

## **New organisational frameworks: the importance of joint action**

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Recent events in Tunisia and Egypt serve to remind us of the inspiring power of emancipatory social movements. Less dramatic, but arguably even more effective in bringing on major political transitions, are for example the results of people's power in Brazil, Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America.

These advances are thanks to joint action. To what extent did private aid agencies and other NGOs contribute to them? I think a lot of modesty is required. Relative to the role of membership-based organisations and movements – of indigenous or minority peoples, of organised labour – the contributions of NGOs hardly stands out. Indeed some have argued that in many times and places they have served to reinforce the status quo by discouraging or diverting energies away from movement-building and political action. Research about the effects of foreign-backed NGOs in Egypt and other Arab lands up reached that conclusion, captured in its title : “Too much civil society, not enough politics!” (Langohr 2004).

The roles of private aid agencies and other NGOs in these broad political advances may be hard to detect, but some of their networks and coalitions have been relevant and effective on more specific terrains of policy of global scope. Think of the NGOs providing crucial support to the success of women's movement for reproductive rights; to the campaigns to ban land mines, to reduce toxic waste dumping or to restrict multinationals' promotion of “baby-killer” breastmilk substitutes; and to new US laws requiring extractive industry firms to account clearly for their profits. These achievements matter, given the rapid and forceful pace at which power is migrating into poorly-governed, often supra-national spaces, under conditions of rising socio-economic and thus political inequality (see Dütting and Sogge 2010).

In those achievements, relational frameworks for joint action have clearly been important. How NGOs organise themselves can make a difference. However NGOs are almost never able to choose a model freely “off the rack” simply because they like it or because they want to follow current fashions. Nevertheless, sometimes even intelligent people do just that. Think of mess and stress created inside some big private aid agencies because their senior executives, seeking to shake up their organisations, bought the “quasi market” organisational model

promoted by high-priced management consultants. Recall also the substantial evidence of disempowerment and other counter-productive outcomes of results-based management practices (see for example Kilby 2006; Denhardt and others 2009). Successful models, on the contrary, don't follow fashions, especially those inspired by neoliberal, New Public Management norms. Rather they show respect for emancipatory goals, for contexts in their complexity and for participating members.

Much research has now accumulated about non-profit organisational models. For those wanting to begin or improve upon an organisational approach, there is no shortage of advice, advisors and lists of "best practice". But like the holy grail of medieval legend, there is no perfect model, no ironclad solution to problems.

In what follows, I present some cases illustrating models of collaboration for certain purposes in certain circumstances. These may help call attention to challenges and dilemmas, and thus to suggest some pathways worth debating and perhaps pursuing, and others to avoid.

Two broad categories of joint action organisational models may be distinguished for purposes of this paper:

- a) promotional networks and consortia among private aid agencies
- b) activity alliances and coalitions, sometimes combining private aid agencies, NGOs and membership-based organisations.

Organisational specialists (see Alter and Hage 1993) have identified four preconditions for collaboration among organisations:

- i) a willingness to collaborate
- ii) a need for information or expertise
- iii) a need for financial resources
- iv) need for speed, flexibility and adaptive efficiencies

That fourth pre-condition is seldom a routine feature of category (a), promotional networks, and thus for our purposes may be taken as an aspect largely related to category (b), the activity alliance.

## **A) Promotional Networks and Consortia**

Since the 1990s, a large number of northern-based private aid agencies have entered closer relationships, particularly to advance their sectors and to manage competition. Private aid agencies based on child sponsorship, humanitarian relief or general development have forged large, rich international consortia. The Save the Children Alliance, Oxfam International and World Vision International are well known examples. As way of achieving corporate purposes through marketing a "brand", or of competing for charitable donations and official contracts, there is little doubt about this model's success – though management consultants continue to

suggest ways to make these transnational consortia even more successful (see Huggett and others 2009). Some of these promotional networks, such as the MSF affiliates, sometimes including joint operations, thus meeting needs for rapid action and adaptation. Regarding these networks' added value in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and emancipatory impact, however, research has exposed weaknesses, such as of opportunism and dysfunctionality (see for example Cooley and Ron 2002).

Two cases suggest the kinds of drives at work, and persistent problems and dilemmas, especially where financial pressures and interests get an upper hand.

#### *Case One: ICVA*

The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) is a sectoral association of mainly humanitarian private agencies. Founded in 1962 through the fusion of three private aid agency networks, it was once a leading umbrella body of what some call the "Humanitarian International". In 1997-98, after a period of growth and diversification, it experienced a severe crisis, a "near-death experience" (for details see Sogge 1999). Among the lessons from that painful episode are that promotional associations like ICVA can overload themselves with objectives; they can bring on board new members with a wide divergence of interests – in this case rich and powerful northern agencies and financially insecure southern NGOs -- and then paper over those divergent interests, effectively neglecting those of less powerful members; and they can be driven off course by siren songs about commercial gain, a "humanitarian marketplace" and a neoliberal vision of aid agencies and for-profit firms as competitors in it.

#### *Case Two: 'Forced Consortia' in Dutch aid system*

The term "forced consortia" can be used about another model of NGO collaboration, in this case in The Netherlands, a country noted for its generous charity market and for its public subsidies to private aid agencies and other NGOs. Over the past decade the Dutch Foreign Ministry has repeatedly revised its subsidy system. These changes have had important consequences for the internal systems and behaviour of private aid agencies and other NGOs, including collaboration/competition among them. The first revision was to create a 'quasi market' among private aid agencies. The government did so by ending exclusive access to subsidies of four old, established grant-making agencies, virtually a cartel, and by inviting additional organizations to apply competitively for subsidies. A second government revision was to merge its two main subsidy schemes, supporting at least 90 organisations in 2009, into one scheme, the Co-Financing System II. Organisations were allowed to apply for funds from that scheme only on condition that they formed consortia with other subsidy-seeking NGOs. Today, 20 of those 'forced consortia' (involving all together 70 organizations) have signed five-year subsidy contracts with the Dutch Foreign Ministry. As intended, the Ministry has thus

greatly eased its administrative burden: it now has to manage only 20 subsidy portfolios instead of 90.

But in so doing it added yet one more link in the aid chain. Agencies and other NGOs seeking subsidies -- both winners and losers in the competition for government subsidies -- have been obliged to enter costly, top-heavy arrangements in which the servicing of bureaucracies takes precedence over genuinely professional programming. 'Delivery' of quantifiable goods and services, according to pre-set formats and targets in low-risk settings, can easily take precedence over process-intensive, difficult-to-steer, often innovative work. As in other Western European aid systems, new rules have intensified competition in charity markets; as a result, efforts to develop NGDO image, 'brand' and marketing today take larger shares of agency revenues. The scramble for suitable for 'partner' organizations has also intensified, since southern NGOs capable of absorbing money are also courted by the Dutch government itself, which funds them directly from its embassies. Many observers (for example, Nijs & Renard 2009) question whether the benefits of these competitive, target- and management-intensive systems are worth the cost, both in resources and opportunities lost, such as for innovation.

## **B) Activity Alliances and Coalitions**

Collaborative relationships can and do grow along other, more promising lines. Some follow North-South and South-South lines, often with creative mixes of professional NGOs and membership- or community-based organisations. I have selected cases I have evaluated or otherwise come to know at first hand.

### *Organised Labour: West-East Solidarity Networks*

With the collapse of state socialist systems in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, organised labour had to "re-invent" itself fundamentally, under very unfavourable circumstances. This is by no means easy or simple. The pre-conditions for collaboration -- willingness, funding needs, and especially needs for expertise/knowledge -- were clear. In the Netherlands and elsewhere in Western Europe, national trade union federations and international umbrella agencies called Global Union Federations (GUFs) rapidly began responding to Eastern workers' organisations, most of them unfamiliar with capitalist rules of the game. The process was largely demand-driven. Easterners wanted new knowledge, and they got a lot of it in thousands of training workshops, exchange visits and background studies. They also received some (modest) funding from Western trade unions, subsidized by government in cases such as the Netherlands and the ILO. Interaction has been horizontal, based as much as possible on norms of solidarity. The GUFs have managed much of the sector-specific support -- chemical industry GUFs assisting chemical industry federations or public sector GUF helping health care unions, for example. GUFs have contributed to activist networks whereby, for example, Western trade unionists' knowledge of multinational

corporations has helped strengthen the negotiating positions of East European unions facing those same corporations. Such networks have also helped to influence national law-making about labour rights (see Croucher and Cotton 2009).

To move forward, West-East collaboration has had to overcome many obstacles, including deep-rooted union/enterprise hierarchies carried over from the state socialist epoch, and the unfavourable of neoliberal economic change. But union collaboration does demonstrate at least two kinds of advantages of international networking among organisations of the same sector or socio-political “family” One advantage is to make possible the transmission of ideas and practical know-how based on experience; this makes such networking more effective because it is *relevant*. A second advantage of the union-to-union approach is that they make use of mutual confidence – some unionists address one another as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ -- thus enhancing the networks’ *legitimacy*.

In Africa, the greater diversity of social and political settings for organised labour, activists have had to develop models of interaction designed country-by-country and even sector-by-sector. Thus for example in contrast to former East Bloc countries, African collaboration models often include significant roles for ‘trade union support’ actors – training and research NGOs, services by freelance consultants and media specialists and so forth.

#### *Drugs Policy Activism*

Before the ‘war on terror’ was the ‘war on drugs’. Its negative impacts on the political and economic well-being of entire societies in many countries has long posed needs for better knowledge and alternative proposals. Today officials of affected countries, health specialists and even conservative editorialists acknowledge the failure of the conventional eradication-repression approach, and some of its terrible consequences; indeed those established figures are now seeking ways out.

In the mid-1990s, after years of research in support of Central American peasant organisations (many on the frontline of the ‘war on drugs’), an Amsterdam-based think-tank, the Transnational Institute (TNI), launched a research project to cast new light on the issues and to propose alternative policies that would reverse the destabilizing spiral of criminalization, violence, and corrupted political life. An account of this programme’s content and achievements can be found on the TNI website ([www.tni.org/drugs](http://www.tni.org/drugs)). As a model of international collaboration the programme illustrates some important features:

- respect for and routine contact with persons ‘close to the ground’, including membership-based organisations, such as of peasant farmers;
- continual ‘north-south’ interaction with national and regional of researchers, journalists, human rights activists and other forming informal networks (often relying on academic centres or NGOs for formal relations);
- ‘south-south’ connectivity, including inter-visitation, seminars among researchers, human rights activists and members of social movements, thus building a socially anchored ‘community of practice’ respected by mainstream bodies;

- increasing connection with sympathetic officials and specialists in ‘established’ research and policy centres at national levels in affected countries, as well as with international policy-makers in high-level meetings (notably the United Nations’ main body for drugs policy, but also EU and other platforms), but without compromising the programme’s integrity.

Some financial resources are channelled through TNI to participants in focus countries; therefore some formal relations (contracts, financial reporting etc) have developed. But the general character of the network is informal. The emphasis is on research rigor, respect for confidentiality and intellectual autonomy. The model permits a flexible and nuanced approach to highly charged issues. It allows participants to get beyond framing the policy choice as one of either prohibiting/repressing narcotics or legalizing them. That highly simplified ‘prohibition’ versus ‘legalisation’ logic leaves little room to think about concrete and urgent reform options. It can therefore be an obstacle to realizing viable harm reduction strategies and an end to a massively corrupting system. Guided by such thinking, the networked organisational model has allowed the programme to build and sustain trustful relationships at local and activist levels while at the same time to gain standing and influence within ‘insider’ policy networks at global levels. This open, independent yet socially-anchored stance has allowed the programme to introduce new knowledge, to offer alternative interpretations of existing knowledge, to foster discussion and to contribute to policy shifts, now increasingly detectable in Europe and in the United Nations.

### *Shackdwellers*

The rapid spontaneous growth of urban settlements in Africa, Asia and Latin America has overwhelmed most political and technical means of steering development in decent and equitable directions. In their usual responses, officials, donors and most NGOs have either ignored or tried merely to use low-income residents and their organisations as instruments in big schemes developed on desktops. Given these ineffective and often counter-productive approaches, alternatives were needed. Beginning in Mumbai in the 1980s and now present in at least 33 countries and close to 100 cities, a movement of shack- or slum-dweller organisations has emerged to strengthen poor residents voice and leverage over their living conditions.

Neighbourhood residents, both owners and renters, form groups in which women constitute big majorities. These groups coalesce in city-wide federations. To pursue their various organisation-building methods (savings, social surveys, etc.) and sweat-equity construction projects, groups get technical expertise and ‘brokerage’ services from made-for-purpose professional NGOs able to provide technical and other services.

From these city-based arrangements, national confederations of shackdwellers have emerged. Through these, linkages have developed within regions, such as East and Southern Africa, permitting ‘horizontal learning’ through exchange visits and other ways of transmitting know-how and building solidarity. Specialist advice, such as from local technical agencies or

universities, is routinely mobilized. Municipal and national officials are included in activities, but on terms set mainly by the federations.

This movement took on formal dimensions in 1996 with the founding of Shack/Slumdweller International (SDI) ([www.sdinet.org](http://www.sdinet.org)). Built largely from the ground up, it is an active alliance composed entirely of 'Southern' organisations, chiefly membership-based federations but including associated professional NGOs. Its founding responded to needs to reinforce and replicate local and national organisations, to spread knowledge of emerging issues, to promote the creation of spaces for federations to dialogue with different levels of public authority, and to promote financial vehicles for improving housing and public infrastructure on terms set by poor residents. SDI relies on a small secretariat in Cape Town and an international Board. It operates as a coordinating platform for South-South interchange and an amplifier of shackdweller voices at international levels, such as in meetings convened by UN Habitat and the World Bank, but is by no means within the policy or intellectual orbit of those bodies; on the contrary, it contests many of their approaches. It maintains maximum feasible autonomy also when negotiating its funding, which comes from a variety of private foundations, official donors and private aid agencies, which can sometimes also serve to spread its ideas and arguments.

#### *Landless and Poor Farmers*

In contrast to most urban struggles, rural struggles over access to land and to decent work have been present for generations, and subject to contestation and manipulation, such as in the Cold War era in Latin America and the Philippines. Since the Cold War, a new movement made up chiefly of landless labourers and poor smallholders has emerged to claim land rights as citizenship rights and to press for a better deal for rural labourers. Since 1993, various associations, NGOs and networks, particularly from Latin America and Asia, have formed a transnational alliance, Via Campesina ([www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org)). It comprises today nearly 150 national and sub-national organisations, both NGOs and membership-based associations. It collaborates closely with professional NGOs and networks, such as the Foodfirst Information and Action Network. Via Campesina's structure has become more formal, but remains highly decentralised and operates chiefly via member organisations rather than central orchestration through its (extremely modest) global secretariat, currently based in Indonesia. Funding comes from member organisations, foundations and a few private aid agencies. Via Campesina's representatives regularly take part in global consultative processes, including those set up by the FAO, World Bank and other major development agencies. Thus, it anchors itself in member-based bodies, serving as a new 'civil space' where they can learn, debate and formulate responses, and from which they can mount pressure for change at various levels including global levels.

## Conclusion

This brief review has sketched a few features of relational frameworks, based on cases of North-South cooperation in the emancipatory camp of civil society. It notes two trends. First, among private aid agencies of 'global North', largely in response to drives in markets for donations and official contracts, sophisticated yet regimented models of collaboration have emerged; these show both the sunny and shadow sides of 'success'. Second, promising forms of collaboration are emerging close to the kinds of people in the global 'South' whose poverty and powerless have served to justify aid interventions. While by no means new (recall that a formally-constituted transnational labour movement emerged in the 1860s) these alliances' present the aid-and-development community with an important, positive challenge. In a nutshell they are saying to aid interveners that development, like all other politics, is something done "not **about** us **without** us".

What makes these emerging models of cooperation different from the conventional one of 'helpers' and 'the helped' in the aid chain? Among major differences are:

- Social anchoring among people whose fundamental interests and rights are at stake;
- Ideas and know-how – not delivery of money and goods – inform and drive the interaction;
- Inter-organisational development – institution-building – is seen as valuable in itself, not merely a management or fundraising gimmick or instrument;
- Networks are developed more and more as vehicles for action, not merely for interchange;
- Joint action is framed within political paradigms of building power, and of contestation and negotiation with powerful actors, not technical problem-solving, 'participation' and conflict avoidance;
- These alliances work deliberately to create their own political spaces for debate and development of alternatives. They prefer not merely to accept invitations to enter political spaces controlled by others (donors, governments, World Bank, etc) but rather to deal with those powerful outsiders on their own terms, and where possible to invite those outsiders to meet in political spaces they as social movements have created (for examples, see Citizenship DRC 2011).

These emerging models can often manifest what are claimed (Weyrauch 2007) as networks' strengths: knowledge sharing, inclusion of diverse actors, making use of members' strengths to compensate for weaknesses of others, solidarity and mutual aid, multiplier effects and political weight, laboratories for citizenship. To the extent that they are socially anchored, and downwardly responsive, they can also minimize international networks' most common weaknesses: low legitimacy, non-transparency, poor accountability, vulnerability to co-option and elitism, non-involvement with local and national public sectors, weak political impact.

Looking ahead, and to conclude, these models face at least six challenges:

- i) Securing financial and material resources to sustain themselves
- ii) providing tangible incentives, visions and social connections that motivate members and 'glue' them together, often by combining the following :
- iii) focusing on common targets in the context of real "structures of opportunity"



- iv) keeping up forward motion in the political arena – even where ‘big victories’ are uncertain and achievable only in the long term (see Fox 2000)
- v) developing responsive, accountable and transparent internal governance
- vi) developing capacities to track progress and learn from it.

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