

What is a CSO network and how to rate performance?

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WHAT IS A CSO NETWORK?

THEIR CONTEXT



During the past decades, most countries have been deeply influenced by rapid globalisation. Not only the growing interconnectedness of national economies and the impact of a variety of economic shifts on entire populations and their physical environment, but also the increasing size and number of national institutions and organisations as well as all kinds of technological developments have had a profound effect. NGO networks have seen these developments too, and quite a few of them have proven to be adaptable and well-suited to an interconnected and ever more complicated world, bringing together entities of various sizes, purposes and expertises.

THEIR DEFINITION



But what, exactly, do we mean when talking about networks? A generally accepted definition for networks is 'voluntary multi-organisational arrangements for collaboration on collective goals' but over the years, all kinds of existing networks have been studied from all kinds of angles. Considering this enormous variety, we can conclude that what they have in common is that they:

- ★ Are voluntary collaborative structures;
- ★ Have nodes and links (actors and relationships);

- ★ Maintain the autonomy of the actors (the network partners);
- ★ Show a wide variety of patterns.

In other words, 'network' is a *label* for a variety of collaborative arrangements rather than a distinct category.

Although some researchers maintain that networks are not organisations or that they are informal structures by definition - which might point to their seeing networks as a kind of informal and fluid project structures but without clear end results or time boundaries - we think this perspective is unhelpful for practitioners. For us, what in real life ends up under the label *network* is what needs to be studied and understood, in spite of maybe failing to pass such a 'network purity test'.

THEIR VARIETY



In the NGO world, the term 'network' is used loosely to indicate a variety of individuals and groups working together; nodes which often cooperate on the basis of varying strengths and with varying intensity. Quite often, the term network is (erroneously) used to indicate just the network's hub or secretariat, or a hierarchical membership organisation. This may be an indication of a - not necessarily jointly agreed or justified - shift in power and authority away from the collective nodes and towards an administrative centre that then proceeds to position itself, and act, as 'the network'.

Collaborative arrangements exist in a variety of forms. They range from working agreements between two individual independent professionals or organisations to arrangements between a great many individuals and/or

organisations, with all kind of sizes and combinations in between. From a structural point of view, collaborative arrangements between a limited number of actors can be seen as voluntary mini-, or sub-networks, if they have a common goal. As such, they can also be nodes in bigger networks. For the purpose of this study we will, therefore, subsume all of them under 'networks'.

'Network' and 'networking' are not the same thing. Networking means either that individuals meet and keep contact to further their interest or that organisations *start* to join forces to address a common concern. This can also be called 'networked approaches', while a 'network' might be the result of these processes.

While network structure typology - rather than network practice - enjoys academic interest, donors and evaluators are more interested in how a network's structure influences its functioning, and therefore its impact. This means that for practitioners a different set of questions than for academics is relevant, including lower-order questions such as whether agreements exist on processes, procedures and activities, whether these are respected or carried out, what the network's actual processes, procedures and activities are and who implements them.

This study offers an overview of network characteristics in general as well as an overview of the elements which determine a *successful* NGO network, by outlining the various ways in which networks are viewed by themselves, by academics and by ODS as experienced consultants.

TYPES OF NETWORKS

CHARACTERISING NETWORKS



To get to grips with the phenomenon of networks in general, they have been studied from different angles and along a variety of dimensions. For donors and evaluators dealing with NGO networks, the most important angle is the network's mission; the (set of) goal/s which has been established, while their most important dimensions are:

- ★ Network purpose
- ★ Structure
- ★ Topic of interest/theme
- ★ Type of work/instruments
- ★ Geographic spread
- ★ Sources of funding
- ★ Decision-making arrangements

Purpose

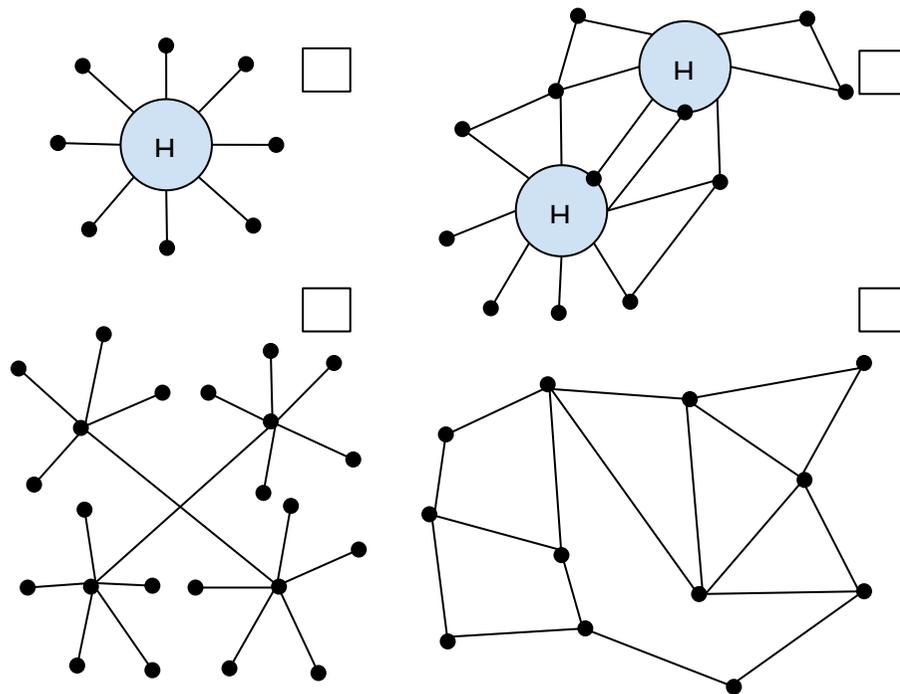
As their purpose, NGO networks choose actions that can be of varying complexity and intensity:

- ★ Exchanging information/knowledge/experience;
- ★ Fundraising as separate entities and/or jointly;
- ★ Planning and implementing programmes/projects separately and/or jointly;
- ★ Advocating for change separately and/or jointly.

As nodes, network actors (the network partners; individuals or organisations) do not necessarily have the same purpose, or do the same work, that they do on a daily basis as individual organisations, nor do they have to. But as a network, they work together to exchange information and/or provide mutual support for individual goals and/or plan joint activities and/or carry out joint action in order to achieve a common goal.

Structure

The structures we are talking about are often distinguished by having one, more or no hubs, and by having links between their nodes or not.



Networks are called brokered when they have one or more joint bodies to work towards collective goals (A and B), or self-governed (C and D) when they don't, with a varying kind and amount of interaction between the nodes. The centralised network form A is often referred to as a 'hub-and-spoke' structure; where one actor in the centre has separate links to various nodes but where there are hardly any, or no, meaningful links between the nodes. This model is very common among NGOs, even though technically speaking it is not even a network, for want of interaction between the nodes themselves. Many of the centralised networks however, do also show links between non-central nodes, in varying degrees of intensity, just as in decentralised or distributed networks.

Obviously, network *nodes* can vary according to:

- ★ Level (local, regional, national, continent-wide, global);
- ★ Size (more or less money and staff);
- ★ Weight (more or less influence on the network's decisions);
- ★ Strength (input into, and output/outcomes for, the network).

Network *links* can be distinguished by:

- ★ Having links of equal and/or different strength; i.e. of different interaction intensity;
- ★ Consisting of single entities (individual organisations, one of their departments or individuals);
- ★ Consisting of multiple entities (federations, platforms, coalitions, alliances);
- ★ Being homogeneous, consisting of e.g. civil society or material experts only;
- ★ Being heterogeneous, e.g. multi-stakeholder (academic, public, corporate) conglomerates.

Topic of interest/theme

NGO networks sometimes focus on one single topic of interest, or theme (e.g. poverty eradication, climate change, nature conservation, human rights), but more often on a variety of topics, with their nodes themselves working on either this one topic or on more, or various - neighbouring - topics. Individuals, individual organisations or conglomerates, including networks themselves, can be part of multiple networks, if these other networks take care of issues that also interest them.

Type of work/instruments

NGO networks themselves choose different instruments, i.e. they do different types of work in order to further their causes, such as:

- ★ Awareness-raising;
- ★ Service delivery;
- ★ Producing, manufacturing & trading;
- ★ Campaigning, advocating & lobbying.

However, as mentioned above, as the nodes in a network actors do not necessarily carry out the same set of activities that they do as individual organisations.

Geographical spread

Geographically speaking, NGO networks spanning entire continents or even the whole world are increasingly common. Their *nodes* though can be, and indeed often are, of a local, regional, national, transnational character, or a combination thereof. In addition, the *links* between different nodes may show different degrees of strength (the intensity of communication and

collaboration between nodes) and interconnectedness (the-number of links to other nodes), according to what and whom they prefer to engage with and what they are capable of doing.

Sources of funding

The financial means of NGO networks can vary considerably in volume and their sources of income can be very diverse. Networks exist that are entirely self-financed (through sources like individual small donors or members, network fees, secondments, hosting agreements, contributions 'in kind', trust funds, legacies, corporate donations, trading or asset management), but there are also networks that operate entirely on the basis of grants from public authorities or big donors. The same goes for their individual nodes.

Decision-making

In NGO networks, decision-making shows a certain variety but legally speaking, this variety is limited. The networks can be formal entities - with a legal structure and legally prescribed governance arrangements - or informal entities, with possibly less rigid decision-making arrangements. Informal entities can be nodes in formal networks, and vice versa.

Whether formal or informal in the legal sense, most networks have an agreed decision-making structure that can range from power-sharing on an equal footing between the nodes to a centralised decision-making system. Some networks are membership organisations with their members being the nodes, while others are more like franchise chains, where the nodes share values, ways of working and the brand. Big global franchise-type organisations often have internal, own-brand only, networks called thematic networks.

JUDGING NETWORKS

IMPORTANT DIMENSIONS



The way a network is structured may shed some light onto how it operates in practice, but this is not necessarily the case. Quite a few individual networks have been studied, evaluated and documented in order to obtain insight into how networks operate and this has yielded a host of useful insights that we describe below. All kind of network aspects have been researched by academics, think tanks, evaluators, activists, consultants (including ODS) and donors, by looking at the networks from different angles and studying their different dimensions. For donors and evaluators in particular, by far the most important dimensions are:

- Network drivers; the forces that made it come together;
- Relevance; producing added value via the right results;
- Effectiveness; doing the right things;
- Efficiency; doing things in the right way;
- Sustainability of results.

These dimensions need to be taken into consideration in order to arrive at concrete recommendations and/or reasoned choices concerning the future of these networks.

Drivers

Network literature mentions various drivers: contextual (social, cultural, technological, economic, environmental, political) and situational (specific issues to be addressed, the money available, public authorities who want a

network to exist, individual people's aspirations and their force of persuasion) for network constitution. The most important contextual drivers seem to be the idea:

- ★ That sustainable change now often requires working together in networks, coalitions and alliances;
- ★ That globalisation means that action for change, and therefore structure and governance too, often have to go cross-border;
- ★ That interconnectedness between different interests requires working in networks, both from a positive perspective (opportunities for NGOs) and a negative perspective (interconnectedness among adversaries, in finance or between government and corporate actors and their interests);
- ★ That technology - in particular communication technology - has made it possible to further both networks and their goals.

NGO network constitution may also be driven by more situational drivers such as:

- ★ Statutory mandate;
- ★ Donor requirements;
- ★ Common goals;
- ★ Personal interests
- ★ Expected benefits.

In this respect, NGO *network* drivers are not fundamentally different from those of any other civil society organisation.

In practice, we have found that the *contextual* drivers mentioned above are generally accepted as the right kind of drivers for network constitution.

Organisations created on the basis of *situational* drivers however, like statutory mandate/request or donor requirements, may lack the genuine will or drive to achieve results together. Instead, they may go into 'survival mode' if funding is modest, or adopt a fairly non-focused 'business as usual' mode if grants are sufficient and continuous.

Furthermore, if a network has its origins in the force of individuals - inspirational figures, great experts or philanthropists - these people can be extremely useful in the first phases of a network but should step aside in time to prevent the network from becoming too marked by them, thereby developing tensions and inconsistencies that may hamper its functioning. It may for example become unable to freely develop further, professionalise and establish the right power balance to make it work. Where personal interests of the individuals representing a network's nodes play a role, or the future partners were unable or unwilling to delegate authority and share power, the network may not always be heading in the officially stated direction, and/or start to suffer from internal tensions.

Network constitution may have been misguided in case the goals were wrong. Network goals e.g. may have proven so simple that they would not require the setting-up of a network, or the goals demanded an organisational rigidity that was incompatible with the common network philosophy of shared responsibility and decision-making.

The individuals supporting the constitution of a network, either à titre personnel or on behalf of their organisations, may also be driven by less noble motives. They may come on board because they are interested in personal gains, including per diems, travel, status, influence or power.

As benefits of coming together many network actors/partners often see opportunities for access to more information, mutual learning, additional funds, more clout with external parties or with higher-level external parties, increased efficiency or synergies, and others. These are rational, altruistic or organisational desiderata. But while the advantages of coming together may seem plausible, in reality all of them depend on the network's organisational strength and functioning, in particular the quality of decision-making practices and individual decision-makers, as well as the number and quality of those actually working for the network, be they paid staff or volunteers. This means that nodes lacking the will, capacity or resources to participate in the network could also, over time, put themselves and/or the network in danger.

While new networks are being created every day, some sources report a trend hinting at a retrenchment of network partners in recent years. Some big brands in particular, but not only these, are reported to have decreased their commitment to collaborate for different reasons. These include:

- ★ Frustration with the lack of progress;
- ★ Unrealistic expectations of the network's power to achieve change;
- ★ Poor cost/benefit ratio;
- ★ Fear of a diminished visibility of their brands;
- ★ Reputational risk;
- ★ Unwillingness to compromise.

Relevance

With networks being voluntary arrangements to achieve collective goals, many researchers ask about networks' relevance in terms of their added

value, i.e. their success in achieving goals that would have been difficult or impossible to attain by individual members. This leads to asking about duplication, i.e. whether the work networks are doing is something others are not already doing and impact, i.e. whether these networks add something specific and identifiable, whether these achievements are what the networks originally aimed for.

Effectiveness

Scrutinising effectiveness implies looking at the degree to which the network achieves outcomes. Therefore, it means asking if networks are doing the right things (i.e. if their activities are consistent with their goals and theory of change). It means questioning whether a network's results/ outcomes/ impact are what it originally intended, whether there have been unintended results and in how far non-network actors have also contributed to desired results. In particular the matter of attributing impact is important, as it tries to answer the question in how far a network as such has contributed towards an intended result and in how far other parties, one or more of its nodes 'going it alone', or even the natural course of events, have played a role.

Many networks suffer from goal-related issues or gaps in their Theory of Change or logical framework:

- ★ Network goals are too numerous;
- ★ Network goals are imprecise;
- ★ Network goals lack prioritisation;
- ★ Lack of coherence between strategy and work plans;
- ★ Lack of coherence between work plans and the network's actual activities;

- ★ The unavailability of reliable data;
- ★ The lack of documentation on results.

These gaps often make it very difficult to establish results. But even if a network's desired results, symbolised by indicators or milestones, are clear and unambiguous, the network may have picked invalid or debatable indicators or milestones. It may not have planned for documenting results and be unable to distinguish between its own contribution to the results and that of others. Finally, even if these networks achieve results, claiming success for themselves although other parties have also been important players is not uncommon.

Efficiency

Studying a network's efficiency isn't so much about doing the right things and achieving results as about doing the work in the right way. Network efficiency is looked at from the angle of how the network uses its human and financial resources to achieve its goals. This is where researchers try to establish whether there is a detectable return on investment, what the character of this return is and whether it is justified by the means employed. Network efficiency, therefore, is not only dependent on the quality of decision-making and people, but also about how people and money are managed.

If networks are more 'hub-and-spokes' structures, these hubs normally have a coordinator or director responsible for guiding and directing the work, i.e. for managing people and money. This makes a network's efficiency also dependent on the network's management quality and resources, although more resources do not automatically imply more efficiency.

If networks are more diffuse, the responsibility for implementing joint decisions gets divided over many individuals in the nodes, making coordinated working and monitoring progress a bigger challenge. If it is the case that some nodes are more, or less, important to the network and more, or less, powerful in the network, they may share unevenly in both decision-making and implementation, thus creating tensions. This can be mitigated through carefully designed processes and procedures but much remains dependent on the actors in the network, including at individual level, and their willingness to cooperate.

Sustainability of results

Researchers - and donors and evaluators as well - also take a critical look at results in order to establish whether a network's results can be considered *sustainable* (in this context meaning repeatable or continuing rather than 'here to stay') or *incidental*. Results are sustainable if they are achieved in a context of organisational health which permits repeating successes, adapting to lessons learned or changing circumstances, and assessing whether goals achieved require new objectives to be set.

ORGANISATIONAL STRENGTH, HEALTH AND FUNCTIONING

Given that networks' relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of results are dependent on its situation as well as on its organisational strength, health & functioning, these might be assessed in the following ways.

LOOKING AT AN NGO NETWORK'S SITUATION



To determine an organisation's situation, one can look at dimensions such as:

- ★ Organisational Foundations (people, environment, vision & mission, governance, values & character);
- ★ Strategy (collaboration, goals, priorities, instruments, coherence of plans);
- ★ Planning (objectives, focus, actions, timeline, inputs);
- ★ Implementation (delivery, monitoring, reporting, evaluating, learning);
- ★ Operational Foundations (organisation chart, management, hardware, processes & procedures, culture).

It is not unusual to find gaps and inconsistencies in all of these areas, but not all of them may be equally important or in need of addressing.

Strength

An organisation's strength depends on the quality of its foundations, i.e its

governance, management, operational structure, strategic plans and its ability to deliver, adjust and learn. There is no single form one can identify which would apply to all types of networks. However, considering these aspects and selecting the appropriate foundations and strategies for the type of network actors, the objectives and its surroundings, is essential to ensure a network's strength.

Health

An NGO network's health depends mainly on a sufficient and stable income, a low attrition rate, fair and sensible decision-making and living its values, i.e. maintaining a pleasant culture. Here, too gaps and inconsistencies may exist which can be resolved in a number of ways depending on the characteristics of the network in question.

Governance structure

Many networks in the NGO world are formal, with a legal form convenient for not-for-profit organisations, i.e. an association, foundation, charity, 501 or social enterprise structure. This usually means that their governance is performed by a board which provides strategic guidance to those who manage the network, while this board also monitors and controls the management's implementation thereof. Also, NGO networks are often membership organisations with membership ranging from individuals and single organisations to 'umbrellas of umbrellas', i.e. international platforms consisting of national platforms. But a great many networks too, exist, that are informal, have joint decision-making but no 'secretariat' or a secretariat hosted permanently or on a rotating basis by one of the network partners. Even in such situations, however, certain forms of informal governance

exist, for example in advisory boards, steering committees or working groups.

Governance in practice

Although the governance of formal networks looks much the same in theory, in practice many networks have boards that have a limited understanding of their duties, govern inadequately or even deviate from what their MoU or legal guiding documents prescribe. This can be caused by insufficient quality, experience or commitment among trustees, it can be caused by poor collaboration due to language issues, personal mismatches or unavailability for regular (online) meetings.

Governance issues are not exclusively found in the not-for-profit sector; they occur in public authority and corporate environments as well. This is hardly surprising, given the economic, political and technological developments described above which have facilitated the proliferation of more horizontal, movements and networks spanning the entire globe, consisting of very different organisations and individuals. Therefore, many networks have realised that there is a need for governance models that reflect this diversity and a more inclusive and consensual form of governance and decision-making should be developed. Although a great many attempts at change have been tried, the jury is still out about whether these can be considered successful.

Management

The most important task of an NGO network's management is making sure that the network delivers on planned activities and results, by rationally

delegating powers, allocating budget and staff, monitoring progress and adjusting if needed. Many directors, however, dedicate too much of their time to managing their boards and/or representing their network externally. And as mentioned above, secretariats or hubs are often seen as a network's headquarters, instead of as its service unit. This may lead directors to neglect their duties towards either the nodes or the hub/secretariat staff. In addition, managers can have an insufficient grasp of the concepts of governance and management. In relatively young, informal or small networks this may not pose a problem, but when the objective is arriving at a formal, long-term or well-funded network, a clearer division of tasks is crucial.

Decision-making

In the end, decision-making is about *power*. In practice, networks often have both formal decision-making systems emanating from their governance structure and informal decision-making systems that are shaped by the personality of the individuals concerned, their access to crucial information, their nodes' financial clout, their decision-making skills, their place in the network, their location or a combination of these, and their personal and/or professional stake in the outcomes of the decision-making process.

When a network has a strong hub, or when this hub is unable or unwilling to share information, this may lead to reduced ownership and cooperation in the network. This is also true if some network nodes have more influence on the direction the network or hub is taking. Therefore, formalising decision-making is thus also about managing power relationships which exist naturally or have grown historically. Ensuring that clarity exists about

who to involve in which decisions in the networks, can therefore be a way to maintain a decentralised but balanced network, which is both inclusive and effective.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Network diversity should not prevent us from identifying certain standards or common practices which all networks should be conscious of. Among these are a **clear internal drive or purpose stemming from the collective aim** of the nodes, an **organisational structure which is proportionate** to this purpose and in which **decisions can be taken and implemented in an effective yet inclusive way**, a **stable financial situation**, sufficient means and **the right people** to deliver on its plans and a positive attitude towards **learning and adapting** to change.

Some practitioners remark that networks might need to be time-bound from the start (thus making them even more like project structures) in order to take stock of their situation at regular intervals and decide whether they need to be continued, because the need might have disappeared or the work could be done by others or in a different way. In practice, it might be advisable to adapt the work but maintain the network structure, since the combined strengths of the participants in a network has an intrinsic value which can be applied to different yet connected issues. The value can also exist in internal sharing of information, exchanging experiences and building each others capacity, as long as the focus is not exclusively internal but predominantly on achieving impact.

Finally, the true resilient and adaptable network is not taken over by a 'hub'

or by powerful nodes, but uses the combined strength and knowledge of all nodes, if necessary facilitated by a hub. In that ideal situation, the strengths of each node contributes to the mission, while its weaknesses are mitigated by the strengths of other nodes, and by the support provided from the hub. This would allow such a network to be both agile and sustainable, inclusive and efficient, and navigate a complex world effectively in pursuit of its mission.

