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Lessons from Two Nationwide Efforts within Bangladesh**

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Nonprofit organizations join alliances and associations to achieve goals they can not reach alone. Collaboration makes it possible to influence policy, address complex and widespread social issues, and expand services to reach the people who need them. Yet governing inter-organizational collaboration is very challenging. Collaboration efforts that appear promising often fail to achieve their desired results, often because the interests of individual member organizations conflict with those of the collective association. Groups that compete for financial resources find it difficult to share information and develop the mutual trust necessary for cooperation. Diverse philosophies of proper strategies and programs stymie efforts to build the sizable coalitions necessary for significant impact. Power differences among large and small organizations make it difficult for the smaller ones to feel they have a voice and influence in the network. As Charles Handy (1994) says of federal organizations, participating in nonprofit collaborations requires a distinctive mindset of “dual citizenship,” in which members are simultaneously loyal to the individual nonprofit and to the association.

Governance structures of collaborative enterprises usually balance the interests of individual members with those of the collaborative by designing relatively democratic systems. Member organizations elect representatives to serve on central management bodies or steering committees and major network decisions are made through formal procedures based on majority vote or consensus. Good leaders communicate frequently with members and develop policies and programs that serve them well. Nevertheless, the kinds of challenges noted above still hinder the effectiveness of joint actions, and sometimes break collaboratives apart altogether.

I compared two associations of third sector agencies in Bangladesh to see if there was any relationship between their governance practices and the effectiveness of their joint actions.¹ One was a well-established association of all the major antipoverty agencies in the country that had carried out a highly successful pro-democracy program. The other was a young association of antipoverty, legal aid and media agencies committed to improving children’s rights in Bangladesh.

Although my study was based in Bangladesh, I have found that the lessons learned there are remarkably relevant to other nonprofits around the globe. Effective governance of associations is only partly a matter of creating appropriate structures and serving the interests of individual members. These factors do help to maintain the association over time, but when associations organize joint action to achieve important policy or program goals, it becomes critically important that they truly forge their common interests and commit their collective energies and resources to the joint activities.

The pro-democracy program illustrates the scale and impact that effective joint action makes possible. The association involved nearly all of its 600 members in providing 15,000 trainers for a voter education program that was designed and delivered in less than two months. As a result of the program and other campaigns, nationwide free and fair elections were preserved in 1996 and the voter participation rate increased by about 50 percent. The child rights association, in contrast, found it difficult to motivate more than half of its 70 members to participate in its campaigns and joint programs and its leaders regularly disagreed about the kinds of activities the association should implement. As a result, the association has not made any concrete improvements in the lives of Bangladeshi children.

Based on a comparative analysis of the governance of the two associations, the following four recommendations highlight key strategies for engaging the common interests and energies of nonprofit collaboratives for more effective results.

1. Enhance the social capital, not just the reputation, of the association. Associations with strong reputations and highly respected leaders are likely to attract the members and resources necessary for significant impacts. Yet, to keep members invested, it is also essential to maintain a high level of social capital – that members know each other and share core values and ways of working together. Too little social “glue” and too much diversity in ideas can lead to destructive conflict and organizing attempts that never get off the ground. New associations can build strong foundations by starting with small-scale yet meaningful actions, in which members experiment with approaches, get to know each other, share their thinking, and find the common ideas and approaches that will be the basis for larger joint actions.

2. Activate the association (and other agencies) and authorize joint action before beginning the planning process. It’s easy for experienced leaders, convinced of the need to act, to jump into the technical issues of planning joint activities without giving enough time for potential participants to discuss and debate the core ideas and goals underlying the joint action. Consequently, arguments erupt over activities that are really about differences in goals and values. Or, with more passive participants, activities are planned but few members actually contribute to them.

Engage participants in active dialogue, formally or informally, and once the goals and ideas have been widely discussed, make the commitment to joint action according to established procedures. The association must tolerate diverse opinions and accept the right of members to not participate if they do not support the joint action approved by the majority.

3. Even large-scale joint actions can be accomplished with few external funds. When members are genuinely committed to common goals, volunteers are likely to come forward to put them into action. Nonprofits have significant resources of leadership, skilled staff, program knowledge, organizational capacity, and relationships with communities, foundations, and government agencies. These resources can all be mobilized and contributed to joint actions. A belief that external funding is necessary to organize and participate in joint actions denies the value of these resources and disempowers the association. External financial resources should support, not drive, joint action.

4. Active learning promotes long-term effectiveness. Nonprofits often avoid evaluating the success of joint programs and campaigns because they believe it takes too much time, requires costly technical expertise, or brings up problems that many would just as well forget. However, a judicious review of what worked well, what did not, and why, can significantly enhance common understanding and prepare the association for future joint actions. A one- or half-day meeting is enough to capture lessons that can serve as the basis for future planning efforts by individual members as well as the association as a whole. In Bangladesh, the leaders of the pro-democracy program jointly reflected on the lessons learned from their successful campaign. As a result, the association and individual members integrated new materials into their resource center and education programs and set a new strategic goal – to encourage poor women to run in the upcoming local elections. About a year later, 14,000 women were newly elected to local offices, due in part to the educational activities of these nonprofit organizations.

These recommendations are not a “recipe for governance,” but can be applied when organizing joint actions and collaboratives. Nonprofit associations have the potential to be dynamic social actors, successfully influencing public policy and social behavior to address persistent social issues. The dominant social issue in Bangladesh was preserving the democratic process; in New England it might be health care, racial discrimination, or homelessness.

Effective governance of associations is not merely a matter of designing appropriate structures and serving members – although these are very important. It also involves leading the association and its members to find their common values, interests, and goals. Members who are actively committed to the beliefs underlying joint actions are more likely to commit their own resources to joint programs and campaigns. Investing a little time in joint learning can strengthen the future program activities of an association and its members. It may be challenging for nonprofits in our individualistic society to develop collective ideas and cooperative practices, but the potential pay-off in better social policies, more effective service delivery, and improved quality of life for clients and communities makes it well worth the effort.

Endnotes

¹ I used rigorous qualitative methods (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994) to compare the associations and analyze results (Ashman, 1999).

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