



IN-PROFILE: AN UNFOLDING NARRATIVE OF COLLABORATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY AMONG CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

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Accountability and collaboration in civil society is potentially one of the more glaring sites for critique. While some institutions are mandated to, and purport to represent all young people, the nature of the accountability is unsatisfactory, as evidenced by little indication of feedback to young people about their work.

ALSO CONCERNING IS the silo mentality of civil society organisations, who are reluctant to venture into partnerships with one another. While this reluctance to collaborate can be explained by differing values and limited resources, such partnerships are vital in order to deepen the impact of their interventions. This article uses the example of the DDP Youth Desk to engage with concepts of collaboration and, to some extent, accountability in its work with youth organisations.

THE DDP YOUTH DESK 2017

DDP's vision for South Africa is for an active citizenry that can hold those in power to account. Part of this vision involves engaging with the youth in an attempt to mobilise young people as active citizens, foster critical thinking and to empower young people to make positive contributions to their schools and communities.

With the formation of the DDP Youth Desk, DDP moved from being the direct implementing body of youth-related projects, towards mentoring and collaborating with younger organisations whose core work involves the youth, and accompanying them on this journey. DDP invested significant time identifying and connecting with youth organisations operating within the communities that DDP is already involved in. From this, DDP was able to steadily build partnerships with youth-based and youth-led organisations

COLLABORATION: REALITIES OF WORKING WITH YOUTH ORGANISATIONS TOGETHER AS PARTNERS

The focus on building the capacity of youth organisations, and not being direct implementers of projects in communities seems to have worked well for the limited staffing at DDP. Given the nature of DDP's oversight and accompanying role, younger and newer organisations were given an opportunity to thrive, with logistical and design assistance from DDP.

Critically, the work appears to have shifted the way in which individuals see their work in communities, and the way in which the organisations themselves collaborate and negotiate agreements amongst themselves. Central to the success of the various partnerships was both the formal and informal opportunities for engagement that were made available, which included allocated time for networking and reflection on work done. Such an approach is vital in building relationships, maintaining a balance of power, and strengthening the development of the network.

AN EMERGING MODE OF PARTNERSHIP AMONGST YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

It is important that, when interacting with youth organisations, there is a deliberate attempt to create an environment of trust through transparency, responsibility and shared learning.

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency is more than just about saying who you are, why you're there, and where you come from as an organisation. Transparency also relates to the individual organisational stories of their interventions and sharing honestly about your own experiences. Identifying synergies, including discussions about challenges faced by an organisation, demonstrates an openness that is useful for youth development.

RESPONSIBILITY

Having an organisational culture that emphasises accountability through various mechanisms and policies that show clear lines of communication, responsibility and decision-making is likely to ease the anxiety associated normally with collaboration among youth organisations. Having a relationship built on shared responsibility also involves having previously agreed to consequences when responsibility is flouted. By agreeing to consequences for a lack of responsibility, accountability amongst collaborators is enforced and respected.

SHARED LEARNING

Given the diverse nature of youth development, shared learning is an important mechanism for enhancing understanding about youth and their contribution towards community development in their own constituencies. Youth organisations, by their nature, need to be dynamic and self-aware and it is vital to continually invest time in sustaining a learning platform. Such learning includes examining the potential indicators as part of the monitoring and evaluation plan, and also reflects critically on the way the working relationship within the organisations is going.

CHALLENGES WITH WORKING WITH YOUTH-LED/YOUTH-FOCUSED NGOS

Some of the issues that are often unique to working with youth organisations (especially at community level), present themselves only as the intervention unfolds and as such, it is difficult to plan for. An awareness of potential challenges needs to be built in to the implementation timelines as a buffer to mitigate the impact of these. Further challenges involve: developing a common vision; managing accountability; managing different power dynamics; and resource constraints. These are discussed in detail below.

DEVELOPING A COMMON VISION AS COLLABORATORS

Energy and priorities of youth organisations are vast and varied. Youth organisations are involved in different interventions in response to the particular challenges in their communities. Any collaboration that occurs must involve a shared vision – developing such a vision can involve a lot of time and effort.

MANAGING ACCOUNTABILITY

Because of the nature of the project, managing different groups means monitoring different deadlines and responsibilities. Such monitoring can put strain on the partnership. There needs to be an understanding of what it is that is negotiable and non-negotiable.

MANAGING POWER DYNAMICS AMONG YOUTH ORGANISATIONS WORKING TOGETHER

If there are no core common values, the cost of building the relationship is too extreme, to the detriment of the intervention. If organisations don't enter the relationship with a shared/common vision,

there will be a continued power struggle while each group view for their individual goals at the expense of others.

INFLUENCE OF RESOURCES ON PARTNERSHIPS

Resource scarcity is an impediment towards relationship building for a sustainable network functioning without a sense of dependence on the lead agency. Due to the nature of funding, particularly in South Africa, organisations that have more resources or access to funding, are likely to carry the burden for the most part of the intervention. Such an imbalance is harmful for the building of meaningful partnerships as those with resources can impose ideas that would not have been as readily accepted if it were not for the dependence on funding.

EMERGING LESSONS: EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The following are some of the lessons that are unfolding as the intervention continues:

MANAGING POWER EFFECTIVELY THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

During our work, we have realised that unless communication is transparent among all parties involved in a network, collaboration and accountability is hampered. Effective communication promotes collaboration in the following ways:

- ✦ Inter and intra-organisational relationships are developed and nurtured through open lines of communication;
- ✦ Effective communication strengthens trust among partners, especially as it relates to decision making and reaching consensus; and
- ✦ Effective communication fosters teamwork, especially in governance matters where

leadership is collective rather than individual-centred, thereby fostering accountability among partners.

BUILDING ON SHARED VALUES TO ENSURE LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO PROCESS AND CHANGE

Building on shared values to ensure long term commitment is a process that happens over time through increased interaction and information exchange as trust is built among partners. As partners identify with the values that bind them together in a network, they become more committed and invested in the partnership. Shared values have in them inherent benefits that promote collaboration and accountability among partners in a network such as:

- ✦ Influencing collective behaviour of partners in the network, as if partners are sensitive to each other a shared culture is developed that defines the network;
- ✦ Having the potential of deepening trust among partners, which is fundamental for creating a cohesive network culture; and
- ✦ Increasing the capacity of a network to outperform themselves due to the additional benefits of working in collaboration.

CONCLUSION

The DDP is persuaded that in enhancing youth development, there is a need to think about new modes of collaboration that strengthen partnerships and promote accountability between organisations and the communities in which they operate. The continued strengthening of DDP's Youth Desk program shows that having an emphasis on collaboration and shared accountability is a desirable approach recommended for civil society organisations seeking to deepen the impact of their interventions towards sustainable community development.