

# Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions

Understanding Collaboration and Innovation in the  
Coalition Context

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## Executive Summary

In the context of community development and social change, it is often assumed that groups need to collaborate and innovate to achieve better results. In addition, coalitions have proliferated across Alberta, becoming a popular, sometimes mandated, way of organizing, which makes understanding their relationship with collaboration and innovation even more important. This project builds on previous work of the Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions project. The initial literature review revealed the key factors essential for coalition sustainability and success. In the follow up focus groups with representatives from Alberta coalitions the importance of collaboration and innovation were alluded to consistently. This project is the opportunity to further explore the factors that support collaboration and innovation at the coalition level and the impact that this is having on communities. More specifically, it addresses the following questions: What coalition characteristics support or hinder collaboration and innovation? What impact does collaboration and innovation have on coalitions and communities?

This project draws on interviews with experts, an electronic survey distributed to a range of coalitions across Alberta, and 3 day-long focus groups with Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap) coalitions to gain a well-rounded understanding of collaboration and innovation. This report synthesizes information from all three sources and outlines a number of recommendations for different stakeholders.

### *Defining Collaboration*

To capture various elements that differentiate collaboration from other types of relationships, this research defines collaboration as “A *mutually beneficial and well-defined* relationship entered into by two or more organizations. The relationship includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards.”<sup>1</sup>

*What coalition characteristics support or are obstacles to their ability to collaborate?* Both the survey and the focus group responses made it clear that coalitions collaborate in a number of different ways. A number of key characteristics were identified as supports for collaboration within coalitions or between coalitions and outside stakeholders. They include:

- Knowing and understanding community needs
- The community’s history of working together
- Leadership
- Membership diversity and their belief in collaboration
- Strong and trusting relationships

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<sup>1</sup> Mattessich, P. W., & Monsey, B. R. (1992). *Collaboration: What makes it work*. Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

- Feelings of passion and ownership over the coalition’s area of interest
- Having a shared vision and common goals
- Having something to offer members and partners
- The availability of financial and in-kind resources
- How “tangible” the collaboration is
- The balance between flexibility and structure

*What impact does collaboration have on coalitions and communities?*

It is important to understand the reasons why collaboration may have an impact on coalition and community. Specific impact includes:

- Accessing a wider network of people and delivering a consistent message
- Increased awareness among coalition members
- The power of a collective voice
- Building relationships
- Pooling resources

*Defining Innovation*

For the purpose of this research, innovation is defined as “an idea or practice that is *new* within the *context* it is developed. This development brings about *change* that addresses an *unmet need* or *shifts established* solutions or ways of doing things.”

*What coalition characteristics impact their ability to innovate?*

Survey responses, conversations with experts and focus group data provide a general understanding as well as detail about the factors that impact the ability of a coalition to innovate:

- Knowing and understanding community needs
- Fear of change, dealing with resistance
- The perception of risk
- Leadership
- Strong, trusting relationships
- Having a diverse membership
- Cultivating shared values and vision
- Having buy in
- Feelings of passion
- The willingness to openly share ideas and resources
- The availability of in-kind and financial resources
- The availability of data
- The balance between flexibility and structure

*What impact does innovation have on coalitions and communities?*

Participants in focus groups and survey respondents were asked when it was most appropriate to implement an innovative idea or practice. This helps us understand what sorts of contexts are more appropriate for innovation:

- Responding to new circumstances and new needs
- Using the excitement of 'newness' to engage community and coalition members
- To engage a new audience
- To learn through experimentation

## Introduction

This project builds on previous work for the Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions project, which was focused on exploring the factors that support coalition sustainability and success. The initial literature review revealed a number of key factors essential for coalition sustainability and success. These included (but were not limited to): leadership qualities, ownership and clarity of vision and mission, and membership qualities. The importance of innovation and collaboration were not specifically highlighted as one of these key factors. However, in the follow up focus groups with representatives from coalitions across Alberta, the importance of collaboration and innovation were alluded to consistently.

This project is the opportunity to explore the factors that support collaboration and innovation and the impact of collaboration and innovation on coalitions and communities. While the literature has identified collaboration<sup>2</sup> and innovation<sup>3</sup> as indicators for a successful coalition, it is generally unclear what factors actually foster collaboration and innovation and the impact that collaboration and innovation have on coalitions and communities.

In the context of community development and social change, it is often assumed that groups need to collaborate and innovate to achieve better results. In addition, coalitions have proliferated across Alberta, becoming a popular, sometimes mandated, way of organizing. This makes understanding coalitions' relationship to collaboration and innovation particularly relevant. Presently, there is limited detailed evidence about this relationship. This project aims to fill this gap by exploring the factors that support collaboration and innovation at the coalition level and the impact that this has on their communities. More specifically, it addresses the following questions: What coalition characteristics support collaboration and innovation? What impact does collaboration and innovation have on coalitions and communities?

In many ways, coalitions are particularly well suited to answer these questions. Coalitions are “groups of people who come together around a particular issue, with the goal of being a catalyst for change in their community. They value and benefit from diverse



Coalitions are defined as “groups of people who come together around a particular issue, with the goal of being a catalyst for change in their community. They value and benefit from diverse membership, egalitarian practices, a broad focus and long-term goals. By bringing together people from different sectors of society and pooling resources, coalitions can accomplish goals more effectively than organizations working independently” (Berger, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> Zakocs, R. C., & Edwards, E. M. (2006). What explains community coalition effectiveness?: A review of the literature. *American journal of preventive medicine, 30*(4), 351-361.

<sup>3</sup> Wolff, T. (2001). Community coalition building—contemporary practice and research: introduction. *American journal of community psychology, 29*(2), 165-172.

membership, egalitarian practices, a broad focus and long-term goals. By bringing together people from different sectors of society and pooling resources, coalitions can accomplish goals more effectively than organizations working independently” (Berger, 2013). Given that coalitions bring diverse people together, want to create change, and deal with complex issues, typically coalitions are trying to actively collaborate within the coalition and with outside stakeholders and are often trying new things to address their complex mandates.

### **Background**

This research is part of “Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions” (HWC), a broader project, which aims to enrich our understanding of how to support the development and sustainability of community coalitions across Alberta. The first part of the project was a literature review of the last ten years of research, conducted to uncover the factors that support the sustainability of coalitions. The second part of the project was the creation of an inventory of some of Alberta’s coalitions and their key characteristics. This inventory was used during phase three, when a number of coalitions were invited to attend focused conversations exploring whether the findings in the literature review matched the experience of coalitions in Alberta. Throughout all three phases of the project collaboration and innovation were alluded to as being important to coalitions but were not explored in depth.

This project used three data sources to gain a well-rounded understanding of collaboration and innovation.

1. Key informant interviews with five people with expertise on collaboration, innovation and community development were conducted to inform the framework of the research. Specifically, their recommendations informed the definitions used, the survey design, and the focus group question-guide.
2. An electronic survey was distributed to 143 coalitions working throughout Alberta. The distribution list came from the inventory collected in phase two of the HWC project. A total of 103 valid surveys were used in the data analysis, reaching a response rate of 74.6%. In addition to findings from responses to individual questions, indexes for leadership, vision, collaboration, innovation and “meeting community needs” were constructed to capture the complexity of these concepts.
3. Day-long focus groups were held in Calgary, Red Deer and Grande Prairie, with participants attending from neighbouring communities. Notes from recorders were compiled and organized thematically. Specific examples from participants provide detail that complement the survey results.

This report synthesizes information from all of these data sources and outlines a number of recommendations for different stakeholders. For additional details on research methodologies, please see Appendix A and B.

### **Limitations**

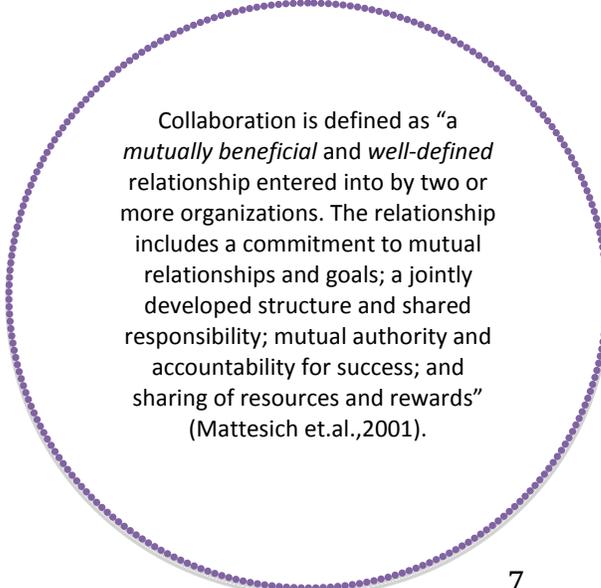
First, all of the participants of the focus groups and 70% of survey respondents were representatives of coalitions that were developed or have been supported through the Early Childhood Development Mapping Project (ECMap). Despite the fact that other coalitions were invited to respond, the response rates among ECMap coalitions was much higher. These coalitions are unique for a number of reasons: the seed grant funding provided by the provincial government, the support that they received from a provincial team of community development experts and researchers, and the fact that they are connected to one another through this provincial project. Focus group participants were self-aware of the influence this structure has on their ability to collaborate and innovate and they highlight the impact this type of structure can have on coalitions' ability to innovate and collaborate. Small differences in the survey results also existed. For instance, approximately 49% of coalitions working with children and young families scored medium high or high on their level of innovation compared to a total of 45% working on other issues. In addition, 55% of coalitions working for children and young families had a medium-high or high level of collaboration compared to 46.5 % of those working on other issues.

Second, one of the research questions explored in this report is the impact that collaborating or innovating has on coalitions and their communities. All data is based on coalitions members' perception of impact. Unfortunately, developing standardized criteria for evaluation was beyond the scope of this research. For many coalitions, measuring success or impact, beyond anecdotal evidence, was an aspect of their work that they struggled with.

Lastly, please note that none of the correlations between the survey questions have been tested for statistical significance.

## **Collaboration**

By definition, coalitions are groups of people that collaborate with one another, to a greater or lesser extent. Coalitions also often aim to collaborate with stakeholders outside of their group. Although we know collaboration is the coalition's way of "doing business" there is not enough evidence about what is happening on the ground, if the coalition structure allows for more collaboration, what aspects of the



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coalition model support or hinder collaboration, and what kind of impact this collaboration is having at the individual, coalition and community level. This research examines the factors that support collaboration within the coalition itself and with outside stakeholders. It also explores the impact of collaboration on coalition members, on the functioning of the coalition, as well as on the community or area of interest within which the coalition works.

The word collaboration is used in many different contexts and often refers to different types of relationships. Different levels and types of collaborative relationships can include coordination, cooperation, strategic alliances, or partnerships, with collaboration often conceptualized as the most formal and structured relationship. These different forms of collaboration are often distinguished by their level of integration, are often assumed to be easier or more difficult to achieve, have different results, or be more or less appropriate in different circumstances. For example, one expert differentiated between collaboration and cooperation in that cooperation is a lower-level form of collaboration that can be defined as people sharing facilities or staff. Another expert described coordination as one organization adjusting their behaviour in response to another, which can result in less duplication. Experts also emphasized that one type of collaboration was not inherently better than the other but that it depended on the situation. Lastly, experts spoke about the fact that “just sitting around the table” is not real collaboration but that it needs to be an “intentional or conscious relationship. There needs to be an effort.”

To capture various elements that differentiate collaboration from other types of relationships, this research defines collaboration as “*A mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations. The relationship includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards.*”<sup>4</sup> The definition was presented to focus group participants and survey respondents to provide a standard of how to think about collaboration. However, given the examples that coalitions shared through focus groups and survey responses, it is clear that coalitions were speaking about various levels and types of collaborative relationships.

The survey was explicitly designed to capture various aspects of collaboration. Respondents were asked about their perceptions towards their coalitions’:

- Development of shared goals
- Inclusive agenda
- Commitment from different people to achieve common goals
- Development of a shared structure

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<sup>4</sup> Mattessich, P. W., & Monsey, B. R. (1992). *Collaboration: What makes it work*. Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

- Effective and efficient achievement of goals

An index for “level of collaboration” was constructed to capture the level of agreement with a total of eight statements. According to this measurement, the majority of survey respondents perceived their coalitions as being collaborative. 52% of respondents rated their coalitions with a medium-high or high level of collaboration and just under 19% of them rated their coalition low or medium low. When analyzing responses to each statement about level of collaboration separately, respondents were the least likely to agree with the statement “*The coalition helps bring the entire community together to make the changes needed*” when compared to other statements.

### 1.1 Level of Collaboration

	Work more efficient	Shared goals	Different people together to address a specific issue	Entire community collaborates	Inclusive agenda	Backbone Structure	All members contribute	Members understand the problem
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	-	-	-	-	-	6.7%	-	-
<b>Disagree</b>	2.2%	3.3%	3.3%	12.2%	10.1%	3.4%	4.4%	3.4%
<b>Neutral</b>	7.7%	14.4%	12.2%	34.4%	24.7%	12.4%	14.4%	11.4%
<b>Agree</b>	58.2%	55.6%	51.1%	42.2%	48.3%	42.7%	57.8%	56.8%
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	31.9%	26.7%	33.3%	11.1%	16.9%	34.8%	23.3%	28.4%
	<b>N=91</b>	<b>N=90</b>	<b>N=90</b>	<b>N=90</b>	<b>N=89</b>	<b>N=89</b>	<b>N=90</b>	<b>N=88</b>

#### Which coalition characteristics support or hinder a coalitions’ ability to collaborate?

Evidence from the literature review and focus groups that were completed in earlier phases of this project pointed to the ability to and importance of coalitions to collaborate within the coalition and with outside stakeholders. However, it was not clear what coalition characteristics support or are barriers to this collaboration.

To identify these characteristics, survey respondents were asked their level of agreement with a number of statements describing key characteristics of their coalition. Literature about collaboration along with interviews with experts helped to structure the survey questions. Respondents’ levels of agreement with statements about these characteristics were then correlated with their perceived level of collaboration, to get a sense of patterns in the characteristics of coalitions with high or low levels of collaboration. Focus group responses about the coalition characteristics that support collaboration often paralleled the factors identified in the survey. These responses provided the in-depth data needed to understand how, why and whether various characteristics impact a coalition’s level of collaboration.

The findings described below suggest that certain characteristics of the coalition's membership and leadership, such as belief in collaboration and their passion and ownership, support coalitions' ability to collaborate. It is also important for the coalition to understand their community's needs, have a clear vision of what the coalition is trying to accomplish, and to support trusting relationships between coalition members. Both access to financial resources and in-kind resources are also identified as key factors that support collaboration. Finally, it is interesting to note that many examples provided by focus group participants highlight how common and attainable "tangible collaboration" is for coalitions.

### **Understanding community context and needs**

Getting an understanding of the needs of the population the coalition is working with was often mentioned as the first step to being able to engage and work with them. Coalition members that responded to the survey felt like they were doing a good job at responding to their community needs, with 87% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that their *coalition's work responds to the needs of their communities*. To add, survey results found a positive relationship between those who felt like their coalition was responding to community needs and those that identified their coalition as being highly collaborative.

Understanding community context was also highlighted as a precondition to collaboration in both the Northern Alberta and Southern Alberta focus groups. In particular, it was important to understand what was going on in the community in order to connect stakeholders who would benefit from working with one another. For example, a participant at the Northern Alberta focus group spoke about working with a lot of little towns that she did not know intimately, making it important to intentionally seek out community experts who could inform them about who to connect with. Community experts can also provide the community context and history that is reportedly important to successful collaboration.

Understanding community needs at a regional level also facilitated collaboration. Specifically, having a regional coordinator who understood what was going on in different regions of the province facilitated the ability to share ideas between coalitions and connect people so that they could work together.

Some focus group participants also spoke about the difficulties in having an incomplete understanding of the needs in their community. For example, a coalition representative at the Southern Alberta focus group described the number of languages are spoken in her community, making it difficult to communicate with residents to understand their needs.

### **History of working together**

A community's history of collaboration and previous experiences collaborating are highlighted by the literature as a factor to consider. Experts highlighted that having a

positive history of collaboration was a factor that could support collaborative work moving forward. Generally, survey respondents felt like their communities had a history of collaboration. In fact, 22% of survey respondents strongly agreed and 54% agreed with the statement that their community has a history of working together. Only 10% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Focus group participants also spoke about how working in a community with a history of collaboration meant that coalition participants had a better sense of what one another are doing, which can help the coalition get started. To add, sharing past or current successes and failures means that the work didn't have to start from scratch but could start from a place of experience. One survey respondent expressed the support that working together in the past provided to their coalition: "We already had a strong group connected to our interagency so it was an easy transition [to become a coalition]."

### **Leadership**

Strong leadership is consistently highlighted as one of the most important characteristics of a successful coalition. However, it is important to specify the type of leadership that fosters collaboration within the coalition context.

Given the complexity of good coalition leadership that supports collaboration, the survey asked questions about members' perceptions towards a variety of different leadership characteristics. This included leaders that:

- Have good skills for working with other people and organizations
- Take initiative to develop connections within and outside of the coalition
- Empower other coalition members to collaborate within and outside the coalition
- Encourage the participation of all coalition members
- Foster trust and response among coalition members and outside partners

These elements were combined into one measurement of leadership. Almost 85% of survey respondents felt that they had a leader or a group of leaders that support collaboration. None of the respondents strongly disagreed with all of the statements regarding leadership and only 4% disagreed with some of the statements. Looking at each element individually, all elements show similar responses, except for the statement: "*Our coalition's leader(s) has good skills for working with other people and organizations,*" to which none of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed and only 4.2% remained neutral.

## 1.2 Leadership and Level of Collaboration

	Has skills to work with others	Takes Initiative to develop connections	Empowers coalition members	Encourages participation	Fosters trust
Strongly Disagree	-	-	-	-	-
Disagree	-	3.2 %	5.3 %	1.1%	1.1%
Neutral	4.2 %	7.4%	9.6%	4.3%	4.3%
Agree	52.6 %	48.4%	52.1%	46.8%	53.8%
Strongly Agree	43.2 %	41.1%	33.0%	47.9%	40.9%
	<b>N= 95</b>	<b>N= 95</b>	<b>N= 94</b>	<b>N= 94</b>	<b>N= 93</b>

Generally, the survey results found a positive relationship between the strength of leadership and the level of collaboration: as the perception of strong leadership increased there was a higher reported level of collaboration. The perceived strength of coalition leadership, and its importance to collaboration, was also highlighted in the focus groups.

In particular, having a leader who is openly, explicitly willing and excited about collaborating and learning from others was highlighted as important. For example, one participant at the Northern Alberta focus group spoke about how changes in the leadership at their local school changed the personal and professional dynamics between the coalition and the school. This characteristic was also highlighted in conversations with experts.

According to focus group participants, leaders' approach to relationship building is also important in being able to build strong collaborations. Unlike other forms of organizing, coalitions are unique because they are ideally open to anyone, expanding the possibilities for collaboration. Having a leader that embraces this approach to relationship building, knows a lot of people, and is visible in the community were also identified as important factors underlying strong collaborations. Generally, it was said to be important to "find the champion" that can bring people together. This is reflected in the survey responses as well with 89.5% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they *have a leader that takes the initiative to develop connections both within the coalition and with outside stakeholders*.

According to experts, leaders also have to build capacity within the coalition, facilitating communication and everyone's participation. Focus group participants suggested that good leaders are also able to encourage members' ownership over a collaborative initiative. They described good leaders as being able to create a space for people to easily and meaningfully join in. Leaders are able to spark interest, generate ideas and have the confidence to move a given collaboration forward. In this regard, 85% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree and only 5% disagree with the statement

that their *leaders empower coalition members to develop connections both within the coalition and with outside stakeholders.*

It is important to note that focus group participants emphasized that the leader doesn't have to be someone who holds a formal position of leadership within the coalition. In fact, ideally there is a concerted effort by all members of the coalition to lead and capitalize on their own connections.

### **Belief in Collaboration**

Similar to the importance of leaders' belief in collaboration it is important that coalition members believe in the value of collaboration. Members who are actively trying to collaborate, and have different, balanced, voices, perspectives and strengths that can be shared with others, is ideal. Focus group participants described the challenges of working with people who are personally or professionally resistant to collaboration compared to those that are passionate about it. One coalition representative at the Southern Alberta focus group called people who are passionate about collaboration "natural connectors" because they believe in the importance of connecting and actively bringing people together. The importance of working with people who believe in collaboration was consistently highlighted in the open-ended responses of the survey where respondents made comments about the importance of, "An understanding that we have more impact when we work together." Another survey respondent suggested, "Openness, [and being] willing to learn about other's activities and ideas" helped to support opportunities to collaborate.

In general, survey results found that coalition members are willing to work together in different ways. In fact, almost 80% of respondents felt that their members were willing to consider different ways of working together while only 6% disagreed with this statement. Coalitions may be particularly good forms of organization to attract people who believe in collaboration because the process of being part of a coalition is inherently collaborative. Focus group participants expressed that this is more likely to be the case when people aren't forced to sit on coalitions by their agencies but are coming because they believe in the issue and the power of working together toward a common goal.

### **Membership Diversity**

Diversity of membership was also recognized as a particularly important characteristic of coalition membership. As one expert pointed out, ideally, a coalition has the participation of everyone who can "influence and will be influenced" and that the coalitions who have the greatest impact in their collaboration are intersectoral; just service providers are not enough. The survey asked two questions regarding coalition diversity: whether "*both community members and agencies are represented on the coalition*" and whether the "*coalition represents the diversity in our community.*" 68% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their coalition represents both

agencies and community members while only 45% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with their coalition representing the diversity in their community.

When looking at the correlation between level of collaboration and membership diversity, there is a positive relationship between the two factors. This means that for the majority of respondents, the more diversity reported on the coalition, the higher their level of collaboration. This may be because many of the benefits of collaboration come from working with a diverse group. As one survey respondent expressed: “The coalition is large and full of varied perspectives [and] expertise. This means the coalition has become much larger than the sum of its parts.”

The benefits of having a diverse coalition was also recognized by focus group participants who expressed that if you could get past the potential challenges of working with a diverse group of people, the benefits of diversity outweighed the negatives. Focus group participants spoke about the benefits of working with people who all think differently and the dynamism that diversity brings. As one focus group participant in Central Alberta put it “I’d go crazy if I was in a group with just three of me.” At the Southern Alberta focus groups diversity was discussed as both an asset and a barrier to collaboration. On the one hand, recognizing the value of diverse points of view and skill sets can actually help highlight the value of collaboration. On the other hand, diversity can create conflict.

Focus group participants also spoke about how collaborating with a diverse group helps them get a broader view of the issue, helping them if they got ‘stuck’. As one participant at the Southern Alberta focus group put it: “You come up with better solutions, better answers” with a diverse coalition. Focus group participants also highlighted that working with a diverse group ensures that the coalition is more representative of the diverse needs of their community.

### **Strong and Trusting Relationships**

Having mutually trusting relationships was highlighted in all sources of data as being a key component of an environment that is supportive of collaboration. This factor was also emphasized in interviews with experts who saw the development of trust and respect, as the basis from which people could start to work together. The importance of honest, transparent, consistent and personal relationships was also highlighted in the open-ended survey responses.

Survey respondents also confirmed that mistrust and feelings of competition between coalition members are barriers to collaboration. Because coalitions bring a number of different organizations and individuals around the table, people can feel territorial over ‘their work’ being taken over by the coalition or by another organization. Getting people to relinquish their individual agendas and egos to work towards a common goal is something that focus group participants identified as being extremely difficult for coalitions. These competitive and territorial relationships may be an important part of

the community history and context that has to be understood and worked through before coalition members are able to collaborate successfully.

The survey captured this aspect of coalition functioning through asking respondents their level of agreement to the statement: *coalition members trust one another*. Generally, agreement was high, with only 8.5% remaining neutral and almost 63% and 25% agreeing or strongly agreeing respectively. When looking at the correlation between this factor and level of collaboration, there was not a clear pattern. However, trust was highlighted by a number of respondents in open-ended questions about factors that support collaboration. One representative comment described trusting relationships as “one of the most important factors in connecting and building partnerships.”

In all three focus groups, the importance of strong, trusting relationships between coalition members was also emphasized. On the one hand, negative working or personal relationships between people can be very problematic in terms of peoples’ ability to work together. On the other hand, having strong and trusting relationships is the basis for strong engagement.

The characteristics of the people involved also matters. Coalition representatives at the focus groups spoke about the importance of having relationships with a broad base of people with different skills, like grant writing or accessing free space in the community, so that they could work with these people to achieve the coalition’s goals. As one coalition representative at the Southern Alberta focus group put it: “people are more willing to commit and go the extra mile when you know someone as apposed to Joe Random.” Another coalition member at the Central Alberta focus group was able to get meeting space in the town council chambers when she needed it, which she attributes to her relationships.

Generally some of the pre-conditions that focus group participants identified to support strong, trusting relationships include having personal values and interests that are aligned and spending time and working through challenges together. Experiencing small, tangible wins on the coalition also helped build more trusting relationships, which helps to tackle bigger, more complex issues.

### **Passion and Ownership**

Experts, survey respondents and participants in all three focus groups agreed that people need to feel passion and ownership around common issues to be able to successfully collaborate. Passion gives people the drive to be part of the team and to do the hard work required to collaborate. It also makes it less likely that all of the work will fall on the shoulders of the coalition coordinator, which is a problem for many coalitions in terms of their sustainability and ability to build capacity among all members. As one focus group participant in Central Alberta expressed: “We are looking for someone who is passionate, to be willing to pull their own weight, and be part of the team.”

Given that participating on a coalition takes a lot of time and effort, the passion and ownership that people feel is what keeps people coming to the table. Generally, it seems as if coalition members are passionate about their work. According to survey respondents, 88% perceive that coalition members are passionate about the work they do. Focus group participants described coalition members that are not passionate about the issues as not participating or bringing anything new to the table. This was a difference noted between members who are mandated to attend the coalition and those that participate because it's something they're passionate about. Building this passion and ownership among members is an active effort. Tapping into people's frustration was a tactic to ignite passion that came up during the focus group sessions. Survey responses also show a clear positive relationship between level of collaboration and passion. For the majority of survey respondents, as their perception about coalition members' passion strengthens, so does their perception of their coalition's level of collaboration.

In addition to feeling ownership over the coalition's vision and mission, focus group participants spoke about the importance of members' connection to the community they work in. The survey results show a correlation between levels of collaboration and agreement towards the statement "*Coalition members are open to different approaches and are willing to consider different ways of working together.*" As respondents increased their agreement with the statement, their level of collaboration increased as well. One participant at the Central Alberta focus group spoke about the difficulties in working with a community that was put within their coalition boundaries but did not feel like this was a natural fit. The coalition member described this community as resistant to collaboration with other communities in the coalition's area.

### **Shared Vision, Common Goals**

Survey respondents were asked their level of agreement with four statements related to the coalitions' goals. These statements were related to:

- Their own understanding of the coalition's vision
- Other coalition members' understanding of the coalition's vision
- The coalition's short term goals
- The coalition's long term goals

After combining these four elements into one index of clarity of vision, 57% of survey respondents reported a medium-high or high clarity of vision. When looking at each element separately, the statement that survey respondents disagreed with the most was that "*coalition members know and understand our goals.*" Only 18% strongly agreed with this statement, almost 13% disagreed and 14% remained neutral. When comparing scores for clarity of vision with those for level of collaboration, there is a clear positive relationship. Participants scoring higher on the clarity of coalition's vision, scored higher on their level of collaboration. In the open-ended survey responses, the importance of

having a shared vision was highlighted by a number of respondents. As stated by one survey respondent: *“shared vision, mutual respect and an understanding that we are more effective and have more impact when we work together (...)”* are coalition characteristics that support collaboration. Survey respondents also reported that having unclear goals were barriers to collaboration.

The importance of having a clear, shared vision, and common goals between partners was also confirmed in all three focus groups as being important to successful collaboration. In fact, according to focus group participants, one of the biggest barriers to engaging people like corporations or community members who are not parents is the challenge of showing how the coalition’s goal relates to them personally or professionally. For example, one of the participants of the Northern Alberta focus group spoke about how the mayor has become more engaged with the coalition now that he has young children.

However, cultivating this shared vision was reported as being challenging by focus group participants. One participant at the Central Alberta focus group spoke about the difficulty of dealing with staff turnover *“You can start with the same vision but three staff later...”* Another participant at the Southern Alberta focus group agreed with the importance of a shared vision but warned that this alone did not guarantee that the group would be successful.

A shared vision is also important to support the willingness to share resources and ideas. Because all of the coalitions were working towards the same goal of improving the lives of families and children, coalition members felt that sharing with one another would increase the *“ripple effect”* of their work. Focus group participants emphasized that being willing to share resources and ideas was very important for deeper collaboration. Regional coordinators were identified as being key in sharing ideas between coalitions. For example, *‘smile cards’* were shared between many coalitions across the province. The fact that people could share ownership over their idea and that there was logistically a clear way to share with one another, made collaboration much easier.

### **Access to quality data**

Having access to data was held up by participants in all three focus groups as being something that helped to promote collaboration within the coalition and with other stakeholders for a number of reasons. First, knowing and understanding the data was a reason for the coalition to have conversations with different stakeholders in the community. The data was a way for coalitions to engage stakeholders that may not feel invested in ECD right from the start. It was something that coalitions could point to, to start a conversation. Focus group participants also found that the fact that the data was available across the province and endorsed by the government, helped to support the legitimacy of the data and in turn, the coalitions. This is especially the case with certain audiences, like politicians.

Second, the data provided a common understanding of the needs in the community, which the coalition and their partners could organize around. As one participant at the Northern Alberta coalition said: “It’s like the coalitions are formed because of ECD but ECD is formed because of the EDI results. It’s another common thing that brings us together to work toward the same goal”.

Third, the data was a catalyst for collaborative action. Because all communities had children that were struggling, it was a reason for people to work with one another and put in the effort to have a positive impact on their community. This is closely connected to the importance of having a common goal and passion.

Finally, while collaboration involves compromise, all parties involved need to feel like they are getting something out of the relationships for it to be sustainable. This came up with discussions with experts who said that there is an assumption that the investment in the collaboration will pay a return for all partners. Therefore, it is important that coalitions express to stakeholders the benefit that they get out of collaborating. For many focus group participants, their ‘carrot’ was the EDI data.

Generally, the majority of survey respondents (70%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “*we constantly have quality data that provide common indicators that base our work off.*” Only 20% remain neutral and 10% disagreed. When looking at the relationship between access to quality data and the level of collaboration, there is not a clear pattern. Regardless of their level of agreement with the statement about data, for the majority of respondents their coalition’s level of collaboration ranged between medium and medium-high.

### **Resources**

Availability of resources is highlighted by the literature as an important factor that supports collaborative relationships. The survey captured the perception of coalition members about whether they have enough financial and non-financial resources to accomplish their goals. The distribution of responses for *our coalition has adequate funds to do what it wants to accomplish* is opposite to the majority of other statements in the survey. In fact, almost 50% of respondents either strongly disagreed (almost 24%) or disagreed (26%) with the statement, with 29% of respondents remaining neutral. This finding is complemented by many open-ended responses that referred to the lack of funding as one of their main barriers to collaboration. As one respondent put it, no funding means “likely no actions will take place.”

Responses from the focus groups provide more clarity to the relationship between access to financial resources and collaboration. Focus group participants saw resources as being important for successful collaboration. Resources were at the forefront of many participants’ minds given that a number of participants’ coalitions had finished their seed grant funding. Coalition participants saw many changes with the lack of funding. For example, some coalitions reported that when they lost their funding, their

relationship with a previous partner changed, negatively. Financial resources were also reported as necessary to pay for basics, including: coordinator, space, reimbursing people for mileage, and providing food at meetings.

The competitive nature of funding can also be a barrier to sustainable collaboration. One survey respondent made the struggle clear: “The competitive funding model which exists for most grants to not for profits prevents organizations from working together as they could potentially lose a source of grant money to the coalition. There are definitely concerns about loses of grant dollars from existing organizations to the coalition itself.” One representative at the Northern Alberta focus group said that even though people can work together on the surface, these underlying issues still exist, preventing true, sustainable collaboration on her coalition. This issue was echoed at the Southern Alberta focus groups where people spoke about funding structures and granting processes as being the basis for competition within the coalition. This is especially the case when individual coalition members and the coalition are competing for the same funds. As one participant stated: “the scarcity in the sector creates a sense of division, the ownership issue can get in the way of collaboration.” The importance of having trusting, strong relationships is especially relevant in this context.

In contrast to the findings about access to financial resources, the majority of survey respondents felt that their coalition had adequate non-financial resources. About 70% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “Our coalition has adequate non-financial resources (i.e. skills, expertise, data, community connections) to do what it wants to accomplish.” When comparing these responses with their scores on level of collaboration, it is possible to identify a positive relationship, meaning that as respondents’ agreement with the statement increases, so it does their level of collaboration.

In contrast, survey respondents consistently highlighted a coalition’s lack of non-financial resources, especially time, as being a barrier to collaboration in open-ended responses. When asked about the barriers to collaboration, comments like: “Participating in the coalition is simply 'something else' for members to do. As is often found, ideas, suggestions and recommendations stop at the coalition table. It is the same few people who tackle the work” were common. The fact that people don’t have dedicated time to work on the coalition, are overwhelmed to begin with, and that it is often the same people in the community that are taking on extra responsibilities were the most common barriers to collaboration on a coalition. Focus group participants also pointed to the importance of non-financial resources such as time, space and expertise in terms of supporting collaboration.

An alternative view of the role of resources came out of a conversation with one of the experts on collaboration who felt that scarce resources actually forces people to come together and work with one another. A couple of focus group participants also spoke

about how money cannot be the focus or reason for not collaborating and that they had been collaborating for years without having access to financial resources.

### **“Tangible” collaborations**

Despite the fact that a definition of collaboration was provided to survey respondents, examples of successful collaboration described in the survey’s open-ended questions typically referred to organizing events or family fairs and less reference to collaborating towards broader community change or bigger transformations at the systems level.

Focus group sessions provided the opportunity to delve deeper into what these collaborative actions entailed. When asked to describe their collaborations, participants at all three focus groups tended to focus on the benefits of “tangible” collaborations. Comments like “collaboration really works for the really big events,” made by a coalition representative at the Central Alberta focus group, were representative of many of the conversations that took place. This included efforts like asking a partner to fund part of an event, set up a booth at a family fair, or provide photocopying services for the coalition. This was especially the case when trying to engage less typical partners, such as corporations who are used to funding something tangible.

In addition, tangible wins help coalition members stay engaged over time and can help to create momentum. According to one Southern Alberta focus group participant this is because they are “time-bound, easy changes and visible.” In fact, one focus group participant said that if the “idea was simple or specific, it’s more likely to be successful.” Comments around the difficulties of collaborating around more intangible efforts were also expressed. As one participant at the Southern Alberta focus group said “If you don’t have a campaign or concrete way of how their effort is paying off, then it’s hard for them to get behind that.”

### **Flexibility and Structure**

A key factor that makes coalitions unique from other groups that was highlighted in the interviews with key informants is the loose structure and the flexibility that coalitions offer. However, members at all three focus groups discussed the importance of balancing flexibility and structure in order for collaboration to work. On the one hand, focus group participants reported that having an agenda and a process to follow was helpful for collaboration. One of the challenging outcomes of collaborating is the looser structure of accountability that means that it is sometimes difficult to ensure that people will follow through on commitments. Often this is related to an underlying issue like a lack of ownership over and passion about the task or the general area of interest of the coalition. Basic reporting structures were held up as helping to support the accountability of the coalition.

## Collaboration and Innovation: Working on a COALITION

Some focus group participants commented on the value of using the coalition as the organizational model itself that helps to support both collaboration and innovation.

According to one focus group participant in Northern Alberta, collaborating on a coalition allows things “that couldn’t be openly discussed in communities before” to be discussed. It’s more of an “unbiased approach” to addressing the issues in a community. The same idea was echoed by a survey respondent: “This platform allows us to represent the interests of people in our watershed rather than be influenced by our funder [...] or most influential sector.” Coalitions were held up as being particularly good vessels for building relationships because they are less formal and more flexible than traditional meetings, such as interagency meetings. About 54% of survey respondents agreed and 33% strongly agreed that their coalition members have developed new working relationships after being part of the coalition. Multiple focus group participants also emphasized that after having worked together on coalitions, coalition members now have better working relationships with one another, which makes them willing to collaborate on projects outside of the coalition. Working with multiple partners was recognized as a way for people to share the risk of whatever they were trying to achieve.

In all of the focus groups some parts of working on a coalition, specifically, were also held up as supporting innovation. First, the risk of hurting your personal or organization’s reputation is mitigated by working on a coalition where you have the support to think outside of the box and the anonymity to execute your ideas. It also frees people from some of the parameters and restrictions that agencies impose on staff through guidelines and rules that can actually stifle innovation. One coalition member participating at the Northern Alberta focus group summed up this idea well “The coalition gives us the opportunity to let go of the usual box that you have to think it- it gives you a chance to think outside the box due to the flexibility of the group.” As another coalition member at the Central Alberta focus group said “There is a strength in numbers.”

Moreover, focus group participants described coalitions as a safe place to try new things and fail. While it may be disappointing, generally their experience had been that other coalition members are not concerned with placing blame but are a very supportive group when things don’t work out as expected, making innovation less risky.

On the other hand, to engage different stakeholders, namely parents, coalitions have reported that they have to be more flexible in terms of meeting time and meeting structure. Keeping the meetings open to different stakeholders, at all times, was also highlighted by survey respondents as being a key component supporting collaboration. Survey respondents also highlighted the importance of flexibility in allowing the coalition to respond to changing circumstances, problems or seize opportunities quickly. These different arrangements and levels of structure have been formalized in some coalitions where they have different committees that meet and interact in different ways. For example, according to participants at the Southern Alberta focus group, a looser governance structure and equal positions between members reportedly built more trust between members. Moreover, being flexible about where groups meet, for

example, being willing to meet at someone's workplace if that is the only way to engage him or her, may be a first step to collaboration. One of the reported underlying features that supported coalition members' ability to be flexible was always keeping the bigger picture and goal at the forefront of their minds.

### **What impact does collaboration have on coalitions and communities?**

Having a better understanding of what coalition characteristics support or are barriers to collaboration is one step; however, it is important to understand the positive or negative impact of collaboration before we know whether to support it or not. Therefore, the following section will try to answer the following questions: What impact does collaboration have on coalitions and communities? Is more collaboration needed to have a positive impact on communities and to achieve coalitions' goals? Are coalitions finding better solutions by collaborating? And if so, how?

It is important to note that answering these questions poses a number of challenges. Measuring the impact of coalition activity has been identified as a challenge by the literature and coalitions throughout the Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions project. Coalitions do not tend to have the tools, time or resources to consistently measure the impact that they are having on their communities. Therefore, this section is less about measuring impact that coalitions are having within their area of interest and more about the impact of collaboration on the way that coalitions work, their ability to do their work and meet their goals more effectively, and the perceived impact they are having on their communities.

General findings about the impact of collaboration are illustrated by survey findings that show that 90% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *working with others on the coalition have made their work more efficient and effective* with only 2% disagreeing and 8% remaining neutral. In addition, about 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *through working together within the coalition they have found improved solutions to their community needs*. In addition, survey respondents recognized that they have been able to collaborate with stakeholders outside the coalition to better meet their community needs. Around 85% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed that *new collaborative relationships between the coalition and outside stakeholders help bring them closer to meeting their community needs*.

Beyond this general agreement around the positive impact of collaboration on coalitions and their work in their communities, focus group participants elucidated a number of more specific impacts on the coalitions and their communities, including:

- Accessing a wider network of people with the same message
- Increased awareness among coalition members
- The power of a collective voice

- Building relationships
- Pooling resources

### Collective Impact

Experts spoke about the merits and pitfalls of the collective impact framework in terms of the impact that it can have on community. One expert said that to achieve comprehensive community transformation, there needs to be much more in place than the five aspects of collective impact, it's about the entire community coming together and changing things from a systemic perspective. Another said that it was not the right approach to start with a method and try and fit it. While collective impact may work for certain situations, it's not appropriate for all.

Survey questions about the level of coalition collaboration included all five elements of the collective impact framework (developing a common agenda, developing shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and the backbone organization). As part of the analysis of the survey responses, the questions related directly to collective impact were also analyzed separately from the "Level of Collaboration" index to see if there was any difference between the two. There were no observable differences between the two measurements, which confirms that people didn't answer the questions about collective impact specifically, and other aspects of collaboration in a significantly different way. This finding suggests that the collective impact framework is not used by coalitions as an intentional approach for them to work together.

### Larger Network, Shared Message

Participants at all three focus groups reported that they were able to enlarge the coalition's network and reach more people through collaboration. As one participant at the Southern Alberta focus group put it: "The more collaboration, the more impact and the more people involved. You're more likely to reach the right person, at the right time, to do the right thing." For example, one coalition representative at the Northern Alberta focus group collaborated with the Parent Link in the low income neighbourhoods to offer summer programming three days a week. After being able to develop relationships with these families, front line interactions with the same families were easier and it brought a lot more families to the centre. Another focus group participant collaborated with outside stakeholders to bring Dr. Robin Gibb in to the community and reported reaching a much wider audience in comparison to when they brought the same speaker in, on their own, a few years prior. They thought that the major difference between the two events was that everyone involved promoted it to their respective networks. Survey respondents also highlighted the positive impact of increasing their reach and network to have a greater impact in their communities. As one respondent replied: "Collaboration with other agencies assisted to disperse information more effectively."

On top of increasing the coalition's reach, collaboration helps to increase awareness about the work of the coalition itself. Survey respondents highlighted the benefits of collaborating in this regard: "Members are sharing information about our coalition and about what the coalition has planned for the community with those parents that are part of their work environment."

Not only do different collaborators have different contacts, but focus group participants also reported that through collaboration people also start to speak the same language in their organizations, meaning that their messages can get out more quickly and efficiently. One participant at the Southern Alberta focus group spoke about the benefits of collaborating and developing a succinct message that all of the people involved in ECD can communicate to their networks. In communicating and reaching out in a consistent way, you are more likely to reach more hard-to-reach players. For example, a participant at the Southern Alberta focus group attributed their success in reaching MLAs and having them respond to invitations a result of more people hearing about a coalition and their work in a consistent way.

### **Awareness**

A number of focus group participants and survey respondents reported that collaborating helped to support awareness among coalition members of the services and resources in their community in addition to the needs and wants of community members. In terms of the survey respondents, about 73% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "*through collaboration communities have better access to resources and services*" and only 6% disagreed. Similarly, 50% of survey respondents think that *working together allows their coalition to share resources and avoid duplication of services*. One survey respondent expanded on this idea: "Awareness is key. Coalition members are more aware of what is going on in each community in a large geographical area. They are able to direct people to these services."

One focus group participant at the Southern Alberta focus group spoke about the assumption that people and organizations are connected and know what others do in the community, but in reality, coalitions have connected people that hadn't been connected before. For example, one focus group participant in Northern Alberta spoke about how they became more aware of Alberta Health Services and were better able to refer parents to them. This also resulted in an understanding of what services were duplicated and discussions about how resources could be used in a more effective way.

Recognizing the benefit and need for this awareness, many coalitions incorporated a 'round table' where people shared what they were doing with other coalition members into their meetings to support this. Coalition members also became more aware of when an organization or an individual needed something (i.e. space for meeting or event) and were better able to respond to that need.

### **Power of Collective Voice**

Collaboration is also beneficial in that speaking as a collective is more powerful than speaking as an individual. Participants at the Northern Alberta focus group used the Northern Alberta Children's Charter as an example of how having a united front made their message more powerful. In the build-up to National Child Day, all of the coalitions in Northwest Alberta endorsed the charter and then approached municipalities to endorse and proclaim it as well. They spoke about how when they were approached with a request people were more willing to "jump on the bandwagon." A collective voice was also cited as being important in terms of getting attention and bringing powerful players to the table. As a participant at the Southern Alberta focus group put it "It lends credibility to your work." Survey respondents also saw speaking with a collective voice as an impact of collaborating on the coalition: "We also have a more unified voice in government and community affairs."

However, the perception of survey respondents of *the entire community coming together to make changes in how community operates* is lower compared to agreement towards other statements related to the impact of collaboration. Only 11% strongly agreed with the statement, 42% agreed while 34% remain neutral and 12% disagreed. This suggests that a great number of coalitions do not feel like they have come together as a community to make large-scale change.

### **Relationships**

While relationships are important in order to support collaboration in the first place, collaboration was also held up as a way to build new relationships. In fact, the impact that collaboration has on relationships was reported to extend beyond the coalition. Survey results show that almost 88% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that *"coalition members have developed new working relationships through their work with the coalition."* In addition, almost 87% of survey respondents agreed and none disagreed with the statement that *"coalition members have developed new personal relationships through their work with the coalition."* Respondents spoke about how relationships that have been formed through the coalition impact their work within their organization. As one respondent put it "We also know and trust each other better as individuals and this goes a long way to helping and supporting each other in our roles." Other survey respondents spoke about the simple, but significant change, of being about to pick up the phone and call someone to ask them a question. As one survey respondent simply said: "We know who to call and since we have a relationship with these people, it's easy to work together."

### **Pooled resources**

The survey findings show that the majority of respondents agreed that by collaborating within the coalition and with other stakeholders they are able to combine both financial and non-financial resources to better meet the needs of their communities. For instance, most (73%) survey respondents agreed and few (6%) disagreed with the statement *"communities have better access to resources and services as a result of new*

*relationships between coalition and outside stakeholders.”* Also, the majority of respondents (83%) agreed that working together within the coalition supports their ability to share resources and avoid duplication services.

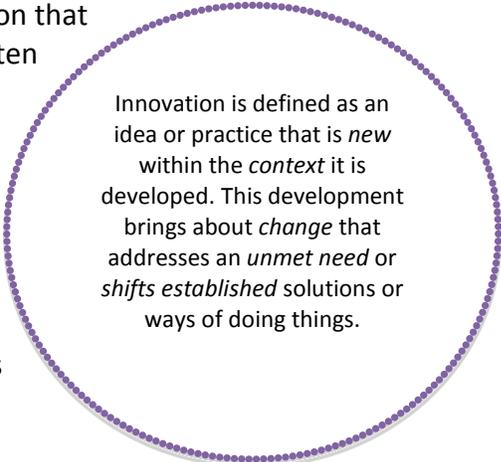
Many coalition representatives at the focus groups also spoke about the benefits of collaboration to (pool, combine, share) financial and non-financial resources. For example, one participant at the Central Alberta focus group spoke about how the local elementary school, recreation centre, the Christian school and the parks and recreation department collaborated with one another to apply for financial support for a new playground in their community. Without the time and effort that everyone gave to the application and recruiting support, it would not have been successful.

Another coalition representative at the Northern Alberta focus group spoke about the benefit of collaborating in terms of being thankful for not having to waste time and resources in always trying to reinvent the wheel: “The more collaborating you can do, the less you have to do.” Not only do many hands make light work, but in gaining a better understanding of what is available in the community, there is less of a chance that resources will be wasted. As one survey respondent explained: “We work with the library in close partnership so programming does not overlap.”

Working with more than one person is also more efficient in terms of using human resources. Survey respondents referred to the importance of using different people’s minds and expertise, and how doing so, results in better solutions for their communities. For example, one survey respondent commented: “In almost every case, the coalition has facilitated work that could not have been done by just one member. For example, a content expert may not have had the resources to communicate issues more widely but the communications person on the coalition can do that.”

## Innovation

During the process of constructing the definition of innovation that is used in this report, it became clear that innovation was often defined by the success of an experiment. In fact, if something was implemented in a community or organization and it did not have a positive, transformative outcome, it did not meet the criteria to be defined as innovation. When speaking with experts, some of them also referred to the importance of having a “transformative change” as part of the definition of innovation. A caution from one of the experts consulted was that often people think about innovation as an individual coming up with a brilliant, transformative solution. Rather,



Innovation is defined as an idea or practice that is *new* within the *context* it is developed. This development brings about *change* that addresses an *unmet need* or *shifts established* solutions or ways of doing things.

innovation comes about through bringing diverse people who trust each other together, who can think creatively and can implement innovative practice. Experts also emphasized that innovation has to be durable and must benefit the people involved.

Because this research is meant to understand the context in which innovation works and when it doesn't, successful outcomes could not be built into the definition that is being used. Instead, it was most important that the idea or practice be new within the context and bring about change that shifts either the intended need or an established way of doing things. In addition to understanding the impact of innovation as well as the characteristics of the context in which it works, the characteristics of the coalition that support innovation were also explored.

The survey captured the perception of participants towards innovation, with specific statements referring to:

- The coalition striving to implement new things and being creative
- The implementation of new ideas with a big impact on communities
- Whether the coalition is willing to take risks and experiment
- The importance of data to innovate

In general, the majority of respondents perceived their coalition's level of innovation as ranging between medium (33%) to medium high (30%) on the innovation index. Only 17% had a high score and almost 19% scored either low or medium low. When looking at each element separately, it is interesting to note that the level of agreement with the statement *"our coalition has implemented a new idea or practice that has had a big impact on our community"* was lower (56% agreed or strongly agreed, 18% disagreed or strongly disagreed) than other elements.

### 1.3 Level of Innovation

	Strives to Improve	Implements new ideas	Big Impact	Coalition Takes Risks	Coalition is creative	Likes to experiment	Comfortable with unknown outcomes	Data
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	-	-	1.3%	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Disagree</b>	3.8%	3.9%	15.4%	9.0%	2.6%	7.7%	7.7%	7.7%
<b>Neutral</b>	5.1%	7.8%	25.6%	29.5%	15.6%	21.8%	12.8%	37.2%
<b>Agree</b>	61.5%	50.6%	38.5%	34.6%	46.8%	48.7%	56.4%	38.5%
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	29.5%	37.7%	19.2%	26.9%	35.1%	21.8%	23.1%	16.7%
	<b>N=78</b>	<b>N=77</b>	<b>N=78</b>	<b>N=78</b>	<b>N=77</b>	<b>N=78</b>	<b>N=78</b>	<b>N=78</b>

When looking at the demographic characteristics of these respondents, the majority of coalitions whose area of interest was children and young families were identified as

having a medium-high level of innovation compared to coalitions working on other issues, who were identified as having on average, a medium-level of innovation.

### **What coalition characteristics support innovation?**

This section describes the specific coalition characteristics that support or hinder innovation. Similar to the factors that support collaboration, having leaders and members that are creative, passionate, have a shared vision, willing to take risks and support others' participation and trusting relationships, are essential to support innovation. Furthermore, having access to financial and non-financial resources (i.e. time and manpower) are important for people to feel willing and comfortable to try something new. A number of barriers to innovation such as current funding models, competition, and fear of taking the risk to try something new are also expanded upon.

Survey questions provide a general idea of the perception towards some factors and also allowed for some preliminary correlations between identified factors and levels of innovation. Focus group participants' responses and data from the open-ended questions on the survey provide more detail to understand why these factors are important to innovation.

#### **Understanding Community Needs**

According to focus group participants, in order for innovation to have the intended impact on communities, it is important that it is being implemented with an understanding of what people in the community want and need. Generally, coalition members felt like their group worked to understand and respond to community needs. In fact, most survey respondents (87%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *"Our coalition work responds to community needs."*

An analysis of survey responses show that a coalition's ability to respond to community needs and to successfully innovate had a positive relationship with one another. However, the relationship between responding to community needs and innovation was discussed in more depth in focus groups. Asking people what they need is a simple but important step that coalitions take before they try something new. Trying to innovate without knowing people's needs risks getting rid of things that are old but may actually be working for the community. For example, coalition members at the Central Alberta focus group discussed the replacement of an old health resource with a new one. The old resource worked much better for parents, and was meeting their needs, whereas the new one was difficult for parents to use and understand. This example was used as an illustration of how putting something out because it's new without understanding what people need is not effective.

Another coalition that attended the Central Alberta focus group asked parents how they would like their information sent to them, anticipating that they may have to develop a

new strategy based around social media. Instead, parents responded that the best way to communicate to them was through the mail, with information printed on a colourful piece of paper so that they could distinguish it from other papers. Similarly, a group of parents surveyed by a coalition that attended the Northern Alberta focus groups found that parents wanted to be engaged face to face. This illustrates the finding that whether implementing an innovative idea or one that is tried and true, it is important to understand what people will respond to.

Evaluating your effort after trying something new is also an important step that came up. Not only do coalitions learn from this information but it also helps to create ownership among community members because they feel like they have input in the direction of the initiative. Having the history of the community and the coalition was also highlighted as important in terms of implementing new ideas. It is important to work from what the coalition has learned and tried in the past.

Understanding the context that you are working in may involve broader considerations like demographics and geography. For example, participants at the Northern Alberta coalitions spoke about the role that distance, geography, weather, and the planting seasons in rural communities impact how engagement can take place. In contrast, working in dense, diverse populations was reported as being a challenge at the Southern Alberta focus groups because it's hard to try something new when you don't have a grasp of the different needs in the communities that you serve. While on the one hand, different needs and perspectives provide the much-needed diversity for innovation, it's harder to get things off the ground faster in a diverse environment. Having a sense of community, was held up as being important for working together and responding to an opportunity in a way that is from a place of understanding of the community.

One conversation at the Southern Alberta focus group came to the conclusion that innovation can only be successful when the community comes to the group with a new need and the group is uniquely positioned to fill a gap. Conversations at the Northern Alberta focus group complement this point of view, with participants commenting on the importance of knowing when to implement an innovative idea to ensure its success and the importance of knowing whether the community is receptive and needing the idea.

### **Fear of change, dealing with resistance**

According to participants at both the Northern Alberta and Central Alberta focus groups, coalitions may deal with resistance when they want to try something new. One focus group member in Central Alberta described this as coalitions members' being "afraid of change." This fear of change was most commonly mentioned in examples of reactions in smaller or rural communities.

This resistance stemmed from a number of different places. First, members feared failure. Sometimes this fear of failure came from negative past experiences. For example,

one survey respondent explained that “previous experiences” were barriers to innovation in that people felt “we tried that a few years ago and it didn’t work. Just the negative talk can literally kill an idea.” When this fear of failure was proven to be unfounded, most effectively through the success of the proposed innovation, people were more willing to try the next new thing. One Central Alberta focus group participant explained: “I find if you do something and it turns out well, you are more willing to try the next time.” Another focus group participant, in Northern Alberta actually described needing “fairly momentous change” to take the fear out of trying something new. This resistance to change does not only come from a place of fear but also from a history of change always being negative. This was brought up as something that is common in Northern Alberta.

Second, members often did not want to invest the time and resources into trying something new. Some coalition members felt like it was too much work to start something new because it often involved developing new processes and working through new ideas. Others, like representatives who attended the Southern Alberta focus group, were afraid of wasting limited resources, including time and money.

Third, sometimes community and coalition members simply feared the newness of the idea. Some focus group participants said that when the idea was something “so far out of the box,” community members were not as keen. In fact, numerous participants spoke about having to change things slowly in order for people to accept the new direction or idea that was being implemented. A number of participants emphasized that it is important that people feel like not everything is being thrown out. However, participants did concede that if they kept trying and actually implemented the idea, people wound up recognizing its value, making persistence and consistency important to supporting successful innovation.

Understanding where the resistance to a new idea is coming from is an important element of good coalition leadership. It is important that understanding the reasons underlying the fear of change can be explored so that they can be discussed and addressed.

Given the fact that there is sometimes hesitation around trying new things, coalition members tried to elucidate the types of situations where despite resistance, trying new things was actually worthwhile and when it was not. For example, if there was very little support on the coalition, coalition representatives at the focus group felt like it may not be worth pursuing something new, especially, if it required a lot of energy to convince the majority of coalition members. This is also tied to the importance of cultivating a sense of ownership and passion over an initiative for it to be successful. If most coalition members feel that something new was a bad idea, and the idea is forced through anyway, it will not be successful. Furthermore, trusting coalition members and their knowledge about what has worked and hasn’t in the past is important.

## Risk

Innovation can be perceived as risky for a number of reasons. Coalition representatives described members who were more open to taking risk and those that weren't. Survey respondents repeatedly identified leaders and members who were "willing to take risks" and "unafraid to fail" as an important characteristics that supports innovation on the coalition. While some people are comfortable with risk-taking, it is still important to convince those that may not be on board. Focus group participants reported that coalitions used a number of different strategies to accomplish this. One representative at the Central Alberta focus group described a strategy of laying out the risk and reward in an impact/effort chart, in order to make more of an objective decision of whether it was a worthwhile risk. Most importantly, tools like this chart help to promote discussion, which helps to strengthen the decision and the coalition itself.

Another approach to dealing with risk is to recognize that even if an initiative does not meet its expected outcome, the coalition still has an opportunity to learn from what went right and what went wrong.

## Leadership

The importance of having a particular type of leader to support innovation was clear through conversations with experts, survey responses and focus group participants. Based on leadership characteristics that were highlighted in the literature and through interviews with experts, survey respondents' were asked about their coalition leaders' ability to encourage:

- Participation
- Trust
- Creativity

Generally, survey respondents felt like they had fairly strong leadership on their coalition with most survey respondents rating their overall leadership as medium (35%) or medium-high (34%). As expected there is a positive relationship between the level of leadership on the coalition and the coalition's level of innovation. Moreover, when looking at each element of leadership separately, they all behave very similarly.

### 1.4 Leadership that supports Innovation

	Encourages participation	Fosters trust	Encourages creativity
Strongly Disagree	-	-	-
Disagree	1.1%	1.1%	2.1%
Neutral	4.3%	4.3%	12.8%
Agree	46.8%	53.8%	43.6%
Strongly Agree	47.9%	40.9%	41.5%
	<b>N=94</b>	<b>N=93</b>	<b>N=94</b>

Focus group participants also consistently held up having a good leader as an important factor for being able to successfully innovate. They described good leaders as ones that are not always noticed but are able to encourage people's strengths, are respected, have experience and passion, ask the right questions and can be the spark when things aren't going well. The leader's passion and desire to try something new were also held out as important for successful innovation. Experts as well as survey respondents reiterated the importance of having a strong "creative drive". Survey respondents also highlighted being open and supportive of new ideas and to non-traditional ways of doing things as an important characteristic to support innovation. As one survey respondent expressed, it is important to "[be] open to trying and if things didn't work out, to look at it as a learning experience." On the other hand, poor leadership, which was described as someone who puts down others' ideas, can hinder innovation.

One leader who was described at the Northern Alberta focus groups as being very good at connecting with parents, confident, resourceful and "full of fire", was reportedly able to implement her new ideas over and over again because she always spoke passionately but was also organized in knowing what she was asking for and connecting it with the mandate and vision of whoever she was asking. Similar characteristics such as persistence, the ability to "sell the idea to the community," passion and hard work were also identified in open-ended survey responses.

Another role of the leader is to ensure the genuine participation of members. Focus group participants in Central Alberta spoke about the importance of promoting a genuine participation of all members. This is tied to the importance of diversity: people's opinions need to be expressed in order for the coalition to benefit from their diverse knowledge and experience. Being able to share more openly, compared to at an agency table, also helps to support the proposal of riskier or new ideas.

The importance of leadership was reiterated in conversations with experts who expressed the importance of strong, local leaders, who understand what communities need. One expert spoke about the difference between "transformational and transactional leaders," arguing that some people have personalities that make them more likely to want to learn, grow and try something new. One of the experts supported the idea of a shared leadership model, saying that it was easier to take risks and innovate because the risk is not all on one person's shoulder.

### **Cultivating trust and relationships**

Having strong, trusting relationships with people around the table was highlighted by participants at all three focus groups as being important to supporting the development of innovative ideas. Moreover, an analysis of survey responses shows that there is a positive relationship between trust and level of innovation. The coalition had to be an

open space where people feel like they can speak and share with one another. The basis for creating this trusting atmosphere was strong relationships.

Focus group participants pointed out that for many coalition participants, these relationships are with people that haven't traditionally worked with one another, making trust even more important before new ideas can be suggested and implemented. For example, without trust, people may be afraid to share a new idea with the fear that it will be taken or owned by another organization. While part of innovation, according to a Southern Alberta focus group participant, is to "let go of ownership and let the idea grow where it needs to grow," this is not typically how we work and being able to do this requires trust.

Focus group participants provided various examples of how they actively tried to build these relationships through activities like icebreakers and taking the time to talk to people about their work and personal lives. While professional sharing was held up as being important, personal relationships were even more effective in building the foundation for working with one another. Building relationships takes a lot of time, meetings, and one on one conversation.

### **Diversity**

Although survey responses do not show a clear relationship between membership diversity and level of innovation, it was one of the factors that support innovation most commonly cited by focus group participants. In fact, focus group participants emphasized that it is hard to come up with new ideas when it is always the same people around the table. In bringing people with different expertise, experience and knowledge around the table, people can discuss ideas from a more knowledgeable and well-rounded standpoint, and by integrating many different points of view, something new can result.

Bringing different types of people around the table also brings diverse personalities and points of view. With a diverse group, it is more likely that there will be people wary of taking risks as well as people who are energizers and able to excite people about a new idea. Despite the flow of new ideas that diverse perspectives can bring, this is not the same as convincing people around the table to embrace and implement the new idea. In fact, survey respondents spoke about the challenge of diversity "Having a varying degree of opinions and ideas often made for a long decision making process."

Coalitions found it challenging but important to have parents involved on the coalition because of their different perspective on issues. Even though some professionals may be parents as well, this wasn't perceived as being the same thing as having a non-professional parent at the table. In addition, having people of different professions, age, and gender were important elements of diversity. One coalition representative, for example, spoke about the benefit of including younger people, who are more willing to

try new things, in contrast to the people who are often seen as ‘go-to’ in the community who may be overworked and less engaged.

Working intersectorally was also a factor mentioned by experts because it opens up new possibilities of working and thinking together, which gives a better chance for things to be able to change. Diverse views, given by people who sincerely care about the coalition’s issue were seen as a precondition for successful innovation.

### **Shared Values and Vision**

Having a common vision and shared values was identified in the survey results as another factor that supports innovation. Although survey results do not show a positive correlation between clarity of vision and level of innovation, focus group participants described the direction, vision and priorities of the group as what kept everyone on the same path, with innovation being how you achieved those goals. Having a common vision was seen as the way to unite people but giving them freedom to approach this vision in a flexible and open way. One participant at the Southern Alberta focus group made the point that it is important to figure out how to find members whose values naturally align with those of the coalition. Given that people are so busy, people are more likely to do something that is in line with their values, where they are willing to put their energy.

The coalition’s vision was repeatedly described in focus groups as something that people could “come back to” to remind them of why they are around the table, being the stable point from which innovation could happen. Part of this vision could be around the importance of trying something new. One focus group member in Southern Alberta emphasized the importance of personally believing in change, being open-minded, and willing to try new things. Another participant articulated the importance of “an unwillingness to feed into the existing structures because of the frustration of how it’s been done and hasn’t worked.” Conversations with experts also emphasized the importance of having a “deep dissatisfaction with the status quo” for innovation to be able to happen.

### **Buy-in**

The importance of getting both community and coalition members to “buy-in” or “get on board” with a new idea was important for participants in all three focus groups as well as survey respondents. Often this was talked about from a negative perspective with a ‘lack of buy-in’ being the reason for little or no participation or support of a new idea. This included survey respondent comments about “lack of commitment” or “lack of understanding of the possible benefits of the new idea” as being barriers to innovation. Making the goals of the coalition relevant to the individual was an approach that some focus group participants mentioned. Focus group participants also noted that the visibility and presence of the coalition in the community helped to encourage buy-in.

A coalition representative at the Southern Alberta focus group noted that there will always be communities that buy-in first and those that are slower to get on board. They suggested that instead of focusing on those that aren't convinced yet, to put energy into communities and people who are eager to be involved. It is important to understand why people are excited about an idea to help support this underlying motivation.

For focus group participants, buy-in for an innovative idea was also important to ensure that everyone pitched in to help implement it. When coalitions are passionate and excited about an idea, other considerations that may be barriers, like limited resources, may be perceived as less of a problem. Buy-in was also described by survey respondents as being important to support innovation, coalitions needed "total buy-in, everyone was committed to making it work."

### **Passion**

Being passionate about the coalition's work was repeatedly held up as being important to innovation. According to survey responses, there is a positive relationship between level of innovation and respondents' agreement with the statement that "*our coalition members are passionate about the work we do.*" As their agreement with the statement increases, so does their coalition's level of innovation. Responses to open-ended survey questions as well as attendees at the Southern Alberta focus group also highlighted passion as a characteristic that supported innovation. For example, you need a shared passion for the work to be willing to commit and put in the time and take the risk to try something new. Survey respondents used words like "commitment", "passion", "energy", "enthusiasm", "determination", and "excitement" to describe coalition characteristics that support innovation. However, some coalition members cautioned that passion isn't enough to create social change. Many people who are passionate have worked on issues without making a difference: "It's not enough to change a system."

While it may be tempting to dream and feel excited about new ideas, a coalition member in Northern Alberta focus group pointed out that balancing excitement with focused priorities is important to move an idea forward.

### **Sharing openly**

Sharing ideas within and between groups is a key piece to innovation. First, sharing resources diminishes the cost of trying something new. For example, the resource book that was developed in Camrose was openly shared with other communities so that they could easily implement this new way of sharing information with parents.

Second, when a larger pool of diverse players share with one another, it's more likely that new ideas and practices will develop. This is the same logic as having a diverse coalition. In addition, hearing a new idea and the success that it has had in another community may give the coalition more confidence to try it on their own: it becomes less risky because someone else has already tried it out and succeeded. This was

reportedly facilitated, in the case of the ECMap coalitions, by regional Community Development Coordinators who shared what coalitions across different areas of the province were doing with one another, making it easier to “piggyback” on other coalitions’ work making coalitions feel like they were actually building off of one another’s ideas instead of “reinventing the wheel.”

Sharing and bringing people together was also reported as a way to energize people and fuel them to move forward, inspiring people’s passion and get the creative juices flowing again.

### **Resources**

Survey respondents, experts, and focus group participants perceived financial and non-financial resources as crucial for innovation. Having limited financial resources can make it especially risky to invest in something unknown and new. One survey respondent explained, “When there is only so much funding available, we were very prudent how it was spent.” In fact, when looking at survey responses the higher a coalition’s level of innovation the more likely they are to disagree with the statement “*our coalition has access to adequate funds to do what it wants to accomplish.*” This can be interpreted as the most innovative coalitions are also those that are least satisfied with their resources. One possible explanation could be that the coalitions that are striving to be the most innovative, which tend to be very resource intensive, are the ones that are the most frustrated with the resources available to them.

When looking at the correlation between level of innovation and access to non-financial resources, results do not show a clear pattern. However, one of the major obstacles to implementing a new idea identified by the open-ended responses from the survey was the lack of human resources (or “manpower”) and time. Innovation makes it even more difficult to invest limited time and energy because of the risk of failure. As one survey respondent explained “not everyone was willing to put in the extra work to make it happen [...] in case of failure.” In addition, responses to open-ended questions on the survey supported the idea that people have to be willing to provide time, manpower, and resources in order for an innovative idea to become a reality.

Resources, including people’s energy, time and money, were also identified as being key for innovation in all three focus groups. Having resources was seen as a precondition for innovation and the lack of resources was seen as a barrier. One coalition member at the Northern Alberta focus group summed up the issue well: “It’s great to have lots of ideas but how do you make that happen without manpower, time, money?” Many who take part in the coalition off the side of their desk can’t give the time needed to move things forward. Moreover, without financial resources, expertise can easily be diverted to other projects that have the resources to execute people’s ideas.

According to focus group participants, having enough volunteers and time to dedicate to a new idea was also important. In particular, having dedicated, paid time to work on the

coalition's new idea was essential. This may be time funded by the coalition or time supported through an employer. Having someone with dedicated time was often addressed by hiring a coordinator.

Further, according to focus group participants, when coalitions have funding, the terms of the funding (time frame, reporting requirements etc) can be challenging in terms of organizing new, larger ideas that take time. Moreover, depending on the funder, innovative ideas may not fit the requirements of the grant. This can be further complicated if a coalition is receiving funding from more than one funding source and the requirements are not coordinated. In addition, applying for funding can be complicated for coalitions who may be competing for the funding against member organizations. Moreover, when funding is awarded to a given organization, it risks causing tension among different groups on the coalition who may have been seeking the same dollars. Survey respondents also referred to problems related to the funder including that a barrier to innovating was that "fear it would result in backlash from funders" and having "specified funding requirements/timelines."

According to conversations with experts, coalitions "don't work in an enabling environment for innovation." The fact that coalitions are required to deliver results on a fixed schedule, be very clear about their objectives before they even measure things, and have little room to change their mind means that people have to be very careful with their resources and use them in a prescribed way. Unlike classic research and development funding, which leaves room for inevitable failure, non-profits are not funded to have extra redundancies and they often have barely enough to begin with.

An interesting conversation at the Northern Alberta focus group was around the fact that people aren't used to having the flexibility and permission to be innovative with their money because of the typical funder requirements. In the case of the Alberta Education seed grant funding "The majority of people in community are still waiting for government to tell them what to do and that younger generations, compared to older ones, are a little bit more creative because they haven't worked in that system for so long. It's a different way of thinking."

According to focus group participants, having money and the recognition that comes along with receiving funding also gives people hope and excitement. One participant at the Southern Alberta focus group put it well: "When the dollars came it was a really beautiful thing because we felt we could try something new." On the flip side, when money stops coming in, people start to lose hope and disengage.

Regardless of the importance of money, a number of focus group participants emphasized that the coalition's work and level of innovation can't only depend on having funds and that a lot of work can be done without them. One participant at the Southern Alberta focus group commented that not having money can force coalitions to be more creative and innovative with what they do have.

## **Data**

The importance of having data to innovate was highlighted in the survey. Respondents were asked to identify their level of agreement with the statement *“our coalition uses evidence-based data to improve current practices and test new ideas.”* About 55% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. While the availability of data was not a major factor discussed in the focus groups, experts felt that having data on the work that was being done was essential to being able to innovate. In particular, one expert noted that you need to have “discipline on data, you test your assumptions with real life data. We all have such powerful narratives in our heads and data is so hard to get with innovation. To be a good innovator you need to have relentless commitment to reality testing.” There is also a lack of evaluation tools available to coalitions to monitor and understand what is working with their ideas, making the process of innovation unsustainable.

Focus groups in Southern Alberta also discussed the barrier of not knowing how to measure impact and evaluate their work, whether it was innovative or not. Coalitions varied in terms of measured outcomes from impacting one parent’s perspective on ECD to shifting future EDI results. There was no consensus on the best types of tools to use to measure coalition’s outcomes or how to define coalition success.

## **Flexibility and Guidelines**

Participants in all three focus groups emphasized the importance of holding a fine balance between structure and flexibility in order to support coalitions’ innovation. On the one hand, the structured support from EMap was held out as a key factor that strengthened coalitions. One participant at the Northern Alberta focus group called this structure a “loose way of accountability.” Accountability structures like the six-month reports were also helpful because they helped people reflect on what they had achieved and where they were at the time.

On the other hand, if the guidelines from either the funder or the structure of the coalition itself are too strict and top down it is impossible to be innovative. This is especially the case if guidelines restrict the group’s ability to respond to community needs in particular. Flexibility is also important to be able to follow new ideas as they evolve and become something else. If there are guidelines, they have to allow for creativity. One participant to the Southern Alberta focus group referred to how the flexible structure of the coalition allows for more innovation than other more formal groups: “Sky is the limit. [the coalition] is an opportunity to dream and to talk about what they can do that they can’t at the agency”.

## **What impact does innovation have on coalitions and communities?**

Generally, coalitions had a hard time describing the impact that their innovative ideas or practices had on their communities.

Survey respondents were asked their level of agreement to three statements related directly to the perceived impact of innovation on meeting community's needs:

1. "Implementing new ideas and practices, in the context of our coalition, has been a positive way of meeting out community's needs"
2. "The best strategy for meeting diverse needs in our community is to implement new ideas and practices"
3. "We have been the most successful at meeting unmet needs when new ideas or practices are implemented"

The majority of respondents (79%) agreed that "*implementing new ideas and practices has been a positive way of meeting out the needs of their communities.*" In addition, the majority of survey respondents (62%) feel that the best strategy for meeting diverse needs in their communities is to implement new ideas and practices and 59 % feel that they have been most successful when implementing new ideas and practices. These three elements were combined in a single measurement to identify the respondents' perception of whether level of innovation is related to the ability to meet community needs. Generally, there is a positive relationship between this measure of meeting community needs and level of innovation.

However, other than alluding to "new initiatives" in a positive way, there was very little evidence from the focus group participants, which provided detailed information about the impact on their community or area of interest. Rather, coalitions discussed when it was appropriate to implement an innovative idea or practice, in understanding that the context matters to whether the innovation will have a positive effect on their community.

On the one hand, according to survey respondents, when what had always been done is still meeting the community's needs, has momentum, is efficient, is successful, and has buy-in from the community, trying something new was less appealing and may not have a positive impact on community. In particular, coalition members described events, programs or ways of doing things that were easy to piggyback on, already had an established audience that could be accessed, and was well-received by communities as being unnecessary to change. As one survey respondent put it, in doing what had been successful in the past there is "no worries about not getting good numbers!" To add, if something is still meeting a need, there is no need to change it. One survey respondent described a continuing program "Our farm safety committee has delivered a training workshop for several years. Based on participant evaluations and outside industry needs we see the need to continue the existing format, revising the program annually as needed."

Also, survey respondents described how it takes time for something new to catch on, making it beneficial to continue with things that already have momentum and a good reputation “Service providers are used to Preschool Fairs. They understand the importance and how they are set-up making it a very smooth running community day. Parents are also becoming familiar with the Fairs and are spreading the word.”

On the other hand, some contexts were particularly appropriate for coalitions to innovate:

1. Responding to new circumstances or needs
2. When community or coalition members need to feel excited
3. To engage a new audience
4. To experiment

### **Responding to new circumstances or new needs**

Closely connected to the importance of understanding community needs is the need to try new things in response to new circumstances. This was held up as an important consideration in interviews with experts as well, who emphasized that there is always a need for innovation because the circumstances that we are working in are always shifting. This is one of the reasons why innovation is closely related to evaluation and assessment. When it becomes clear that something isn't meeting community's needs, it is important to try something new. As one survey respondent expressed “assess the need. If it is not hitting the mark try something new.” Participants in both Central Alberta and Northern Alberta focus groups spoke about the need to try something new to address a new situation or achieve a different result. People spoke about feeling “stuck” in that “we've done it this way for ten years and still getting the same outcome.”

Some of the particular circumstances that coalitions are responding to are the changing demographics in many communities. Experts also spoke of the need for innovation in constantly shifting social setting with new demographics, new policies etc: “You are always needing to reinvent.” Coalition representatives from Northern communities spoke about the change in terms of the immigrant groups that are moving to their communities. New considerations such as needing to translate coalition material, representing the community in a way that includes people of various backgrounds, and addressing shifting beliefs about childcare are examples of new circumstances that have now become important to coalitions.

However, survey respondents cautioned that if you conduct an evaluation and find that what had been done in the past was still working “don't do new things just for the sake of something new”.

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### **Excitement of “newness”**

Not only was it important to try new things in order to address new circumstances, but coalitions also felt that trying new things was important in terms of attracting new coalition members or stakeholders. Coalition members felt that people were attracted to new ideas, which created a dynamic atmosphere that was important to get people energized and excited about the coalition’s work. One survey respondent expressed a similar idea, “[innovation] creates excitement in the community. People want to try it out.” Representatives from coalitions at the Southern Alberta focus group also emphasized that trying new things gave people hope and that sometimes trying something new, irrespective of other outcomes, could be beneficial for this very reason.

In addition, being exposed to something new could also spark that same approach in other people in their own organizations. One survey respondent explained, “It exposes communities to different experiences than they have had before. It excites people and helps to encourage them to take more risks on their own to meet their needs and goals.”

### **Broader Engagement**

Survey respondents described innovation as being particularly successful because trying something new that hadn’t been done in the past meant engaging segments of the community that hadn’t been engaged in the past. As one survey respondent simply put, innovative action “helped to engage a part of the community that wasn’t engaged.” This was also tied to the coalition’s area of interest in that in engaging a new segment of the population, more people became aware of the coalition and the issue that mattered to them. As one survey respondent expressed their new activity “allows parents to become knowledgeable about the ECMap Project and how it affects our children.”

### **To experiment**

Some experts emphasized the importance of experimenting for the sake of experimentation and learning. While this was not a common theme in the focus groups, one survey respondent described the process of experimentation involved in innovating as having a positive impact, regardless of the outcome. In fact, trying something new was framed as being an important way to learn “I feel trying anything new is always beneficial, because if the outcome has been good you know to do it again. If the outcome isn't as good as you had hoped for- at least you know you tried and now you know it didn't work as good as first thought... But without first trying we would have never known.”

## COLLABORATION AND INNOVATION

During all of the focus groups it was a challenge for people to discuss collaboration and innovation as separate processes. In fact, many spoke about them being deeply intertwined and connected. While the conversations around the factors that support both processes and the impact that they have had on their communities was kept as distinct as possible, all focus group participants also directly discussed the relationship between collaboration and innovation.

Most commonly, focus group participants saw collaboration as a precondition for innovation. This was echoed in conversations with experts and in open-ended survey responses. The more that people work closely together, trust each other and have relationships the more likely a 'safe' environment in which to innovate will be possible. Collaborating helps people be more creative and innovative. People get ideas from others rather than just thinking of creative things on their own.

To add, as mentioned in previous sections, diversity was clearly expressed as being a factor that supports innovative activity. Having a diverse group of people who think differently also helps innovative ideas to be thought of through a critical lens, which is helpful when trying something new. Diversity also helps to reveal different wants and needs, and successful innovation is all about meeting identified needs. For example, one coalition representative at the Southern Alberta focus group spoke about learning of the needs of employees working in Lake Louise through collaborations with various employers in the area. As a result, they had to address these issues in a new way but these needs never would have been identified without this collaboration in the first place.

Learning from others is also an important piece in terms of supporting innovation. You need to build on what has already been done. Also, working with people who are excited about innovation can support the process. Focus group participants repeatedly spoke about how "naysayers" can have a negative impact on the process of trying to innovate. At the same time, having people who are less prone to trying new things may also help temper the process, guiding people who are always trying something new to reflect about what they are doing.

Collaboration also increases access to a variety of resources, and many coalitions saw innovation as a resource-intensive process.

Others conceptualized collaboration and innovation as overlapping circles: they happen together and overlap in different ways but are still separate processes. As one participant at the Northern Alberta focus group put it "They're completely interwoven, for your coalitions to experience to successes and work through challenges you need to be innovative at problem solving and it comes easier as a collaborative initiative."

## **Conclusion**

Interviews with experts, surveyed coalition members, and focus groups with ECD coalitions have been rich sources of information about:

- The coalition characteristics that support or are barriers to collaboration and innovation
- The impact that collaborating and innovating has on coalitions and the communities that they serve.

Understanding community needs, leadership and membership characteristics, the diversity of the coalition, trusting relationships among members, having a shared vision, sharing, adequate financial and non-financial resources, balancing flexibility and structure, and passion are all important factors that have an impact on successful collaboration and innovation. Many of these factors were also found to be important in earlier phases of the Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions project, which investigated the factors that support coalition sustainability. Given that these factors are held out consistently as being important to various positive coalition outcomes, these factors should potentially be conceptualized as supporting coalition health, in general.

The positive impact of collaborating both within and outside of the coalition is clear. Networks have expanded allowing coalitions to reach more of their audience, a greater awareness of their issue is shared, coalitions have a greater understanding of community needs, groups are more powerful and have a bigger voice and the trusting relationships that are developed through collaborating extend into people's professional and personal lives.

Likewise, understanding innovation in a more detailed way has allowed us to distinguish when it is best for coalitions to try to innovate, namely when there is an expressed need in the community that they are uniquely positioned to address. It was clear through the focus groups that something new isn't always better, which is especially the case when what is already being done works well or if the innovation is not meeting an expressed community need. Innovative activities on coalitions have been reported to have an energizing effect and are an important approach to meet the shifting needs in community.

While collaboration and innovation were discussed separately, it is clear from the focus groups and conversations with experts that they are closely intertwined. In particular, strong collaboration is an important factor that supports innovation. The diverse perspectives and trusting relationships that characterize successful collaboration, also support innovation.

Coalitions have also proven to be a particularly appropriate form of organizing to support collaboration and innovation. Coalitions reported the importance of working outside of their usual organizational structures, having flexibility, and being able to work

anonymously, finding the strength to take risk in numbers and the supportive, trusted relationships that are supported by the informal nature of coalitions. Supporting the extra time and resources that it takes to assemble groups of diverse, passionate individuals working toward a shared cause is something to strive towards.

### **Recommendations**

#### For coalitions

- Actively and intentionally pursue collaboration and innovation: it is not something that is achieved passively.
- Recognize the power of strong relationships and actively encourage them through informal time and sharing between members.
- Support leaders and members that actively encourage collaboration and innovation, encourage everyone's participation, and foster trust among the group.
- Speak openly about the benefits of collaboration and innovation so that people feel free to share their ideas and resources.
- Share ideas and resources with one another. This is not only more efficient, but it helps coalitions speak the same language to their networks and have a more powerful voice in their area of interest.
- Continue to value the diversity of coalitions, despite the challenges that it may bring about.
- Make sure to explicitly understand the needs of the community that is being served and let these needs guide the work. As needs shift, innovation may be required to respond to these new circumstances.

#### For funders

- Support flexibility and risk-taking. If coalitions are required to be explicit about their outcomes before they receive their funding, this limits their ability to be dynamic and learn from what their community needs as they go along.
- Support evaluation so that coalitions can learn from what they are doing.
- Support long-term funding so that coalitions can plan larger, more ambitious initiatives.

#### Questions for further research

- How do we weigh the importance of different factors that support collaboration and innovation? A more rigorous statistical analysis of correlations of the impact of key factors that support or hinder collaboration and innovation could help clarify the factors that have the strongest impact, statistically.
- Throughout this report, it becomes clear that coalitions refer to various, often 'tangible', types of collaboration using the same words to describe them. Therefore, it is important that we understand what we mean when we say 'collaboration'. How can we support coalitions' ability to identify their levels of collaboration? And express this clearly?

- Is there a difference between EMap coalitions and coalitions working on other issues? Does the broader support and provincial level structure that supports EMap coalitions make a difference?
- How can we develop tools so that coalitions can understand and speak about their impact on communities and their area of interest?