Working together for refugees:
the value of network collaboration

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Introduction

In an ideal world, networks relating to refugees and internally-displaced persons (IDPs) would not be necessary. The refugees and IDPs themselves would be able to express their opinions and needs and directly influence policies affecting displaced persons and their immediate and long-term settlement requirements. Government departments, international agencies and non-governmental welfare organisations involved in refugee policy, needs assessment, emergency relief, resettlement, training and infrastructural support would be well linked and have sufficient resources. They would understand the reality of urgent and long-term needs and problems of IDPs and refugees, as well as the practical and policy implications. All the stakeholders would collaborate effectively. Colleagues in refugee organisations, government departments, aid agencies and advocacy groups would work well together and the refugees and indigenous populations would listen to them and understand the strategies being implemented. The advantages and disadvantages of the different infrastructural, socioeconomic and administrative options for IDP and refugee relief and rehabilitation would be widely understood.

In the real world, many of the different stakeholders involved in refugee problems exist in separate realities, with little interaction. Information flows tend to be top-down and narrow, restricted to single organisations, particular issues, limited geographical areas and the different organisational persuasions for coping with particular situations. They do not have the time, vision, experience or facilities to compare what is actually needed with the range of options that could be implemented, and what strategies have been successfully employed in comparable situations elsewhere.

Networks can help overcome such problems by allowing people and organisations to exchange information and experiences and to cooperate with those outside their immediate working environment.

Networks and networking activities

A network is any group of individuals or organisations who, on a voluntary basis, exchange information or undertake joint activities in such a way that their individual autonomy is strengthened by the interactive process of networking. Networks link people who would not otherwise be linked.

Various organisational structures are possible. Networks can be formally established as non-governmental organisations or can be less formal groups of people and organisations linked through common planning and activities. It is the multi-directional *process* of networking that is vital, and more crucial than the network structure itself. There is scope for complementary national and international networks relating to refugees and displaced persons.

Electronic networks

Electronic mail and website discussion groups enable people to participate in international discussions and electronic workshops. Several refugee-related websites and electronic networks exist and are open to anyone who uses e-mail. Electronic networks are valuable tools that can effectively complement other forms of direct networking interaction.

Network benefits

Networks facilitate the *exchange of information*, skills, knowledge, experiences, materials and media, through meetings, workshops, publications and cooperative programmes. This increases the competence of members.

Network information exchange *reduces unnecessary duplication* of work and effort, facilitating faster progress and a wider overall impact.

Networks *effectively link* people of different levels, disciplines, organisations and backgrounds who would not otherwise have an opportunity to interact and *bring together* funding and technical cooperation agencies with those in need of resources and support. They *create awareness* that many others have similar concerns and development problems and provide the *critical mass* needed for local, national or international advocacy and policy change.

Networks help *address complex development problems* and issues that seem overwhelming to those working at local level. They are a *source of peer support and encouragement, motivation and professional recognition.*

Some practical problems

Networks *without clear objectives* find it difficult to develop dynamic, monitorable programmes, with distinct targets that can be met.

Networks can easily become *dominated* by particular organisations, individuals and interest groups. Members in small organisations close to the reality of existing refugee problems may be less influential within the network than the well-educated, confident and perhaps intimidating staff of resource-rich agencies and international institutions. Discussions in electronic networks may be dominated by a few individuals with specific interests and geographical scope.

Centralisation can occur when a network coordinator, secretariat, steering committee or network board starts to run the network for its own sake rather than facilitating the activities of its members.

Networks may have *insufficient funds* for network activities and coordination. On the other hand, when networks have funds, their allocation and administration can generate tension.

While networks can disseminate valuable information an atmosphere of questioning and self-criticism is required. Otherwise networks could end up *sharing information of dubious reliability.*

Competition from networks or organisations with overlapping agendas should lead to creative collaboration but can also cause competition for recognition, limited resources and membership.

Assessing the impact of networks is difficult. Their influence on members, policy makers and the public may be profound yet of a general nature (enhanced awareness of problems, improved communications, increased motivation, more relevant discussion of issues, etc.).

There can be *political constraints* to the operation of national and international networks, especially where information exchange and criticism of government policy is unwelcome.

Guidelines for successful networking

Involve new people from the start. Invite as many different organisations and stakeholders as practicable to an open meeting. Focus on stimulating issues while emphasising common interests and joint purpose. Delegate tedious administrative matters and maintain momentum by agreeing some visible, inclusive activities of interest to a wide range of stakeholders.

Formulate clear objectives through discussion with a wide cross-section of members (to prevent domination).

Establish a committed core group of individuals or organisations to devote time to initiatives, network coordination and management. The network core group (committee or board) should be representative of the membership and should view network success as an explicit objective of their professional lives. The core group must regularly interact with a variety of ordinary network members to keep up with their ideas and changing needs and to avoid centralisation and increasing isolation. Refugee-related networks should find creative ways of involving a wide range of refugee stakeholders in network management.

Develop an active programme of activities based on ***enthusiastic member participation interaction and sharing***. Refugee networks must ensure refugees and other stakeholders see the value of the network, so they will actively participate. Sustained willingness to undertake voluntary duties depends on a clear interest in network objectives

and wide recognition of network value

Explore the scope for complementary networks and linkages. International refugee networks and national refugee groups should be complementary and mutually supporting. Refugee networks should plan joint activities with other networks with overlapping agenda (eg, settlement and housing, employment, training, logistics and supplies, land and agriculture, gender issues, cultural and sporting exchanges, etc).

Have sufficient resources for activities and coordination. Funding is not everything. Some resource-rich networks established by international institutions have had a low impact. Some networks without core funding have achieved greater impact through the dedication of members' time, effort and personal resources to network activities. The more a network is user-supported, the stronger it will be. Non financial user-supplied resources such as voluntary work and dedicated time are particularly valuable Nevertheless international network participation requires money.

Close association with a sympathetic organisation able to provide access to resources, additional contacts and institutional support services can be beneficial to a network. The danger is that such institutional arrangements can lead to centralisation, domination or the sudden termination of resources at the whim of that organisation.

Establish a social and political legitimacy that attracts participation and facilitates funding. Involvement of influential individuals and organisations, effective programmes, an easily recognisable name or logo and well-targeted publicity can assist establishing legitimacy.

Regularly monitor and evaluate network work plans and actions in relation to network objectives, and overall progress. The network should evolve as initial goals are met and circumstances change.

Conclusions

A light, facilitating approach to network coordination is most effective. This should be based on concrete objectives, delegation, decentralised initiative, broad participation, flexible responsiveness and regular monitoring. Networks can survive on low overheads but do need adequate resources to sponsor regular sharing opportunities. The network members, committees and sponsors should ensure that networks evolve and develop effectively in order to meet changing needs. If network objectives are appropriate and inter-institutional linkages are in place, active, decentralised programmes of refugee-orientated network activities can make a significant contribution to developing local and international solutions to IDP and refugee problems.

Further reading

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