Best Practices and Challenges of Collaborating on Conservation

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OCTOBER 9, 2024
LATORNELL SYMPOSIUM

Outline

My background

Methodology

Literature review

Findings: Types of collaborations, best practices, and challenges

Summary

My Background

Currently PhD candidate at York University in the Department of Sociology

Previously Executive Director of a regional environmental network of 50-60 member groups

Volunteered with the Halton Children's Water Festival for over 10 years as Recycling Coordinator and a member of the Steering Committee

Collaboration – Definition

Nonprofit collaboration = "what occurs when different nonprofit organizations work together to address problems through joint effort, resources, and decision making and share ownership of the final product or service" (Guo & Acar, 2005, pp. 342-3).

Forms of collaboration:[1]

- Informal
  - Limited duration
  - Each organization retains internal decision-making authority
- Formal
  - Involves strategic restructuring

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom between May 2023 and January 2024

10 CA employees and 33 board and staff members of nature-related non-profits

39 organizations across Ontario

Questions relevant to this presentation:

- What other *nature or environmental* organizations does your organization work most closely with?
- What *other* organizations does your organization work most closely with?
- Has your organization had any conflicts with other groups?

Disclaimers:

- Qualitative study, by no means intended to be complete
- Confidentiality of interviewees and their organizations

Motivations for Collaboration

Some organizations may have little need to collaborate[2,3]

Resource dependence theory[2,3]

- Looking for tangible or intangible benefits

Network theory[2,3]

- Relationships and information

Institutional theory[2,3]

- External pressure, e.g., mandate from funder[1,2,3,4]

Collaboration – Best Practices

Memoranda of understanding[4]

- Establishing obligations
- Documenting routines
- Documenting handling of resources

Building trust[3,4]

- Rural location can facilitate trust building through closer interpersonal relationships[3]

Sensitivity to different demographics[4]

Collaboration – Challenges[3]

Co-opetition

- "organizations simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another" (Proulx et al., 2014 p. 748)

Loss of autonomy, threats to boundaries

Risk to reputation

Unequal exchanges

Determination of accountability

Differences in cultures, goals

Types of Collaboration[3]

Merger

Joint program office

Joint partnership with affiliated programming

Joint partnership for issue advocacy

Joint partnership leading to creation of new separate organization

Joint administrative office and back-office operations

Confederation / umbrella organization

Types of Collaboration[3]

Considerations for confederation model (umbrella organization)

- Benefits
  - Provision of services, support
  - Increased stability for member organizations
  - Increased exposure for member organizations
  - Enabling coordination of services
- Challenges
  - Balancing control vs. independence
  - Decision-making that represents the interests of member organizations
  - Effective communications

Findings – Types of Collaboration

Joint program office

- Remedial Action Plan (RAP)

Joint partnership with affiliated programming

- Water Festival

Joint partnership for issue advocacy

- Ontario Nature petitions
- Green Shovels Collaborative

Confederation / umbrella organization

- Conservation Ontario, Ontario Nature

Findings – Umbrella Organizations

Loose confederations, e.g., Ontario Nature

- Information and communications
- Networking meetings
- Insurance, legal
- Signing petitions
- Rules, regulations, policies
- Supporting acquisition of funding (grants, charitable donations)

Network theory

Resource dependence theory

Tight confederations, e.g., Conservation Ontario, Friends of Ontario Parks

"We do a lot of Zoom together." (Friends board member)

Network theory

Coordination of citizen science, e.g. Birds Canada

Motivation – Resource Dependence

Win-win opportunities:

a. with businesses:

"We also work with a lot of larger corporations who are looking to meet their, you know, ESG goals. … A lot of organizations wanna fund tree planting projects where they come out, they buy the trees, and their staff come out and help plant the trees. " (CA employee)

b. new rural non-agricultural homeowners:

"First of all, do they have a septic system? And do they know that they have a septic system? Because when we did a survey, … there was … a relatively large percentage of people who didn't know that they were on septic systems. … As well, it's a constituency that often wants to convert what would be a former farmland into naturalized areas. They want that feeling of wooded area or naturalized area. And so, they're a great target audience for our restoration program." (CA employee)

Motivation – Resource Dependence?

Expanding range of community partners:

“We have partnered in the past with the [Canadian] Mental Health Association, who are promoting, of course, Healthy Hikes, Step into Nature, for, you know, mental health.” (CA employee)

“When it comes to volunteer participants—so, people who would come out to an Earth Day tree planting event or whatnot—we're seeing a growing number of new Canadians who are really wanting to have that experience. So, lots of new Canadian families will participate in these types of events.” (CA employee)

Best Practices – MOU

Landowner organizations provide trail access to trail user groups in exchange for maintenance work

Ducks Unlimited Canada was mentioned positively by a number of interviewees:

“We have a signed agreement with them. We are stewards. … They have a really good approach to how they manage their land and deal with landowners and things like that. I really quite like them. … We created a trail that they authorized on the Ducks Unlimited property, but they don't want incursions on the core. That's meant for conservation. They do allow hunters in. We just keep an eye on the thing and let them know if there's any major issues.” (ENGO board member)

Best Practices – Building Trust

Peer-to-peer approach

a. with farmers:

- Demonstration projects
- Annual bus tour of projects
- Workshops
- Walk-and-talks

"If we can facilitate a peer-to-peer workshop where their *peers* are telling them about the challenges of cover crops, what works, how they do it, you know, that's many times over more valuable than what we can do." (CA employee)

Best Practices – Building Trust

2. Peer-to-peer approach
   b. with the community:

"A lot of the programs that we do are, like, community led. So it's the activities that we're doing to restore the watershed is done by community members and volunteers. So they're getting that hands-on experience and those connections that they're made. So we're just helping the community rebuild the watershed and regain those connections." (ENGO employee)

Best Practices – Building Trust

Maintaining relationships between CAs and:

a. ENGOs:

"They wanted to plant forty trees. So we helped to, you know, facilitate that. … We make sure that they're invited to our various events." (CA employee)

Best Practices – Building Trust

Maintaining relationships between CAs and:

b. Member municipalities – focusing on board vs. focusing on staff:
   - Board meetings
   - Site visits where stewardship projects are happening.
   - Annual education program , driven by board members, incorporated into board meetings
   - Newsletters
   - Municipal presentations
   - Networking at events
   - Working directly with staff

"We've really found that it's important that they see us, that we are in front of them. And that's been really critical for maintaining their support and maintaining their engagement in what it is that we're trying to do." (CA employee)

Challenges – Co-opetition

Competition for funding:

“We're all looking for funding from the same buckets. … But, on the other hand, we also work together to deliver projects. … So it’s an interesting relationship.” (ENGO employee)

“Sometimes that can lead to sort of overlapping goals or overlapping program areas where you could almost say we're ‘competition.’ Friendly competition, in a way. But there, we definitely work with each other on many, many projects.“ (CA employee)

Challenges – Co-opetition

Competition over land procurement for preservation:

> “They're often buying large swaths of land as well, like, similar to us. So, in a way, it's, like, they're competing, like, maybe, funding-wise, because we're doing similar work.” (ENGO employee)

Challenges – Differences in Cultures

Collaborating with First Nations:

"They run their own programming, and they have a lot of responsibilities and initiatives that they're just working on themselves. They probably don't have a lot of time to join our organizations.." (ENGO board member)

"Sometimes, for example, we do have an area that we are trying to protect. And in that area, there's an Indigenous community who's entirely *against* development in that area. However, there's an entire group of Indigenous communities who are *for* that development because they want more economic advancement. They know that by having that development there, their communities will be able to, to benefit, you know, financially from it." (ENGO employee)

"You're gonna make somebody mad, depending on who you work with." (ENGO board member)

"We sometimes have had cases where we needed to check our privilege. … Things are cordial between us. But, you know, we'll build that relationship as they're willing to, as they're ready." (ENGO employee)

Challenges – Government Regulations

Inability to address non-agricultural homeowners:

"The Act identifies planting trees on non-conservation-authority-owned land as a non-mandatory service. So, in order to continue that, it has to be, you know, fully cost-recoverable." (CA employee)

"Actually, federal partners are probably more important to us at the moment than the province."(CA employee)

Summary

Main collaboration types: joint partnerships with affiliated programming, confederations

Continuum of closeness of networks coordinated by umbrella organizations

Main motivations for collaboration: resource dependence and networking

Best practices: building relationships / trust, peer-to-peer approaches

Main challenges:

- Co-opetition / competition for individual donations, grant funding, and land procurement
- Differences in culture
- Government regulations (for CAs)

References

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4. Snavely, K. & Tracy, M. B. (2002). Development of trust in rural nonprofit collaborations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 31*(1), 62–83. doi:10.1177/0899764002311003.

Thank you!

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