

Knowledge sharing in protracted conflicts - the case of national humanitarian networks in South Sudan and Yemen

1. Introduction

The majority of disaster-affected countries have a strong network of national and local NGOs. This case study explores the role of national NGO networks for capacity building, using the examples of South Sudan and Yemen. The two national NGO networks were established to facilitate coordination and information sharing among national and local organisations. They engage in formal and informal knowledge sharing and capacity building activities. This study describes their activities and analyses the learning outcomes achieved through networked approaches to capacity building.



Figure 1. South Sudan and Yemen

2. Methodology

The case study used a mixed methods approach, including:

- 1) Desk review of secondary data sources such as publically available strategic plans and annual reviews of the South Sudan NGO Forum.
- 2) Desk review of primary data sources including training manuals and online portals
- 3) Semi-structured interviews with:
 - a) Forum focal points of both the South Sudan NGO Forum and the Humanitarian Forum Yemen (HFY)
 - b) 3 national member organizations of the HFY

- c) Representative of UNDP, Yemen
- d) Education Consultant, HFY

3. Network design

This section describes the formation and activities of the national NGO networks in Yemen and South Sudan.

3.1 The Humanitarian Forum Yemen

Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the world, has faced years of conflict, poverty and underdevelopment. Since the escalation of conflict in March 2015, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated and 18.8 million people - approximately 80% of the population - require humanitarian assistance. Basic services and the institutions are collapsing placing enormous pressure on the humanitarian response.¹ Due to financial constraints, NGOs are also struggling and the last 2 years has seen the closure of hundreds of local NGOs.²

The HFY³ is an affiliated network of 15 national NGOs and 150 partners in Yemen. The forum was set up in 2009, along with national forums in Indonesia, Kuwait and Sudan, by the World Humanitarian Forum, a London-based global network of organisations. Its main aim is to improve the work of local NGOs in Yemen, through capacity building projects and by fostering relations between local organisations and international humanitarian actors.⁴ The HFY is largely funded by international donors on a project-by-project basis. Core costs are covered by membership fees (10,000 Yemen Riyal/equivalent to £32) and international organisations.

3.2 South Sudan NGO Forum

The recurrence of civil war in South Sudan in December 2013 led to the displacement of more than 2.8 million people. The security situation in the capital, Juba, has been less volatile since a ceasefire was signed in July 2016. However, violent outbreaks are still occurring across the country and conflict has caused massive displacement and extreme food shortages.

The South Sudan NGO Forum is a membership body of 101 national and 127 international NGOs that facilitates the work of its members to address the humanitarian and development needs in South Sudan (see Figure 2). It was established in Kenya in the early 1990s as a coordination mechanism, relocating to Juba in 2005. The forum's stated aims are information sharing, external engagement, policy, NGO-INGO coordination and security information management. The Secretariat is funded by SIDA, SDC, ECHO and through membership fees.

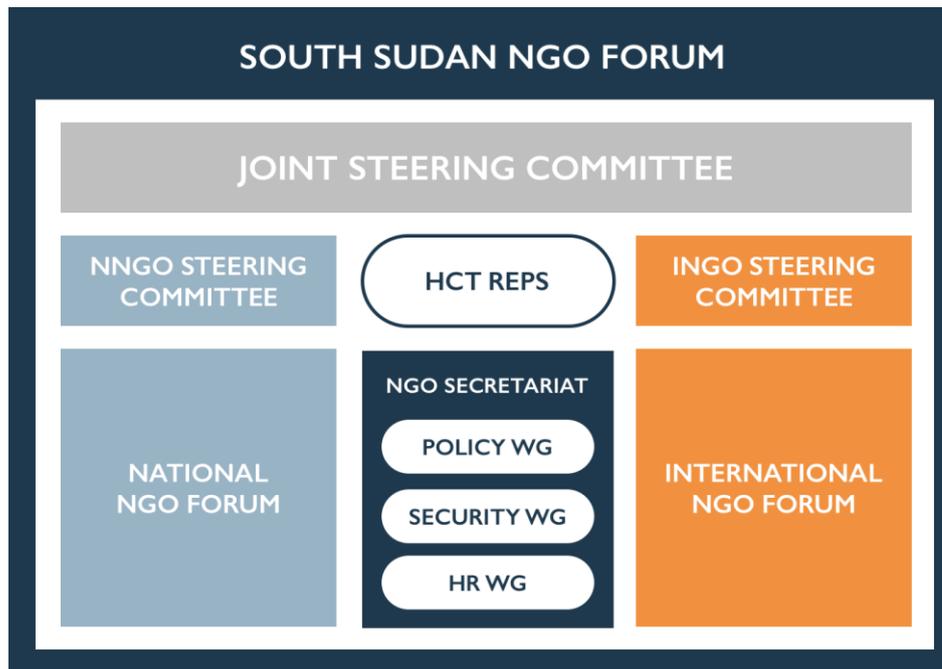
¹ http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/YEMEN%202017%20HNO_Final.pdf

² Hilal Mohammad Al Bahri, 2016, Interview.

³ The name of the Forum in Arabic is 'Al Muntada Al Insaniya', which is literally translated to the 'Humanitarian Forum.' In most official documents in English it is referred to as the Humanitarian Forum Yemen (HFY) but is also sometime referred to as the Yemen Humanitarian Forum (YHF) or THFY (The Humanitarian Forum Yemen).

⁴ Al Bahri 2016.

Figure 2. South
(adapted from



Sudan NGO Forum
2015 Annual Report)

4. Knowledge generation, organisation and dissemination

The national NGO networks tend to focus on capacity building and knowledge sharing activities. Nevertheless, there are also some examples of the networks creating knowledge sources and portals of their own. This section explores knowledge creation and sharing activities by HFY and the South Sudan national NGO forum.

4.1 Knowledge sharing in Yemen

In Yemen, training activities organised by the HFY and UNDP have led to creation of an online information sharing portal and three thematic training manuals (on early recovery, humanitarian competencies and peace building).

The training manuals are designed to improve service delivery in conflict-affected areas, and are due for distribution in February 2017.⁵ They are specific to the Yemen context, and are based on needs assessments conducted by the HFY as well as lessons learnt from field experiences of 60 trained NNGOs.⁶ The manuals contain descriptions of international frameworks and standards (such as the Sphere standards) and context-specific background and situational knowledge on the Yemen response. The manuals also suggest discussion-based simulation exercises based on past scenarios, which allow national NGOs to test operational knowledge on issues such as child protection and partnership building during acute conflicts.

The [online portal](#) contains profiles, projects and activities of local NGOs, INGOs as well as trainers' profiles. The portal was launched recently, and the newness of the project makes learning outcomes difficult to measure. However, member NGOs⁷ are optimistic about the benefits of the portal and explained in interviews that

⁵ Training manuals were made available to the Jigsaw team by the HFY. The three manuals were analysed for the learning approach used and the relevance to the Yemeni context.

⁶ Khaled Al Azza, 2016, Interview.

⁷ Interviews with three member NGOs, 2016

widespread sharing of information can have system-wide benefits, such as improved coordination and response.

In addition to the information sharing tools, the HFY ran Training of Trainers (ToT) for 150 local NGOs in six of the most crisis-affected governorates (see Figure 3). The training has been conducted in two phases. Phase 1 and 2 were funded by the Emergency Response Fund (ERF) of UN-OCHA and Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) of UNDP and took place between 2014-2015. Phase 2 had been halted due to the outbreak of violence. When Phase 2 of the training was resumed in June 2016, the focus was shifted to account for the changed context. The training was conducted over a small period (12-14 days) using class-room based learning modality (which included lectures, case studies and discussions focused on sector-specific skills). Training activities included sessions on donor and financial management, strategic planning and report writing.⁸



Figure 3. Location of HFY capacity building activities

Learning outcomes

There is evidence that knowledge-sharing activities in the national NGO networks have achieved learning outcomes at the individual, organisational and country-level. An evaluation of Phase 1 training activities identified that national NGOs had increased capacity to access international funding as well as partnerships with international organisations. The training has online information sharing portal and thematic training manuals are expected to support ongoing capacity building of national organisations.

⁸ Similar training had been provided by Islamic Relief Germany in 2010-2011. It is not clear if the same organisations benefited from both trainings.

Figure 4. HFY capacity building activities

Phase 1 of the training was viewed as a major success by HFY and UNDP. Evaluation of training was



conducted through a rigorous scoring system, whereby UNDP assessed what national organisations had learnt and their ability to apply the learning. They selected the most-improved national organisations for small grants for early recovery activities.⁹ The grants scheme was devised as a way to build capacity of local organisations as well as evaluate the success of the training activities. Half of the trained organisations (30 out of 60) were able to access significant international donor funding following the end of the training.¹⁰

Local NGO involvement with the HFY and its training activities has also led to the strengthening of local partnerships and grassroots knowledge sharing. While it was not the main goal, one of the benefits of the training sessions is that they provided space for local NGOs to meet and interact. The Forum encourages informal partnerships and collaboration between the member NGOs leading to the creation of WhatsApp groups to share information. Members have created regional groups as well as cluster groups and these initiatives have led to different campaigns and projects. Interviewees argued that better coordination has led to more effective delivery of humanitarian aid. For example, when news broke of hunger and malnutrition in the city of *Hudaya*, various NNGOs used these WhatsApp groups to rapidly coordinate food convoys for residents living in worst affected neighbourhoods.¹¹

Membership within HFY also gives local NGOs regional visibility. The Forum attends regular regional conferences on capacity building and information sharing. Knowledge sharing has been documented in Arabic and can be found online in short five-page summaries on other national Arab NGO websites.

4.2 South Sudan

In South Sudan, the national NGO network has also produced a number of different tools and platforms for local NGOs to generate and disseminate knowledge including:

- NNGO **Capacity Assessment Tool**, an online auto-computing platform designed to help national NGOs assess their own organisational capacity for programme design, implementation and accountability to crisis-affected communities.
- An interactive **Operational Presence tool** showing locations and sectors of all NNGO and INGO activities. This is the first comprehensive mapping activity of both development and humanitarian activities in South Sudan.

⁹ UNDP and HFY Implemented a 'Small Grants' scheme with a ceiling of \$5000 for trainee organisations to apply for to increase NGO capacities in delivering humanitarian aid, recovery and development with conflict sensitive approaches.

¹⁰ Khalid Al-Sharabi, 2016, Interview; Al Bahri 2016.

¹¹ Al Bahri 2016.

- **Communications Portal** for members to browse past communication with the Secretariat (it includes regularly updated and easy to browse links to jobs opportunities, courses and training activities, and tender advertisements).
- **Document Portal**, containing documents on coordination, regulation and security.
 - **South Sudan Knowledge Platform** where open-source academic and policy research on South Sudan is collected.
- During 2015, the Forum also conducted a number of member surveys on issues such as staff payment practices, health facility and legal firm experiences.

In terms of knowledge sharing activities, the national NGO focal point, Hafeez Wani, has convened a peer-support working group to promote sustainable capacity building.¹² This scheme involves individuals from smaller local organisations shadowing counterparts in larger, well-resourced national organisations for up to 2 days a week.

Learning outcomes

The South Sudan national NGO forum is active in promoting the work of national organisations and their inclusion in funding and coordination systems. For example, the NNGO Steering committee lobbied UN OCHA at the 2014 Oslo Pledging Conference for greater support for national NGOs. This advocacy has led national organisations to gain a better understanding of the system through trainings on proposal writing, the humanitarian architecture, programme design and how to access the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF). Training has increased CHF funding to national organisations as well as the number of NNGOs participating in the common response plan (2015 Annual Report).

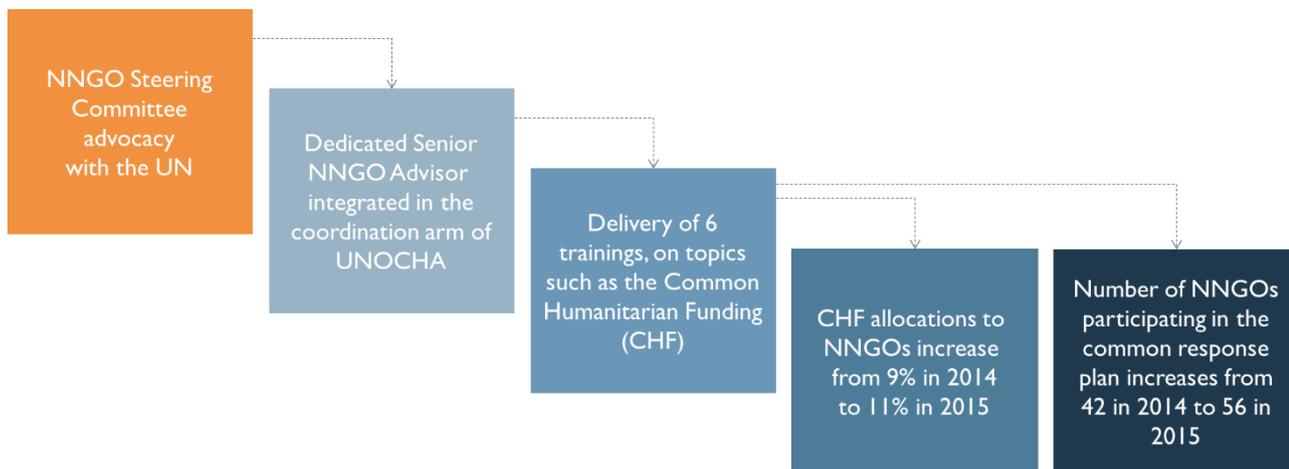


Figure 5. South Sudan National NGO Forum capacity building activities

5. Lessons learnt and relevance to other contexts

The NGO networks in Yemen and South Sudan both have a high level of active membership and are perceived to be important sources of information and support. This case study provides relevant lessons on networks, adaptive capacities and the use of technology.

5.1 Functions of network is key

National NGO networks present a valuable platform for capacity building and humanitarian knowledge sharing. Effective networks can lead to collective impact and better coordination at the local level. However, the function of the network and relationship with member organisations is key.

¹² Hafeez Wani, 2016, Interview.

NGO networks organise themselves in different ways and have different membership criteria. In the Yemen case, power is more centralized, so that the Forum makes decisions on training needs (albeit with consultations and based on needs). The South Sudan case provides an example of a more democratized knowledge-sharing platform. The Secretariat of the Forum takes on the role of the conduit, rather than enforcer for communication, supporting collective learning and mutual support. Needs are determined by individual member organisations.

For local NGOs there are many benefits to be associated with a network: from increased access to information, capacity to access funds, expertise and financial resources, solidarity and support, increased visibility of best practice, increased credibility as well as a multiplier effect which has the potential of increasing impact.¹³ Belonging to an NGO network in a fragile environment has the added benefit of the ability to share information in real time, rapidly mobilise and coordinate relief efforts.

National NGO networks foster a sense of belonging and local ownership. The South Sudan NGO Forum conducted a self-evaluation based on member engagement levels and found high levels of activity on the portals (50,000 website hits per month; 34,000 emails sent per month; 1000 individuals on mailing list). According to the Focal Point, all activities are designed to 'inspire a more independent approach to achieving resilience in institutions'¹⁴ and the different tools and mechanisms (online and offline) encourages communication and participation between the different member NGOs. Having a common voice allows members to set their own agenda and jointly explore their learning needs.

5.2 Learning approaches

Classroom-based learning is arguably the most common type of learning activity in the humanitarian sector. However, it has some disadvantages compared to other learning modalities; the most significant is the cost of scaling when compared to e-learning or digital peer-based learning. One approach to reducing costs is the 'training of trainers' model. In this model, a small group receives training that they are expected to pass on to others.¹⁵ Research into this model emphasises the importance of trainees having the support and structures necessary to facilitate further training. For example, it is normally insufficient to participate in a single ToT session.¹⁶

Networks also facilitate peer-to-peer learning, which encourages open sharing of knowledge and skills between colleagues. This can happen via informal peer-exchange or via formalised processes for networking and sharing. Research suggests that peer '*learning occurs best through 'in - time' experiential exchange with respected and trusted colleagues and peers around issues of immediate operational importance*'.¹⁷

One of the core benefits of p2p learning is that it is inherently participatory. Learners must ask colleagues with experience in certain activities to assist them, via a systematic 'learning before doing' process.¹⁸ The South Sudan p2p learning initiative is an interesting example because it allows national organisations to participate in a peer-support group, identify their own learning priorities, and learn on-the-job.¹⁹

¹³ Liebler, C and Ferri, M. (2004) *NGO Networks: Building Capacity in a Changing World' A Study Supported by Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance Office of Private and Voluntary Cooperation*. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadb767.pdf (19 January 2017).

¹⁴ Wani, 2016.

¹⁵ Jigsaw 2017.

¹⁶ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2006) 'Ways to Increase the Effectiveness of Capacity Building for Sustainable Development', Discussion Paper presented at the Concurrent Session 18.1 The Marrakech Action Plan and Follow-up, 2006 IAIA Annual Conference, Stavanger, Norway: . Available at: <https://www.unpei.org/sites/default/files/PDF/institutioncapacity/Ways-to-increase-effectiveness-SD.pdf> (Accessed: 17 January 2017).

¹⁷ Thomas 2007.

¹⁸ Ramalingam, B. (2006). *Tools for Knowledge and Learning: A Guide for Development and Humanitarian Organisations*. Research and Policy in Development Programme, Overseas Development Institute.

¹⁹ South Sudan NGO Forum 2016

5.3 Use of technology

This case study demonstrates how technology can augment the work of NGO networks. In Yemen, the online portal allows organisations to share contextually specific training manuals, while in South Sudan, the portal allows access to a range of tools and information. Such online portals can facilitate systematic data collection and mitigate against organisational turnover. The combination of both online and offline approaches to knowledge sharing allows local NGOs to assess their own needs and create localised solutions. For example, data from the NGO self-assessment tool (completed by 23 national organisations so far) will be 'used to create better information on organizational capacity' in South Sudan.²⁰

5.4 Adaptive capacities are difficult to build

During a protracted conflict, regular acute emergencies can lead to operational challenges and issues around sustainability. The HFY struggled to provide real-time learning amidst the additional demands caused by the acute emergency in 2015. The outbreak of violence led to the halting of all training activities, and resumption after a significant period in time saw a change in direction. This suggests the need for flexibility in funding for humanitarian training. Failed or incomplete initiatives need to be documented for further reference.

²⁰ Tanner et al (2017). *National Actors in South Sudan*. Special Feature: The Crisis in South Sudan. [Humanitarian Exchange](#). ODI
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Annex 1: Semi-structured interviews

Name	Organisation and role
Khalid Al-Sharabi	UNDP, Yemen
Hilal Mohammad Al Bahri	Director, Yemen Humanitarian Forum
Amal Al Kibsi	Manager of Capacity Building Projects, HFY
Khaled Al Azza	HFY Consultant and creator of training manuals
Anon	Project Manager, NNGO, Hajjah Governorate, Yemen
Anon	Director of Projects, NNGO, Sa'ada governorate, Yemen
Anon	CEO of NNGO, Aden governorate, Yemen
Hafeez Wani	South Sudan NNGO Forum Focal Point
Zvidzai Maburutse	OCHA, South Sudan