

Improving the Role of Coalitions in Public Policy: Coalition Formation Lessons and Recommendations

Lessons from the Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition (ECHCAC) Case Study

This report provides key lessons of a year-long case study conducted on a coalition formed within the health care subsystem in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The aim is to provide other coalitions or those wanting to start coalitions with some recommendations based on the challenges and successes of the Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition (ECHCAC).

The study explored the conception and functionality of the ECHCAC and was able to assess the formation and structure of the coalition, the members' beliefs that influence the performance of the coalition, and draw lessons for better achieving coalition outcomes. Some of the lessons include the importance of shared core and policy beliefs amongst members, and the shared strength in working as a collective.

These lessons are based on a research report produced by Lindelwa Nxele (PSAM Advocacy Impact Programme officer). The full report is available on the [PSAM website](#).

About PSAM

The Public Service Accountability Monitor forms part of the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. It has a vision to ensure that the right to social accountability is universally realised. PSAM's activities include research, monitoring, advocacy and capacity building. Working through Sub-Saharan Africa, PSAM generates and shares knowledge about the right to social accountability and the monitoring tools necessary to give effect to this right.

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About the ECHCAC

In June 2013 the Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition (ECHCAC) was formed by a group of organisations concerned and unsatisfied with policy implementation and service delivery by the Eastern Cape Department of Health (ECDoH). The poor state of health care provision in the province was intensifying, resulting in morbidity, poor health outcomes, and in general a negligent violation of people’s constitutional rights (see the Section 27 report ‘[Death and Dying in the Eastern Cape](#)’ for background). Organisations working independently in the sector realized that working in isolation, especially when dealing with issues that affected all of them, was inefficient. The ECHCAC establishment was spearheaded by a group of organisations which had already worked together previously, and then invited other organisations to join them in forming a coalition. These organisations included those whose work focused on service delivery, human rights, policy change, social accountability, trade unions, and associations of medical professionals.

The Case Study

This qualitative research study was conducted in September 2015. Data was collected primarily through interviews with key informants from the ECHCAC, either through face-to-face interviews or through Skype. Due to human resource and time constraints, purposive sampling was used when identifying informants. Members from five different organisations and the coalition coordinator were interviewed. The questions in the interview guide focused on the collaborations and values held by organisations and within the broader coalition, the structure, and the impact of the coalition in the policy change and service delivery process, as well as their perceived future as a coalition. In addition to interviews, a desk-based review of literature was conducted to learn what other researchers have produced on coalitions. Project documents, and other relevant documents relating to the ECHCAC were assessed to understand the structure, mission and vision of the coalition, the work it’s been involved in, their achievements, and progress.

Case Study Finding 1 – Coalitions are powerful, but time consuming and difficult to sustain.

Our Experience

Most coalition members were in consensus regarding the crisis that the health sector faced and knew that on their own, they didn’t have as much power as they would have when united. What was not easy to foresee at its inception, however, was the time that would need to be invested to implement and coordinate the coalition and its activities. Coalitions are powerful bodies but are not easy to sustain.

“The coalition operates without a team, and it’s only recently that we deployed a coordinator. One person is not enough, teams make things better and would have been able to serve the real coordinating and collating of information duties” (coalition member).

Recommendations

- Selecting a steering committee and a coordinator is something that a coalition should do at the outset to ensure that everyone understands the role they ought to play. Those organisations forming part of the coalition need to include the work of the coalition as part of their organisational key performance areas to be able to dedicate the necessary time to the coalition.
- Clear communication is integral to the longevity of the coalition and should not be limited to the use of emails and circulated minutes of meetings. Making use of other forms of communication, such as WhatsApp and other instant messaging platforms, as a notification platform for members to access their coalition information may promote the culture of improved communication between members.
- There is a need to constantly strengthen the cause of the coalition through organising collective awareness campaigns, or any other activities that require the involvement of a large number of members of the coalition, the targeted communities, and state actors.
- The coalition should regularly review whether all members of the group benefit equally from membership, and if not, what can be done to ensure that there is shared satisfaction of as many of the members as possible.

Case Study Finding 2 – Lack of clarity at the formation stage will hamper efforts throughout the life of the coalition.

Our Experience

The various organisations that had been working within the healthcare sector realised the need to work together, with a belief that there is strength in numbers. However, certain issues arose from forming the coalition which were not initially conceived, such as the benefits of joining the coalition, the requirements of maintaining it, and the image it portrays to others.

“The coalition started stagnating because people were not participating. Some of them did not understand their role within the coalition and their expectations were not aligned with the coalitions” (coalition member).

Recommendations

- Gathering as much information as possible on the nature of work of the coalition is important at the outset. Coalitions should be clear on their objectives from the very beginning and ensure that the member’s core beliefs are aligned with those objectives. This will assist in mitigating issues with members regarding expectations, as well as prevent government officials from being unclear about the role of the coalition.
- It’s necessary for coalition members to clearly understand the structure of a coalition, and the various roles each can play so there will not be any confusion and frustration amongst members regarding the benefits of being part of a coalition.

Case Study Finding 3 – Learning is difficult, but is made easier if there are mechanisms which foster shared understanding.

Our Experience

Learning can be a long, involved process with various elements that need understanding. From the inception of the ECHCAC, those involved learnt about their partners, their objectives, and the various methods they could use to deal with issues they encounter. Learning is an important process for individuals and the organisations they work with, and it can be a collective effort or a personal endeavour. However, without the right mechanisms in place, what is learnt can be lost if not shared or integrated into the work.

“We need to constantly improve ourselves so that we will not find ourselves being redundant due to lack of necessary skills. I am now able to do things I was not able to three years ago, and I’m still studying to improve myself so that I can engage better with my colleagues and even donors” (coalition member).

Recommendations

- There should be learning, knowledge, and skills transference mechanisms in place that will ensure that the knowledge from previous employees, coalition members, or those that have extensive field experience is transferred to newcomers. For example, establish guidelines for documenting campaigns, develop an M&E strategy, and set aside time to reflect on impact.
- Coalitions should promote documenting and reflection amongst its members. It is necessary to have a culture of documenting and reflecting to be able to review the work, assess where it works, its shortfalls, and allow room for change and adaptation towards intended objectives.
- Development and progress are long-term initiatives, therefore patience, perseverance, and commitment are crucial traits to have. This will aid the coalition members to maintain their enthusiasm and fight against demotivation and a lack of participation, especially when their expected results are delayed.

Case Study Finding 4 – Advocacy is context specific. Understand the partners, stakeholders and relationships within the sector.

Our Experience

There were various methods adopted by the ECHCAC to mitigate the challenges faced within the health sector. These include engaging the state, mobilising the public to participate, and involving the media in important matters. It was often difficult to get cooperation from the government as the coalition was viewed with suspicion. Some government members accused the ECHCAC of working for the opposition, and although there are some government officials that agree with the coalition's agenda, they didn't have the power to influence policy. Beyond engagement with government, mobilising the public to participate in policy change is a strenuous process that demands effort and patience. Furthermore, the media has a tendency of using the information provided by these policy participants for their own agenda. Regardless of the methods of engagement, they should be specific to the coalition objectives.

"We made a mistake of thinking that the reports we produce and share with government regarding service delivery [lack of] will facilitate the necessary communication, but in reality, to some people it demonstrated negative connotations, as they felt like we were aiming to expose their corruption and cared for nothing else but shaming them" (coalition member).

Recommendations

- The coalition needs to understand the ever-changing nature of the subsystem, and be ready to adapt and re-strategize their campaigns when the status quo changes.
- There is a need for coalitions to establish relationships with relevant duty bearers that will be willing to listen and incorporate the public's opinions and concerns into their plans and strategies. Once the relationship has been built, it should be maintained, by not only the individual members, but the organisations and coalition as well. Building trust is fundamental in all these relationships.
- The public needs to be included throughout the intervention, and there should be systems in place that will allow the coalition to provide feedback to communities. People should be empowered to demand their rights on their own, even when the coalition no longer exists.
- The coalition should adopt a media strategy that will advance the cause of the coalition. Members should be clear about the messages they want to convey before engaging with the media.

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