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Collaboration in a Competitive Environment: Evaluation of and Reflections on an Integrated "Youth at Risk" Project

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Abstract: This paper reports on the activities, processes and outputs in the first 18 months of a 3 year collaborative project, the *Gold Coast Integrated Response for Youth At Risk*. Survey, focus group and interview data were collected from project participants as part of a formative evaluation. Results identify both success and ongoing challenges within the project. Five key findings from the project are presented and discussed. These relate to issues such as the need for well designed project evaluation, and negotiating and clearly defining governance processes during the initial project planning stages. In addition, stakeholder communication and engagement processes are identified as an area of concern. The inherent tension of working collaboratively in a competitive (funding) culture and finding an operational balance between developmental processes and more tangible project outputs are also discussed.

Introduction

Governments and community sector agencies are increasingly confronted with complex community problems. For example, young people have a diverse range of needs relating to issues such as safety, education, accommodation, health and well-being. Arguably, a response to these diverse needs becomes critical when focusing on sub-groups of young people such as 'youth at risk'. Collaborative responses, focusing on broad-based stakeholder participation, networking and capacity building have been suggested as an appropriate approach for addressing these complex community issues (Cuthill, 2003; Mandell, 1999; Chambers, 1998; Himmelman, 1995; Gray, 1989; Arnstein, 1969). There is an underlying assumption within this collaborative approach that 'working together' will produce better coordinated and more effective responses to these issues (Cuthill, 2007).

Such approaches can be theoretically linked to diverse but inter-related concepts such as empowerment (Freire, 1970; Friedman, 1996), community capacity building (Cuthill & Fien, 2005; Eade, 1997; Kaplan, 1999), participatory democracy (Leal & Opp, 1999; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001) and community development (Ife, 1995; Kretzmann & Mc Knight, 1993). Methodologically, it closely relates to a cyclical action research process (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This paper describes a collaborative response addressing complex issues relating to 'youth at risk' on the Gold Coast. It builds on results detailed in a government evaluation report by Nielsen & Wilson (2002). Specifically, it describes the project context, a theoretical foundation for collaboration, the design and implementation of the evaluation framework, evaluation results, and twelve key themes for reflection which emerged from the evaluation. Key learnings, relating to collaborative processes, are presented in the concluding section of the paper.

The Context for Implementing the Gold Coast Integrated Response for Youth At Risk Project

The Gold Coast is situated in the south east corner of Queensland, Australia. It comprises a population of approximately 400,000 residents who predominately live along a 70 km coastal strip (Gold Coast City Council [GCCC], 2003). The hinterland behind the coast is semi-rural and facing rapid population and development growth. Tourism is the major industry on the Gold Coast with tourists nearly doubling the resident population during peak holiday periods. While there is a general perception of affluence associated with the Gold Coast, census data reveal that a number of socio-economic factors fall below both Queensland and Australia averages (GCCC, 2003). Research by the Australian Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS, 2002) supports this situation and identifies 14 statistical local areas within the Gold Coast that they classify as highly disadvantaged.

The idea for a *Gold Coast Integrated Response for Youth At Risk (GCIRYAR)* project was initiated in 2000 by the then Minister of the Queensland Department of Families (now renamed the Department of Communities), Ms Anna Bligh (Queensland Government, 2000). The Minister became aware of problems at the Gold Coast following a Community Cabinet Consultation in August 2000 when she was approached by four separate community groups voicing their deep concerns about issues affecting Gold Coast youth. In reply to this consultation the Minister proposed the development of an integrated response to youth at risk issues on the Gold Coast. The three-year pilot project is funded through the Queensland Department of Families (DoF) and based at the DoF area office at Mermaid Beach on the Gold Coast. In April 2001, a Resource Unit comprising four DoF staff was formed to administer and manage the project during its establishment phase.

A draft discussion paper indicated that the project's aim is for "All young people at risk [to] be able to actively participate in family and community life." (Queensland Government, 2002, p. 1) The key target group, identified in this paper, is:

> *Young people aged 10 to 17 years who are at risk of offending, engaging in prostitution, drug and/or alcohol abuse, experiencing family conflict and/or other activities that place them at risk of homelessness or harm. This target group may include families of these young people. Specific considerations will be given to those young people who are indigenous, of non-English speaking background or young people who have a disability. Priority will be given to,*
>
> - *young people at significant risk who are involved in multiple service systems and agencies*
> - *young people at significant risk who have had limited contact with service systems*

Following on from the discussion paper, the resource unit, in early consultations with other stakeholders, identified two key operational objectives: (Queensland Government, 2002a, p. 2)

1. *to provide strategic leadership in the development of an innovative and creative model of integration in line with the aim of GCIRYAR;* and
2. *to establish meaningful partnerships across local, state and commonwealth government and non-government sectors to achieve optimum practice in service delivery to young people at risk.*

These objectives incorporate a focus on both 'young people at risk' and 'service organizations who provide for youth at risk.'

Partnership, participation and collaboration are the key concepts underpinning the project. This focus reflects an ongoing commitment by the Queensland Government to engaged governance (Queensland Government, 2006). The adoption of a collaborative approach provided an opportunity for involvement of a diverse range of participants. This was implemented through the establishment of issue-specific working parties. These involved 30 government and community agencies who work with youth at risk, and representatives of the target population. Over the first 18 months, a total of 15 working parties were established. Collectively, these groups conducted 78 meetings focusing on specific topics such as youth participation, drugs and alcohol, education and transition, accommodation, communication and information technology and complex needs. A joint working party coordinated implementation of the project, and a management group comprising senior staff from participating agencies provided oversight of institutional arrangements. An evaluation working was formed to guide the evaluation process.

It was acknowledged at the beginning of the project that a sound theoretical foundation relating to participatory and collaborative approaches was required. Social researchers from the Gold Coast City Council provided input through a literature review on this topic (Cuthill & O'Reilly, 2002). A brief summary of the theoretical basis for the project follows.

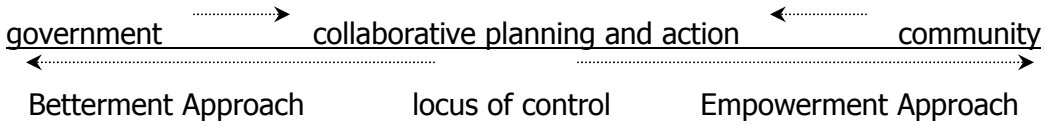
A Theoretical Basis for Collaboration

Collaborative processes provide an opportunity for community and government to come together as equal stakeholders "to deliberate about and decide the important matters facing joint lives as citizens in a community" (Morse, 1996, p. 15). Himmelman's (1995) dichotomy of collaborations describes 'empowerment' or 'betterment' approaches to collaboration. The

betterment approach involves the community being "invited into a process designed and controlled by larger institutions", whereas the empowerment approach "begins within the community itself" and involves other stakeholders as the collaboration evolves (Morse, 1996, p. 10). Neither approach should be viewed as either right or wrong, rather they can be viewed as sitting at opposite ends of a continuum. In order to facilitate a meeting place for each specific collaboration requires that stakeholders negotiate "up-front about who is driving the collaboration" (Morse, 1996, p. 10), thereby establishing an appropriate locus of control for that collaboration (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Establishing locus of control for collaborations



This locus of control implicitly acknowledges a pragmatic reality that the power within any collaboration will depend on contextual factors such as the abilities, commitment and intention of those people involved, the nature of the collaboration, the issues to be addressed, and the time and resources available to stakeholders (Cuthill, 2002). These influencing 'contexts' form the basis of negotiation for each collaboration.

The implementation of collaborative processes may place heavy demands on both the time and resources of stakeholders. Nevertheless, successful collaborative endeavours can facilitate positive outcomes for both community and government, returning dividends on resource investments (Amalric, 1998; Cuthill, 2001; Healy, 1998; Hoatson & Egan, 2001). However, these benefits have not been well articulated. This lack of evidence continues to hinder the introduction and acceptance of a collaborative approach between community, governments and other stakeholders (Cuthill, 2007; Hoatson & Egan, 2001).

However, there are two distinct but interrelated results that are evident from these collaborative processes. These are 'process outcomes' and 'project outputs' (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Jackson, 2001; Scottish Community Development Centre [SCDC], 2000). Process outcomes relate to the building of networks, and relationships of trust and understanding resulting in increased human and social capital (Cox, 2000; Cuthill, 2003; SCDC, 2000). Project outputs include the more tangible end results of collaborative processes, for example the delivery of training or services. The level of success of each of each of these two results of collaboration can be determined through evaluation.

Establishing an Evaluation Framework for GCIRYAR: Methodology and Methods

The GCIRYAR *Evaluation Working Party*, in conjunction with the DoF resource unit, developed an evaluation framework for the project (Queensland Government, 2002b). The three objectives (Hall & Hall, 2004, p. 32) of this participatory evaluation were to:

1. Facilitate reflection: A participative process of evaluation fosters a shared understanding of the goals, successes and challenges of the project, and facilitates ongoing processes of learning and the development of a culture of continuous improvement (Guijt & Gaventa, 1998; SCDC, 2000);

2. Articulate accountability requirements: Accountability to the Department of Families is required for acquittal of funds and project deliverables; and
3. Provide an empirical basis to inform ongoing strategic planning processes (Kaplan, 1999).

Working towards these objectives the GCIRYAR evaluation focused on the articulation of both 1) process outcomes, such as the development of human and social capital, and 2) project outputs, such as the funding of new projects and the development of formal structures and systems for effectively responding to 'youth at risk' requirements. The evaluation working party recommended an 'external' consultant be engaged to conduct the evaluation to ensure that participants would feel that they could freely and confidentially express their perspectives about the project to an independent third party (Hall & Hall, 2004).

It was acknowledged by the evaluation working party that an evaluation framework should have been developed as part of the initial project planning process. As such, to some extent, this evaluation has been forced to take a reactive stance to help sort out some issues that should have been negotiated by stakeholders at an earlier stage of the project. In keeping with the collaborative nature of the project a participatory approach to evaluation was chosen (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hall & Hall, 2004).

Participatory evaluation is people-centered with stakeholders identified as the key actors of the evaluation process and not the mere objects of the evaluation (United Nations Development Program, 1997). The stakeholder role is as an active participant who is involved in and learns from the evaluation dialogue. As such, reflection on the lessons learned from past experiences is an essential dimension of the evaluation. Participatory evaluations recognise the wide range of knowledge, values and concerns of stakeholders and acknowledge that these should be the litmus test to assess and then guide a projects performance.

In line with this participatory approach, the GCIRYAR evaluation utilized methods that encourage inclusive, open, honest and interactive dialogue between the evaluators and project participants. Non-threatening evaluation settings and non-judgmental approaches were chosen by the evaluators (Drysdale & Purcell, 1999). This approach seeks to listen attentively to participants, recognizes them as the end-users of the evaluation, and allows them to drive the process by talking about what they consider important (Estrella & Gaventa, 1998). A key intention of the GCIRYAR evaluation was to facilitate participant reflection in a meaningful way in a supportive environment. Three main methods of data collection were used to implement this participatory approach.

1. Focus Groups Sessions

The independent evaluators selected five of the GCIRYAR working parties for the focus group sessions. These included the Resource Unit, Evaluation Working Party, Management Group, Young People's Participation Working Party and the Accommodation Working Party. The two-hour focus group meetings involved three exercises. The first, a *Creative Framing Exercise*, allowed private time for each individual to reflect on and record their own experiences of the project. The second and third exercises were group-based, comprising a *SWOT Analysis* and an *Exploring Organisational Support* exercise. All drawings, writings and group responses were recorded and collected by the evaluators for analysis.

2. Semi-structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were used to record participant experiences, thoughts and feelings relating to GCIRYAR. These interviews provide rich qualitative data from an individual perspective (Hall & Hall, 2004; Maxwell, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The Evaluation Working Party discussed and identified four criteria to guide the selection of a representative range of participants for the interviews including that participants would,

1) possess a good strategic understanding of GCIRYAR and its goals,
2) hold a relatively 'balanced' view towards GCIRYAR,
3) have a demonstrated level of commitment to GCIRYAR, and
4) represent a cross-section of government and non-government organisations.

Based on these criteria the Evaluation Working Party, in conjunction with the resource unit, identified a pool of 19 potential interviewees from which five people were selected (project funding and timeframes prevented a more comprehensive interview process). Interviews were arranged at times and locations suitable to the participants and lasted not more than 45 minutes. All interviews were taped and transcribed, and participant's comments were thematically coded.

Two limitations to the interview results are noted, both of which pertain to the tight timeframes imposed on the evaluation. First, only five people provided input through the interviews. Nevertheless, when this data is triangulated with focus group and survey results, it is argued that this rich description provides extra depth to the analysis. Second, due to time constraints the evaluators were unable to return the interview transcripts to participants for either editing or further elaboration on specific points.

3. Participant Survey

The survey asked project participants to rate their agreement/disagreement with 37 statements regarding 1) GCIRYAR processes, 2) participants' personal experiences and 3) effects/outcomes on service provision. Responses were recorded on a five point Likert scale where 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree.' A 'not applicable' and/or 'don't know' category was included. The survey also included open-ended questions about personal learning, negative effects and potential improvements. Further data was collected regarding general demographics of participant involvement, such as the type of organization they represented, how long they had been involved with GCIRYAR, whether they were on a working party and whether they had received funding through the project.

The survey was emailed to 143 participants on the GCIRYAR email list. A turnaround time of two weeks was allowed for completion of the survey. Participants either emailed or faxed back their completed surveys. A total of 35 (approx 24%) completed surveys were returned. Again, limited timeframes for completion of the evaluation restricted any follow up with participants to increase the survey return rates.

Despite the stated limitations, the Evaluation working party felt that it had effectively canvassed a diverse range of stakeholder input for the evaluation. Information from focus groups, interviews and surveys was analysed using a triangulation technique to compare and validate results from each source (Maxwell, 2005; Neuman, 1994). An overview of responses from the survey and focus groups follow. These results are then incorporated with responses from interviews to inform the section titled 'Themes for reflection.'

Results: GCIRYAR Participant Responses

Focus groups identified the key successes of the GCIRYAR project as achieving the 'real' involvement of participants and facilitating positive outcomes for young people. The 'worst' features focused on the lack of government commitment and frustration with GCIRYAR processes (Table 1).

Table 1

Best and worst elements of GCIRYAR (top five responses) N=30

Best elements	Worst elements
Provides 'real' involvement (15*)	Lack of government commitment/ involvement (20)
Outcomes for young people (10)	Frustration with the process (11)
Project facilitation (9)	Government cycles of avoidance (9)
Welcoming atmosphere (9)	Information management (9)
Relationship-building, diversity of participants and commitment of participants (8)	No funding guarantees (7)

* Figures listed inside brackets refer to the number of times the theme was mentioned – participants were able to nominate their three 'best' and three 'worst' elements.

Eight themes of 'innovation' emerged from the focus groups (Table 2). The most frequently mentioned themes referred to bringing groups together, and the principles and visions which guide the project.

Table 2

Innovative elements of GCIRYAR N=30

Theme	Selected participant quotes
Bringing groups together (27)	*The bringing together of so many stakeholders – all have same vision/hopes* *For me it has enabled the building of strong relationships*
Guiding principles and vision (12)	*Chance for the Gold Coast to become one of the best places for young people to grow – in a safe, risk free environment*
Commitment and participation (11)	*GCIRYAR process engenders and supports real dedication in working party members*
Welcomes new ideas (8)	*GCIRYAR is challenging, constantly growing, adjusting, shifting, self-evolving through growth.*

Participants also identified key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the project (Table 3).

Table 3

GCIRYAR SWOT analysis (top five responses for each SWOT criteria) N=30

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
Project facilitation (15)	Lack of working party links (8)
Participant relationships (13)	Communication/information management (7)
Strategic focus/goals (11)	Unclear decision-making process (7)
Diversity of participants (10)	Changes in facilitators/staff (6)
Participants' skills/experience (10)	Lack of resources (6)
Opportunities	**Threats**
Build stronger relationships among participants (7)	Lack of resources (7)
Identify clear roles for working parties (7)	Lack of government support (6)
Improve working party links (6)	Development of factions within GCIRYAR (6)
Increase outcomes for young people (6)	Unclear decision-making process (5)
Improve communication (5)	Lack of involvement of young people (5)

In all aspects of data collection participants expressed a strong sense of ownership for the project (Table 4). They also felt that ownership was generally encouraged by DoF.

Table 4

Perceived ownership of GCIRYAR N=30

Theme	**Selected participant quotes**
Participants feel ownership (16)	*I truly believe, I as an individual have an equal ownership of the project, alongside all other stakeholders.*
Needs further development (12)	*Could do better!*
Ownership is encouraged (5)	*I feel there has been a lot of opportunity for involvement, however the process seems to suit some people more than others*
I don't feel ownership (2)	*My role is quite different to others involved and I don't feel any personal ownership at all*

Surveys were conducted to explore four key areas: 1) project processes; 2) individual's experiences; 3) service provision; and 4) participant learning.

In response to 15 questions about project 'processes' participants strongly agreed with the statements 'I have a clear understanding of the purpose of GCIRYAR' (4.37) and 'I feel that GCIRYAR is a positive initiative' (4.30). Statements which received the least level of agreement were 'GCIRYAR has increased cooperation between government, non-government and private agencies working with YAR' (3.50) and 'I believe that GCIRYAR has had a positive effect on the delivery of services for YAR' (3.55). It should be noted, however, that even the lowest rated response had over 60% of participants responding either agree or strongly agree.

Out of the 11 questions relating to an 'individual's experience' within the GCIRYAR project the strongest levels of agreement were given to the statements 'I feel that GCIRYAR provides access to a useful network of YAR services/organisations' (4.03) and 'I feel my input has been valued' (3.91). The lowest levels of agreement were for the statements 'I have learned new skills to help me work with YAR through involvement with GCIRYAR' (2.94) and 'GCIRYAR has broadened my understanding of how to work successfully with YAR' (3.03).

Of the 11 questions pertaining to areas where GCIRYAR has improved 'service provision to youth at risk' the strongest agreement related to 'Awareness of gaps in service delivery for YAR' (3.75) and 'Participants' skills for working collaboratively' (3.72). Lowest levels of agreement were given to statements about improvement in 'Community awareness of YAR issues' (3.03) and 'Community attitudes towards YAR issues' (3.07). Four major themes relating to 'participant learning' were identified (Table 5).

Table 5

Participant learning N=30

Themes	**Selected participant quotes**
There are major difficulties with trying to integrate responses (16)	*it is very difficult to break down the endemic competition for funds in the community sector even with a structure like the GCIRYAR*
Value of good relationships (7)	*A solid base of good relationships between people is required in order to achieve effective integration*
Collaboration can occur (6)	*… great outcomes, innovation and strategies can happen with commitment to pool/shared resourcing between organisations*
The value of process (3)	*Process cannot be undervalued - it is the process that guides and defines the outcomes*

An open ended question in the survey asked for participant's thoughts on how GCIRYAR might be improved. The most cited suggestions for improvement focused on developing stronger commitment from the Department of Families and other government departments. For example, one participant suggested that DoF currently,

> *Seem to have a door which is permanently closed to new and especially 'out there and innovative' information and projects*.

Other suggestions included the need for clearer identification of goals, the articulation of roles and responsibilities for all GCIRYAR participants, and better communication and information management strategies especially between working groups.

An opportunity for participants to provide some general comments about the project elicited responses which focused particularly on the need for ongoing, positive relationship-building. For example, one participant stated,

> *I think that this project has started a very positive interaction between the various players involved, with youth, government and community sectors starting to engage amongst each other in a united approach to issues being faced by youth at risk. This will obviously be refined and enhanced as the model evolves and relationships are strengthened, with all participants gaining from the process of sharing the ownership for successful outcomes.*

Other responses identified issues such as a lack of tangible outcomes for GCIRYAR, an unequal level of government commitment to the project compared to the community, the perception

that the DoF exert excessive control over the project, and a concern that the project had lost some of its original focus.

Themes for Reflection

Triangulation of survey, focus group and interview data identifies twelve key *Themes for reflection*. These include innovation, difficult beginnings and high expectations, working parties, the resource unit, role of the management group, accountability and decision making, participatory challenges, ownership, commitment, participant benefits and learning, differing perceptions of success, and timeframes.

1) Innovation

Generally, stakeholders perceived GCIRYAR to be innovative and unique in its move towards genuine participatory approaches. However, some participants were not supportive of the project being innovation.

> *I don't see that it's anything different to what was happening before the integrated response happened. So it might be that people might be more encouraged now to work on a cooperative basis because financially they're expected to.*

2) Difficult Beginnings and High Expectations

Participants described a sense of confusion surrounding the evolution of the 'original' GCIRYAR integration model. Some participants strongly believed that the prime purpose of GCIRYAR was to work directly with youth at risk while others thought that the objective was to facilitate strategic relationships between organizations working with youth at risk

It was also felt that the GCIRYAR was established with extremely high expectations regarding its potential for developing an integrated response for youth at risk. There was a particular emphasis on building relationships amongst groups who, in hindsight, were not able to start working together within the short timeframes envisaged by the project.

3) Working Parties

Participants discussed the development of the working parties and their role as a form of participant involvement. Their comments suggest that there was no clear brief given about the roles and responsibilities of working parties. Another issue raised was the time that it takes to develop strong networks that can initiate integrated projects,

> [It takes] *three years … for people to be meeting on a monthly or bimonthly basis - to develop that. It also depends on how many times they've been shafted in that period of time … memory's a big thing ... you can't legislate for somebody to like somebody or to trust somebody.*

4) The Resource Unit

Many evaluation comments revolved around the Resource Unit, highlighting the benefits of having this group facilitating and supporting the collaboration. However, an issue faced by the Resource Unit workers was the relatively short contracts on offer. There was an expectation that they would quickly get GCIRYAR ready for auspice and thus project workers' longer-term involvement was not clear to them or other stakeholders

5) Role of the Management Group

The role of the Management Group has been a contentious issue within GCIRYAR. The Management Group was established with an equal number of government and community representatives. While the group had the potential to lead the project, and advocate for a broad based government and community collaboration, this did not appear to happen. There was uncertainty within and outside the Management group whether its role was meant to be

'managerial and directive', or rather to 'bring together' government and community participants. As a result participants report that meetings were spent in conflict, debating what the group's responsibilities were. Some comments reflect a perceived inequality of power which dominated relationships between government and community representatives of the Management Group,

> *The government people have the more powerful voice and their more powerful voice took over, and that was the confusion and the conflict, and in the end it was left at – giving up, basically. There were resignations.*

6) Accountability and Decision-making

Concerns were raised regarding the accountability of decision-making processes. Unexpectedly, some comments focused specifically on the dilution of decision-making ability due to the highly participatory methods adopted for the project. For example, one participant questioned the effectiveness of participatory decision making processes,

> *I think it gets diluted because nobody feels that there is anybody who ultimately makes a decision … and then because of that, you lose an accountability process.*

Other comments regarding accountability referred to an apparent lack of clearly stated goals and outcomes, including who was responsible if these goals were not met,

> *You have to be accountable for every cent and you have to very clearly state to your stakeholders, where are we going, what are we doing, how are we going to do it, how we going to know when we get there, you know, what are the measures going to be, what's the evaluation going to be along the way, who's going to implement changes if we're not on track to achieving our targets – who's going to be responsible for that?*

7) Participatory Challenges

Participants identified three major challenges for involving a diverse range of stakeholders in a participatory process.

- First, that all participants are kept well-informed so that they can continue to actively and effectively participate.
- Second, there is a historical context that must be negotiated. The third challenge revolves around competition between organizations within the community services sector
- The third challenge revolves around competition between organizations within the community services sector

8) Ownership

Views on project ownership were somewhat divided. Some participants felt strongly that 'they are the project' while others felt that they were 'on the outside.' It was suggested that GCIRYAR must continue to encourage and work towards open processes and totally inclusive ownership encompassing all stakeholders.

9) Commitment

While high levels of competition remain and concepts of 'ownership' were contested, all participants have indicated a strong and positive level of commitment to both GCIRYAR and its objective of improving the lives of youth at risk on the Gold Coast.

> *We all share commitment to getting outcomes for young people and if we let go, what happens then, you know? ... I'm sure that what keeps [us] around the table is a commitment to youth and if we go, then what happens?*

10) Participant Benefits and Learning

Participants indicated that GCIRYAR processes had facilitated new relationships with other stakeholders who are also working towards common goals.

> *It's people discovering how to work together and then building those relationships…*
> *I believe in working together. I believe in strong relationships…*
> *…. that was a big learning curve for me and it was necessary for me to then change course.*

However, the learning outcomes were not necessarily easily achieved. One participant reflected on the additional stress that the project had created in their life.

> *… a few more grey hairs. Some good strategies for keeping my mouth shut. I actually got a fair bit of uncomfortableness out of it, which I haven't enjoyed.*

11) Differing Perceptions of Success

Ideas of project 'success' varied. Building relationships and networks were acknowledged as important as were service delivery outcomes. The need for clear articulation of all outcomes was stressed.

> *People look for tangible outcomes. … the real outcomes, you know, like the growth that's achieved or trust that's built or any of those sorts of really important things.*

> *There was a funding submission a couple of weeks ago and I could see that it was going to be very beneficial to do a joint submission, so I rang up another service that I've got to know very well through Integrated Response … I mean, there was just absolutely no hesitation whatsoever.*

12) Timeframes

Participants have argued that it is difficult to gauge the success of GCIRYAR when the benefits from the establishment phase may take many years to become evident.

> *Judging success is a hard thing and you might not get it now and you might see the benefits of it in 10 years time and by then they will say 'the GCIR who?*

Each of these twelve themes inter-relates to each other theme, highlighting the complexity of analyzing collaborative processes. In response to this complexity, five key findings from the project are discussed in the concluding section.

Conclusion:

Five Key Findings

This evaluation facilitated a process of accountability and reflection for stakeholders and funding agencies of youth at risk programs. Results are also feeding into a strategic planning process that will take the project forward into the second half of a three year funding program. This planning process will provide a foundation for a second, three year funding submission to DoF. Five key findings, arising from the reflective processes inherent in a participatory evaluation, are presented. These learnings may have broader relevance for researchers, project managers and policy analysts exploring effective participation, collaboration and networking.

First, effective evaluation must be considered a core component of community-based, participatory processes. A three stage strategy incorporating front-end, formative and summative evaluations will facilitate the reflective learning, accountability and planning

requirements previously discussed. Front-end evaluation involves establishing an evaluation framework at the beginning of collaborative projects as an integral part of a strategic planning process. This stage should clearly articulate the expected 'process outcomes' and 'project outputs'. Ongoing formative evaluation charts the course of the project as it progresses. The iterative nature of this second stage means that the project can be responsive and flexible, collaboratively refocussing the activities, and pursuing new leads and directions as understanding develops. Finally, a summative evaluation provides a sign-off on accountability requirements including funding obligations and stated project outputs. In an ideal world, where ongoing funding is available, this summative stage would also inform planning for subsequent operational initiatives. This approach can be easily integrated into standard project design, management and reporting processes.

Second, with collaborative projects, such as GCIRYAR, stakeholders must negotiate and clearly define governance processes during the initial planning process. From a GCIRYAR perspective a lack of governance was highlighted through participant confusion relating to both decision-making processes, and the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and working groups. It is evident that 'top-down' government approaches to decision-making are not appropriate in collaborative projects. Indeed, such approaches are diametrically opposed to the philosophy of genuine participation with the likely result that any sense of stakeholder ownership of and commitment to projects will drop off. Anecdotal evidence from the GCIRYAR experience, suggests that senior regional bureaucrats have found it difficult to support and adopt flexible and innovative approaches to governance while centralized accountability systems remain in place. This issue requires more attention, however increased regional level autonomy in negotiating collaborative governance arrangements may provide an opportunity to overcome this constraint.

Third, communication between diverse stakeholders, who are looking to collaboratively respond to complex community issues, is problematic. For example, the 15 GCIRYAR working parties addressed interrelated issues such as drugs and alcohol, education and transition, and complex needs. Each of these issues focuses on a specific topic relating to youth at risk. However each issue also relates to each other issue. The number of meetings that were held to discuss specific issues and the information generated from these discussions created a dilemma for resource staff. In a collaboration, that seeks to be open and accountable to all stakeholders, it would appear that all information should be distributed. However, this can and does result in information overload prompting a possible de-valuing of stakeholder input. Arguably, a more focused approach is required, while still maintaining appropriate opportunities for stakeholder participation. Early development of stakeholder communication and engagement plans can help manage this requirement (Cuthill, 2007).

Fourth, collaboration between community groups, and between these groups and various levels of government, provides opportunities to maximize resources, share information and learning, and build trusting and supportive relationships that help citizens to survive and adapt in a rapidly changing world (Cuthill & Fien, 2005). However, as Hoatson & Egan (2001, p. 8) state, "a policy environment expecting competitive and collaborative practices to comfortably co-exist has posed considerable difficulties for agencies." In this context, community-based stakeholders within GCIRYAR have had to try and put aside their competitive culture and work collaboratively. It is evident that cultural change, which ultimately focuses on considerations of power sharing, may not come easily within either governments or the community sector. The GCIRYAR experience has shown that such an approach can be passionate and heated, and that not everyone necessarily ends up as a winner. To walk into an emerging collaborative process

without this understanding may prove quite disconcerting to the faint hearted or naïve stakeholder.

Fifth, the initial focus of GCIRYAR to date has been to build stakeholder capacity, trusting relationships and establish operational networks that facilitate better outcomes for youth at risk. However, there has been ongoing criticism of the project (from some quarters) and emerging tensions between some stakeholders due to an apparent lack of tangible 'on the ground' benefits for youth at risk. While developmental processes, that build human and social capital, are argued to be critical in laying foundations for achieving long term outcomes for the target group, there is also a concurrent need to quickly translate these developmental processes into positive outcomes for youth at risk. Hence, there remains an ongoing tension in collaborative projects between a focus on 'processes' and a need for tangible 'outputs.'

Summary

The evaluation described in this paper provides a case study of a participatory evaluation process focusing on an integrated youth at risk project. It can be expected that some of the points raised in this paper might have broad applicability across other similar projects. However, some issues might be considered specific to this particular project.

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