



LEARNING BRIEF 5

City-wide Approaches

July 2022

SUMMARY

- CoP members identify the importance of working with city-wide government and organisations to influence policy and service delivery in order to meet the complex needs of their clients.
- To build and sustain partnerships, CoP members are resilient in overcoming barriers to housing and land; adaptable to changing policy environments; and nurturing of the people they support.
- Effective engagement of city-wide partners relies on clear targeting of public service decision-makers and the ability to demonstrate the unique value of collaboration between community and government.
- To sustain city-wide dialogue, active communication is needed between community-based organisations and government that regularly introduces new knowledge and renews shared partnership goals.
- Impact measures should be meaningful and shaped with partners to provide an indication of progress towards goals, improvements to individual quality of life and the strengthening of city-wide relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION

This learning brief builds upon Community of Practice (CoP) webinars held in January and April 2022, which discussed the different ways that CoP members were tackling homelessness and insecure shelter. The webinars exchanged views on how groups worked with city government and other organisations to influence policy and the delivery of services. This brief focuses on the

practical aspects of building engagement at a city-level, how dialogue is maintained and how to track the impact of partnership working. Examples are drawn from CoP members to highlight how groups manage city-wide relations in increasingly complex situations.

The learning brief is aimed at members of the CoP and other organisations working to

address homelessness and insecure shelter. This brief and other materials are available via the [CoP website](#).

2. WAYS OF WORKING

Across the CoP, groups shape their activity to meet the specific needs of their clients and respond to the political and economic environment. The activity of the CoP has highlighted the similarities across country contexts in how members support people with complex needs and navigate relationships with government. It has also shown how strategies differ to reflect the particular barriers to change that CoP members face in their country. However, all members of the CoP share a challenge of working simultaneously at multiple levels: with people and communities impacted by homelessness and insecure shelter and at the same time with city government and the wider housing market.

Our webinar in January explored how CoP members strive to eradicate homelessness in their own contexts, by identifying some of the characteristics necessary to build and sustain city-wide working. These characteristics were revealed in an exercise where participants selected animals to represent the organisational traits needed to tackle homelessness and insecure shelter.

- A **lion** represented the need for **courage and perseverance to achieve difficult**

goals. Eradicating homelessness requires changes to policy, to housing markets and in the lives of individuals. This can be scary and difficult and may not always be successful. Sometimes the lion represented the power to bring about change, but sometimes it illustrated the obstacle that groups had to overcome.

“Some days the lion has looked cute and cuddly and other days it has roared at me...” **Vineyard Compassion**

Like a fish, “in this work we keep learning and we have to keep our eyes open and keep moving to not stagnate”
Tshwane Leadership Foundation

“The chicken provides shelter and protection in a way that represents the security of tenure that we are looking at” **Habitat for Humanity Zambia**

- A **fish** represented the need for groups to be **agile and alert** to changes that affect the people they support. Circumstances can quickly shift to create new risks that groups need to be aware of, but may also present opportunities for change for groups to respond to.
- A **chicken** was selected to highlight the importance of **caring, nurturing and protection in hostile environments**. Helping people to access safe homes that provide them with security of tenure and allow them to prosper, is important for

addressing homelessness and insecure shelter.

These characteristics help CoP members to build strong networks at a city-level to influence government policy and ensure that homelessness remains a political and public priority. The webinar in April looked in more detail at CoP member experience of establishing and maintaining city-wide relationships. These are discussed in section 3 below.

3. LEARNING POINTS

Engaging public agencies, service providers and other NGOs across a city is important to enable CoP members to influence policy and to gain access to the housing and welfare support needed by their clients. Tackling homelessness and insecure shelter is complex, relying not just on the provision of housing, but drawing on support across a range of issues including health, employment and immigration status, as well as policy influence on rights to land and housing tenure.

Beyond meeting individual needs, city-wide approaches can offer a route to understand and engage the housing market; address problems in local regulatory arrangements; influence policy and the decision-making of municipal government; and create a collective voice for people impacted by homelessness and insecure shelter.

During the webinar in April, members of the CoP shared their experiences and practical advice on: building city-wide approaches; maintaining dialogue with city-wide stakeholders; and understanding the impact from city-wide engagement. The following highlights key principles and practical tips identified by CoP members from their experiences of taking a city-wide approach.

3.1 How to start a city-wide approach

Establishing relationships at a city-wide level to tackle homelessness and insecure shelter can be challenging for community-based groups. A lack of knowledge of how networks operate, limited access to people in authority and previous experience of conflict with government can all limit the opportunity for engagement. Across global north and southern contexts, CoP members have significant experience of how to build city-wide approaches that include the following.

Relationships are the basis for long-term change, “if you can’t get the door open and engage with people, then it’s useless.”

Tshwane Leadership Foundation

- Be clear on the **policy or service issues that can be best addressed** through city-

wide working. A clear focus helps groups to target their engagement and prioritise their activity.

- **Identify the organisations, individuals or existing partnership** structures that have influence over issues of concern and package advocacy and messaging to create opportunity for dialogue.
- **Demonstrate the unique value of community involvement** for public policy and service delivery. Focus on the benefits community-based groups can bring through use of local knowledge, access to communities and mobilising capacity.

Learning Point 1



Butterflies India have found that working through a city-wide child social protection committee in Delhi, is essential to meet the complex needs of their clients. Addressing homelessness and family breakdown has a range of housing and non-housing challenges that require support from multiple stakeholders. Membership includes local government, police, schools and community organisations that work together to direct service delivery and shape local policy.

- When seeking to engage city-wide government, **collaborate with other community-based organisations** working

on the same issues. A common voice can be louder than working alone and can help reduce competition between groups.

- Where possible, **bring government and public agencies into the community**. This can break down barriers, change perceptions and provide an opportunity for new solutions to complex issues.

Formalising engagement through standing committees or partnership groups can provide a powerful means to keep housing issues on the public and political agenda. It also provides a basis for longer-term joint working, trust building and influence over the design of policy and services. Navigating a route into city-wide partnerships may be difficult, but is vital to making change.

3.2 How to maintain dialogue with city-wide partners

Once dialogue has been established it needs to be maintained and refreshed to stay effective. Where partnerships have been formed for the delivery of a specific project, groups need a new purpose and goals to sustain the interest and involvement of members. City-wide partnerships that have multiple stakeholders, with different priorities and values, need to maintain momentum to remain viable. The advice of CoP members is as follows.

“Just because the paperwork has been signed, it doesn’t mean the project will work out on the ground, if there is a fundamental difference in values.”

Community Organisation Resource Centre

- **Active communication is vitally important** to maintain visibility of the key issues. This can be achieved through regular meetings and reinforced by activity between meetings to keep in touch with partners.
- **Design activity that necessitates government and community-based organisations** working together as joint partners. Collaboration can help build understanding, break down barriers and improve the accountability of service providers through scrutiny and open dialogue.
- Use new information, research or knowledge to **refresh partnership activity and introduce new perspectives on familiar issues**. Visits and exchanges can be very effective to challenge perspectives of city-wide partners and help to deepen their commitment to action.
- **Identify potential problems or conflicting values among partners** and reinforce common goals. City-wide partnerships work where there is a sense of joint endeavour, even where the

specific motivations of individual partners are different.

- **Ensure that active dialogue is not overtaken by bureaucracy** or limited by rigid organisational cultures. Focus on the unique contributions that community-based groups can make to the work of the partnership. Provide support to public agencies that need to report or gain permission for action from senior managers or politicians.

Learning Point 2



Cambridge House, UK use ‘training swaps’ with partner organisations to share skills and knowledge and deepen understanding on the issues experienced by tenants in London. Allowing people to see challenges from different perspectives can help revitalise partnership activity and reinforce commitment to resolving problems. Similarly, across the global South, SDI operate country exchanges and visits of politicians and grassroots leaders to informal settlements to see how their problems play out in different contexts. This not only strengthens country links, but is important learning used to inform partnerships actions.

Sustaining city-wide partnerships through active dialogue and collective problem solving is difficult where political and policy

contexts are constantly changing. Strengthening bonds of trust and clarifying the benefits of collaboration across sectors at a city-scale is key to partnership working.

3.3 How to understand your impact

Tracking the impact of city-wide partnerships is essential to encourage on-going participation in activity and to renew the effectiveness of joint action over time. Understanding impact is, however, difficult where there is a complex mix of interests, actions and stakeholders working together over a long period. Experience from the CoP members shows that being clear on short- and long-term goals and establishing feedback mechanisms from the outset of partnerships, can be effective. The key aspects include the following.

- **Clarifying objectives and setting short-term measurable steps** toward goals is essential. Tackling the challenges of homelessness and insecure shelter can be very complex, making it important to simplify messaging to define clear actions, with partners.
- **Developing a mix of countable output measures** (people supported, homes provided etc) and qualitative indicators (perceptions, confidence, engagement etc) to assess progress. Measures should be meaningful, aid accountability and

reflect the issues that are important for the community.

- **Documenting performance** and change over time is useful to gain a deeper understanding of key challenges and to highlight learning. Groups such as Tshwane Leadership Foundation work with their local university (University of Pretoria) to document city-wide partnerships and provide continuity of knowledge, which is useful for when partnership members change.

Learning Point 3



Habitat for Humanity Zambia use the following methods for tracking and verification:

- baseline and midterm surveys, highlighting performance across key indicators;
- focus group discussions involving community members and stakeholders;
- collect everyday impact stories from the community that are shared via social media;
- report increasing numbers of savings accounts held by local residents; and
- increased number of people that are able to obtain occupancy licenses.

- **Grounding ownership** of activity in the communities affected by actions strengthens participation. Community engagement provides mechanisms for feedback and accountability, uses the capacity of people to deliver change and provides an important perspective on the quality of impact on individual lives.

“There are community impact stories and the best people to share these are members of the community themselves.” Habitat for Humanity

- **Learning from others what works** through city-wide, national and global dialogue can help refine measures of impact. Networks such as the Institute of Global Homelessness Vanguard Cities Initiative, that includes Tshwane Leadership Foundation in South Africa, provides a framework to define shared objectives to tackle homelessness at a city-level and a forum to share global experience of on what works.

City-wide partnerships provide an opportunity to influence policy and mainstream services that directly address the needs of people that experience homelessness and insecure shelter. Over the long-term, evidence that show the creation

of more open forms of governance, increased joined up working and more equal partnerships between stakeholders are key to demonstrating impact.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- **For practitioners** – engaging in city-wide partnerships can provide an important means to influence policy, gain the support of service providers and scale-up activity to deal with the complex issues at the heart of homelessness and insecure housing.
- **For partnerships** – sustaining engagement of stakeholders is vital to achieving reductions in homelessness and improving the supply of land for housing. Establishing frameworks to track the difference that partnerships make is key to mobilising participation and demonstrating impact.
- **For policy** – city-wide approaches offer an essential means to generate an integrated approach to addressing homelessness and insecure shelter. Bringing public sector and community perspectives together creates an opportunity for better policy and more sustainable outcomes.



5. FURTHER INFORMATION

Additional information on the work of the Community of Practice is available via our [website](#).