

## **Networking/Partnerships with Local Organizations**

### ***Description***

Local organizational networking and partnership means establishing relationships with other community organizations to further your common values or goals. The relationship may be between the CEDO and one other organization or with a group of them. Bringing local groups into collaboration to address the complexities of reversing community decline and improving community resilience can consist merely of an exchange of information or it can involve co-ordinated efforts on a common project. As examples of fostering specialized relationships, see [Entrepreneurial Network Facilitation](#), which includes such things a flexible manufacturing networks, or the technique of job search clubs in [Job Search Assistance](#).

Networking and partnership does not mean building some super-organization, but a loosely tied mutual consultation system that encourages co-operation and avoids any suspicion that one or another group is bossing everyone. After all, a CEDO cannot, by itself, do all the things necessary for CED success. Other organizations or individuals will do their part, but all will do that better if they can work together to complement each other's efforts.

When a network consists of only two organizations, it is likely that it will rest upon a rather specific project for which their partnership is established (such as dividing up the government agencies to be tracked - see [Government Liaison](#)). When it is a multi-group network, contacts may be as simple as a regular informal lunch meeting in which common problems are discussed. Or it can be a formal council that is publicly recognized as a partnership for that purpose. More specific than such mutual consultation efforts would be a committee that gets set up for collective action.

While networks are generally an on-going affair of mutual consultation, they may even be confined to a major one-shot meeting. At such a meeting basic understandings are reached and laid out, after which each of the organizations carries out its own part without regular cross-consultation with all the others.

The experience of an Ontario group, CODA (now Lutherwood-CODA), in its Opportunities 2000 project illustrates the variety of forms that local networks and partnerships can take. OP 2000, as it was called, was generously financed by public and private sources to help 2000 families in the region move from welfare to self-support in jobs or microenterprise. CODA knew that by itself it could not meet the goal of helping 2000 families in the time projected, so it sought community partners, at first simply by "millions of coffees" to talk about the possibilities with each potential partner separately. Later it would host monthly

meetings for all its partner groups together, in which the focus would be some topic of common concern to them, such as how to build alliances with the business sector or how to strengthen their own financial sustainability. Still later there came to be sub-groups that got together for collective action, such as publishing a manual on sustainability. And at a critical point in the process, the search conference format was used, by which a very diverse set of participants are set a task of innovative planning. So what emerged as important in the networking effort was not whether each of the groups helped CODA move the 2000 families, but whether they learned how to work together, and enjoyed it.

Different stages in the evolution and work of the CEDO probably call for different types of networking or partnership. There is good reason, therefore, to think out carefully the projected and intended outcomes of the networking effort, as well as the ways in which other organizations will be approached.

### ***Benefits***

What came out of the experience for CODA over the long term demonstrates the prime benefit of this tool. Namely, the most significant results in networking do not rest upon achieving the CEDO's own project aims. Rather, the way in which groups work together is most important for a continuing effort on common goals. It is the process of true partnership, not the operational projects that ultimately have the most powerful effect for coordinated action in the community. And just sharing information is essential, especially because groups tend not to know much about each other and therefore do not know much about the possibilities of all sorts of collaboration.

Information exchange is basic; yet moving toward some kind of meaningful common activity eventually becomes important for cementing the relationships. That activity is not necessarily a big project (and certainly not just the CEDO's own project), but it leads to some clear results that the participating groups all consider important and that all have contributed to.

### ***Major challenges***

It is only natural that the CEDO is focussed on making its own projects successful, and it may be difficult to recognize that more general contextual community conditions will be equally or even more important for the future of the community - such things as fostering common perspectives, mutual information sharing, and collective action on more general issues. The advocacy function of the CEDO in this connection is more difficult to maintain than attention to the operational details of the CEDO's own projects. Yet strengthening the community's capacity to collaborate is truly fundamental to building its resilience. A CEDO can continue to be relatively successful in its own limited projects, but the question is, Are these changing the

community? Are patterns of collaboration being created that engage many more than the CEDO itself?

To engage in networking is time-consuming. How is that time to be financially supported? Any major efforts, as in the CODA case, need to have financial support. Thus it becomes imperative that all project budgets get set up to be generous enough to allow that activity. That in itself can be a demanding pressure.

***Some practical steps***

1. The formation of networks and/or partnerships needs to be recognized by your CEDO as an important, even essential activity - as one part of the overall advocacy function of the CEDO. As such, then, it must have a place in the CEDO's budget. This is particularly important since success with this tool requires a kind of saturation effort - i.e., the more organizations contacted, the more chance for serendipitous results.
2. It should also be accepted that CED involves helping other organizations to do *their* thing; certainly, networking is partly a matter of finding partners for your own purposes, but it is more than that.
3. In the process of reaching out to others, if mobilizing support for any CEDO project is one objective, that part of the CEDO's motivation needs to be made clear at the outset.
4. It will not necessarily be easy to promote the CEDO's objectives even with the potentially friendly audience in other community organizations. So staff engaged in the process need to have some specific orientation on how to approach and talk with the other groups. Good networking won't necessarily come naturally, and so explicit planning and thinking can make a difference.
5. Try to structure the effort so that some specific meaningful accomplishment or result can come out of it, for the other organizations as well as your CEDO.

***Resource organizations & contacts***

The Imagine Program at the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy (425 University Avenue, Toronto, ON M5G 1T6) is based on building networks at the community level. Chris Pinney is the director (tel. 416-597-2293-x-228).

***Publications***

- **\*Case Study:** "Searching for Responses to Poverty." The application of the search conference technique brought greater unity of purpose to the vast range of participants in Waterloo (Ontario) region's ambitious Opportunities 2000 project.
- Frank and Anne Smith, *The Partnership Handbook* (HRDC, 1997), copies available from the website for HRDC ([www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/common/partnr.shtml](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/common/partnr.shtml)).

## *Tools & Techniques*

- National Association of Development Organizations, *The Power of Partnerships: A Guide for Practitioners and Policy Makers* (Washington, DC: NADO, 1998; 20pp.). This is the final report of a Ford Foundation-sponsored field research project on partnering by regional (esp. rural) development organizations.
- **\*Case Study:** “How Can Communities Reduce Poverty?” A look at the early stages of OP 2000. If poverty was essentially due to too little money or skills, state and private initiatives might be its equal. But given the complexity of the problem, action is required that is more comprehensive and more subject to local design and control.