CHALLENGES TO BUILDING AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS: LESSONS FROM BHAMBAYI, KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary South Africa, partnerships between service providers in government, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and community based organisations have been identified as a means to strengthen communities and the sustainability of social services. However, the unequal power relations that exists between and within these organisations often leads to fragmentation, duplication, and lack of co-ordination of social services. Using Fowler's (1998) conceptualisation of authentic partnerships, this qualitative phase of a larger study explored the challenges of building authentic partnerships in Bhambayi, a predominantly informal settlement in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Individual interviews and a focus group held with nine service providers revealed that intra-organisational challenges, cross-boundary and inter-organisational relations as well as political influences were obstacles to the development of authentic partnerships. The article suggests that open communication, clarity of roles and mutual trust between service providers is vital.

Key words: authentic partnerships, informal settlement, service partners, resource constraints

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, social welfare policy in South Africa has prioritised poverty alleviation and developmental social welfare services. The White Paper on Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) calls for an integrated developmental welfare system and, in order to achieve this, highlights the importance of nurturing partnerships and increasing collaboration within and between social service organisations. South Africa has a long history of partnerships between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) community based organisations, the private sector and government departments. Lombard and Janse Van Rensburg (2001) have argued that without such partnerships, organisations would not have been able to respond to the challenge of making developmental welfare services relevant to communities in the post-apartheid era. More recently, the National Department of Social Development Strategic Plan (2012-2015) has emphasised strengthening existing partnerships between the different stakeholders in the welfare sector to enhance the goals of redistribution, social justice, poverty alleviation and economic growth in the second decade of service delivery. While these goals are ambitious, it is positive to note that the National Department of Social Development acknowledges the importance of partnerships.

The authors have been working in a predominantly informal settlement named Bhambayi for the past seventeen years. Poor service delivery continues to be a major problem in the area and social services are characterised by fragmentation, duplication and lack of co-ordination and there is little evidence that the service providers are working together in a way that benefits the community. This article examines the challenge of building authentic partnerships among service providers in this particular area. While the context of this study is an informal settlement, it is hoped that the insights gained from this study will contribute to our understanding of the challenges of building authentic partnerships and might be helpful in other contexts.

This article begins with a brief discussion of partnerships, their benefits and problems and the notion of 'authentic partnerships'. It then goes on to describe the background to the study and provides an overview of the research context as well as the research process. Three core themes that were perceived by participants as obstacles to the development of authentic partnerships are then discussed: intra-organisational challenges, cross-boundary and inter-organisational relations, and political influences. The article concludes with a summary of the challenges and suggests that one possible solution may be the involvement of an external change agent.

PARTNERSHIPS: A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

A common definition of partnership is a "coalition of interests drawn from one or more sector in order to prepare and oversee an agreed strategy for the regeneration of a defined area" (Bailey, MacDonald and Barker, 1995:1) and there are many different types of partnerships. Partnerships may be private-public sector and examples of these types of partnerships have been common in the field of urban development (Houghton, 2011). They may be public sector–NGO partnerships and Nair and Campbell (2008), for example, described their attempts to develop a partnership between the Departments of Health, Social Development and two NGOs in respect of HIV and AIDS interventions in a rural area. Cranko and Khan's (1999) research focussed on partnerships between municipalities and civil society organisations.

The benefits of partnerships have received much attention in the literature. For Morse and McNamara (2006:323), these include "maximising the probability of success in a development intervention". Summarising the benefits of partnership, Gomez-Jauregui (2004:42) writes that the main objectives of partnerships are to "achieve greater efficiency; reduce duplication of services and achieve economies of scale; create civic commitment and engage the community in efforts to resolve problems; and to strengthen institutional capacity across the board." Cranko and Khan (1999) commented that community based organisations have much to offer partnerships with municipalities in terms of their knowledge of local conditions and their ability to support behaviour change that would support development and service delivery.

Thomas (2007) suggests that partnerships have the potential for sustainable local development and summarises many of the potential benefits of partnerships in the area of service delivery. Partnerships provide the possibility of enabling different sectors to share specific competencies and capabilities to address commonly identified problems and to achieve common and complementary goals. They provide greater access to a variety of financial, technical and human resources and they provide an opportunity for increased community participation in local affairs. The pooling of ideas and resources can thus be helpful in addressing the complex and multi-dimensional problems that affect communities.

Despite the many benefits attributed to the notion of partnerships, many challenges have also been identified. Riley and Wakely (2005) list a number of these. They argue, for example, that partnerships that are initiated by government (top down partnerships) are characterised by too many pressures

and constraints to allow for equal partnerships to develop. The demands for efficiency and accountability by the more powerful partner may result in the partnership becoming little more than one of "willing buyer, willing seller". In these types of partnerships, lip service may be paid to the notion of equality but in reality the status quo is maintained in terms of power relations. Linked to this, is another problem, that of agendas that are pre-set rather than developed collegially between the partners.

Partnerships, according to Riley and Wakely (2005:12), are thus very often "contract governed relationships between different actors who come together for their own advantage". Furthermore, they are of the opinion that these contractual relationships are being framed in 'partnership' terms because of claims that partnerships can save money, deliver services, generate new ideas, build social capital and citizenship. Drawing on the work of Fowler (1998), they call for partnerships to be 'authentic'.

The idea of 'authentic partnership' has its roots in the "ideological aspirations of international solidarity in the development cause" (Fowler, 1998:140) with Northern non-governmental organisations seeking to establish equitable relationships with those NGOs (particularly in the South) who were the recipients of developmental aid. Partnerships, in this context, were meant to embrace common goals, a common understanding of the causes of the problems of poverty and marginalisation, and how to intervene, as well as respect for the independence of each partner (Fowler, 1998). It was these types of partnerships that Fowler (1998) described as 'authentic'. An authentic partnership thus focuses on the nature of the relationship between the partners rather than on who the partners are and their respective roles and responsibilities. In the opinion of Riley and Wakely (2005:14), it is this type of partnership that has the potential to "promote equality, effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery".

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Much of the value of this current study is the multiple perspectives in the context of diverse functioning service partners that existed in Bhambayi. In this section, we discuss the background and context of the study as well as the research methodology.

Background

The University of KwaZulu-Natal: Community Outreach and Research (UKZN:CORE) has for the past 17 years facilitated a student training unit in

Bhambayi where final year social work students provide counselling, therapeutic group work programmes and community work services to residents in the community. In 2007, the Bhambayi Reconstruction and Development Forum (BRDF) approached the University to investigate the effects of poverty and HIV and AIDS on households. Ethical clearance was obtained in June 2007 from the Research Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal to conduct this study. Phase one of the study comprised a quantitative household-based survey (Raniga and Simpson, 2011) while phase two focussed on the qualitative impact of poverty on various groups in the community.

This article reports on phase three which aimed to:

- Explore the extent to which government departments, non-governmental organisations and community based organisations in Inanda co-operate in the delivery of social services to residents in Bhambayi.
- Examine the challenges experienced in building partnerships
- Explore suggestions for building authentic partnerships and improving service delivery in Bhambayi.

Research context

According to Census 2011 (SA Stats, 2013), 13.6% of South Africa's 51 million people live in informal dwellings. While some of these may be in the back yards of houses in formal areas, many are in informal settlements. Typically, informal dwellings do not comply with local authority building standards and are built from easily accessible material such as plastic, cardboard, corrugated iron and mud. High rates of unemployment, HIV and AIDS and lack of access to basic services are features of informal settlements (Barry and Ruther, 2005). This translates into a difficult context for service providers to provide optimal and sustain social services (Simpson, 2001).

Bhambayi is predominantly an informal settlement with only 920 formal houses and a population of approximately 4000, located in the Inanda region, north of the Durban city centre. While the majority of residents have lived in the area for more than 25 years, the past decade has seen an influx of people from the Eastern Cape and neighbouring African countries such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Kenya. This in-migration has contributed to deeper levels of poverty and unemployment coupled with competing for minimal access to services and resources in the area calling for urgent need for integrated anti-poverty intervention strategies by service providers.

Research process

Using qualitative, anti-oppressive community-based research techniques to capture service providers' voices about their service partnerships, the researchers were guided by a three-pronged simultaneous process of contact-making, strategic engagement and planning (Baines, 2007). The contact-making phase comprised compiling a list of the service partners who were providing social services to residents in Bhambayi. The strategic engagement and planning phase involved several meetings as well as telephonic contacts with these potential participants to inform them about the objectives of the study as well as to seek written informed consent to participate in the study. The research team assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting of the findings.

Throughout the process, the researchers were committed to valuing the knowledge and work experience of every service provider and their willingness to share insightful information on the challenges of building partnerships in Bhambayi. As Sin (cited in Baines, 2007:166) states, researchers should be committed to "giving voice to the voiceless and research projects must be grounded in the community and open to ideas and suggestions from participants who are otherwise silenced in mainstream discourse". In other words anti-oppressive research must be premised on assisting people to transcend their own limitations and negativity to make space for them to reclaim their capacity for transformative action. The researchers were mindful of three major activities throughout the research process: critical thinking, critical self-reflection and critical action.

Research participants

Since the researchers were aware of the population from which to draw the sample, criterion sampling was appropriate for the purposes of this study. Marlow (2012:146) states that: "criterion sampling allows the researcher to intentionally select those participants that have rich information and meet some criteria which is relevant for qualitative research".

The selection followed a purposive process where nine key informants were chosen using the following criteria:

- They had been service providers in the Bhambayi community for more than two years;
- They were aware of the social problems in the community;

- They were willing to engage in a discussion about their roles and functions as service providers in the community;
- They were willing to commit to action strategies to improve service delivery in the area;
- They were willing to exchange ideas and share their work experiences in a group setting.

The use of these criteria resulted in an interesting mix of nine research participants who represented different sectors and professions as well as different levels of government. The table below provides a brief profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Participant	Description of organisation
Mr A	Mr A represented the trust which was the original owner of the land. This trust now owns a small portion and which is a tourist site and they offer workshops to the local community
Mrs B	Mrs B is a nursing sister from the 'Clinic' project. This project provides services to people affected by HIV and AIDS, including home based care and a feeding scheme
Mrs C	Mrs C is an educator from the local primary school
Mrs D	Mrs D is an educator from the local secondary school
Mrs E	Mrs E is the owner of a crèche in Bhambayi
Mr F	Mr F works in the community work programme at the Department of Local Government and Traditional affairs
Mrs G	Mrs G is a social worker at the local child welfare organisation located about 10km from Bhambayi
Mr H	Mr H is a community member and chairperson of the local development forum
Mr I	Mr I is the local government councillor for the ward

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using two methods, a semi structured interview and a focus group.

Semi-structured interview

One semi-structured in-depth interview with each key informant was held. This gave the researchers an opportunity to discuss the objectives of the study, to explore whether the participants were willing to share their work experiences in the focus group sessions and to establish them as equal partners in the research process (Baines, 2007). Secondly, it provided the platform for engaging them about the obstacles and challenges of providing social services in the Bhambayi community.

Focus group

One focus group session of approximately one and a half hours was held with the key participants. This focus group session triangulated the in-depth interview as the aim was to encourage the key informants to not just to see their own experiences in isolation, but to engage as a collective and to hear the voices of other service providers who experienced similar challenges. More importantly, it served as a forum to commit to improving the service delivery in the community and to increase networking and collaboration between the service providers.

Morgan (1988) illustrated two approaches to analysing qualitative data. The one is an ethnographic summary and the other a systematic coding via content analysis. The researchers used a combination of these two approaches. Morgan (1988:65) contends that "there is likely to be a cycling back and forth between the raw material in the transcripts and the more abstract determination of what topics will go into the ultimate report". Additionally, the data were thematically and critically analysed in relation to the conceptual framework of authentic partnerships and the researchers were constantly mindful of interpreting the key informants' experiences in relation to the characteristics of authentic partnerships.

Issues of trustworthiness

Triangulation, as well as prolonged engagement and the rich descriptive details shared by the participants about their work experiences in both the semi-structured in-depth interview and the focus group sessions, served to enhance the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings (Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter, 2006).

Limitations of the study

In the reporting of the findings it is important to take note that the detailed interview transcripts were translated from IsiZulu to English. A research assistant who was well versed in isiZulu conducted the interviews with the key informants. The researchers held several meetings with the research assistant to discuss the interview experiences as well as the English translations of the interview transcripts. The research report was compiled at the end of this process. It is, however, possible that some meaning may have been lost from the translation of the field notes and transcripts from isiZulu to English. A further limitation may be the absence of a major government social service provider who was unable to participate because gaining informed consent involved numerous bureaucratic processes and permission was not granted in time for the study.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Three important themes, namely intra-organisational challenges, cross-boundary and inter-organisational relations as well as political influences that are closely connected and that distilled from the analysis, form the central premise of the discussion of results below. In the reporting of the findings the researchers were mindful that understanding the service providers' roles and functions in the community necessitates an understanding of the complex interplay of socio-economic and resource challenges that profoundly impact service delivery in this community.

Intra-organisational challenges

One of the difficulties of establishing authentic partnerships that was identified in this study, was the existence of many obstacles within organisations. Some participants (Mr H, Mrs G, and Mr F) pointed out that some of the organisations had no computers (access to email or internet), and telephone lines and staff had to use their personal cell phones for work purposes. Not only did this lack of resources impact negatively on service delivery, but it also hindered the formation of co-operative working relationships and partnerships with each other and other service providers in the Inanda region. This is not an isolated problem as Nair and Campbell (2008), related from their qualitative study in a rural community in KwaZulu-Natal the difficulties of establishing partnerships and setting up meetings when phones, faxes, and e-mail do not work. Swanepoel and De Beer (2006) aptly make the point that community projects can only be implemented

effectively if the material, financial, technical resources and managerial capacity within organisations to do so exists.

All the participants were of the view that their respective organisations were unsuited to working with others in partnership as organisational structures lacked the capacity to cope with the range and intensity of community demands confronting them. In particular, participants complained about the lack of funding which negatively impacted on the delivery of services as well as staff morale. Mrs G called for increase in subsidies and human resources in respect of delivery of optimal services in Bhambayi. She stated: "*What we are actually looking at is the budgets and the human resources in order to strengthen service delivery*".

Mr F from the Department of Local Government spoke about staff shortages and gave an example of 19 supervisors in his department who were responsible for the supervision of 330 community workers who worked throughout the KwaZulu-Natal province which made supervision of services and networking with partners even more difficult.

An additional obstacle to building partnerships raised by two project managers in community based organisations (Mr H and Mrs B) was that raising funds in the present economic climate in South Africa was difficult. Mr H stated that what adds to the complexity is "*when there is competition for similar programmes in the same community, the problem is exacerbated*". Mrs G added that another problem that hindered authentic partnerships was *the lack of knowledge about where to apply for funding and how to write funding proposals*".

This lack of skills was also evident in the organisations' lack of knowledge on how to intervene in complex cases in the community. For example, Mrs E explained that she tried to deal with a case of suspected child abuse by calling the parents, but they then removed the child from the school. She said she now *"keeps quiet"* so as not to interfere in family matters. The implications of such silence from service providers are serious as children will continue to be harmed unless service providers strengthen partnerships through active networking and group consensus building.

Capacity building within partnership projects is essential to improve reporting mechanisms, communication between partners and ultimately build trust (Riley and Wakely, 2005).

Cross-boundary and inter-organisational relations

Many social service agencies across the various sectors have been dependent on the establishment of a variety of inter-agency partnerships and working groups. Riley and Wakely (2005) indicate that the authenticity of such working partnerships should ideally be based on a foundation of trust, respect and the capacity of each partner to be at a level that will enable an equality of power in the partnership. Mr H, Mr I and Mr A were all of the view that the relationship between the organisations in Bhambayi was problematic and that instead of working together for the good of the community, there was competition and duplication of services. An example of this was the fact that the schools, the 'clinic project', the creche and the child welfare organisation all provided food parcels to poor households in the community. In fact, one school even wanted to expand its food programme claiming that many learners did not want to access food at the 'clinic project' because this project targeted residents who were living with HIV. These sentiments reflect that rather than collaborate to address this stigma and strengthen the 'clinic' programme, the school instead believed that it would be better to start their own nutrition programme to meet the food security needs of learners at the school. This conflict led to a break down in the relationship between these two service providers with the 'clinic project' then excluding the school from its meetings about their supportive services to families infected and affected by HIV and AIDS in the community.

Despite the unanimous sentiments shared by participants that services offered by their respective organisations were accessible to the residents of Bhambayi, it was clear that this was not always the case. Mr A, for example, complained that there is a pattern of poor attendance by community-based organisations when capacity building workshops are organised by his organisation "*despite them being free*". He added that even though his organisation had a prolonged engagement in the community that "*no-one had been to ask about programmes for the past few years*". Historically this organisation owned much of the land in the area and there had been considerable conflict between this organisation and the community over the illegal occupation of the land. It is possible that these old wounds still affect the relationship today. In spite of this poor response to services, the participant was, rather oddly, of the opinion that "*our organisation offers the best service to the community*".

Mr F spoke of role conflicts between the municipality and the provincial department. He stated that: "*From inception, the community development programme was politicised as councillors in the eThekwini Municipality felt*

threatened as they think that their jobs will change with the employment of community workers who are expected to inform the community about government services". Clearly, as Ife and Tesoriero (2006) argue, even though funders and policy makers positively encourage partnerships as a key strategy in social development, it remains highly problematic as a result of the complexities of relationships that are the substance of partnerships.

Another challenge that the participants spoke about was the lack of communication and collaboration which led to much fragmentation among social service providers in the delivery of social services in Bhambayi. One participant (Mrs G) stated: *"It's like we each have our own little projects, our own budgets so we don't share much with each other"*. It was clear that there was a degree of suspicion as well as competition between service providers. As Ife and Teseriero (2006) commented, it cannot be taken for granted that there is harmony and sameness among partners.

Another gap identified by the participants was that there were no consistent therapeutic services available in the community. While social workers from specialist organisations did visit the community and provide support services, this was irregular and inadequate. Two of the participants confessed that due to their excessive caseloads, they were unable to provide consistent services to residents in Bhambayi. One social worker commented: *"it is a luxury for me to spend a whole day once a week in Bhambayi when I have several other service areas in the Inanda region"*.

Political influences

This theme focused on inter-governmental dynamics and how these have shaped and impacted partnerships in the Inanda region. A major concern raised by participants (Mrs B, Mrs C, Mrs D, Mr F and Mr I), was the fragmentation that existed across these different (education, health and local government) government departments.

It was evident that complex power imbalances existed between community structures, political parties and local government representatives. Bhambayi has a historically been a politically volatile area (Simpson, 2001) and these tensions were still evident at the time of this study. Mr I reflected on some of the 'political' challenges that he faced in his role in the community.

The challenge I face is that despite my hard work some people don't stop accusing and criticising me – for example, some people at Bhambayi accuse the Councillor and Street Committee for disciplining criminals in the area.

Even if you can sweat blood ... rivals from different political parties always try to make your name bad as way of creating a platform for themselves.

Habib (2013) argues that even though local governments do not have much discretion in formulating policy, they do have considerable latitude in interpreting legislation and implementing social services. The sentiments expressed by Mr I revealed that political tensions and power imbalances are real and continue to exist between residents in Bhambayi and local government structures in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Habib (2013) adds that in contemporary South Africa such conflicts and partnership struggles are an inevitable effect of change, a process of which the outcome is still uncertain. What is clear is that such political tensions and power imbalances have impacted the overall management, the quality and extent of social service delivery in this community.

Many of the participants also complained about community leaders who they felt were elected by the community to represent their voice and should therefore support their efforts to improve the quality of life of residents in Bhambayi. Some of them complained about the lack of accountability on the part of the councilor and were frustrated that they could not trust his word as he failed to attend meetings even when the meeting dates were set in consultation with him. This infers that in community development, partnerships between residents and community leaders as a modus operandi remains problematic when there is contestation about the nature of issues, the roles and desired outcomes in the partners' relationship (Ife and Tesoriero 2006). As Patel (2005) indicates that co-ordination of social services itself, is a political enterprise that is concerned with changing power structures in communities.

The participants revealed frustrations they experienced every time the Provincial government departments underwent re-structuring, as this usually meant the re-deployment of staff. Mr F commented: *"the political implications of these decisions cannot be ignored".* Many of the participants questioned whether their organisational needs were taken into account and whether they, as service providers, had any input into decision making in respect of funding, resource allocations and the management of service programmes.

The deliberations above reflects that there is a close link between the political influences and the 'blurred' relationship between community leaders and service providers and this has a systemic effect on inter-departmental

relations and the institutional resource capacity within organisations in the delivery of social services.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided insight into the experiences of service providers from various organisations in the welfare sector in respect of partnerships and has explored the challenges of developing authentic partnerships in an informal settlement. While much needed and valuable services are provided by service providers who are motivated and committed to increasing the quality of life of residents in the Bhambayi community, social service delivery is in fact, limited and fragmented. Many complex challenges at the intra and inter- organisational levels, as well as at the macro level remain and these impact negatively on the building of authentic partnerships.

In the words of Fowler (1998:144), authentic partnerships must be understood as "mutually enabling, inter-dependent interaction with shared intentions". This study reveals that partnerships in Bhambayi cannot be considered to be 'authentic'. Some of the organisations were struggling with internal challenges such as lack of funding, staff and resources. This has hampered their ability to meet with and work with other organisations. This lack of resources may also place organisations in competition with each other as they try to access scarce resources for themselves. The study also revealed that there was a lack of communication and even at times conflict between service providers. Complex bureaucratic procedures and political influences exacerbate the problem. As Lombard (2008:10) suggests that "partnerships based on trust and open discussion on the respective roles of government and non-government sector in service provision, policy development and levels of funding for services is urgently needed in the welfare sector".

A positive outcome of the research study was the bringing together of the different sectors in a focus group. Participants were unanimous that this was an important event as it provided the opportunity for them to share their frustrations and ideas. In this context, the role of an external change agent such as a social worker or development practitioner may be useful. This person could help to set up a co-ordinating forum as envisaged by Friedman (2006) who suggested that such structures could enable citizens to come together to discuss challenges in their communities and to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. Such fora could also serve as important channels of communication between service providers and the community. A further role for the external change agent could be to provide training and

support to the partners in order to build capacity as well as to mediate conflicts.

A central premise of this article has been that authentic partnerships which are characterised by mutual trust open communication and collaboration would contribute positively to social service delivery and the development within communities. The policy context of a developmental social welfare framework in South Africa encourages this but the question remains whether social workers and other development practitioners will rise to the challenge?

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