Acceleration Of Alliances: A Networked Way Of Working

Definition

By 2030, stakeholders will increasingly create alliances, integrate their structures for mutual benefit, and build on shared interests and objectives.[1] An acceleration of alliances between NGOs and new actors will create a networked[2] way of working in the humanitarian system, creating interdependence and strengthening connections between actors*.*

Key insights

NGOs will have to be part of more diverse alliances to continue to be relevant and access resources

Funding from the international community and private companies will be increasingly directed toward alliances and networks that can provide a systematic and transnational response, not singular actors.[3]

Alliances will be among organizations with similar objectives though they are still likely to face the challenge of cultural tensions

NGO alliances will more likely be among organizations with similar objectives. However, organizational cultural clashes will continue to slow progress toward a fully networked response.[4]

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[1] Oxford Dictionary (2017), retrieved on 20 November 2019

[2] "Network" definition: "Formal or informal structures that link actors (individuals or organisations) who share a common interest on a specific issue or a general set of values." Perkin, E. & Court, J. (2005) Networks and Policy Processes in International Development: A Literature Review, Overseas Development Institute, Working Paper 252, pg 2

[3] Gray, B. and Stites, J. (2013) Sustainability through Partnerships: Capitalizing on Collaboration, Pennsylvania State University, Network for Business Sustainability, pg 11

[4] Balboa, C. M. (2014) How Successful Transnational NGOs Set Themselves Up for Failure on the Ground, *World Development* 54 (2014), pgs 273–287

Hybrid system

The types of partnerships and alliances will diversify. New models of networking will rise that use for-profit enterprises to invest in their programming, creating an alternate model of funding to reach beneficiaries and to survive as bigger networks.[5] Thus, the profit/non-profit hybrid system's importance will grow.

Changes by 2030

➢ **From Western to multipolar world: multipolar alliances**

For decades, Western norms and principles have heavily influenced the biggest international donors and humanitarian organizations. However, new actors that have begun investing in the sector are growing in importance, and others are only just beginning to be recognized. Middle Eastern donors and the BRICS countries are only two of the most important blocs.[6]

As the world grows increasingly multipolar, non-Western countries and national/local organizations are looking to create their own space, expanding the diversity of partnerships and donors in the humanitarian system. INGOs of Western origin are also looking for alliances and partnerships with donors and organizations from the Global South. For example, Action by Churches Together (ACT Alliance) is a coalition working on development, humanitarian issues, and advocacy, linking 144 churches and faith-based organizations in over 100 countries.[7] Such engagements are likely to continue to grow.

➢ **Beyond transactional partnership to an alliance**

Local implementing partners and advocacy organizations are being increasingly recognized as humanitarian actors in their own right. Creating alliances between local NGOS and INGOS has the potential to enable each group to benefit from the other's experience and to improve the quality of care for vulnerable communities. However, to achieve the full potential of a networked approach, alliances and partnerships would need to move beyond the transactional interaction, as is often the case.[8]

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[5] This type of network is already in place and is typified by BRAC. Stitching BRAC International, What We Do, retrieved 20 November 2019

[6] Global Humanitarian Assistance (2016) *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report*, Development Initiatives

[7] ACT Alliance, How We Help, retrieved on November 2019

[8] Pesqueira, L. (2017) NGOs and Businesses: From Philanthropy to Transformation, EGADE Business School, Tecnológico de Monterrey, 4 May 2017

Many partnerships between INGOs and local NGOs have been structured around the funding or capacity building of local partners. These partnerships have been criticized for their top-down approach based on a unilateral transfer of skills, in which INGOs make limited efforts to change their own structure or ways of working to make partnerships more equitable.[9] The reason for this is the business-like neoliberal structure of NGOs today, which incentivizes profit and henceforth is resistant to drastic change. However, the growing recognition of the role of local NGOs in the sector could challenge this distortion, and the move to fund local NGOs more directly, as has been called for by some groups,[10] could begin to invert the power structures that have previously characterized many alliances and partnerships.

Supporting this trend further, INGOs such as Care and Oxfam have already signed the Charter for Change, an initiative launched in 2015 by 50 Southern-based NGOs to localize humanitarian aid, urging international organizations to change the way they work.[11] Specifically, this would entail shifting decision-making responsibility to the Global South while maintaining advocacy networks in the Global North.

➢ **A cross-sectoral system: Toward bigger networks (but with limits)**

The increased competition between humanitarian actors and the trend toward alliances pushes NGOs to look to diversify traditional modalities of operations, advocacy, and fundraising. A standard model of coordination, mostly between INGOs and international organizations, has limitations. The emergence and empowerment of new humanitarian actors such as private companies and local NGOs means that alliances will need to become more inclusive as traditional and new humanitarian actors find ways to work together.[12]

There are different depths of partnerships, ranging from coordination of efforts, to collaboration in designing joint positioning or programming, to a more formal alliance that could provide a platform to institutionalize interactions, creating a shared obligation. The formulation of the latter requires a much greater investment of resources and as a result is likely to be formed by organizations with similar mandates and goals.

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[9] Eade, D. (2010) Capacity Building: Who Builds Whose Capacity? In Cornwall, A. and D. Eade (2010) *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*, Practical Action Publishing in association with Oxfam GB, Warwickshire pgs 203–214 pgs 209–210

[10] Network for Empowered Aid Response (2016) NEAR's Commitments to the World Humanitarian Summit: Closing the Gap – Reinforce, Do Not Replace Local Capacities (May 2016)

[11] *Charter for Change: Localisation for Humanitarian Aid,* July 2015

[12] Altahir, A. A., Rethinking the Relationship of International NGOs and Local Partners, ATHA, retrieved on 20 November 2019

The functionality of all types of partnerships, particularly for alliances, depends on the institutional culture and practices of each organization. Though the selection of partners is likely founded on the commonality of goals across the alliance, the ethos of each agency is similarly important. For example, organizations that are more inclined to speak publicly on issues or rights violations could jeopardize the operational presence of other partners who rely on the acceptance of governments or parties to a conflict for access.

The ability to progress with a networked way of working relies on community building, which underpins the values and standards of work for the alliance.[13] Every network and alliance needs to have a common framework, policy, and goals to be efficient: these conditions might be easier to establish with a like-minded organization but more difficult to build, representing the gauntlet of actors involved in the humanitarian space. As a result, the more diverse formulation of alliances will likely be slower to evolve as trust is built.

The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN Network)[14] of the UN, which brings together all United Nations agencies working in nutrition to break the cycle of malnutrition across generations, is an example of a cross-sectoral and inter-actor network. The SUN Network was founded in response to a "fragmented and dysfunctional" international architecture.[15] It makes civil society, donors, UN agencies, and the private sector collaborate to support country-led, multi-sectoral strategies to combat malnutrition. Bond is another kind of network, which is especially active in advocacy, speaking with a common voice. Furthermore, the Bond network generates money through member subscriptions and paid-for service. Bond also receives grants, including strategic funding from the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.[16]

Uncertainties

➢ **Open versus closed systems**

Will there be a cultural and normative clash between traditional versus non-traditional humanitarian actors or will they find common ground to work together? How will professionals from differing agencies design and implement shared principles and standards for engagement across cultural lines, in light of the challenges and tensions these may elicit?

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[13] Ramalingam, B., Mendizabal, E., and Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2008) Strengthening Humanitarian Networks: Applying the Network Functions Approach, Overseas Development Institute, pg 6

[14] U.N, The SUN Network, retrieved on 21 November 2019

[15] U.N, The History of the SUN Movement, retrieved on 25 April 2017

[16] Bond, About Us, retrieved on 21 November 2019

The ability of humanitarian actors to overcome these challenges and create open alliances that can foster innovation and look beyond the more traditional breakdown of groups in the sector will be critically important. Without meeting the potential cultural challenges of diversifying members and being open to including new participants, alliances could become closed groups of like-minded institutions and a stumbling block to the potential creativity of a networked system.

> ➢ **Equality versus competition and power**

Will alliances reach their own goals or will traditional power structures limit the space for equitable relationships?

If traditional humanitarian actors are unable to move beyond transactional partnerships in which dominance is maintained through financial power and scale, then the resources, skills, and capacities of all alliance members are unlikely to be fully exploited. Governance in alliances must be shared and common resources developed to create the space for innovation and for efficiencies to be gained. Whether traditional humanitarian actors are willing or able to relinquish control over their resources on a large scale is as yet unclear.