

## **Community and Systems Change Collaboration: Challenges in Taking its Best Outcomes to Scale**

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### **Introduction**

For over 40 years, community-based partnerships have addressed a very wide range of issues, including increasing affordable housing, fostering economic development, increasing access to healthcare and improving its quality, transforming public education to create better outcomes for all students, and engaging diverse stakeholders to protect and sustain the well-being of the environment.

In order to be successful in achieving community and systems change, these partnerships require shared knowledge about and expertise in using many kinds of methods and techniques which are particularly suited to multi-organizational and often multi-sector practices and processes. Fortunately, there is a large amount of high quality resources assisting those in designing, implementing, and evaluating the complexity of such collaborations. A selected sample of these resources is on page four.

### **Basic Goals**

While there are vast numbers of goals in community and systems change collaborations, there are three that can be viewed as basic to all:

- (1) Needs and Resources Assessment.** This is an assessment of stakeholders, communities, neighborhoods, or constituencies to determine what kinds of problems/challenges exist within the parameters of the partnership's mission and what resources and assets can be identified that can help address, and possibly solve, the problems or challenges that merit priority action.
  
- (2) Innovation and Demonstration.** This involves creating action plans and engaging in strategic activities, based on the findings and priorities of a needs and resources assessment, which can demonstrate problem-solving innovations generally not possible without working with others. Partners in these demonstrations can span a wide and diverse range of stakeholders, including people and constituencies in geographical areas, organizations, and institutions in public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

- (3) Policy Advocacy and Systems Change.** This advocacy is based both on the needs/resources assessment, and the most effective methods and results of innovative demonstrations addressing priorities of particular partnerships. Generally, this is usually the least well supported basic goal because of the risks involved in challenging existing power relations and the complexity of system change processes. However, without shared commitments to change policies, systems, and existing power relations, even the best innovative demonstrations have little possibility of going to scale and making intended substantial, sustainable differences in the lives of people and communities most affected by the activities and results of collaborative partnerships.

### **Challenges in Taking Best Partnership Outcomes to Scale**

It is not possible to take the best outcomes of a partnership to scale, that is, made available to large numbers of people and communities without successfully achieving the third basic goal. However, given the challenges involved in achieving the policy and systems change goal, it is common to find the effectiveness of community-based partnerships limited to assessments and demonstrations. Sometimes, these partnerships spend the majority of their time on assessing the needs and resources of communities (often without much attention to resources) and not enough on innovative ways of demonstrating intended results. In part, this is due to a general resistance to collaborative action due to time, trust, and turf constraints, but also because of the relatively short-term nature of public and private funding for such efforts. It is common to find that, by the time a partnership is operating well, funding is difficult to find to sustain it.

Although these challenges in taking best results to scale are well known, there is not much being done about them. Indeed, of all the issues and topics of interests to researchers, evaluators, practitioners, and funding sources, going to scale is far from a priority except in their rhetoric. In part, this is because going to scale requires changing/transforming existing public policies in order to “disrupt” current practices and reallocate substantial financial resources. In order to do so, existing power relations need to be significantly changed and power is not something most funding sources want “on the table.” Nor do most community-based partnerships focus on it through strong community organizing accountable to stakeholders most affected by the partnerships.

The largest overall challenge is the fact that going to scale can only be done through the public sector and requires government to be supportive, effective, and even courageous. As is well known, public sector responsibility for addressing basic human needs (in contrast to the military) has been maligned, seen necessary resources reduced for issues addressed by many community-based partnerships, inappropriately privatized, and considered by many to be a barrier rather than the essential source of substantial change in our democracy.

Indeed, an examination of the origins of the vast increase in community-based partnerships over the past thirty years of so-called devolution from federal to local government, suggests that these partnerships were never intended to take successes to scale. To the contrary, they were meant, as are the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, to divert the attention of those most focused on improving the lives of people and their communities from making government work well for this purpose.

At its core, going to scale means establishing a social democratic public sector within capitalism and taking large sums of money and resources from the military and prison industrial complexes, from large corporations and extremely wealthy individuals, and investing it the common good and well-being of people and their communities and for the sustainability of healthy life on our common planet.

## **Suggested Reading and Resources for Collaboration and Partnerships**

Coalitions and Partnerships in Community Health, by Frances Dunn Butterfoss. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2007.

“Collaboration for a Change: Definitions, Decision-making models, Roles, Collaborative Process Guide, Collaborative Leadership.” by Arthur T. Himmelman. Minneapolis: Himmelman Consulting, 2004. Free by request at [ArthurTHimmelman@aol.com](mailto:ArthurTHimmelman@aol.com)

Collaborative Leadership: How Citizens and Civic Leaders Can Make A Difference, by David D. Chrislip and Carl E. Larson. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.

Community Organizing and Community Building for Health and Welfare (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), by Meredith Minkler. Pascataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012.

Community Tool Box: ctb.ku.edu. *The most comprehensive, single source of information on community and systems change collaboration and partnerships.*

“Communities Working Collaboratively for a Change,” by Arthur T. Himmelman in Resolving Conflict: Strategies for Local Government, edited by Margaret S. Herrman. Washington, D.C.: International City/County Management Association, 1994.

Everyone Leads: Building Leadership from the Community Up, by Paul Schmitz. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2012.

Ignite! Getting Your Community Coalition “Fired Up: for Change by Frances Dunn Butterfoss. Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2013

Leading Public Health: A Competency Handbook, by James W. Begun and Jan K. Malcolm. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2015. *Highly valuable discussion of leadership for community and systems change based in public health but widely applicable in many contexts.*

Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results, by David Peter Stroh. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015.

The American Journal of Community Psychology, Volume 29, Number 2, April 2001. *Community Coalition Building – Contemporary Practice and Research*, edited by Tom Wolff.

The Lobbying and Advocacy Handbook for Nonprofit Organizations, Second Edition by Marcia Avner and Bob Smucker. Saint Paul: Minnesota Council for Nonprofits, 2002

The Power of Collaborative Solutions: Six Principles and Effective Tools for Building Healthy Communities, by Tom Wolff. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2010.

# **NOTES**