Many small communities in the western United States are experiencing rapid population and economic growth. Newly built power plants, mining operations, seasonal residents, tourism, and in-migration in rural communities are significant causes for rapid growth. While most communities welcome growth and see it in a positive light, few are prepared to deal with many of its attendant problems. Rapid growth often causes strain on local government decision-making and tax structures. There can be pressure to develop more land for urban uses, to provide more public services, to increase employment, educational, and recreational opportunities, and to provide new housing and commercial establishments. It is impossible for any community to simultaneously implement all the alternative strategies that will help meet the diverse needs brought on by rapid growth. One strategy that may help soften growth’s impacts is the promotion of coordinated and/or joint program efforts among local agencies.

What is interagency coordination?

Interagency coordination can be defined as a process in which two or more organizations come together to solve a specific problem or meet a specific need. It carries with it the assumption that by working together, agencies will increase their effectiveness, resource availability, and decision-making capabilities—and thereby more effectively assist in the resolution of a community need or problem that could not be met by any single agency acting alone.

A common misconception is that interagency coordination means only cooperation. Certain, any joint effort among agencies requires that they cooperate. However, agencies may be cooperating on one issue, competing on another, and in direct conflict on still another issue. For example, a local planning department and a housing authority may be cooperating on the development of a housing code. At the same time, both agencies may be competing for the authority to enforce the housing code—and they could well be in direct conflict over the code’s relationship and application to existing housing stock.

The term "coordination" itself is subject to a wide range of interpretations. Studies of organizations have identified several dimensions. At its lowest level, agencies are familiar with the personnel and programs of other local organizations. There will be some informal "coordination efforts" toward the exchange of general knowledge and data. Membership in joint councils can also be identified as a low level of interagency coordination.

At the intermediate level, agencies have developed formal exchanges of information, resources, and personnel through participating in joint projects, although specific tasks and responsibilities will not have been clearly defined. At the highest level of coordination, agencies will be engaged in joint budgeting of programs. Specific agreements as to goals and policies will be clearly understood, and probably written down as part of an overall joint agreement. Agencies will also be well represented on overlapping boards and councils. Communities experiencing rapid growth may benefit from some level of coordination. Demands for new services and fast-changing situations caused by growth can often be more easily resolved by agencies working together.

Why is interagency co-ordination necessary?

Recent societal trends, most of them resulting from rapid growth and development, indicate that interagency coordination will benefit the agencies involved as well as the community.

- **Trends**
  - Increasing number of agencies. As demands are placed on local units of government to provide a more diverse assortment of public services, the complex interaction is increasing agency (or department within an existing agency) to meet that demand. This has resulted in many organizations functioning in service to serve the same population, thereby fragmenting responsibilities within many organizations.
  - Increasing complexity of community needs and problems. New means that solutions will be more complex. To achieve their purposes, organizations need access to a wider range of resources, information, and expertise. Often, cooperation with other agencies is usually the most economical and expeditious method of gaining access to needed resources.
  - Increasing comprehensiveness of individual and community needs. Most needs have become interrelated. The challenges facing agencies can meet them totally. For example, a community experiencing rapid growth may need more housing, improved streets, more schools, better recreational facilities. Coordinating the resources of several agencies may be more effective, with the top priority needs being
  - **Increasing number of special interest groups.** It is becoming more difficult to respond to the diverse special interest groups. Organizations, especially government agencies, are discovering a need for systematic, comprehensive, coordinated efforts toward making efficient use of available manpower and resources.

**Benefits**

- The above trends highlight the need for interagency coordination. In addition, there is increasing benefit for the agencies and the community needs to be coordinated. Agencies can make a concerted effort to coordinate their programs and activities. Some of these benefits follow:
  - **Reduced duplication and overlap.** Several agencies working to resolve similar problems and meet community needs, duplication of services and assistance can occur. Coordinating agencies can help avoid wasted effort by sharing resources and explicitly stating who is responsible for specific tasks.
  - **Covering gaps and oversights.** Having several agencies actively working in a community does not ensure that all needs are met. Some agencies will not cover the whole area, which may promote an exchange of ideas and viewpoints, leading to a broader definition of the community needs that joint agency efforts should address.
  - **Minimizing conflicts.** Improved interagency coordination can often prevent conflicts and logistical problems. Agencies who are communicating and sharing ideas and information can avoid the mistaken interpretations of community needs that so often occur when organizations are working independently. Coordination can also facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of each individual agency's goals and purposes.
  - **Giving smaller agencies a voice.** A small, single-purpose agency, often feeling its unique contribution in a comprehensive community assistance program can coordinate as well as the small, less visible, and often fragmented organization, through the sharing of information, resources, and technical assistance, thereby improving each agency's effectiveness.
  - Internal agency structure. How an agency is organized and operates can also be a barrier to coordination. Many organizations have systems with different ways of doing things, and therefore making it difficult to make efficient use of available manpower and resources.

**Making it work**

Despite recognition of the necessity and benefits of agency coordination, it is seldom practiced with any degree of success in local communities. Because of the constraints that hinder growth that affect the economic, political, social, and environmental conditions, there is a great need for agency coordination. For successful growth in local organizations, there is a need to establish interagency coordination efforts.[9]

- **1. Identify the area to be impacted.** This is important because a very small area can be impacted. Several agencies or districts need to be involved in the coordination, it may also be necessary to identify specific functional groups that should be involved in any program.

- **2. Define problems and needs.** Two benefits result from defining problems and needs. First, this should tell you if interagency coordination is necessary. Not all growth impacts lend themselves to interagency coordination. Agency coordination appears to be required, an adequate definition of problems and needs will help identify which agencies should be involved in the interagency coordination effort. This is very important in the case of a community agency coordination approach to meeting local community needs and problem-solving. All of these characteristics tend to promote what is referred to as an organizational effort at "turf maintenance."[8]

- **Agency reputation.** Many agencies have built high visibility and are identified by their programs or one program or one service very well. They see little value in any kind of coordinated programs where risks exist that might threaten their autonomy, reputation, or prestige. It is especially true for local organizations that have developed programs for specific clients in a specific geographic area.

- **Unfair power among agencies.** This affects both large and small agencies. Small agencies often feel they have little to contribute in the way of manpower, resources, or creativity to any coordinated effort involving large agencies. They also fear that a loss of identity or autonomy will result from working with larger agencies. At the other end of the spectrum, large organizations, having access to most of the resources they need, often see no value in taking the time and effort to enter into joint endeavors with smaller, less visible agencies.

- **Unclear goals.** If agencies operating in a community are unclear as to the goals and purposes of their own organizations, it will be difficult to identify any common objectives they may share with other agencies. An inability to see where programs links and information, responsibilities, or efforts will influence the creation of an interagency effort. In addition, the organizational goals may differ widely from community goals.

**Barriers**

Although many agencies agree that it is beneficial to coordinate as much as possible with other organizations, there is little evidence that they do so. For example, two agencies who do not take place usually reflect a low level of community. Interagency coordination is hindered for several reasons; some of the barriers are discussed below:

- **Administrator training.** Leaders of most agencies are skeptical in the art of directing—coordinating. The principles that foster a well-coordinated interagency or interdepartmental effort (commitment, consensus-building) are not always within an agency director's field of expertise.

- **8 Snyder, John P., "Working with Institutions." Rural Development Leaders School, Rural Development Services, 1977, pp. 9-10.**

- **Klinglan, Gerald E. and Benjamin Yip, Theory and Practice of Interorganizational Relations, (Iowa State University, Ames, 1972, op. 200-201)**

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Identify resource flow. Clearly indicate what resources each participating agency will have to provide, when they will be needed, and how they will be used. This will ensure that each agency knows what is expected and required in terms of funding, manpower, and physical resources.

8. Define the coordination structure. Each agency should understand how organizations will relate within the coordinated framework. Knowing in advance how decisions will be made, who will be considered the lead agency, and what is expected of each organization will prevent conflicts and lost time.

9. Define objectives. All agencies participating in a coordinated effort must agree to the goals, objectives, and policies that will guide their involvement. If possible, these guidelines should be put in writing to avoid misunderstanding. It is important that each objective be specific, acceptable, and possible for the agency involved. Each agency’s initial objectives should be fairly easy to accomplish so they will be encouraged by early successes.

10. Follow a plan of action. A strong structure for interagency coordination plus solid commitments and well-defined problems cannot guarantee a successful coordination program. It is also important to translate the identified goals, responsibilities, and problems into a realistic plan of action. A procedure for feedback, evaluation, and recognition must be included so that each agency will know what positive impacts the coordinated effort is having on the community. In this way, agency enthusiasm for the project will be retained, as well as a willingness to become involved in future coordination efforts.

11. If the community benefits from the coordinated effort, make sure the agencies are notified of the benefits from their contribution. This needs to be tailored to the chain of command, but let management know so there can be rewards for these efforts.

References

This publication is part of the “Coping with Growth” series produced by the Western Rural Development Center. Other titles in the series include:
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