



**THE DEMAND FOR, FEASIBILITY AND SCOPE OF A
GLOBAL NETWORK OF SOUTHERN NGOS
IN DISASTER RESILIENCE, RESPONSE AND RECOVERY**

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Executive Summary

The role of southern NGOs (SNGOs) is the subject of debate and dissent in international humanitarian circles. Long viewed as the unseen workhorses of the sector, their efforts are increasingly seen as vital for a more effective and responsive global system.

However, efforts to bring them center-stage have been muted, despite various past pronouncements and commitments. Capacity strengthening efforts tend to be focused on disasters and one-off interventions, and have a short-term focus. Long-term partnerships between Northern NGOs and SNGOs can be one way of addressing this, but their track record is uneven.

SNGOs are starting to mobilize their own efforts, through establishing a range of regional networks. This study sought to identify the demand for, feasibility and scope of a global network of SNGOs. It did so through a series of key informant interviews with representatives of southern NGOs, and a smaller set of Northern network actors.

There is significant demand for a global network of SNGOs, to help strengthen and focus capacity building efforts, enable mutual learning, advance advocacy and deepen the evidence base on Southern engagement.

Such a network was seen as potentially contributing to improved capacity strengthening efforts, providing a valuable means by which to engage a broader constituency of actors in humanitarian, recovery and resilience efforts, and providing a unique global platform that is 'for SNGOs, run by SNGOs'. The interviews also generated a number of specific findings about how the network might operate, in terms of its vision, mission, and possible activities.

The findings were not unanimously positive, however: the respondents warned that resources would be a crucial issue, and potential stumbling block. Moreover, there are key lessons from prior network efforts that will need to be incorporated into how the network is developed.

There are considerable opportunities for a Global network of SNGOs. There is real potential for such a network to help enhance the role, position and contribution of SNGOs to broader humanitarian effectiveness. For many of the SNGO and Northern network members interviewed, this is an idea whose time has come. The key now is to balance meaningful engagement across potential network members with strategic engagement with the wider sector in order to build engagement and buy-in.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and context

SNGOs play a vital role in responding to many emergencies. Their ongoing presence in crisis-affected countries means that they have a better understanding of contextual and historical realities than their international counterparts. They provide the first line of response, and are often the only means of reaching populations where access is constrained by logistical or security issues. Because they typically maintain their operations through the recovery phase and into development and resilience-building activities, they often establish more sustainable relationships with affected communities than their international counterparts¹. This means they can be a source of innovative ideas for how response could be improved, to make it more attuned with long-term development.

It is widely recognized now that local actors can play an enormous role in preventing, preparing for, and responding to humanitarian emergencies, building resilience to shocks and crisis, and generating economic growth. In recent years, there has been growing interest in resilience, defined as “the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth.”² This is a critical midpoint between responding to a humanitarian crisis and building the foundation for long-term development. This is a process that cannot be driven from abroad; it can happen only if local institutions and communities are empowered to carry out these actions.

Given their potential contribution to filling such critical gaps in aid effectiveness, it may be surprising that the role of SNGOs remains a subject of ongoing debate in humanitarian circles. Some maintain that SNGOs should be playing a more central role in resilience, response and recovery. From these perspectives, the potential contributions of SNGOs have been unnecessarily and unfairly limited by the attitudes and actions of more dominant Northern humanitarian actors.³

Counterarguments include the fact that Southern-led responses are limited by the relatively small-scale responses many SNGOs are able to mount. Also often cited are the ongoing concerns about effective organizational and financial management.

Whatever one’s position is in this debate, it is clear that the *potential* of SNGOs in international resilience, response and recovery work has not yet been fully realized.⁴ This has long been highlighted as problematic by SNGOs themselves. Increasingly, however, these issues are raised in analyses funded by and conducted on behalf of the traditional – generally northern – actors as well.⁵

The most prominent example of this is to be found in the multi-agency joint evaluation of the international tsunami response, published in 2006. The first and primary recommendation of the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition was for a ‘fundamental reorientation’ of the humanitarian system, away from supplying aid internationally to supporting and

¹ NGO Consortium (2013) ‘Missed Opportunities: the case for strengthening national and local partnership-based responses’

² USAID (2012). Building Resilience to Recurrent Crisis: USAID Policy and Program Guidance.

³ Christian Aid (2012) Local Capacity and Partnerships for Emergency Assistance

⁴ Global Humanitarian Platform (2007) Principles of Partnership

⁵ Oxfam (2012) Crises in a New Work Order

facilitating communities' own relief and recovery priorities. National and local organizations were to be at the heart of this transformation.⁶ The Tsunami evaluation is far from being the only example of such an assessment. One could easily insert a standard paragraph into all of the major evaluations conducted in the aftermath of crises of the past 20 years, along the lines of 'national and local actors were bypassed and their skills and knowledge were not capitalized upon.'

There have been numerous calls to change how the system works in regard to national and local actors – to enhance national ownership, to 'flip the system', and so on. However, such changes have arguably been limited by existing power disparities and resource allocations that serve to maintain the status quo.⁷

As a result, and despite ongoing calls for reforms, there has been little change in the status of SNGOs. They are still, with a few notable exceptions, treated as 'last-mile' subcontractors: effectively a 'pipeline' for the delivery of humanitarian goods and services from donor countries to disaster affected populations.⁸

This is of course not to ignore the efforts made by international actors in this area to change the dynamic of NGO relations between northern and southern actors. Within the sector, a number of organizations give prominence to a partnership-based approach. Many faith-based organizations (including CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund, and ACT-Caritas) and a number of global alliances (including the Red Cross-Red Crescent Movement and Action Aid International) espouse a partnership approach, and actively work to strengthen capacity of Southern counterparts.⁹ In addition, international actors who do not typically work through partnerships have done so in a range of emergencies because of external contextual factors. These latter relationships however tend to be focused on short-term tactical concerns rather than long-term strategy engagement. Especially notable here are the growing efforts in 'remote management' techniques in those contexts considered too dangerous for direct Northern presence. This has led to a pragmatic interest in issues of local capacity and the best means of strengthening it.¹⁰

The recent emphasis on resilience has also seen calls for more and better work with SNGOs. As the UK Government's Humanitarian Emergency Response Review noted, "[the] new resilience approach will include working at regional, national, community and household level... Civil society organizations that respond to disasters should be supported to play their role..."¹¹

Looking into the future, a variety of external factors are helping to emphasize the importance of local and national efforts in responding to, and preventing future humanitarian disasters. Chief among these are the rise in the numbers and complexity of disasters and the looming threats of climate change and urbanization. Together, these drivers of crises suggest that national and local actors need to be capitalized upon if the formal sector is going to be able to cope with a rapidly growing humanitarian caseload.¹²

⁶ Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (2006) Synthesis Report

⁷ ICVA (2008) Flipping the System, Meeting Background Paper

⁸ ALNAP (2006) Capacity Building Amid Humanitarian Response

⁹ NGO Consortium, *ibid*

¹⁰ Humanitarian Outcomes (2010) *Once Removed*

¹¹ UK Government (2011) Humanitarian Emergency Response Review

¹² Christian Aid, *ibid*; Oxfam, *ibid*

But the jury is out on whether the efforts being made in this direction are relevant or sufficient. The data that exists tell a stark story. In terms of actual financial flows for responses, for example, estimates from 2009 suggest that less than 2% of official funds for humanitarian aid flow to organizations headquartered in affected countries.¹³ The landmark ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System Report 2012 made the following pertinent observations:

“Despite the increasing importance of local partnerships... there remains an underinvestment in the capacities of local operational partners. Interviews and evaluations noted that national organizations are often working at or beyond their maximum operational capacity and find the additional pressure to meet a variety of international standards challenging, if not impossible, given available resources and time. Yet local capacity-building remains one of the hardest areas to raise funds for in non-emergency periods, when it is needed the most.”¹⁴

1.2 The growing role of Southern networks

Over the past ten years or so, some of the most interesting efforts to move the ‘Southernization’ agenda forward have been among SNGOs. Like-minded organizations have come together and formed collaborative networks,¹⁵ both formally and informally to share knowledge, ideas and experiences. The theory has been that through better networking and cooperation, SNGOs can learn more effectively from each other, and thereby address gaps in the capacity building efforts developed and administered by their Northern counterparts. These networks can be seen as part of the broader shift toward South-South cooperation within humanitarian and development work.¹⁶ These SNGO networks have focused on strengthening member engagement on humanitarian and disaster risk reduction issues, on sharing information, on capacity sharing and learning.¹⁷

In some instances, these networks have also been able to influence humanitarian debates and policies, to voice SNGO concerns and issues in a more meaningful and impactful way, and gain credibility in the eyes of major international actors. For example, the African Centre for Humanitarian Action has been a vital interlocutor between a number of African NGOs and the African Union, and has also helped to inform policies of a number of bilateral donors.¹⁸ The Asian Disaster Response and Risk Reduction Network worked to influence the Asian Ministerial Conference on disaster risk reduction, and has also brought vital civil society perspectives on the Hyogo Framework. The same Asian network worked to coordinate members responding to major crises such as the Tsunami and the Pakistan earthquake, enabling on-the-ground learning from across members and with affected communities.¹⁹

However, even these successful examples of SNGO networks have found sustained funding difficult to come by, and have therefore ebbed and flowed in terms of their presence, activities and level of engagement. Moreover, none of these networks have operated at a global level, focusing instead on regional and national levels.

¹³ Development Initiatives (2012) Global Humanitarian Assistance

¹⁴ ALNAP (2012) State of the Humanitarian System

¹⁵ ALNAP (2013) Regional humanitarian networks

¹⁶ ODI (2012) Capacity, Complexity and Consulting; lessons from managing capacity development projects

¹⁷ ALNAP (2013) *ibid*

¹⁸ ODI (2008) Japan G8 Global Project <http://www.odi.org/projects/651-japan-g8-global-project>

¹⁹ ADRRN (2014) Website

The lack of investment and support for such efforts becomes marked when viewed in light of the range of global initiatives that have been launched to strengthen Northern organizational capacity and effectiveness. The past two decades have seen sustained attention and investments to address issues of quality, performance and effectiveness of international humanitarian actors. There have been successive waves of initiatives, starting with SPHERE, ALNAP, People in Aid and HAP in the 1990s, through to efforts such as the clusters and financial reforms, and INGO capacity building projects in the 2000s. More recently, there has been a wave of efforts in the 2010s such as the START Network, CDAC, the Digital Humanitarian Network, the Humanitarian Innovation Fund, and others.

As one of the Northern network directors interviewed for this study noted, it is remarkable that given this wealth of efforts to improve humanitarian aid, and the numerous calls for Southern capacity building, that there has been no global, cross-organizational initiative with a primary focus on SNGOs. There have of course been some initiatives that have looked at Southern capacities as part of a much broader agenda. There have also been concerted efforts by specific international organizations, as alluded to earlier. But, as of the time of writing, there have been no sustained global effort in this area.

It is against this background and context that the present study was designed and implemented. For some years now, numerous leaders of SNGOs have seen the potential for a single global network that works to bring together like-minded organizations to collectively address some of the systemic challenges and gaps described above. While there have been a numerous conversations around this issue, it has not progressed far beyond a preliminary conceptual stage.

This study set out to develop a more systematic understanding of the current demand, feasibility and scope of such a global network of Southern NGOs

The rest of this report sets out the research methodology, the findings from the research (in separate sections of demand, feasibility, network development and scope), recommendations for the proposed network, and conclusions.

2. Research Approach and Methodology

This work was commissioned by Adeso – African Development Solutions, headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, and had the following objectives:

- To assess the demand for a new global network of SNGOs, drawing on the perspectives of NGO leaders;
- To assess the feasibility of such a network; and,
- To indicate the possible functions and mode of working of such a network

In consultation with the Adeso project manager, the researcher developed an outline interview framework and applied this across 16 interviews with SNGO representatives. These interviews were conducted by phone or in a minority of cases, email. We initially limited the interviews to SNGOs with operations in more than one country in order to narrow the scope of potential interviewees. Over the course of the research, however, the respondent pool was expanded to include selected national NGOs that were recommended by the first wave of respondents as having particularly useful perspectives to bring to the discussion.

Other methods used in the research included desk studies and literature review, a review of

relevant existing NGO network information, and key informant interviews with representatives of Northern humanitarian networks.

It must be said at the outset that the perspectives shared here are subject to a degree of selection bias due to the fact that, on the whole, those SNGO representatives interviewed are already working closely with a variety of Northern networks, and can be presumed to be drawn from a pool of those who felt positive enough about the potential of a network to take the time to respond. As such, the sample is better described as 'interested and informed' in the research subject, rather than fully representative of SNGOs.

The findings from the interviews are presented next in four sections. First, **Section 3.1** provides a summary of the extent and the nature of the demand for a global network of SNGOs, first as articulated by SNGO representatives, and next by a number of Northern INGO and network representatives. **Section 3.2** sets out the feasibility of such a network, **Section 3.3** looks at its potential scope, while **Section 3.4** provides an overview of lessons on network development with a focus on the historical experiences of Southern networks. **Section 4** provides recommendations and synthesizes ideas about the scope of the network.

3. FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

3.1 Findings: Demand

Across the SNGO leaders participating in the research process, there was widespread and positive support for the proposed Global Network. There was an overall consistent view that the establishment of such a network could be beneficial for the organizations participating in the research.

Respondents communicated demand in general and specific terms. At a general level, there was seen to be a need for a focused platform for SNGOs to engage with global humanitarian issues. In specific terms, respondents shared their ideas about the kind of value such a network might bring to members.

The general demands were described in the following ways:

- a) to provide a mechanism for signaling the presence and role of SNGOs in disaster resilience, response and recovery

“...we are always referred to as the invisible workhorses of the sector... many individuals in donor countries don't know we are even here... this network could help to put us on the map ...”

- b) to enable SNGOs involved in humanitarian and resilience work to collectively mobilize and deepen their shared understanding and solidarity

“...it would build our sense of solidarity with our colleagues and counterparts around the world ...”

- c) where appropriate, to enable SNGOs present a common front on critical humanitarian issues, and address longstanding problems

“...it would strengthen our voice and our influence, and help us make the best possible contribution to improving aid efforts...”

The specific demands often related to particular organizations' own interests and agendas, and how the network might help to further them. These included the following issues:

- a) to enhance and broaden performance and effectiveness through mutual learning processes with Southern NGO counterparts in other areas
- b) to share experiences of working in specific regions, countries and operational contexts
- c) to widen access and exposure to global actors and related policy fora

The demand for the network was justified in terms of gaps and niches in the existing network landscape. Respondents felt that the network would ideally focus on vulnerability, resilience and humanitarian response issues – not neglecting development issues, but rather focusing on the interface between humanitarian and development work.

Such a network was seen as having the potential to fulfill a range of functions and

requirements for SNGOs. Interviewees felt that these were only partially addressed, at best, or not addressed at all, at worse, by existing networks. The need for the proposed global network to play a 'gap filling' function in the architecture of humanitarian aid was also expressed by a number of Northern respondents.

"...there are some networks that try to do this kind of thing regionally, and there are some international networks where the kinds of things we hope for happen more by chance than by design... but there is no global platform for SNGOs focusing on the issues that matter most to them..."

When asked to identify the most important element of demand, the responses were almost unanimous, and related to getting SNGOs working more closely together to achieve their strategic and operational goals. By doing so, it was felt that the members, individually and collectively, would be better placed to contribute to a more effective global humanitarian effort.

The global network was seen as playing an important role in making linkages between global, regional, national and local levels. If successful, the network had the potential to address longstanding gulfs between the realms of policy and operations in humanitarian aid. As some of the respondents stated:

"...we go to global meetings, then we go back to the operational context, and it really becomes clear that so many of these global interventions are cooked up many miles away from where the action is, and by the time they get to the action, they are meaningless... this new network should provide an important reality check for the system..."

"...the network will have work to do at different levels if it is going to be effective... we will have to work to exchange knowledge globally, to advocate and influence globally, but to remain firmly grounded in Southern NGO, in-country, realities... we have to keep our feet on the ground..."

While demand at the global level was clearly articulated, the relationship to regional and national networks was seen as needing to be clarified. A few respondents – notably those involved in regional network efforts – suggested ways in which this might work. For example, the global network could play the role of a 'network of networks', providing a shared platform for ongoing dialogue between regional networks from around the world. Where the regional networks did not already exist, the global network could potentially help to initiate and shape such efforts.

While many saw the membership as focusing on Southern operational NGOs, others saw a need for the network to address wider gaps in the sector. For example, it was noted that humanitarian policy and research was dominated by Northern organizations. Similarly, with the increased interest in private sector approaches to humanitarian aid, much of the focus has been on international corporations. The network was seen as playing a powerful convening role for a broad range of Southern actors by bringing in Southern think tanks and academia, private sector in affected countries, as well as national governments. That said, even those who were most optimistic about the potential breadth of network membership acknowledged that such a diverse group of actors would need to be mobilized carefully, strategically, and over a sensible amount of time.

While overall demand and support for the network was clear, a number of respondents also expressed the need to articulate exactly how such a network would go about supplying services. That is, how would the network meet their specific interests and demands and thereby add value to the existing 'humanitarian network landscape'. This issue is discussed in greater detail in the section 3.2, on feasibility.

It is important to put these responses from SNGO leaders into context alongside the perspectives from representatives of international Northern NGOs and related networks. First, the support for the network was in general very positive:

'...This is clearly a good idea. We have seen a huge growth in national and regional NGOs, but this hasn't translated into a more balanced system. And there are other Southern networks but they are still a bit haphazard. There is a clear gap here, for SNGOs and for the system as a whole...'

Just as with the SNGO perspectives, Northern respondents felt it was vital to start with the right focus. Some had specific ideas about this, while others thought it was a more open question:

'...The platform could have considerable convening power, providing SNGOs space to learn from each other, to identify shared goals and common approaches, and to leverage change in the sector...'

'...Of course there is a need and potential. The question is how to turn that into something practical and meaningful, with what focus and for whom. That is still open, I think...'

For one respondent, the rationale for the network was as much about representation and voice as anything:

'...From my perspective, the idea of Southern networks is extremely important for a new way of working in the international aid system... and if it works, it will make for a stronger, more inclusive system... and it will bring a voice and a presence that the international community will have to listen to...'

All respondents were clear on what the network needed to get off to a successful start:

'...This will fundamentally depend on skills and motivations of a core group of people to get it going... it cannot be a unilateral effort...'

'...you will need people at the center who are committed and have a long term vision... this is going to take time, and impatience will be fatal...'

In terms of resourcing, there was some concern as to whether 'traditional donors' – meaning existing bilateral and multilateral donors – would buy into and support the network. Some felt that it was a potential way of engaging newer donors in the humanitarian space:

'...You have to ask whether any of the big Western donors will support this, and the reality is that they may not be interested. So you may need to look to new emerging donors: the UAE, Turkey, Korea, or the foundations...'

One way around this was to take a strategic approach to fundraising, with some requests for

‘core funding’ and some for specific activities that might attract and fit with mainstream donor priorities:

‘...One way of getting traditional donor interest is to come up with a very strong work plan which touches on common interests, and ask them to fund activities, rather than just the network. Once the network starts producing things, they can say, ‘this is what we have done, you can see the value we add’...’

It was noted that support for large travel budgets are likely to prove problematic for many donors:

‘...this is likely to be a major sticking point because many do not wish to fund T&S [travel and subsistence] to a large extent, and this would be necessary for the network to operate. It would be strategic to focus on deliverables in the first instance and T&S slightly later, otherwise donors will be put off. You don’t want the network to have a reputation for too much ‘net’ and not enough ‘work’...’

There were also numerous mentions of the large number of existing humanitarian networks, and how to demonstrate that the proposed network is different:

‘...The humanitarian ‘network space’ is so crowded – and so clear messaging about what makes this network new and different will be vital – for the members and for potential collaborators and supporters...’

Another critical issue was whether the proposed network would impinge on work of Northern networks. Although this was not seen as a major issue overall, one respondent did highlight the network activities as potentially overlapping with their own plans, and emphasized the need for collaboration and coordination:

‘...This network could be wonderfully collaborative with us, or it could be in direct competition. It is all about how the founders go about the process and how it is set up and managed...’

This implies that a central element of developing the network will be engagement with the leadership of selected Northern networks: to share emerging plans and ideas from the embryonic membership, and to agree ways of working together on issues of shared interest.

3.2 Findings: Feasibility

Although a clear demand for the Global Network emerged from the interviews, it is interesting to note the large number of operational and feasibility issues and concerns that were raised when discussing how the network might be established and operated.

Financing

To a large extent, respondents expressed their belief that cross-organizational networks require ongoing financial investments from their members in order to be sustainable, conduct their activities in a strategic fashion, and succeed in their goals. (See Box 1 below for a breakdown of necessary costs).

Box 1: Financial Requirements for the Global Network

In order for the Global Network to fulfill the scope set out in section 3.3, there would need to be sufficient resources, year on year, to cover the following costs at a minimum. For each of these areas a number of feasibility issues were raised.

- Secretariat staffing, administration and hosting costs
- Program activities, including research, capacity building and advocacy
- Network activities, including membership management, member communication, meeting costs, travel and subsistence for meetings

Given the budget constraints faced by many SNGOs, sustained inputs from members were only viewed as feasible for a very limited number of SNGOs. Even in these cases, the total volume of funds raised was seen as unlikely to meet the total operating costs of the network. Therefore the support for the network could not come solely from member fees, but would also require mobilizing third party donors, who probably would not be full members of the network.

Of particular importance in this regard was the need for the network to be able to finance the travel costs that would be integral to effective functioning of the network. Some context may be necessary here: in many Northern networks, the participation of SNGO members is covered by the network's core costs (supported by Northern membership dues or outside fundraising) rather than the SNGOs themselves. Although this may seem a mundane point, it was seen as one of the critical roadblocks for a global Southern network as the *majority* of members would need to have their participation costs covered. Many respondents observed that this has proved an issue for previous Southern network efforts.

This challenge underpins the broader concerns of many respondents around resources for the network, namely that the lack of available funds would be a critical roadblock. As noted by one respondent:

“SNGOs simply cannot finance a global network just through membership fees.”

It is however also worth noting that of the large Northern networks representative interviewed, very few were financed solely through *regular* membership fees. Instead there is a pattern of a small number of donors – often no more than about five - financing up to 75% of the operating budget of these networks, with standard member fees making up the rest of the budget proportion. Although these large funds may in some cases be classified as membership costs, the size and scale of these resources go well beyond typical scales for fees. Rather, this kind of funding of networks should be better described as a combination of membership fees and large donations/investments by the largest and best-resourced members.

This mixed funding model has not been fully explored to date by SNGOs. For most sustainable regional Southern networks to date, funds have been raised through contributions for specific projects or program activities, and a number of donations for one-off events or communications activities such as meetings, publications or websites. There are also in-kind contributions by members, to cover meeting venue costs, for example, or accommodation of network representatives while at meetings.

One of the ubiquitous issues raised in relation to network financing was that, regardless of the donors involved, the network priorities should be driven by member needs and interests – and that the network should be free from any overt donor influences. Some saw this as a ‘deal breaker’ because of previous difficult experiences where following donor money had led to networks serving donor interests more than member interests, becoming more of a ‘Southern consultancy’ to Northern funders. Given the likelihood of donor conditions on funding, there will no doubt be a need to strike a balance based on pragmatism and feasibility.

Engagement

Following from financing, the next set of feasibility issues relate to member engagement, which needs to be considered in relation to both the start-up of the network and its management. In the short term there is a need to work out how to engage members fully. As one participant put it:

“the legitimacy of the network is fundamentally reliant on the quality and extent of member participation.”

This is especially important because of what some saw as ‘repeated failures’ of previous attempts to establish such mechanisms.

“...unfortunately among many possible members there will be some cynicism about even the idea of a global capacity building network. Many have heard the promise before but have not seen the support materialize. It will be important to convince a wider network of possible members that, this time, things will be different...”

Some respondents also raised the issue of whether the relevant SNGO leaders and organizations would have the time to effectively engage with such a network, especially since the up-front investment in time, staffing, and other resources will not yield the expected return until some time into the future.

“...with the Northern networks there is a clear pay-off to engaging, in terms of organizational interests [of SNGOs]. But an emerging Southern network will not have the same draw until it has shown that it can raise the necessary funds and support. But it is unlikely that resources will be made available until members commit...”

This ‘chicken-and-egg’ problem was seen as potentially being addressed in a few ways.

For example some interviewees highlighted the possibility of ‘piggy backing’ initial network activities on existing networks for some fixed period – for example, holding embryonic network meetings in the sidelines of other events such as ICVA or ALNAP annual meetings. Others suggested that a small quorum of highly dedicated network members could be tasked with initiation and set-up activities, build the nascent community, and bring others in when the network starts to gather momentum and interest.

Overall, there was seen to be a need to take a more collaborative and strategic approach to financial mobilization. One possibility mooted was for a range of potential members to seek funds in tandem, in a coordinated fashion, in order to raise interest among a range of donors.

“...members need to be clear that, despite the vision, we will start as a newly formed network, struggling to raise resources, and they will need to see their role as not waiting

for resources before deciding to join the network, but as actively engaged in bringing resources in...”

A related issue on engagement was about ensuring the network was ‘a network in practice rather than simply in name’, as one participant put it. In many previous network efforts, a single powerful leader or organization had become synonymous with the overall network, leaving little space for others and not allowing for sustainability.

There are trade-offs to be considered here, of course. Even the most horizontal and decentralized networks benefit from the existence of effective leaders. Moreover, having an inspiring and credible leader for the network will contribute to a positive public image, strengthening engagement with relevant actors, invitations to relevant fora and discussions, and so on. Good leaders also play a central role in the strategic management and communications of the network.

Competition and voice in the ‘network space’

A key issue raised by a number of respondents in relation to feasibility was the growing interest among Northern networks for establishing regional or Southern chapters. While such efforts do not always directly target SNGOs, and to date many of these efforts have remained embryonic, it was clear that the Global Network would need to take the time and effort to distinguish itself from, or align with, these initiatives.

This issue of whether the network will be an insider or an outsider to the formal humanitarian system was also seen as requiring careful consideration. There are costs and benefits to both positions: insider networks typically have close links with the ‘powers that be’ and seek to influence them through trust, collaboration and engagement, while outsider networks take on a more oppositional and confrontational role in order to push for change.

Some felt that the network would need to be more outspoken than many of its members could individually afford to be, given their reliance on the international sector. At the same time, others felt that an overtly aggressive tone was likely to alienate rather than engage necessary stakeholders and partners, such as the United Nations system, Western governments, and key Northern-based humanitarian NGOs. The conclusion was that a balance was needed – as one put it

“...it will need to be both Gandhi or Malcolm X, depending on the context...”

Identity, constitution and set-up of network

A more operational set of issues related to the creation of the network – in particular how the secretariat will be legally and institutionally established, and where it might be geographically located.

All respondents accepted the need for a network secretariat that would coordinate and manage network activities. However, there were differences in opinion about whether the secretariat should be an agent of the members, or work to facilitate efforts among the members. Some felt that the secretariat would need to be more of a facilitator in the long term, but that it would need to play a leading role in the initial period. Others suggested that the secretariat should be limited to a facilitation role from the outset:

“...the management of the network needs to be done very delicately, allowing for the diversity, and dynamism of the members to shape the network in a democratic

fashion...”

Some concerns were raised about where to house the network secretariat in order to enable the network to be truly global. Many felt that the regional hubs for the humanitarian sector, such as Nairobi or Bangkok would be ideal. However, there was a clear sense that any decision on location would need to be fully vetted by members, because of the implications this will inevitably have on the character and agenda of the network.

This raised issues about the identify and profile of the network, with some respondents suggesting that this set of issues would need to be continually revisited and refreshed throughout the life of the network. Some suggested that the network secretariat would need to regularly rotate around different locations, while others highlighted the challenge this would pose to institutional memory and staff retention.

Because of the challenges around network development, many felt that it would be ideal to start with a relatively tightly defined group of champions, or initial members (of no more than 15-20 organizations). This group should subsequently seek to expand the membership after reaching initial milestones on resource mobilization and strategy development.

As well as a steering group made up of network members, a few respondents felt that it would be useful to have an external advisory group, which would provide “valuable external inputs on quality and progress.”

Risks

Because of the overtly political position of the proposed network, there would need to be adequate effort to identify and manage the risks inherent to any program of work. These include reputational risks for the members, institutional or funding risks, and risks of non-performance of the network.

For some, the research goals of the networks were seen as especially challenging, because very few SNGOs have strong research capacities. But there was an acknowledgement that, because of the lack of knowledge in this area, a core requirement for the network would be its ability to produce a solid evidence-base for advocacy and capacity development interventions.

There was also a need to consider selection criteria for members, to ensure that composition and values reflect the overall principles and goals of the network.

3.3 Findings: Potential Scope of the Network (Vision, Mission and Activities)

The proposed Global Network, through its mandate and activities, was seen as needing to have an overarching mission to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of resilience, response and recovery efforts through greater SNGO involvement in such work.

To this end, a clear focus on aid effectiveness was seen as integral to the success of the network. More specific ideas on the potential vision, mission and activities of the network are set out below.

Vision

3.3.1 *The Global Network should provide “an open forum for SNGOs”*

The proposed network was seen as providing an open forum for SNGOs, both those focused on specific developing countries and those working across multiple countries. It was seen as filling gaps that currently exist in terms of platforms that support and facilitate relationship-building and mutual capacity strengthening of SNGOs, by SNGOs. It was also viewed as providing a much-needed means for SNGO actors to interact directly, rather than being mediated by Northern actors and networks.

The Global Network was also seen as being in a unique position to help forge relationships with Southern actors not traditionally seen as central to humanitarian efforts, including national governments and domestic private sector firms.

3.3.2 *The Global Network should provide a platform for strengthening “the collective influence of SNGOs on global policy issues”*

The network was seen as providing a much-needed platform for collective SNGO leadership on critical humanitarian, recovery and resilience issues and problems. It was felt that the network could help move SNGOs from ‘following policy agendas’ to playing more of an active role in shaping and co-constructing such agendas.

The network was viewed as providing SNGOs a clearer institutional framework within which new coalitions can be built towards the achievement of a range of specific policy and operational goals.

Mission

3.3.3 *The Global network should play a leadership role in “establishing global capacity strengthening mechanisms” that are sustainable and relevant to SNGOs*

The network was seen as filling crucial gaps and addressing critical failures in ongoing existing capacity building agendas of the international aid system.

It would do so by ensuring sustained engagement with SNGOs, rather than one-off efforts around specific crises. It would focus on mutual capacity strengthening between Southern and Northern actors, as well as south-to-south learning between members.

The network was also seen as playing a role in establishing good practices and principles for capacity building work and for south-north partnerships, and furthering the evidence base around the contribution of southern actors to global humanitarian, resilience and recovery efforts.

3.3.4 *The Global Network should enable members to better address “ongoing operational issues in aid delivery”*

The network was also seen as having the potential to contribute to a number of effectiveness areas, including but not limited to: better engagement and learning with and from local communities, improved context and cultural analysis, culturally sensitive needs assessments, improved allocation and targeting, and enhanced value for money

3.3.5 *The Global Network should provide an important means for strengthening ongoing efforts to “bridge the current divisions between the development and*

humanitarian sides”

One of the important lessons from SNGO work in humanitarian responses is that they can work to smooth the divides that exist between humanitarian and development activities that, to date, have proved very difficult for international actors to navigate. Funding lines are separate, and often mean that humanitarian assistance is short term and volatile in nature, while development resources can be slow to mobilize and do not focus on issues of vulnerability and resilience. The proposed network was viewed as having the potential to help address this critical gap.

Activities

3.3.6 The Global Network should develop a portfolio of ‘flagship’ projects involving a variety of network members

The network would need a series of carefully developed and facilitated network activities to give the members a sense of the rhythm and energy of the network’s operations on a day-to-day basis. The network would also need a diverse portfolio of continuous and complementary projects that are clearly communicated to members and the wider world. Members should have the opportunity to engage in different elements of this portfolio of projects, depending on their interest and capacity.

Each of these activities should be planned as a collaborative venture between the proposed network and affiliate networks in the North. This would help to build credibility and demonstrate the commitment of SNGO members to joint work. Initial suggestions for possible engagements are set out below, but of course the precise agreements and arrangements will need to be worked out through dialogue and discussion with the networks in question.

It was suggested that activities could include:

1. Establishment of a number of specific facilitated processes for cross-network communication and engagement, through both electronic and face-to-face platforms. This might include a website, an email list, webinars, and annual meetings, as well as side meetings wherever possible at other events. Some of these might be organized with the support of other networks such as ALNAP, ICVA and Interaction.
2. Support to the learning and capacity development of members through specific cross-network exchanges. This will need to expand over time to the mobilization of sustainable resources for ongoing capacity strengthening of network members through grants and tailored expert advice. There may be potential to explore this area with the START Network, which has already approved a project on Southern capacity building.
3. Support to members on specific issues of standards and quality assurance, in particular supporting members with processes such as accountability, professionalization and operational effectiveness. This will require engagement with the various ‘quality and accountability’ initiatives, including HAP, SPHERE and People in Aid, and ways in which their ‘offers’ can be effectively brought to a broader constituency of southern actors.
4. Undertaking a program of research and development, to develop handbooks, guidance and learning materials tailored for member. This might be usefully developed with existing research units such as ALNAP, HPG, Tufts, as well as Southern institutes such as

Makarere University, Seeds India, and so on.

5. Regularly communicating the role and contribution of member SNGOs to major crises in order to 'make the invisible seen'. It would be ideal to engage with media networks on this, such as the BBC World Service Trust, Thomson Reuters, Alertnet, and IRIN.
6. Bring SNGO member perspectives into global aid effectiveness debates and policies, most notably the World Humanitarian Summit 2016. This could be done in collaboration with advocacy-focused networks such as ICVA or Interaction.
7. Facilitate a joint evaluation of the contribution of SNGOs to disaster resilience, response and recovery, to demonstrate both the potential value of the network and the members' commitment to transparency and openness. This could be done in collaboration with ALNAP and the OECD-DAC Evaluation Network, both of which have facilitated humanitarian joint evaluations in the past.

3.4 Findings: Developing the Network

3.4.1 *The Stages of Network Development*

All networks, regardless of substantive focus or membership, are said to go through a broadly similar process of development. This process involves a number of typical phases, each associated with a range of activities (see Annex II).²⁰ Successful networks are those that are able to overcome challenges at each phase of development.

While the experience of Southern humanitarian networks suggests that the challenges faced by the proposed global network are not unique, the evidence gathered from the interviews suggest there are indeed some specific issues that would need to be overcome if the network is to be successful.

The Potential Phase

At the potential stage, the network is not formal, but a loose coalition of people who occasionally interact around common issues. This is where, arguably, the proposed Global network is today.

However, as an embryonic network, it has the potential to be formal: it has key individuals, with shared interests and issues, and a sense that the grouping could become more with more concerted effort. To move forward from this stage, an actor or group of actors needs to step forward to take responsibility for getting a more formal arrangement started. This may be through interviews with potential members, or a meeting to get them together to discuss the potential.

Key lessons from Southern networks:

1. Often, Southern networks focus on a single highly motivated individual or organization, rather than a distributed group, as the initial driving force;
2. There is a tendency to pay insufficient attention to the diversity of the group at the outset, and assume that the network can easily represent and work on behalf of all;
3. The assessment of needs and interests can often be rather perfunctory, based more on the vision of the founding institution or individual, than on a systematic assessment of potential members' views.

The Coalescing Phase

Once the network is formally established, it has to deal with the problems of any startup. While members may have high hopes due to the discovery of shared potential, and there may be enthusiasm following a launch event, the value of the network is not yet fully realized. This transitional stage requires a focus on community development, to initiate and sustain a rhythm for network activities. This is vital because after initial interest, commitment and energy usually drops away quickly.

The key to moving through this stage of network development is an active focus on building and facilitating dialogue and relationships. This typically means establishing a range of tools to support and enable cross-network dialogue – shared projects, meetings, email lists, and so on.

²⁰ Ramalingam, B et al (2008) Strengthening Humanitarian Networks

Key lessons from Southern networks:

1. This stage is a particularly tenuous time for Southern networks, and many do not get past this effectively because they lack resources to facilitate and enable effective community interactions;
2. Expectations of an immediate return or value-added may be high, leading to impatience, disappointment and disengagement;
3. Network leaders and facilitators may not know how to manage this stage effectively, and how to keep the energy alive across a dispersed and diverse group, in part because they have never done it before, and in part because of the obvious challenges of doing so across geographical and institutional boundaries;
4. Some Southern networks never emerge from this stage, and therefore never fully take shape or develop a tangible presence for the members.

The Maturing Phase

After the coalescing stage, the community needs to start to develop a more focused set of activities, in pursuit of its shared purposes. This means being more intentional about collective efforts, and ensuring that the work done has a clear objective, both in terms of the positive contribution to members, and in helping to realize the collective ambition of those members.

It is at this stage that a network may start to run specific projects, develop products, guidance and standards for specific issues. Dialogue may become more technically focused and in-depth. The network can start to reach out to influence other external groups based on shared perspectives of members.

Key lessons from Southern networks:

1. At this stage, donor interests, rather than membership priorities, may start to overtly shape network activities;
2. Resources for collective activities and projects may not be as readily forthcoming as members had initially hoped;
3. Core financing is rare and unreliable, making it hard to be strategic about development;
4. It may become very hard to maintain broad involvement of the membership, and many activities may involve only the lead organization, leading to tensions within the network about 'who the network is really for';
5. Outreach activities can often happen too early, and with insufficient consultation, leaving some members feeling that their voices and perspectives are not being heard, or are unimportant.

The Stewardship Phase

Having established a reputation and presence, networks need to continue to evolve and grow to respond to changing member needs and a dynamic environment. Networks may expand focus areas, leading to the emergence of multiple areas of work. This may be beyond the original focus of the network, based on gaps that have been identified by the membership.

The original leaders often move on at this stage, in the hope that others will take up the mantle. This is perhaps the stage of network development that places most emphasis on strategic thinking among members.

Done right, this stage can lead the network to have a more credible voice and presence on its issues of concern, and lend greater credibility to members. Done wrong, the network can get pulled apart by opposing forces.

Key lessons from Southern networks:

1. Broadening of the scope of the network can lead to tensions and issues that are hard to surmount because of the relative infrequency of meetings;
2. Expansion of the membership may require careful thought, but it is often done in an unthinking way leading to a dilution of the network's energy;
3. Leadership succession is especially weak for Southern networks, and not many have managed to sustain themselves after the initial founders have moved on;
4. Many Southern networks can peter out at this stage, because of the lack of a sustained effort to re-energize and refresh the network agenda.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Recommendations: Network Rationale and Outcome Areas

These recommendations build on the ideas that were raised by the interviewees, and are intended to provide more specific detail on ways forward for the Global Network. They are presented here to inform the next stage of network proposal development and resource mobilization.

More detailed plans and activities will need to be built on these recommendations through a collaborative approach that gives network members the opportunity to determine priorities and reach consensus and specific ways forward.

4.1.1 *Rationale for the Global Network*

Despite widespread agreement among international humanitarian agencies and growing evidence on the need to strengthen the role of SNGOs in humanitarian response and resilience, the field is under-resourced.

Although some international actors increasingly recognize the potential for SNGOs to help address gaps in aid effectiveness, and some modest initiatives have emerged, these do not operate in a strategic or global fashion to influence policy and debates.

More and more SNGOs are recognizing the need to participate in networks in order to further their strategic and operational goals. While these actors continue to call for longer-term capacity building support, the lack of sustained response has led some to establish alternative mechanisms.

Through efforts over the past decade, SNGOs have discovered that engaging with other SNGOs yields collective benefits in terms of learning, organizational development and policy influencing. The Global Network seeks to build on these efforts to establish a unique first for the humanitarian sector: a network of SNGOs involved in disaster resilience, response and recovery that will work to address critical and longstanding gaps in aid effectiveness.

4.1.2 *Vision and Mission*

The vision of the network should be to contribute to an international humanitarian system that is more global in terms of its composition and its workings, more attuned to national and local realities, and more able to position humanitarian, recovery and resilience work in the broader context of development progress

The mission of the network should be to promote improved contribution by SNGOs to international disaster resilience, response and recovery efforts, in terms of knowledge, policy and practice

This goal should be achieved through collaborative work against the outcome areas as set out below.

4.1.3 Outcomes

Outcome 1: SNGOs collaborate with each other globally to enhance their performance in resilience, response and recovery efforts

Any single organization or group cannot solve challenges faced in disaster resilience, response and recovery work. Effective solutions will require the collaboration of many organizations, working together over time. The network should recognize this and strive to bring diverse SNGOs together through networking in order to build the foundations for future knowledge sharing and action.

Possible activities for the network could include:

- Collaborate with potential members to identify common critical challenges that would benefit from a networked learning approach;
- Collaborate with members and other actors to draw lessons from previous experience which may be valuable;
- Support collaborative projects and exchanges between members to enable mutual learning on critical shared issues;
- Establish a program of information exchange and virtual/face-to-face learning events to enable critical issues to be discussed and lessons and experiences to be shared;
- Synthesize results into program of materials and training sessions specifically aimed at Southern NGO members.

Outcome 2: Capacity to support member development is established

Strengthening global capacity to support members' organizational development will be essential for the network to achieve significant impact.

The network should work as an umbrella body for mobilizing capacity resources from a range of donors, and use clear and systematic approaches to make grants to members on the basis of articulated needs.

Special priority should be given to those areas where there is potential for mutual capacity strengthening across SNGOs through training, exchanges, fellowships and mentoring.

Possible activities for the network include:

- Undertake a survey of donors, traditional and new, who are interested in capacity building issues to identify possible funding partners;
- Develop proposals for funds to be mobilized from a range of donors;
- Develop principles and guidelines for providing capacity building resources to members, including criteria for selecting grantees;
- Develop a 'Members Fund' to provide technical assistance grants to strengthen operational, organizational, research, knowledge management, communications, public affairs and policy advisory capacity of members, with an emphasis on building on existing member capacity and south-south learning;
- Where appropriate, organize targeted information, training and capacity building programs to address common challenges;

- Establish systematic means by which the effectiveness of capacity building support can be evaluated.

Outcome 3: SNGOs participate actively in global policy discussions and debates and develop stronger common advocacy positions

The network should seek to advocate for changes in three distinct areas: changes in attitudes and awareness, changes in knowledge and practices, and changes in policy.

The aim should be improving understanding of the potential of SNGOs to contribute to effectiveness of humanitarian cooperation efforts, and how this can work in practice. This should focus on establishing a stronger voice and presence for SNGOs in key national and international debates on humanitarian and resilience issues.

Possible activities for the network include:

- To actively engage the sector on key messages related to Southern capacity and Southern organizations;
- To introduce new ideas and concepts into capacity and partnerships debates;
- To introduce evidenced-based innovative practices which have been successfully developed by members into the mainstream sector.

Outcome 4: Research and evidence base on SNGO contribution and effectiveness is established

Much work in capacity building to date has been informed by a 'try it and see' mentality. The network should address this by developing a program of analysis and research to strengthen evidence on capacity and contribution of SNGOs to humanitarian efforts globally and nationally.

The emphasis should be on a more systematic, experimental approach, ensuring that all network activities include a focus on gathering evidence about the process and outcomes of efforts.

Possible activities for the network include:

- Members to work together to generate evidence on the role of SNGOs in disaster resilience, recovery and response in different regions;
- Undertake a ongoing program of research and analysis to learn how SNGOs can work together effectively in networks and build capacity;
- Publication of high-quality Southern research in the North, to be disseminated proactively through relevant contacts and networks.

4.2 Implementing the Recommendations

The potential network members should use the above recommendations to work together and develop clear strategies and activities in each of the outcome areas, as well as plans for resource mobilization.

A small steering group (or group of champions) should be established in the next few

months, and include representatives from an initial set of members. The group will be expanded as the project proceeds, to include representatives from Southern partners.

4.2.1 Staffing and network management

The network should aim to establish a secretariat in one of the regional hubs for humanitarian assistance (Nairobi, Bangkok, etc.). In the initial phases, and potentially for the first few years, this will mean negotiating some form of hosting arrangement with an existing, credible organization that can provide administrative, legal and financial management infrastructure for the secretariat.

A key role of this secretariat will be to establish the governance and accountability structures necessary for the effective functioning of the network, including the decision-making systems and structures. Additional formal accountability measures will need to be developed, for example, reporting to donors.

The network secretariat should be responsible for coordinating and managing specific program activities, ensuring a diversity of representation across the portfolio. There is also a need for the secretariat to establish effective quality control measures in relation to outputs such as research, processes such as networking and participation in debate and capacity strengthening.

The secretariat functions should include membership management and development. Different kinds of network membership should be feasible, from information seekers through to joint program activity implementers and steering group members.

Network participants should be able to contribute to achieving the goals of the network in a variety of ways including (a) aligning their individual activities with the network mission (b) using network to add value to their own work (c) building relationships with other network participants (d) contributing to the maintenance and expansion of the network, and (e) engaging in joint activities with other network participants.

4.2.2 Communications

The Secretariat, once established, should use a variety of communications tools to extend the network and to ensure communications between existing members. In the initial period, these communications will be the primary function of the network, and so time and resources need to be invested to get clear protocols and systems in place.

These should include:

- A dedicated website with members areas
- Email discussion groups, workshops and meetings
- Network newsletters
- Program activity reports
- Research reports
- Outreach through other organizations' communications tools (e.g. ALNAP, HPN, CIVICUS, UNISDR, etc.)
- One-to-one communications between the Secretariat and members and between members.

5. Conclusions

The notion of a global SNGO network has been mooted in the past, but for a variety of reasons, has not taken off. With the growing attention being paid to aid effectiveness, resilience and local ownership, there are some clear drivers internal to the sector that are pushing SNGOs more towards the center stage in international disaster resilience, response and recovery efforts.

Moreover, there are a number of external factors, not least the growth in numbers of disasters and the limited surge capacity of the international system, which are also pushing the 'Southernization' agenda. At the present time, the need and opportunity for concerted effort in this area seem clearer than ever.

The research respondents were from a group of informed and interested actors, leaders of SNGOs with long experience of engaging in disaster related issues. From their collective perspective, the need for a global network was clear. The mandate, in terms of what it might do, was also relatively clear and consistent, although of course there were a range of strategic and operations details that needed to be ironed out. The feasibility – in terms of whether such a network would be supported by the international system – was where the most critical questions were raised.

The need to engage members and donors was seen as a problem that needed to be dealt with simultaneously. It was felt that there was growing scope for such a network to be supported, but that it would need creative and strategic resource mobilization. It was felt that the most visionary of existing donors together with a range of new donors should be sought out in order to help turn the vision of the network into a reality.

For many of the respondents, the proposed network is an idea whose time has come. The degree of consistency in responses about its functions and mandate, and about the possible areas of recommendations, go some way to illustrating the extent of shared demand for the network.

For future success, the proposed network will need to walk its talk. There will need to be concerted, distributed leadership across a network of fully engaged and committed actors who are willing to share their ideas and experience fully, in pursuit of common goals. If this core pillar of the network is in place, it is to be hoped the other elements – resources, advocacy opportunities, collaborations and so on - will surely follow.

Annex I: Key Informant List

Southern NGO representatives

Semhar Araia, Diaspora African Women's Network

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Northern NGOs and Networks

Nan Buzzard, ICVA

David Hockaday, Start Network

John Mitchell, ALNAP

Annex II: Stages of Network Development²¹

Network Development Phase	Potential	Coalescing	Maturing	Stewardship
What networks looks like	Loose network of people with similar needs and interests	Members come together to formally launch the network and initiate shared activities	Development of network identity, culture, practices	Establishing the network as a sustainable presence for members and a credible voice amongst external actors
Typical activities	Discover common ground, identify demand, preparations to launch network	Establish the initial value of exchange and dialogue across members, work on the right design and process for the network	Establish a presence, a way of working, a learning agenda, manage growth	Sustain energy, renew and expand interests, gain voice and influence, engage with wider world

²¹ Adapted from Wenger, E (2002) Communities of Practice

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