LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE RUNNING OF NGO NETWORKS

(compiled by Jonah Mudehwe)

"The <u>idea</u> of networking is good. We can do more when we work together. We can make a big difference because we have more power. But it's a big challenge – <u>how</u> can we work together?"
   Vietnamese Health Program Manager, US NGO, Hanoi, Vietnam in Ashman (undated)

1. Introduction
This paper has been prepared at the request of the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (Dochas). The purpose of the paper is to share some of the pertinent lessons learnt in trying to effectively run associations of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The paper outlines some lessons and makes recommendations as well. It does not exhaust all lessons that can be learnt from running associations.

2. Methodology
In preparing this paper, a review of literature on the concepts of networks and networking was conducted. It looked at the theories on contemporary types of networks as well as alternative typologies. Some of the major organizational characteristics pertaining to networks were explored. Available existing literature on the documented experiences of some networks or associations was also examined. Finally, the author had the opportunity to use the frameworks provided to reflect on his personal experience during the time that he led an association of NGOs for a period of 10 years. For purposes of this paper, the words 'network' and 'association' have been used interchangeably. In identifying the lessons, the author has deliberating tried to focus on those issues that are only unique to associations or networks of NGOs.

3. The concept of networks

Today, networks are a firmly entrenched facet of almost every aspect of society and exist just about everywhere in the world. While many networks exist, there does not seem to be a formula of how and why they develop. Networks are created for a variety of reasons and they embody a variety of structures. They can be both formal and informal associations and they can be created at different levels ranging from local, provincial; national; regional and international.

3.1 Contemporary network typologies
The word "network" can mean many different things to many different people. Liebler and Ferri argue that "it is essential to understand the contextual environment in which any network operates and to seek to know the perspective of its constituency" (2004 p.15). They also observe that some of the most common types of networks consist of:-
- communities of practice
- knowledge networks
- sectoral networks

- social change or advocacy networks
- service delivery networks

Communities of practice are defined as self-organised networks of organisations and individuals that share common work interests and practices. Knowledge networks usually encompass more specific networks that include the generation and dissemination of information as part of the core business. Sectoral networks are organised around a specific sector like NGOs; HIV/AIDS and environment. Social change or advocacy networks are also usually referred to as alliances and coalitions. They are often created to articulate common causes or interests of the members. Service delivery networks are usually autonomous organisations set up to coordinate the work of different agencies in service delivery.

According to Engel (1993) almost all civil society networking is characterised by four types of activities, namely the provision of services; learning together; advocacy and management. Service provision would normally be in the form of information sharing and training. Advocacy is usually in the form of collective efforts to influence government policy. Learning together refers to joint efforts in diagnosing; exchanging; comparing and synthesizing common complex development problems. Management is usually a unit established to facilitate the networking process.

Liebler and Ferri (2004) however also note that there is difficulty in achieving consensus on what a particular label of network actually does. They argue that networks are defined better by their attributes than by what type they are. They observe that what is important is not the label that the network uses, but rather what it means by the label that it has chosen to describe itself. The label that is used reflects the users' perception of the network's character; formality; form; function and purpose. The same label can be used in entirely different ways by other networks. It is what is reflected by the users' understanding that is important.

3.2 Alternative network typologies
A number of other authors have developed typologies that provide innovative alternative ways of understanding networks and how they work. These typologies are rooted in the principles that make networks effective.

Ashman (2003) evaluates networks according to the following seven key characteristics:
- Pre-existing social capital
- Strategic fit
- Donor relationship
- Leadership commitment
- Governance and management
- Mutual trust
- Joint learning

For Ashman, effective networks are formed on the basis of mutual trust created from a shared history; employ methodologies that are of value addition to all members; manage their partnerships with donors, allowing donors to neither unilaterally set agendas nor

shirk accountability; and have strong leadership both within the network and within its member organizations. Ashman (2003) also argues that effective networks are managed in ways in which control is shared and management coordinates activities so that all members are represented and have influence.

An alternative typology used by Church (2003) is built around democracy; diversity and dynamism of networks. For her, effective networks are democratic when there are flattened hierarchies which are easily accessible; there is full and equitable participation and decision-making is inclusive. Diversity is prevalent when the ideas and positions of all members are reflected in the network disposition and activity. The network is dynamic when action is centred on the set goals, coordination is responsive and effective and there is a multiplier effect from activities. Nunez and Wilson-Grau (2003) added 'excellence' as a fourth variable to Church's framework. They argue that the effectiveness and efficiency of a network are derived from the quality of its structures, relationships and processes.

Dochas (2008) identified the following ingredients to be essential for an effective network. The first five ingredients are to do with promoting accountability while the last five are about ensuring that there is organizational effectiveness.
  Accountability
  • Mechanisms for membership participation
  • Members' commitment and ownership
  • Members' mutual trust and respect
  • Transparency and predictability
  • Representativity

  Organisational Effectiveness
  • Quality of services
  • Staff skills and capacity
  • Relevance to members
  • Board leadership
  • Board effectiveness

Civicus (2007) also developed the following framework for the running of a successful national association of NGOs:
  • Strategic planning
  • Membership development
  • Advocacy and lobbying
  • Maintaining accountability and legitimacy
  • Sustaining a national association
  • Profiling the association
  • Sustainability
  • Monitoring and evaluation
  • Relationships with donors, government and business
  • Building coalitions

3.3 Networks or Networking
Engel in Karl (1999) describes the difference between networks and networking well saying "… networking is more than simply working together – more than the mere collaboration of individuals and institutions on the basis of common interest. Networking has to do with achieving 'social synergy' ….Networks represent 'communities of ideas', a space for like-minded people to interact on the basis of not only common interests but of conflicting ones too, building mutual trust and learning to accommodate each other's needs…". Liebler and Ferri (2004) argue that it is helpful to speak not just of networks, but of networked approaches. Engel (1993) strongly argues that we look at networking as a process. According to him, the networks are just the results of people and organisations dedicating time and energy to building relationships with each other and that the network as such is just part of the outcome, and not the only one. On one hand what is clear is that networking is about organisations; institutions and individual actors joining forces around a common concern (Creech/ Willard 2001). On the other hand it is also about building relationships with other independent actors to usually share knowledge, goods and experiences and to learn from each other with a common goal in mind (Padron (1991), Plucknett (1990), Engel (1993)). Networks usually refer to organizations whilst networked approaches refers to the designing of processes.

Plucknett (1990) provided a contemporary definition of network as "an association of independent individuals or institutions with a shared purpose or goal, whose members contribute resources and participate in two-way exchanges or communication". Engel (1993) defined networking as "the process resulting from our conscious efforts to build relationships with each other…. Networks are more or less formal, more or less durable relational patterns that emerge as a result of such efforts. The core business is not the manufacture of products or the provision of services, but social learning, communication and the making of meaning".

3.4 Sustainability
In its Sustainability policy, Dochas outlines that sustainability is a function of:
- Relationships – this is about encouraging quality participation of the membership and building mutual trust and respect within the membership
- Relevance – while Dochas undertakes to deliver timely and quality services to its members, it strives to ensure that it maintains a distinct and clear cut mandate on whose basis it continues to engage its external stakeholders. Dochas also believes that it shall continue to function effectively until its goals are met, or until its members see no more need to continue, or until it becomes irrelevant.
- Resources – this aspect looks at the strategy of mobilising financial resources for supporting the work of Dochas. This is done through membership fees and grants from the government and other funders.

Liebler and Ferri (2004) highlight some of the key ingredients that promote sustainability as trust, adaptability and leadership. They trace the roots of trust in a network to the pre-existing social capital. They argue that trust is fostered and facilitated by strong leadership, and quote Church et al. saying "…trust provides the glue that allows control

to be relinquished into the hands of those that will act in the best interest of all" (2003). Liebler and Ferri (2004) also argue that networks that adapt to the changing contexts and needs of their membership are sustainable. They cite ICCO (2004) stating that "…the more networks understand and effectively develop themselves as spaces for innovation, experimentation and learning…., the more successful they are in continually renovating and revitalizing themselves within an ever changing development context and hence, ensure their pertinence". The question of leadership is well articulated by Skidmore (2004) who argues that "networks challenge our conceptions of leadership, which too often are still rooted in an outmoded 'great man' theory that mistakes the formal authority of status, rank or station with the exercise of leadership". He asserts that "new network-based ways of organizing social and economic activity will only thrive if we evolve new models of leadership and embrace the distinctive 'organizing logic' of networks, and do not seek to apply the old set of principles in an environment that has been dramatically altered" (Skidmore 2004). He suggests that the concept of 'leading between', which is a type of leadership by facilitation, is more suitable for networks than top down leadership. Stephenson argues that the following are essential of effective network leadership:
- Leading from the outside in
- Being cognisant of the external environment and seeking ways to adapt accordingly
- Mobilising energy from the power source of network members
- Fostering trust and empowerment
- Coaxing members out of their comfort zones
- Viewing themselves as 'lead learners' in the network; and nurturing other network members to become leaders in their own right.

3.5 Conclusion
The section on the concept of networks has looked at the contemporary and alternative network typologies. The general types of networks that exist has been noted as communities in practice; knowledge networks; sectoral networks; social change networks; and service delivery networks. Alternative typologies looked at some of the main characteristics of effective networks as argued by different authors. In light of that, Ashman (2003) stated that the key characteristics are pre-existing social capital; strategic fit; donor relationship; leadership commitment; governance and secretariat; mutual trust; and joint learning. Church (2003) on the other hand looked at effective networks from the point of view of democracy; diversity and dynamism. Nunez and Wilson-Grau (2003) added the fourth dimension of 'excellence', which is composed of the quality of networks structures, relationships and processes.

The next paragraph shall explore how the key ingredients of effective networks have operated in practice. We shall use a hybrid type of framework that we have developed from a combination of the Civicus (2007) Resource Guide and the Dochas (2008) framework, to look at the key lessons learnt and also make some recommendations.

4. Lessons and Recommendations

4.1 Membership

Lessons	Recommendations
<u>Managing member expectations</u> The process of incorporating member interests and motivating their participation can lead to raising of unrealistic expectations	To avoid confusion and frustration, it would be helpful for the association to clarify precisely what members can expect from it. The association can develop a list of membership services, indicate what is expected from a member who wants to access the services also outline the process of accessing services (Civicus 2007)
<u>Representation</u> Some issues require the immediate response of the association and not much time may be available to check with the members	The network should pre-define key policy positions and stay as close as possible to its mandate/ area of expertise (Zomer)
<u>Participation</u> Whilst an association or network relies on the willingness and ability of its members in order to effectively function, the expectation that members would be active is often not met. By placing attention on networking, the attention and energy of members may be taken away from their own core business. The members who regularly and enthusiastically participate in the association may end up forming a clique that can dominate the association or foster inequalities.	A network should have a clear strategy that puts membership participation and relationships building at the centre of networking. The members however also tend to participate more where there is trust and respect; capacity to professionally get things done within secretariat and the network works on the basis of clear and predictable rules (Dochas). Identify the levels of willingness and ability to participate of individual members then focus on those members who can move into the High Willingness and High Ability category (Zomer). A memorandum of understanding can be developed between the network and the individual member outlining roles and responsibilities (Dochas) Encourage relationship building amongst the memberships so that they value each other; provide each other support and also resolve differences (Dochas)

4.2 Managing relations

Lessons	Recommendations
NGO/ Government relations Relations between the state and civil society have significantly changed over time. The government is no longer the sole legitimate agent for making decisions on development and public policies. Governments are increasingly including civil society as accepted actors in processes and institutions of governance.	A national association needs to build its capacity to be more organised, competent and eloquent in order to influence government decisions and policies. The association however needs to remain independent, non-partisan and keep its distance from the government (Mudehwe)
Relations between a national association of NGOs and government can swing from anything from cooperation; complimentarity; co-optation to confrontation, from time to time, depending on whether the government is democratic or hostile.	An association should be able to work on a variety of political environments. It should be able to manage the dichotomy of relations with government and be guided by its own policies on national issues. The association should openly support the government when progressive policies are passed. It should equally confront the government over lack of democratic practices (Civicus)
Some members may distance themselves away from the association when it confronts the government.	The positions taken by the association should be principle-based and consistent with policies of the association (Mudehwe).
NGO/ Business relations Some businesses can donate funds or collaborate with NGO sector on specific welfare-type projects. Businesses are however not willing to support work on human rights, democracy and advocacy as they are sensitive to their relations with the government.	Engage the business sector selectively and be pragmatic about what you can expect from them (Civicus)

4.3 Sustainability

Lessons	Recommendations
<u>Strategy</u> The work of NGOs has evolved over the years from mere welfare activities to the current activities in the political space which now involve influencing government policies and ensuring that both the government and markets are held accountable. An association is usually faced with a plethora of expectations from the membership, which may be impossible to satisfy all at once.	Besides meeting the needs of the membership, an association should continuously follow and adapt to changes within civil society, government and the market in order to remain relevant and provide leadership. An association needs a well structured environmental scanning mechanism (Mudehwe). The Board and staff should prioritise which of these expectations can realistically be accomplished within a period of time. The association should be open with the members on what can done and what cannot be done (Dochas).
<u>Leadership</u> An association requires an innovative way of facilitative leadership as the conventional type of centralized leadership can constrain the energy that pushes the achievement of goals and restrict participation.	The Board and staff need to be skilled in facilitative leadership. It would be desirable if there are also skills of activism amongst the senior staff in order to mobilise and stimulate membership to participate (Mudehwe).
<u>Trust</u> Trust is a key asset and the glue that holds the network together. The golden rule is that the association should never abuse or destroy the trust that members have invested in it.	The association should continue to build on the social capital that exists at the time of setting up the network. The association should also invest in methods that build trust, like face to face meetings; respecting diversity; and occasionally visit the membership (Ashman 2003) The association should visibly shift to a 'trade union' role when the sector is under threat (Dochas).
<u>Funding</u> Funding is one of the major challenges that faces an association of NGOs. Most donors are now just providing project funding only, perhaps for 3-4 years only.	Reduce vulnerability by diversifying sources of funding. Invest in the identification of strategies to generate funding internally. Continue to employ cost effective methods (Civicus). Negotiate with funders to contribute to basket funding for the association (Mudehwe).

4. Governance

Lessons	Recommendations
<u>NGO leaders</u> It is important that the Board of an association of NGOs is composed of key NGO leaders that command respect from within the NGO sector as well as government and business community. Such senior NGO personnel are however usually too busy to accept nomination to the Board.	Spread the burden of the Board by setting up sub-committees of the Board. The Board should have a clear strategy for its renewal. The Board should organise its work to ensure that it makes the most effective use of time, skills and knowledge of directors (Dochas).
<u>Muddling governance and management</u> It is sometimes difficult to know where the line is drawn between governance and management in practical terms. The Chief Executive Officer is usually caught in a difficult situation on how to facilitate the Board to function without creating a rubber-stamping tendency. Equally, some board members can interfere with the running of the office.	Develop clear guidelines and procedures that outline the responsibilities of the Board and that of the Chief Executive Officer, including decision making processes (Mudehwe). The Board should focus on the strategic direction of the organization to avoid being involved in the day to day operations (Dochas).
<u>Balancing representation on the Board</u> At times there is a difficulty of trying to balance representation from geographical structures; sectoral structures; gender and skills on the Board without creating too big a board.	The constitution should create clear guidance on how this should be handled. Provisions for co-option of board members can also provide the much needed flexibility (Mudehwe).

5. Managing Accountability and Legitimacy

Lessons	Recommendations
<u>Legitimacy</u> There are instances where an association or its members' legitimacy is brought to question. It usually happens when something embarrassing happens within the sector or civil society attacks either the government or business community. The question asked is 'who do these unelected people think they represent?'	An association needs to build and continually maintain its legitimacy and that of its members in the eyes of other stakeholders. There are different sources of legitimacy which need to be upheld (Civicus 2007). • Moral legitimacy emanating from the worthiness of your cause • Legitimacy of action which comes from ability of the association to lead and protect the interests of members • Good standing – being professional in your work and complying with

	laws
	• Representativeness – the more members you have the better you can claim to represent
	• Ability to manage relationships with major sources of power.
Accountability It can be difficult to enforce an NGO code of conduct. It is sometimes regarded as a moral document which is voluntary	It is important that at the time of drafting the code, issues of enforcement are discussed and agreed. The code should be adopted together with enforcement mechanisms. Help can also be solicited from funders and government for them to increasingly begin to recognize only those organizations certified for compliance with the code (Mudehwe).

6. Profiling the network

Lessons	Recommendations
Communications Communications is a very important in helping the association to accomplish its goals as well as build a credible public profile.	An association needs a clear communications strategy to communicate with both internal and external audiences. The strategy should clearly spell out which message should be disseminated to which audience and though which media (Civicus).
Attending meetings and functions The Chief Executive Officer is usually inundated with invitations to meetings and workshops by members; government departments; international organizations and funders.	The Chief Executive Officer should assign only 60% of his time to administrative work. The other 40% should be reserved to respond to invitations and networking. The association has the biggest opportunity of being visible through its CEO who attends meetings and functions. Contacts are also made with important stakeholders (Mudehwe).

7. Secretariat

Lessons	Recommendations
<u>Inadequate staff</u> An association usually runs with inadequate staff due to limited resources and the danger of not being able to sustain a big secretariat in the long run.	Innovative methods should be explored to get gap-filling staff on an ad-hoc basis. In addition to the few full time staff, an association can get interns; volunteers and part-time staff. The association can also create a pool of approved consultants who can be called in at short notice to provide back up (Mudehwe).

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