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# Ambiguity, complexity and dynamics in the membership of collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the role that membership structures of inter-organizational collaborations have on the achievement of *collaborative advantage* in the context of tackling social issues. Based on action research involving participants in a wide variety of collaborative situations, the paper aims to explore the nature of the membership of collaborations in practice. A picture of membership is built up from two perspectives. The first considers the *structure* of collaboration, and argues that ambiguity and complexity in structure may be demonstrated over many dimensions. The second adds another layer of complication through exploring the *dynamics* of the way in which membership structures change over time. The paper concludes by examining the implications for practitioners and policy makers of this picture in terms of its effect on the design of collaborations and on the factors which tend to lead to *collaborative inertia* instead of collaborative advantage.

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## Introduction

### Collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia

*The regeneration of our most deprived urban communities is a major challenge for all of us and requires the commitment of a wide range of key players over a number of years. . . . Those involved in housing, planning, education, child care and social work must work alongside those with a role in economic development, health and crime. . . .*

> *(Calum MacDonald, MP, quoted in a Scottish Office news release, 20 March 1998)*

Partnerships, alliances and other forms of inter-organizational collaborative arrangements are now a commonplace part of institutional life. Government policy documents and advisory papers abound with quotations in the spirit of that above and an ever increasing number of papers on the subject relating both to business concerns and to social issues is appearing in the management, strategy and policy literature on the topic (see, for example, *Academy of Management Journal*, 1997; Coulson, 1997; Healey, 1997; Inkpen & Beamish, 1997; Kickert et al., 1997; Osborne, 1997; Painter et al., 1997; Vansina & Taillieu, 1997). Understanding how to manage across organizational boundaries has been argued to be almost as significant as knowing how to manage within organizations (Kanter, 1994; Metcalfe, 1993).

Much of what will be reported in this paper is applicable to inter-organizational collaborative arrangements in all sectors. The specific focus, however, is on collaborations concerned with tackling social issues in which public agencies and non-profit (community and voluntary) organizations are the main partners although private sector businesses are also sometimes involved. There is a huge, and ever increasing, variety of such partnerships, set up – both voluntarily and from government mandate – to tackle issues such as rural development, urban regeneration, economic development, health promotion, service delivery, drug abuse, poverty, safety, community care, housing and so on. Whatever the specific purpose, most will be aiming to gain *collaborative advantage*; that is, to achieve outcomes that could not be reached by any of the organizations acting alone (Huxham with Mac- Donald, 1992; Huxham, 1996a). There is ample evidence, however, that inter-organizational arrangements are difficult to manage and often fail to meet expectations (Himmelman, 1994; Medcof, 1997; Meschi, 1997; Webb, 1991). Instead of achieving collaborative advantage, they often degenerate into a state of *collaborative inertia* in which the rate of work output is much slower than might be expected (Baumhauer & Naulleau, 1997; Huxham 1996a; Huxham & Vangen, 1996a). As former manager of a

community anti-poverty organization recently commented:

> . . . I was involved in a lot of joint projects, but I gave up on many of
> them . . . there is only so much time that you can spend at meetings
> that don't achieve anything.

Over the past 10 years the current authors have been engaged in research
which aims to develop practice-oriented theory into the management of
collaboration (Huxham & Vangen, 1998a, 1998b; Vangen, 1998). A key thrust
has been to develop a detailed conceptual understanding of the factors which
lead to collaborative inertia, and, hence, by implication, of the challenges
which face practitioners actually involved in making collaboration happen.
In brief, among the factors which tend to induce inertia are: difficulties in
negotiating joint purpose because of the diversity of organizational and
individual aims which those involved bring to the collaboration; difficulties
in communicating because of differences in professional (and
sometimes natural) languages and organizational (and sometimes ethnic)
cultures; difficulties in developing joint modes of operating given that the
partner organizations inevitably operate quite different internal procedures
from each other; difficulties in managing the perceived power imbalances
between partners and the associated problem of building trust; difficulties of
managing the accountability of the collaborative venture to each of the
partner organizations and to other constituencies while maintaining a
sufficient degree of autonomy to allow the collaborative work to proceed;
and difficulties with the sheer logistics of working with others who are based
in physically remote locations.

Other articles have developed detailed conceptualizations of many of the
above factors and this process is ongoing (Eden & Huxham, 1998;
Huxham, 1993a; Huxham & Vangen, 1996a; Vangen & Huxham, 1998;
Vangen et al., 1994). In this paper we focus on one aspect of collaborative
structures – their membership – which, we shall argue, impacts negatively
upon all other factors which can lead to inertia.

### Membership of collaborations

Much of the literature on inter-organizational relationships stresses that *who is
involved* is a significantly important factor in gaining advantage rather than
inertia from collaboration. Mattessich and Monsey (1992), for example, cite
'having an appropriate cross-section of members' as the most frequently
mentioned 'success factor' in their literature review, and Huxham
(1996b).

Concludes, in an edited volume, that 'who should be involved and how' is a theme which runs through almost all of the contributions in the book. Much of this literature is prescriptive, or at least implies prescription.

A key theme in the literature on the membership of public and com- munity sector collaborations is with the identification of *stakeholders*; for example:

> [One aspect of the initial leadership task is to] identify the relevant community of interests: the stakeholders. . . . In the context of collaboration, the term means those people who are responsible for problems or issues, those who are affected by them, those whose perspectives or knowledge are needed to develop good solutions or strategies, and those who have the power and resources to block or implement solutions or strategies.
>
> (Chrislip & Larson, 1994: 64–5)

> Member factors include who is invited to participate in a collaboration and their willingness to participate. . . . One of the most serious limitations is not involving key stakeholders. . . .
>
> (Gray, 1989:262)

> Similar statements may be found in Auluck and Iles (1991); Long and Arnold (1995); McCann (1984); Tilson et al. (1997); Waddock (1988); Wilcox (1994); Winer and Ray (1994) and many other sources.

Taken out of context the advice often appears conceptually simple; for example, Mattessich and Monsey quoted above summarize the advice of the authors they reviewed as:

> the collaborative group [should] include representatives from each segment of the community who will be affected by its activities.
>
> (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992: 12)

Some authors do recognize that the reality may be more difficult to enact. Gray (1985), for example, comments that stakeholders may not be easily identifiable and may not be concerned with the problem simultaneously. Our own experience, gained from extensive work with people involved in a large variety of collaborative initiatives, certainly suggests that what happens in practice with respect to membership of real collaborations is both more complex and more ambiguous than a face-value reading of the literature would suggest. It is our experience, for example, that many of those involved centrally in collaborations are unable even to specify who the members are.

This is not a matter of memory or record keeping; the collaborations quite simply have an ill-defined membership. This point is explored in more detail later in this paper.

Given that the membership of collaborations is generally regarded as important to success, it seems reasonable to contend that an understanding of the issues involved will be valuable for collaborative practice. This paper therefore aims to unravel some of the ways in which, in practice, the member-ship of collaborations – and the meaning attributed to the term 'member' – is both complex and ambiguous. A picture of membership is built up from two perspectives. The first considers the *structure* of collaboration, and argues that ambiguity and complexity in structure may be demonstrated over many dimensions. The second adds another layer of complication through exploring the *dynamics* of the way in which membership structures change over time. The paper concludes by examining the implications for practitioners and policy makers of this picture of ambiguity, complexity and dynamics in two ways: first in terms of the implications for the design of collaborations, and second in terms of its effect on the factors which produce *collaborative inertia.*

### Research base

The paper is based on action research of the type described by Eden & Huxham (1996). This paradigm involves the researcher intervening in the organizations studied and working with organizational members – for example, in the role of consultant or facilitator – on a matter of genuine concern to them and over which they have a genuine need to take action. Research data and insight are gained alongside – or on the back of – the intervention. The theory derived is 'emergent'; that is, it is produced inductively from the data. It is created incrementally, with each intervention having the potential to test out, and add to, existing theory. This form of action research is thus a phenomenological research approach and is in contrast to those which are essentially a form of organizational development (Eldon & Chisholm, 1993), a form of self-development (Whitehead, 1994), or a form of empowerment (Stringer, 1996; Whyte, 1991). It is also in contrast to those forms which place emphasis on inclusion of hypothesis-testing experiments in the intervention (Alderfer, 1993; Lewin, 1946).

The action research from which the following arguments are derived has taken place over nearly 10 years during which time the authors have worked extensively with people directly involved in collaborative initiatives. This has involved: one-to-one 'consultancy'; group decision support facilitation; of

collaboration awareness raising workshops; in depth interviewing of members of collaborative groups; work with managers of an alliance aimed at developing methods for helping community workers to assist collaborative com- munity groups; and direct involvement as participants in collaborations. The settings have generally, but not exclusively, been concerned with social issues. Some interventions have continued over a number of years while others have lasted just half a day (Huxham & Vangen, 1998b).

During these interventions, the expressed experiences, views, action-centered dilemmas and actual actions of participants have been recorded as research data in a variety of ways. These include: cause maps (stored on computer using the software, *Decision Explorer* (Banxia, 1996)) containing individuals' views expressed in interviews; cause maps prepared for and developed during group decision support workshops containing combined views of collaborative group members; video recordings of workshops; notes from meetings with people involved in collaborative initiatives; models of aspects of collaborative practice developed with people involved in collaborative initiatives; flip chart responses developed during awareness raising workshops; notes taken while observing meetings or workshops; documents produced by organizations or collaborations such as minutes or strategy documents; notes of comments made by those who have listened to our presentations or read articles we have written; and notes from meetings between ourselves and fellow researchers as we try to analyze and conceptualize the situations we have been involved in.

The various records described above amount to a vast quantity of data which relate to many different aspects of collaboration. In order to build up a picture which focuses specifically on membership of collaborations, the data were reviewed and membership issues and examples extracted. The issues and examples were then grouped into clusters of related ideas. Five clusters emerged which seemed to focus around: 'lack of clarity of membership'; 'considerations in stakeholder analysis'; 'the evolution of collaborations'; 'individuals as members vs. organizations as members'; and 'the structure of collaboration'. A working paper was created around these themes (Huxham & Vangen, 1996b), and this formed a basis for more focused collection of data during the more recent action research interventions, and for elaborating and refining the conceptualization into the form to be presented here. Carefully recorded data deriving from more casual conversations with, or presentations by, practitioners, some publicly available policy documents and research papers describing aspects of practice were also used to supplement the action research data. The process of moving from unprocessed data to conceptualization there- fore required the kind of creative cyclical process typical of qualitative research methods (Cassell & Symon, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

The conceptualization below is thus created from the merging together of many different instances of experience. The aim is not to create precise description or predictive theory. Rather, it is to identify key dimensions of membership as an indicator of the types of ways in which ambiguity, complexity and dynamics are manifested in collaborative structures. Real quotations (or paraphrases) and real examples are used to illustrate the arguments made. In these, the collaborations referred to have been disguised but the stories and quotations are our genuine understanding of what happened or what was said.

## Ambiguity and complexity in collaborative *structures*

The aim in this section is both to build up a picture of the ambiguity and complexity inherent in collaborative structures and to 'unpack' the picture by viewing it from a number of different perspectives. The initial focus is on the lack of clarity about who the members of a collaboration are. The argument is then made that this lack of clarity is contributed to by ambiguity over the status of members, over the relationship between individual and organizational members and over the source of members' representativeness. The final perspective suggests that a further source of confusion stems from the inevitability that many collaborations will have extremely complex membership structures. Table 1 provides a summary of these perspectives.

### Ambiguity in membership and status

It has been argued that having *'explicit' membership* where the parties 'know and agree on who is involved and in what capacity' is a key definitional element of collaboration (Roberts & Bradley, 1991). Although other authors do not generally express this so explicitly, most literature – and, in our experience, most participants – seem to presume that all members know who the other members are. In practice, this does not always appear to be the case. Cropper (1997), for example, describing his own participation as his university's representative on local partnerships commented:

> whether an organization is in or out is very difficult to read; there are lots of signals, but it isn't clear.

An episode from a three-year long action research project involving a Youth Empowerment Working Group of The Empowering Communities Partnership, completed by the authors, illustrates this lack of clarity:

**Table I**  Summary of dimensions of ambiguity and complexity

**Ambiguity**

*Ambiguity in membership and status*
Members' perceptions of who else is a member vary
Members' perceptions of each other's status in the collaboration vary

*Ambiguity in representativeness*
Members are confused over the degree to which an individual representative is representing an
   organization
Members are confused over which organization, organizations or other constituency is being
   represented

**Complexity**

*Complexity in structure*
There can be complex hierarchies of collaboration
Individuals and organizations are often members of multiple partnerships with overlapping
   membership
Departments of an organization may become involved in partnerships independently of each
   other
Collaborations often have complex structures involving partnership staff, executive committees,
   working groups and so on

**Dynamics**

*Shifting membership*
Government policies and other forces cause demise and reforming of organizations
Individual representatives come and go or change their role within their organizations

*Shifting purpose*
Government policies and other forces lead to refocusing of collaborative purpose (and hence of
   membership)
Mismatches in members' agendas lead to continual negotiation of purpose (and hence the
   possibility of changing membership)
Learning from past activity and completing agenda items also leads to continual negotiation

*The pace of change*
Changes can take place frequently, rapidly and sometimes imperceptibly

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The initial intervention task was a series of individual interviews of seven people identified by the director of the partnership as the Working Group members. In the course of the interviews, each person was asked to name the other members of the collaborative group. Interestingly, none mentioned all of the seven individuals who were to be interviewed, and some named people who were not on the interview list. It transpired that only a handful of these individuals met regularly,

others joined occasionally, yet others had been involved on specific occasions and many more were on the mailing list. Consequently, the individuals in the group – who did not have an agreed way of defining who was a member and who was not – each had their own interpretation of who the members were.

The likelihood that perceptions of who counts as a member and who does not will vary is reinforced because individuals often have very different perceptions of their own and others' role or *membership status*. This relates in general to the many varying motivations that individuals and organizations have for getting involved with a collaboration (Eden & Huxham, 1998; Vangen et al., 1994). For example:

> In the course of a discussion during a facilitated workshop about resources available to the Youth Empowerment Working Group, one individual insisted that he was a *resource to the group* rather than a member because he was mandated by the Board of the Partnership to be on the group. This view, however, was not shared by the other members who took him to be a key group member.

It seems that members often come to a collaboration viewing their selves as being in some way different from everyone else. Another example relates to the status of members who are members primarily because they provide funding:

> In a collaboration called the Ethnic Minority Rights Group, a statutory organization had become a member of the collaboration because it was able to provide some funding. When the organization at a later point had to withdraw the offer of funding it also ceased to be a member of the collaboration.

Presumably, the organization had some stake in the issue since it was offering the funding in the first place, yet it apparently ceased to have any interest when it was no longer able to contribute in the way it had expected. Apparently, it saw itself as having only one kind of contribution to make and a membership status linked only to this.

In other cases, the status of members varies more formally:

> In one area of England, an Urban Forum of community groups encourages local authorities and private sector organizations to become

> *affiliated* members. A similar umbrella organization of informal community groups in another UK city receives some support from paid employees of community and public sector organizations but does not allow them voting status.

Formal arrangements of this type do, at least, help to clarify membership status; collaborations involving membership fees are at least likely to be able to provide an official list of members. For most community collaborations, however, the status of the different members is likely to be perceived differently by each and this will lead to a lack of clarity about who the members are.

## Ambiguity in representativeness

A further source of confusion stems from ambiguity about whether the *members* of a collaboration are the individuals who work together in a collaborative group, or the organizations that they represent. For example:

> The Youth Empowerment Working Group was originally described to us as consisting of Rachael Smith of . . . (large national charity), Joan MacPherson of. . . (local youth support group), Reverend Jim Burns of . . . (church) and so on.

Indeed, the phrase, 'working *group*' implies a collection of individuals. By contrast, a Scottish Office announcement about its urban regeneration Programme for Partnership, focuses entirely on organizational members:

> The secretary of State . . . expects such partnerships to involve, as key partners, the local authorities . . ., Scottish Homes and the local enterprise companies as well as other public sector agencies and representatives of the private and voluntary sectors.
>
> (Scottish Office, 1995: 3)

In practice, people tend to verbalize both conceptualizations interchangeably and apparently unconsciously. There is, however, an assumption that *individuals are usually representing something beyond their own self-interest* when they participate in a collaboration. Many participants who have taken part in an exercise on 'defining collaboration' run as part of the authors' series of collaboration awareness raising workshops have argued that a group of individuals working together is not a collaboration unless the individuals are *representative* of organizations or coordinated community groups.

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Taking the linguistic perspective, it seems inevitable that the term 'member' will continue, in the context of collaboration, to be used to refer to both the individual collaborative group members and the organizational members because the English language does not provide a ready alternative. However, the question of the extent to which the collaboration actually does take place between individuals or between organizations is significant. This can be seen as a continuum. At one extreme the organizations take little interest in the collaboration. The individuals are effectively collaborating in their own capacity, though they usually think of it as part of their job or of their role as a member of a community organization. The only contribution from their organizations is the allowance to the individual of the time spent working with the collaboration. Nevertheless, the individuals are representing their organizations to the extent that they may bring with them their organizations' cultures and views and, if employed by the organizations, that they are obliged to consider whether their time spent on the collaboration is in line with their job specifications. If the collaboration takes on a direction which is not in agreement with an employer organization's objectives, for example, then the individual may need to reconsider their involvement with the collaboration. At the other extreme, organizations are fully involved in the collaboration with full commitment to its aims and objectives and to ensuring that these are met. In this case, the individuals are fully intended to be representatives of their organizations.

The notion of *representative individuals* would perhaps suggest that it is what an individual represents (e.g. an organization) that is important rather than the individual themselves. For example, the pooling of different organizations' resources is often key to taking the collaborative purpose forward (Himmelman, 1994). This appears to be the rationale underlying the Scottish Office's Programme for Partnership referred to above:

> The Secretary of State expects . . . a partnership approach, involving full (organizational) commitment (including commitment of resources) from all parties.
>
> (Scottish Office, 1995: 4).

Similarly, the UK National Council for Voluntary Organizations is quoted as arguing, in the context of the equivalent English and Welsh programme, the Single Regeneration Budget, that:

> True partnership involvement occurs at every level . . .
>
> (Tilson et al., 1997: 9)

Yet often, it is individuals who are seen to be significant to the success of the collaboration; so much so that the collaboration would suffer greatly if their organizations were to be represented by someone else. Sometimes organizations may be included only to provide individuals with the legitimacy to take the collaborative agenda forward. Some collaborations are entirely or partially shaped on the basis of individual involvement with the individuals pulling their organizations with them as opposed to organizations assigning individuals to represent them (Barr & Huxham, 1996). For example:

> The Ethnic Minority Rights Group was described by an individual member as having been initiated by individuals with different ethnic backgrounds who then drew in their organizations. These organizations included local authorities and major charities which did not have an ethnically oriented remit.

And Cropper (1997) commented:

> There is ambiguity about whether I or the University is a member. One alliance asked the University for me to be there. I am invited for my process skills; there are others who could represent the University much better regarding the topic of the collaboration.

Thus, sometimes the involvement of organizations is important for collaboration, sometimes the involvement of specific individuals is important, and sometimes both are necessary. In practice, ambiguity arises because the members involved are likely to sit at different points on this continuum. The degree to which individuals in a collaborative group are representative of their organization will vary and will be influenced by the size of their organization, their position in it, their personal interest in the subject of the collaboration and so on. Furthermore, the extent to which an individual does represent their organization is likely to be unclear and is frequently even not considered by the individuals themselves.

In practice this ambiguity can be a source of stress for the group members. For example, individuals in the Youth Empowerment Working Group expressed needs to:

- address who/what people are representing when they participate in the collaboration;
- become more aware of how to hook member organizations into the partnership;

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- get member organizations more involved;
- identify how integrated the member agencies are into the collaboration;

but also viewed the collaboration as:

- a partnership between individuals rather than between agencies.

The arguments above have focused on ambiguity concerning the *degree* to which an individual is a representative of their organization. A further set of confusions stems from ambiguity in *what* is being represented. While many individuals do come to collaborative groups representing a single organization, it is not uncommon for people to wear multiple hats. For example, members of the Ethnic Minority Rights Group apparently saw themselves as representing *both* their employer organization *and* their ethnic grouping. The group member who described this situation commented that:

> it is often difficult to tell which hat other group members are wearing at any particular time.

Similarly, when community activists are involved as community representatives in collaborations, it is often difficult for other members – and, indeed the representatives themselves – to know which, if any, of the many community groups in which they are typically involved, they are representing. Sometimes they appear to perceive themselves to be representing 'the wider community', though they generally have not been given any formal legitimacy to do so by any party other than themselves (Barr & Huxham, 1996). In the case of the Butterforth Umbrella Group, to be described in the next section, individuals reported that it was often not clear whether it was a community group or the activist who was involved with the Umbrella Group.

## Complexity in the structure of collaboration

The above sections have aimed to demonstrate ambiguity in collaborative structure from many perspectives. Namely, it is often not possible for those involved to name members, to recognize each other's perceptions of relative status, to know whether a member is an individual or their organization, to know the degree to which an individual is representative of their organization or even which organization, group or community they might be representative of. In addition, many collaborations have extremely complex structures to superimpose on this ambiguity.

**Figure I**   The structure of the Butterforth Regeneration Partnership

The Butterforth Regeneration Partnership provides an illustrative example. The diagrammatic representation given in Figure 1, and explained below, is the result of considerable effort spent in unravelling the nature of the Partnership and in finding ways to represent it. Even so, it is undoubtedly a simplification.

The Partnership was initiated as part of a government policy initiative. Its membership includes a number of relevant local organizations such as the housing agency, the Health Board, the Chamber of Commerce and so on (represented by the circle on the left in Figure 1). The interests of 'The Community', however, are represented by the Butterforth Umbrella Group (represented by the circle near the centre towards the top of Figure 1) which was initiated, at the request of the Partnership, solely for this purpose. The Umbrella Group is thus both itself a collaboration of community organizations and part of the wider collaboration, the Regeneration Partnership.

To complicate matters further, many of the organizations represented on the Umbrella Group are themselves collaborations, comprised of a mixture of community activists and officers of statutory and voluntary organizations (represented by the circles on the middle right of Figure 1). The local authority (represented by the circle at the bottom centre of Figure 1) is also a member of the Partnership. However, departments of the local authority, such as Social Work and Education, generally act as autonomous units, almost independently of each other. Representatives from these departments are involved in many of the community collaborative initiatives which are members of the Umbrella group. Thus the local authority is represented on the Partnership both directly, and indirectly through a large number of community collaborations and the Umbrella group.

There are thus multiple layers of collaboration in the Partnership, and some organizations appear on more than one layer. The fact that, as mentioned above, many of the community activists tend to be acting as representatives of many community groups (or of none) adds an additional layer of complexity.

It is not uncommon in the not-for-profit sector for collaborations to be part of other collaborations. In another case, for example, the chairperson of the local Council for Voluntary Organizations acted as the representative of the voluntary sector on the local city partnership. A recent analysis of bids to the Scottish Office's Programme for Partnership showed that 44 percent of the proposed partnerships were to include sub-groupings of partners (Turok, 1997).

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Given the sheer number of partnerships which have recently been initiated, it is not surprising that complex hierarchies of collaboration emerge. Another effect is that organizational members find themselves increasingly being part of multiple partnerships. For example, the Local Partnership Guide for Bristol highlights 16 prominent partnerships in the city (Westec, 1996). The Chamber of Commerce and Initiative is a member of each of these. Individuals, too, become embroiled in many different capacities and this is another way in which the ambiguity in representativeness discussed in the last section manifests itself. For example:

> In the city in which the Empowering Communities Partnership is based, the manager of the city's Environmental Alliance mentioned, by way of example that the director of the city's Regeneration Partnership is on the Alliance's Executive Committee and the chair of the latter is on the Board of the Regeneration Partnership. The manager himself is a Board member of the Empowering Communities Partnership, while the Director of the latter is on the Environmental Alliance's Executive Committee and another Empowering Communities manager is a member of one of the Alliance's subgroups. He commented:

> . . . everyone on the Executive Committee has multiple roles; you really don't know where people are coming from when they participate in the partnership.

Structures such as that depicted in Figure 1 are thus parts of much more complex networks of collaborations. Stewart and Snape (1996), referring to this phenomenon as 'pluralism in partnership', have argued that involvement in so many collaborative arrangements is fundamentally altering the nature of the participating organizations. It may also alter the way in which purpose and actions are determined in each of the partnerships. Cropper (1997), for example, describes himself as:

> . . . a lone champion pulling together the domains of a number of alliances. I see these Alliances as having linked aims and am trying to ensure that mutual acknowledgement takes place, but others, as yet, do not.

And a representative of a community organization involved in a community care initiative argued:

> The trouble is that the representatives from the Health Board and

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> the local authority are involved in so many other joint initiatives that they have many opportunities to discuss matters relating to our collaboration between meetings. So they move the agenda forward between one meeting and the next and the rest of us are left in the cold.

The situation is complicated further because it is often the case (as with the Butterforth example above) that different departments or divisions within organizations get involved in partnerships independently of others. This is particularly true of local authorities where, for example, the Social Work Department might be a more likely member than the whole local authority. Participants may even consider themselves as representing sub-units of departments:

> One group of Community Education managers saw themselves as *collaborating* not only with community groups, but also with those responsible for the school system within their own department, the local authority Department of Education.
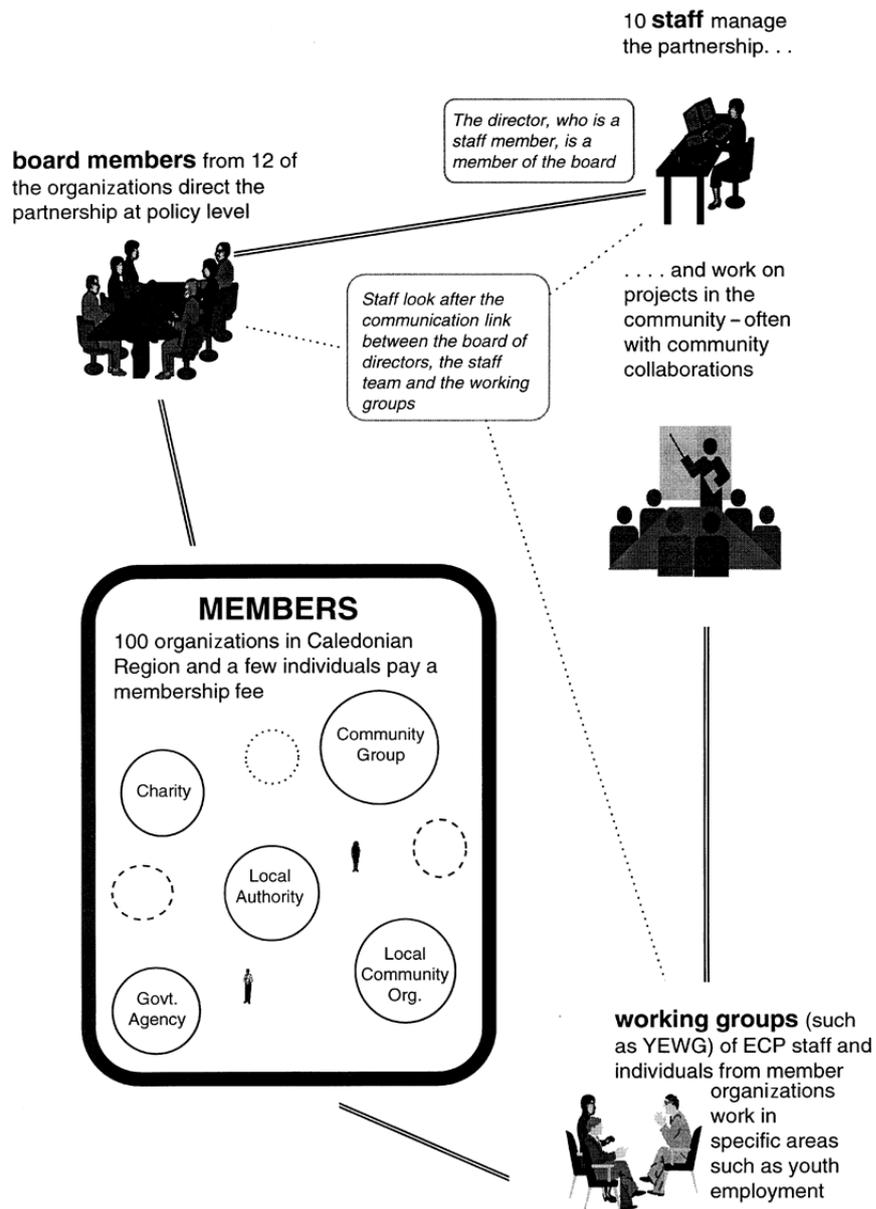
There is often little co-ordination of partnership involvement across departments and the effect on the overall organization of membership of multiple partnerships is unlikely to be considered.

Many collaborations have identities and structures which are very complex in other ways. For example, it became apparent, during a two- day-long workshop designed and facilitated for The Empowering Communities Partnership, that there was a great amount of confusion about structure and identity amongst members:

> The structure of this Partnership, consisting of members, a Board, staff and working groups is indicated in Figure 2 and, as can be seen, is indeed rather complex. In the course of the workshop, the question was raised specifically as to whether it was an organization or a partnership. The director of this Partnership has on a number of occasions mentioned the juggling of roles that he needs to undertake with some situations requiring him to lead as if he were the director of an organization and other situations requiring him to 'step back' because he is orchestrating a partnership of others.

Thus, the structure of a collaboration may be on the border between being an organization and a partnership.

Complexity in a partnership's structure can also lead to complexity in its sub-structures. For example:

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10 **staff** manage the partnership. . .

The director, who is a staff member, is a member of the board

**board members** from 12 of the organizations direct the partnership at policy level

. . . . and work on projects in the community – often with community collaborations

Staff look after the communication link between the board of directors, the staff team and the working groups

**MEMBERS**

100 organizations in Caledonian Region and a few individuals pay a membership fee

Community Group

Charity

Local Authority

Local Community Org.

Govt. Agency

**working groups** (such as YEWG) of ECP staff and individuals from member organizations work in specific areas such as youth employment

ECP - Empowering Communities Partnership
YEWG - Youth Empowerment Working Group

**Figure 2**    The structure of the Empowering Communities Partnership

> At one point in the history of the Youth Employment Working Group, one individual's organization, a large national charity, took a specific interest in its work and provided a large input of financial resources. At this time, the Working Group seemed to become essentially a partnership between the Empowering Communities Partnership and the charity. The individual representatives of other organizations involved in the original collaborative group, who wanted to continue the work, took on a steering group identity. All the organizations involved, including the charity, were members of the Empowering Communities Partnership so in effect what happened was the Partnership collaborated with one of its own members, which clearly had a different status in the group from that of the others. It remains unclear whether the other members, who formed the steering group, thought of themselves as representing their own organizations or the Partnership – or both.

While the various examples which have been discussed in this section may seem extreme, they are typical of many collaborations. The point is not that those involved have unnecessarily designed 'camels' where 'horses' would do, but that the mass of concerns which any collaborative structure is aiming to address, makes complexity of structure inevitable.


### The dynamics of collaboration

The discussion so far can be thought of as a series of snapshots – each presenting a different perspective on the ambiguity and complexity of collaborative structures. When taken together, the combined picture is already difficult to comprehend in its totality. It is, nevertheless, so far, a static picture. In reality, however, collaborations are rarely static structures. Roberts and Bradley, describing an education policy advisory discussion group, commented, for example:

> Some stakeholder groups sent different representatives to the meetings, others added new representatives over time, and two stakeholder groups changed their status from that of active participant to that of observer.
>
> (Roberts & Bradley, 1991: 215)

In practice, the structure of collaborations is continually changing, partly because external pressures and changes within the member organizations have a direct influence on who can and should be a member, and partly because
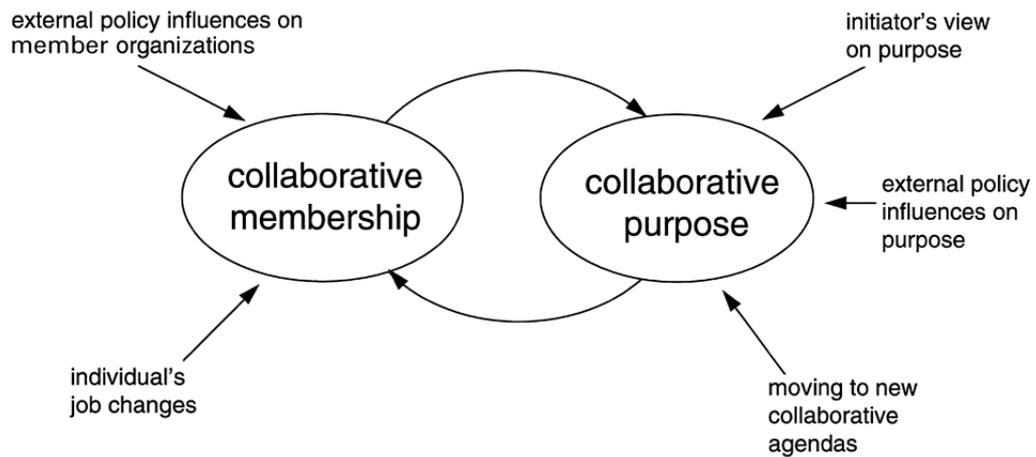
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**Figure 3**   Influences on the dynamics of membership

inevitable changes to the collaborative purpose imply different membership needs. Figure 3 illustrates some of the influences which maintain this dynamic. These are described below.

## Shifting membership

At an organizational level, factors such as withdrawal of funding, public sector reorganizations or mergers often mean that some organizations cease to exist, and others emerge. Because of the dependence of public and com-munity organizations on external funding and policy imperatives, the demise or reforming of organizations belonging to collaborations is likely to be even more common in these sectors than in private sector alliances. When this happens, the remaining members have to decide whether to continue with fewer members or whether to make up the numbers by seeking new possibilities.

In the UK, recent local government reorganization has had a significant effect in this respect. Jones and Pickford (1997) describe a Welsh case in which prior to reorganization the local authority providing social services and the health authority covered identical physical areas with the local authority taking the leadership role in joint arrangements for community care. Following reorganization, three local authorities cover the same area. Consequently, the joint arrangements have had to be completely redevised and it is no longer possible for a single local authority to lead in the same way. Similar issues have arisen with the Empowering Communities Partnership:

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> Originally called 'The *Caledonian* Empowering Communities
> Partnership', it received core funding from Caledonian Regional
> Council. After local government reorganization Caledonian Region was
> replaced by 13 local authorities to cover the same physical area.
> Suddenly, core funding had to be sought from 13 different sources. The
> future of the Partnership is under threat, or at least likely to
> change, not only because the jobs of those who manage the
> Partnership are insecure, but also because concurrently many of the
> member organizations, which also received funding from the Regional
> Council, are facing the same problems in their own right.

Individual changes also have an influence on membership. Role changes within
organizations – or career moves to other organizations or the ending of
contracts – often lead to an individual ceasing to be an organization's
representative on the collaborative group. Usually a new representative will
be sent to, or co-opted by, the group as a replacement, but sometimes the
organization as a whole leaves the collaboration on the representative's
departure. By contrast, sometimes – for instance, if a member of staff of one
of the participating organizations is appointed to a position for which the
collaboration has special relevance – role changes may bring additional
people into the collaborative group. Individuals also tend to change their
representativeness over time:

> One member of the Ethnic Minority Rights Group, for example,
> represented a large national charity but is also a member of a local
> ethnic community group. When her job changed in the charity, she
> ceased to represent it on the collaboration. She remains on the group,
> however, now representing, in a voluntary capacity, the ethnic group.
> Two other members of the group represented an organization which is
> funded by the charity. The charity then asked them to be its
> representatives on the group – as well as remaining as the
> representatives of their particular organization. They also informally
> represent their own ethnic groups.

In this case, the group members remained unchanged but the organizations
that they represented altered – even though they all remained members of
their original organizations. Inevitably, changes of this kind cause agenda
changes, but participants are not always explicit about, or conscious of this.

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### Shifting purpose

External factors may also alter the shape of the membership indirectly, through influencing the purpose. For example, changes of government policy may mean that the specific concerns of the collaboration cease to exist, or that other issues become more important for some members. This may engender a renegotiation of aims which may end in the withdrawal of some members and co-option of others.

The Caledonian Empowering Communities Partnership, for example, was tied to the Regional Council, not only in its funding, but also in its name, remit, and hence membership, which had been partly defined by the physical boundaries of the Region. After Caledonian Region ceased to exist, the Partnership was forced to redefine its purpose in order to survive. It decided to become 'West of Scotland' oriented. These changes opened up the possibility of a vast new membership.

At about the same time, the Government's introduction of the National Lottery in the UK provided the Partnership with the opportunity to bid for funding to carry out specific projects in the community. When it was decided to make a bid, the much publicly debated ethical issues surrounding the Lottery led one board member – who had, until then, played a very central role in the Partnership – to resign. Though his organization remained a member of the Partnership, it ceased to have an active input at board level.

More recently, the change in UK national government means that some roles – such as campaigning – previously central to the Partner- ship's activities may become less important or differently focused with concurrent membership implications. At the time of writing, the introduction of a Scottish Parliament is another external factor which may be expected soon to have significant impact on the Partnership and its members.

> Waddock (1989) has argued that the environmental forces which drive the initiation and shape the formation of collaborations are tenuous so that collaborations are necessarily highly fragile structures.

It is not only environmental forces, however, which ensure that the structure of collaborations remains dynamic. Collaborations are, by their very nature, movable feasts. The centre of Figure 3 depicts the cycle of influence which maintains the dynamic. To understand this, it is helpful to imagine a collaboration at the point of initiation. The initiator of a collaboration will have an initial view about the intended

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purpose of the collaboration. The initiator will also have a view about which other organizations or individuals are relevant to that focus. The dynamic arises because the purpose as defined by the initiator may not be of central importance for the other organizations.

For example, an organization might initiate a collaboration to tackle drug abuse in a community and might see it as important to involve another organization whose prime role is concerned with tackling 'problem youth'. The latter could be expected to regard drug abuse as an important part of its concerns, but not the most central one. Any collaboration involving just these two organizations would be likely to involve a – possibly implicit – renegotiation of the purpose, perhaps agreeing on 'youth drug abuse' as the label for the issue with which they are both prepared to work. This new focus might suggest other organizations that should be involved, and these would be unlikely to be the same as those relevant to the initial issue label.

There is thus a cyclic relationship between the nature of the participating organizations and the focus of collaboration, with the participants defining the focus and the focus defining new participants. This process may be referred to as *domain shift* (Huxham, 1993b); each time a new participant is involved, the focus, or 'domain' (Trist, 1983) alters slightly and other organizations become relevant. Taking this argument to its extreme, the domain and the collaborators could shift indefinitely. In practice, the cycle tends to be slowed down as those involved lose interest in inviting new members. However, if new members, whether individual or organizational, do join for any of the reasons described earlier, they will bring new agendas (both their individual agendas and their own interpretations of their organization's agendas), and the purpose will (albeit sometimes not explicitly) be renegotiated. This will happen even if the new individual is a representative of an existing member organization. The focus of the collaboration will then seem more relevant to some members and less to others and the cycle may restart.

In addition, the very process of taking action, reviewing results and agreeing new courses of action makes it inevitable that the cycle will continue to cause incremental changes to the collaboration's purpose. Both Finsrud (1998) and Waddock (1989) have noted that, since members both learn from previous activity and finish with agenda items, there will be a continuous iterative process of negotiating purpose and hence coalition building and membership changes. Short-term motivations may add to this dynamic. A former project worker on the Butterforth Area Regeneration Partnership commented, for example: 'They say it's been successful in involving the community, but the community organizations come in until they get what they want and then they get out'.

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The pace of change

The above picture is a simplification of the dynamics that take place in collaborations, but does give an indication of the forces that are involved. While all organizations continuously evolve (Dawson, 1992; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the nature of social issue collaborations is such that they can change from one shape to another frequently, rapidly and sometimes imperceptibly. As the manager of a community economic development partnership for a region of Scotland commented:

> The partnership was set up as a way of gaining government funding which was available at that time. This was shortly after local government boundaries had been reorganized so the partnership began life having to cope with disarray in a lead partner organization. A year or so later, there was a change of UK government and this initiated a mass of other changes. No sooner did we get the local National Health Service Trust involved than they announce a reorganization of the Health Service which means that the Trust will soon no longer exist in its current form. . . The European programme which supports this kind of partnership changes at the end of next year so there will be new funding programmes which will present us with new opportunities. There will be the Scottish Parliament to cope with next year too . . . Our original government funding is now coming to an end. Two new government policy documents have just been released which lay out new views about how development should operate in this kind of area and give the responsibility for community economic development to particular agencies. The latter may now take over the role that the partnership formerly played. After two-and-a-half years, we are beginning to get the hang of how to make this partnership work but we now have to assess whether the partners feel that there is a role left for the partnership which they would be prepared to support, and whether they would be prepared to put serious resource into it.

In the course of quite short spaces of time, collaborations can change shape completely, evolving into a form in which both the purpose and the member- ship cease to overlap with the original shape – rather like the apocryphal axe with three new heads and four new shafts. The history of the Youth Empowerment Working Group provides a prime example:

> The Working Group was originally convened following chance discussions by employees of two organizations. As mentioned earlier, the Membership of

this group was rather confusing: a small core of representatives from apparently committed organizations met regularly; representatives from other organizations joined them occasionally; many other organizations were on the mailing list. As the collaboration was formally a working group of *The Empowering Communities Partner- ship* a (very senior) representative from the staff of the partnership was regularly involved.

After a number of years of slow progress, external funding for group facilitation assistance (by the authors and a colleague, Colin Eden) led to a new injection of life. One of the actions taken by the group during the period of facilitation was to ask the original convener to be 'released' from the convener-ship. She readily agreed to this and even seemed relieved, though she remained a group member for some months. It was at about the same time, just as the group was beginning to pursue actively an agreed strategy, that the directorate of the Scottish section of a large national charity offered to the group the significant injection of funding mentioned earlier. The second of the two members who originally initiated the collaboration works for this charity but in a different (comparatively low level) part of the organization. The offer of funding was not mentioned by the charity directorate to this member prior to making the offer to the group. Indeed, the offer was made directly to the senior representative from The Empowering Communities Partnership. It appeared almost as though the charity was unaware that it had a representative on the group. However, after much deliberation, the group took up the offer and altered its agenda and focus quite significantly to allow for the charity's requirements.

In the course of these changes, members were asked to recon- sider their commitment to the group. The member who worked for the charity was apparently relieved of his representative duties by his organization and a new and much more senior representative joined the group. A couple of other individuals also left, taking their organizations with them, including the other initiator – the original convener – of the group. Since then, there have been a number of changes to the individuals present on this group and six of the organizations were 'represented' by more than one (one as many as four) individuals in a six-months period. In the space of a few months, the group had become unrecognizable in membership and purpose.

**Implications**

The intention of this paper has been to create a picture of the membership of collaboration as *ambiguous, complex* and *dynamic.* It has not been possible to provide a full picture partly because, in the process of describing it, some of the richness of reality has inevitably been lost. In addition, work by the authors with practitioners involved in collaboration during the period while this paper was being written has generated many additional examples which raise new issues and hence new slants on the picture. It seems likely, therefore, that the development of the picture will be an ongoing phenomenon. It is hoped, however, that the illustration of some key dimensions of membership has at least given a sense – if not a precise picture – of the reality of membership of collaborations.

There are undoubtedly a wide variety of perspectives from which the implications of the preceding discussion could be drawn. Two, raised initially in the introduction, seem especially important and will be discussed briefly. The first of these raises implications for those convening or designing collaborative structures. The second concerns the contribution of the lack of clarity of membership to *collaborative inertia.* By way of conclusion, the most significant implications for practitioners and policy makers will be high-lighted.

## Implications for designing collaborations

Since so much emphasis is placed in the literature on the notion that membership plays an important role in achieving collaborative advantage, it seems reasonable to suggest that those involved in collaboration should pay attention to their membership structures. The picture presented in this paper, however, suggests that *designing* the membership structure most likely to achieve a specific purpose is unlikely to be a simple task. Initiators or conveners of collaborations thus have a difficult task ahead of them if they wish to do this thoughtfully. How to achieve the 'right' mix of individuals and organizations; how to involve members in different capacities, or with different status, without alienating them; how to ensure that the desired interests are represented; and how to maintain a stability of membership are among the many challenges facing them. Deciding *who* should make these decisions is another!

It was suggested in the introduction that the identification of *stake-holders* is a design consideration running through much of the literature. Both pragmatic and ideological reasons are given for this: the pragmatic being primarily concerned with gaining ownership and avoiding sabotage (Chrislip & Larson, 1994); the ideological generally stemming from a concern to empower those being 'done to' through participation in the

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collaboration (Chisholm, 1998; Himmelman, 1996). Practitioners involved in the collaborations referred to in this paper, however, have stressed that there may be reasons for targeting members other than simply that they have a stake in the issue. Ensuring that the collaboration has the resources or expertise it needs is one reason (see also, for example, Himmelman (1994) and Sink (1996). Another reason given is to ensure a 'balanced membership'. One collaborative group member, for example, argued that a balance between 'directors and ordinary people' was needed. A further reason for targeting members may be no more specific than a requirement that the collaborative group is large enough to ensure, for example, 'sufficient energy to deliver' and to 'make the group less vulnerable'. By contrast, there will generally be a good argument for aiming to keep some potential members *out* of the collaboration in order to reduce the group size and ease communication and relationship building. Finn (1996) argues for explicitly making a distinction between 'internal stakeholders' and 'external stakeholders'.

Whichever considerations may be felt pertinent by those involved, there still remains the difficulty – both ethical and practical – of persuading desirable members to be a part of the collaboration and others to remain outside it. Feyerherm and Milliman (1997), discussing citizen advisory panels in the US, encapsulate one of the challenges:

> Some stakeholders, such as the media, have little stake but want to get involved; others, such as schools, have a large stake but don't see involvement as their role.

A member of one of the researched collaborations made a similar point: 'Should we include members who feel that they could have an impact or should we let current members decide who else should be involved?'. And members of a neighbourhood support group for the blind set themselves an impossible challenge:

> We have a constitution that says we must have a representative of a school board on the group and that that member must be blind – but there aren't *any* blind members of school boards in this area. We spend hours arguing about this . . . some people make a big thing of having them even though they do not exist. . . Anyway why don't they recognize that we need the support of able-bodied people too?

It is apparent that satisfying all considerations is not likely to be possible in any collaboration. Indeed, the ambiguous, complex and dynamic structures

described in this paper are, at least in part, the inevitable outcomes of the *balancing of mutually incompatible considerations*. Most particularly, the need to allow the collaboration the flexibility to manage itself in whatever ways it may devise to avoid inertia, and to react to its own developing needs and to externally imposed pressures, has to be balanced against the benefits of having clearly defined membership structures. There is also the question of the degree to which it is possible to be explicit about all membership considerations. In practice, even apparently simple matters can become confusing and pose core dilemmas. The Youth Empowerment Working Group, for example, apparently found itself struggling for clarity about the way in which it related to the Empowering Communities Partnership when finalizing the implementation details for a major collaborative project, as the following two somewhat contradictory extracts from different pages of the same management report imply:

> The Project office is located within the Partnership's premises. Given this, it is important to note that the Project is not integrated into the Partnership's main office systems, but operates separately and has a different telephone number.

Project staff will be fully integrated members of the Partnership's staff team; will be required to attend Partnership staff team meetings and to report on occasion to the Partnership Board.

It is perhaps not surprising that those involved in most of the collaborations which are referred to in this paper do not try to delve into the matter of designing their collaborations too thoroughly. A key message of this paper is the recognition that there is a limit to the extent to which it is sensible to delve.

## Collaborative inertia

This paper has aimed to demonstrate that the picture of membership structures as ambiguous, complex and dynamic is not only descriptive of how collaborations are formed in reality, but is also an inevitable consequence of the nature of collaboration. In this section, we discuss briefly the way in which this impacts upon the tendency of collaborations to drift into inertia rather than to achieve collaborative advantage.

As noted in the introduction, among the factors inherent in collaborations which often lead to collaborative inertia are difficulties in agreeing goals for the collaboration, in working with those who use different languages and who operate within different organizational structures, procedures and cultures, in managing power relationships and hence creating trust and managing accountabilities. Ambiguity, complexity

and dynamics in membership structure are significant to each of these areas.

Almost all participants in collaborations raise the need to agree on a clear set of goals as crucial to moving forward. In practice, however, this is frequently not achieved because of the difficulty of understanding and negotiating around the different, and often conflicting, overt and hidden agendas that both individuals and organizations will have concerning the collaboration (Bryson & Eden, 1995; Eden & Huxham, 1998; Vangen et al., 1994). This task is thus difficult enough – frequently impossible – to achieve in its own right. Ambiguity and complexity in membership structure will clearly compound the problem, making it difficult for those involved to assess whose agendas they need to be concerned about and the degree to which, and the way in which, these members play a role in the collaboration. Continually shifting membership means a continual need to reassess and renegotiate others' agendas. Hard-won compromises can be suddenly reopened. As the convenor of the neighbourhood support group argued:

> The trouble is, all the organizations keep changing so that at each meeting a whole new set of people come along and we have to discuss the same difficult issues over and over again – just when we thought we had come to a resolution.

The difficulty of negotiating goals, and in interacting generally, in collaborations is exacerbated by differences in professional languages, organizational cultures and procedures. When people from different organizations work together for the first time, a great deal of effort generally has to be invested by all concerned into understanding the world as seen by the other participants. Any differences in natural language or national or religious culture add another layer of difficulty. As with goal negotiation, membership issues will compound the problem, making it unclear where effort towards attaining mutual understanding should be directed and creating the probability that, once effort has been invested, the partners will change.

Resolution of problems resulting from power differentials between members and the difficult process of creating trust between members are also hampered by lack of clarity about membership. Fathoming out the power relationships will be problematic for those involved if they are unclear about the membership structure. Carefully negotiated social order and carefully nurtured trust may be knocked down at any time by changes in membership.

The issue of accountability is particularly affected by the membership issues identified in this paper. Participants in social issue collaborations frequently have a high degree of concern to ensure democracy in terms of accountability to the organizations or interest groups represented (Hambleton et al., 1995; Huxham & Vangen, 1996a). There are also pragmatic reasons to be concerned about accountability; the *actions* of the members, whether individual or organizational, in the context of the collaboration need to be in line with the actions and goals of the members in other contexts and vice versa. If members are unclear about the structure of the collaboration, they cannot be clear where the accountabilities lie. Likewise, they cannot be clear whether some of the interests they wish to have represented are actually being represented. Individuals confused about their own representativeness will also be confused about their accountability. Individuals, such as the chair of the local Council for Voluntary Organizations mentioned earlier, who are representing one collaboration on another, are likely to find that satisfying their accountability to all of the member organizations that they supposedly represent is extremely difficult – if not impossible – to achieve. Continual shifts of membership not only add to the confusion but also lead to continual renegotiations of the collaborative agenda to allow for new accountabilities. The potential for conflict is high; the alternative is often to make little progress while participants become embroiled in discussions between themselves and with those they believe they represent.

### Implications for practitioners and policy makers: nurture, nurture, nurture

The key message of this paper is that collaborative structures need to be understood as ambiguous, complex and dynamic in order that practitioners convening them, or policy makers promoting them clearly understand the enormous challenges which collaboration presents. Achieving collaborative advantage for all but the simplest of collaborative tasks requires major resource investment, together with significant managerial skill and patience from each of the individual participants (Webb, 1991). The goodwill both of these individuals and of the organizations they represent is also essential. An experienced and competent collaboration manager, facilitator or convenor is an essential asset, but cannot be expected to deliver for the collaboration without the appropriate level of resource and support. If collaborations were clearly, defined, static entities, considerable effort would be needed to nurture them through their early stages (Carley & Christie, 1992; Wistow & Hardy, 1991). The picture painted here demonstrates that the nurturing process must be expected to be required indefinitely.

**Acknowledgements**

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