



# Collective action between Civil Society Organisations: How can networks be effective?

Anyone who works for real and lasting change, whether in their workplace, their community or their society, will almost always reach a point where they realise they have to combine their efforts and their voice with others to be able to have a real effect. Thus are organisations formed: people come together to achieve something more substantial than they would be able to alone. However, very frequently, it soon becomes clear to the people in an organisation that even what their organisation can achieve alone may not be enough and they start to look for others with whom they can combine their efforts.

ALONE, AN ORGANISATION CAN BE VULNERABLE AND CAN FIND THAT THEIR VOICE IS MARGINALISED OR SILOED. WITH OTHERS, THEY ARE HARDER TO IGNORE.

In our work, the team at Well Grounded has encountered many networks, platforms and coalitions: for organisations trying to influence politically and economically sensitive forest policy, it's a necessity to collaborate with others. Alone, an organisation can be vulnerable and can find that their voice is marginalised or siloed. With others, they are harder to ignore. In addition to developing a stronger lobbying voice, networks can be formed to share learning and expertise or even to pool resources and use them more efficiently.

However, collaboration is far from easy: even within an organisation there are challenges as individuals, teams and groups have to negotiate their place. But when you put several organisations together, the problems can be more complicated still. This paper presents some of the challenges the networks, platforms and coalitions that Well Grounded has worked with have found themselves faced with and presents some ideas about possible solutions.

In this paper, we will be using the word “network” as a generic term for networks, platforms and coalitions: groups, either formal or informal, of civil society organisations (CSOs) and, at times, individual activists.

## THE CHALLENGES

### ORIGINS AND PURPOSE

Many civil society networks that we have encountered have been created in response to an initiative by external actors, without a real impetus coming from organisations or people on the ground. This may be because a partner organisation has identified an issue that they consider to be critical and they wish to support an effective response or it could be catalysed by the preference of governments, donors and other actors to deal with a single interlocutor rather than the multiplicity of voices and nuances of opinion that may be present in civil society. Either way, in our experience a network thus formed faces challenges.

In the first place is the development of a common vision and purpose. A network does not necessarily start with a common analysis of the problem that they are tackling and its solutions and, at times, the momentum of external processes mean that networks end up following rather than setting the agenda, always reacting to events rather than laying out what they wish to see happening. This type of network can all too often develop a “presenteeism” mentality – they lobby hard for a space at the table to influence policy, but then are not clear what they want to do with it.

**IF MEMBERS DON'T AGREE ON THE PRIORITIES THAT THE NETWORK HAS CHOSEN, THEY MAY WELL NOT FEEL ANY COMMITMENT TO DELIVERING ON THOSE.**

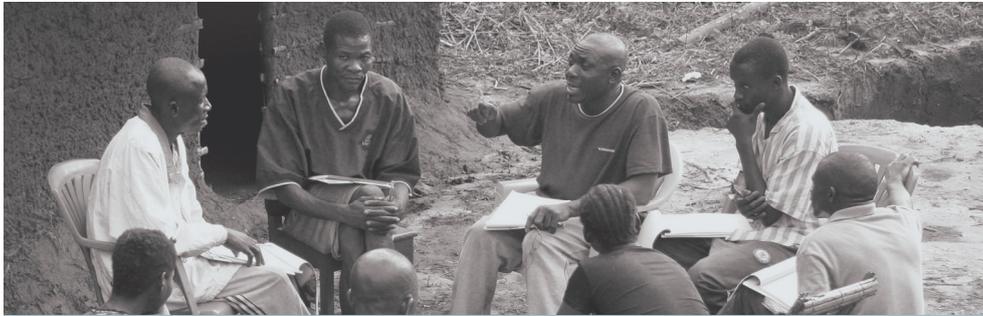
For such networks it takes a long time, if ever, for the members to feel ownership of and to lead the network. In cases where a partner has initiated it, that partner can frequently remain being the body with the final say, so the network can end up prioritising aspects of an issue that may not be central for national CSOs but are for the partner. Motivation and direction thus becomes a problem: if members don't agree on the priorities that the network has chosen, they may well not feel any commitment to delivering on those.

Added to that, the perception that with an external partner there must be funding and opportunities means that in the initial stages, many organisations and individuals may wish to join because of the benefits they hope they will gain, even if they have no real interest in the issues that the network is trying to tackle. That generates huge challenges further down the line when the network comes to developing positions, strategies and action: the members may have no shared vision and no particular interest in developing one. It also creates inertia as some members can be disinclined to act if they don't see themselves as benefiting materially.

In the case of networks formed because there is an expectation from external actors that civil society should speak with one voice, this can often result in relatively weak positions being taken by the network. Organisations that are not natural allies and may have very little in common in terms of vision, approach and strategy have to invest huge amounts of time and energy in trying to reach agreement and with such limited common ground, it may be hard to arrive at and maintain a common lobbying or policy position.

All too frequently, we have found that networks perceive that to have set

themselves up with a nice statement about their objectives is sufficient, and the time and energy of the members becomes focussed on internal politics and structural issues, whilst the overall purpose and objectives of the network are left to one side.



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## TRUST

In Well Grounded's experience, this is the biggest challenge for many of the networks we have worked with. Mistrust between members hampers information sharing, makes working relationships difficult and division of responsibilities very hard as members don't trust each other enough to let one another develop different strands of work towards the same objective. It becomes particularly complex when a network has access to funding or to some form of power through lobbying or negotiation: who takes the decisions and who controls the funding or the access to decision makers becomes heavily contested and often ends up overshadowing the original purpose of the network.

The origins of this mistrust are many. As explained above, in the first place, the network may not have emerged from a group of like-minded allies, but may be almost imposed by external actors, which means that the members haven't necessarily developed relationships of trust with one another and may have entirely different agendas. Between some organisations there may be a history of mistrust, based on past experience or on prejudices or preconceptions about one another.

There is also the phenomenon of individuals or organisations that engage in networks for other reasons: personal or organisational gain or political positioning. Such an actor or actors in any network can poison the dynamics quite profoundly and Well Grounded has witnessed a number of crises in networks due to this kind of manipulation.

**SOMETIMES A LACK OF CLARITY ABOUT WHAT THE NETWORK IS FOR CREATES MISTRUST.**

Sometimes a lack of clarity about what the network is for creates mistrust: if an organisation believes that it will be funded if it joins a network and then it is not, it is inevitably going to be disappointed and possibly disillusioned.

Likewise, if a network is not clear about its lobbying or campaign objectives, suspicions about different members' agendas may persist.

The issue of mistrust will keep emerging as we discuss other issues below: each of them can contribute to it and make it worse.

## INCLUSION AND MEMBERSHIP

The networks that we have encountered have taken different attitudes to membership. Some are very open and any organisation that is interested in the issues addressed can come along. Others have very strict membership criteria, including membership fees, and rigorous approval processes. Whatever the form, there are some common challenges in relation to membership.

In the first place, there is the delicate balance that needs to be managed between the needs and priorities of the individual members and the needs and priorities of the network as a whole. Sometimes that is again due to a lack of clarity about the purpose and role of the network: members start to perceive that everything they do should contribute to the network and they somehow start to lose their own identity. Also, all too often, networks become competitors with their own members, the network being perceived as drawing on human and financial resources that individual members would otherwise be able to make use of, (for example, such as when staff members end up dedicating huge amounts of time to network activities rather than their own organisation's activities). In addition, the stronger organisations involved in a network can end up dominating: they can afford to allocate staff and resources to network activities and so end up having a large amount of control of the agenda. Or the organisation or the individual with the most passion for the issue takes the lead. Some of these factors need not be a bad thing: stronger organisations or people who are well-informed can mentor others and get them involved, but when it results in closing space down for other members it becomes a problem.

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Whatever type of structure, we have found that problems can arise when membership criteria aren't sufficiently understood by the membership as a whole or if they appear not to be applied across the board. It is also crucially important that all members understand what their obligations are and what they can expect.

Unrealistic financial expectations of members, for example, have been one of the major stumbling blocks for the effectiveness of a lot of networks, as has the tendency by members to see the network as a service provider for them, rather than a space to develop collective action together.

A critical issue that we have come across many times is that of inclusion, particularly of groups that experience discrimination. Many networks profess to represent peoples, groups and communities that are marginalised, but in practice, they do not include those marginalised groups in their own structures and decision making and at times they can show discriminatory practice themselves. This can be structural: meetings, discussions and decision making processes may take place in languages, with technologies or in physical spaces which are not accessible to all. It can also be manifested in behaviours and attitudes: ignoring certain perspectives, laughing at or belittling interventions from marginalised groups or actively silencing those same groups.

A particular way in which power dynamics manifest themselves in networks is in the choice of representatives: there can be a vicious circle established where the one or two individuals that are perceived to have a good understanding of the issues, or good negotiating skills – or to be well connected – are always chosen as representatives. This consolidates their position of authority in such a network and means that others who may have had less opportunity do not get to develop the appropriate skills, knowledge and experience. This in turn can reinforce marginalisation or discrimination within a network.

**IT IS ALSO CRUCIALLY IMPORTANT THAT ALL MEMBERS [OF A NETWORK] UNDERSTAND WHAT THEIR OBLIGATIONS ARE AND WHAT THEY CAN EXPECT.**

Finally, in relation to membership, there is another particular challenge: in some Congo Basin countries with a history of conflict and unrest, civil society organisations are particularly concerned when there are visible displays of lack of consensus or even disagreement between network members. It can take a long time for network members to come to terms with the fact that differences of opinion are inevitable and can even be healthy. Before that time, the emphasis on presenting an appearance of solidarity when there may be no real agreement underneath can weaken the network's position on key issues and can contribute to the slow build-up of mistrust between members.

## STRUCTURES AND DECISION MAKING

It is with some hesitation that we discuss the challenges of structures and decision making: as explained above, structural questions have tended to dominate over and above those of the original purposes of many networks and our perspective is that one of the main causes of lack of success is when a network loses sight of its objectives and gets lost in structural issues. However, these issues are crucial to enabling a network to function.

Membership, as a starting point, has been discussed above – without commonly understood and applied criteria for membership and a clear, common and realistic understanding about the purpose of the network and the reason for being a member, the network can have problems right from the start.

In most of the networks with which we have worked, which operate at regional or national level in countries where communications are poor and travel is expensive and difficult, the members usually choose to delegate



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decision making powers and authority to a smaller committee and, frequently, the management of the day to day activities of the network to a coordinating body. This can work well – so long as there is sufficient trust between members and enough accountability to the broader membership. However, Well Grounded has found itself spending a lot of time working with networks in which members feel let down by their steering committee or their coordinating bodies. This almost always has its roots in the question of trust, but there are other factors too.

An issue that we have noticed that might be specific to the context of the Congo Basin and the francophone world in which CSOs there operate is a tendency to focus on texts and documents as a means to developing structures and processes. We have found that the networks we work with can become very fixated on having the “correct” texts, without addressing the underlying issues of trust and how things can actually work in reality. Debates within the network become totally focussed on whether an

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organisation or an individual has “respected the texts” and the texts can start to get used as tools for manipulation or fomenting disagreement.

Another factor is a tendency to hierarchy: very often, organisations or individuals perceived to be junior in some way – due to geographical location, social status, age, gender, ethnicity, knowledge and expertise or a whole combination of these – are not expected to initiate actions and indeed are actively discouraged from doing so. And those perceived as senior are expected to take the lead and initiate. This can weaken the effectiveness of collective action, as members wait for decisions and initiatives from “the top” and do not see themselves as having agency. This in turn can create a dynamic whereby members become too dependent on the coordination to provide direction (and resources) for the network.

Many networks are overly dependent on the mechanism of a face to face “General Assembly” of members as the key decision making space. We say “overly dependent” because in the context of the Congo Basin, it is expensive and difficult to bring together all members of a network, which means that such general assemblies tend only to happen when a network receives external funding – and very few partners are prepared to fund such an activity. As a consequence, general assemblies occur only very occasionally and decisions and frustrations pile up, only to explode into discord when the meeting actually takes place. And once again members get very animated about the respect for texts – even if those texts are impossible in practical terms to put into action.

## LONGEVITY

A final challenge is what to do if and when a network achieves its aim. Many networks see themselves as permanent structures. A network may be created to respond to a particular issue and may have a lot of success in responding to it – indeed the most effective networks we have encountered are those which have emerged around an issue and that have developed a very concrete and focussed response. However, in our

experience, almost no network is then prepared to close itself down, seeing its work as done. This generates a network that can end up existing just to exist, exacerbating the problems of lack of focus and conflicting agendas of members. The tendency to hierarchy and formalisation via legal texts reinforces this risk of networks trying to persist long after their natural lifespan would have expired. Having said that, we have also encountered networks that have very effectively reinvented themselves and that have remained relevant to the needs and aspirations of their members.

## RESPONSES

Well Grounded has worked with many networks on these issues. Our response is focussed around an understanding that the purpose of a network is to build collective action – to ensure that what the members

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can achieve by combining their efforts is something larger than they could achieve by each of them working in isolation on the same issue.

This therefore involves supporting the people and organisations involved in networks to develop a clear understanding and agreement about

why they are working together, what they want to achieve together and how they are going to do it. And within that, what they need to do collectively – and what they can leave to each individual member to continue doing alone.

More specifically, Well Grounded's engagement with networks has included the following steps:

### I. COMMON PURPOSE:

*Supporting the members to understand and agree on why they have come together in a network and what they wish to achieve by collaborating together.*

We have found this to be an essential step, however longstanding a network may be and however clear their documents are on the issue - we have found that revisiting the fundamentals of a network almost always generates rich and fruitful change or consolidation. Such work can include:

- a. Development of a clear analysis of the issues that the network wants to tackle and a good understanding of their possible responses, given the context. Members are supported to use a range of participatory analytical tools and to explore different scenarios in order to reach a common understanding of the issues.
- b. Facilitating agreement between members on the network's vision, objectives and shared values. This can take time: it is important that all the members understand what it is they are agreeing on and so there may well be a lot of explaining, re-explaining, discussion and disagreement. In this phase, we have found that work in smaller groups and making sure that people are using languages and working in groups in which they can express themselves freely is critically

important. Once there is real ownership of these elements of a network by its members, we have found that people will defend it to the hilt.

## 2. STRATEGY:

■ *Supporting the network members to agree on what they want to do and how.*

### THE PROCESS OF STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT IS CONSTANT AND ITERATIVE.

This can include identifying and agreeing on their approach, agreeing on common positions and bottom lines on key issues, exploring the strengths and weaknesses of different members so that they can make best use of the skills and resources they have to offer to the network. It is worth underlining that strategies, particularly in relation to advocacy and lobbying, need to remain flexible. Developing a strategy can take time and at times a network needs to be relatively speedy in responding to new developments. So the process of strategy development is constant and iterative: so long as the overall objectives are clear and agreed, approaches can be tried, tested and adapted, building on existing skills and knowledge and developing new ones as they go along.

## 3. STRUCTURE AND DECISION MAKING:

■ *Facilitating a process of agreeing on how they will work together.*

This usually involves developing a good understanding of current relationships between organisations and how they communicate already, exploration of positive and negative experiences that they have had of collaboration in the past and development of the simplest system that is compatible with the members' requirements for transparency and accountability. These days, with access to smartphones and internet connections gradually improving even in more remote areas, some networks have started to be able to develop more decision making at a distance. In the future, we anticipate that this will become increasingly important – and may well make networks more effective and responsive.

### THE ROLE OF WELL GROUNDED IS TO SUPPORT THE MEMBERS IN REACHING AGREEMENT ON A SYSTEM THAT IS WORKABLE AND RIGOROUS

On the specific question of who is a member and what the rights and responsibilities of a member are within a network, our impression is that both formal and informal models can work. What is crucial is that there is a common understanding of the criteria by which organisations can become or remain members and clarity around what they bring to a network and what that network offers to them. The membership criteria could be as simple as signing up to an agreed set of principles or a common objective or can be more complex: submitting applications, committing to paying subscription fees, submitting copies of their organisational accounts, undergoing selection interviews by existing members and so forth. The role of Well Grounded is to support the members in reaching agreement on a system that is workable and rigorous enough to satisfy the network's needs – and we have found that the simpler, the better, on the whole.

**4. MANAGING CONFLICT:**

Identifying, naming and encouraging constructive discussion of contentious issues, particularly in relation to trust.

**PATIENT AND CAREFUL  
WORK IS NEEDED TO  
FACILITATE DISCUSSIONS**

Well Grounded has found that time is needed for us as facilitators to build our own relationship of trust with the network members before they are willing to open up this discussion. However, once the discussion is opened up, most members do acknowledge that it is a very necessary one. It can be extremely challenging for all concerned – to talk about trust and mistrust is to take a risk, particularly in a context where conflict and mistrust has at times ended in violent conflict or suppression. Patient and careful work is needed to facilitate discussions, as well as a willingness to identify issues and confront people with them when it is appropriate.

**5. LEARNING AND BEING REACTIVE:**

Regularly reviewing progress and having the willingness to change.

Many of the networks with which we have worked and speed of reaction to changing external circumstances so that the network can adapt and respond. At times, reviewing what has worked and what hasn't is crucial – as is revisiting the original analysis of a problem. It can be that heavy and lengthy decision making processes mean that a network can't be quick on its feet, so regular check-ins and mechanisms for taking quick decisions and changing direction if needed are necessary. For these, of course, the confidence of the members is paramount.

**LEARNING**

As with all organisation development, building and strengthening networks can take a lot of time and patience. As facilitators, at Well Grounded we have often found that our role is to enable the members to stop, reflect on what they are doing and check that they are all moving in the same direction. And, most importantly, to ask members the right questions at the right time. This requires patience and repetition, both on the side of the facilitators and of the network members, but bit by bit it can deliver real results.

Opening up discussion of a network and how it is functioning has, at times, in the short term, resulted in major schisms and divisions between members and even the dissolution of some alliances. The first time this happened, we perceived this as a failure on our part. However, on reflection, we have seen that such incidents are an almost inevitable result of some of the challenges outlined above and can be healthy in the longer term in producing networks that are more coherent in their shared objective and clearer about the rights and obligations of their members. In the end, without a shared vision and without members perceiving that they can achieve more in a network than alone, a network will not work. And at times, perhaps it is better to have two or three smaller, focussed and

committed networks than one sprawling one that spends too much of its time looking at its own internal workings and not addressing the real issues it was set up to tackle.

## CONCLUSIONS

Networks can be very effective in delivering transformative change and rich sources of learning and exchange of experience for their members. However, they can also become energy drains, absorbing huge amounts of time and resources of their members and generating and exacerbating conflict. In order for the latter not to happen, it's crucial that a network keeps its focus on its core objective, that it is realistic in its ambitions and its demands on its members and that it continues to be accountable to those members, particularly those that are frequently marginalised or excluded. At times, an external facilitator is a great help to network members who may be getting stuck in particular cycles or patterns: the external facilitator can pose key questions and help bring core issues to the surface so that the network can deal with them and move on.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is the result of reflections of the Well Grounded team as a whole and we would like to extend our thanks to all the members of all the many networks we have worked with over the years. As always, the commitment and energy of civil society actors in the Congo Basin is extraordinary.



### ABOUT WELL GROUNDED

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Well Grounded provides organisation development support to civil society organisations (CSOs) in Africa so they have real and sustainable impacts on natural resource governance and community rights. We offer support to CSOs in the following areas: strategy development, leadership, team building and development, planning and evaluation and relationship and interpersonal skills. We also believe that connecting people and organisations is an important element of achieving positive change.

### THE DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

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This is one of a series of discussion papers published by Well Grounded with the objective of prompting debate and discussion about key organisation development issues relevant to CSOs in the Congo Basin. The papers do not present much theory – many other authors do that very well elsewhere – but are rather the fruit of our own observations and learning in our day to day practice in working with CSOs. They are designed to share the lessons we have learnt through our practice and to promote further debate and discussion on the development of African CSOs.