

Networking, the experience in Macedonia

NGO perspectives for networking

The competition in the area of economic and cultural development occurs all around the world. Every nation aims to achieve the best for its social development, because the nation that is better developed has better advantages and choices for their future. The development is a process in relation to the efforts and resources invested for a specific period, which increases our awareness, being influenced by the numerous information that reach us from all sides. All this accelerates our everyday activities, with a possibility to make up for the time lost, as well as to catch up with the others. This implies that we are living in a turbulent period, where the changes influence our lifestyle, the system of values, and the establishing of new relations. The socio-political changes that occurred in Macedonia at the beginning of the 90-ies generated inevitable changes in the way citizens organize themselves in the country. In the period when the two pillars- the politics and the business sector were going through total changes, the NGO sector started its gradual introduction as something new and challenging; a movement that slowly but gradually started to gain the position of a third factor in the country. During the 12 years of transition, this sector had additional injections derived from the crisis in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia, which increased and accelerated the interest for organizing of this kind, and attracted the attention of many international institutions and donating agencies. These institutions, on the other hand, besides their donations, brought their experience and better standards of organizing, which required us to adapt in a relatively short period. One of the processes, besides many others, is networking, or as we call it here, coordinating the activities among several organizations. We started developing the first networks, initiated in many various ways, and came to know that certain NGOs are quite ready for it, while others are still trying to define the process. After the membership in several networks and the sentiment for the lost élan, time, and effort, two years ago we started looking for information concerning the world networking, in order to find answers to the question whether we are different in this process.

The world comments in domestic practice

NGOs throughout the world, being asked for the reason why they engage in networking, gave the following answers:

1. *“The networking is a good platform to express solidarity among the NGOs. It also helps to exchange experiences and expertise, to work on common action programs in order to influence the policy of the governments.”*

This kind of networking should be the goal for every NGO in the country. Although we require more work and time to achieve this quality in the networks, in relation to the maturity

and the sustainability of the organizations, several existing networks in Macedonia demonstrated a certain degree of achievement in putting into practice their action programs. The best and most recent examples are the Women Organizations and their networks in the Macedonian Women Lobby Group, which have already achieved their idea for better representation of women in politics and the decision-making processes. Although it is a typical example of gender solidarity, the outcome shows that any form of devotion and consistency in networking can bring positive results. Considering the exchange of experience and expertise, the networks have successfully established their own database, which demonstrate in a very picturesque way the capacities of the network, in order not to maintain the inner use of it only on paper. The trend of inviting foreign experts and trainers is still functioning, which is illogically making the domestic activities very expensive. It is often a case where the exchange of expertise turns from a short-term to permanent engagement, which significantly weakens the position of the organization where the expert comes from.

Network priorities and...

2. *“...It helps groups share the development problems and solve them. It also helps the groups be better informed.”*

It is one of the many reasons why the organizations are engaging in a network. Every organization has a period when they face the development problems. When there is lack of planned activities for the development of the domestic organizations, i.e. strengthening the capacities, the organizations are most often managing this situation on their own. The organizations have no opportunities to ask for adequate trainings for their membership from the foundations, the existing literature is very little available (generally in English language), and the domestic Internet websites have almost no educational materials for the NGO management. The membership in a network gives a possibility for solving part of the development problems, which is relatively put into practice; however, observed from a strategic aspect of the organizations themselves, the networks pay little attention to the correct development of the domestic NGOs. The networks often have short-term missions, which have to be implemented under the pressure of a certain period, which puts the development of the members on a second position. There is certain development in terms of strengthening the capacities of the organizations, but it is still in the category of “soft outcomes”, which cannot be measured or recognized by many of the domestic organizations. The experience shows that the networks, formally, have this goal, however, in practice it is a different issue. The goal seems to be a motive to attract certain NGOs to a certain network only. The listed situations have pros and cons why it is such a case, but generally, it is due to several reasons;

- ? The networking between organizations with different missions and level of development, which is an inevitable process
- ? The members in the networks resist to define strict rules and working mechanisms, i.e. they aim to have full freedom of choosing the priorities between their own and the agenda of the network
- ? Every network has a certain mission, but they almost have no visions what will happen after the mission is fulfilled. It is logical to ask whether the networks need vision, i.e. whether the networks should define their existence, their possible transformation etc.
- ? There is not sufficient use of the achieved development of the network and the members individually, it is not canalized for further transmission and building more capacities.
- ? There is a general opinion that the development might be achieved only via implementation of projects, i.e. using the network resources. It is a wrong approach for operating within a network since it brings the members to a position of conflicted interests and competition for grants, which can cause inner divisions and fractions. In situations such as this, certain members are very active within the activities of the network, while the unsatisfied turn into a reactive part of the network trying to “seduce” the passive members to join them in producing changes within the network.

Informing is one of the most useful processes within a network. It is a normal process, considering the fact that there are many organizations communicating with each other through the center of the network. This way of communication increases the transparency of the members and the network; it improves the communication abilities and increases the confidence. To what extent this communication has been put into practice is another issue. The organizations often have problems with the abundance of information that overcomes their capacities, which puts them in a position where they have to select adequate or “more important” information for their use. This is a point where the interest of the network is neglected, i.e. in our practice, it is not possible to represent both interests with the same intensity at the same time.

...realistic needs

3. “...*It is important for collective action towards social justice and common needs.*”

The networks in Macedonia have not shown major results so far, in terms of greater influence on the public, the way our colleagues in Croatia and Serbia have done. The campaign “It is enough!” which at times assumed the role of a network, demonstrated similar results, but with

a far lesser influence on the citizens’ opinion. Considering the support of the networks for the public demonstrations and meetings of certain groups of citizens, we can openly say that it is a very rare phenomenon. The NGOs and their networks are preoccupied with their own agendas and responsibilities, so they cannot keep record of the daily political events, in terms of rapid reaction and support of certain civic structures. The politics and putting pressure on politicians is still a taboo, where domestic organizations do not dare to address the issue in public, despite the greater credibility and the lower risk of being “marked” as somebody’s extended hand, if the organizations use the networks to raise their voice. While forming the networks, the organizations bring it all down to only the common needs of the members and the donating agency, which are not always clearly defined, nor they can satisfy everybody within the network. With a starting position such as this, the networks are announcing superficial and lethargic approach to their work at the very beginning, which requires the members to be patient and ready to compromise. Lacking to define the common needs/interests can lead to a sort of manipulative leadership among the organizations, where the more experienced are looking for alibis and support of the “younger” NGOs with the sole purpose to put certain group in favour of gaining profit from the networking. The struggles for gaining control are not rare, which are only illusionary and do not have concrete results at all.

Our dilemmas and habits

4. “...*The networking is good and necessary to think in a similar way. It gives support to each other.*”

Having similar opinions is not always beneficial to the networks. Our experience in the network activities shows that the different opinions can also join together realizing the necessity for common actions. In certain networks, the joining of different opinions is a painstaking process, while it is quite efficient with others. It occurs in cases when the members have known each other for a longer period and have a certain amount of confidence, as well as well-developed relations. In this context, there is an open dilemma whether the networks should accept organizations that have developed partnership relations, or NGOs that have not had any prior contacts at all. However, the support gained via network activities is significant and can result in changes of the behavior of the organizations. Once they gain support from the network, the organizations have a responsibility to be careful in their rapport, as well as to return the favour to the network partners. Sometimes the favour can be done for objective reasons, but sometimes it is only done to return the “debt” to the partner. In cases when the expected support is not given, there are conflict situations and disturbances within the network activities, even in cases where the reality does not give a chance for returning the

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favour. It happens quite often in situations where the donors insist on projects implemented by several partner organizations, where every “partner” receives an alibi role and the role of a constructor of the credibility of the project.

Mature organizing or developed sense for networking?

5. “...*It is a positive structure that promotes peaceful competition among the organizations.*”

I particularly like this statement, since there is a lot of truth about our network activities in it. We have to admit that we meet and make friends with lots of organizations from the country through the network activities, we acquire new skills, but above all, the most important thing is that we stopped seeing each other as competition. Getting to know each other’s strengths and weaknesses, the network partners feel a bit more relaxed knowing that nobody is perfect, and that building the organizations’ capacities is a long term process. The dialogue via the networks made it clear for us that we all must learn from one another, maintain the continuity in the learning process and be ready to support the process of teaching the others too. The intensity of the excitement for network activity grows or shrinks depending on the period for “peaceful competition”. In some networks the competition becomes grants hunting, in others it is undergoing a period of stagnation due to the extremely ambitious goals, while others the members are trying to increase their rating as quality players. It is a very real situation and it will always happen. What is important today for the quality of a certain organization might not apply in the future, due to the rapid changes within and outside the organizations’ environment. The changes, caused by the departure of the experts from the organization or the donors from the region are difficult to go through and are very dangerous for the existence of the current organizations. In that respect, the domestic organizations are highly dependent on the work of several key persons (one or two), and a single donating agency as a major financial support. This causes temporary “escapes” of the organizations in a network, in order to test their donating interests, in a rather relaxed environment, through certain intersected structuring of multi-lateral goals. The experience shows that the organizations eventually return to the primary “donors” and continue with the confirmed cooperation following the mutual interests.

NGO in a trend means NGO in a network!?

6. “...*Given the critical context in which our country finds itself and the way in which the volunteering sector dived into the waterless ocean, there is a huge need for urgent networking with honest intentions.*”

In the last two years, the trend of networking increased, because of the maturity degree of the sector. The networks started building up carefully, applying specific methods and criteria,

respect...and lacking initiatives for building networks from bottom up. The networks are primarily initiated by the donors that provide financial support and a certain network mission, while the members are given the choice to find a way to blend in the agenda. The whole process appears artificial due to the fact that the need for network activity as not initiated or identified by the domestic organizations, and, on the other hand, the joining around certain fund in order to consume it in a given timeframe, reminds of a sort of automatism of the network as a consumer. To form a network, having only a desire but no financial grounds, is also unreal, because one cannot achieve anything specific only by wanting it. The only thing to do here is to balance these two extreme conditions in order to maintain the basic elements for network functioning. The networks increase their quality in time; they are structured in a specific way, and there is hope for honest networking in the future. In times when the organizations’ responsibilities are increasing rapidly, and the organizational development is not able to keep up with it, the networks are the alternative for successful solution to these conditions. The awareness for honest networking is rising, due to the experience of short-term networking, the wasted time, and efforts, which was a lesson to us not to repeat the same mistakes again. Our conclusion is that we have to and we can work together in order to achieve more, having in mind the realistic timeframes for it. The honest nature of the networks will be achieved with a maximum transparency; clearly defined goals; unreserved support within and outside the network; and, of course, with adequate ambitions related to the capacities of the network.

The determinism does not influence the network compactness

7. “...*Working together on common needs.*”

The networks in Macedonia have had this characteristic so far; otherwise, any membership in the network without sharing the needs would be senseless. In a certain period, the organizations have a need to join in order to follow certain common needs. As longer s there are more common needs in a certain network, its existence and success will stand better chances. Therefore, it is very important to define the common needs that link the organizations, at the very beginning. Whether it is going to be the number of trainings, projects, annual reports, or researches, it does not matter; what matters is that the members have clear vision of what is ahead of them. There were networks that promised a lot; however, after they stopped functioning we realized that much of the promised never became a practice, which made us feel manipulated. Every network has bi-directional possibilities, from extremely centralized to fully liberalized (disorganized); it is up to the members to choose the model they prefer. In the first case, certain structures have maximum control of all

the activities and do not allow radical changes in the management of the important processes and functions in the network, while in the second case, the mutual distrust within the network

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is rather high. Both cases introduce mechanisms and regulations that reduce the success of the network, delay specific activities, cause inner disturbances and divisions, and eventually stop functioning. The “golden middle” principle is highly implicative when defining the rules of the game, having in mind the two possible extreme directions of the networks. What happens when a certain network has no common needs or their importance is reduced? It implies that the network is facing an inevitable breakdown, since the organizations are innately motivated to protect their own interests and priorities, therefore, it is quite expected they direct their focus somewhere else. This is the first motif, the second being the fact that the matrix organizations have full freedom of choice, without any control from the network center. The future networks should consider the dynamics of the mutual needs, and provide, in that respect, periodical analysis of the inner needs and possible changes in the development of the membership.

Polyvalence as a means to quality

8. *“...It can lead to changes in the government policy in favour of the minority groups.”*

As we mentioned above, a network has better chances for success than a single organization to make efforts on its own in order to cause changes in the government policy. In this section, this statement imposes another context for analysis. The NGO sector in Macedonia is facing a variety of problems in the area of representing the interests of the minority groups. Beginning with the legislative regulations, the ethno-political biasness of the population, and the economic (in)dependence, everyone has influence on the forms of pressure that the sector is using towards the politicians. This is even more difficult when it comes to the minority groups, due to the generally accepted association of this term with the ethnic belonging. The ethnic belonging dominates in all segments of the public life, thus, even the third sector lacks immunity for this trend. The networks enabled joining of organizations of different ethnic groups, in order to develop the sense of multiculturalism among our target groups. We had success in this direction, our users participated in the shared activities, tribunals, and concerts, so that we asked ourselves whether this is what our target groups really need. The effects from such projects are difficult to measure due to the further division of the citizens on ethnic grounds, which brings forward the fact that the organizations implemented the projects either very badly or just superficially. The sector should reconsider the further steps in this regard; whether to continue getting to know each other or to put our efforts in the economic activities, which in our opinion will have influence on the relations between the minority and majority groups in a most natural and uncomplicated manner. Although the networks and the sector

are working to improve the interethnic relations for a longer period now, the feeling is that there have been no major changes in practice. For those that are not familiar with the sector, it implies that somebody is not doing their job properly, but everyone who is better informed

about the conditions and circumstances under which the third sector is operating, would say that the people working on such a “hot” topic deserve praise and encouragement. Being aware of the influence and expansion of the politics in every aspect of our daily lives, in a small state where everyone knows everyone, with a high degree of corruption, every effort in terms of improving the position of the minorities is respectable. The networks are facing greater challenge, when within the network there are members that are trying to represent the interests of their target groups, without any intentions to reduce the chances of the others. The networks have problems structuring the rules of the game, they avoid using figures, and percentages of representation, but they aim to use the network resources and benefits equally. However, besides all the good intentions, it happens that certain organizations, without any confirmed quality and efforts, take advantage by joining the networks, and the membership accepts it without hesitation, and even express solidarity with them. This process is very important for confidence building and strengthening the capacities of the organizations, which improves the relations among the minorities in a long run.

Besides the many failures, the networks are still attractive

9. *“...It is important to develop activities that will influence the adoption of new technology, implementation of development activities and those who involve procedural implications.”*

The NGO sector has demonstrated good results in the timely adoption of the technology in its functioning. In the time of globalization and Internet domination, the sector stirs up with the capacities of informatics, communication, and multimedia equipment. The networks made great contributions in that respect, imposing the use of latest technology in every day communication. While the other institutions and the business sector are still using old technology, it is rare to find an NGO that does not possess a PC, printing machine, Internet connection, which exist for more than 2-3 years.

The development activities are an important part of the networking, which derive from adopted working procedures and criteria. Depending on the given possibility for the members to participate in the rules-and-procedures-making process, the network will develop an appropriate quality standard. It primarily depends on the quality of the members that take part in the decision-making process, their expertise and experience in managing the procedural implications. Our latest experience in a certain network shows that, despite the fact that we took part in the decision-making process, it does not imply that we have conducted the matter

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ideally, i.e. for the last time. The relations in a network are very dynamic, always influenced by the outside events, as well as the various interests within the network. Every member has a period of expectancy for the achievement of their interests, while the outside factors influence in an opposite direction from the interests of a single member or the network, bringing forward other priorities. Being aware for this condition, the members of this network have analyzed the adopted working procedures, they proposed and adopted new, in order to realize that after a year we need changes. We are making efforts to make it more transparent this time, to involve a more people, on a vertical and horizontal scale, in order to find out whether there is enough motivation for changes with the membership. If there is motivation with the membership, we can work to create and adopt new procedures, but the moment we stop being motivated, the whole matter becomes obsolete, even though we have adopted the ideal procedures and regulations.