

Strengthening humanitarian networks: Applying the network functions approach

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Economic and political globalisation, accelerating technological innovation, shifting climate patterns – wherever we look, it is clear that we live in a world of continuous change. New challenges are calling for new approaches, new ideas and innovative mechanisms for information exchange, collaboration and decision-making. In response, and in areas as diverse as climate change, labour standards and arms control, the idea of the network is taking on increasing importance.

Whether it describes the G8, anti-globalisation protest movements, Facebook or al-Qaeda, the word ‘network’ is among the most ubiquitous and pervasive of buzz-words. But is it more than simply buzz? *What do networks actually do, and how do they work?*

Research at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and elsewhere has shown that many networks began to bring together organisations and individuals who remain geographically separated and institutionally distinct. They have evolved into self-governing structures that help diverse actors work together to reach their goals in a cooperative manner. Driven by technological innovations and globalisation, the last 20 years has seen a profound transformation in the role and functions played by networks in the global public sector. Leading analysts have even predicted that international networks will be the pre-eminent global public policy mechanisms of the future.

Few in the humanitarian sector would disagree. Cross-organisational networks have played pivotal roles over the past decade. There are now a plethora of network structures and platforms to support and shape the efforts of humanitarian agencies to coor-

ordinate and collaborate. At the global level, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the recently created Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP), the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) are but a few examples where collective processes at the policy level are being used to meet new and ongoing humanitarian challenges. At the operational level, the Cluster approach – sector-specific aid coordination mechanisms established in 2005 as part of the UN-led humanitarian reform process – can be regarded as working towards thematic communities of practice, focused on the improved delivery of different types of humanitarian aid.

Networks clearly have wide-ranging applications in the humanitarian sector, yet surprisingly little has been written on the strategic development and management of networks with the humanitarian sector in mind. In this Background Note, we address the question of what networks actually do from this perspective, drawing on existing initiatives and mechanisms. We move on to outline a simple, flexible and powerful methodology – the network functions approach (NFA) – that can be applied to analyse and strengthen humanitarian network initiatives.

This note aims to help those facilitating, acting within or supporting humanitarian networks and communities of practice – whether across or within organisations – reflect on their activities and frame them in a more structured and strategic fashion. In doing so, we hope that network strategies will be honed, thinking will be clarified, activities be sharpened and ultimately, humanitarian performance will be improved – delivering greater value to members and to those receiving humanitarian assistance.

The lifecycle of a network

Analyses of networks suggest that they are usefully seen from a lifecycle perspective. Networks often emerge organically and cannot always be forced into existence. They can, however, be fostered by identifying areas where specific network functions might be required or usefully performed to benefit members.

After the initial excitement, the network needs to maintain interest and build commitment through face-to-face meetings, introducing new and challenging perspectives and building wider support and relevance. Networks can come to an end too, if members reach their original objective, or when there is a natural fragmentation of a network into multiple smaller networks with more defined purposes.

Throughout the lifecycle of a network, it is important to ask the question: how can the network maintain and sustain relevance for its members? Research has shown that it is especially valuable and useful to analyse the functions performed by a particular network, how well it performs them, and how it should adapt to external changes and internal dynamics. It is vital to keep asking this question throughout the lifecycle of a network.

Network functions in a humanitarian context

Our research and advisory work on networks in the aid sector has adapted a model of networks developed by leading public policy analyst Stephen Yeo. It has proved a powerful mechanism for the systematic exploration of what networks actually do.

This work suggests there are six overlapping functions for networks that different networks perform in varying mixtures. The functions are described in more detail below, along with relevant examples from networks across the humanitarian sector.

Function 1: Community-building

The community-building function promotes and sustains the values and standards of a network of individuals or groups. These networks often include similar kinds of members, and as a result they lead to strong links within the network but only a few weak links beyond it. Some make the transition from community-builders to ‘Amplifiers’ and ‘Conveners’.

A good example of community-building network in the humanitarian field is the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) — a small group of eight major non-UN humanitarian agencies. A significant part of its work is devoted to peer review: two members of the network review the work of another member in a particular thematic area. Another good example is the Interagency Working Group

(IWG), which brings together seven international non-governmental agencies. Collaborative projects between these agencies, such as the Ambiguity and Change initiative, and the Gates-funded Emergency Capacity Building Project have led to stronger cross-organisational relationships, greater exchange of ideas and experiences, more innovation and – importantly, for the community role – trust-building between individuals at the head office and operational levels.

Function 2: Filtering

Filtering allows the organised and productive use of information, providing decision-makers with a valuable support service. There is evidence that NGO networks fulfil an important filtering function by synthesising ideas and evidence from diverse sources.

A particularly good example of filtering by a network in the humanitarian field is the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), a global network that brings together humanitarian and human rights NGOs as an advocacy alliance for humanitarian action. Through its secretariat, ICVA categorises information in a way that is practically useful and relevant to its network members. It also performs the important next step of analysing and synthesising information and offers the products in an easy-to-digest form to the members, such as regular updates on policy developments. The Humanitarian Practice Network is also a good example of a filtering network, working to bring together the experiences of the members through regular Exchange newsletters and a blog, and developing Good Practice Guides and Network Papers in response to members interests and needs.

Function 3: Amplifying

Amplifying means taking a private or complex message and turning it into a public or more understandable message. Amplification can be used to disseminate a message or idea, and can also be part of a two-way process of communication and feedback.

In the humanitarian sector, there are countless examples of Amplifying network functions. One of the best known is the African news website IRIN, providing humanitarian news from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia to a wide audience. IRIN has regional desks in Nairobi, Johannesburg, Dakar and Dubai, an extended network of staff in sub-offices and correspondents in the field. It targets decision-makers in relief agencies, host and donor governments, human-rights organisations, humanitarian advocacy groups, academic institutions and the mainstream media networks. Another good example is the East Coast Development Forum (ECDP), a network of 12 Indian NGOs that mobilised in response

to the tsunami. As a result of lessons learned during this work, the network initiated collaborative advocacy work, lobbying the state and national government to protect the regional natural resource base and to strengthen disaster mitigation efforts. Interestingly, the network emerged from existing joint advocacy networks in response to the tsunami. While it was recognised that NGOs were often poor at networking in relief work, the trust built up through joint advocacy work provided a foundation for better operational cooperation. The tsunami showed existing advocacy networks that they do not necessarily have competing interests.

Function 4: Learning and facilitating

Learning and facilitating functions help members undertake their activities more efficiently and effectively. Like facilitators at a workshop, this function enables network members to acquire new knowledge and develop practical abilities. While sometimes hard to differentiate from the other functions, it is an increasingly important function because of the need for humanitarian aid agencies to learn collectively.

ALNAP provides a unique sector-wide learning function in the humanitarian world. It has worked to strengthen accountability and learning capacities within member organisations through the provision of tools and handbooks. It also performs other functions, but this is done with the ultimate aim of strengthening the learning and accountability of its members. The Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) is an example of a particularly effective regional network, bringing together regional and national Asian NGOs involved in disaster relief and risk reduction to share experiences and undertake joint programming. The Sphere Project to establish minimum standards in humanitarian assistance also uses the learning and facilitating function. It is building a community of practitioners to serve as focal points for the broader humanitarian community wanting to use the Sphere standards, and is increasingly using multimedia and distance learning approaches to share ideas on putting Sphere handbooks into practice. Another example is the Emergency Personnel Network of People in Aid, which works towards improving the member performance in emergency personnel management. It brings together HR professionals, and increasingly senior operational managers, to hear case studies, new methodologies, problems faced and attempted solutions tried in a range of contexts.

Function 5: Investing and providing

The investing and providing function offers a channel to give members the resources they need to undertake

their activities. Investor and provider networks act mostly to connect donors, thematic experts, and trainers with the members of a network. Networks may also invest in or provide resources to non-member third parties, for example by collaborating to provide resources to organisations outside the network.

Investor and provider networks are seen in many developed countries at the national level where they play a pivotal role in public information campaigns and fundraising – especially when times of crisis provoke feelings of charity among the general public. Good examples of such networks include the Disasters Emergency Committee in the UK and the Samenwerkende Hulporganisaties in the Netherlands. Some of these networks focus exclusively on public information and/or fundraising related to emergency situations, while others have forged structural links with their members on issues such as professionalisation of humanitarian aid and accountability. Elsewhere, the Ethiopia-based African Centre for Humanitarian Action (ACHA) advocates for more efforts by international actors to build the capacity of African civil society organisations to respond to humanitarian crises. The African Capacity Building Foundation, set up by the World Bank and various donors, is an example of how this has already happened on the development side of the aid system.

Function 6: Convening

These networks bring together individuals and groups from different nationalities, disciplines and practices. This function allows the development of more systematic and sustainable linkages between groups. However, due to the complexity of this function, attention needs to be paid to issues of audience demands and contexts, credibility, authority and communication.

The ProVention Consortium, which addresses disaster risk-reduction by bringing together stakeholders with different backgrounds and constituencies, performs this important convening function. Another example is the Geneva-based Global Humanitarian Forum, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. This forum aims to engage a wide range of groups as stakeholders to ensure the cross-fertilisation of ideas and the application of a multidisciplinary approach to issues of common concern in the humanitarian sector. Efforts by the Humanitarian Futures Programme of King's College London to develop the Futures Group, a coalition to improve the dialogue between humanitarian organisations and scientists, illustrate an explicit convening function aimed at two specific – and often disconnected – stakeholders.

The network functions approach

Together, these six functions are at the heart of a simple yet powerful methodology: the network functions approach (NFA), which has played a central role in our advisory and training work on networks and communities across the aid sector.

The NFA has been used in the following ways:

- As a management tool to set strategic priorities for an emerging network, or to re-think the strategic priorities of an existing network;
- As a collaborative learning tool, bringing together different networks to discuss common problems and solutions;
- As a mechanism to analyse existing work plans and monitoring network activities;
- As a model that can be part of an overall approach to evaluating the effectiveness of a network;
- As a framework for comparative case-study research across a range of networks.

This methodology is tried and tested, having been applied within British Overseas NGOs for Development (BOND) in the UK, in NGO networks in Australia, Denmark and in thematic networks and communities of practice operating within a range of international agencies. Recent applications in the humanitarian sector include the development of the new five-year ALNAP strategy and the future ICVA strategy (see Box 1) and the work of the emerging Global Network on Disaster Risk Reduction (See Box 2).

The NFA has also attracted the attention of the private sector, forming the basis of a Master Class in Collaboration for senior executives of global corporations interested in strengthening their internal networks and communities of practice.

The NFA process is simple and very flexible. It can be carried out as part of a workshop session lasting no more than 90 minutes, or as part of a broader consultative process, utilising wide-ranging discus-

Box 1: The NFA in practice: Experiences from ALNAP and ICVA

ALNAP: The NFA was introduced to the ALNAP Secretariat midway through the development of the new five-year strategy. A number of objectives had already been identified, but it had been difficult to deal with overlaps and bring them together in a coherent way. The NFA was used as a framework to structure and consolidate feedback from member organisations, leading to five strategic objectives, each of them related to one or two of the key network functions, as shown below. Where two network functions came together under a single strategic objective, this was because that objective required undertaking both of those functions, either simultaneously or sequentially.

| Strategic objective | Key network function |
|--|---|
| One: ALNAP will establish stronger links between learning processes and improvements in humanitarian policy and field practice | Filtering; Amplification |
| Two: ALNAP will advocate for, and actively promote, improvements in performance in the humanitarian sector. | Amplification |
| Three: ALNAP will improve system-wide fora for active learning and the exchange of experiences and ideas. | Community Building |
| Four: ALNAP will work to improve the quality and utilisation of evaluations within the Network and throughout the humanitarian system. | Filtering; Learning and Facilitation |
| Five: ALNAP will expand its global reach and engagement in order to better promote humanitarian learning. | Convening |

The NFA was subsequently used to present the final version of the strategy to the ALNAP membership in December 2007. The framework proved especially useful in clarifying what would stay the same and what would change as a result of the new strategy.

‘...The network functions approach has proved to be an invaluable tool in the development of the five-year ALNAP strategy. It has helped ALNAP establish a coherent framework which illustrates the differences and complementarities between each strategic objective and how they fit together within the context of the strategic vision. This has enabled the ALNAP membership to engage more fully with the development of the strategy and has provided a means of framing the final product in a lively and understandable fashion. NFA has brought clarity and new energy to ALNAP’s strategic processes...’ (John Mitchell, Head of ALNAP)

ICVA: For an established network such as ICVA, a network functions approach is an indispensable tool in determining its new strategic direction. With a membership as large and diverse as ICVA’s, there is always a challenge in providing a range of activities to keep all members satisfied, while maintaining a coherent focus. One (very common!) mistake that ICVA has made in the past is to try to cover too many activities in its workplans and programmes.

At present, ICVA’s dominant function is filtering large amounts of information to aid in understanding new trends in humanitarian policy and practice. However, it also includes elements of ‘community-building’ and ‘amplifying’.

In its strategic review process, currently underway, ICVA will use the NFA to determine whether it is ideal to maintain this combination of different functions, or whether there is a need to concentrate on a single distinct function and build the work of the network around this.

Box 2: Applying the NFA to a new network

The NFA was designed with an existing network in mind, as emerging networks are generally dynamic and unpredictable. However, there is a growing awareness that the basics need to be thought through, especially when the network has wide membership and complex goals, and here the NFA can prove useful.

Thinking through the vision and mission is essential for any new network (step 1). Mapping planned activities to the functions (step 2), and identifying the planned balance of effort (step 3) is also important. Some thinking about the active–support balance of the network may be useful (step 4). Efficiency and effectiveness (step 5) will probably be the least useful, as the network is unlikely to have done enough to have a sense of this during the start-up phase. Reflecting on the vision and mission is a good way to check the relevance of the planned activities to the vision (step 6) while the ideal functional focus would be a useful way to frame early conversations about how the network could better fulfil its vision (step 7). Finally, reflections on what should be done to move the network towards the ideal balance are essential (Step 8). The full NFA process could be applied at some later stage as a way of monitoring and evaluating progress.

The network functions approach was recently applied to the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction, and proved a valuable mechanism to think through the strategic approach of this multifaceted network.

‘Understanding the different functions of networks is a very practical way to understand the relative strengths and optimal activities of different networks – I used the approach with national and local alliances whilst in India and people found the different functions a useful way to understand how national and international networks can work together.’ (Marcus Oxley, Chairman, Global Network of CSOs for Disaster Reduction)

sions, semi-structured interviews and opinion polls. The amount of time needed depends on the size and scale of the network, and how important it is to reflect on its strategy and functions. We believe that even if the network in question consists of just one part-time coordinator, it is still worth working through some version of this exercise, and doing so regularly.

Steps to applying the NFA

The following section shows how the six network functions can be applied in a structured, step-by-step process to rethink and reshape the work of an existing network. The approach can also be used at the beginning of a new network (see Box 2 for more on this).

Step 1: Analyse the relevance of the network’s vision and mission

Discuss the vision and mission of the network and their ongoing relevance. Analyse what changes in the wider world and among the membership are making the vision and mission either more or less relevant.

Step 2: Map existing / planned activities against the six functions

Use the six network functions to reflect on and categorise what the network does, and then map ongoing or planned activities to these functions. Don’t worry if some activities fall between functions – just put them under the most relevant heading.

Step 3: Identify the current / planned balance of effort across the six functions

Allocate 100 marks to the overall effort of the network, and then identify the current (or planned, in the case of a new network) balance of effort of the network by dividing those marks across the different functions in accordance with what the network does. This can be

done in a variety of ways – an approximation of the resources spent on activities that contribute to the different functions is preferred. At least one network has used their budgetary allocation across different functions to determine their balance of effort.

Step 4: For each function, identify how the network role is balanced between ‘Agency’ or ‘Support’

For each function, determine whether the network exists to provide a Support role – supporting members to perform certain activities – or an Agency role, as an active agent undertaking activities on behalf of the members (for example, as an active Secretariat, or an empowered Board). For most functions, most networks are likely be balanced somewhere between the two extremes of ‘Agency’ and ‘Support’ and this should be reflected in the analysis of functions. One useful way of doing this is by using ratios. For example the Agency:Support ratio for the Filtering function of a particular network may be 80:20 because the secretariat has a dedicated information management role that it performs on behalf of members, as well as providing some technical support to the efforts of the network members to gather and categorise information.

Table 1 on the next page shows the framework used to map the functional balance of effort and balance of role of a fictitious network called Diaspora Communities for Better Humanitarian Responses. It shows a network that focuses most of its effort in four of the functions, with half of the effort focused on community building work. In terms of its role with respect to the different functions, this network seems to be more strongly orientated to an Agency role rather than a Support role, meaning that the members charge the network as an independent body to act on their behalf. Interestingly, the network efforts in the Amplifying function are entirely focused on providing Support to members.

Table 1: Mapping the functional focus of a network

| Name of Network — Diaspora communities for better humanitarian responses | Current functional focus (total = 100 across each function) | Current balance of role (agency: support ratio e.g. 80:20) | Efficient (1-5, 5 = high) | Effective (1-5, 5 = high) | Ideal functional focus (total = 100) | Ideal balance of role (agency: support ratio e.g. 80:20) |
|--|---|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Community-building (promote and sustain the values and standards of the group of individuals or organisations) | 50 | 80:20 | | | | |
| Filtering (organise and manage information for members which is worth paying attention to) | 15 | 80:20 | | | | |
| Amplifying (help take new, little-known or little-understood ideas and makes them public, gives them weight or makes them understandable) | 15 | 0:100 | | | | |
| Learning and Facilitating (help members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively) | 20 | 100:0 | | | | |
| Investing and Providing (offer a means to provide members with the resources they need to carry out their main activities) | 0 | - | | | | |
| Convening (bring together different, distinct people or groups of people) | 0 | - | | | | |

Step 5: Rate efficiency and effectiveness

If efficiency and effectiveness for activities under each function were to be scored from 1 to 5, where 5 is high, what would be the score for each? ‘Efficiency’ is the time and cost put into activities undertaken as part of a function compared to the outputs, while ‘effectiveness’ refers to the extent to which objectives were achieved in relation to a function.

Other aspects to consider include: What activities might be performed better, why and how? What activities are performed particularly well, why, and how might this capacity be expanded? The efficiency question may need to take account of the efficiency of the different roles that are played. The effectiveness question may need to take into account the value added for members as a result of the work in different functional areas.

Step 6: Reflect on the vision and mission

Use this current functional focus to reflect back on the overall network vision and mission, and think about how these might need to change. For example, the network mission may state that its role is to strengthen ties within the NGO relief sector. However, if very little time is spent on this function, or if the role is an active one whereby most of the effort is spent improving relationships between the secretariat and the members, then how relevant is the network to its mission? And should the functional balance change, or should the mission change? Such questions can be used to ensure that the network is in line with its mission.

Step 7: Agree ideal functional focus and role

Using the discussions and findings in steps 4 and 5 as a starting point, discuss the ideal functional focus of the network, both in terms of what should be done, and how it should be done. It may be that the balance of activities needs to be re-thought from the perspective of what is currently done well, in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, so that those activities are expanded. This may mean doing a different mixture of things, which means changing the balance between different functions. It may be that things are being done effectively, but they are not having the necessary outcomes with regards to benefits to the network members. This may mean doing the same things, but differently – for example, moving from emphasising Support to Agency (or vice versa) for a particular function. What is important is to ensure that there is discussion and agreement on the ideal focus and role from across the network membership. For certain decisions, it may be the case that agreement cannot be reached, in which case the NFA can be used to provide a clear argument as to why this is the case. It should be clear from the above that good facilitation and communications skills are a must for anyone planning to use the NFA in earnest.

It is vital that once the ideal functional focus has been agreed, the network then uses this to revisit and revise its vision and mission. It is also important to reflect on the role of the network in terms of providing support to members or as an agent in its own right.

Table 2 shows the completed table for the fictional network. It shows wide variation in the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the different functions, with the

Table 2: Establishing the ideal functional focus

| Name of Network – Diaspora communities for better humanitarian responses | Current functional focus (total = 100 across each function) | Current balance of role (agency support ratio e.g. 80:20) | Efficient (1-5, 5 = high) | Effective (1-5, 5 = high) | Ideal functional focus (total = 100) | Ideal balance of role (agency: support ratio e.g. 80:20) |
|---|---|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Community-building (promote and sustain the values and standards of the group of individuals or organisations) | 50 | 80:20 | 2 | 2 | 10 | 20:80 |
| Filtering (organise and manage information for members which is worth paying attention to) | 15 | 80:20 | 3 | 3 | 15 | 80:20 |
| Amplifying (helps take new, little-known or little-understood ideas and makes them public, gives them weight or makes them understandable) | 15 | 0:100 | 2 | 1 | 0 | - |
| Learning and Facilitating (help members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively) | 20 | 100:0 | 4 | 5 | 50 | 50:50 |
| Investing and Providing (offer a means to provide members with the resources they need to carry out their main activities) | 0 | - | - | - | 15 | 100:0 |
| Convening (bring together different, distinct people or groups of people) | 0 | - | - | - | 10 | 50:50 |

Learning and Facilitating role coming out on top. Based on this and the other discussions, the table indicates that there has been a decision to shift the focus of the network towards Learning and facilitating, with the Amplifying function being dropped altogether. The Community-building function, the previous dominant function, has been significantly reduced. Additional effort will be expended in Investor-providing and Convening. We can also see, by reading across the Ideal balance of roles, that the network hopes to get a more even balance between Agency and Support roles than it has had previously.

Step 8: What is needed to move from the existing focus and role to the ideal focus and role?

Once the ideal focus and role is decided, a practical question must be asked: how will these changes be achieved? What kinds of changes are needed in terms of resources, capacities, structure, membership or otherwise (see Box 3)? What can be done to make these changes possible? What are the interdependencies, synergies and trade-offs between the different functions, and how can these be best utilised? For example, if a network is focused on Learning and Facilitating and Community-building, are there activities that enable both functions to be fulfilled simultaneously? What are the risks and what contingency measures need to be put into place? It is important to note that technological innovations have the potential to transform networks, but that – no matter how advanced – they should be seen as a networking tool and not an end in themselves.

Box 3: Things that might need to change to move from current to ideal

Agency or support: Does the network perform these functions itself, or do the members perform the functions? How should this change, if at all?

Localisation and scope: Where are the network and its members located, both physically and ‘thematically’?

Membership: Who are the network’s members and how are they related to each other?

Governance: What are the behaviours and processes in place that govern its short and long term functioning?

Resources: Does the network have access to all the inputs necessary for its functioning? Resources include:

- **Capacity and skill:** Do the network and the network members have the capacity and skills necessary to carryout their functions and tasks?
- **Communications:** Does the network have appropriate communication strategies to carry out its functions, thus amplifying messages outwardly or sharing messages and information within the institution?

External environment: What are the external influences affecting the network?

Strategic and adaptive capacity: Is the network capable of managing changes and shocks in the internal and external environments? Does it depend on others (partners, networks, donors) to manage those changes?

Source: Adapted from Mendizabal (2006b)

The way forward for humanitarian networks

Both formal and informal networking is essential for the effective operation of the global humanitarian system. The NFA provides a simple and powerful means for humanitarian networks to initiate useful discussions, and framing strategic processes. ALNAP has used the NFA to shape the development and implementation of its new five-year strategy, and at ICVA it is being used to inform and develop future strategic vision.

The approach could also answer crucial questions about the humanitarian networks that are working across the sector. For example, are the diverse networks covered here sufficiently clear and distinct in function from each other? If not, there seems to be some value in applying the NFA to identify the areas of overlap, and working together to systematically reduce duplication of efforts. This will strengthen our understanding of how humanitarian networks can collaborate to better to perform specific functions. There are many more questions that might be asked. For example, how can humanitarian networks make better use of the potential of technologies? What role do humanitarian networks play in engaging with non-traditional groups such as the private sector, the military and diaspora communities? What role do networks have in influencing political attitudes and ensuring humanitarian principles are upheld? What role might national and regional networks play in the reorientation of the system, called for in the tsunami evaluation and discussed at the 2008 ICVA conference on humanitarian reform? What roles do networks play in anticipating and being better prepared for a more complex and ambiguous future?

It is important to note that there are both policy and operational processes in humanitarian organisations. Although the NFA was developed with policy-

oriented networks in mind, it has some applicability at operational levels. For example, one of the Southern networks covered earlier – the ECDF – moved from an advocacy network to an operational network in the wake of the tsunami. The ECDF experience suggests that there are similarities in the role of networking, whether the task is advocacy or operational response. In light of the ongoing debates around coordination of relief, the question deserves further exploration. Some work has already been done, using network analysis to better understand the aid networks that formed in response to the Mozambique crises of 2000. This analysis worked from the principle that effective evaluation of aid coordination requires that the evaluation be able to situate humanitarian aid operations within an inter-organisational network framework. More effort is needed, especially to better understand the key functions and competencies of such a framework. If the clusters can indeed be seen as an effort to establish cross-organisational operational networks to provide resources and share information, is there scope to use approaches similar to the NFA to aid the design, plan, implementation and re-focusing of specific clusters? And can such approaches help develop shared cross-agency learning from, and ownership of, the cluster approach?

These are important questions for the future of networks within humanitarian work, and the answers are not straightforward. But one thing is clear from our research and experience with networks, both within the humanitarian sector and more widely in our globalised, interconnected world: the bigger and harder the challenge that is faced, the more important it becomes to work together to address it.

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Additional resources

<http://www.alnap.org>

<http://www.dec.org.uk>

<http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/about/schr.asp>

<http://www.icva.ch>

<http://www.irinnews.org>

<http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID>

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