

## **Partnership Strengthening in FAM: Lessons Learned**

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### INTRODUCTION

At the Food Aid Consultative Group meeting on March 25, 2003, the Office of Food for Peace (FFP) released their Draft Strategic Plan and Concept Paper for FY2004-2008<sup>1</sup>. The proposed strategy reflects a shift in thinking about FFP's development and relief activities as well as a shift in thinking about FFP's role in the global development arena. FFP's Strategic Objective is to reduce food insecurity in vulnerable populations. This will be accomplished via two Intermediate Results: increasing the impact of Title II programs in the field and enhancing FFP's global leadership. One of the ways FFP intends to enhance its global leadership is by strengthening its national and global partnerships. By raising this intention to the level of a Sub-Intermediate Result, FFP is underlining the importance of partnership in relief and development activities, whether in policymaking, program implementation, or operational improvement.

In February, representatives of FAM's member organizations met for a planning retreat. The goals of this retreat were to determine PVO priorities for future institutional capacity building and elaborate on how FAM might play a role in facilitating collaborative activity to meet those goals. There was strong PVO support for 'partnership strengthening' activities. Here, partnership strengthening means building the capacity of PVOs to collaborate with local NGO partners, with their PVO peers, and with U.S. and foreign governmental interests. There were a number of topics proposed under this new focus, including the development of a code of conduct for collaboration and the development of guidelines based on PVO experiences to determine when collaboration does and does not work. It was proposed that FAM create a Working Group to focus on these topics.

FAM's ISA midterm evaluation pointed out that member organizations felt FAM's activities (past and present) fostered a culture of professional sharing and interaction. Subsequently, FAM<sup>2</sup> decided to examine this phenomenon to gain a better understanding of how FAM interactions worked and to what extent they fostered partnership. That research, which seems to have anticipated PVO and USAID interest in partnership building, summarized FAM's history, isolated trends in collaboration, and presented suggestions for how collaboration in the FAM context might be improved in the next few years. The project was intended to highlight positive partnership building practices for activities outside the FAM context.

Considering the growth of interest in this topic, it seems pertinent to present the final results of that history and constituency building study in Food Forum. Hopefully, the lessons learned from FAM activities reprinted here might begin a dialogue between FAM members, other PVOs, and relevant governmental interests that will feed into the proposed Working Group's activities.

Organizational partnerships and collaborative activities have been increasing in frequency over the years within the nonprofit sector. Organizational researchers are working to understand the reasons why these organizations are increasing, what the

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<sup>1</sup>The FFP Draft Strategic Plan for FY 2004-2008 is undergoing extensive review by Title II stakeholders and will be subject to a parameter-setting procedure prior to implementation.

<sup>2</sup> This research was implemented with the financial support of CARE USA.

defining characteristics are, and how these organizations can ensure their success. (see Heydebrand 1989, Rothschild and Russell 1986, Rothschild-Whitt 1979, Srivastva and Cooperrider 1986, Waters 1993.) Cooperation and collaboration do not arise simply because opportunities exist. In an environment where cooperation is not traditionally accepted, it takes work to encourage that kind of interaction. The comments below build on that statement and fall within a framework of behaviors necessary for building collaborative capacity (Foster-Fishman 2001). Because partnerships and consortia are interactive and member organizations *are* the building blocks of those networks, these recommendations suggest ways that *member organizations* can improve collaborative activities.

The lessons learned and recommendations are generalized for partnerships, networks and other types of collaborative activity. Following the summary is a bibliography of relevant networking and organizational collaboration references.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM FAM'S ACTIVITIES

Constituency (or partnership) building is the primary focus of the FAM consortium. The coordinating position that FAM serves is secondary to fostering an environment in which a common base of knowledge is shared, common procedures are developed and common goals can be achieved. In an environment of decreasing development funding it is possible that collaboration will be encouraged and perhaps linked to resources in the future. FAM's activities, then, provide a model for PVOs interested in improving their own capacities for collaboration and institutionalizing those activities throughout their organizations.

The Title II environment, though not completely stable, is stable enough to encourage cooperative and collaborative activity. Partnerships and consortia, and their member organizations, can increase the stability of that working environment by improving transparency, and by sharing information and general knowledge of each other's programs. Providing opportunities for interaction and information sharing while aiming to solve common problems of procedure and compliance is likely one of the best means for achieving that goal.

One means to support collective activity in an environment that is friendly to collaboration, but in which it may not receive total individual commitment is to formalize collaboration within work plans and establish agreements between partners and any coordinating bodies. To ensure clarity, partners should develop a set of minimum requirements for participation, taking into account variation with regard to size, age, location, funding levels and other relevant variables. Those guidelines should be incorporated into a collaborative agreement signed by each partner. This is not to increase the amount of work, reporting, or responsibilities of the various partners. It is merely to formalize, systematize and build into the monitoring and evaluation system activities that organizations are already completing. When collective action is formalized, there are means to monitor and evaluate that collaboration, well-defined avenues for collaboration, and clear roles for each player in the collective. Until collaboration becomes systematic and institutionalized, this is the most successful means of ensuring cooperation, given the high rate of turnover in the PVO community and the variability of personal commitment to collaboration.

A review of FAM's activities reveals that information exchange functions are considered the most successful constituency-building activities. Thus, partners should focus on improving collaboration through interactive pursuits that encourage information exchange and that have the flexibility to meet changing needs. This will encourage participation, and will therefore increase the success of any partnership or collaborative activity. To maximize the impact of collaborative activities, smaller peripheral organizations should be encouraged to participate more fully, through leadership roles or partnerships with core organizations already in leadership roles.

Recent research suggests that coordination among PVOs does improve programming effectiveness, though PVOs could do more to achieve even greater results (Owada et al 1998). This indicates that circumstances are favorable for a push to encourage more collective activity. Renewed support for partnering from the PVO community and from AID provides more encouragement for collaborative activities. Though it may not seem to be, variation in individual commitment to collaboration and cooperation is a surmountable obstacle with only a very few changes in organizational behaviors. Building on past successes and incorporating a few adjustments to an organization's current activities is one of the best ways to encourage gradual growth and development in an organization (Grenier 1972). Using that framework, organizations have the opportunity to ensure that their partnerships become more successful in the future.

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## Using Social Network Methods to Monitor Involvement

The FAM History and Constituency Building study relied on a mixed methods approach to provide a balanced, holistic picture of FAM's collaborative activities and of member PVOs' roles in FAM activities. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were integrated to ensure valid and reliable results that reflected the 'ground truth' of FAM interactions. One of the methods applied was social network analysis and visualization. This approach, based on questionnaire responses, provides a more objective and internally valid analysis of organizational interactions and involvement in collaborative activities than would traditional self-assessments or external evaluator assessment.

Gathering data for social network analysis is simple. A network elicitation question prompts respondents to note organizational interactions with respect to each relevant activity. (For example, Steering Committee activities, Working Group activities, etc.) Responses are then entered into a spreadsheet that contains variable identifiers and each organizational name in the top row. Basic demographic and organizational information for respondents and a '1' or a '0' for the presence or absence of an interactive link between the respondent and the particular organization is entered in each row of the spreadsheet. Responses are then aggregated by organization. To ensure the most robust measures, if any organizational respondent indicates an interaction with an organization for the particular activity, then the organizational response should reflect an interaction with that organization. This data aggregation will result in an organization-by-organization matrix of 1's and 0's that reflects interactions for a particular context.

After the data is collected and adjusted, the spreadsheet can be imported into a social network analysis software package called UCInet. This package uses matrix algebra to calculate social network measures that describe the social interactions captured by the organization-by-organization matrix. The most relevant indicators for collaborative activities are network density (how interconnected the network is), centrality (which organizations are noted as most involved), and core/periphery (a measure that dichotomizes centrality measures to increase contrast and reveal the key players). These measures can identify changes in collective activity over time and can be used to monitor and evaluate the facilitation of collaborative activity. The only caveats for monitoring and evaluation purposes are that all participating organizations must know that they are being measured and all organizations must understand that managerial decisions may be made using the data.

From UCInet, the data can be visualized by another software package called Pajek. There are other visualization programs like NetDraw and Mage, but Pajek seems to be the simplest to use. Visualization software generates diagrams that look a bit like spider webs. Each intersection in the web is an organization, and each strand of the web is an interactive relationship as reported by the respondents. These social network diagrams can be color coded to increase the information communicated. For example, core or periphery organizations could be color coded so that a viewer can easily distinguish between them. Other organizational characteristics could also be used to code the organizational nodes, depending on the needs of the analysis.

The measurement and graphic representation of social network and interaction data can provide a very powerful tool for monitoring organizational interactions and evaluating the facilitation of those interactions. With AID's proposed focus on partnership strengthening, these tools may become pertinent for PVOs in the future, particularly those that move into collaborative and interactive relationships.

#### IMPORTANT WEB SITES

For UCINet and other social network analysis software: Analytic Technologies.

<http://www.analytictech.com/>

For Pajek:

<http://vlado.fmf.uni-lj.si/pub/networks/pajek/>