

Successful partnership functioning and the role of synergy – critical elements of intersectoral collaborative arrangements

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Theme 4.1

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Intersectoral collaboration has been identified as best practice in addressing the challenges facing society. But is this the most effective way of solving problems? In theory, intersectoral collaboration creates synergy between members that cannot be achieved by individual sectors working on their own. However, it is unclear what critical elements create this synergy or whether this leads to extra and better outcomes. This study aimed to determine the key factors that influence partnership functioning and the relationship between partnership synergy and outcomes.

A postal survey was administered to 469 active partners in 40 intersectoral collaboratives in Ireland. The questionnaire incorporated a number of specifically designed and validated multi-dimensional scales to assess the contribution of ten factors that influence partnership functioning. Scores on individual items were summed to give total scores for these factors. Multiple and logistic regression analysis was used to identify the significance of each factor to partnership synergy and outcomes.

A response rate of 72% (n=337) was achieved. Partnership outcomes were predicted by synergy, leadership and community assets. Trust and leadership were shown to be the most important determinants of partnership synergy. Community assets, boundary-spanning skills and partnership efficiency were also significant predictors of synergy. Expert assets and mistrust had a negative relationship to partnership synergy.

Successful partnerships need synergy if they are to achieve outcomes. Leadership and high degrees of trust are the key factors that create synergy within intersectoral collaborative arrangements. We need to develop systems where the best leaders are put forward for intersectoral partnerships. This should be consistent across all organisations. Trust-building mechanisms also need to be built into the partnership forming stage and this trust needs to be sustained throughout the collaborative process. In this way outcomes can be achieved and partnerships can work towards addressing the challenges facing society in the 21st Century.