

Head office attitudes towards inter-organisational learning in Irish non-governmental organisations

Caroline Forsyth^a and Malcolm MacLachlan^{a,b*}

^a*Centre for Global Health*; ^b*School of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland*

The Paris Declaration seeks to increase the effectiveness of international aid. Donor-to-donor cooperation is seen as a key element of this. Given that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often play a mediating role between donors and recipients, the importance of NGOs harmonising their activities has also been realised. While the value of mechanisms to achieve organisational learning within NGOs is becoming increasingly appreciated, the dynamics involved in sharing organisational learning between NGOs, as a means of harmonising their activities, are poorly understood. Given the significant flows of both public and governmental funding through NGOs, it is important to ensure that NGOs are both accountable for it and able to share their learning with others. This study explores the attitudes of senior head office NGO staff in Ireland towards inter-organisational learning between NGOs working on health-related projects in Africa. The strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats associated with sharing organisational learning are explored through key informant interviews with representatives from 10 NGOs. Content analysis of the transcripts identifies a tension between positive and negative feelings about sharing organisational learning. These tensions include a recognition of the possible increased collaborative power and profile to influence government or raise funds, along with concerns over possible loss of identity; an anticipated increased knowledge of the sector, along with concern about the relatively weaker positioning of smaller NGOs; the desire to be open with others involved in similar work, along with the fear of initiatives being stolen and the consequences of disclosing poor outcomes; the value of a more structured way of relating to each other, along with a concern with being over-structured in their relations, or losing influence in collaborative efforts; and the desire to learn from others along with frustration that NGOs existing mechanisms and commitments to achieve organisational learning are insufficient. These tensions, while real, need not necessarily prohibit attempts to promote organisational learning between NGOs and, in so doing, contribute to increasing the effectiveness of international aid. The extension of the present analysis to collaborations facilitated through strategic alliances is recommended.

Introduction

Aid flows to least developed countries (LDC) increased from about US\$ 60 billion per annum in the 1990s to US\$ 100 billion by 2005, and they are expected to climb 30% further to US\$ 130 billion by 2010 (Burrall *et al.* 2006, p. 1). Yet it is argued that aid increases will not help reduce poverty in the absence of major improvements in the quality of aid (Action Aid 2005, Killick 2005). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) notes that ‘donors . . . could do a much better job at delivering aid more effectively’ (2006, p. 4). The 2005 Paris Declaration, drawn up by over 100 donor

*Corresponding author. Email: malcolm.maclachlan@tcd.ie

and recipient countries, recommends a series of reforms regarding how the business of aid should be conducted, in order to increase its impact and make achievement of the Millennium Development Goals a more realistic possibility (see OECD 2006).

The base of the OECD's 'aid effectiveness pyramid' is donor-to-donor harmonisation, a process whereby donors aspire to be more collectively effective and less burdensome on recipient countries through such means as establishing common arrangements, simplifying procedures and sharing information. While the Paris Declaration seeks to change how donors and recipients behave, this also requires that intermediaries participate in the changes and take on board the idea of harmonisation (along with alignment, ownership and mutual accountability). Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which often play a mediating role between donors and recipients (Martens 2005) should therefore examine more closely how they can work together to make aid more effective.

Anticipating these developments, Edwards (1997, p. 246) argued that:

NGOs need to develop ways of working that are less focused on promoting their own profile, and more concerned with building alliances, working with others, and dividing up roles and responsibilities in a collaborative way. More openness to new ideas and a greater willingness to learn will be essential in the context of new actors and problems

Edwards *et al.* (1999) also recognised that the rapidly changing global context was opening up new possibilities for NGOs to relate to each other in different and healthier ways, fostering the possibility of genuine partnerships.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, organisational learning (OL) has become increasingly valued by NGOs working in international aid (Britton 2003, 2005). However, OL is variously defined, with different authors emphasising different aspects. Argote (1999) noted that OL has been plagued by a plethora of definitions. The adoption of any one of these is therefore, in some sense, arbitrary, but it should be guided by 'fit-for-purpose' considerations.

The vast majority of published research on OL among international aid NGOs has focused upon OL from an internal perspective (see, for instance, Pettit *et al.* 2003, MacLachlan *et al.* in press) (i.e. vertically within an organisation) rather than from an external perspective (i.e. horizontally between organisations, through the formation of strategic alliances and networks). While there are undoubted benefits to network participation, it is clear that there may also be costs (Liebler and Ferri 2004, van Zee and Engel 2004). However, the idea of harmonisation reaches beyond and implies much closer working relationships, facilitated by organisations sharing what they know, and indeed how and what they learn. The Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness (2008) has called for the building of coalitions and networks for enhanced civil society coordination and impact. If this is to be achieved and to make a meaningful contribution to increasing the effectiveness of aid, we need to understand the attitude of NGOs toward such collaborative possibility.

It is important to distinguish between two different forms of collaborative working. One of these may be described as egocentric networks, which concentrate on specific actors, or egos, and those who have relations with them. In egocentric networks, the concern is with analysing the relationships between a network of actors (alters) with whom the participant has some relationship (Marsden 2005). These sorts of predefined networks can be contrasted with less static, more dynamic, strategic collaborations where organisations temporarily combined resources in pursuit of a common goal (Schaefer 2004). Of course, subgroups of members of an egocentric network, grouped around a

single umbrella organisation, may also be involved in strategic alliances that reach beyond and have distinct goals from the overall-network group. Thus networks and strategic alliances may overlap with each other but each have different functions. Although both may involve the sharing of resources and/or knowledge, they are different modes of operating.

Allee (2003) affirms the value of knowledge, asserting that knowledge is much more than information and that, in the process of sharing information, new knowledge is created. However, sharing knowledge presents a huge challenge in a competitive market in which NGOs are competing for funding against one another. Moreover, the view that knowledge derived through organisational learning is expensive and therefore should not be shared easily (Grant 1998) may constitute a serious barrier to resource-poor NGOs. Despite its clear importance, work on NGO attitudes towards inter-organisational learning is lacking. This paper seeks to contribute towards this need. In particular, it explores the perspectives of representatives of NGOs – all of whom were working on health-related projects in Africa – toward the idea of ‘horizontal’ or inter-organisational learning, i.e. the act of sharing their knowledge with other NGOs working in their sector. Forsyth and MacLachlan (2006) have reported that while Irish NGOs work all over the world, Africa is a particular focus of their activity, with up to 16 different NGOs working simultaneously in any one country, and 12 of these working on at least one health-related project.

Irish NGOs constitute a particularly interesting test case for attitudes toward inter-organisational learning in international aid. In the aftermath of the Asian Tsunami, the Irish public was estimated to have donated 0.7 of gross national product (GNP), one third more than estimates for the next highest donors (Australia and Netherlands).¹ The population of Ireland, circa 4 million, raised over €75 million, leading some NGOs to request that people stop funding their Tsunami appeals. Yet despite such strong public interest and support of NGOs, few feedback mechanisms offer public accountability. Such significant public expenditure surely justifies not just monitoring and evaluation, but also learning from experience, and sharing this learning to prepare the sector better to respond to such crises in future. While these concerns are by no means unique to Ireland, its high level of NGO activity and public engagement make it a strong test case for exploring organisational learning between NGOs in the donor country. The lack of research on this, the ‘supply side’, is an important omission in the literature. While local exigencies may facilitate knowledge sharing in-country, ‘head office’ agendas may prohibit the full benefit of such sharing. Thus, while acknowledging that a variety of organisational learning mechanisms may exist ‘in-country’ and between organisations at individual or team level, this paper directly addresses the issue of organisational learning between organisations at the organisational level, through NGO head offices.

Methodology

Participants in this study were senior staff members of 10 NGOs selected from the 35 NGO members of Dóchas, an Irish NGO umbrella organisation which includes approximately half of Irish NGOs working in international aid contexts. Members of Dóchas, an information-sharing network, are, by virtue of their participation in this network, explicitly committed to learning across the sector through what has been described in the literature as an ‘egocentric’ network (i.e. around Dóchas). Interviews were held with the Director, Coordinator, or another person authorised to represent the organisation’s views, during April–June 2006. Twenty member organisations were randomly selected and invited to participate in the study. Initial contact was by e-mail to each organisation, asking them to provide the name of a person authorised to speak on behalf of the organisation with regard to its views

on organisational learning. The people named were then e-mailed a letter and an accompanying information leaflet outlining the proposed research, asking if they were willing to participate in a face-to-face interview and giving advance notice of a follow-up phone call to try and recruit them into the sample. Respondents were assured of anonymity, that they were free not to answer any questions, and that they could end the interview at any stage.

Representatives of 15 organisations, all of whom were engaged in health-related projects, agreed to be interviewed. It was anticipated that interviews with representatives of 10 different organisations would reach data saturation, but provision was made to undertake additional interviews if necessary. Each of the 15 organisations was deemed suitable for inclusion in the study, with the 10 individuals being selected purely on the basis of their immediate availability. The 10 organisations included represented a good mixture of the scope of work in which Irish NGOs are involved. The organisations represented children's welfare, volunteering and missionary endeavours (both Protestant and Catholic). They included a large long-established NGO with a broad-based agenda, two organisations based outside of Dublin, one organisation with a general broad-based agenda, and one very specialised NGO.

Interviews followed a modified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) procedure (Barry 1986). In the SWOT analysis, participants were asked about the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats that inter-organisational learning presented to their organisation. The SWOT assessment may encompass both internal and external dynamics. The combination of these four factors is argued to present a broad spectrum of strategic issues and concerns relating to the topic being explored. Interviews were audio tape recorded (following the signing of a consent form), and transcribed in full. Transcripts were coded and the main themes were extracted from each interview. The themes were then clustered according to similarity of content. A random sample of 20 segments was extracted from the transcripts for an independent judge to assign to the categories identified by the researcher. Inter-rater reliability between the researcher and the independent judge was 95%.

Results

The results are divided according to the structure of the main question: 'What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding organisational learning across the NGO sector in Ireland?' Emergent themes are described as 'major' if they were characteristic of all, or almost all interviewees, and 'minor' if they were characteristic of a minority of interviewees.

Strengths

Major strengths of inter-organisational learning included the sharing of information and expertise; NGOs' knowledge of the sector and the sector's knowledge of them; and the collaborative power of NGOs working together.

Sharing of information and expertise

Respondents highlighted benefits to their organisation from shared information and expertise in terms of generating funding, being able to develop policies on common issues, determining what proposals were likely to succeed or fail, and logistical matters such as how to organise visas for overseas travel:

Huge benefits, I would think. Everybody has different expertise or experience and there's a lot of information sharing and expertise sharing [in] coming up with good working policies and guidelines in the different sectors. (Respondent 1)

[T]he sharing of knowledge and internal processes within . . . [government agencies] is very useful to me as well, so there's a lot that you can learn from other people and that's really the benefit. (Respondent 3)

In terms of things like best practice, it's good to hear at this level if such and such didn't work, then we can report back and say they're doing that, definitely there's huge learning curves . . . if someone had submitted a proposal to the Irish government and they rejected [it] for whatever [reason], it's great [to know] so then we don't have to waste the time doing the same thing, so yes, there are huge tangible benefits [to] it. (Respondent 6)

Sharing resources, everything from salaries up to codes of practice in how you deliver programmes and what are the issues and how you present the issue in Ireland . . . for all those reasons I think it's important. (Respondent 8)

NGO knowledge of sector and sector knowledge of NGOs

Belonging to a network allowed organisations to get to know others in the sector involved in similar work and to make stronger connections with them. It also afforded organisations a platform to establish themselves in the sector, which was particularly useful to new or small organisations, or long-standing organisations that had changed their *modus operandi*:

I think if you want the right messages to go back to government and other donors, then it's better to know the sector and to know the people within the sector . . . if we were in the dark and on our own, they wouldn't know how we work and they would probably still have the same perception of us as we were back in the 70s, and they wouldn't know about the new programmes we deal with or the new ways we work for example. (Respondent 3)

Probably be a selfish reason – the recognition of our organisation, so we're well known within the NGO fraternity which is a good thing . . . We know how to move around but also it's a good information resource . . . like hearing about funding situations or possible initiatives or things like that. (Respondent 7)

That we are seen by others to be a good member of the development NGO community here in Ireland, and that we're willing to pull our weight to play a role. (Respondent 9)

Collaborative power of NGOs

Being able to speak and negotiate with one voice on issues affecting all the organisations, such as dealing with the government and representing the sector to the public, was also found to be beneficial:

If the group decides ok we want to develop a policy on monitoring and evaluation, that if it's developed for all the NGOs [and] then put to Irish Aid,² they might fund it because again, they can see instead of having to fund these five or six NGOs individually, they can see the combined benefit. (Respondent 5)

[Collaboration confers] enormous strengths in that we can speak with one voice at times which is very good. I think it just doesn't make sense not to have collaboration. The sector is going to be much stronger when we can come together on certain issues, the Make Poverty History campaign, for example . . . Over and above, it makes practical

common sense that people who are involved in the same areas of work . . . have some opportunity to come together on occasion and have a representative body waving the flag. (Respondent 8)

One of the very good things that we have done is some of the joint lobbying and advocacy . . . (Respondent 9)

Other minor themes also emerged, such as use of organisational learning in helping new organisations to set up in Ireland:

I get benefit in liaising with other international organisations who have set up here. Their experience of setting up here and the progression they've gone through and how they plan it that has been very helpful. (Respondent 3)

Another minor theme was increased professionalism in the sector:

The gains are that we can contribute to raising the game of the whole sector. I think there is a lot to be gained from that. In that the professionalism of the sector is enhanced, and if that is enhanced, the quality of the work on the ground is enhanced, therefore, the benefits to the people in developing countries are greater. Also the more professional we become, the more people will recognise that and the more they'll want to continue to support us. (Respondent 9)

Weaknesses

Major emergent themes included NGO limitations, the level of honesty and openness among NGOs, poor organisational learning within organisations, and NGOs having a reactive rather than proactive approach to their work.

Constraints of NGO resources

Many organisations felt constrained by a lack of human and financial resources, which meant they could not invest as much as they would have liked in linking up with other organisations:

I think one of the problems comes down to the workload. You just haven't got the time to do it and yet it could make a big difference . . . the thought of going to talk to another group about what they're [doing] . . . I would have difficulty giving it the time, even though it would be beneficial. (Respondent 4)

Several interviewees noted that the larger NGOs may have the capacity to ensure that someone is there all the time, but that the smaller NGOs do not have that capacity:

[T]he demands that can be made, and your time, and the expectation that if you are involved with other organisations that you're not just turning up at committee meetings, that you're a working member of . . . and that you do have a contribution to make . . . therefore it's the drain on my time. (Respondent 9)

Level of honesty and openness among NGOs

Some respondents felt that openness to sharing was sometimes inhibited by organisations wanting to protect their own market and NGO competition for funding; as a result, they were often reluctant to share anything that would compromise their market share:

All charitable organisations, they want the same person's wallet so they are in competition, so like there is only a certain level of, you know; you just don't open the doors and say 'come on in and take away all of my ideas'. (Respondent 1)

I think people are, at the end of the day, protecting their own interests here because it's such a competitive market . . . We can learn from each other but there is an element of trust and so long as people's margins aren't affected, they'll share information. It's that simple. (Respondent 6)

[O]rganisations are jealous of their own, or want to keep their own power or economic base. (Respondent 7)

I think there's a tendency . . . for organisations, particularly overseas NGOs, to protect what they have and say 'Oh no, we never made a mess here.' Big organisations can afford to do it [sharing OL], because they're so big, but anyone else won't do it. (Respondent 6)

Poor OL within organisations

While OL across the sector is desirable, perhaps a prerequisite is for effective OL within the sector's constituent organisations. Some respondents observed that NGO representatives changed from meeting to meeting, or pointed to a lack of formal structure within their organisation to share the information they obtained at meetings:

If we all had one person who was the liaison person who knew everything and went to everything, it would be great, but it's not the reality . . . So that's a problem, sending the right people to attend the meetings and the right people to share the information. (Respondent 6)

[T]he energy required and the resources needed to have really in-depth cooperation; like the liaison person that would be at every NGO and would be in charge of that kind of thing. And bringing back ideas . . . if I go to a . . . meeting about HIV/AIDS, where do I bring that back, where do I file that? And if that goes up along the organisation, and they decide that we're not really interested in that, then that's really the end of that. (Respondent 7)

Reactive versus proactive approach

Respondents perceived a reactive approach to issues at times, namely that NGOs were not proactive enough in dealing with situations or in deciding in what direction the sector needs to go:

Organisations here tend to be reactive here rather than proactive. It's when it all hits the fan that people said 'I didn't know'; it's one of the areas that I fear. (Respondent 6)

It seems to be quite ad hoc and . . . the meetings bring about reactive rather than proactive results. (Respondent 3)

Minor themes that arose included the distance/time/cost element for NGOs not based in Dublin, where collective meetings are generally held, and that sometimes the meetings 'are a bit ad hoc . . . and often too late'.

Opportunities

Major emergent themes involved opportunities for collating research, to have greater influence over public perceptions of NGOs and for joint fundraising.

Research

Respondents perceived opportunities were seen with regard to the potential for harnessing research in the sector which could result in better use of limited resources and increase its professionalism. While some research in this area is being conducted, some organisations professed a lack of knowledge of this work or an inability to easily access the results:

I think there's huge scope for [research on OL]. Who gathers all that, where is all that information, all the theses that people like you're doing, where are they? That shared learning is not available. There is a huge body of work there that maybe might have some use in it . . . why reinvent the wheel. But also that whole research field I think might be something where NGOs could help out each other . . . And that whole thing of research, like all the ones in . . . development studies. Their theses are all sitting out there. Who reads them? Who even has a list of them? (Respondent 7)

Another possible thing is that people like yourself, I suppose there are people doing research in different things and that you can possibly tap into that, a lot of this organisational learning is having the time to pull information together. (Respondent 5)

Salary surveys that were done that you have to pay for rather than being collected and collated here in Ireland by Dóchas as the coordinating body, that should be a priority, that is one issue rather, they're the kind of things, issues on governance and HR [Human Resources] they're things . . . just slow down and get the basics right. (Respondent 6)

Public perception of NGOs

Some respondents cited an opportunity to improve the perceptions the Irish public have of NGOs through Dóchas, which could be a figurehead for the sector and speak on its behalf:

One of the good things is to see the director getting quoted and interviewed on issues affecting all the organisations on whether it's legislation or the Tsunami, and that's good. Then it looks like we're speaking with one voice and if the public feel that the money was wasted, you have the director explaining, which is good. (Respondent 6)

I suppose one of the things is the public perception and I'm not quite sure if any research has been done on that field. The perception of the different NGOs. What's the difference between them? Is there any difference? Is it the way they do things – to the person on the street? (Respondent 7)

[We should] have a common message to the public as well as to the government and that's really important. (Respondent 3)

Joint fundraising

Joint fundraising was felt to be a useful way to work together for the benefit of the organisations, the Irish public and the beneficiaries, as it would reduce the administrative costs of fundraising for smaller organisations, and there would be less open competition between NGOs trying to raise money from the public:

If we were more coordinated in our efforts towards fundraising in Ireland, that would help Irish organisations much more . . . we would actually be spending less on trying to attract that money so we would save quite a lot of money . . . I think that coordinating the agencies for public fundraising would bring in standards that would professionalise [the sector]. (Respondent 3)

[O]ne area in which [it] is quite difficult to get collaboration is in the area of joint fundraising . . . I know there are many organisations that would like to promote joint fundraising. Along

the lines of the UK model . . . [but] a couple of the big organisations here are not in favour of that, for their own reasons . . . The one time I think there is a case to be made for NGOs collaborating in fundraising is at times of major disaster. (Respondent 9)

And in relation to the Asian Tsunami:

We could have done an awful lot more in a sense that we could certainly have avoided the over-funding part . . . the big organisations, they were completely over funded and that is unfortunate, because other organisations who are much smaller don't have the big budgets to do the marketing to get in those funds, [and they] suffered because there were even less funds for those. (Respondent 3)

Finally, one respondent suggested restructuring of the sector, such that larger NGOs would work through local NGOs around the country that already would have links with the local population: 'bigger NGOs could be pumping money down to the smaller NGOs and the sector could be supporting itself' (Respondent 8).

Threats

Major emergent threats were competitiveness, the dangers of over-structuring, non-member NGOs finding themselves on the 'outside', losing out through joint fundraising, new NGOs taking away from more established ones and a loss of organisational profile.

Competitiveness

Competitiveness was mentioned as a possible threat in terms of some agencies losing financially if they gave up too much information regarding their donors or marketing strategies:

You have to be realistic. It's 2006, we're all in the NGO sector and all NGOs have to be run now in a business-like fashion . . . We probably all have the same objective at the end of the day. It's to help the developing world and its people . . . But it is a business. (Respondent 1)

There is also the element of fundraising competition between the different groups . . . There's a lot of flag flying that goes with emergencies, but if you want to raise money for your agency, then it's a means to an end. (Respondent 4)

I think people have started to realise as well, they've got to protect their marketing information and their bankrolling, and that kind of stuff. (Respondent 6)

Losing their share of the market, that's it. (Respondent 7)

Over-structuring

The possibility that over-structuring of the sector would cramp organisations' individuality or flair, and promote development of a 'sameness' among the NGOs was an important theme. This however, was not seen as imminent at the moment because of the diversity of the constituent NGOs:

Provided it [OL] wouldn't be too structured. If it became over structured I think it could just cramp the initiative for some. (Respondent 2)

I think you can't oblige anyone to [join inter-OL] . . . if everyone is being told to do the same thing, then it kind of stifles progression, imagination and creativity in the market. You also have to have a little bit of competition in any market. (Respondent 3)

Being on the outside

Some respondents perceived there was a threat in not being part of an inter-organisational learning body, resulting in being left out of the information circle, which could be damaging in terms of funding from Irish Aid, and the flow of vital information:

I think in fact not being part of it is more of a threat because if you look at say the Irish government funding, they actively encourage organisations to work together, and I think until we joined Dóchas, they were a little suspicious of us. (Respondent 3)

I can only speak from my own perspective here and say that I feel that we need to be members of everything possible because we're not old enough to have enough protection in here, we're not strong enough really at this stage . . . it's really a case of can you afford not to be in things sometimes. (Respondent 6)

Joint fundraising

This view also applied to some extent to joint fundraising. If they were part of an organisational learning body, NGOs could lose a direct connection with donors who prefer to support agencies they know. The feeling was that while it could benefit smaller organisations, the larger ones would not agree to it because of possible financial loss:

You will never get the stronger organisations coming into that ever because they're sacrificing their numbers for the standards – they won't do it. (Respondent 6)

It is a complex issue, because some of the major organisations feel they can do better on their own than coming together within the family of NGOs. They feel it would undermine their ongoing fundraising strategy, which is based around a direct relationship between the agency and the individual punters who get their money, because it means if a donor provides money to an organisation that means they have the donor's name and e-mail address. (Respondent 9)

New organisations

New organisations could be seen as a potential threat because they would possibly be taking donors from existing agencies:

At the beginning everyone's your friend and helps you out; once you start becoming a threat, it's a different story . . . we're seen as a threat to a certain degree, by the big three or four maybe, here as well, . . . [because] we're hovering up the bits that they like, and that we're in here, and it should be regulated, and all this kind of stuff. (Respondent 6)

Well that's one of the things we looked at when we did our own SWOT analysis. One of them was the growth of new organisations. But also it's a challenge, it's not just a threat. (Respondent 7)

Loss of organisational profile

Finally, respondents raised the idea that being part of an inter-organisational learning network would somehow eclipse the organisation's own image in the public mind:

I think it certainly has improved in the last five years with the new understanding they [Dóchas] have with Irish Aid and the funding and having a director now and a research officer, but then I wonder if that could create its own monster, you see that was one of the things years ago with organisations, they didn't want to have a strong Dóchas because if Dóchas is in the public eye, then their names will get left behind. (Respondent 7)

Discussion and conclusions

The Paris Declaration stresses the importance of those on the 'supply side' of aid sharing information, simplifying procedures and establishing common arrangements in order to make aid delivery more effective. Inter-organisational learning between NGOs, which potentially brings these components together, is therefore a vital capacity to develop in the aid sector. Furthermore, as Edwards (1994) noted, NGOs would benefit from OL, not only in terms of being more effective, but also in terms of being more transparent and accountable to those who fund them, including the general public. The present study is the first to explore inter-OL between NGO head offices. The interviews reported here indicate that Irish NGOs are aware both of the potential benefits to be derived from OL and also of the challenges facing such an endeavour.

Positive aspects of inter-organisational learning

The interviews reveal several benefits from participating in horizontal OL, or inter-organisational initiatives, some of which reinforce findings in existing literature on this theme. Our respondents indicated that a major strength of OL between agencies was the potential it offered them individually and/or collectively to position themselves in relation to advocacy, and to fortify their public image and ability to attract funding. They also ascribed benefits to being able to formulate and articulate common policies, and share information. These responses accord with existing evidence. Liebler and Ferri (2004) found that when NGOs participate in networks, they can achieve further reach and greater impact. Within our sample, some organisations felt that being part of the Dóchas network gave them credibility in the eyes of donors. Wiewel and Hunter (1985, p. 490) similarly argue for the value of network affiliation in gaining legitimacy, particularly among the small, less established, NGOs:

By becoming part of the network . . . agencies acquire status and acceptability they could acquire on their own only after many years of effort.

In addition, horizontal networks provide scope for increasing aggregate volumes of money being channelled to aid, and could ensure a smoother distribution among organisations, in line with their capacities. Wiewel and Hunter (1985, p. 490) report that:

as small agencies have limited fund-raising capacities . . . in most communities, general fund-raising can be done far more efficiently and effectively when it is centralised . . . than if agencies attempted to raise funds on their own.

The Disaster Emergency Committee³ (DEC) in the UK provides a vivid illustration of this claim. Set up in 1963, DEC is an umbrella fundraising group for 13 NGOs that has been very successful in raising funds for its members, thereby alleviating the necessity for its members to raise their own funds. DEC has managed to develop an efficient mechanism for national fundraising and procedures that ensure a degree of accountability. It has also raised standards regarding how NGOs approach humanitarian issues, and has facilitated

coordination and communication among its members. Perhaps some of the benefits of OL in a network of NGOs could also be realised in a consortia of NGOs coming together to target a particular action, without broader networking implications.

Levinger and Mulroy (2004) reports that donors found networks useful for reducing bureaucratic correspondence with individual organisations, improving accountability and helping organisations to become more efficient. Networks also provided a means for donors to ascertain the credibility of NGOs with which they desired to work in the future. While views regarding enhanced efficacy and/or professionalism were expressed by our respondents, these were not especially prominent. The notion of networks reducing 'bureaucratic correspondence' should be considered with caution. It is clear that the efficient collection and use of knowledge has administrative costs: these costs being justified by improved performance.

Although this is going beyond the data reported here, pertinent to the point above is that some NGO marketing literature makes a virtue out of low administrative costs (sometimes claiming less than 1%) and emphasises that donated money is spent directly on the poor. Yet it is unclear that spending such a tiny percentage on planning, coordinating, monitoring, evaluating and learning should really be seen as a strong selling point. Perhaps one advantage of OL-based networks is that they could lower administrative costs without sacrificing performance by promoting economies of scale. At the same time, the distribution of some administrative costs amongst a group of affiliated organisations might make potential donors judge organisations less on indicators such as administrative costs, which alone might not reliably gauge overall performance.

Individual NGO's efforts to raise funds to respond to disasters have been problematic. Some of our respondents referred to the 'over funding' of large NGOs following the Asian Tsunami alongside the under-funding of smaller organisations. Moreover, the scramble for funding that often accompanies disasters may induce donation fatigue, perhaps aggravated by confusion arising from a plethora of connected appeals that aspire to be somehow distinct. The extent to which donation behaviour is motivated through brand loyalty and/or underpinned by a persuasive evidence base remains unclear and warrants further research. Perhaps this is the sort of research that horizontal OL networks could promote?

Negative aspects of inter-organisational learning

The interviews also brought to light several negative perceptions of the actual and potential impact of inter-organisational learning amongst representatives of member organisations. It became apparent that, while NGOs could garner significantly more power and influence by acting collaboratively, they also risked being less visible. Further, it was perceived that involvement in a horizontal network could diminish individual fundraising prospects. Irish NGOs involved in health-related projects effectively compete in a 'free market', seeking contracts from the government, and other national and multinational funding agencies, as well as contributions from the public and business sector. This is a market that is largely unregulated. The notion of fair competition is implied by the nature of the work but keen competitive interests have the potential to undermine such a presumption.

Further, respondents raised the argument that participation in an OL network might benefit some organisations more than others. As membership in networks that promote sharing of OL is generally voluntary, with organisations paying a subscription to register, organisations that do not perceive enough benefit from their membership are at liberty to withdraw (as has happened in Dóchas, although on a very small scale). It is therefore important that members recognise and experience the benefits of being part of the group.

Provan *et al.* (1980) suggested that larger agencies may derive less benefit from being part of a network because of their already existing high profile, and that they therefore can exert more power within the group because of their threat of withdrawal. Their withdrawal could significantly affect the group because of their financial input and also because their presence might lend legitimacy to the group. This concept of uneven influence was also mentioned by our participants, alongside the benefits of legitimacy by association.

As regards collective learning from less successful projects, some respondent observed reluctance on the part of certain NGOs to honestly acknowledge past failures. This was attributed to fear that either other NGOs would perceive them less favourably or that the information would somehow enter the public domain and become part of a public relations slur on the agency. This has in fact happened in the past in Ireland, rendering it difficult for afflicted organisations to recover. Further, admitting to failure could have repercussions on future funding if it became known, as funding is generally linked to successful outcomes. Finally, it was noted that poor OL within organisations was associated with ineffective horizontal OL. Of course poor OL within organisations limits the extent to which learning can be shared, and profited from, between organisations. Some commonalities in the monitoring and evaluation procedures used by NGOs could therefore promote both types of learning.

Reconciling positive and negative aspects of inter-organisational learning

The evidence from the interviews suggests respondents perceived many benefits of inter-organisational learning but, at the same time, several potential threats from greater involvement. We propose that the tension these findings illustrate could in fact be healthy ones: the need to compete for funding and to maintain an independent identity may give organisations an incentive to strive for greater efficacy, while greater cooperation could yield potentially large gains. NGOs must balance the real benefits of sharing OL – including wanting to and being seen to want to participate in structures that promote good governance – with the need to appear distinctive and independent. For highly specialised NGOs, this competition may be less of a problem than for very broadly-based NGOs, which may be competing with both other generic and more specialised NGOs.

Further, we argue that some changes in practice could induce a greater willingness amongst organisations to engage in inter-organisational learning. Much of the reluctance to engage more fully in inter-organisational learning appears to derive from short-term thinking. Engel (1993) argued that members of new networks need to remain committed to overcome the initial organisational and establishment phase, even though there will be no real benefits until the network is established. Our respondents' concerns related mostly to short-term threats while many of the gains were perceived to be more diffuse and to take longer to materialize. This suggests that adoption of a longer-term outlook amongst members and potential members would lead to recognition that what helps the sector as a whole will ultimately benefit its component members. Recognising and addressing the implicit tension between organisational (self) interest and the common purpose of poverty reduction and health enhancement must be a core aspect of NGOs sharing their learning within the sector.

In addition, we suggest that practices that would bolster trust amongst member organisations would strengthen the potential benefits from inter-organisational learning. While the literature on sharing OL in NGOs is limited, the literature on networking (one possible mechanism for sharing OL) is more substantive. Liebler and Ferri (2004) and Rosenfield

(2004) report the need for an open environment where people feel they can admit, analyse and learn from successes and mistakes, i.e. an environment which encourages organisations to share. This may be enhanced through some element of collective ownership and perhaps anonymity with regard to public presentations of lessons learned from poor outcomes. However, as Ashman (2000) cogently argues, networks cannot flourish without this trust. Similarly, some writing on strategic alliances has stressed the importance of striking a balance between knowledge creation and knowledge appropriation (Larsson *et al.* 1998). Where there is seen to be an equal opportunity between members to assess and acquire knowledge through the alliance, this results in cooperation and improved performance (Lubatkin, Florin and Lane 2001). Such knowledge sharing, whether through networks, strategic alliances or other forms of cooperative action, probably creates a degree of 'cooperative-competition' tension between the partners (Yan and Gray 2001).

A dominant theme that arose in our study was the lack of time that participants felt they or their organisation could give to OL. Guijt *et al.* (2003) report that if members do not have enough time for reflection because of the pressures of their workload, they cannot actively engage in a network. Further, Ashman (2000) found that senior leaders must support their staff in underlining the importance of networking. Liebler and Ferri (2004) also report that commitment to the network is important for it to be productive, and that making members aware of the potential they have to contribute to change in their organisations may help to strengthen commitment. There is clearly a link between the demands of networking, other workload and the extent to which people can avail of learning opportunities that might exist between NGOs. Greater commitment of member organisations and supporting staff in these roles would help to surmount many of the problems our respondents identified.

Limitations of the research

This study is a descriptive account of the patterning of views across a relatively small number of aid organisations and, as such, does not seek to be representative of the Irish NGO sector, or NGOs in general. While the sample here was accessed through the Irish NGO coordinating organisation Dóchas, not all Irish NGOs are members of this organisation, and Dóchas has a strong track record of successfully facilitating a broad range of networking and inter-NGO learning activities. Furthermore, Dóchas is by no means the only organisation to promote such activities among Irish NGOs. In an attempt to recognise the limitations of this study, the penultimate draft of this paper was circulated among the Dóchas network and feedback received incorporated, where possible, into the final draft. The views expressed in the paper should not however necessarily be taken to be comments on Dóchas, *per se*, but rather on the activities of inter-organisational learning which Dóchas members, may or may not engage in, either through Dóchas, through other networking mechanisms or under their own initiative.

While we sought participants who were senior representatives that could speak on behalf of their NGO employers, those who participated may reflect a range of seniority, as well as degree and type of experience. It is also important to acknowledge that inter-organisational learning does not only happen through collective networks or meetings, but also happens at the level of individuals from different organisations sharing their experiences in informal as well as more formal settings. As our research implicitly addressed OL at the level of more collective inter-organisational relationships, it is likely that we failed to capture this important mechanism of inter-organisational learning. The dynamic between individual and organisational levels also draws into question the extent to which different NGOs make explicit decisions regarding their knowledge

sharing activities with other NGOs, and the extent to which this may or may not occur. Individual managers, teams or Departments within NGOs may engage in inter-organisational learning, to differing extents. Finally, our informants may be considered 'single-sided' in that they described their own view without us ascertaining the views of others who were necessarily interacting with them directly, as opposed to interacting with other network members in general. As such these views can only be considered to be partial.

Conclusions

In conclusion, while this study was focused on a small number of NGOs with their head office based in the same country, we have reported on data that gives some important insights to the tensions involved in realising one aspect of the Paris Declaration. That is greater cooperation as operationalised through inter-organisational learning between NGOs working on similar issues (health-related projects) in a region that presents at least some common challenges (Africa), despite its many differences. Given the very large sums of money involved, both through funded contracts and through public donation, a higher level of accountability and code of good practice could facilitate progress along the path laid out by the Paris Declaration for NGOs involved in aid delivery in Ireland. We have argued that the identification of challenges to inter-organisational learning by participants in a networking organisation (Dóchas) does not undermine the validity of inter-organisational learning, nor alleviate the need to go on strengthening the network. We have provided evidence suggesting that respondents recognise important gains to be derived from OL and that additional steps should be taken to reinforce these benefits while alleviating potential drawbacks of greater cooperation. We recommend the extension of this type of research beyond the 'egocentric' type of network with which we have been concerned, into looser and more dynamic strategic alliances, described earlier.

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Notes

1. Data available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanitarian_response_to_the_2004_Indian_Ocean_earthquake (accessed 10 January 2006).
2. Available at <http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/about.asp> (accessed 25 April 2006).
3. DEC, available at www.dec.org.uk (accessed 17 June 2006).

Notes on contributors

Caroline Forsyth is a graduate of the Masters degree in Global Health programme at Trinity College. She has lived and worked in Zimbabwe and currently works as a Project Officer in the Research and Innovation Office, Trinity College Dublin. Mac MacLachlan is with the School of Psychology and Centre for Global Health, Trinity College Dublin. He has lived in Malawi and South Africa and worked in many African countries. He is currently Director of the multi-institutional International Doctoral Programme in Global Health (Indigo).

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