

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT ABOUT COLLABORATION?

A chapter of the Centre for Human
Ecology's Learning Report on the Govan
Together Project.

Introduction

This section is a part of the full Learning Report written by the Centre for Human Ecology about the Govan Together project. Here we explore what we learnt about partnership working and collaboration, one of the richest areas of this year-long project funded by the Climate Challenge Fund.

Setting the scene

As far as we know, Govan Together was the only round 8 CCF-funded project involving 5 organisations working in partnership. And it was one of perhaps few projects that worked on tackling community resilience as a precursor to addressing carbon reduction. This brought a high level of complexity to the project, numerous tensions between and within partners as well as invaluable learning and some real achievements.

Govan Together emerged from the then recently established Govan Folk University (GFU), a loose partnership between the Pearce Institute, the Centre for Human Ecology (CHE), the GalGael Trust, Fablevision and Govan and Linthouse Parish Church. When the Govan Together application was submitted, Govan and Linthouse Parish Church chose to support but not directly participate in the project, whilst LegUp, although not part of GFU, were invited to join. Members of GalGael, Fablevision and CHE played a key part in drawing the application. Due to the speed at which this process took place, and whilst the overall goals and objectives were clearly laid out in the application, budget allocation and clarity around roles and responsibilities hadn't been agreed between partners by the time we heard that our application had been successful. Added to this, the complexity mentioned above made the first few months of the project bumpy, stressful and initially slow in delivering.

Here are explored in more depth the difficulties we encountered:

First of all, due to the fact that in a low income area like Govan, Climate Change is more an issue of resilience than carbon reduction, we were dealing with the unfamiliar field of inquiry of how to facilitate conversations and experimental activities towards building community resilience and resourcefulness.

Moreover, the 5 partners forming 'Govan Together' had never worked together in this combination, did not all know each other well (or at all in some instances). It took us the length of the project, many tense conversations (face to face and via emails), bi-weekly management and project meetings and a whole year of joined up activities to truly get to know each other and start achieving some flow.

As a result of this complexity as well as the imperative to deliver our outcomes within a year, pressure was put onto the group forming process and the final agreement on budget & roles allocation didn't take place until mid-September. Activities such as organising the first big event, food growing in the garden, filming and initiating the collaborative inquiry into issues of resilience and resourcefulness happened within the first months of the project. It is fair to say, however, that a lot of our energy was mobilised into wrestling with tensions, investing considerable efforts to create and maintain space for

dialogue, and drawing proposals after proposals to clarify roles and budget allocation.

The remaining six months saw a clear acceleration on the delivery front and the commonly agreed view amongst partners is that we met most of our agreed outcomes. During these last six months, tensions between us continued but did not prevent each organisation, in the whole, from undertaking the work they had committed to. Lack of time, complexity of the issues at hand, as well as tensions experienced within some organisations, were perhaps as much of a barrier to delivery than differences in worldviews, management practices and cultures across organisations.

What made or would have made our partnership work?

In a nutshell, effective collaboration is an accomplishment rather than a given. It requires ongoing efforts, specific skills, and collectively agreed structures to facilitate accountability, learning and delivery.

1. Funding and commitment to Govan

In some respect it is an obvious statement to make but being granted funding from CCF played a major role in making the partnership work. Without funding we probably wouldn't have had the impetus to draw this combination of partners together; in particular as LegUp wasn't part of the work that GFU had initiated in the year preceding the application process, they might not have had the motivation to join Govan Together. Individuals within each organisation were also able to commit significant time to this project whilst previous GFU initiatives had been voluntary. Linked to the funding, the obligation to deliver a set of objectives within a year gave us the motivation to keep going under difficult circumstances. And, possibly more importantly, our commitment to making a difference in Govan and the opportunity given by this project to do something truly innovative and exciting encouraged us time and time again to face and work at our challenges.

2. Individually led projects versus collaborative activities

In the course of the project, a balance naturally emerged between individually led projects (such as the Collaborating for Change workshops for CHE, film and broadsheet for Fablevision, food growing course for LegUp etc) and collectively owned projects (e.g. Tuesday evening events, big events etc). This allowed autonomy and control over some project outcomes by each organisation. Collaborative activities added considerable value to the project as they broadened access to beneficiaries, created mutually beneficial conditions for

each partner's contribution and stretched partners to find ways of working together that accommodated everyone's vision.

Tuesday evening events were a good example of this. The meal provided by LegUp was pivotal in creating a space of conviviality. This in turn allowed CHE to progressively establish a space for learning as well and for Fablevision to offer its cultural events. The meal made people come out on a Tuesday night and drew them together. LegUp volunteers made everyone feel welcome. People naturally joined the talks and conversations organised by CHE over the weeks and slowly formed a core learning community. Fablevision slotted 3 small events in the programme as well, making us work as a threesome from January onwards.

Similarly to the project as a whole, establishing a sense of flow, coherence and real partnership working took time and a few challenging conversations. Our visions and ways of working initially diverged and created tensions, particularly for LegUp. As explained in the section on the Govan Conversations, CHE's first events, rooted in our previous incarnation as an academic entity, attracted people from out with Govan (in one occasion in large numbers). We were unaware of the drain this was to put on LegUp's workload (food making and dish washing) and of course on their willingness to support our events when they didn't contribute to their vision. A conversation between LegUp and CHE before Christmas clarified what was important to us all as regards to the Tuesday nights.

The main points were:

- Increasing the garden's capacity by raising awareness of its existence and enrolling Govan-based volunteers;
- Creating enough time on the night for both a relaxed meal and spacious learning events;
- Ensuring a certain coherence and continuity every week – hosting group members need to be there on the night;
- Creating a safe space so that people feel held;
- Enabling people to take ownership of what happens on the night;
- Developing a vision of what Govan wants to learn to build resourcefulness: a learning plan for Govan?

After this conversation, CHE decided to experiment with a new format for the evening – the talks would happen in the café before the meal and the after meal discussion (for those who wanted it) would happen in an adjacent space so as not to disturb the atmosphere of conviviality for those wanting to stay and chat at the tables.

In practice, the latter didn't happen as there wasn't another suitable space available in the PI on Tuesday night. It meant that some adjustment was needed – people wanting to chat needed to keep the volume down and removed themselves into the kitchen (due to the café's acoustic) whilst CHE made its talks and

discussions more attractive & participatory, drawing most of the people present at the meal into a learning space that worked for them.

Similarly, after the Burns Night event that attracted 120 people and considerably stretched LegUp's capacity, Fablevision held a debriefing session with a few core members. It was agreed that consequent events wouldn't be advertised as extensively in the community and would be ticketed so as to keep numbers to a manageable level.

The 3 big events present another example where true collaboration emerged over time. Whilst the first event was loosely coordinated by the Chair of LegUp with help from Fablevision, all partners apart from CHE played a part on the day. Whilst the day itself was successful in attracting people (thanks to the brilliant idea of organising bus trips to link the different resources in the community) and in inquiring into resources valued by people in Govan (thanks to a mapping process, collective writing of poetry and collection of 'kitchen stories'), its organisation was stressful due to lack of clarity & communication. Consequently, the coordination of the following 2 events was allocated to Fablevision.

Reclaiming Christmas was organised through a series of weekly production meetings out with the regular bi-weekly meetings. Whilst publicity and organising the various elements of the day was very professionally handled and whilst many elements of the event undoubtedly fulfilled our aims of creating togetherness and forging a new story for Govan, lack of trust and tiredness regarding ongoing tensions meant that the day didn't reflect the diversity of the partnership. Some partners' attention was also fully focused on delivering other parts of the project and it was difficult to fit another weekly meeting in an already busy schedule.

By contrast, "Seeds for the Future" on 31st March saw each partner contributing to the full. We had made a point of discussing the event at each project group meeting in February and March. Partners also attended Fablevision's production meetings and we all took responsibility for different parts of the day and activities. Although attendance was lower than at the previous 2 events, the event was the most meaningful and successful of all our events from the point of view of partnership working.

3. Flow of communication

Collaboration would have been less stressful if all members of partner organisations had been well informed of the goals and objectives of Govan Together as well as decisions made by the various GT structures (hosting group, management group, project group and Basecamp software).

The speed at which the application process happened, as well as difficulties encountered in the first months, meant that many LegUp volunteers felt disconnected from Govan Together.

Added to this, our structures didn't empower everyone involved in the project to relay information and opinions effectively. A lack of safety at our meetings prevented less experienced and quieter individuals to express their voice and feel heard. It could also be said that operational and management issues were given priority over process. Having at least one representative of each partner organisation on the management and project groups wasn't enough to establish an effective flow of information.

As a result of this, volunteers and staff involved in the delivery of key parts of the project (dinner nights and big events) didn't know enough about the aims and objectives of Govan Together, nor motivations and organisational cultures of other partners. This created frustration, hurt and misunderstanding.

Paying more attention to effective structures of communication and checking that all people involved were sufficiently informed would have avoided many tensions.

4. Managing the project

On the practical issue of management, it was felt that managing the project via bi-weekly management and project group meetings worked well, especially once we reached clarity as to who was doing what and with which budget. These regular meetings allowed some communication and collaboration to take place. The introduction in September of Basecamp, a project management software, enabled focused communication over different aspects of the project.

Although no-one held the post of project coordinator, each partner held a clearly defined coordinating role: LegUp coordinated all activities related to food growing and preparing, Fablevision coordinated 2 big events, creative evaluation and reporting activities, CHE coordinated a range of transformative learning activities as well as capacity building and 'space holding' within the partnership, the Pearce Institute provided venue space and GalGael chaired the project and management groups.

5. Resources that make collaboration work and where we are at the end of it

What facilitates harmonious and effective work across differences, in our understanding, boils down to resources: *external resources* on the one hand such as time, appropriate structures, funding to pay external facilitator/mediator when necessary etc, and *inner resources* on the other, including specific skills (in particular communication and dialogue) and certain qualities (self awareness, resilience, capacity for self-reflexivity and openness to feedback, authenticity and courage to speak one's truth to name a few). Appropriate training, establishment of more structures, effective communication between Govan Together and members of partner organisations as well as time to get to know each other at the beginning would have gone a long way towards making our collaboration better.

However, despite much commitment to resolving tensions, a lot of time and effort invested in facilitating dialogue, real passion for our work and commitment to Govan, notwithstanding some skills in mediation and communication within the partnership, trust never fully emerged between us. Coming to the end of our year together, it's unlikely that this particular combination of partners will come together formally to hold a follow-up project (although only time will say for sure). Activities initiated by Govan Together such as the dinner nights and the Govan Conversations might continue on a self-organising basis. Individual organisations might choose to work together in the future, especially as despite immense challenges we still talk to and respect each other. A last debrief session, planned for end of May or early June, will give closure to the project and give us space to explore the legacy left by Govan Together and what might be given birth to in the future.

What will we do differently when collaborating in the future?

We know that circumstances (and the funding environment in particular) rarely give time to establish solid foundations for partnership working. However, in an ideal world, here are the steps we'd like to take when launching into a similar initiative in the future:

1. **Build rapport and relationships with potential partners** before formally agreeing to work together – practically it would involve having individual conversations with partners, attending events they organise, checking websites, reading reports on previous projects, inquiring into capacity for self reflexivity when appropriate, exploring frames of reference underlying partners' practices etc – the aim of these conversations would be transparent: can we work with one another? What can we bring to the partnership to complement each other's vision and work? What challenges can we expect from the little we know of each other and is there anything we need to put in place to avoid tension emerging?

2. Carry out a **visioning process** before applying for funds. This will clarify whether we have enough in common to work together, reveal partners' values & frameworks, let other potential partners know what they might be choosing to join and create a standard against which decisions will be made.
3. The process of **applying for funds** will be the first concrete collaborative effort and reveal further whether partnership working can indeed happen between us. At this point, there will still be room for choice on whether to collaborate or not.
4. Draw a **partnership agreement** with budget allocation and clear roles & responsibilities before funds are granted. Ideally, we would also agree, as early as possible in the project, on the monitoring & evaluation framework ensuring that participatory action research is an integral part of the process. Agree on structures of decision making, resource allocation, conflict management and accountability at an early stage of the project. Also agree that each organisation will support their staff in dealing with tensions arising from the partnership and will ensure effective flow of communication between staff/volunteers and project management structures.
5. Organise an externally facilitated session at the start of the project to **explore issues of capacity**, constraints, strengths and fragilities of each partner organisation – what could be called a risk assessment. This will reveal potential areas of tensions and enable faster mutual understanding. This process might also reveal where mentoring of particular individuals needs to be put in place (if they've not had previous experience of partnership working). If time and finances aren't a constraint, organising training on collaboration and communication skills would add huge value to our capacity to work together.
6. When finalising the work plan, pay attention to **balancing individually-owned projects and collective ones** where potential synergies are identified and encouraged (see previous section);
7. Regularly **review the work plan**, reflect on agreed aims, objectives and outcomes/outputs so as to encourage partners to stay connected to what we are trying to achieve collectively.
8. In our case, where there was complexity on the subject matter (e.g. community resilience and behaviour change), we would have benefitted, at an early stage in the project, from an **externally facilitated session to engage intellectually in the issues at stake and existing frameworks around community resilience, resourcefulness** etc. It took us a long time to get our heads around these notions. Some orientation in this field would have been invaluable. Dr Kate Driscoll, then based at Glasgow University's Geography department, played this role informally when she joined the collaborative

inquiry group in July. She introduced us to the importance of mapping resources and played an important role in the July 30th event. Unfortunately, she left in August to take up a new post in the States. The workshop that she led on March 17th when she returned to Glasgow for a research visit, brought back the richness of bridging academic and applied knowledge. This workshop was one of the highlights of our year together – something to reflect on for future collaborative projects.

9. And finally, trust that **time, commitment** to the community and its place, and **joined up activities** will reveal, often in unexpected ways, the magic of collaboration.

Vérène Nicolas
(on behalf of The Centre for Human Ecology)