

DEVELOPING COLLABORATION IN RURAL POLICY: LESSONS FROM A STATE RURAL DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

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Collaboration is a much-used word these days. Why? The need for collaboration is being driven from several directions. Policy issues are increasingly diverse and are increasingly viewed from a systems, or holistic, perspective. Words such as *integrated*, *comprehensive*, *watershed*, and *ecosystem* are creeping into the planning lexicon. Framing issues in such a broad way makes strategic sense, but creates confusion and conflicts among service deliverers with overlapping missions, authorities, programs and service areas.

In addition, budget constraints operating at the local, state and national levels mean that no single agency can craft effective solutions to complex problems. This creates a powerful motivation for working together. Finally, there is renewed interest in making government more effective by being more attuned to customer needs. Citizen customers are best served by involving them in decision making early and often, another reason to forge partnerships.

What is meant by collaboration? It is not cooperation, in which authorities inform others of what they plan to do anyway. Nor is it coordination, in which authorities share information and alter what they plan to do anyway to mesh with what others intend to do anyway. *Collaboration involves committing decision-making authority and resources to a group of stakeholders with a shared interest in taking action on an issue.* This is not easy to do. It is risky to voluntarily relinquish control. In addition, collaborations seek to include all stakeholders and to respect all viewpoints.

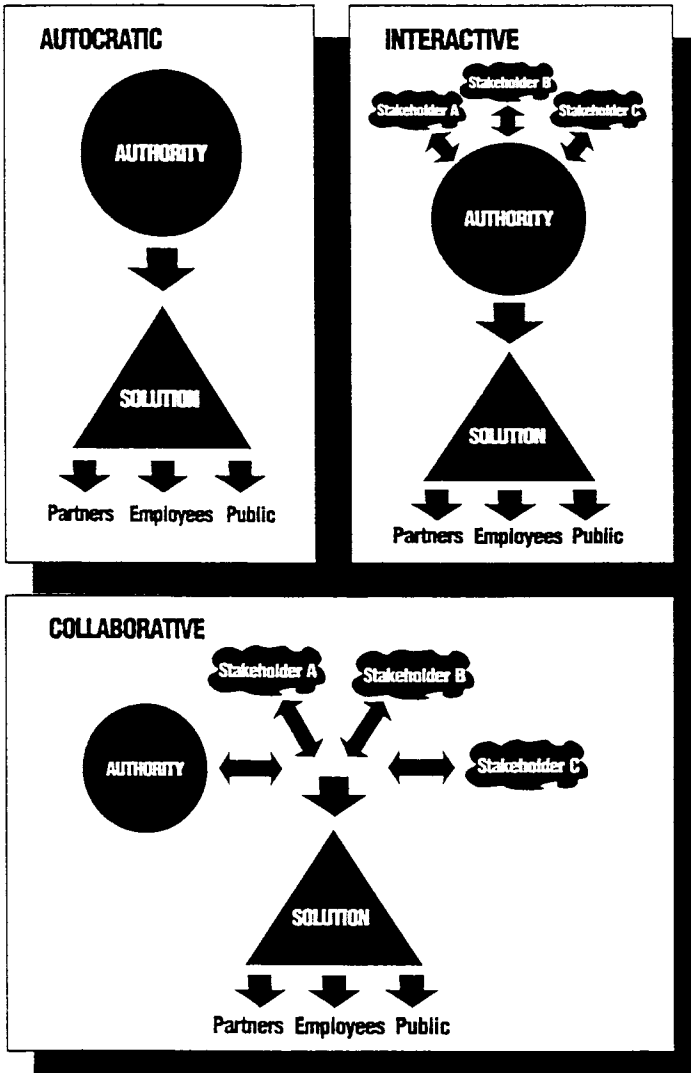
Figure 1 illustrates three planning models (U.S. Department of Agriculture, p. 7). Note that the interactive model is the dominant method of public involvement today. Agencies develop plans, hold public hearings at which they inform citizens and receive their comments, then formulate responses and revise their plan. Decision-making authority is retained in the agency. In the collaborative model, the stakeholders come together as a community of interest and share decision making.

National Rural Development Partnership

State rural development councils (SRDCs) are a modest invest-

ment in reinventing government with a collaborative model. SRDCs were created as part of a Bush administration six-point Rural Development Initiative. Proof of their effectiveness as a nonpartisan vehicle for sharing information and catalyzing collaboration is the retention of the SRDC network under the Clinton administration National Rural Development Partnership. There are currently thirty-nine state rural development councils working with a National Part-

Figure 1. Planning Models



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, p. 7

nership Office and the National Rural Development Council in Washington, DC. The majority of funding is provided by a consortium of seventeen federal agencies, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the lead.

The Idaho Rural Development Council (IRDC) is one of the oldest. It was conceived with the passage of the 1990 farm bill and held its initial meeting in April, 1991. It is the only SRDC that originated independently from the national initiative, operating for eighteen months without budget or staff, because we saw the need to link rural development efforts (Gardner et al.) The IRDC took shape in two strategic planning retreats held at the Council of Governors' Policy Advisors Rural Policy Academy. The IRDC mission is:

. . . to strengthen communities and improve the quality of life for rural Idahoans by providing a framework for cooperation, collaboration, and partnership-building to use the available resources of the private sector with those of the federal, state, local, and tribal governments.

The word "available" means the IRDC recognizes the continued presence of budget constraints in the rural policy environment. ". . . providing a framework for cooperation, collaboration, and partnership-building" is the role that the IRDC plays. Thus, it is a *wholesale* entity whose customers are its members. It serves by acting as an information clearing house, a referral agent, a neutral meeting place and a mechanism to germinate new collaborations. The IRDC does not deliver services or grants directly to rural Idahoans, but works through its member organizations.

Lessons in Collaboration

Because collaboration for many of us is a relatively new problem-solving approach, I would like to spend the rest of this paper describing some of the lessons that members of the Idaho Rural Development Council have been learning about collaboration. There are dozens of community-based organizations around the country learning similar lessons. Many of these lessons were described by members of the IRDC Board of Directors at a recent retreat. (Chynoweth provides a good guide for practitioners seeking to lead collaborations).

Lesson 1. Not All Share the Same Paradigm of Community Development

We found early on that members came to rural development from several different perspectives: public and private sectors; different levels of government; providers and consumers of services. We discovered five different types of member orientation to rural development—economic development, natural resource management,

human services delivery, loan and grant administration, and general government. This reflects the current paradigm of creating top-down bureaucratic structures with narrow slices of authority.

That dichotomy was not sufficient. On occasion, we have also noted the differences between process- and project-oriented people. We need both types in rural development, though they often do not seem to understand or appreciate one another. An article by Bill Traynor that described two paradigms in community development was useful. These two different orientations explained some of what we were observing.

The Technical/Production Paradigm describes the viewpoint of many project-oriented community development professionals and the local officials with whom they work. This is the dominant view of community development today. Here are its major points:

Technical/Production Paradigm

- Views community residents as clients who passively receive products and services.
- Views development as a technical process of deal making.
- Values technical/professional skills over community participation and leadership.
- Measures performance by units created.
- Technical and financial support is tied to projects rather than community organizations.
- Opportunity and technical/financial feasibility more important to project selection than community need/importance.

The Empowerment Paradigm has been around for some time, but has been less widely recognized. However, its emphasis on building strong local organizations to shape their future has been gaining acceptance recently. This paradigm is the reason the IRDC listed leadership development among its top challenges, and it explains the work we put into holding Community Leader Forums around the state to build capacity and encourage peer learning networks. Its major features are listed below:

Empowerment/Consumer Planning Paradigm

- Emphasizes building organizations and power over building structures.
- Views development as a broad, citizen-led effort to direct and shape the community's future.
- Sees community residents as consumers of products and services and as potential leaders.
- Uses anticipatory leadership to identify and create opportunities, not wait passively.

- Advocates for resources to overcome technical/financial constraints to community priority projects.
- Uses professionals and their organizations to carry out projects.
- Produces process outcomes that are difficult to measure.

These two paradigms were played out as an IRDC task force developed an Americorps application for community development. In discussing where to place student volunteers most effectively for rural Idaho, there were several who advocated placing individual volunteers at the service of local Gem Community organizations. There they would work on implementing whatever projects that community had identified as important, serving as a local contact and initiator. They were advocating empowerment.

In contrast, others suggested placing volunteers as regional specialists in certain types of projects, e.g., a forestry major working on community tree-planting projects or an architecture major focusing on several downtown revitalization projects. This specialization would be a more efficient way to get projects done. Since the community had identified the problems, it was argued this approach was sensitive to local needs.

Lesson 2. Collaboration Creates Social Capital

We became confused. It was very possible that the regional specialist approach might be a more efficient way to deliver projects into a community. Yet this approach did not seem satisfying because the volunteer was not located in each community directly working for the local group. What was missing?

The answer came from Dr. Cornelia Flora, who spoke to the IRDC Community Leaders Forum in Pocatello. The empowerment model creates more social capital. *Social capital is the interactions, linkages, networks, and trust that help individuals in a community coordinate and cooperate for mutual benefit.* It is the mutual respect, the trust, the group confidence, the momentum created by the successful completion of one project that encourages the group to tackle the next problem.

Dr. Flora called social capital a necessary precondition for effective government and community development. Its presence enhances investments in the other two types of capital—physical and human capital (Putnam).

Social capital is a peculiar resource, because it diminishes if not used and grows when it is used. In other words, success breeds success. But it does take considerable time and effort to create. Much of the groundwork is already laid in small towns, because people there already see one another in several different roles and places, e.g., in church, at the grocery store, at the football game, in the Rotary Club.

This concept of social capital is important because it explains why the empowerment model seems so satisfying to those involved. It puts a name on the intangible camaraderie created by community-based projects.

Social capital can help justify the large amount of technical assistance that a rural practitioner may need to invest in a community group to help them get organized and moving. This is important when agencies are asked to evaluate the outcomes from their programs. Many of the outcomes of community-based programs are process-achievements, such as organizations formed or new partners involved, that do not have measurable results. Yet they are important for creating social capital. Many of the activities of the IRDC have to do with creating social capital within the rural development community of Idaho. IRDC meetings are designed with the idea of building social capital within the IRDC itself.

Lesson 3. Not Everyone Shares the Collaborative Spirit

Our culture is steeped in the autocratic model. We are taught early on that successful leaders are hard-chargers who accumulate power. Agencies are imbued with formal planning processes that derive from a central authority. The notion of finding success in shared decision making can be foreign. In the Americorps application example referred to earlier, we experienced that paradigm conflict. Our attempts to collaborate with the state commission in order to develop a more competitive application to serve rural Idaho were misunderstood as an attempt to exert influence over the commission and subvert their process. Their paradigm required an arms-length relationship and formal procedures.

Some people have sampled IRDC activities but have not seen the potential of a persistent investment in network building. This is especially hard for advocacy groups accustomed to working in the political arena. Yet there are some individuals who are capable of more than one operating style. They know the IRDC offers a chance to approach policymakers in a patient, nonjudgmental way. Eventually, the pay-off is incremental change from the inside, based on personal trust, even while they push as outsiders to change policy in the political realm.

Lesson 4. Collaboration Is Based on Personal Trust

No one will commit resources or authority to a group they do not know. Each group member must trust that the others will rise above their personal agendas to address the common good in a responsible manner. There also needs to be trust to share knowledge and opinions openly. It is this trust building that requires so much investment of time. This is why time spent socializing together is time well

spent; it allows people to show a different side of themselves. For example, a new collaboration we have begun that attempts to create a wood manufacturing network will require a larger investment of time because it involves people from Montana as well as Idaho. We simply do not know each other well.

Trust building is also the reason that many collaborative efforts begin with seemingly inconsequential issues. Trust is best built with less at risk. An early IRDC project had to do with encouraging timber bridges; another concerned community tree-planting programs; a third was a straightforward survey of community water and sewer rates. Over time these have led to more substantive and strategic endeavors. In the Montana example, a collaboratively-organized conference on value-added wood products built a foundation of working relationships for the network project. Other current collaborations include a Community Mandates Pilot Project, a Rural Telecommunications Education Project, and a series of rural leadership capacity-building efforts.

Lesson 5. Check Egos at the Door

For many people, who gets the credit is as important as what gets done. The IRDC would accomplish little or nothing without the contributions of its members. The IRDC Board of Directors wisely decided on a low public profile from its inception. Unlike many other state rural development councils, there has been no public relations effort to inform rural Idaho of our intentions or our accomplishments. As a wholesale entity, IRDC success does not depend on public awareness. In fact, the public is likely to misinterpret our networking role and assume the IRDC delivers services.

The IRDC avoids perceptions of competition with its member agencies by giving them credit for accomplishments. This policy has paid off in willing partners. Similarly, rather than create duplicative committees, we have recognized existing interagency coordinating efforts as affiliated work groups. The IRDC does not attempt to control their activities, but simply offers a communications link to the larger council. For example, the IRDC has helped recruit new partners, has provided meeting facilitation, and has served as a communication vehicle for a large interagency working group on rural health care.

On a personal level, it is hard to let go of control and credit. In a successful collaboration everyone feels they have contributed. In one IRDC project, local leaders are still convinced they initiated the project. In very popular projects, there is a risk of partners claiming credit in public and forgetting to share it with the others. Abandoning a collaboration to chase glory can destroy trust in a hurry.

Lesson 6. Collaboration is Best Learned Through Experience

After establishing a sense of shared purpose, there are two ways to foster collaboration. Some groups focus on relationship building and process by studying and planning together. The IRDC has a bias for action. We prefer to learn collaboration by doing it on projects of increasing importance and complexity. The sense of team accomplishment is the biggest reward for working together. Experiencing the difficulties of teamwork reinforces the learning.

Believing that the best way to learn collaboration is to begin, the IRDC is leaving a series of completed tasks in its wake. We have also left some failures. Our Americorps application failed as a project, even though it succeeded as a collaboration, because it created a functioning team that overcame several obstacles.

One could argue that some of our activities were not the most strategic to our mission or to our seven challenge areas of isolation, community leadership, restructuring the economy, natural resource utilization, infrastructure, education and health care. However, we have had projects that allowed players in each of these areas to come together and learn about one another while getting something done. We have discovered and filled several gaps in rural service delivery in the process.

Lesson 7. Different Perspectives Enrich a Collaboration

The IRDC experience has shown that different perspectives *do* enrich a collaboration. The cliché is true. We each have different skill sets, different life experiences, and different perspectives to offer a collaboration. The sum is greater than the parts, and no one person is responsible for success or failure. A diverse team may redefine a problem. For instance, an Hispanic representative of a development finance work group made a convincing argument that making culturally-appropriate technical assistance available could tap the economic growth potential of an often-overlooked segment of the community. Creative solutions often result from collaboration. In one training session, rural arts council staff helped community leaders draw pictures to learn about shared values.

Lesson 8. A Little Grease Helps Collaborative Wheels Turn

State rural development councils have small amounts of discretionary funds that can be used to increase the capacity of the Council. Idaho's experience has been that contributing very small amounts to encourage a collaboration can jump-start what becomes a substantial effort. The first commitment of resources makes the possibilities for success seem real. In addition, it helps legitimize the

IRDC as a player in the process who can make things happen. The Council is careful not to portray or operate this as a grant program, but to use its discretion where an action is strategic to our mission.

This notion of pump-priming works well for community-based collaborations, too. Small, flexible grants to help accomplish community priorities serve as an incentive to community groups far out of proportion to the size of the grant. This has been the case in Idaho with \$10,000 Gem Community Action Grants offered as a reward for community certification. Thirty-six grants totaling \$353,000 led to completed projects valued at \$2.6 million. Small U.S. Forest Service rural development grants and even smaller Resource Conservation & Development area (RC&D) discretionary seed money have similarly generated a lot of enthusiasm and achievements in rural Idaho.

Lesson 9. Drawbacks are Time Demands and Measurable Outcomes

The only criticisms we have encountered to the collaborative approach are that each activity involves substantial commitments of time by diverse members before success becomes apparent. Some of this time is later saved in not having to sell a plan of action or coerce others into contributing to it. Implementation tends to flow easily because all members see their roles and voluntarily do their tasks. Yet the cumulative time demands of working together on many issues takes its toll on agency staffs who shoehorn these projects into their workload.

The lack of quantifiable outcomes has several roots. Many IRDC accomplishments can be found in the process: information was shared more broadly; diverse parties were involved; customers were consulted. Additionally, many IRDC projects empower others with information to act, but leave the responsibility to act and change with the individual. Another significant issue is that horizontal networks have no central (and limiting) hub that can monitor all resulting actions. For instance, an IRDC survey found that one-third of members had been in partnership projects that were initiated through the IRDC, but not done as an IRDC project. This is to be encouraged. Decentralized networks are empowering and efficient, yet they frustrate funders who demand accountability. Perhaps the best measure of success is the satisfaction level of the members of the collaboration, which is why we conduct a membership survey.

Lesson 10. The Opportunities for Collaboration Are Numerous.

The farther we advance on the learning curve, the more we realize there is to learn, and the more we find possible to achieve for rural Idaho through collaboration. An arts representative and a health expert share a drive across the desert and return with an idea to use theatre to teach youth about health risks. The director of agri-

culture sees a way to use insects to control noxious weeds and create jobs for Native Americans at the same time. Conservation interests, regulators and farmers explore ways to coordinate farm plans. Utilities and a city association organize workshops on telecommunication.

The Idaho Rural Development Council may be a good example of the collaborative model at the state level. We strive to build top-down support for bottoms-up initiatives. However, there are hundreds more community-based groups in rural America grappling with their futures. Most are nonprofits or ad hoc groups like community development corporations, forest service action teams, grassroots sustainable development groups, groups concerned with the provision of health care, groups of environmentalists and land users working out resource management issues.

The more we work together, the more traditional turf lines fade. Connections between issues become apparent. The number of potential partners on any project multiplies. Problems are redefined and new solutions emerge. Collaboration is not easy, but building a sense of community to work together may be the best way to make progress for rural Americans in a fragmented, complex, and often paralyzed, world. I encourage each of you to get involved and begin to learn collaboration by doing it.

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