



Working Together for a Better World

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Building Effective Working Groups

Black Sea NGO Forum, 9th Edition
October 31-November 2, 2016, Varna, Bulgaria
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Creating and participating in effective working groups and networks can **enhance your knowledge**, **increase your outreach**, and **double your impact**. The focus of this paper is to:

1. Demonstrate the importance and added value of regional working groups and networks;
 2. Suggest how to build a regional working group and network;
 3. Offer ways of working together – coordination, communication and motivation;
 4. Show how to elaborate a plan with roles and responsibilities, monitoring and evaluation;
 5. Provide guidance in how to maintain working group and network activity;
 6. Indicate that building and maintaining a regional working group or network is an extension of individual networking with purpose.
- **Individual networking on a collective basis is a working group.** Very often an effective working group moves on to become a network.
 - **A working group that becomes more institutionalized or more permanent is a network.** A network is likely to achieve greater results than a working group.

1) Why join a Working Group or Network?

It is important to see the bigger picture of challenges and opportunities in the region that affect your own work in your own organization and to see that you can achieve your organization's objectives only by cooperating with others.

Recently I asked a Romanian consultant with extensive experience in evaluation in the NGO world, why should anyone join a network. Her answer: "First, **to learn skills from the others**; second, **to have more force with government by unified cooperation.**"

1. 10 minds working together on the problem are far more productive than 10 minds working individually on the same problem. This is a **multiplier effect** and a more powerful impact from synergy.
2. Some years ago, Peter Drucker, the management guru, said that business was more effective in its planning and management than nonprofits and that nonprofits were more motivational in their vision and mission to make this a better world. He said that each should learn from the other. One of the things businesses know is that working together on issues they face in common can achieve results that they could not get by working alone and individually. It is common practice for businesses to align themselves in common pursuit of certain policy or government or public relations objectives. Why do they do this? Results. By working together, they achieve more for their own organization or company. **In fact, the fiercest competitors in the marketplace regularly come together in networks to achieve common objectives.**

3. Similarly, NGOs are generally in competition with each other for grants, donations, and share of mind of the publics which are their key constituent groups. As NGOs, you can be as fiercely competitive as any group of corporations - I have seen this with development NGOs, childcare NGOs, human rights NGOs, environmental NGOs, and literally all the others. However, there are those many other important activities and objectives where **an individual organization simply cannot get the results it wants by working all by itself.**
4. Governmental authorities are far more impressed by and responsive to a group of NGOs working together when they represent a larger number of constituents and more influential individuals collectively. This is what I call **clout in advocacy**. Similarly, businesses listen to a group of NGOs which represents a larger segment of their current or potential customers. When NGOs come together on a social issue, they can have a powerful influence on changing corporate behavior.
5. Sponsorship of NGO activities by corporations almost always reflects a larger volume of public interest and constituents for the NGO or the group of NGOs. A corporation is not going to waste its sponsorship monies and efforts on a small and unknown NGO. By working together, environmental NGOs, for example, can indicate they represent most of the people in the public and accordingly have a great influence and clout. A public relations campaign in support of the environment by sponsorship is **more likely when a group or a network** approaches the corporation.
6. Being part of a network also has **significant personal benefits**. It's rather nice here in Varna by the Black Sea! There are really interesting people I've met here. You can **learn a lot** from the other participants. You will make new friends here who will become colleagues and friends for life. Being part of a network also gives you **regional exposure** to larger organizations and donor groups. The final benefit maybe that someone will offer you a very attractive job which represents an important career step for you.

Enjoy your time here. Network well. Focus on the future. The future for your organization. The future for your cause. And the future for yourself.

2) Working Groups: Networking for More Impact

Networking with purpose by individuals can have great results, as indicated in another paper presented to the 2016 Black Sea NGO Forum. **Networking for impact by organizations** within a working group of NGOs can have even greater impact.

1. You will recall the horrible genocide in Rwanda in 1994. The world watched and did nothing. A prominent American senator, Paul Simon, later said that if each member of Congress had received letters from 100 people protesting the Rwanda genocide that would have been enough to push Washington to act. **Volume matters.**
2. An article in the New York Times on May 29, 2016, is titled "Grass-Roots Drive Is Forcing Mexico to Confront Its Corruption." The article highlights how extensive corruption had become in Mexico and reports that new legislation is being considered which could dramatically change the situation. The article states that "the public clamor for legislators to pass a robust set of anticorruption laws has been energetic." The pervasiveness of corruption, which is a problem in many countries, led to action by citizens' groups in Mexico – 630,000 signatures support the new anti-corruption legislation. **Unified citizens action, led by concerned organizations, can have a profound impact on political processes.**

3. When I was president and executive director of Plan International USA (then called Foster Parents Plan), Congress (our Parliament) was debating a serious cut in USAID funding. I got together with other executive directors who had large individual donor support. We agreed to ask our donors to contact their senators and representatives to support USAID funding. I wrote to our 200,000 donors and provided information on whom to contact in Congress, how to reach them, what to say, and why it is important. In our case, our donors were sponsors who were supporting family and community development in another country and had correspondence contact with a child in that location. They cared deeply about the children and our work and believed the US government should do more in foreign assistance. We had a high percentage of respondents (40%?) who actually contacted their representatives in the national government! The other NGOs also had good response from their donors in contacting and advocating with their elected officials.

As I recall, **funding was fully restored** and, this is even more important, USAID realized that the public actually cared about foreign assistance and that American NGOs could have an important influence on USAID appropriations in Congress. This led to **substantial changes in the way USAID saw the NGO community**. There were many more consultations, more joint committees, and more partnership. The lobbying and advocacy efforts by a large number of people in the population was truly effective.

4. There are many examples of **competitors coming together to learn, share and cooperate**. The sharing usually comes about through a working group or alliance of competitors.
 - Soft drink companies sharing and cooperating to oppose regulations against sugar in drinks.
 - US and Russia sharing and cooperating in the Iran nuclear treaty.
 - Environmental NGOs working together to get better regulation of environmental waste.
 - All the bottling companies in Romania sharing and cooperating to reduce litter from bottles.
 - Football players compete with each other for salaries but cooperate to beat an opponent.
 - NGOs who are in competition for donors but who advocate together on common concerns.
 - Members of InterAction sharing and cooperating to support USAID budgets.
5. **Working groups are often created to address and solve a specific issue.**

As an example, there are many **NGOs working to combat malaria** through research and development (R&D). Different approaches included vaccine development, medicine development, research, education, vector control, bed nets, prevention, etc. The mortality and morbidity effects of malaria were having devastating impacts in many countries around the world, and the competition was strong among the various NGOs for access to donors and for presenting themselves as having the best strategy. The net result was confusion and concern among donors and the public. It was clear that highlighting the issue to the public and **mobilizing financial support required a more coordinated effort far beyond the capacity of any single organization or company**.

Several of the more foresighted NGOs and donors realized there were opportunities to increase global support for malaria R&D through such a coordinated effort. I was asked to facilitate a meeting of the senior executives of the leading malaria organizations, prominent donors, corporate executives, and scientific experts where we hoped to create “a common approach to global malaria R&D advocacy and communications.” It was obvious that there was “a compelling need to **present the ongoing activities in a structured way, showing with clarity how they fit together.**”

At the meeting, we first addressed the questions of **why to work together; what to do together; what are the benefits** of working together; **what would stakeholders think** about it; **who should be involved** in it; **what would be the goals and objectives** of working together; **how to structure** it; **what resources** are needed; **who will lead** it; and what are the **immediate next steps**. There was extensive discussion but eventually clear agreement. Typical comments included: “We need to put malaria on the agenda.” “We need to exchange ideas, innovate strategies together.” “Our community is not perceived as having its act together.” “We are competitive with each other.” “We need a united front for coordination and avoiding contradictory messages and pot shots at each other.” “The only way to make progress is to team up.” “One voice, a bigger voice, gets attention.”

Participants **agreed to cooperate and communicate a more comprehensive, complementary and synergistic approach** to the malaria crisis. This would build on group support, the common things they already do, the gaps and how they fill them, and new tools and how to use them. They saw that cooperation in communication and advocacy would benefit each individual organization and agency, that the public and donors would be more likely to increase their support for a coordinated effort to eliminate malaria, and that cooperation would not hinder their own fundraising and promotion efforts.

The second day focused on **identifying the dilemmas, barriers and appeals of working together**. Conclusions highlighted the urgent need for focus and clarity of goals, a unified voice, leadership of the joint effort, funding for meetings, clear roles for those involved, and a clear statement of the benefits which would result. During the rest of the day, participants developed a strategic framework for the coordinated effort: vision, mission, value added, benefits, participants, key stakeholders, situation assessment, key goals, and next steps.

Guidelines for Effective Working Groups

1. Clear focus of the **purpose** of the working group of real benefit to society and the region.
2. Clear **benefits** for the participants, their organizations, and their countries.
3. A **plan of action** with objectives, responsibilities and deadlines for a 12-month period.
4. Strong and consistent **leadership** in each group to maintain activity and get results.
5. **Committed participation** by all members of the group with equal time and space for each.
6. Sharing and accepting **responsibility** clearly and specifically by each member of the group.
7. A participant-driven structure with **open and transparent** discussions and decisions.
8. Steps and responsibilities to **reach out** and involve others in the work.
9. A **feedback** system in each group and to organizers on activities, problems, achievements.
10. Ongoing **support** for meetings, communications and motivation by the organizing team.
11. And what else?

Most important, perhaps, was **the will to work together to achieve the participants’ individual objectives**. A working group was created to refine what the meeting created, draft a detailed implementation plan, set priorities for members and stakeholders, create key messages, identify performance metrics, reach out to involve others, and draft a proposal. This two-day meeting set in course a whole new process of global cooperation with benefits both to the global health

community at large and to the participating organizations. This was a working group created to solve a specific set of problems. **By working together, the NGO participants achieved results they could not have reached on their own.**

An effective working group can address its identified challenge and achieve success in one meeting or over a long period. Usually there will need to be **an ongoing working group to continue to develop and monitor progress.**

3) Building Working Groups with Committed Participants

A major challenge is how to get the right participants in a working group.

1. The first requirement is to have a significant need to come together in a working group – its vision and mission.
2. The second requirement is to have a committed and able coordinator of the working group who is both leader of the group work and facilitator of the group process.
3. The third requirement is to have a good decision-making process and structure so everyone is involved, can participate, and feels valued.
4. The fourth requirement is committed members. No matter how well the working groups are created, structured, led and supported, they will fail if the participating members are not seriously involved and committed.

How to Involve Participants at a Forum in a Working Group (WG)

1. **Request the choice** of the Working Group the applicant would like to join and support.
2. Ask the applicant for his/her **dream** or vision for the Working Group of choice.
3. Confirm the participant's **organization supports** the Working Group.
4. Identify the **skills, capacities and contacts** the participant would bring to the Group.
5. Explore the **leadership profile and facilitation skills** of potential Group coordinators.
6. Secure **motivation and commitment** from each Working Group member to assure success.
7. Ascertain the willingness to **carry our agreed tasks** in the coming year for the Group.
8. Ask about the ability to put in **2-3 hours per week** on average and occasionally more.
9. And what else?

In some countries, there is a history of conferences and meetings where participants receive travel grants, food and accommodations and, if I can say it, a great time. Some people enjoy such conferences but are not serious about the topics and have no commitment to do anything after the event. In countries where civil society is developed and the economy is doing better, participants or their organizations cover the cost of travel and accommodations, pay a conference fee, and attend a meeting or conference if and only if they are committed to the topics and the process – and see a clear benefit to themselves and their organizations.

4) Building a Network

Networks are ongoing working groups. Here are two powerful examples of effective networks.

1. The United Way in the United States is a monster fundraising agency. It has local offices and staff in most major cities in all regions of the country. It dominates the corporate fundraising approach of payroll deductions by employees that are funneled to the local United Way for dispersion among approved organizations. Corporate executives compete to get better results from their employees, often match employee donations with corporate donations, and frequently serve on the boards of the local United Way. One of the themes is “Give where you live.” Although there are many great NGOs dedicated to development in other countries, we did not initially know how to compete with the United Way and its focus on local giving. So the **international NGOs created a consortium** called International Service Agencies.

Initially the seven largest international service agencies came together in this consortium which later expanded to 15 or 20 NGOs. We found that by having our own staff who would meet with local United Ways and negotiate to include the internationally oriented agencies in the list of approved recipients and to receive a fair share of the total given, we could generate substantial flows of donations. But it was only by the group of individual NGOs coming together that we could afford a staff working for all of us and have the power and impact of a united front. **Alone, each of us would have been crushed by the United Way.** When confronted by something big, do what you can to be big yourself by joining forces.

2. A strong story of working together though an ongoing alliance is **InterAction** with more than 180 American internationally-oriented NGOs as members. It is an excellent example of the **benefits of sharing and cooperating in a network**. Excerpts from its strategic plan:

- “Our vision: A sustainable world where all people live in freedom, prosperity, dignity, and peace.
- “Our mission: To be a leader in the global quest to eliminate extreme poverty and vulnerability, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.
- “Who we: As the largest alliance of international NGOs and partners in the United States, InterAction’s 180+ members work in every country. Collectively, members invest and manage over \$18 billion a year.
- “What we do: InterAction is a convener, leader, and voice of our community. We enable members and partners to mobilize, enhance their impact, align common interests, build community, and promote learning and innovation. We set the world’s highest nonprofit standards. We formed effective partnerships with civil society, government, and the private sector.
- “Our slogan: A united voice for global change.
- “Using its collective voice, InterAction seeks to shape important policy decisions on relief and long-term development issues, including foreign assistance, the environment, women, health, education, and agriculture. Members are at the forefront in responding to humanitarian crises and disasters worldwide and InterAction acts as a hub for in these efforts.
- “Our policy papers and documents showcase the work of our members and highlight trends and best practices in the sector.
- “Alliance members adhere to standards drawn up by InterAction, which aim to ensure accountability and transparency in financial management, fundraising, governance, and program performance.
- “Strategic Goals (2015-2018):
 - Promote the ability of civil society to thrive around the world, and advance the independence and mission of our members.
 - Mobilize members and partners to have greater collective impact.

- Convene, lead, and influence coordinated action to drive policies, practices, and behaviors that advance our mission.”

Surely, InterAction is a model for other working groups and associations of NGOs in a regional or global context. **Everyone gains from committing to, participating in, and contributing to such an association!** In my work with InterAction, I was **able to achieve our NGO’s objectives more fully than by working alone**. I also learned many things from my peers and improved my skills in communication, motivation, group process, planning, meeting process, innovation, and leadership.

How InterAction Keeps People Involved

1. A strong sense that the **community is more powerful together** than fragmented.
2. Better **results for society** by working together than if each member worked alone.
3. Better **results for your own NGO** by working together than by working alone.
4. Belief that the individual and the NGO get **more out of participation** than they put in.
5. Conviction that the impact of working groups makes a **better reputation** for NGOs overall.
6. Strong and **supporting leadership** by working group heads along with support from others.
7. Excellent **working group processes** that involve everyone and their skills and capacities.
8. A welcoming and **reaffirming culture** and fun in working sessions.
9. Extensive **praise and appreciation** by senior executives, board members and donors.
10. A **sense of commitment** from having participated in drafting strategic and working plans.
11. Individual **satisfaction** in making a difference by networking and participating with peers.
12. Benefit from the **professional connections** with other members to share and learn.
13. Opportunity to grow important **personal skills** and make **connections** in a larger arena.
14. Cooperation and reputation that may lead to the next **job offer**.
15. And what else?

The working groups of InterAction are so productive that the **executive directors believe that the benefit of joining and participating far exceed the cost of participation**, that **alone they could not replicate the overall results of the group**, and that working together was **necessary to achieve key results**.

Another reference point is a publication by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on [Developing Successful Global Health Alliances](#). It recommends on the basis of experience to have in a network:

1. a **clear and compelling overall goal**
2. a **clear scope**, as defined in terms of geography, patient [i.e. client] populations, functional activities, and time
3. a **clear understanding of the added value from being in an alliance** – and what is required to capture this value
4. specific **success metrics**, milestones, and partner contributions
5. specific **commitments as to what resources** (e.g., staff, technology, money, facilities) each will contribute

6. a concrete view of **what ‘success’ will look like** at different points in the future – for instance, at the end of years two and five – by implementing specific performance metrics
7. a **detailed work plan** with specific activities attached to each work stream
8. the **right mix of skills, credibility, and committed individuals** to drive the alliance forward

Global health alliances as envisioned in the Gates Foundation paper are more complicated than most working groups or networks of interested NGO representatives. However, the elements of success are pretty much the same for both.

In my training work, I strongly advocate a participation fee, even a modest one, as a means to confirm the seriousness of the applicant and his or her organization. I always want to see a statement of serious intention, endorsement by the NGO, acceptance to participate actively in the meetings, promise to use the materials and lessons and connections from the meeting, and commitment to follow up with agreed actions after the forum. It is essential to have participants who are dedicated to the particular topic, who will feel an obligation to make the working groups succeed, and who will be responsible in honoring their commitments.

And the next question is how to sustain their interest in working in the working group. We’ll have a session on this topic to get participants’ own ideas.

Maintaining Interest in Working in a Working Group

1. **Involve everyone** in the ongoing work. Don’t dominate discussions. Be a facilitator!
2. At a meeting, ask and **capture on a flip chart** the thoughts and concerns of everyone.
3. Get and **share feedback** from external stakeholders, potential donors, political leaders, etc.
4. Keep **everyone informed** about progress and developments and even problems.
5. Have some **one-on-one calls** with more members to identify their concerns and interests.
6. **Share responsibility** with those who are able. Let the light shine on them.
7. Create and **support sub-groups** to address issues of concern to one or more participants.
8. Identify examples of how participation helps a participant get **results for her own NGO**.
9. **Don’t overburden** any one participant. Allow for some ‘time off.’
10. Send a letter of **appreciation** to the WG participants for work well done.
11. And what else?

Simple conclusions about working groups and networks:

1. Ten minds are smarter than one.
2. One hundred voices are louder than ten.
3. A dozen small NGOs are the equal of one large NGO.
4. You will achieve more for your NGO by working together with others.
5. Your NGO will be a more successful organization when it networks.
6. The world will be better from your unified work.
7. You will be a better leader.

And last –What to do with poorly functioning Working Groups?

1. Assure that **egos** do not get involved to overrule good work.

2. Don't let any geo-**political issues** come to interfere.
3. Make sure **power** and decision-making are shared.
4. Focus on higher level **values** as the basis for work.
5. Keep **interest** in all participants.
6. **Expand** to others.
7. What else?

Suggested reading about networks:

<http://www.speaking.pitt.edu/student/groups/smallgrouptips.html>

<http://www.inc.com/peter-economy/5-steps-to-really-effective-teams.html>

https://www.hks.harvard.edu/davidlazer/files/papers/Lazer_Katz_Building_Effective.pdf

<https://hbr.org/2007/01/how-leaders-create-and-use-networks>

<http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=8659>

<file:///C:/Users/Ken/Desktop/Designing%20and%20Managing%20Partnerships%20-%20Copy.pdf>