



BRIEFING

EnergyREV

What works for multi-stakeholder, multi sector collaborations for smart local energy systems?

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Executive summary

Successful collaboration between multiple stakeholders is likely to be a critical factor in the planning, setup, development and sustained operation of smart local energy systems (SLES). True SLES are complex projects combining social, technical, financial, legal, and other elements. The necessary expertise and capacity to meet these demands effectively is highly unlikely to be held in any single organisation. So, organisations must work together. This report aims to provide practical guidance on how they can do that successfully, based on a review of evidence on what works in multi-stakeholder collaboration across a range of sectors.

There have been many reviews of collaboration between organisations within the same sector, such as between businesses of different types, and within the public sector, such as between health and other social services providers.

There remains a gap in our knowledge about what works for collaboration between multiple stakeholders of diverse cross sectoral types, including non-profits, for-profits and the community, relevant to the SLES configurations and contexts.

Cross sector, multiple stakeholders' collaborations need to consider the pitfalls and challenges as well as what works and the contexts, mechanisms and mediating factors that can influence the final outcomes.

A rapid realist review is a systematic review that considers the context-mechanisms-outcome configuration in a theory of change model, but is undertaken at pace, to a policy relevant timescale. We sought to achieve "rapidity" by reviewing and synthesising the systematic review literature on multisectoral, multi stakeholder collaborations. Like previous reviews we did not find comparative research that could determine the strength of the evidence linking actions to outcomes on a causal pathway, but by creating logic models of the collaboration programme theory we devise strategies as to what should work and give practical guidance on how organisations can work together when trying to achieve similar aims under similar circumstances.

Nine reviews met the inclusion criteria. Five were reviews of collaborations between health and other sector organisations, three were of public private partnership (PPP) collaborations. And One review was about collaborations between universities and business for product development.

Mechanisms and strategies to activate and support collaboration, and that underpinned successful collaboration were:

- Mutual advantage or gain (five reviews): there had to be a problem to solve and there had to be more to gain from working together than any single organisation could achieve. Strategies to activate mutual advantage and mutual gain could include the help of a kind of “broker” who activated this mechanism by mediating between mutual interests. Also, mutual advantage and gain could be reinforced by regular updates against agreed milestones of success, demonstrating the continued success and value of collaboration as well as identifying risks and mitigations to the project early on.
- Communication (five reviews): communication was critical to the successful operation of the collaboration, and a breakdown in communication was often cited as a reason for collaboration failure. Co-location, proximity, and face-to-face meetings and learning together through joint training sessions were strategies used to enable communication. Other strategies to enable communication included working together to articulate a shared vision and a clear statement of aims, and developing a shared understanding of success that could be measured throughout the lifespan of the collaboration through milestones and performance indicators.
- Trust (five reviews): strategies to balance differences in power, resources and interests were found in stating goals and formalising them into agreements, sharing skills and knowledge and resources in shared meetings in diverse ways, sharing time and financial resources through pooled budgets and face-to-face meetings. Being clear about the roles and responsibilities of members in clear and transparent procedures for decision making and accountability ensured that skills and knowledge of members were utilised effectively and that members felt empowered to participate and their contribution valued.
- Legitimacy (two reviews): equitable funding and resourcing, staff, equipment and time were important supports to resolving tensions around fair sharing of risks and resources. A lack of equitable funding and resource sharing was identified as a common barrier to collaboration. Outreach activities had the potential to create greater inclusion and participation for a diversity of membership and representation of the community. Decision making procedures that were transparent and responsive to change could resolve tensions through the legitimacy of process, ensuring that everyone feels that they get a “fair hearing” if not their desired outcome every time.
- Leadership (two reviews): one strategy to support leadership could be through a neutral convener. Another, or additional strategy, would be to consider nominating a dedicated management team.

We identified several clusters of contexts that could influence the success or failure of collaborations:

- Political contexts, such as the regulatory environment and national policies that were aligned with local priorities, windows of opportunity for policy change
- Economic contexts of the available financial resources both within the collaboration and locally
- Social contexts were around the relationships and type and quality of interactions of the collaboration members. Social contexts also include local capacity and infrastructure
- Cultural contexts included the professional histories, cultures and ethos of the agencies involved.
- Demographic characteristics of the members were around the skills and capabilities of the members, the diversity of membership in the collaborations and the diversity of communities that were represented in the collaboration.

Conclusions

Tensions between aims and goals and organisational values are to be expected where differences in perspectives and purpose offer the advantages of collaboration, and it a breakdown in communication was often cited as a reason for collaboration failure. Resolving disagreements by preventing misunderstandings and being realistic and open about divergent goals needs clear and fair processes, spaces and means for open and honest communication of aims and goals, and ways to measure progress against these. This suggests that collaboration itself is an ongoing process rather than a single state or entity.

About EnergyREV

EnergyREV was established in 2018 (December) under the UK's Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund Prospering from the Energy Revolution programme. It brings together a team of over 50 people across 22 UK universities to help drive forward research and innovation in Smart Local Energy Systems.

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