



CPRN Policy Brief

Canadian Policy Research Networks

Number 12

November 2006

Keys to Success in Federal-Provincial-Territorial Collaboration

Two of the most vexing challenges facing governments today are to:

- integrate programming across departments
- work collaboratively with other governments

Meanwhile, two small, low profile programs have been quietly doing the job for more than 10 years. Here are some of the lessons we can learn from them.

Background

In 1993, Canadian governments signed the protocols to establish in each province and territory the *Community Action Program for Children* (CAPC) and the *Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program* (CPNP). These two programs continue to deliver much needed services to support the health and development of children at risk under six and their parents. Together, they have created a network of over 750 funded projects in communities across Canada.

Most of the money for the programs came from the federal government, but they were administered by provincial and regional Joint Management Committees which linked the interested parties vertically (from Ottawa through provinces and territories to community leaders and parents) and horizontally (across ministries of health, families and children, community, education, training and agencies in each jurisdiction).

In 2005, the Family Network of CPRN completed a review of the Joint Management process, to help inform the new Public Health Agency of Canada

about the potential for using it as a model of collaborative multi-level governance.

It quickly became clear that CAPC and CPNC have serious challenges in today's political environment. In 1993, CAPC and CPNC were "the only show in town" when it came to child and family programming. They now face a proliferation of more recent federal and provincial programs attempting to deliver child care, early learning and a wide variety of health initiatives for preschool children. Each of these has its own intergovernmental agreement, governance and evaluation criteria. The competition for attention and dollars is intense.

In this context, it is not surprising that commitment to the Joint Management process has diminished, making it increasingly difficult to bring the relevant federal-provincial-territorial players together. Yet continuing evidence of so many children in distress highlights the need for continued collaborative interventions.

Keys to Success

Overall, the review concludes that the Joint Management Committees were the right kind of mechanism for the time. The design of both CAPC and CPNC was considered path-breaking in the early 1990s, and the joint process helped to establish the trust and problem-solving environment essential to success for at least the first six years. Today, the programs remain relevant and important, but the governance hasn't evolved and is under stress.

What were the ingredients of success?

- A rigorous framework for co-operation. It worked well because of:
 - clearly negotiated roles and responsibilities;
 - stability in membership, at least for the first five to six years; and
 - considerable flexibility to manage and operate the programs to reflect local needs, free of the constraints of intergovernmental politics.
- Information sharing helped to strengthen programming across the country and provided considerable knowledge which influenced the design of later early childhood initiatives.
- Strong commitment “through good times and bad times” by the two levels of government, including the departments and ministries involved and by the community coalitions.
- Effective working relationships. A sense of trust and respect enabling compromise and consensus when needed. This was fostered by strong and co-operative leadership from co-chairs.
- Significant levels of federal funding at the outset. However, the uncertainty in federal funding has eroded working relationships since 1997.

Weaknesses identified included the following:

- Limitations and uncertainties on the scope of the protocols, which have made it difficult for the parties to support integration with other related programs for families with children.
- Uncertainties about the level of federal funding, after 1997.

- Lack of transparency on the part of provinces and territories with respect to their plans for use of the subsequent funding for Early Childhood Development.
- Frequent reorganizations of government departments, ministries and agencies, including the introduction of regional health authorities. This has also contributed to disruptive turnover in membership in the Joint Management Committees since 2000.
- Lack of documentation of the payoffs from sharing best practices across jurisdictions.
- Lack of funding to finance periodic meetings, to undertake committee work, and to support training and professional development across regions and communities.

Now the two programs are caught in a time trap. The rigorous protocol that guaranteed success in the 1990s has not been adapted to the evolving context. This reflects rising tensions in intergovernmental relations and the constant flux in government programming and in federal and provincial organizational structures.

Governments undertaking new collaborative initiatives from now on can learn a lot from the initial success of CAPC and CPNP as well as from the weaknesses that emerged in the later years. And certainly it is in the interest of citizens and taxpayers to see much more effective integration of programming horizontally across governments and vertically from Ottawa to the community level.



Interested in discussing this work or collaborating in research in this or a related area?

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