

Community-Based Organizations Creating Effective Partnerships

What We Know So Far

By Mark Cabaj, Tamarack Institute

MOST PEOPLE WORKING IN COMMUNITY-BASED organizations (CBOs) know that partnering with other groups (e.g. a community group, business or government agency) can bring in much needed additional resources, skills and knowledge to their organization and projects. They also know that creating and sustaining such partnerships is not always easy to do.

As part of the Federal Government's Urban Aboriginal Strategy – an initiative designed to improve the capacity of urban Aboriginal communities and government to improve the quality of life for urban Aboriginal people – the Federal Privy Council Office contracted Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, based in Waterloo, Ontario, to develop and share resources on the topic of partnership development.

The Challenge & Strategy

There is no shortage of information and resources on partnerships and CBOs. In fact, there are a growing number of tools, stories and training resources designed to assist community organizations to develop and sustain partnerships.

Unfortunately, very few of these resources are designed to reflect the unique experience of Aboriginal community organizations and therefore are not as helpful to Aboriginal groups as they could be.

The goal of the Capacity Enhancement Project is to create resources that are rooted in the experience of Aboriginal community organizations and to make these resources available to all Aboriginal groups in the cities participating in the Urban Aboriginal Strategy. These resources will include:

- A Guidebook describing the advantages and disadvantages of partnership, the different types of partners, what they can offer community organizations and what they might want in return, and the different stages of creating and sustaining partnerships.
- A Tool Kit with practical tools to assist staff and volunteers of community organizations at different stages of the partnership development process.
- A series of small workshops for Aboriginal staff and volunteers of community organizations to explore different

aspects of partnership development in more detail.

- A manual for managers in community organizations, facilitators coaches interested in using – and improving – the guidebook, tool-kit and workshops in their own work.

In order to generate these resources, the Capacity Enhancement Project has three simple steps:

Step One

Tamarack will collect, summarize and share an initial package of resources on developing effective partnership development for community organizations. These resources and workshops will be based on the most current “best practice” resources on partnership development for community organizations.

Step Two

Tamarack will facilitate *evaluation & upgrading* meetings with Aboriginal trainers, facilitators and community organization staff and volunteers to review the feedback of workshop participants and to identify ways that the workshop's learning techniques, stories and case studies, guides and practical tools can be improved for use by the Aboriginal community. Based on this feedback, Tamarack will upgrade the original package of resources and/or identify other ways that the group's recommendations can be implemented.

Step Three

Tamarack will facilitate a *Sharing our Learning* sessions with Aboriginal organizations (i.e. facilitators, managers, trainers and directors) in different communities to review the upgraded resources for partnership development and explore how they can be used in their day-to-day work. Aboriginal organizations will be free to use, improve and adapt the workshops, stories and case studies, guides and tools in whatever way they feel is appropriate.

This article describes the key findings that will be shared in more detail in the Partnership Guidebook, Partnership Tool Kit and project website (available August 2004 at) and upgraded with the feedback of Aboriginal organizations as the project proceeds through steps two and three throughout the summer and Autumn of 2004.

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What We've Found

After six weeks of looking at stories of CBO partnerships, reading research about partnerships, exploring the different tools available to support partnership development and tapping into our own experience working in CBOs, Tamarack staff have found a number of important patterns and themes about creating effective partnerships. Here is what we've found so far.

Defining Partnerships

We found that a lot of people have tried to come up with the perfect definition of partnerships, but we do not feel that any one did a great job of providing a practical definition. In some instances, people create a paragraph long definition in an effort to capture all types of partnership. In other cases, the definition is very precise, but refers only to a special type of partnership (e.g. organizations providing a program together). We did find one definition, however, that was helpful:

Partnership is two or more organizations working together to accomplish something they cannot do on their own.

While the definition is very simple, we found that it captures the essence of why people in CBOs take the partnership plunge. In some cases, partnering can help them do something they need to do bigger, better and/or faster, which enables them to do something they could never hope to do on their own.

Why So Much Emphasis on Partnerships?

As long as there have been CBOs there have been partnerships. But, in the last decade, people in CBOs appear to be spending an extra ordinary amount of time talking about, creating and managing partnerships. Why? We think there are two reasons.

The first is that they are being "pulled" into considering partnerships because they appear to offer so many advantages. As the section below describes in more detail, partnerships can help a CBO secure new or additional resources to support the work, to develop expertise to address more complex social,

economic and environmental issues, or even to develop stronger credibility and links with other organizations.

CBOs are also feeling "pushed" into partnership. And the biggest push comes from funding organizations. In an effort to make their dollar go farther – and in some cases to prompt groups to share their knowledge and expertise – government agencies, philanthropic and corporate funders are encouraging (often requiring) CBOs to develop partnerships with other organizations when requesting funding.

While all CBOs will likely be motivated by a combination of the above push and pull factors, why people in a CBO are motivated to partner does seem to matter. The more convinced they are of its possible benefits – rather than feeling they are required to do it – the easier and more effective their eventual partnerships are likely to be.

The Good, Bad & The Uncertain

Whatever the reason the staff and volunteers of a CBO decide to roll up their sleeves and explore partnerships, it is clear that partnerships offer a mix of benefits, costs and even uncertainties. We think the conversation about the pros and cons of CBO partnership can be summarized as follows:

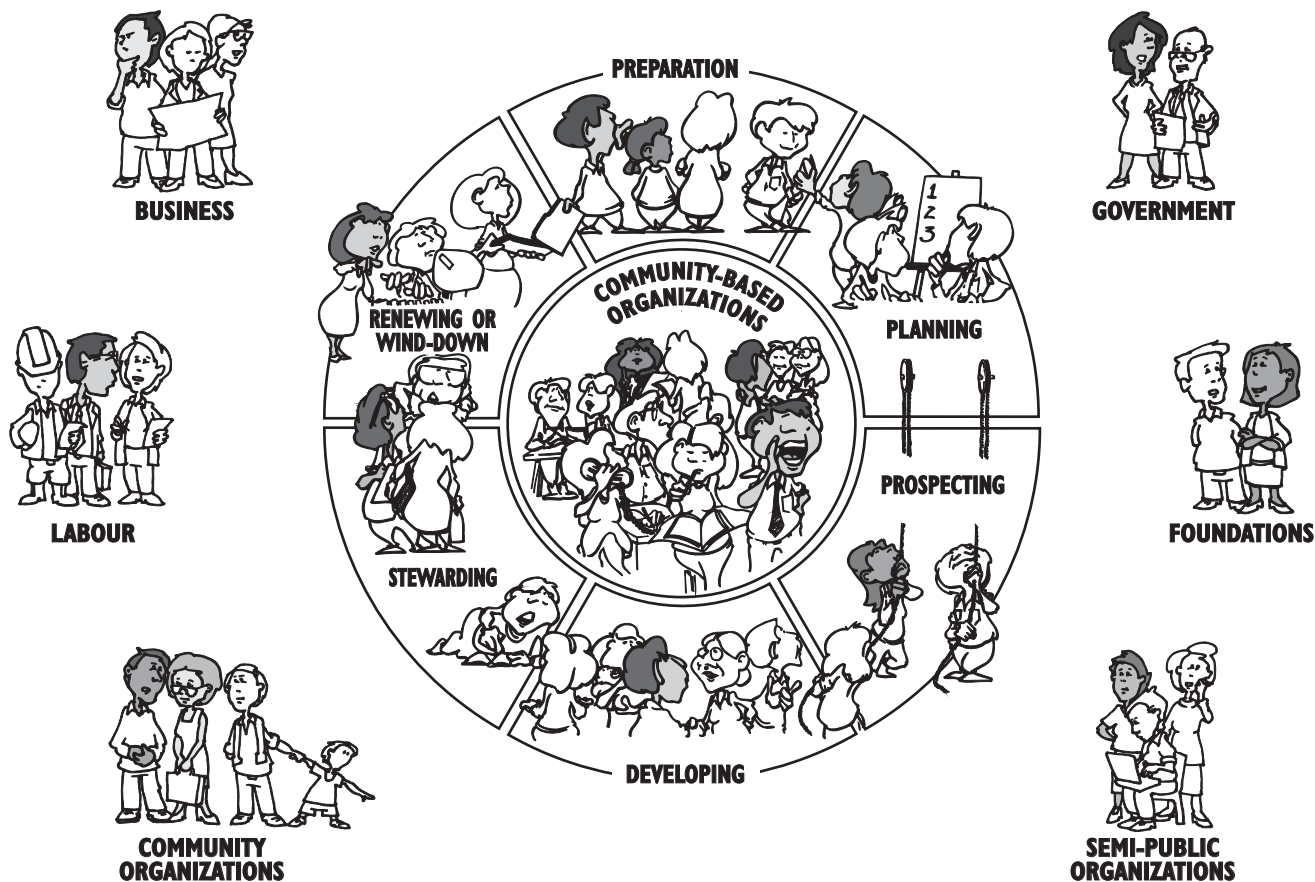
The Possible Benefits

- *Greater credibility* – greater support for the organization's work because of their association with certain organizations.
- *Expanded resources* – more cash and in-kind contributions and entrepreneurially generated resources (e.g. sales from products or services).
- *Improved skills and knowledge* – extra insights, experiences and capabilities that the people in a CBO do not have themselves.
- *Expanded networks and relationships* – strengthening or establishing new links with different communities and stakeholders
- *Better alternatives to conflict* – addressing an issue in a productive way.

The Possible Costs

- *Public Divestiture* – government agencies assuming CBOs will replace – rather than complement – public sector leadership in an area (e.g. employment training).

Creating & Sustaining Effective Partnerships



- *Power imbalance* – disproportionate control or influence in the decision-making.
- *Ethical issues* – possible conflicts and pressure to compromise organizational values (e.g. a focus on training people for “any job” – rather than a “good job”).

The Uncertainties

- *Unclear accountabilities* – determining who is responsible for what.
- *Amount of investment required* – the time, energy and money it takes to develop and sustain a partnership.
- *Unpredictability of results* – the possibility that a partnership may not generate anticipated results because it is more difficult to work together than alone.

These benefits, costs and uncertainties will be different for each partnership. However, we did find an important theme - smaller CBOs often have the greatest to gain in a partnership but struggle most in finding the resources required to start-up and sustain a partnership.

Types of Partners

CBOs are capable of developing partnerships with almost every type of organization possible. In Canada, there appears to be six categories of organizations with whom CBOs appear to develop partnerships most frequently (see diagram, above):

- Other Community-Based Organizations
- Government (i.e. local, region, Provincial and Federal)
- Businesses (i.e. small, medium and large companies)
- Foundations (i.e. community and private family foundations)
- Labour Unions
- Semi-Public Organizations (e.g. police, health authorities, schools and universities).

While each partner is unique, there appear to be some common themes underlying the motivation to partner for each of these sectors and the types of partnerships they develop with CBOs.

Types of Partnerships

CBOs get involved in a mind-boggling variety of partnerships ranging from the short term and simple to the longer term and

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more complex. And while each group of organizations will come up with their own unique arrangement, their partnerships tend to vary along the following characteristics:

- *Functions* – from research and planning to community investment and joint program delivery.
- *Level of Intensity* – from simple cooperation to more complex collaboration.
- *Leadership Emphasis* – from one organization assuming central leadership to two or more organizations assuming shared leadership.
- *Number of Partners* – from a simple partnership involving two organizations to one involving hundreds.
- *Length of Partnership* – from one-time, short-term efforts to partnerships that last for years and years

Of course, there is no ideal partnership format. As a general rule, however, partnerships that are more intense, involve a broad range of functions, use shared leadership and are long term in nature have the potential to create substantial results. They also require a lot more time and energy to develop and sustain and may be riskier. Similarly, low intensity, short-term partnerships involving only a few contributions are easier to manage, but may not produce dramatic results.

Phases of Partnership Development

The process of developing and sustaining a partnership is a dynamic one and a group of CBOs and partners will never experience the partnership development exactly the same. There appear, however, to be some common themes on the phases and tasks in the partnership development process:

- *Preparing the CBO* – reviewing experience with partnerships so far, identifying organizational strengths and weaknesses and clarifying what the CBO seeks in a partnership and what it can provide in return.
- *Planning the Partnership* – clarifying policies on partnerships, developing a “case document”, delegating someone to lead the partnership development process.
- *Prospecting Potential Partners* – identifying, researching and screening possible partners.
- *Developing the Partnership* – clarifying “fit”, developing an agreement, establishing plans for management, communications, operations and evaluation.

- *Stewarding the Partnership* – monitoring, ongoing communication and trouble-shooting.
- *Renewing or Winding Down the Partnership* – evaluating partnerships, celebrating achievements, determining next steps, and upgrading partnership agreements.

We have found a lot of examples of CBOs skipping key tasks – or even phases – entirely. In some cases, their partnerships are weaker because of it and in others the “jumping ahead” does not seem to have made much of a difference. We have not yet explored this sufficiently in depth to understand why this is. As a rule of thumb, however, it appears that CBOs with a track record of creating resilient and productive partnerships methodically work through these phases on a continual basis.

Challenges of Partnership

It may be productive for a CBO to get involved in a partnership – but it is not always easy. It appears that nearly all partnerships experience some type of difficulty along the way. There appear to be at least 10 generic challenges a CBO faces in its efforts to develop and sustain partnerships. These are:

- Building Trusting Relationships
- Clarifying Accountabilities
- Ensuring Sufficient Resources
- Being Clear About Motivation
- Managing Transition and Change
- Making Good Deals
- Effective Communication
- Staying on Track
- Dealing with Conflict
- Burnout

CBOs and their partners have come up with interesting ways to address each of these challenges and their efforts meet with varying degrees of success. How a CBO and its partners handle these difficulties are often as important as they solutions they come up with.

Ingredients of Success

We’ve uncovered a lot of information about partnerships in this study: the reasons why CBOs consider partnering, the strengths and weaknesses of partnering, and the various types of partnerships, the phases and steps of developing partnerships and some

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of the key challenges CBOs face on the way.

At the end of the day, we can't help wondering if there are absolutely essential steps and commonalities across successful partnerships. We are not the only ones. Several thoughtful organizations and people have come up with lists of core ingredients – ranging from 10 to 20 – to any proven partnerships and we found these immensely helpful.

Karen Ray of the Wilder Foundation has come up with what we feel is the best summary of the core ingredients of effective partnerships. These are:

- *Relationships* – acknowledging, understanding and learning to bridge personal and cultural differences and building trusting and respectful relationships between people is the single most important and consistent ingredients in all successful partnerships.
- *Resiliency* – partnerships usually require extra effort, take time to unfold and are often unpredictable.
- *Results* – people need concrete results, not just the promise of results, to stay engaged in the hard work and warrant the extra investment that partnerships require.

We have not tested Karen's idea very thoroughly, but it makes sense that without these ingredients, it would be difficult to imagine a partnership being as productive or as sustainable as it could be.

Conclusion: A Mix Of Humanity, Art & Science

We have come up these findings after six weeks of research and reflecting upon our experiences developing – and supporting other CBOs develop – partnerships. We are amazed at the volume and range of partnership stories and the tools and research on the topic.

There does appear to be some science in the efforts of CBOs to create and sustain effective partnerships. The tasks of analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of a CBO organization before seeking partners, for example, or trying to capture the results and progress of partnerships can be broken down methodically and in a relatively easy-to-use way.

Yet, we are also convinced more than ever that creating effective partnerships cannot be reduced to simple formulas and techniques. Partly, its because there are so many types of partnerships and partners operating in dynamic environments that it is difficult to generalize how a CBO can create and sustain a productive partnership every time it tries – never mind create a set of generic steps and tools to fit every situation.

More importantly, partnership building is essentially about people agreeing to work together to get something done they cannot do alone. And like any human exercise, it requires commitment, creativity and a spirit of generosity to turn out well. Art and humanity – rather than science – is probably more useful here.

While we still have a little research left to do on the general experience of CBOs creating partnerships to help us fill in some of the gaps in this first phase of the Capacity Enhancement Initiative, we feel good about going to the next step in the process – having a conversation with people working in urban Aboriginal organizations to determine if and how the general experience of CBOs across Canada reflects their experience, needs and priorities.

MARK CABAJ is a principal at Tamarack - An Institute for Community Engagement, 139 Father David Bauer Drive, Waterloo ON N2L 6L1, (tel) 519-885-5155, (fax) 519-885-5155, website www.tamarackcommunity.ca. Contact Mark at (tel) 780-451-8984, (e-mail) mark@tamarackcommunity.ca. All rights reserved © Tamarack - An Institute for Community Engagement, 2004.



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