Original Article

Partnership tools for health promotion: are they worth the effort?

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Abstract: In health promotion and community sector programs, working through partnerships has become a key strategy for capacity building and infrastructure development that is intended to achieve better health outcomes. Government and funding agencies are providing significant support for partnership work in the apparent belief that partnerships are more likely to improve sustainability of programs and their outcomes than single agencies working alone.

Online partnership analysis tools are designed for organisations to measure the effectiveness of their collaborative endeavours, and to demonstrate to funding bodies that the partnership was worthwhile. The tools are predominantly self-assessment evaluation tools but there is a lack of clarity about what these tools actually set out to measure. Self-assessment tools assist partners to recognise strengths and weaknesses in their practice, but analysis of their intentions indicates that there are significant problems with the 'snapshot' data that is generated in terms of analysing effectiveness. Partnership work is complex, dynamic and context specific with varying synergistic rewards which cannot always be represented in survey tools. This article reports analysis of online self-assessment partnership tools which have data-generating capacity, to determine just what they measure and to understand how effective they can be in evaluating collaborative practice. Criteria for analysis were developed from a review of the existing literature. The review and analysis has highlighted that practitioners must consider what they are measuring and for what purpose they seek to evaluate before utilising and implementing a partnership analysis tool. (Global Health Promotion, 2011; 18(3): 8–14)

Keywords: collaboration, evaluation, partnership

Introduction

Complex health and social issues stretch the resources of all health and social care agencies, making it difficult for community-based organisations to operate effectively by themselves if they are to improve health and social outcomes in their communities. Funding bodies are beginning to mandate partnership work, to the point where it is mainstream practice for organisations because the investment in partnerships is thought to generate outcomes that could not be achieved by working alone. By developing partnership relationships, outcomes are achieved through coordinated approaches where perceived incentives from partnership work outweigh the reported drawbacks (1). Proponents of partnerships highlight the advantages of shared costs, resources, skills and knowledge along with increased innovation and more strategic visioning that arise from inter-organisational collaborative endeavours (2) although the systematic review by Smith *et al.* (3) found that to date there is no clear evidence of

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