



Collaboration: Enablers and Barriers

In order to plan a successful collaboration, project leaders should ask themselves the following questions in preparation for a planned intervention:

- With whom do I want to/have to collaborate?
- What form should this collaboration take?

How much decision-making power can be granted to each stakeholder? Many factors influence whether participation can be realised within the collaboration among the project team, target group, funding body and other stakeholders. Based on our research results, we have identified the following aspects as being most important for practitioners:

- Attitude
- Effort
- Collaboration Maintenance
- Interests
- Internal Unity
- Professional Expertise

Each aspect was further differentiated according to each cooperating partner: target group, funding body and others.

Attitude

Target group participation may under certain circumstances require a change of perspective regarding implementation: a project is not (or no longer) primarily implemented for, but with the target group. The development of participation is a process that a project has to consciously embark on. To do this necessitates trust in the target group, patience with the process and discipline in following through with efforts to strengthen participation. Building trust in the collaboration between the project team and the target group can prove problematic because of the suspicion with which some socially disadvantaged people view social service organisations. A barrier in the opinion of many service organisations wanting to enable stronger target group participation is a lack of interest on behalf of the funding body to support target group participation as a project objective.

The degree to which concessions have to be made to funders' expectations in order to gain their understanding and respect is not always the same. Project personnel generally consider it important to preserve authenticity in their collaboration with funders: to present oneself exactly as one is in day-to-day professional practice can make one's position more believable. A prerequisite for increasing a project's participation in decisions about the funding of interventions is trust on behalf of the funding body. An overly demanding attitude can get in the way of participatory collaboration.

In collaborative arrangements with cooperating partners, project personnel have to accept that some service organisations are not allowed to share decision-making power based on their internal policies or (hierarchical) structures. Competition between agencies and service organisations is another reason why participatory forms of collaboration can sometimes only be established in a limited way or not at all.

Effort



Participatory Quality Development in HIV Prevention

www.pq-hiv.de/en
Wright/Block/Unger



Building collaboration - whether with the target group or with other cooperating partners - is a demanding process that can only be established over a longer period and through the investment of resources (human and material). Participatory forms of collaboration may therefore be more costly in the short term than non-participatory ones. Over the long term however, health promotion and prevention services developed and implemented using participatory processes will have better outcomes because their involvement of the target group provides for better integration into the lived experience of the socially disadvantaged, making services more effective.

Collaboration Maintenance

It is the duty of cooperating partners to recognise that collaboration does not emerge on its own accord, but that it must be built and continuously looked after by all.

For working with the target group, this means leadership that enables stronger participation of the target group over time (e.g. in the form of a strategic planning process to strengthen collaboration). A consumerist attitude on the part of the target group can be a barrier to the establishment of participatory structures. In this scenario, confrontations between project personnel and members of the target group may be necessary in order to motivate the target group to move from the passive stance of being a recipient of services to a more active position of ownership of the project. It may be helpful here to demonstrate to the target group how important their involvement is for the continuation of the project.

The form that collaborations with funding bodies take should be determined with care and diligence. A partnership in the sense of equally shared power to make decisions on all aspects of the project is often not desirable, but a collaboration that preserves a certain degree of autonomy for the project is. To establish a culture of communication between the project team and the funding body, adequate structures have to be created (regular meetings, decision-making and conflict resolution processes, information exchange etc.). Transparency on both sides is the prerequisite for successful collaboration.

From a practitioner's point of view, the development of a respectful culture of communication is also important for working with other cooperating partners. A diverse range of group discussion methodologies can be used to this end. The motto "stronger together" can be used as a maxim to encourage participants to identify common interests and consider concrete forms of collaboration. Organising meetings where potential cooperating partners can introduce themselves (project conferences) can contribute to reaching consensus on the subject matter of the project. Not infrequently, collaborations are prescribed by funding bodies or other (political) decision-makers; in the experience of practitioners however, some such "mandated collaborations" work better than others. "External" suggestions for collaboration may be useful, but their rationale must be clearly communicated and the right framework must be created for the collaboration.

Two further phenomena can cause problems for the establishment of collaborations with other partners: *pseudo-collaborations* and *too many collaborators*. *Pseudo-collaborations* do not expect participation to occur in decision-making processes, yet the working relationship is presented as if it were included. Regarding the number of collaborators, the old adage of "too many cooks spoil the broth" should be kept in mind: too large a number of cooperating partners or partnership agreements can make processes lengthy and create unnecessary levels of bureaucracy; quality development may not be enhanced, but slowed down and compromised.

Interests



Participatory Quality Development in HIV Prevention

www.pq-hiv.de/en
Wright/Block/Unger



Shared interests are the foundation of all forms of cooperation, especially in the case of participatory collaboration, which requires a high degree of consensus.

The target group's interests are not always easy to discover. The interests of the service organisation, which are strongly influenced by the interest of the funding body, are often equated with the interests of the target group. A basic assumption is generally made of the target group's needs, which are then used in the application process as the reason for providing a service, yet which do not offer a basis for participatory collaboration with the target group. It is not unusual for the target group to define their life situation differently and to prioritise other definitions of and solutions to health problems. Importantly, ways should be found to investigate the interests of the target group outside of the rationalisations of the application and funding grant process. It is also possible that the target group does not have one shared, but several (and diverse) interests, as "target groups" are themselves constructed, as opposed to than naturally forming communities of people who normally confer with each other regarding their common interests.

Discovering the prevailing interests is also of central importance with other cooperating partners. Smaller and larger preferences, both in regard to subject matter and in regard to forms of interaction, are important to consider in establishing collaboration.

Internal Unity

It happens not infrequently in projects that a group of workers aims for a collaborative arrangement with a target group or other collaborating partners without the agreement of their colleagues or superiors. The resulting disunity in the service organisation means that no durable collaboration can be established because the interests of the organisation cannot be represented to the outside consistently and credibly. For this reason, many practitioners follow a rule: to internally answer the question of who to collaborate with before launching into concrete steps toward concrete forms of collaboration.

Professional Expertise

Further prerequisites for a project's successful collaboration with all its partners are the following aspects of professional expertise:

- Clear goals and positions on relevant content-related questions
- Clarity on one's own boundaries and limits during negotiations (which compromises can we agree to as an organisation, and which ones not?),
- Awareness of successful, comparable projects
- The ability to communicate the work clearly, including its specific significance (using relevant documentation, case studies etc.),
- The ability to (co-) represent the concerns of the target group,
- The ability to adjust to the language used by politicians and other decision makers as well as to that used by the target group, and
- The ability for political advocacy (lobbying).

Authors: Wright/Block/Unger