RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Improving Partnership Governance: Using a Network Approach to Evaluate Partnerships in Victoria

Jeanette Pope
Department of Planning and Community

Jenny M. Lewis
University of Melbourne

Partnerships of various kinds are now widespread, but evaluating them is complicated. This article examines the usefulness of a network approach for analysing partnership effectiveness, where the central concern is governance. The approach is based on interviews, and for this evaluation they were conducted with 120 people from 10 different partnerships in Victoria. A detailed examination of network structures uncovers important features of partnerships, yielding crucial information about them as governing entities, and providing feedback to partners on where effort needs to be spent on relationship building. This article adds to the existing knowledge about what makes partnerships effective, and to the toolkit available for evaluating them.

Key words: *partnerships*, *community development*, *network analysis*

Partnerships which bring together a range of organisations in order to address a wide variety of issues are now widespread. They occur in many formats aimed at divergent topics – from public-private partnerships to deliver large infrastructure projects, to government-community partnerships to revitalise disadvantaged communities. This article examines the results of an evaluation of ten partnerships in community development run by the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development (the Department for Victorian Communities at the time this work was undertaken). The partnerships are local structures with government support, which reflect attempts to institutionalise the positive effects of networking (O'Toole 1997), and as such can be considered as managed networks (Lewis 2005b). A variety of terms are used elsewhere to signify these forms of governance (networks, alliances, collaborations, partnerships, etc). In this article, 'partnership' is used for the entities under examination (outlined in detail below), and 'network' refers to the concepts and techniques employed to evaluate the partnerships of interest.

The rise of partnerships as a means of addressing a range of policy problems has been followed by the recognition that evaluating them is not a simple task (Milward and Provan 1998). Nonetheless, policy-makers and practitioners need evaluation information to assess: 1) whether a partnership is performing well as a governing entity; 2) whether better decision-making resulted than would have been possible through the actions of single organisations (the 'value-add'); and 3) whether desired outcomes were achieved (Provan and Milward 2001; Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Benington 2001; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002; OECD n.d.). Examining outcomes is particularly challenging because partnership work is focused on complex issues where outcomes take time (Lewis 2004). In the short term, policy-makers and practitioners may need to rely on evaluation information about a partnership's performance as a governing entity and its value-add, to make judgements about effectiveness.

A comprehensive academic literature now exists on the characteristics of effective partnerships and some social science researchers have

undertaken large studies with robust research designs (for example, Provan and Milward 1995; Milward and Provan 1998). Nonetheless there are few tools based on that literature that can be utilised by evaluators for routine program evaluation. Many policy-makers and practitioners turn to the range of self assessment tools that have been designed for internal use by partnerships to examine their practice (for example, Audit Commission 1998; Hardy, Hudson and Waddington 2003; VicHealth n.d.). These tools take the form of checklists of the business principles for establishing and running effective partnerships. While they are a useful way for a partnership to perform a 'rapid appraisal (a quick "health check")' internally (Hardy, Hudson and Waddington 2003), they are limited as they generally do not focus on the network structures underlying the partnerships and may not have the objectivity/anonymity required for formal evaluation.

The department's approach to evaluating partnerships examines processes (governance and value add), achievements and outcomes. For the partnerships described in this article achievements and outcomes were measured using achievement audits, community satisfaction surveys and other methods, and the results for individual partnerships can be found in other reports as cited in the results. This article deals with the evaluation of processes. It focuses on the impact of partnerships in terms of improving governance, which is one of their major impacts (Giguere 2008). In order to do so, it examines partnerships (managed networks) as networks (a broader class of objects), using an approach based on network concepts and techniques.

The 10 partnerships are examined using a network approach created by one of the authors for Primary Care Partnerships (described in previous publications: Lewis 2005a; Lewis 2005b; Lewis, Baeza and Alexander 2008). The approach allows an external evaluator to examine a partnership's effectiveness by mapping and assessing its network structure, and examining how those involved in a partnership use and value it.

The aim here is to assess how useful this network tool is in creating information policy-makers and practitioners can use to evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships, and how useful it is for partnerships to diagnose structural and other shortcomings that may be making them less effective than they could be. The article focuses on governance to emphasise the utility of the tool in improving partnerships, even though the tool also captures information about value-add. It describes the characteristics of effective partnerships identified by the tool, and assesses whether these are the same as those identified in the theoretical literature and self assessment partnership tools. It should be useful both to those interested in methodologies for evaluating partnerships, and for practitioners interested in examining what makes them work well.

Partnerships in Community Development

A substantial literature now describes partnerships as a form of governance in community development (eg, in the UK, Skelcher et al. 1996; in the US, Mandell 1999). Partnerships described in this literature involve coalitions of public, private and not-for-profit organisations addressing issues that are complex enough in scope and scale to require a diversity of expertise and resources (Skelcher et al. 1996; Radin et al. 1996; Mandell 1999; Mandell 2001; Agranoff 2007). Organisations share responsibility for assessing the need for action, decide on what action will be taken, agree on implementation methods, and pool their expertise and resources (beyond information) for action (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). Carley (1991 in Skelcher et al. 1996:8) describes them as 'link[ing] stakeholders who have an interest and impact on economic development into a sustained agenda which can support successful development'.

Partnerships undertake activities that go beyond what can be achieved by their composite organisations alone (Macintosh 1992 in Sullivan and Skelcher 2002; Mandell 1999; Mandell 2002–03; Keast et al. 2004). For example, while individual organisations may be interested in improving service delivery, a partnership can focus on the system reform that cuts across services (Mandell 2001). In this type of

structure, each organisation (or individual) is 'only one small piece of the total picture', and broad social goals will only be met by them joining together to create new policy solutions (Keast et al. 2004).

As partnerships are based on the formation and maintenance of relationships, they require a unique kind of management that relies on network facilitation (O'Toole 1997; Mandell 1999; Mandell 2001; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002; Keast et al. 2004). A partnership facilitator, or 'broker', undertakes tasks related to managing behaviours, such as activating the right people, 'blending' participants with different goals and norms and establishing operating rules for them to deal with operational complexity (Agranoff and McGuire 2001).

The DPCD Partnerships

Over the past five years the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) has been brokering partnerships that bring together government, non-government organisations, businesses and community members to identify and address issues in specific geographic areas. These initiatives were established to acknowledge that social and economic restructuring over the past decades in Australia has affected communities differently. Some have lost major assets in the shift away from manufacturing towards service and knowledge industries, some are experiencing demographic change as their population's age or move to cities, and some have seen globalisation diminish control over their local circumstances (Howe and Cleary 2001). Traditional one-size-fits-all policy approaches have not been enough to address the specific issues facing some communities (Howe and Cleary 2001).

It is important to note that DPCD's partnerships are not seen as a panacea to disadvantage, but as one strategy that complements broader policy efforts, in particular universal service provision, as outlined in the Victorian government's social policy statement *A Fairer Victoria* (State Government of Victoria 2008) and vision statement *Growing Victoria Together* (GVT) (DPC 2005). GVT, for example, sets out the

social and economic investment, from the universal to the targeted, to reduce disadvantage (DPC 2005).

It was in part to target disadvantaged places that the department's community development arm was established in 2002. Its aim was to strengthen communities by strengthening local governance arrangements and this was deemed important for four reasons (DPCD 2007). First, there was a growing concern that governments were becoming distant from local communities and were difficult to navigate, complex, and sometimes uncoordinated. Second, there was increasing interest in the role of social capital and networks in community development and the potential role of governments in building networks. Third, there was a desire to engage communities in planning and civic life. And finally, there was increasing interest in examining ways governments could better work in partnership with business and local communities in the planning and delivery of services (DPCD 2007). DPCD's support for partnerships was also developed in response to a widespread recognition of the need for 'joined-up' solutions, promoted by governments in other countries (eg, UK Cabinet Office 1998) as well as in Australia (eg, Management Advisory Committee 2004).

The 10 partnerships examined in this article all address problems that need multi-agency solutions, such as transport disadvantage in rural areas, socio-economic disadvantage concentrated in particular geographic areas, socio-economically disadvantaged population groups (such as Indigenous populations), and disadvantage related to a lack of services in new 'growth areas' on the metropolitan fringe. The partnerships bring together a range of organisations concerned about these issues to find solutions that recognise a particular community's priorities, demography, culture, local economy and interests (Montgomery 2005). A summary of these 10 partnerships, in terms of the partners involved, investment by DPCD, funding for brokers, and stage of program development, is provided in Table 1.

All but one was instigated by DPCD after detecting partner's interest in an issue (the exception being initiated by the Council of

Table 1. Partnerships and Some Key Characteristics

Partnership	Prior investment by DPCD	Broker funded by	Stage of program evaluation tool was used in
The Caroline Springs Partnership in which the Melton Shire Council, Delfin Lend Lease and the department trialled a new way of planning and delivering infrastructure and services in a new development in Melbourne's growth areas	No But a state funded education services 'broker' was previously assisting in developing education infrastructure and services	Developer, Council, state government	Final evaluation After 15 months operation (project complete)
* The Aboriginal Council of Australia Governments (COAG) Partnership in Shepparton in which local, state and federal government and a coalition of Indigenous organisations and representatives are examining ways to improve the social and economic well-being of the Aboriginal community and support cultural sustainability (* Not instigated by DPCD)	No	State and federal government with administration support from local government	Interim evaluation In its fourth year, but only one since the Aboriginal Policy Unit was established to give the community better capacity to participate
Laverton Community Renewal in which local and state government, non-government organisations and residents are examining ways to revitalise one of Melbourne's outer suburbs through economic development, housing improvements, neighbourhood precinct renewal and improved governance	Yes Builds on previous DPCD funded community engagement activities	State government with administration support from local government	Interim evaluation In its second year
Transport Connections Partnerships (3 sites) in which local and state government, non-government organisations, community members, transport providers and local business are examining ways to develop transport solutions tailored to communities needs	No	State government with administration support from local government (2) and a volunteer agency (1)	Interim evaluation In its fourth year
Wimmera Regional Sports Assembly in which local and state government and health and sporting non-government organisations are examining ways to support and build the capacity of sporting groups and clubs in the region	No	State government with administration support from local government	Interim evaluation In its 25th year (ongoing work)

Three unspecified partnerships – data collected as baseline only. These partnerships were still in their relationship building phase (in their first year of operation)

Australian Governments). They are all voluntary and none were formed as a condition for receiving resources beyond the broker. Just under half were created in sites where investment and energy had already been undertaken to build a community or resident network – a precursor also reported as common in the UK (Lowndes et al. 1997).

In each case, DPCD provides support in the form of the broker – although in most the broker is jointly funded or supported by a partner agency in some way (for example, office and on costs) (see Table 1). The partnership's work plans are jointly funded by partners and other sources such as competitive grants processes. The partnerships are self governed and determine their own processes for operating. However, half are held accountable through performance criteria set by the department, rather than by the partnership.

In 2007 the 10 partnerships were evaluated using a network approach, in parallel with other evaluation activities. At the time of the evaluation, the partnerships had all been operating for different periods of time (see Table 1). One application of the tool was therefore part of a final evaluation, six were part of interim evaluations (after at least three year's operation) and three were collected as baseline information for partnerships that had just commenced and were still primarily in a relationship building phase.

A Network Approach to Partnerships

Network analysis is a method of collecting and analysing information from individuals/organisations that are interacting with each other (Provan et al. 2005). The unit of analysis is not the individuals or the organisations involved, but the relationships between them. To operate effectively as partnerships, there must be connections. In this case the cluster of relationships is within a partnership, based on information provided by the interviewees, but maps relationships between partners and others outside the partnership. Social network analysis, which focuses on analysing relational data, provides a useful set of concepts and analyti-

cal techniques for evaluating network structure. It encompasses tools for network visualisation and network analysis using graph theory, statistical and algebraic models, and a range of concepts aimed at examining global network structure, network sub-structures, and the position of individuals within these networks (see Wasserman and Faust 1994).

Focusing on network structure acknowledges that working together is fundamental to partnership work and should therefore be central to partnership evaluation. Provan and Milward (1995) argue that network effectiveness can be explained by an examination of aspects of structure and context. The approach taken in this evaluation was developed by one of the authors, based on combining an analysis of structure and agency. It examines connections (ties) between people, through the use of network mapping, which provides information on the connections between people, in relation to various purposes (structure). This is combined with an exploration of the quality of relationships within partnerships. A detailed explanation of this approach, and its foundations in social network analysis, can be found in Lewis (2005a; 2005b), and an example of its use over time, in Lewis, Baeza and Alexander (2008).

Using this approach involved interviewing up to 15 members of the partnership's steering committee (or equivalent governance body) in face to face or telephone interviews. 120 interviews were undertaken in total out of an identified sample of 139 (86% response rate). Four people refused to participate, and 10 declined because they were recently appointed onto their partnership and felt they could not comment on it as yet. Five could not be contacted (were on leave, etc). One undertook the interview but would not supply a list of their network contacts. Hence, there were very few non-respondents amongst those who were approached. The interviews were carried out by four interviewers, including the first author of this article, and all but two partnerships were interviewed by a single interviewer.

Interviewees were asked about: 1) their relationships with each of the other partners (including what was good and what was bad); 2) organisations or people that should have been

involved that were not; 3) the biggest successes or achievements that had resulted from the partnership (if any); 4) what had helped and what had hindered the partnership's work; 5) what could have been done better; 6) what lessons they had learned that could be translated elsewhere; and 7) sustainability (of the partnership activities or its outcomes). They were also asked to name the people they talked to most to undertake their day-to-day work in the partnership and to get strategic information about the partnership. This was used to generate the network maps.

The information provided in interviews was transcribed and grouped into themes by searching the text in MS Word. The respondent-generated effectiveness criteria, arising from the themes from the interviews, were used in an interactive fashion, along with the characteristics of effective partnerships identified in the literature. They were also checked off against the topics contained in a selection of self assessment tools.

The day to day work and strategic information network data were used to create two maps for each of the partnerships. In the network maps that follow (the first is a day to day network map and the second, strategic information), each dot is a person who was either interviewed or mentioned by someone who was interviewed. The lines and arrows indicate who nominated whom as someone they would talk to. The arrow head indicates the direction of the nomination (from who to whom) and the thicker lines indicate relationships that were signified as 'crucial'. A mapping option was chosen that places the most highly connected people in the centre of the maps – so the people with many lines going to and from them are in the middle of the maps, people with fewer connections are further out, and those nominated but not interviewed are peripheral. While centrality (ie, a measure of the number of ties to a person from others in a network), is widely regarded as an indicator of importance within a network (see Scott 2000), this does not unequivocally signal influence. Peripheral actors might yield large resources. The following discussion of the centrality should be read as a measure of importance of partnership members, but not necessarily as influence outside the partnership.

Results were reported back to the partnerships in the form of the maps, and a report that presented their themes assessed against the general characteristics found across the sites. Meetings were then held with the steering committees and brokers to discuss the results.

Characteristics of Effective Partnerships

Seven partnerships were deemed effective to varying degrees, based on the criteria that: 1) the partnership was performing well as a governing entity (based on this part of the overall evaluation); 2) better decision-making resulted; and 3) desired outcomes were achieved (based on other parts of the evaluation). These partnerships were the Caroline Springs Partnership (DPCD 2007), the Aboriginal COAG Partnership Shepparton (ACPS 2007), Laverton Community Renewal, three Transport Connections and Wimmera Regional Sports Assembly (Table 1). As the remaining three partnerships had their data collected as baseline data (after less than one year), it was too early to judge their effectiveness. Their results have been included when the absence of a factor was reported as hindering their work.

Analysis of the interview responses revealed a limited number of characteristics that were features of all the effective partnerships. Conversely, the absence of these features was reported as hindering some of the new partnerships. The characteristics were generally in line with those reported in the literature, and used in self assessment tools. They are described below in five categories: a good broker/facilitator to build relationships; the right decision-makers at the table with a commitment to contribute; a clear purpose; good process; and ongoing motivation through champions and evaluation. The maps of network structures were important for partnerships wanting to examine their interactions with others to identify strong connections as well as gaps. They provide important information in assessing the role of brokers and whether the right people are involved.

A Good Broker/Facilitator to Build Relationships

The first factor, a 'good broker' (facilitator, 'network administrative organisation' (Provan and Milward 2001)), was reported as the main thing that helped all partnerships. Two had experienced periods with no broker and one, at one time, had a broker they had not been happy with. These partnerships reported that the absence of a good broker was the main thing that had hindered their work. The brokers are easy to identify in the network maps, as highly nominated and centrally placed, as would be expected.

The partnership literature details the importance of brokers and the relationship building they undertake (Skelcher et al. 1996; Mandell 2001; Provan and Milward 2001; Keast et al. 2004). When partners first come together they do not necessarily see themselves as interdependent (Keast et al. 2004) and to achieve this requires building both trust in, and understanding of, other organisations (Mandell 2001; Lewis 2005b). The success of partnerships is therefore dependant on the relationship building that allows people to learn about each other and reshape any stereotypical views they hold (Mandell 2002–03). This area is not dealt with in self assessment tools as they do not assume that a partnership has a broker. Some self assessment tools however, do include checklist items about whether everyone in the partnership has networking skills (Hardy, Hudson and Waddington 2003), whether the partnership and its staff have the right skills for this work (Audit Commission 1998; VicHealth n.d.), and whether actions are being taken to build and maintain trust (Audit Commission 1998).

The reshaping of views about others was apparent in the partnerships in this study. Many of those interviewed reported their partnership's biggest achievement had been bringing people together across departments and organisations and learning about how others operate. This strengthened understanding between organisations, had broken down stereotyped views of others, and had made partners more aware of the constraints other organisations face.

Brokers were described as critical in the process of relationship building but were also described as useful because they:

- fostered co-operation;
- kept a bird's-eye-view over work and made sure that everything was completed;
- provided them with capacity that they otherwise lacked;
- assisted in navigating state bureaucracy; and
- identified opportunities and resources.

Partners reported the skills and experience needed by a successful broker were:

- communication, networking, facilitation and negotiation skills;
- project management skills;
- local knowledge and some standing in the community at a leadership level;
- knowledge of the workings of state and local government;
- to be seen as independent by all partners ('owned' by everyone) (trust); and
- to be highly personable and enthusiastic.

Partners reported brokers helped keep focus, minimised procrastination and prevented the 'down time' that occurs when work falls off busy people's radars. They therefore increased the speed with which things moved along.

In addition brokers were reported as being useful to deal with some of the biggest hindrances reported including: 'blockers' (organisations or individuals that slowed down partnership activity or acted against the interests of the partnership); staff turnover (particularly in state and federal government); and organisational silos (particularly in all levels of government).

The description of the utility of, and skills needed by, brokers revealed here is consistent with that in the literature. For example, Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) argue brokers need to (in order of correspondence with the dot points above): talk the right language and have networking skills; have organisational skills; show leadership; have entry into a variety of settings; be trusted; and see the 'big picture' and how partners contribute to that.

Figure 1. Aboriginal COAG Partnership Shepparton Day to Day Network
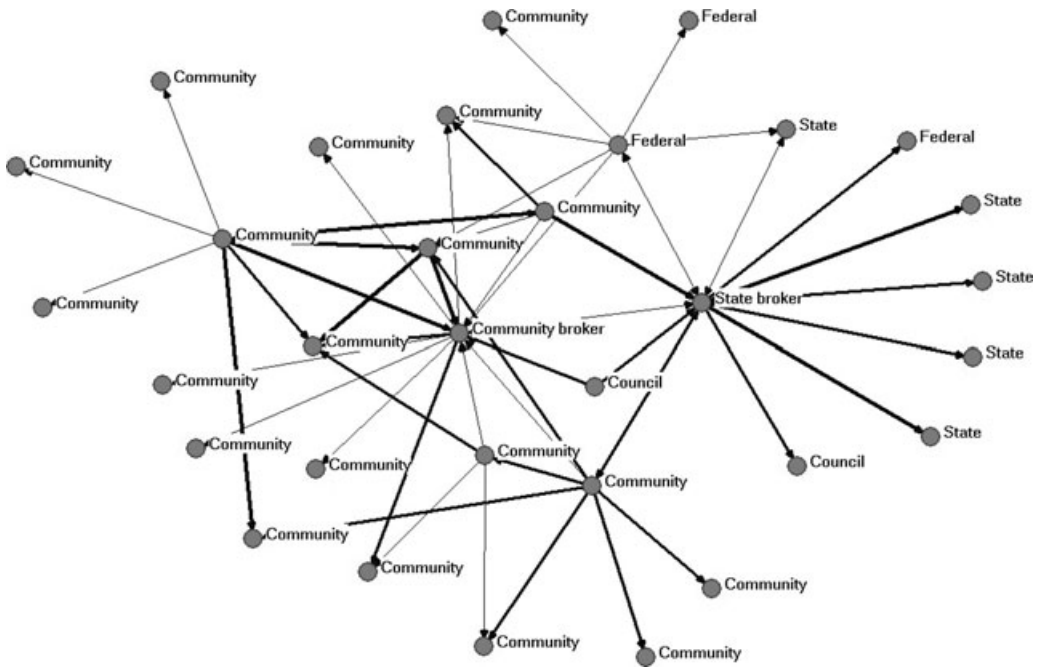

The importance of brokers is neatly illustrated by the two examples of the network maps shown in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows the day-to-day work network of the Aboriginal COAG Partnership in Shepparton. The two brokers are indicated – one is from the Aboriginal community's local Strategic Planning and Policy Unit (community broker) and the other is from state government (state broker). The two broker's connections extend to 32 people from 17 separate organisations/community members, and in particular connect the eight Aboriginal Non-Government Organisations and four community members to local, state and federal government (ACPS 2007). The brokers are connected to others predominantly through dark lines that indicate that the relationship was perceived by the Steering Committee member or broker as 'critical'.

The importance of a dedicated resource to get the day-to-day work of partnerships done was demonstrated in all the partnerships, but the Aboriginal COAG Partnership shows the importance of providing capacity to enhance a community's ability to take its place at a part-

nership table. Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) argue that building strategic, governance, operational, practice and community capacity is necessary for the effectiveness of any partnership. In Shepparton, this has been done through state and federal funding of an Aboriginal Community Strategic Policy and Planning Unit, which supports the Aboriginal community through community engagement, policy development, research, capacity building, communications and the building of stakeholder relationships (ACPS 2007). Many partners reported the creation of the Unit has improved progress towards the partnership's objectives (ACPS 2007).

Figure 2 shows the strategic information network for the Caroline Springs Partnership. Partners reported relationships were 'stormy' between the Council and developer and non-existent with state government (except with the then Department of Education) before the partnership (DPCD 2007). All organisations reported their relationships had improved enormously – to the point where there was now a large amount of trust and confidence in, and understanding of, each other – and that this

Figure 2. Caroline Springs Strategic Information Network
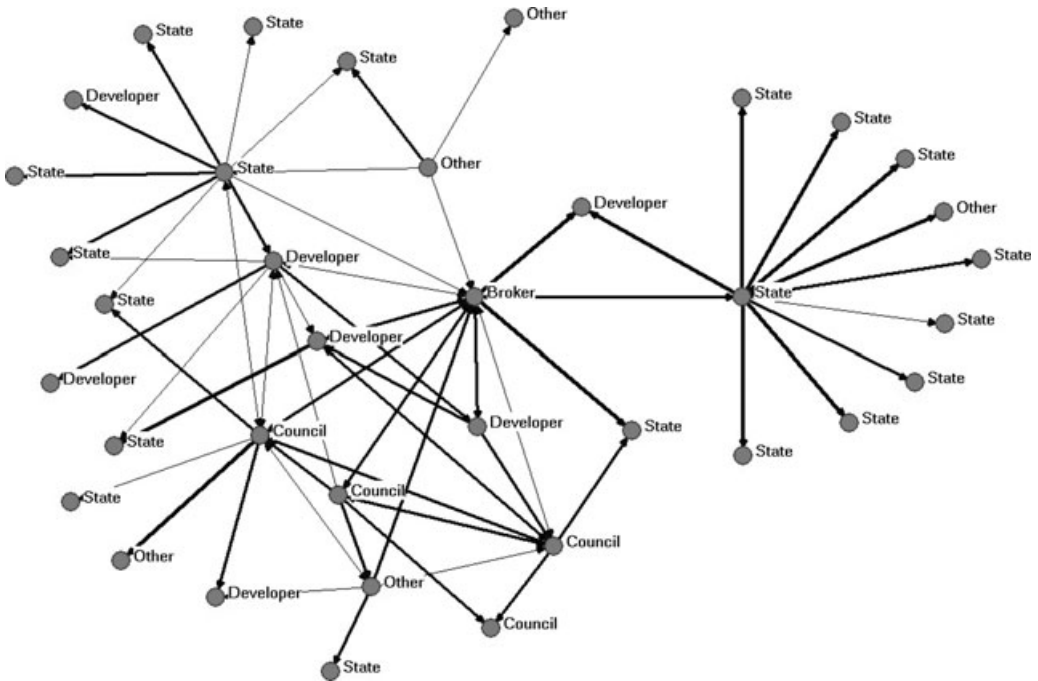
was largely the result of the broker. A well con-
nected local network has been created, as shown
to the left of Figure 2, which includes local gov-
ernment, regional state government agencies,
Delfin Lend Lease, local schools and some
non-government organisations. The state gov-
ernment broker can be seen on the right edge
of the left hand cluster. This broker links the
local network to a range of other state govern-
ment decision-makers, including three central
departments and the minister responsible for
planning. Again, the broker is connected to oth-
ers predominantly through dark lines and this
is because the relationship was perceived by all
Steering Committee members to be 'critical'.

This broker has since been removed (as the
project was complete), leaving behind a strong
local partnership that is moving on to new in-
frastructure development projects in the area. It
will need to foster links with outside agencies
to replace those that existed through the broker.
The network maps made the partnership aware
of this.

In the Caroline Springs Partnership inter-
views it was suggested a number of costs

savings offset the cost of having a broker
(DPCD 2007). These were savings from the:
1) reduced time professionals spent planning
because of more efficient processes (decreased
transaction costs); 2) economies of scale that
resulted from partners sharing building and
management costs of facilities; and 3) efficient
sequencing of services that meant there were no
gaps in planned activities (DPCD 2007). This
is an area that needs further work to determine
how cost-benefit (or 'value for money') should
best be assessed (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002).
Some self assessment tools pose questions re-
lated to costs and benefits (Audit Commission
1998) but in our research it was not something
partners felt they could readily assess.

***The Right Decision-Makers at the Table with
a Commitment to Contribute***

The second factor was having the right
decision-makers, with a commitment to con-
tribute, at the partnership table. The network
maps assisted in the assessment of this, as did
the analysis of the question about who else

should be involved to make the partnership more effective (see next section – *Feeding the Maps Back to the Partnerships*).

Having the right people at the table is described as critical in the literature (Skelcher et al. 1996; Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Mandell 2002–03; Keast et al. 2004). Skelcher et al. (1996) argue involvement and resources are the two most critical aspects of network effectiveness. All self assessment tools include checklist items about whether the right people are at the table and whether they are senior enough, committed, investing enough time/personnel/materials and have enough authority to contribute resources (Audit Commission 1998; Hardy, Hudson and Waddington 2003; VicHealth n.d.).

In this study the right decision-makers were described as those that had a commitment to taking work and information away, and who were senior enough to have the authority to make decisions and contribute resources. For example, the CEO of the Melton Shire Council kept Council informed of the activities of the Caroline Springs Partnership but was also delegated the power by Council to commit resources to its work. Several of those interviewed emphasised the importance of those involved not being 'seat warmers'. Seat warmers could be identified in the more detailed network maps as steering committee members who did not speak to anybody else about the work (including their own management) and did not, or could not, contribute resources (including labour).

One of the major hindrances reported by partnerships was having committees that were too large ('a cast of thousands') and subsequently having meetings that were long and repetitive as participants changed each time. The effective partnerships had adopted strategies to deal with this. Some limited who was involved and set up communication channels to keep peripheral organisations informed of activities. Organisations were considered peripheral if the opportunity costs of maintaining relationships were too high compared to the benefit they brought to action. An example would be building and maintaining links to federal government over issues where it had no 'levers' for action.

The Laverton Community Renewal Partnership identified 50 people from 22 organisations in its strategic information network. Its governance structure includes four committees that each report to the other. These are: a high level Strategic Partnership Group (chaired by the local MP) that includes state government departments, local government and non-government organisations; a Laverton Action Group that includes local government, residents and local organisations (including local business); a local government inter-council 'Directorate' that includes all the directors from all the departments of Council that meet regularly to discuss Laverton; and Working Groups focused on specific actions. This model reduces the opportunity costs for those involved, including residents.

Limiting partnerships is discussed elsewhere as sometimes being necessary and functional because it reduces disruption (Lowndes et al. 1997; Mandell 2002–03). The challenge is for partnerships to not be too exclusive (Skelcher et al. 1996) and to maintain legitimacy (Smith et al. 2006). These aspects of partnerships are not covered in any of the self assessment tools examined, except one which posed questions about ways to communicate to those not involved in the partnership (Audit Commission 1998) and posed questions about mechanisms to review partners with the view to adding or removing some (VicHealth n.d.).

A Clear Purpose

The third factor was having a clear purpose. This meant having a well articulated vision and objectives. In this study, partners in the most effective partnerships described their purpose coherently and consistently, and the interviewer left with a strong feeling of consensus around the vision. A clearly defined vision and objectives was reported as keeping people focused and clarifying roles and responsibilities so everyone was clear about what was expected of them. This was deemed important because decision-making processes in partnerships were seen as more difficult because of the range of voices that need to be taken into account and because they

involve negotiation about who should provide resources.

More importantly, a number of the partnerships argued that setting clear objectives helped them to prioritise their work. The effective partnerships had developed 'action plans' in consultation with their communities of interest to help them clearly state their priorities and keep them focused on what they needed to do. Partnerships that are focused on issues such as socio-economic disadvantage can be overwhelmed by the work that still needs to be done. The Aboriginal COAG Partnership, for example, the biggest lesson was to focus its limited energies on several priority areas (governance, cultural enhancement, education and employment), and this strategy appears to have worked in terms of them beginning to achieve results (ACPS 2007).

The importance of shared goals and clarity of purpose is discussed in all partnerships literature (Skelcher et al. 1996; Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Mandell 2002–03; Keast et al. 2004). If the reasons different organisations join together mesh, the partnership is likely to be more effective (Skelcher et al. 1996; Mandell 2002–03). It is also understood that there needs to be formal requirements on activities so people in partnerships are clear about their roles and responsibilities (Skelcher et al. 1996; Mandell 2002–03). These aspects of partnerships are included in all self assessment tools with checklist items on why the partnership exists and whether objectives are clear and realistic, outcomes are defined and responsibilities and roles understood (Audit Commission 1998; Hardy, Hudson and Waddington 2003; VicHealth n.d).

Good Process

The fourth factor was having good processes for running meetings, creating work plans and documenting activities. Most of the partnerships in this study operated under clear process and decision-making rules, but the partners that reported theirs did not were left feeling unsure about their role, or frustrated by long meetings and the inability to get decisions made. A number of partners, particularly in those rural areas,

voiced frustration that little guidance is available about process, both in the form of tools and training, and in the lessons or experience from others about previous partnership activities.

The most comprehensive summary of corporate governance requirements for partnerships can be found in Sullivan and Skelcher (2002:153). Broader aspects of accountability are also well canvassed in Smith et al. (2006). They argue the partnership should set terms of reference and set clear procedures (written policies) for selecting a chair, setting a quorum, decision-making (consensus or voting), written records of meetings, roles of members, contracting work and complaints. The partnership should also write an equal opportunity policy and ensure all members are involved in decisions, receive papers in good time and determine the style of their meeting and ensure accessibility. Finally, the partnership should make the evidence underlying its strategic plans public. The self assessment tools all canvass issues about process through questions about accountability, operational arrangements, efficiency, administration and management and whether the partnership and its staff have the right skills for this work (Hardy, Hudson and Waddington 2003; Audit Commission 1998; VicHealth n.d).

Ongoing Motivation through Champions and Achievement Reports

The fifth factor was finding ways to keep people motivated to stay involved. Most partnerships work on complex, long term projects and it can therefore be difficult to keep motivation high. Partnerships working on the most intractable problems can also fail to see the impacts of their activities because they are so focused on what more needs to be done. Two strategies were described by effective partnerships for dealing with these problems.

The first was using champions. Having members of parliament, local identities, business people or local government councillors say a partnership was worth trying was seen to be good for motivation, community confidence and making others receptive to providing assistance (a 'door opener'). The second strategy

was to use systems set up to collect evaluation data to regularly report achievements back to the partnership and community for which it was working. Many reported that scepticism gave way with the reporting of successes such as funding obtained or the implementation of projects on the ground.

Champions from the wider authorising environment (rather than from within the partnership), is not an issue that is canvassed in the literature or the self assessment tools. Evaluation is widely canvassed but there is less written about this in terms of the need to show progress to the partners (and the community) to keep motivation high (Skelcher et al. 1996). Most self assessment tools, on the other hand, contain checklist items about monitoring, review, achievements and the wide dissemination of these (Hardy, Hudson and Waddington 2003; Audit Commission 1998; VicHealth n.d).

Feeding the Maps Back to the Partnerships

Part of the interactive design of this evaluation, was to feed the network maps back to the partnership's brokers and Steering Committees so they could visualise the structure of their partnership, and examine the role of their organisation within it. There are some examples in the literature of network analysis being used in this way to help communities build their networks (Skelcher et al. 1996; Provan et al. 2005) including some that outline questions that can be posed (Provan et al. 2005). Using the maps from our study, the brokers and partnerships were encouraged to discuss:

- whose voices are included and are these the right people/groups to address the problem?; who does not speak to people back in their home organisation?;
- have relationships been strengthening over time?;
- which organisations that are vital to the success of the work have tenuous links?; who is not involved that should be?; should involvement be broadened/limited?;
- who has links to important resources and decision-makers?; if someone left, what

links to external decision-makers would be lost?; how sustainable are the relationships over time?; and
- how is the partnership linked to the democratic institutions of government and to the community of interest?; are there capacity issues for the community in being involved?

Examining these questions about where additional relationship building was necessary ensured the question of legitimacy was raised and discussed.

Partners enjoyed the novelty of the maps as a way to view and analyse their partnership. In addition, in some cases the external interviewer became a real asset to a partnership after the evaluation by providing another resource the broker could utilise to discuss facilitation issues.

Conclusion

This article assessed the extent to which an approach that is centred on network structures, could assess the effectiveness of partnerships as governing entities. Several strong themes emerged from the interviews describing the characteristics of effective partnerships and these characteristics resonate strongly with what has been said about effectiveness in this (now quite substantial) literature. Focusing on network structures and relationship building highlights what partnerships require in terms of governance if they are to be effective.

These findings add to a growing literature describing the ways network analysis can assist policy-makers and practitioners in the evaluation of their partnership initiatives (Milward and Provan 1998). While network structures and relationship building are acknowledged as key features of partnerships in the theoretical literature, these aspects are only touched on by some self assessment tools, notably the VicHealth tool, which starts by mapping who is in the partnership (VicHealth n.d). Partnership evaluation should also assess how a partnership fits in the broader political and institutional environment – and its links to power and other strategic decision-makers outside the partnership. This article indicates the value of

analysing network structures, which can be fed back to partnerships to help improve them.

Finding ways to evaluate the governance aspects of partnerships is important because outcomes can take years to deliver. A process evaluation that is network centred, such as the one outlined here, provides those involved in partnerships with a useful diagnostic for identifying and addressing disconnections so they can shape their future operations in ways that are most likely to lead to strong structures and effective partnerships. Used alongside evaluations that examine achievements and outcomes, this provides a robust means for measuring effectiveness.

Over time the department will repeat this research in these partnerships to create time series data. It will also continue to match the network data collected from the partnerships with other data collected about the outcomes generated for communities. The authors are working to make the information from this research available to policy-makers and practitioners through a DPCD website to assist in running effective partnerships, which will include a manual for the approach described in this article.

Acknowledgements

References

ACPS [Aboriginal COAG Partnership Shepparton]. 2007. *Report to Community 2007: Select Achievements of the Aboriginal Partnership with the Council of Australian Governments, Shepparton*. Shepparton: Aboriginal Community Strategic Policy and Planning Unit. URL: <http://www. sppu.org/SPPU%20Aboriginal%20Partnership%20Report.pdf>. Consulted 8 February 2008.

Agranoff, R. 2007. *Managing within Networks: Adding Value to Public Organizations*. Washington: Georgetown University Press.

Agranoff, R. and M. McGuire. 2001. 'After the Network is Formed: Process, Power and Performance.' In *Getting Results through Collaboration. Networks and Network Structures for Public Policy and Management*, ed. M.P. Mandell. Westport CT: Quorum Books, Chapter 2.

Audit Commission. 1998. *A Fruitful Partnership: Effective Partnership Working*. London: Audit Commission. URL: <http://www.audit-commission. gov. uk / reports / NATIONAL-REPORT. asp? Category=ID&ProdID=A190CA25-7A7E-47D1-BCAB-373A86B709C0>. Consulted 8 February 2008.

Benington, J. 2001. 'Partnerships as Networked Governance? Legitimation, Innovation, Problem Solving and Co-ordination.' In *Local Partnerships and Social Exclusion in the European Union*, eds M. Geddes and J. Benington. London: Routledge.

DPC [Department of Premier and Cabinet]. 2005. *Growing Victoria Together*. Melbourne: State of Victoria.

DPCD [Department of Planning and Community Development]. 2007. *Strengthening Local Communities: Integrated Local Area Planning in Growth Suburbs. The Evaluation of the Caroline Springs Partnership*. Melbourne: Department of Planning and Community Development. URL: <http://www.dvc.vic.gov.au/web14/dvc/dvcmain. nsf/headingpagesdisplay/research+and+publicationsresearch+and+other+information>. Consulted 8 February 2008.

Giguere, S. 2008. The Use of Partnerships in Economic and Social Policy: Practice Ahead of Theory. In *The Theory and Practice of Local Governance and Economic Development* eds M. Considine and S. Giguere. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hardy, B., B. Hudson and E. Waddington. 2003. *Assessing Strategic Partnership: The Partnership Assessment Tool*. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. URL: <http://www.comm unities. gov. uk / publications / localgovernment / assessingstrategicpartnership>. Consulted February 2008.

Howe, B. and R. Cleary. 2001. *Community Building: Policy Issues and Strategies for the Victorian Government*. Melbourne: Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Keast, R., M.P. Mandell, K. Brown and G. Woolcock. 2004. 'Network Structures: Working Differently and Changing Expectations.' *Public Administration Review* 64(3):363–371.

Lewis, J.M. 2004. 'Partnerships, Primary Health Care and Health Inequalities: Problems and Possibilities.' *Australian Journal of Primary Health* 10(3):38–45.

Lewis, J.M. 2005a. 'A Network Approach for Researching Partnerships in Health.' *Australia and New Zealand Health Policy* 2:22.

Lewis, J.M. 2005b. *Health Policy and Politics: Networks, Ideas and Power*. Melbourne: IP Communications.

Lewis, J.M., J.I. Baeza and D. Alexander. 2008. 'Partnerships in Primary Care in Australia: Network Structure Dynamics and Sustainability.' *Social Science and Medicine* 67:280–291.

Lowndes, V., P. Nanton, A. McCabe and C. Skelcher. 1997. 'Networks, Partnerships and Urban Regeneration.' *Local Economy* 11(4):333–342.

Management Advisory Committee. 2004. *Connecting Government. Whole of Government Responses to Australia's Priority Challenges*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Mandell, M.P. 1999. 'Community Collaborations: Working through Network Structures.' *Policy Studies Review* 16:86–102.

Mandell, M.P. 2001. 'Collaboration Through Network Structures for Community Building Efforts.' *National Civic Review* 90(3):279–287.

Mandell, M.P. 2002–03. 'Types of Collaborations and Why the Differences Really Matter.' *The Public Manager* Winter: 36–40.

Milward, H.B. and K.G. Provan. 1998. 'Measuring Network Structure.' *Public Administration* 76:387–407.

Montgomery, J. 2005. *Community, Place and Buildings: The Role of Community Facilities in Developing Community Spirit*. Melbourne: Department for Victorian Communities. URL: <http://www.dvc.vic.gov.au/web14/dvc/dvcmain.nsf/headingpagesdisplay/research+and+publicationsresearch+and+other+information>. Consulted 8 February 2008.

OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development]. n.d. *Local Governance and Partnerships: A Summary of the Findings of the OECD Study on Local Partnerships*. URL: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/51/42/1962067.pdf>. Consulted 8 February 2008.

O'Toole, L. 1997. 'Treating Networks Seriously: Practical and Research-Based Agendas in Public Administration.' *Public Administration Review* 57:45–51.

Provan, K.G. and H.B. Milward. 1995. 'A Preliminary Theory of Interorganizational Network Effectiveness: A Comparative Study of Four Community Mental Health Systems.' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 40:1–33.

Provan, K.G. and H.B. Milward. 2001. 'Do Networks Really Work? A Framework for Evaluating Public-Sector Organizational Networks.' *Public Administration Review* 61(4):414–423.

Provan K., M. Veazia, L. Staten and N. Teufel-Shone. 2005. 'The Use of Network Analysis to Strengthen Community Partnerships.' *Public Administration Review* 65(5):603–614.

Radin, B., R. Agranoff, A. Bowman, G. Buntz, S. Ott, B. Romzek and R. Wilson. 1996. *New Governance for Rural America*. Lawrence: University of Kansas.

Scott, J. 2000. *Social Network Analysis: A Handbook*. London: Sage.

Skelcher, C., A. McCabe, V. Lowndes and P. Nanton. 1996. *Community Networks in Urban Regeneration*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

Smith, M., N. Mathur and C. Skelcher. 2006. 'Corporate Governance in a Collaborative Environment: What Happens when Government, Business and Civil Society Work Together?' *Corporate Governance: An International Review* 14(3):159–171.

State Government of Victoria. 2008. *A Fairer Victoria: Strong People, Strong Communities*. Melbourne: State Government of Victoria.

Sullivan, H. and C. Skelcher. 2002. *Working Across Boundaries: Collaboration in Public Services*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

UK Cabinet Office. 1998. *Modernising Government*. London: HMSO.

VicHealth, n.d. *The Partnerships Analysis Tool: For Partners in Health Promotion*. Melbourne: VicHealth. URL: <http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/VHP%20part.%20tool_low%20res.pdf>. Consulted 8 February 2008.

Wasserman, S. and K. Faust. 1994. *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*. New York: Cambridge University Press.