

Moving from Communication to Collaboration:

Learning from Canadian city-region partnerships' experiences



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Abstract

The flow of goods and services move beyond municipal borders. Municipalities are working together to develop service sharing agreements, align their development plans, and develop strategies in order to deal with the growth of their populations. All of these tasks require elected officials, public and private sector planners, and community agencies to work together. City-regions – large, fast paced growing regions in which there is an urban centre – are the focus of this document.

City-regions form complex partnerships due to the diversity of stakeholders within the region. In order for these groups to have a successful partnership they need to be able to work together, and to take it one step further, they need to be able to collaborate with one another. The following case-in-point will look at how partnerships can move from communication to collaboration and begin to build a framework for successful partnering.



Background

It is a strategic move for a city-region to focus on building a partnership. Strong partnerships ensure that each municipality and citizen group that's involved in the partnership is empowered to voice their concerns and work together. City-region partnerships are some of the most complex types of partnerships. They often involve stakeholders, who are used to competing for services/funding, working together in order to provide benefits to the region and to the citizens of the region. Communication is a factor involved in any partnership; partners must be able to communicate effectively to one another. Beyond communication is collaboration and the most successful partnerships are those that are collaborative and inclusive.

Collaboration is a method for partnerships to take their communication to the next level. Not only do they need good communication to work as partners, but they need great communication to collaborate. To be able to communicate and discuss issues becomes a fairly easy process once the stakeholders within the partnership are working together. Great communication can be challenging, it is based on openness, and the sharing of information freely and equitably. Collaboration requires partnerships to work at problem solving together and at times put their own interests to the side in order to focus on making decisions that are better for the region as a whole. This is not to say that one group's needs are forgotten about or ignored,

decisions should be made based on the priorities that have been set by the group that are in the best interests of the region.

Collaboration is a process and a way of working together where stakeholders can begin to create the partnerships that are needed to build strong city-regions (Abbott, 2009). The final outcome is not that a solution has been reached but that ideally, new partnerships and understandings are created (Brand & Gaffikin, 2007). Collaboration is not a method that is brought into a conflicting partnership that is meant to heal the conflict, collaboration is a process and an objective that the partnership should be working toward from day one.

Moving towards Collaboration

The following steps identify how a partnership can move beyond communication and begin to work on collaboration. Collaboration is a time consuming process that is inclusive and requires all stakeholders make decisions together regarding the future of the region.

A reason to work together

Partnerships need a reason to come together, without that reason there will be a lack of focus on the future. Stakeholders, even though they have unique and different interests, are originally brought into a partnership because there is a common interest or reason for these groups to be working together. A reason could be less complex (i.e. building on better communication) to more complex (i.e. aligning development plans in order to mitigate sprawl). Either way, there is an initial reason for stakeholders to work together. This is the initial point where collaboration is introduced into the partnering process.

Collaboration is a process as much as it is an objective

Collaboration requires individuals involved in a partnership to work together

and do more than have great communication. Collaboration is the sticky part of the partnership that involves people working and planning together. It is important to remember that although collaboration is a goal, is it also a process (McKinney & Johnson, 2009, p. 141-145). The process of collaborating is always ongoing, sometimes it can be stalled due to conflicts, but it must always keep moving forward. Collaboration is not an instant fix; it will take more than monthly meetings for collaboration to succeed. If carried out effectively, a collaborative process is one that is always changing to suit the changing needs of the partnership. All changes are made based on decisions decided by everyone in the partnership and where everyone has an equal voice to contribute to the collaborative process.

Equally available information for everyone

Stress within partnerships can be the result of a lack of equality. There can't be any power relationships that have an influence within the partnership. In order for a fair and equal partnership to exist there needs to be equal access to information. This means that all stakeholders involved in the partnership have the same information and all have access to this





information. This will create a more transparent process so that it is easier to see why certain decisions are being made and it will ensure that there is a strong foundation of trust built among the stakeholders. In order for information to be accessed easily there could be a website or online forum for stakeholders involved in the partnership, where calendars, agendas, meeting minutes, and decisions are posted. This information does need to be made public, since there are confidential discussions brought up in meetings, however all stakeholders within the partnership should have equal access to information.

Conflict can be healthy if it's dealt with

Conflict within a partnership can be healthy. It shows that individuals within the partnership are passionate about what they are doing. As long as conflict is dealt with, it can be healthy (Paul Thomas, 2011, University of Manitoba presentation at a Regional Learning Event on Intergovernmental Collaboration). However, if conflict has not been dealt with and there are outstanding issues, the partnership will not succeed. Conflict within a partnership cannot turn into a personal matter. Personal issues need to be put aside for the betterment

of the partnership and for the city-region the partnership is serving. Part of the collaborative process is overcoming differences and finding a common ground. There needs to be a formal process for handling conflict that is established by those in the partnership and agreed on by the partnership as a whole.

The partnership develops a constitution

A constitution that is developed by all stakeholders involved in the partnership gets everyone on the same page. Stakeholders must all come together and agree on what is accepted and what will not be accepted when it comes to the partnership. This will allow stakeholders to develop roles and responsibilities, cover how decisions will be made, and discuss how conflict/issues will be dealt with. Although developing a constitution is time consuming, it will be more effective and efficient for the future. The constitution will be more like a guide book on how stakeholders should act, how meetings should be run, and will describe the voting structure and how decisions are made. If all stakeholders are involved in this process, and they all should be, this will cause less conflict and issues in the future. Not only will this type of planning establish a strong governance

structure but also a tight financing model.

Inclusive not exclusive partnership

A collaborative model would benefit from a wide range of participants, including representation from the school board, health board, community activist groups, environmental representatives, and higher ups from the municipalities including mayors, reeves, and CAOs. Elected officials are the foundation of the partnership, there needs to be political buy-in. Again this is viewed to be more time consuming depending on the number of issues that are brought forth by bringing in more stakeholders. It is important to always remember to keep the partnership's focus on the future. Time that is spent upfront building relationships with all stakeholders will mean a more secure and better future; there will also be less resistance when it comes time to implementation. The stakeholders may change throughout the process, sometimes more will need to be included in the process, sometimes less. It all depends on where the partnership is at and what it is trying to achieve that will determine the number of stakeholders, and what specific stakeholders should be present.

Trust needs to be established overtime

Trust must be present in a partnership for stakeholders to be able to work collaboratively together. This is built up overtime. Through having equal access to information, the development of a constitution, and including all different levels and sectors of stakeholders, trust will be created. Stakeholders need to put aside their own individual interests and work towards the future together. Competition and power balances jeopardize the level of trust in the partnership. This is why it is important to move through the collaboration process slowly, not only to taking the time to hear every stakeholder and working through potential conflicts and issues, there also needs to be a lot of time dedicated towards building trust between stakeholders. Trust can be built through success; small relatively easy projects that help demonstrate power/benefit of collaboration.

Autonomy in a wake of compromise

A large concern that stakeholders have when developing partnerships is finding the balance between maintaining their autonomy and acting as a cohesive entity. This is a sensitive balance. While all stakeholders need to be





willing to make compromises since they are planning for the city-region, they still need to feel secure that their autonomy is intact. Autonomy can be maintained through the partnership's voting structure and developing a constitution. The more collaborative a partnership is, the less it will feel like a stakeholder has to give something up. Decisions are made for what is best for the city-region, while still keeping the individual municipalities and stakeholders in mind.

Public promotion of partnership and collaboration to all members of the public and society

Successful partnerships are not just supported by those directly involved with it; they are also supported by the wider public. In order for the public to be aware of the partnership it needs to be promoted positively by its members. Employees of municipalities, elected officials, and third sector parties must be able to promote the partnership to the public in an honest and transparent way. If the public is supportive of the partnership and understands why it exists it will only make it easier for the partnership to implement plans in the future. In a successful collaboration, this is something that would happen quite naturally for all the stakeholders that are involved.

The stakeholders also need to report back to the public; including the public in decision-making processes.

Collaboration is a living process, always being reviewed and changed depending on the needs of those involved in the partnership

It is important to identify collaboration as a process, not as a structure. There is not a prescribed set of ways that actions must be carried out in order to achieve collaboration. There is not one particular method that is suited to all partnerships. The relationships and partnerships

***“Broad participation
in a collaborative
planning process
builds shared
ownership ”
(Warner, 1999, p. 205)***



that are working through the collaborative process always need to be re-evaluated. This will ensure that the partnership will always be moving forward. Overtime the partnership itself will change which means that levels of collaboration will need to adjust with these changes. All changes that are made need to be agreed on by the stakeholders involved in the partnership and should be reflected in an amendment to the constitution.

Outcomes

It is understood that collaboration is not an easy process, especially if there is conflict or power struggles that are preventing stakeholders from

working together. Globalization is forcing regions to become more effective and competitive. Movement between city-regions is becoming more fluid, not just between nations, but between regions within a nation. People are choosing to live near larger cities rather than within the city in order to achieve more affordable housing and have separation from the busy urban lifestyle.

The boundaries between regions are fuzzy because people increasingly move between regions and share resources. Globally, it has been acknowledged by professionals and academics that regions with strong partnerships and some form of governance in place

are in a better position to take advantage of certain incentives and remain more competitive (Tewdwr-Jones & McNeill, 2000). For these reasons, collaboration is a new method of working together when it comes to regional partnerships. Now is the time to start to work together.

Collaboration will ensure that the partnership stays focused on the goals they have established. The outcome of a collaborative city-region is that they will be able to compete globally for products and resources. This means that the economy of the region will be strong, which will also reflect on the economy of the Province, the larger region. Cities and

smaller municipalities would gain more through working together. Instead of waiting for provincial and federal funding to be handed out, these areas could be working together and strategically improving upon their economic development initiatives.

Collaboration demonstrates maturity; it is a high form of partnership founded on win/win agreements where the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Lessons Learned

There are a number of city-region partnerships in Canada that have been developed, or are in the beginning stages of developing a plan to work together. Some of these partnerships are the Capital Region District (Victoria area, BC), the Alberta Capital Region (Edmonton area, AB), and the Partnership of the Manitoba Capital Region (Winnipeg area, MB). Each of these partnerships is in a different stage of the partnering process and each partnered for their own unique reasons. However, each partnership has had to collaborate. The Alberta Capital Region has developed a constitution that is available on their website which has been an important contributing factor to the success of their partnership. Deciding roles and responsibilities together helps to keep stakeholders aware and

accountable.

There are partnerships within Canada that have seen struggles as they begin to embark on a partnership. The Calgary Regional Partnership has faced challenges due to past conflict not being resolved. This conflict has resulted in multiple partners slowing pulling out of the partnership. As one of the fastest growing city-regions in Canada it is imperative for this partnership to succeed.

It has been learned that forming partnerships is not easy. It is a time consuming process where it is easy to make the decision to spend time, money, and energy in other areas. Although, taking the time to build a strong city-region partnership is a strategic and long term decision that regions need to focus on. It is a challenge for stakeholders to work together and make decisions for the region, since they feel like they are losing their autonomy when they do so. It needs to be made clear to stakeholders that when they are all working together to make long term plans for the region, everyone is benefiting.



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Images

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