

Social Change – Making the Improbable Possible through Collaboration: NGOs Working Together in South Africa to Tackle HIV/AIDS

By

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Three intersecting trends create an interesting arena for this study – collaboration is increasingly being portrayed as the way to solve wicked problems (Conklin and Weil, 1997; Gray, 1989; Lasker, Weiss and Miller, 2001) at a time when significant cross-border social issues are ever more pressing (Fisher, 1997; Young, 1991) and when the number and level of activity of non-government organizations (NGOs) is on the increase (Annan, 2000; Eizenstat, 2004). The result is a world where NGOs are working together differently, more collaboratively, to address these intractable social issues. But results indicate that their collaboration efforts are not always successful (Das and Teng, 2000; Lasker, Weiss and Miller, 2001). This paper explores the collaborative structures and processes being used by nonprofit leaders to tackle the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa, a super-stressed society (World Bank, 2005) that is home to the largest number of people living with the disease worldwide (www.globalhealthfacts.org).

The findings are based on a grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of interviews conducted in the summer of 2005 with 19 leaders of six NGO collaborations working to tackle the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa. The type of collaboration chosen for study because it appears to drive the highest levels of social change is called ‘collaboration’ in the literature (Bailey and Koney, 2000; Frey, Lohmeier, Lee, Tollefson and Johanning, 2004). The study has powerful implications for practice in that, as conjectured, there are differences from the conventional literature in both the nature of the collaboration as well as the barriers and enablers to collaboration. Further, the findings should be of interest to both researchers and practitioners as this particular context (the wicked nature of the problem occurring in a super-stressed society) has not been well studied.

Our interviewees suggests that in this particular set of circumstances, collaboration is a noisy, messy, unwieldy situation fraught with competition, tension and ambiguity and where seven ‘orientations’ are required for the collaboration to be successful, namely: a drive to action, clarity of roles and responsibilities, careful selection of partners, orchestration of the collaboration, management of internal competition, implementation of a sufficiency of structure and process and finally, knowing when to end or transform the collaboration. This particular paper will explore the drive to action as identified through five tensions or polarities: sufficient clarity vs a push to action; seeking alignment but maintaining separate agendas; valuing transparency but recognizing the essential messiness of the relationship; valuing personal relationships and reputation above credentials and references; and keeping priorities clear and simple regardless of the complexity of the project.

Keywords: [1] NGO/nonprofit/not for profit; [2] wicked social problems; [3] barriers and enablers to collaboration; [4] collaboration structures, processes and practices

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