commitment to overriding goals as well as on the need to blend the many different cultures, needs and goals that will be present in these arrangements. Developing a shared purpose can serve as a foundation for all actions.

The question of 'power' raises issues of who exactly controls or is in charge of the network. Several reviews stress how 'external' organisations are important in the establishment of networks, but can also stifle them. This is particularly the case with government agencies, where the original impetus for the establishment of networks comes not from network members, but from central policy makers. For central policy makers this can pose a dilemma:

*...in effect, there is a desire to continue to tightly control what occurs in the network structure... the key role for policy makers is to lay the foundation for members to be able to operate with the authority they will need, and then to step back and 'get out of the way'. (Brown & Keast, 2002)*

This does not mean that policy makers should not be involved in the assessment of the network structure, but it does mean that they have to pull back and allow the members to have the kind of flexibility they will need to come up with innovative systems change and to feel comfortable taking the risks they will have to take. (Brown & Keast, 2002)

This is particularly true of assessing network 'performance'.

Networks established by policy makers, or by central agencies often have performance measures that conform to the worldviews of those policymakers. However, the performance of network arrangements cannot be judged, evaluated or measured along traditional bureaucratic lines such as outcome or outputs, since they are essentially evolutionary, developmental and contribute to the establishment of trust and relationships that may take quite unintended courses. (Brown & Keast, 2002)

What are the appropriate indicators to assess the performance of a network or collaborative activity?

### **Impact of political/cultural context**

The openness or restrictiveness of the political/cultural context can make a difference as to whether complex coalitions or network structures will ever get off the ground. In very restrictive contexts, action may be limited to relatively simple networks and thus relatively simple goals.

In the case where more complex problem solving is the goal, however, it will be up to the manager to influence those in the political arena to change their position. This will mean the manager will have to first build support and legitimacy for the network from sponsors and then rely on an ability to influence rules, procedures, values and norms.

### **Type of issue**

This factor becomes, for managers, a double edged sword, as the simpler types of issues may be easier to get people to the table, but they will do so because they feel the stakes are low enough to insure their individual goals will prevail. In this case, there may be fewer difficulties in terms of getting agreement, but the end result may be maintaining the status quo rather than any systems change. If managers are interested in achieving more complex purposes (eg establishment of collaborative ventures), this will mean that members must perceive their mutual interdependence, which, in turn, will require an emphasis on maintaining a shared commitment to goals.

This will be impacted by the perceptions of the issue by the members, and managers may need to focus on influencing and altering perceptions to develop a shared purpose.

### **Culture of members**

In a network the development of a 'rationale' allows members with diverse backgrounds and affiliations to come together as a new whole. This does not mean, however, that members give up their identity as representatives of individual organisations or groups or even give up their way of thinking and behaving based on their affiliations prior to becoming members. Consequently management techniques must be adapted that allow members to build commitment to the other members for their own reasons and in their own ways, not by imposing traditional controls or coordinating mechanisms (e.g. performance measures or practices imposed by one organisation on all members of the network).

It is not entirely true that the cultural and political context is less important in simpler forms of network. If managers want to maintain the relative independence of the members *and* still be able to solve mutual problems, then managers will need to work even harder on finding sponsors who are able to get a minimum of agreement to take joint action. In simpler networks that are predominantly focussing on information sharing, this can be a major undertaking.

How does the culture of members affect your network?

Indeed in the more complex types of networks, members tend to be more astute about the need to develop a program rationale than in the more simple types of networks. They know they must continually work on maintaining a view of the whole and blending different cultures, needs and goals. This is still a difficult process, but nonetheless, often there is a better foundation for these management strategies in the more complex types than in the simpler types.

### **Stage of network**

It is also important to take into account the stages of coalition development. Different factors may be important in enhancing coalition functioning at different stages. (Butterfoss *et al*, 1993) Knowing what these are may help coalitions move from one stage of development to another. These factors may include:

- Positive attitudes towards the idea of a coalition;
- Availability of resources;
- Failure of existing efforts to address the problem;
- Legislative or extra-organisational mandates;
- An effective, motivated catalyst organisation;
- Previous history of collaboration or competition between coalition members;
- Capacity to maintain linkages - essentially the technical ability of members to stay in touch and create a sense of direction.

### **Illustration from the Strategy**

Interviews with some Strategy projects identified a number of factors that were inhibiting the building of strategic partnerships between organisations in the same region:

- The large number and diversity of community and government organisations actively involved in community work in the region;
- Divergent philosophies;
- A silo mentality;
- The persistence of old habits;
- A desire to maintain secrecy about funding source;
- The need for continual crisis management.

## **6 Contribution of the Strategy to building or maintaining networks**

### ***6.1 Types of contribution***

The contribution of the Strategy to building and maintaining networks and partnerships in funded projects has been twofold:

- Those projects where the Strategy has supported existing networks and partnerships, and
- Those projects where the Strategy has supported the formation of new networks and partnerships.

While some of the networks and partnerships existed prior to the funding from Strategy, the process of applying for Strategy funding and consciously going through a structured planning process to develop meaningful project plan and implementation has allowed new networks to be forged and existing networks to be strengthened. This process has allowed community groups and organisations to choose and develop networks on their own, based on the issue they were grappling with in their region. The network research, which shows that networks do better when the goals are set by its members, rather than by external bodies, would support this approach. Many of the organisations that have completed their Strategy projects believe that the partnerships they have forged are likely to continue after funding.

#### **An illustrative example where the Strategy supported existing partnership**

A Project was initially funded under the Family and Community Networks Initiative and subsequently received funding from the Strategy to continue its activities and partnerships. The project aimed to build social capital by developing venues that encourage 'enterprise networks' within the community. Enterprise networks build community capacity by facilitating the exchange of skills, which can be used to generate community initiatives. The specific venues were an Art and Craft Centre, a Community Garden, a Men's Shed and a bi-monthly community market at a local shopping centre. The FCNI evaluation noted that the project had demonstrated its ability to create a tangible groundswell of community activity through enterprise networks. There was also agreement among project officers and committee members that within a very short period, the program had raised the self-esteem of participants, developed social networks, promoted skills exchange and begun to foster an enterprise culture in the community. However it is situated in one of the most socially disadvantaged regions in the nation with very scarce local resources. The FCNI evaluation concluded that there was 'a need for continuing Commonwealth and State support to ensure that the valuable groundswell of community support generated so far by the project does not abate.'

Having received funding through the FCNI Initiative to establish the project, the project subsequently received funding through the Strategy to continue the partnerships between the project and the Department of Family and Community Services to help ensure that the program is sustainable in the longer term.

**An illustrative example where the Strategy supported formation of new networks and partnerships**

- In a large regional city, the Strategy has been a key player in facilitating the formation of new networks and partnership arrangements. For example, The City has auspiced and been actively involved in three of the 10 SFCS projects funded in the region;
- One project brought together many local organisations and individuals for the purpose of improving family, community and organisational relationships in the city;
- Numerous community and government agencies are actively contributing to the daily delivery of another;
- A Leadership and Cultural Awareness project has been developed as a collaborative partnership between local the Aboriginal community, a training and employment organisation, a Public Health Unit and others.

## 7 Implications

Networks and partnerships are important ingredients in building social capital and strong, self-reliant communities. While communities are well placed to find solutions to their problems, they are more likely to find sustainable solutions to their problems through strategic partnerships with key agencies and stakeholders in their locality.

Establishment of networks and partnerships – of all kinds – require a delicate balance of features, and careful matching of management styles, skills and contextual responses.

We need to acknowledge that forming of networks and partnerships takes time and both individuals and their organisations can impact significantly on success of the collaborative effort.

*The question is when is it appropriate to collaborate or partner and when not – in other words, what is fit for purpose needs to be explored first. (Pratt, Pamling & Gordon, 1998).*

This has implications for how FaCS identifies and determines the performance indicators to measure the success of this principle within the Strategy. The research suggests that it is the quality, not the quantity of networks that matters. However, the Strategy identifies the number of networks formed as a Performance Indicator. It might be more appropriate to select indicators from the range of characteristics that affect the success of particular kinds of networks at particular stages of their development.

Another issue that needs to be explored further is the role of FaCS in supporting the development of networks. The research suggests that networks do better when its members rather than having external bodies initiate the formation of the network and set the goals. Are there particular types of organisations or communities where this support is most helpful?

Are there examples of Strategy projects where SFCS has played a significant role in building, supporting networks?

## 8 What next?

This issue paper offers some insights and understanding about:

- the different types of networks that can be developed;
- the need for effective management of networks;
- the influence of context on network effectiveness.

Some of the areas that we could explore in the next stages of the evaluation are:

- What types of networks have been established or maintained by Strategy projects?
- What are the factors that have helped or hindered the development and maintenance of networks?
- What have been the strengths and weaknesses of these networks?
- What have been their contributions to the project outcomes?
- To what extent have these networks developed after funding has ceased?
- In what ways and under what circumstances have these networks fostered effective working relationships between FaCS and communities on the ground?
- What has been their role in family and community capacity building processes?
- In what ways and under what circumstances have these networks increased sustainability of project outcomes?
- What has been the role of FaCS in identifying and forming these networks?

Completed projects are providing information about the partnerships they have formed during planning and implementation. As more projects finish, and these data become available, these questionnaires, together with other data about project activities and outcomes, will help us answer many of these questions.

We invite your comments on this issue paper, particularly in terms of its implications for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, or examples that either illustrate or contradict the points it makes.

Feedback on this paper is most welcome, and can be sent to the Evaluation Project Director Dr Patricia Rogers, CIRCLE at RMIT University, 124 Latrobe Street Melbourne VIC 3000, [Patricia.Rogers@rmit.edu.au](mailto:Patricia.Rogers@rmit.edu.au), fax (03) 9925 2998.

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## Networks and Partnerships