The owl and the dove: knowledge strategies to improve the peacebuilding practice of local non-governmental organisations

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Chapter 6. Hubs and links

Networking for peace

Given that Southern peace NGOs identify exchange and interaction with other actors as central to the way in which they learn, in this chapter we look at networking as a knowledge strategy. Networking is a major learning strategy for nearly all of the organisations visited as part of this study. The number of networks in the peacebuilding field has risen immensely in recent years. Donor agencies are also beginning to focus on these networks. The Dutch NGO Cordaid, for example, has made the support of peace networks a central part of its peacebuilding strategy.

This chapter builds on the discussion in section 3.7 of networking as a strategy for knowledge exchange by NGOs by providing information about networks encountered during my field visits, drawing on interviews with a large number of NGO staff members involved in those networks. The chapter analyses some of the main characteristics, obstacles and conditions for success of civil society peacebuilding networks. The first section of the chapter discusses the characteristics of peacebuilding networks in the countries visited. 6.2 goes into the potential benefits of networking as seen by civil society organisations, while 6.3 discusses the challenges that peace NGO networks face. 6.4 combines findings about the functioning of networks with earlier findings on NGO learning, knowledge exchange, and obstacles to learning and exchange, in order to formulate a number of factors that influence the success of networks and networking in the field of peacebuilding.

Next, these factors are applied to a case study of a specific network, namely the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and its member networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone. WANEP is introduced in 6.5, and in 6.6 it is connected to the earlier mentioned success factors in order to achieve a better understanding of what conditions the results of networking for learning in a postconflict context. 6.7 discusses the implications of all this and relates the findings from the chapter back to the research questions guiding this study. Finally, as chapter six concludes Part Two of this book on structure and agency in the knowledge strategies of Southern peace NGOs, 6.8 draws a number of conclusions from this Part.
6.1 Networks and networking in the field of peacebuilding

6.1.1 Networks encountered in the field

Section 3.7 discussed the literature on networking as a strategy for peace NGOs. It emerged that networking can be a useful peacebuilding strategy because it involves making links between different regions and levels, because the dynamic nature of peacebuilding means that rigid structures are not suitable, and because the field is dispersed over a great number of mostly small organisations. Advantages of networking included strengthening the field of peace NGOs as a whole, helping to avoid duplication of activities, and facilitating complementary partnerships.

Indeed, as the lists of networks encountered during my research visits illustrate (see Boxes 6.1-6.4), networks of peace NGOs are widespread in the countries visited. They exist locally (such as the Rural Women Peace Link in North-western Kenya), nationally (such as the Alliance for Conflict Transformation in Cambodia), regionally (such as the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding or WANEP) and globally (such as the International Action Network on Small Arms or IANSA). Most striking is the abundance of networks in the Philippines. Although some in that country say that there are too many networks, peacebuilders in the Philippines and elsewhere value networks as important venues for knowledge exchange, mutual support, voicing issues and grievances, and joint action.

Box 6.1: Networks encountered in the Philippines and Cambodia or mentioned by interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philippines:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Waging Peace network of the Gaston Z. Ortigas Peace Institute (organises regular conferences of Philippine peace NGOs and published the conference reports)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace Education Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindanao Peaceweavers (a network of Mindanawan peace networks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindanao People’s Caucus (see Boxes 1.1 and 5.1 and section 1.5.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (a network of Mindanawan NGOs focusing on the empowerment of the Bangsamoro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Relief Service (CRS) partner network (regular meetings and capacity building initiatives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindanao Emergency Response Network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

276 In this and the following boxes, information is provided about the networks to the extent that it is available to me. Some networks were merely mentioned in passing and I do not have additional information about their focus and activities.
Most civil society peacebuilding networks encountered were founded relatively recently: in the late 1990s or later. While in Kenya and the Philippines most networks seem to be local in origin, in West Africa most peace networks were created to some extent through outside interventions – by local branches of international NGOs or as national sub-networks of larger regional forums. In Cambodia both are the case. In Central Asia, many networks have been created top-down (by donors, NNGOs or large SNGOs), but there are exceptions, such as the Dolina Mira network in the Ferghana Valley (see Box 6.5) In the Philippines and Kenya the networks appear the most indigenously driven. In both countries there are grassroots networks that aim to strengthen marginalised groups through joint action – such as the Bangsamoro in...
Mindanao, which have formed various networks. The women forming the Rural Women Peace Link in North-western Kenya are another example (see Box 4.2 in section 4.1). In addition to such grassroots empowerment networks, both countries witness many networks that have been created for exchange among peace NGOs.

This difference between Kenya and the Philippines on the one hand and Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cambodia on the other appears to correspond with the state of civil society more generally in these countries (see chapter one), which in turn corresponds with the amount of destruction and level of development of the countries concerned. In resource-deprived states such as Cambodia, Sierra Leone and Liberia funding “seems to be an important prerequisite for any NGO activity”, including peace networking (Douma 2005: 10). Networks are also seen as a tool for access to funding. At the same time, participants emphasise the intrinsic value of networking in terms of knowledge sharing, avoiding the duplication of activities, and gaining contacts both within and outside the country. Central Asia is a region that is different due to its Soviet past and present prevalence of authoritarian governments, which make it difficult for civil society to operate independently from authorities. Although many people said that networking is a new and little understood methodology in Central Asia, interviewees and survey respondents also named various networks operating in the region. The Dolina Mira network was identified by many as a successful network (see Box 6.5).

**Box 6.2: Networks encountered in Liberia and Sierra Leone or mentioned by interviewees**

**Liberia:**
- Union of Liberian Civil Society Organisations
- Network of Liberian environmental NGOs
- Network for Collaborative Peacebuilding Sierra Leone (NCP-SL; see case study in this chapter)

**Sierra Leone:**
- Sierra Leone Association of NGOs (SLANGO)
- Partners in Conflict Transformation (PICOT; consortium of three relatively strong Sierra Leonean peace NGOs)

**Regional:**
- West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP; see case study in this chapter)
- Women in Peacebuilding network (WIPNET; part of WANEP)

**Global:**

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Networks are formed to extend the reach and influence of members and to gain access to sources of knowledge that could improve practice. They aim at a “cross-fertilisation of knowledge”\(^{277}\) between different actors who learn from each other’s perspectives and experiences. The content focus of the networks varies. Some focus on peacebuilding as a whole, others on sub-issues (disarmament, early warning, the role of women in peacebuilding) or related issues (human rights). Still others are even broader. In most of the networks encountered, civil society organisations make up the members of the network and send representatives (often the director of the organisation) to network meetings. In some cases, individuals not directly aligned to an NGO, but nonetheless considered to be players in peacebuilding, are allowed to join. Central to the activities of most networks are regular meetings. In addition, many engage in online interaction between meetings. This depends on the extent to which members have access to internet. All networks have either appointed an individual coordinator or established a network secretariat. Sometimes one of the member NGOs takes on the role of secretariat, in other cases it is newly created.

Knowledge sharing is considered by most participants to be a networking priority and important benefit, although at the same time it is difficult due to a lack of trust among NGOs and fear that others may take advantage of sensitive information. There is quite some competition and suspicion among NGOs. In Sierra Leone it is said that that politicians use NGOs and networks to “nurture a specific public personality […]. [NGOs] with a high public profile are useful starting points for political campaigning. Networking in such cases means personal networking to advance the interest of specific individuals.” (Douma 2005: 10)

\(^{277}\) Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
In addition to knowledge sharing, many networks engage in joint activities. The network secretariat often raises funds for particular programmes after which it engages relevant members in their joint implementation. In this way networks engage in similar kinds of projects as individual peace NGOs. Networks encountered engage in human rights monitoring, local dialogue and mediation programmes, the ‘training of trainers’ in conflict mediation, peace education, advice and advocacy towards authorities, and early warning. The latter activity may be particularly suitable for networks as it requires a widespread presence and capacity for gathering and disseminating information. Aside from engaging jointly in peacebuilding work, many networks also carry out support functions for their members. They try to assist NGOs in getting in touch with each other and aim to build the individual and organisational capacities of their members through knowledge sharing, training, advice and direct support in activities. Networks do not always succeed in achieving these support aims. WANEP Liberia for example has not been able to implement its capacity building programme, while it does carry out many direct peace programmes – as we will see in the case study further on.

**Box 6.3: Networks encountered in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan or mentioned by interviewees**

### Kyrgyzstan:
- A network of centres for educational policy
- Regional Coordination Councils of government and civil society
- Association of Crisis Centres in Kyrgyzstan
- The UNDP has established a local network in Southern Kyrgyzstan

### Tajikistan:
- The Public Committee for Democratic Processes *(coalition of Tajik pro-democracy CSOs)*
- Tajik Public Council *(high level body consisting of state and CSO representatives)*

### Regional:
- Dolina Mira network *(see Box 6.5)*
- Young Lawyers of the Ferghana Valley network
- Ferghana Valley Lawyers without Borders *(established as a result of a conference on the role of legal specialists in conflict prevention. Members are lawyers, prosecutors and judges based in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Aims at the protection of the rights and interests of citizens and provides free legal consultations.)*
- Central Asian network of human rights protection organisations
- Central Asian development network
- EAWARN, an early warning network for the post-Soviet states based in Moscow
- International committee of CSOs on People’s Diplomacy, Moscow
Networks have sometimes been difficult to sustain. In Cambodia various attempts to form peace NGO networks failed over the past decade. This was because of a lack of time invested in them and in other cases due to disagreements over organisation, representation and management. However, lessons have been learned from these experiences. When the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT) was founded in 1997 it was decided to adopt a very loose organisational form in order to avoid governance issues. This has kept the network going. People can join in activities and pull back as they please; there is no set membership.

Leadership is a problematic issue for many peacebuilding networks. Some networks are ruled relatively autocratically and leaders often exercise an exclusive grip on networks. This is noted particularly in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mindanao. Sometimes networks are used as political fronts by important civil society leaders. More generally many are “dominated by few individuals who are important public figureheads. In Sierra Leone and Liberia networks quickly become identified with such an individual. This may have an important political side effect. Networks can easily become associated with a specific party or a political interest group.” (Douma 2005: 29) Many networks concentrate resources and staff at the central level. This is particularly the case in West Africa and Cambodia. Phnom Penh, Freetown and Monrovia contain nearly all of the headquarters of peacebuilding networks (or for that matter of all civil society organisations active in these countries). As the report from the network meeting in Kenema, Sierra Leone in Box 5.3 (section 5.5.1) illustrates, the physical and mental distance between network headquarters and members in the provinces is often large.

Box 6.4: Networks encountered in Kenya or mentioned by interviewees

Kenya:
- Africa Peace Forum (resource institution working for peace and security in the greater Horn of Africa. Carries out research and engages with governments to shape policy. Founded a group working on early warning that includes governments and NGOs.)
- Peace and Development Network (PeaceNet Kenya; national umbrella body of NGOs, organisations and individuals supporting human rights, peace and...
reconciliation, justice and conflict resolution in Kenya

- Rural Women Peace Link (see Box 4.2)

Other country but with secretariat in Nairobi, Kenya:

- New Sudan Indigenous Network (network of NGOs working in South Sudan to empower civil society and act as a watchdog in order to achieve sustainable peace for the region)
- New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC; consists of six member churches. When in the late 1980s the national Sudan Council of Churches ran into increasing difficulties as a result of the war, NSCC was founded to focus on the South of Sudan only. Initially it was a relief organisation, but shifted its focus towards peacebuilding in response to increasing conflicts within the South of Sudan)

Regional:

- Peace Tree Network (regional network connecting NGOs working for peace in East Africa, the Great Lakes region, and Africa as a whole)
- Fellowship of Christian Councils in the Great Lakes region and Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA; supports the peacebuilding activities of church councils in the countries of the Great Lakes region and Horn of Africa)
- All Africa Council of Churches
- GPPAC Central and East Africa (see chapter seven)

Global:

- GPPAC (see chapter seven)
- World Council of Churches (global organisation of Christian churches that, among other things, supports its members to carry out peace activities)

Most peace networks face resource constraints and have to focus much of their energy on the acquisition of funds on order to sustain their institutions and pay for salaries of staff, stationery and other running costs. Due to their dependency on donor funding, peace networks in all countries face issues similar to those described for individual NGOs in chapter four. Network coordinators who interact with donors to secure financing for their activities complain of a lack of contextual understanding by donor representatives, and are critical of the programming priorities that donors impose. Like peace NGO employees more generally, network staff members feel that donors should be more aware of the knowledge, priorities, and concerns of themselves and their members. Networks have difficulty securing support for network meetings – particularly for transport and accommodation of members. These are often seen to be overhead rather than project costs or even unnecessary. The hesitancy of donors to fund not only programmes but also core funding and overhead costs represents an obstacle for networks. Costs for staff and logistics are not systematically taken into account. As a result, most secretariats are under-capacitated.

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The issues posed by the funding regime may be particularly salient for networks, as they are for learning, given the intangible nature of these activities and their results. They are also generally quite long-term in orientation. As particularly the Southeast Asian interviewees emphasised, networking is not a technical matter but is about building relationships. This takes time. However, unlike technical arrangements, relationships are likely to last, and participants will know how to find each other when they need something. The Action Asia network, for example, is built around a number of key and committed individuals. As these people move to different jobs around the world, they take their network and knowledge – as well as their vision and energy - with them and continue to be of value. These people share resources with one another and because they are so committed they do it in addition to their regular work.278

Box 6.5: The Dolina Mira network in the Central Asian Ferghana Valley279

The Dolina Mira (“Valley of Peace”) network is a cross-border CSO network in the conflict-stricken Ferghana Valley on the border of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The network aims to address a variety of cross-border issues relating to ethnic tension, resource conflicts, vulnerable populations, customs regulations, legal issues and border crossings in the region. The Dolina Mira network comprises thirty CSOs and has a paid membership. Member organisations often carry out joint activities, such as constructive dialogue and awareness raising activities and training and tolerance building in relation to conflicts originating from border crossing. There is also a small grants programme through which grassroots organisations can carry out socio-economic projects. Through this programme organisations also did a border monitoring project for the improvement of the Ferghana Valley region.

Dolina Mira operates at the micro level. Most members agree that it is practical and working well. In the past year Dolina Mira has been the only functioning network in Uzbekistan - illegally. Even after the bloody shooting of demonstrators in Andijan, Uzbekistan in 2005, Dolina Mira was able to keep the Uzbek CSOs involved by offering them funds and training. What is considered especially important about Dolina Mira is that it provided local civil society groups with knowledge and qualifications and has enabled them to exchange experiences.

The way Dolina Mira was established was truly bottom-up. It was created by locals, unlike many other networks in the region that were founded in response to the availability of donor funds. A concept paper was produced, and a donor found: the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). One interviewee remarked that “Dolina Mira is our baby, who found a tutor”. The donor is not dominating; the decisions are made by the coordinators and General Assembly of the network. People feel there is mutual respect.

There is a strong and competent secretariat, with resources. The coordination board is

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278 Interview with staff member of a Cambodian NGO and coordinator of a regional network. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006.
279 Interviews held in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, 23-29 July 2006.
also considered competent and professional, consisting of well-known persons. The work of secretariat and coordination board is transparent; members can always ask for reports. Members note the possibility to speak openly and freely at network meetings – apparently, this is different in other networks in the region. In the network “democracy is at work. The main goal of a network is changing values and mentality […]. The way the network is organised gives the right example.”

Money is available, making possible regular meetings, activities, planning, and implementation in clusters of CSOs. At the same time it is felt that “we can do more for less money because we like our network”. Local government officials have also become involved. They have approached Dolina Mira for cooperation, because they know it has the resources to resolve the problems. The members are “real partners in daily work; they are working together practically.”

On the negative side, Dolina Mira is heavily dependent on the funding and staff time of the DRC. This is not sustainable. Another negative point about Dolina Mira is that it works mainly at the concrete level, focusing on socio-economic projects. Some feel that this is not the role a network should be playing and that it should instead aim to change politics and politicians in the Ferghana Valley, so as to change the situation. Considering that authoritarian politics are closely related to many of the conflict issues in Southeast Asia, this is an issue that some say peace organisations and networks need to focus on. However, the members of Dolina Mira have low organisational capacity and prefer to work on small and concrete projects. They are also afraid of running risks by upsetting politicians.

6.1.2 Categorising the networks

Section 3.7 discussed several dimensions that can help categorise networks: their degree of cooperation and organisation, their focus and objective, and issues related to their accountability and exclusiveness. Here, I add some depth to these dimensions using findings from the field research, and add two other dimensions that emerged from the conversations held with network members, namely the mode of exchange and the role of the coordinating body.

Degree of cooperation and organisation

Section 3.7 introduced two extremes in the degree of cooperation and organisation of networks. On the one extreme, there is the ‘spider web model’: a strong centralised network consisting of a central board and secretariat, surrounded by circles of members in various levels of involvement from full to partial membership. At the other extreme is the fish-net or cell-structured network, which is much more loosely organised. In reality, most networks find themselves somewhere in between these two forms, as is the case with the peace networks encountered in my field research. Most have a secretariat but it tends to be small, under-funded and overburdened. Much depends on the
capacities and contributions of individual members. Many networks depend on a few strong member organisations to keep them going.

**Focus and objective**

Finding the right balance between focus on the one hand, and inclusiveness and diversity on the other, emerges from the field research as an important challenge for peace networks. The GPPAC network in the next chapter will illustrate this. Many of its members argue for more focus in terms of clear objectives, priorities and strategies, noting that networks working toward a specific outcome often function well, because they have a clear focus, their activity is time-bound, and the participants have an obvious common interest. A Cambodian network of student organisations was formed to do an interfaith project. It was explicitly decided that it would last only for the duration of this project. The network worked well. 280

At the same time, people see value in having a diverse membership that brings people with different backgrounds and points of view together. A Cambodian NGO staff member stated that “networking usually takes place among like-minded people; networks with people who have diverging interests often fail. However, it is precisely networking with people who are different that has value. People have to get out of their comfort zone.” 281 Such networking across boundaries may contribute directly to peacebuilding. Still, it is noted that diverse networks need to share a sense of common purpose that overrides individual differences. 282 Formulating clear and shared objectives therefore remain important. In addition, various people said that good networks are built around an issue people are interested in and passionate about.

**Legitimacy and accountability**

We saw in 3.7 that the loose structure of networks raises issue of accountability and ownership. In response, the networks studied devise their own mechanisms of accountability. Often they introduce democratic elements, electing representative bodies of governance. Codes of conduct or constitutions are sometimes developed. Financially, peacebuilding networks are usually accountable to donor organisations that demand transparent practice and reporting. In many cases the coordinating organisation is asked to conduct monitoring and evaluation,

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280 Interview with staff member of a Cambodian NGO and coordinator of a regional network. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006.
281 Informal conversation with staff member of a Cambodian NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 23 May 2006.
282 Informal conversation with staff member of a Cambodian NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 23 May 2006.
but the way this is carried out still depends on the cooperation of the partners.

Formal structures do not always correspond with the actual division of power within a network. As mentioned, Southern peace networks are in many cases dominated by a few strong individuals. Often, public figureheads start networks. In Sierra Leone civil society networking starts when “powerful and well known individuals […] approach colleagues or other important civil society members. They tend to form personal alliances as a first step.” Naturally, networks quickly become identified with such individuals. Douma notes that “[t]his may have an important political side effect. Networks can easily become associated with a specific party or a political interest group.” (Douma 2005: 29)

The influence of donor organisations in networks is often not immediately visible. Networks can be Northern-dominated and donor-driven, but they can also be built from the bottom up, as a result of Southern organisations meeting a shared need. As one donor representative pointed out in a conversation, donor-initiated is not necessarily the same as donor-driven; what matters is who sets the agenda283. Indeed, some donor-initiated networks are perceived to be very useful by the participants284.

Many networks face internal and external discussions on the legitimacy of their leadership and representative structures. Sometimes the way in which representatives are selected is subject to criticism. The position of network secretariats at the interface of the internal network and external stakeholders presents them with more general issues of legitimacy and representation. On the one hand they represent the interests of their members; on the other, they strive to maintain a particular reputation externally. The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) can serve as an example: it consists of a number of national networks. These networks lend the WANEP secretariat its legitimacy and the secretariat exists to support them. However, the secretariat also demands a certain measure of quality from the national networks in order to maintain its reputation and retain donors. The national networks obtain legitimacy from being a part of the wider WANEP network. Ensuring quality is something they have to do in return. The WANEP secretariat is constantly struggling to find the right balance between maintaining the autonomy of the national networks and ensuring a bottom-up decision-making structure, while at the same time making sure that the national

283 Conversation with staff members of a Dutch NGO. The Hague, Netherlands, 22 December 2005.
284 Such as the ICCO partner network in Liberia.
networks live up to the quality standards and principles of WANEP.285 The Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) of which WANEP is a part faces similar issues at the global level.286

*Mode of exchange*

The mode of exchange is another characteristic by which networks may be categorised. Most networks encountered in the field depend highly on more or less regular face-to-face meetings, which are considered indispensable to a valuable exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge. However, many networks at the local or national level are connected to regional or global ones, and although large conferences are sometimes organised, much of this exchange takes place via e-mail (and in one case, videoconferencing287). E-mail is also used in local and national networks for exchanges in between meetings. Some networks have e-groups on which all members can regularly post messages. In a Philippines-wide network for example, one member is good at accessing relevant websites, which are then posted on the e-group and mailed to others.288

*The role of the coordinating body*

Network members interviewed had clear views on the role of the coordinating body. They mentioned the following issues. Successful networks need more than a few committed people and capable institutions to sustain and enhance the process, so that the burden is not borne by one institution only, as often happens. Also needed is a good coordinator or secretariat that people feel comfortable with. The coordinator should be active, have a clearly understood role, and have the time to do his or her job well. One network encountered had five people trying to coordinate it, all of whom were doing so in addition to their regular work. This lead to confusion and all coordinators according low priority to the network.

A coordinating party is required for a network to function well. This can range from one person spending a few hours a week on the network to an entire fulltime network secretariat. Some networks visited are coordinated by a member organisation that has been assigned to do so.

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286 Conversation with staff members of the GPPAC International Secretariat, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 25 April 2006.
287 The Asia-Pacific Peacebuilding Network, initiated by the World Bank, has videoconferencing sessions during which peace NGOs from various Asian countries exchange information and experiences. A number of Cambodian NGOs participates in these via videolink from the local World Bank office. Source: interview with director of a Cambodian youth NGO, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24 May 2006.
288 Interview with staff member of a Philippine NGO, Quezon City, 19 May 2006.
These organisations perform a network secretariat function in addition to their other activities. The coordinating party moderates online interaction, processes information, and facilitates direct contact between members by putting them in touch with each other and by organising face-to-face meetings. In more action-oriented networks, coordinators may also raise funds for the network, initiate common programmes, and take the lead in lobby and advocacy.

The role of the coordinator is crucial. A network needs one or more persons who feel a special responsibility about the forum which they have joined or created, who facilitate exchange, organise events, and start discussions on governance matters where necessary. At the same time, the role of the coordinating body or secretariat can also be problematic. First of all, financing a secretariat is often difficult, because donors are often unwilling to provide anything other than project funding. In addition, it often happens that a secretariat has difficulty finding the right balance between the interests of the network members and their own organisational interest. For example, a secretariat may be tempted to use funds attracted for the network to implement its own programmes. This, we will see below, occurred at WANEP Liberia. Another issue may be that an organisation acting as secretariat fears losing its profile vis-à-vis donors and other potential partners, as NGOs are under continuous pressure to demonstrate their unique contribution to the field. (Galama and Van Tongeren 2002: 35)

The selection of a coordinator may also present problems. There may be competition over this position, particularly when the coordinating party is also the recipient of external funds for the network. Experience shows that where an existing NGO is selected to coordinate the network, this organisation acquires a power position from being the recipient of donor funds for the network. This can have an adverse effect: the coordinating NGO may be reluctant to jeopardise its newfound power and start monopolising rather than sharing knowledge as a result. More generally, the position of power that individuals and organisations derive from being at the funding interface is recognised by practitioners\(^{289}\) and researchers (Hilhorst 2003) alike. This makes democratic governance of networks a priority – but not always a reality.

It is important that the coordinator has the time to do his or her job well. A lot depends on whether this coordinator acts in an authoritarian or an

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\(^{289}\) Mentioned by interviewees in Liberia and Sierra Leone in February 2006 as well as during a conversation with staff members of a Dutch NGO that supports networks (The Hague, Netherlands, 22 December 2005).
empowering way. A good coordinator acts as a motivator, has an open mind for everyone, and ensures that everyone is heard. He or she always promotes the network’s cause and never forgets who his/her constituency is. It is difficult to find such people, particularly in places where authoritarian styles are common. A network coordinator in Cambodia noted that to some degree, the networking methodology defies the participatory principles prevalent in the development community, particularly in peacebuilding.

“Development avoids top-down approaches and emphasises accountability. It tries to empower people at the bottom to take responsibility. By contrast, networks are generally dependent on strong relationships and key people taking certain initiatives forward. Often they are highly centralised and are managed by a small group of people. The differences between networking and ‘regular’ development work should be well understood by donors.”

6.2 Potential benefits of networking for peace

Nearly all the SNGOs visited for this study participate in one or more networks. Table 6.1 shows the kinds of answers given when interviewees were asked about the benefits of networking to their work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits of networking and knowledge exchange</th>
<th>Lib (10)</th>
<th>SL (16)</th>
<th>Kenya (11)</th>
<th>Phil (10)</th>
<th>Cam (14)</th>
<th>C-Asia (15)</th>
<th>Total (76)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hear about other ways of doing things, experiences</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronger together vis-à-vis authorities, international organisations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widens reach, visibility of organisation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build capacity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combine expertise; complement one another</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge creation through interaction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

293 Interview with staff member of a Cambodian NGO and coordinator of a regional network. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006.

294 Interview with staff member of a Cambodian NGO and coordinator of a regional network. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<td>Learn from successes of others and avoid repeating their mistakes</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Solidarity, moral support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prevent duplication</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Build peace: change perceptions and attitudes; counter misinformation;</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>empowerment through knowledge</td>
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<td>Better analysis of context, issues</td>
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<td>Systematisation/standardisation of approaches; work towards integrated</td>
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<td>Keeping one’s knowledge up to date</td>
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<td>Indigenous knowledge accessed and shared</td>
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<td>Create common goal</td>
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<td>Regional cooperation</td>
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<td>Find new partners</td>
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<td>Increase recognition, legitimacy of organisation</td>
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<td>Informing people outside country of what is happening</td>
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<tr>
<td>International partners can decrease isolation</td>
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<td>Provide expertise to external actors</td>
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<td>Be inspired by others</td>
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<td>Intervention in conflict</td>
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<td>Early warning</td>
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Table 6.1: Benefits of networking and knowledge exchange according to Southern peace NGOs
The table shows that knowledge sharing is seen as the most important benefit of networks. It is mentioned in various forms:

- **hearing about other experiences and ways of doing things**
- **combining expertise and complementing one another’s knowledge** (particularly in West Africa this is a way of looking at knowledge sharing)
- **jointly creating knowledge through interaction** (when people from different places come together and share, this generates new energy and ideas. A workshop with peace scholar Johan Galtung that was organised in Phnom Penh during my visit to Cambodia generated ideas for three new projects in one of the participating NGOs.)
- **learning from the successes and mistakes of others** (for example, one Cambodian NGO collected the inputs and experiences of many other NGOs and used them for the development of a school curriculum.\(^292\))
- **better analysis of the context**
- **systematisation and standardisation of approaches, working towards an integrated approach** (this point, particularly in combination with the previous one, is important when we think back to the difficulties local peace NGOs have to reflect on the bigger picture of conflict and peace, their role in it, and the extent to which their work complements that of others\(^293\))
- **keeping one’s knowledge up to date**
- **accessing and sharing indigenous knowledge** (a point emphasised in the Philippines)
- **informing people outside the country of what is happening**
- **providing expertise to external actors**
- **exchanging early warning signals for conflict prevention.**

Another important benefit of networking is through the power of numbers. It gives individual organisations a stronger position vis-à-vis authorities, which may be used for policy influencing, lobby and advocacy activities. This point, phrased in several ways (being stronger together vis-à-vis governments and international organisations, widening the reach and visibility of an organisation, joint policy influencing, and having international partners, which may decrease isolation) is mentioned everywhere but receives particular emphasis in Central Asia, where civil society is generally weak in the face of authoritarian

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\(^{292}\) Interview with staff member of a Cambodian NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006.

\(^{293}\) See in particular section 1.6.1.
governments and such strategies are important prerequisites for its survival and impact. Other benefits mentioned include that networks may help build the capacity of organisations (something also related to knowledge sharing) and may coordinate between the activities of member NGOs to prevent duplication, something that is said to occur often. In addition, networks may facilitate NGOs linking up for joint projects and programmes.

Some additional insights about the benefits of networking may be gained from the global survey carried out as part of the GPPAC case study, analysed in the next chapter. Asked what the benefits of the global and regional GPPAC networks had been for their organisation, there was little difference between the answers given with regard to the global and regional level. The main benefits mentioned largely confirm the picture arising out of the interviews. They were:

- *exchange of experiences and learning* (127 people); collecting and sharing lessons learned and best practices
- *contacts; expansion of network and partners* (89)
- *access to knowledge and expertise* (83) in the field for an increased understanding of issues that play a role in conflict and peace, particularly those at global level
- *facilitate collaboration and work towards joint goal and strategy* (75); this provides the potential for truly regional and global action.
- *capacity building* (55), increasing understanding of the context, strengthening organisations, providing training
- *lobby and advocacy* (38); more advocacy power through the power of numbers and links with influential players; bridging the gap between governments and civil society; lobbying with the UN
- *increased visibility/legitimacy/influence* (26) of one’s organisation through the network
- *raising awareness* (21) of conflict prevention, peacebuilding and the role of civil society
- *fundraising and access to funds* (16)
- *mutual assistance* (13) and practical and moral support
- *unity and solidarity of civil society* (9)
- *link the global to the local* (5)

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294 See Annex 2.
Networks can also help overcome divisions within civil society. A West African network coordinator gave the example of Togo, where there are two NGO collectives, one pro- and one anti-government:

“Well-intentioned interventions by NGOs can be counterproductive in such an environment because it is easy to be seen as biased. For that reason it is important that our national network in Togo includes organisations from both collectives, which work jointly to show that it is not a response from one side only. This increases the credibility of actions. Sometimes it can also be important for a neutral outsider to step in; this is a role often played by staff members of the regional network secretariat.”

Particularly in Southeast Asia, another benefit of networking emerged from many of the interviews held that is not mentioned so often in the networking literature: the sense of solidarity and moral support that being a part of a network provides. The Action Asia network for example organises solidarity events for Burma and East Timor in other Southeast Asian countries. The Mindanawan organisation Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID) sends a newsletter to organisations throughout the region informing them of developments and activities around conflict and peace in Southeast Asian countries. NGO workers that receive these newsletters say they feel strengthened by knowing that others face similar issues as they do.

More practical mutual support is also considered an important feature of networks. In addition, networks enable organisations that otherwise have difficulty reaching audiences to voice their issues and grievances and advocate solutions. Speaking as a member of a civil society network gives one a much better advocacy position than as an individual organisation. The Mindanao Peace Caucus, a network of grassroots organisations, lobbied successfully for an international ceasefire monitoring team in Mindanao. The network also contributed to forging the ceasefire agreement through a huge demonstration on a highway. Such joint activities are another potential benefit of networks.

Of course, networks do not always achieve the potential benefits listed in this section. For one thing, they are affected by the obstacles to knowledge sharing discussed in the previous chapter – as the West African case study further on in this chapter will illustrate. At an even more basic level, whether a network benefits its members and is

295 Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
296 Several conversations with staff member of Action Asia.
298 Interview with chairman of the Mindanao People’s Caucus. Marbel, Philippines, 16 May 2006.
conducive to peacebuilding depends on the extent to which it adds value to activities and exchanges already taking place. If there are too many networks operating in a given region, then individual networks are unlikely to add much value. In Mindanao some people consider this to be the case. A donor representative noted for example that “there are a lot of networks in Mindanao, and there is a lot of overlap between them.”

A member of Mindanawan civil society adds that “too often in Mindanao, networks are formed. After each conference an organisation is created. This results in many abbreviations [the names of the networks], but usually it is the same people who make up the network. Often the new organisational forms only add to the workload. If the activities aimed at could as well be carried out within one or more of the organisations involved then there is no need to create an organisation”.

6.3 Challenges for networking

In general, the challenges to learning and knowledge sharing identified in section 5.6 apply to networks. In fact interviewees often mentioned them in the context of discussing networks. Thus, a lack of time and money to participate in networking, the need to adapt knowledge to the context, competition and distrust among actors in peacebuilding, the low capacity of SNGOs, imposition of ideas by donors, the lack of constituency of some SNGOs, the fact that the content of knowledge is often contested, aspects relating to power relations and inequality within a given country or region, constraints resulting from the difficult social and political situation in (post)conflict societies, cultural issues, gender and the fact that knowledge changes over time all play a role. In addition, networks face a number of specific organisational issues, which become clear from the GPPAC survey mentioned earlier that also asked respondents about the challenges to successful networking. They include most of the factors mentioned above. In addition, the answers included:

- the difficulty of proving the value of the network by moving towards implementation and concrete activities (26 people)
- finding a focus and developing a clear strategy (16)
- difficulties with information flows and communication (18) within the network

299 Conversation with staff member of a Dutch development organisation. The Hague, The Netherlands, 19 April 2006.
300 Informal conversation with staff member of a Mindanawan NGO. Davao, Philippines, 15 May 2006.
301 See Annex 2.
• keeping the momentum, continuity and sustainability (17)
• low commitment (8) on the part of some members. Persuading people to be actively involved is a challenge. Members have to deal with competing demands on their time and energy.
• governance, transparency and ownership (6)
• becoming more rooted at grassroots level (4)
• supporting weak members (4)
• language barriers (4)

The regular mentioning of the difficulty of moving towards concrete activities should be seen in the context of GPPAC. Although the question about network challenges was asked in general terms, the survey was held among GPPAC members. As the next chapter will show, the difficulty of becoming concrete is an important issue for this network. The need to find a focus and clear strategy was also mentioned in sections 3.7 and 6.1. There it became clear that this need has to be balanced against the values of diversity and inclusiveness. The challenge of keeping the momentum and sustaining a network over the longer term applies to GPPAC, as well as to many other networks in the field, including the Sierra Leonean WANEP network analysed further on in this chapter, which was dormant for several years before it was revived. Governance, transparency and ownership were also discussed in 3.7 and 6.1. They are important issues to deal with in order to prevent (or overcome) conflicts within networks and to ensure that the interests and views of members are represented in decision making.

Sustaining information flows and communication, particularly in between face-to-face meetings, is an issue for many networks. This is not only related to a lack of access to communication tools on the part of some members, but also to coordinators being overburdened and lacking time and capacity to pass on information. In addition, language barriers (mentioned separately in the above list of challenges) play a role in international networks. Finally, low capacity and commitment of members, and a lack of time to participate in networking, resonate with issues described in the previous chapter.

6.4 Factors influencing network success

Building on the experiences presented so far, what characteristics of knowledge exchange networks are found to be important for successful functioning? Networking is affected by the issues outlined in previous chapters:
- the organisational learning capacity of their members (chapter three)
- the structural constraints posed by inequalities between North and South as well as among actors in (post)conflict countries themselves, most notably donors and recipients, and the way in which these determine the capacity of local actors to generate and disseminate knowledge (chapter four)
- obstacles to learning and exchange such as a lack of time and money, limited organisational capacity and characteristics, the fact that much knowledge in conflict is contested, competition and distrust among civil society actors, power relations and inequality among participants in exchange, the difficult social and political situation in (post)conflict societies, cultural issues and gender divisions that need to be bridged in order to share and learn jointly, and the fact that knowledge changes quickly (chapter five)
- the way in which a network is organised; its activities, focus and objective; the role of its coordinating body; its legitimacy, transparency and accountability; its extent of exclusiveness; and challenges it may face (section 3.8 and chapter six).

The following pages translate all of these issues into a list of twenty-five factors that influence the success of knowledge networking. These factors relate to
- the capacity of the member organisations
- the relationship between members and the network
- general characteristics of the network
- governance, legitimacy and organisation of the network
- coverage and inclusiveness of the network
- the content of the network
- the context of the network
- the funding structure of the network.

6.4.1 Capacity of the member organisations

One basic requirement for the success of a network of NGOs is the extent to which the participating organisations are able to give valuable input and make use of whatever comes out of it. Thus, the organisational capacity of members (as discussed in section 5.6.2) is of significance for networking. As our focus here is particularly on the knowledge exchange function of networks, this means that the knowledge level and learning capacity of the member NGOs are especially important.
Organisations with low learning capacity will be unable to improve their work based on knowledge gained through networking. Networks themselves can also play a role in stimulating the learning capacity of members. This leads to the following success factors for networks at the level of the individual members.

1. The participating organisations have the capacity to learn and to use the network for some purpose. They are able to apply the knowledge gained from network participation to their own work. This requires both the will and space to change work methods and try new things. The members also have a work culture that stimulates learning. The network supports learning processes within member organisations.

2. The network contributes to the capacity building of its members. This helps to deal with issues of power and inequality and ensures that members can get the most out of their participation in the network. The network also provides room for discussion and reflection upon actions.

3. Participants have time to engage in meaningful exchanges.

6.4.2 Relationship between the member organisations and the network

Earlier we discussed the need for networks to add value to an existing field. This leads to the following factor in the relation between individual NGOs and their network.

4. The network has a clear added value for the members. The members have a need for the network and participants are motivated to participate actively. The network does not exist in isolation but has sustainable links to activities carried out in reality.

In 3.7 and 6.1 the importance of shared objectives and clarity about its aims and possibilities emerged, leading us to the next two points.

5. There is a clear purpose; a shared mission by all parties involved. This has been translated into a clear set of objectives. Without a specific aim, interaction quickly becomes spurious. However, with a too narrowly defined objective, a community may not survive its own success. It may fall apart once the aim has been realized, without making sure that the accumulated insight is passed on.
6. From the outset, there is clarity about the limits and possibilities of the network. There has been sufficient discussion about what the network can do, and expectations are not unrealistic. Similarly, there is clarity about the process. Lines of communication and dissemination are clear and systematic, but flexible.

6.4.3 Characteristics of the network

The organisational learning discussion, covered in chapter three, generates number of factors conducive to learning that can be applied to networks in the following way.

7. The network is flexible and capable of responding to changes in the environment. The network is also flexible in that room is created for self-organisation – participants who link up can start all kinds of initiatives together.

8. There is an atmosphere of safety in which to express doubts and criticisms and manage uncertainties; in other words the network constitutes a safe setting for knowledge exchange.

Also part of the organisational learning literature, but particularly significant for our area of study, are issues of trust, openness to different views, and cross-cultural sensitivity. These are needed to overcome some of the obstacles formulated in the previous chapters, such as discourse dominance, contested knowledge, competition, (conflict-related) mistrust, and cultural issues and gender.

9. There is trust among the members and between participants and funders. Without the confidence that everyone is in it for the larger good there will be a tendency to withhold knowledge in order to strengthen one’s position.

10. There is openness to different points of view, different values, and different interpretations of reality. The network’s knowledge exchange function is not hampered by the constraints of a discourse coalition or hegemonic project. The network may engage in advocacy but its “common voice” does not prohibit the coexistence of different opinions. Cultural issues are recognised and discussed in the network.
6.4.4 Governance, legitimacy and organisation of the network

Power relations and inequality also emerged in chapters four and five as particularly salient issues that can limit the success of knowledge sharing and networking activities. The way in which a network is governed, and specifically the extent to which all participants are accorded an equal say, can make a difference in mitigating such issues.

11. The network is **democratic and inclusive**. It is not controlled by a single set of interests. Members may have unequal capacity and strength but they have an equal voice. Those who coordinate the network are accountable to the members.

12. The network strives to **mitigate power issues**. It has mechanisms in place that regulate conflict and prevent personal issues from taking the foreground. The stronger members have a genuine desire to contribute to open exchange and facilitate the capacity building of other members. They inevitably influence the network more strongly than weaker members do, but they do not impose their own views at the expense of openness and diversity.

13. The participating organisations have a sense of **ownership**. It is their process and not something that has been imposed by donors or governments.

In section 6.1.2, the role of a coordinator or network secretariat emerged as a factor that influences the success of a network, as follows.

14. **Facilitation and moderation**: sustaining networks requires considerable time, effort and resources. There should be at least one person who is enabled to spend time on the facilitation of the network. Some kind of secretariat needs to coordinate and organise the flows of knowledge, preventing information overload and scatter. It follows that funding is required. However, a network can also be overmoderated, if a moderator has a narrow view of the purpose of the group, takes decisions in an authoritarian way and stifles discussion rather than stimulating it. There is only a narrow space between channelling a discussion smoothly into a constructive direction and pressing people into a straightjacket which would exclude any spontaneous detours, exchanges or personal remarks. The role of the moderator is crucial, since all the other dimensions mentioned in this list depend on a moderator who assures that the group avoids the many possible pitfalls.
In chapter five a potential obstacle to learning and knowledge sharing was found in the fact that knowledge – particularly knowledge about conflict and peace – changes rapidly. Strategies working today may not work in a few months’ time, particularly given the dynamics of conflict situations. In order to deal with that problem, the following factor can be of importance.

15. Knowledge sharing needs to occur on a regular basis, otherwise information provided may already be outdated. As explicit knowledge tends to change more slowly than tacit knowledge, face-to-face interaction is important for the exchange of the latest tacit knowledge.

6.4.5 Coverage and inclusiveness of the network

In sections 3.7 and 6.1 I discussed the difficult issue of finding a balance between focus on the one hand, and diversity and inclusiveness on the other. This leads to the following three factors.

16. The right balance has to be found between inclusiveness and diversity on the one hand, and focus and direction on the other. This goes for content as well as membership, as points 17 and 18 elaborate.

17. Membership balance: if only people with a similar background participate, opinions may not differ sufficiently to generate creative ideas. Moreover, if only a small fraction of the potential constituency participates, people will turn to other forums where these people do meet. On the other hand, by asking too many people with different backgrounds to join, communication could also falter. The reasons are that chances increase that individual contributions are beyond the interest of the majority of members; people hesitate to engage themselves because they do not see a common denominator which brings participants together; and there may be an information overload – unless the information is skilfully channelled into different subgroups and discussion threads.

6.4.6 Content of the network

18. Content balance: if the field of discussion is too narrow, it will not stimulate a broad enough flow of information and interaction may be less creative, since creative ideas often result
from the combination of hitherto uncombined elements. In addition, a too narrow field would only attract the ‘usual suspects’ who already know each other fairly well; little cross-fertilization would take place. If the field is too broad, however, then the interaction remains too vague and becomes uninteresting for serious people, and it becomes very difficult to arrive at common products which bind the group together.

The importance for learning of exchanging both tacit and explicit knowledge emerges from chapters two and three, but also from the discussion on quickly changing knowledge in chapter five. It brings us to the following factor.

19. **Tacit as well as explicit knowledge** is exchanged; the network brings people into contact with each other who can share experiences, but it also attempts to draw experiences together into codified knowledge that can be distributed more easily. A combination of face-to-face and online interaction is probably the best way to achieve this.

Section 6.3 mentioned the importance for networks of having a clear aim. This is indeed something that is regularly mentioned by network members interviewed. Thus, there has to be some kind of result a network is working towards.

20. **Results**: networks may generate ‘common products’. These could be joint publications containing lessons learned or recommendations, joint projects or programmes, the organisation of an event, a broadening of the community, or the start of a new one in a different field or region. Many communities are created for the exchange of knowledge and experience per se. But there is always an implicit assumption that this exchange will lead to better results, if not through joint activity, then through the improved functioning of the individual participants who are enriched by the exchange.

A final thing to remember with regard to content is that a network is different from an organisation. As we saw earlier in this chapter, ideally it should be a flexible and easily changing framework that stimulates individual initiative rather than prescribes action. This also goes for the content; the knowledge that is shared. To prevent the dominance of a particular discourse or interest, and be as open as possible to different perspectives, flexibility about content and exchange is important.
21. The network does not strive to be an overall, comprehensive knowledge system, but aims to offer a stimulating framework that facilitates exchange and access to knowledge sources.

6.4.7 Context of the network

Chapter four has shown that each peacebuilding initiative, including networks, functions within a structural context. Chapter five added to this by discussing how the social and political situation in conflict-affected countries influences the success of knowledge sharing initiatives. Thus, the context of a network is significant, and the way in which networks relate to this context matters for the way they function. This leads us to the following three factors.

22. Embeddedness: any network should be linked in an appropriate way to a wider environment, to neighbouring communities, similar initiatives in other countries or regions. If this is not the case, a network remains isolated. Insights generated in similar networks might not be taken into account, resources will not be pooled, results cannot be compared, and ideas will remain less widespread. At the same time, the network should not be embedded to the extent that it cannot operate autonomously.

23. The network establishes links with existing networks in order to prevent duplication and maximise knowledge benefits.

24. The network operates in an enabling context. It is not obstructed by governments, conflict parties or other organisations. The basic infrastructure is present and there is some level of safety and security. The political environment fosters free speech and freedom of movement. If the context is not so enabling, creative ways are found to deal with constraints.

6.4.8 Funding of the network

Section 5.6.1 showed how important it is to have resources available for knowledge activities – including networking – in order to enable NGOs to make time for, and give priority to, these activities. At the same time we in the back of our minds the discussion in chapter four of the constraints imposed by funding regimes. A combination of these issues leads us to the following characteristics of successful networks.
25. The **funding structure** of the network has the following characteristics:

- There is sufficient funding for networking and knowledge sharing activities, even if the direct impact of these cannot always be shown.
- At the same time, the network is accountable financially.
- Donors do not impose particular kinds of knowledge or particular modes of knowledge exchange.
- The funding structure does not provide a position of power to one organisation at the funding interface, but ensures that the funds benefit the network as a whole.
- It does not enhance competition between members.
- Donors engage in knowledge exchange with the network, thus contributing to the knowledge processes inside it and linking it up to other networks.
- Donors take the knowledge generated in the network seriously and make use of it in their policy formulation as much as possible. This will increase the relevance of the network and give participants an incentive to continue contributing to it.

Having abstracted the above success factors from the practice of civil society networking peace, it is time to return once more to the empirical reality and compare these factors with a concrete case of a peacebuilding network. In the next section, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) will be introduced, before being linked in section 6.6 to the factors formulated above in order to both apply and illustrate them.

### 6.5 Case study: the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)

The next two sections provide a case study of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). The network exists in fourteen West-African countries. The data presented here are based on information obtained during a visit to the regional headquarters of the network in Ghana for an interview with its director, and on an analysis of the member networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone by interviewing peace NGO staff members involved in them.

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302 Out of the 24 WANEP members in Liberia, five were interviewed. This amounts to 20%. In addition, the coordinator of WANEP Liberia was interviewed, as well as four non-members who knew the network. Out of the 72 members of NCP-SL, the Sierra Leonean WANEP network, fourteen were interviewed, which also amounts to about 20%. In addition, the network coordinator
The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) was founded in 1998. The process that led to its foundation began in 1990, when the relatively peaceful state of the West-African region (not counting numerous coups d'etat) ended with the outbreak of the conflict in Liberia. The Ghanaian Emmanuel Bombande worked with the Kenya-based NGO Nairobi Peace Initiative (NPI-Africa) in East-Africa, through which he met the peace scholar John Paul Lederach, who in turn brought him into contact with Liberian peace activist Samuel Doe. Both Bombande and Doe went to do a Master programme at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in the United States. They struggled with the best ways to apply the concepts introduced there in their own region and had many conversations with the faculty of EMU about this. The idea to set up a West African peacebuilding organisation began to form. The EMU faculty helped Doe and Bombande to obtain a grant from the Winston Foundation that allowed them to conduct research in West Africa in order to test and form ideas about the best structure and nature of such an organisation.

At the time there were no organisations in the region that focused exclusively on peacebuilding. Many development organisations experienced a contradiction between their development work and the conflict, with development activities sometimes unintentionally leading to an escalation of conflicts. Latent issues emerged into violence as development interventions introduced new inequalities and envy. As a result, these organisations overwhelmingly recognised the need to deal with the conflicts more directly.

According to the director, the various countries in the region faced similar problems, creating a need for a common body. At the same time the region was also extremely diverse, calling for a loose organisational form that left room for diverging initiatives and ideas. Therefore the form of organisation chosen for WANEP was a network. A regional secretariat was created and based in Accra, Ghana. Next, the new regional secretariat moved to create national networks in fourteen countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. According to the director, in retrospect this top-down way of

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303 This section is based mainly on an interview with the director of WANEP. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
developing the network was the wrong way around and led to problems later on (see below).

The Winston Foundation provided another grant, and Cordaid gave three-year support. There was also some EU money granted. After the three-year fund ended, Cordaid gave bridging funds to enable WANEP to restructure and to draft a new three-year plan. In the meantime, WANEP also applied for funding from other donors. However, an evaluation in 2003 brought problems to light between national networks and the regional secretariat. As the national networks had been created by the regional secretariat, they remained overly dependent on it. In response, it was decided that the national networks should become more autonomous, while they should continue to recognise the overall mission and values of WANEP and act within these. WANEP’s regional staff have difficulty walking the thin line between national autonomy on the one hand, and stepping in when national networks do not act in accordance with WANEP’s vision, potentially damaging its reputation, on the other. Some national networks are more dependent on the regional secretariat than others – financially, but also for creative input.

The 2003 evaluation also revealed a top-heavy structure in which the various regional bodies all consisted of representatives of the fourteen national networks. Instead, it was decided to create a professional (rather than representative) executive board. The professional board includes an organisational development expert, a gender expert, a financial administration expert, and two peacebuilding and conflict prevention experts. The annual regional meeting of country representatives nonetheless retained the ultimate decision-making power. The secretariat reports to the executive director, who reports to the professional board, which reports to the annual regional meeting. Each national network has a national board, the chairperson of which is represented in the annual regional meeting.

The restructuring period that followed the 2003 evaluation was a very difficult one in which power issues began to come to the fore and there was a lot of mistrust about the agendas of individuals. The two founders of WANEP found themselves in opposing positions (with Doe more willing to compromise and Bomande more principled). People’s positions began to be more about which individual they supported rather than about content. Doe finally left.
6.5.2 WANEP objectives and activities\textsuperscript{304}

WANEP’s vision is “a West Africa region characterized by just and peaceful communities where the dignity of the human person is paramount and where the people can meet their basic human needs and decide their own direction.” In terms of objectives, WANEP seeks to

- strengthen the capability of peacebuilding organisations and practitioners in West Africa to engage actively in the peaceful transformation of violent conflicts
- increase awareness on the use of non-violent strategies in responding to conflicts in West Africa.
- develop a conflict prevention network in West Africa to monitor, report and offer indigenous perspectives and understanding of conflicts in West Africa
- harmonise peacebuilding activities in West Africa through networking and coordination of WANEP members.
- create understanding of the impact of truth, justice, and reconciliation on peacebuilding in West Africa.
- build the capacity of West African Women to actively participate in peacebuilding processes at all levels.\textsuperscript{305}

WANEP recognises that knowledge is needed to inform practice. The regional network uses the term ‘cross-fertilisation of knowledge’ between different actors that learn from each other’s perspectives and experiences. Each of WANEP’s programmes\textsuperscript{306} is supposed to promote such cross-fertilisation. The most common ways in which knowledge is shared within WANEP are, first, regular meetings of national representatives and second, workshops and seminars in the framework of the West Africa Peacebuilding Institute (WAPI). National network coordinators are regularly asked to propose people from within the national networks for participation in one of the WAPI workshops. WAPI’s facilitators, who come from various countries, try to ensure that knowledge is exchanged in an interactive way. Concepts are continuously related to their practical relevance in the different contexts represented.

\textsuperscript{304} This section is based mainly on an interview with the director of WANEP. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{305} www.wanep.org. Accessed March 1\textsuperscript{st} 2006.
\textsuperscript{306} Active Nonviolence and Peace Education; Capacity Building Program; Civil Society Policy and Advocacy Program; Justice Lens Programme; Women in Peacebuilding; Early Warning and Early Response; and West Africa Peacebuilding Institute. (Source: www.wanep.org. Accessed March 1\textsuperscript{st} 2006)
Enhancing indigenous knowledge of conflict prevention is one of the priorities of WANEP. The Justice Lens Programme, which explores issues of justice versus truth and reconciliation, and aims to bring together human rights practitioners and peacebuilding workers, wants to help bridge the gap between traditional and modern solutions. National laws in West-Africa are often drawn up inspired by Western examples and do not necessarily reflect common values. The peacebuilding field may facilitate a dialogue between laws and common values. The now increasingly used concept of restorative justice is an outcome of such a process.307

Both content knowledge (characteristics of conflicts and ways to deal with them) and technical knowledge (related to ways of running an organisation) are exchanged within WANEP. The emphasis has shifted recently from the former to the latter. Increasing attention is paid to M&E mechanisms, for example. WANEP is now attempting to better retain and write down its stories. It is also starting up a research effort to map and document conflicts and create a database of narratives. This would provide baseline information for interventions. The director feels that WANEP has been successful in some areas in building local capacity – the number of facilitators has grown significantly. The Women in Peacebuilding (WIPNET) programme in particular has trained many trainers.

6.5.3 The national networks308

The national network coordinators report to the regional secretariat quarterly and have a voice in the annual general meeting. In their view important learning takes place in these meetings as experiences from the national networks are shared. The national network coordinators are responsible for informing their national network members of the knowledge gained at the regional level by feeding reports into meetings held at the national and district levels. The coordinators have a mixed opinion of the way WANEP as whole is functioning. On the one hand, the network is relatively well organised and communication is efficient. All national networks are enabled to give input into WANEP’s strategic planning. The coordinators feel part owner of WANEP; their voice in the general meetings is heard and taken seriously. The national networks

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307 Interview with the director of WANEP. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
308 This section is based mainly on interviews with the national WANEP coordinators in Liberia (Monrovia, Liberia, 8 February 2006) and Sierra Leone (Freetown, Sierra Leone, 15 February 2006). In addition, it uses information from interviews with various other WANEP members in those two countries.
have autonomy. It is also positive that they are asked regularly to propose members to be sent to training sessions. However, the national coordinators feel that WANEP needs to pay more attention to the capacity building and institutional development of the national networks. These can only start acquiring their own funds after their capacity has been developed. They need more money to run their office, afford vehicles, and pay staff. It is feared that WANEP might begin losing members if it does not provide more support in these areas.

WANEP Liberia aims to facilitate knowledge sharing and provide technical assistance to individual members, helping them with strategic planning and finding money. The network secretariat also provides expertise to international organisations, giving advice, organising workshops, and writing manuals. In addition it implements programmes of its own in the areas of peace education, the training of trainers, and early warning. Most of the members of WANEP Liberia are very critical of the fact that the network secretariat implements programmes; they feel that it should limit itself to supporting its members, rather than competing with them.

WANEP Liberia works on knowledge sharing through thematic workshops that bring together a number of members around a particular issue. Exchanges take place around content issues: what are we doing and how well are we doing it? What are the issues, and how can we best deal with them? The regular membership meetings of the network were valued for the things that were discussed. Because of a lack of funding, these meetings no longer occur frequently. Members also appreciated the newsletter and ‘from the field’ publication of the network; unfortunately these are no longer being produced due to a lack of funding. Little funding is coming from the regional network secretariat that wants the national network to become more autonomous and gather its own funds. But donors are proving hard to find except for individual programmes with clear and visible outcomes. At the time of the visit the network secretariat was financed mainly through income from consultancy work by the coordinator. Soon afterwards the coordinator became a deputy minister in the new Johnson Sirleaf government. It is not clear whether his successor has been able to generate a similar income.

The Sierra Leonean WANEP network is called Network on Collaborative Peacebuilding Sierra Leone (NCP-SL). NCP-SL does not implement programmes but serves purely to coordinate and facilitate the
members. It focuses on five thematic areas: capacity building; institutional development; research\textsuperscript{309} and advocacy; early warning and early response; and promoting learning and sharing. Until recently the knowledge exchanged in the Sierra Leonean network was mostly content knowledge, focusing on issues and strategies of peacebuilding. Recently a technical component (focusing on issues such as organisational management and M&E) has been added. Meetings are open and anyone can propose a topic for discussion. At the last annual meeting of the national network inadequate communication was identified as a major issue and during my visit in February 2006 NCP-SL was creating an e-mail group and a newsletter (to be called Peaceletter). It is also carrying out a ‘Mapping the Field’ exercise\textsuperscript{310} to achieve more clarity about the aims and activities of the network and its members.

In 2004 and 2005 the network experienced severe leadership problems and was accused of mismanagement. Some board members wanted to use the network for their own purposes. There was disagreement in the board and some members resigned. It also became clear that intentions and expectations of members differed greatly. As a result, for several years the network was almost dormant. Recently, a new coordinator has taken office. He instituted a ‘visioning process’ in order to get everyone looking in the same direction again. The process created a new constitution and a five-year strategic plan. The constitution is to prevent board members from personal interference in the future. As a result the network is being reinvigorated. However, this new élan is only slowly taking root, particularly at the local level, and problems still persist. There is still a lack of funding for the running of the secretariat.

The frequency of network meetings varies. At the national level, there is an annual general meeting in addition to thematic workshops every few months (at least in Liberia). In addition, there are provincial network meetings. At the time of my visit to Kenema, Sierra Leone, the network members in that district met once every two weeks. The time spent by members on the networks varies as well. At one extreme, some attend most meetings, exchange knowledge outside of meetings, and participate in joint projects. At the other, some members are largely inactive.

\textsuperscript{309} At the time of my visit (February 2006) NCP-SL was working with one of its members to write a research proposal on the issue if chieftaincies that have been amalgamated into larger entities (the number of chieftaincies went down from 400 to 49), causing disgruntlement among some chiefs and providing a possible potential for renewed conflict.

\textsuperscript{310} Every member is to fill in a questionnaire detailing its expectations of the network, its added value to the network, its activities and recent developments.
6.5.4 Challenges

The following challenges are identified by people involved in WANEP and its national networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

- At the regional level trust issues are beginning to be repaired, but it still takes a lot of effort to continuously make clear that positions and decisions are not personal but about issues. Avoiding internal conflict remains a priority.
- There is a tension between the maintenance of the regional mission and vision on the one hand, and the autonomy and local flavour of the national networks on the other. Some national network members have taken advantage of the network for their own benefit, forcing the regional secretariat to intervene (this happened in Nigeria). It is important to keep focusing on the issues in such situations, instead of on the people. There has been a lot of unclarity about the operating space of the national networks.
- WANEP invests in its staff and their knowledge. Unfortunately this means that they become quite sought after by other NGOs and sometimes leave for better-paid positions elsewhere.
- WANEP is sometimes seen by international NGOs to be acting as a gatekeeper, warding off contacts with its member organisations. The director emphasises that this is unjustified. It is merely trying to coordinate, optimise contacts, build on local capacity, and find opportunities for synergy.
- At the national level, important issues are the lack of funding and the diverging expectations of members. In addition, not every member is equally active, and there are also sleeping members. One board member of NCP-SL was recently removed because of his inaction. At a network meeting in Kenema, Sierra Leone in February 2006 less than half of the members showed up.

6.6 Requirements for successful networking applied: the case of WANEP

In section 6.4 I formulated twenty-five factors that influence the successful functioning of knowledge networks. The following section uses these factors as a framework for analysing the information from...
WANEP and its members in Liberia and Sierra Leone, as well as other stakeholders in those countries\textsuperscript{312}.

6.6.1 Capacity of the member organisations

The capacity of peacebuilding NGOs in Liberia and Sierra Leone varies widely. A lack of funds plagues almost all of them. As we saw in 5.6.3, NGOs complain of a lack of knowledge in the areas of conflict transformation and the systematic analysis of conflict and there is little skilled manpower within organisations. The capacity building of members is an explicit aim of WANEP, WANEP Liberia, and NCP-SL alike. However, it is also an element that is much criticised by members, whose expectations are not being met in this area. In Liberia, the members are supposed to pay a registration fee of $50 and an annual fee of $100, but they have not been doing so recently because they feel WANEP Liberia has not kept its part of the deal: there was supposed to be a capacity building programme for members but no funds have been found for it. In both countries a lack of funds is given as the reason for the limited capacity building offered. The national network coordinators want more support from the regional secretariat. They argue that they cannot engage in capacity building of members until their own capacity, including the capacity to raise funds, has been built first. Although it is sometimes mentioned, a lack of time to participate in networking does not figure prominently on the list of challenges noted by member NGOs in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

6.6.2 Relationship between the member organisations and the network

Despite sometimes grave criticism almost all of the members of WANEP’s national networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone saw some measure of added value in the network. This value was found mostly in exchanges of knowledge with other members. These exchanges were seen to have four main benefits for participating NGOs:

- Better knowledge of what others were doing, and where, was considered important. This allowed NGOs to avoid the duplication of activities, identify possibilities for cooperation and information exchange and see ‘gaps’: areas in which no one yet worked.

\textsuperscript{312} See note 302.
Practical knowledge was exchanged, ranging from security updates to funding opportunities (although many members felt that the latter should be done much more).

Exchanging content knowledge about peacebuilding strategies, and experiences with these, was found useful. “Learning from one another” was a phrase that was frequently used.

Being a member of WANEP and other networks also gives weight to lobbying. Being a member of a network in which many different NGOs working in all regions of the country are represented brings common strength and credibility.

For the WANEP networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone, lack of clarity and disagreements about objectives have led to diverging expectations and dissatisfaction. Some members are not clear about their role as a member. Some are in it only as a way to get funds and have no interest in the objectives of the network. Through its ‘mapping the field’ exercise the Sierra Leonean network is trying to get these different expectations out in the open. The coordinator emphasises that people have to be clear and honest about what they are doing and must subscribe to the, jointly adopted, mission and vision of the network. One of the main issues of contention with regard to the aims and possibilities of the networks was whether they should engage in fundraising for its members. Many members expect this (quite a few interviewees mentioned access to funding as an important potential benefit and were disappointed that little had been forthcoming), but it is not an explicit aim of the networks. The new network coordinator organised a ‘visioning process’ in response to diverging expectations, aiming was to reach an agreement on the objectives of the network. Members formed working groups to formulate recommendations for a new constitution and work plan. All of the representatives present at the network meeting subsequently voted on these recommendations. However, not all members were equally involved in this process and diverging expectations still existed.

In Liberia there was also lack of clarity and disagreement about the role of the network. A few interviewees, including the coordinator, felt it should engage in the implementation of programmes itself, while most other interviewees emphasised it should limit itself to its function as coordinator and facilitator. WANEP Liberia does carry out programmes, and to most members interviewed this runs counter to its aims and brings it into competition with its own members. This dissatisfaction also relates to the way in which the network decides to take on an
activity: these decisions are often taken by the secretariat rather than the members.

6.6.3 Characteristics of the network

This section deals with the flexibility of the network, whether there is an atmosphere of safety and trust, and whether there is openness to different points of view. Regarding flexibility, the structures of the networks are relatively formalised (particularly in Sierra Leone) but this was also necessary to prevent abuse and deal with differences in understanding with regard to the aims of the network. Most interviewees consider the atmosphere in network meetings to be such that participants are not reluctant to raise critical points. Members tend to have an open mind to different points of view and values.

With regard to trust, the picture varies considerably. Some network members claim that trust within the network is high. Others feel that some members take advantage of the network by benefiting without contributing, or that organisations participate that should not because they are not really peacebuilding organisations. Many interviewees refer to competition among NGOs over scarce funds: this competition limits openness of members and their willingness to share information for fear of damaging one’s competitive position. In response to this issue, WANEP’s annual meeting came up with a rule that members should not duplicate programmes and that the network as a whole only adopts programmes that no one else can do on their own.313 However, as we have seen, at least in Liberia this rule is not followed.

Some network members voiced their distrust of other members and their intentions. In both countries interviewees accused other members of being free-riders. It was noted, for example, that at a meeting of the Sierra Leonean network people suddenly began paying their subscriptions as it became clear that only paying members could vote and be elected into the board. In Sierra Leone, some members pretend to be organisations while they are really only one person. Similarly, in Liberia an NGO representative claimed that some members of the Liberian network were not necessarily real NGOs. These organisations were said to have bribed their way through the government accreditation process for NGOs. They are members only because they hope to gain access to funds and opportunities, and do not really care about the aims of the networks. It happened that after WANEP Liberia had rejected an

313 Interview with director of WANEP. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
activity proposed by a donor because the funds allocated to it were insufficient, one of these organisations went to the donor and accepted the cheap job – going on to deliver poor results that are bad for the reputation of Liberia civil society as a whole.\footnote{Interview with director of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 8 February 2006.}

There are also trust issues between the national network coordinators and secretariats on the one hand, and many of the members on the other. In Liberia members complain that the secretariat in effect competes with them by carrying out programmes of its own instead of facilitating and supporting the implementation of programmes by members. In Sierra Leone the national secretariat has not performed up to expectations in the past and now has to regain the trust of members. Some interviewees complained that some of the network’s founding members, active and capable organisations, have been sidelined. They are never contacted when decisions are made. The board members who represent a particular region select provincial representatives for national meetings based mainly on who they happen to like. In Kenema the regional secretary resigned in protest.

Although not many interviewees mention this explicitly, it is likely that all of these issues of low trust and power play are partly related to the legacy of the conflicts in Sierra Leone in Liberia. These conflicts have eroded social capital and separated communities. The sudden availability post-conflict of large sums of donor funds for NGOs led to a rapid rise in the number of organisations and contributed to discussions about the lack of constituency of many NGOs\footnote{See 1.6.3.} and about their intentions. Here as elsewhere, distrust more generally was mentioned as an important obstacle to successful networking.

Regarding the content of exchanges, the stronger organisations, which have more access to training and knowledge, have a large role in determining the knowledge flows inside the network and the positions adopted by the network as a whole. In terms of discourse, some interviewees recognise that terminology used and even issues emphasised depend to some extent on the training courses and materials available and on the discourse and priorities of donors. Indeed, many NGO staff interviewed have experienced that donor priorities rather than the needs in the field determine the activities that are carried out – and as a result, the issues that are discussed.
6.6.4 Governance, legitimacy and organisation of the network

As far as their formal structure and regulations are concerned, the networks studied are democratic. In practice, however, some members raise questions about the accountability of the secretariats and boards. In Liberia the secretariat is criticised for starting programmes without consulting the members. In Sierra Leone there is some discussion about who decides which members get to go to national network meetings and training courses. At the district level existing regulations about the election of representatives are not always put into practice and there is discussion about the legitimacy of some people who are supposed to represent a particular region on the board of the network. Some members complain that there is not enough support to networking activities at the provincial level. The network has decentralised, but the structures put in place are not very clear. This also includes the criteria for the selection of representatives.

Because power issues have played a role in the Sierra Leonean network in the past, developing mechanisms that regulate conflict and prevent personal issues from taking over is a priority of the network at the moment, and a major aim of the ‘revisioning process’. During this process the constitution was also revised in a participatory way. It remains to be seen in how far these changes will lead to changes in practice. At the level of the regions and districts, there is considerable lack of clarity about procedures and dissatisfaction with the representation of the region or district. It appears that the revisioning process has not yet thoroughly reached and engaged this level. This may simply be due to the early stage in which the process finds itself. In Liberia a ‘revisioning’ process would also be useful to bring to the fore the diverging expectations and different levels of satisfaction with the network, and to agree on the direction to be taken. Such a process might be easier in that country because the majority of peacebuilding NGOs is based in the capital.

The creation of the networks in Sierra Leone and Liberia has been more bottom-up than was the case in other West-African countries in which WANEP networks were created, though in both countries the regional WANEP network played a large role. Because one of WANEP’s founders is a Liberian, he involved some of his colleagues from Liberian NGOs in the initial consultations that prepared the ground for WANEP. Afterwards, a Liberian information sharing group of four organisations was created. At some point these organisations saw the need to form an organisation and organised a retreat where it was decided to create a national network. At the retreat it was also decided to link the new
organisation to WANEP. NCP-SL was founded in 2001 at the initiative of WANEP and a number of Sierra Leonean peacebuilders. The number of peacebuilding NGOs was growing rapidly at that time and there was a need for coordination to avoid duplication of activities. The network started as a peacebuilding collaboration programme hosted by the Campaign for Good Governance. In May 2001 various stakeholders met and decided to make it into a network. It was decided to name the network Network for Collaborative Peacebuilding rather than WANEP Sierra Leone in order to emphasise the indigenous and bottom-up nature of the network. Nevertheless it became Sierra Leone’s national network for WANEP and was endorsed by it. WANEP provided expertise in the early phases as well as some seed money to set up an office.

It might be expected that these relatively bottom-up processes have had consequences for the extent to which members feel they own the network. Indeed, most participants do appear to have a sense of ownership. When asked whether they feel responsible for the network and the way it develops most say that they do. Likewise, when asked whether they feel they are able to influence what happens in the network, most members answer positively. It should be noted that this self-image portrayed in the conversations seems in some cases to be at odds with the way in which criticisms are phrased, for example in terms of “they should” when talking about the network. Only few organisations actively contribute their expertise in order to build the capacity of the network secretariats, such as one Sierra Leonean member does in the area of financial management.

In more practical terms, each network has a national coordinator and a secretariat. However in both countries there is not enough money to pay these people. Overmoderation does not appear to be an issue; during meetings participants are able to jointly determine what issues should be discussed. However, between meetings there is hardly any information flow. This is due to low capacity of the secretariats but also to limited internet access on the part of some members. When networks run into difficulties, fewer meetings are organised and networks quickly become dormant. Low turnout at meetings is also mentioned as a issue. After meetings, there is little follow-up. During network meetings plans are made, but not enough attention is paid to their implementation. Some members of the Sierra Leonean network have withdrawn out of disappointment. They had not heard from the network in a long time and felt neglected. The secretariat is not sufficiently proactive in contacting members and communicating with them. However, it is aiming to change that. The secretariat is collecting the contact details of members. A newsletter is in the making.
Many interviewees emphasise the need for face-to-face meetings to share tacit knowledge. This is important because of the volatile and rapidly changing political situations in Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, the frequency of contacts varies depending on a number of factors, which are mentioned elsewhere in this section in more detail. They include limited access to internet, the condition of roads, and funding issues that sometimes prevent the regular organisation of meetings.

6.6.5 Coverage, inclusiveness and content of the network

Many network members in Liberia and Sierra Leone point towards the extreme variety among network participants in terms of their area of work and their size and capacity. This makes effective networking difficult. When it comes to differences in capacity most network members agree that, though this is problematic, it is precisely part of the aim of the networks to build the capacity of members and it is an obligation of the stronger members to work on the weaknesses of others. Regarding differences in the content of work, there is less agreement. Some participants are happy about the diversity because it means that there is more for them to learn; others are of the opinion that only peacebuilding organisations pur sang (and not NGOs whose main focus is on human rights, the reintegration of refugees, or social development) should participate in a peacebuilding network in order to keep the necessary focus.

As we have seen in chapter two, tacit knowledge tends to surface and develop only through direct and preferably face-to-face interaction. In the Western tradition of documenting knowledge, explicit knowledge is easier to come by than tacit knowledge. This is also related to the fact that knowledge tends to be taken more seriously when it has been subjected to scientific standards and written down. The situation is different in West African societies, which have no tradition of writing things down. They also have much less access to modern forms of knowledge dissemination. As a result, most knowledge exchange is verbal and face-to-face. Gaining access to tacit knowledge is not so much an issue here. By contrast, the need for more documentation of knowledge is increasingly recognised. Recorded and codified knowledge after all can spread more widely. Documentation can also help to convince donors of the reliability of local knowledge.
None of the networks studied come close to being an overall knowledge system – even if they wanted to be they would not be able. They aim much more at providing a stimulating framework for knowledge exchange and at supporting members in doing their work more effectively. Both at the regional and national levels the networks have shown some flexibility in adjusting their structures in order to better carry out their objectives. Issues of funding and capacity nevertheless limit the extent and speed with which these adjustments take effect, particularly at the national level.

With regard to the results of networking, diverging expectations play a role. Some members expect concrete outcomes in the form of, for example, funds raised and joint programmes. Others emphasise knowledge exchange. The networks tend to have quite ambitious aims that include the exchange of experiences but also advocacy and capacity building. The latter outcome – capacity building – is recognised by all involved as an important aim of the networks. Unfortunately, it is also identified by most as a shortcoming in practice.

6.6.6 Context of the network

Although the political context does not obstruct the functioning of the networks and the security situation in both countries is improving, practical issues relating to poverty and bad infrastructure play an important role in limiting the efficiency and effectiveness of the networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone. A lack of access to internet for many NGOs, expensive and intermittent energy supplies (which limit the use of computers), and bad roads and bad (or no) vehicles all severely constrain interactions within the network. Illiteracy is an issue when knowledge gained in the network is spread in constituencies. A regional network meeting attended in Kenema, Sierra Leone, showed how members deal with constraints: a hand-written invitation and agenda was copied and driven by motorbike to the members. Less than half of the members appeared, which may have been due to dissatisfaction with the networks but also to bad roads or a lack of transport.

In terms of links to other networks, the national networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone are of course linked to the wider WANEP network. However, this link is not as strong as might be expected. The average national network member does not gain as much from the link to WANEP as he or she would like. They hear about others participating in training in Accra and wonder on what basis those people have been
selected. Members do get briefed on materials and knowledge that has been developed by WANEP, for example on M&E. However, it appears that they are less involved in policy making at the regional level than they might be. For example, not many members at the national level have been involved in the development of a Regional Action Agenda as part of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), of which WANEP is a sub-network.

The networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone work actively to engage governments and other stakeholders in their country. NCP-SL, the Sierra Leonean network, regularly organises a National Peace and Development Forum with network members and government representatives from various ministries as well as UN staff. Each person present reports on his or her activities and a discussion takes place. The fact that the Liberian national network coordinator was recently appointed assistant minister in the government shows that the network is recognised and has links with the government. In Sierra Leone the government does not know where to start with the implementation of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and has invited civil society organisations to help. A TRC group will be visiting peacebuilding organisations to discuss the recommendations and collect suggestions for concrete action. In the meetings of the network, these visits are discussed and the report of the TRC is shared. These links to official institutions in both countries do not appear to jeopardise the independence of the networks or their members, or their ability to criticise governments.

Aside from the connection to the regional WANEP network, individual members also have links to other networks, ranging from networks created by donors to bring their partners together to local networks that focus on a specific issue. Both Liberia and Sierra Leone also have civil society forums that bring together NGOs in all fields. The national networks have informal links to these networks through members and in some cases also through the secretariat. Sometimes the secretariat is approached by an organisation or network and requested to provide expertise or consultation. For example, Amnesty International once needed information about the situation in particular Liberian counties, and asked WANEP Liberia for assistance. The network secretariat then put Amnesty into contact with a member actively engaged there.
6.6.7 Funding of the network

A lack of funding severely affects the networks. WANEP regional has been able to secure funds from donors, but the national networks have not had much success in that area. Reasons given for this are both low capacity for fundraising and limited willingness on the part of donors to finance networking and capacity building activities whose direct impact cannot be shown. The national networks recognize that they are too dependent on WANEP, but they criticize the strategy WANEP has adopted in making them more autonomous: in their eyes WANEP is reducing their funding without helping to build their capacity to raise other funds, thereby undermining the future of the national networks. According to some, WANEP is also not living up to promises it has made to support secretariat staff by paying their salaries and building their capacity, so that after some time they would be able to raise funds on their own for the network and its members. The salaries of the coordinators are often paid late and the other staff are not paid at all. Financial accountability is something that the networks are working to improve, but with no funds to pay a financial officer the results are limited as of yet. The members have little interest in meeting the financial commitments of being a network member. This is a serious constraint. Their contributions could provide at least some funding for the network to move forward.

To what extent do donors shape the networks? Based on the available information the donors do not appear to influence the mode and content of knowledge exchange strongly. What does have an impact on the relations within the networks is the provision of funding itself. As mentioned above, in Liberia the secretariat is seen by some to be abusing its legitimacy as a network to raise funding for the implementation of its own programmes, rather than raising funds to improve networking or to support members. On the other hand, the coordinator has also contributed income from his own consultancy work to the network. In Sierra Leone this issue is less prevalent, in part because the secretariat has not been able to raise many funds.

In both countries, the network secretariat is a separately created organisation. This prevents some of the problems that may arise when one member organisation is given the responsibility to function as coordinator, giving that organisation a position of power and access to funding that it may be tempted to take advantage of. Not too much is known about the extent to which interactions around knowledge take place with donors. However, one donor – Cordaid – makes a real effort to establish knowledge exchange with WANEP. It regularly invites the
director to its Dutch office for discussion, not only over accountability but also around policy. In November 2006, I attended a seminar on peace networking organised by Cordaid, in which the WANEP director also took part.

6.6.8 Concluding 6.6

WANEP and its national networks in Liberia and Sierra Leone have all experienced distressing difficulties relating to personal, trust and power issues. In the case of the network in Sierra Leone, these have raised accusations of mismanagement and led the network to be dormant for some time. In particular the regional network and the Sierra Leonean one have taken important steps to get past these problems. But other problems still exist. For example, the members of the networks vary extremely in their capacity and put forward diverging expectations with regard to their participation in the networks. A lack of funding available for networking activities, particularly at the national level, has been another major problem, due partly but not exclusively to limited willingness on the part of donors to fund networking because its impact cannot readily be measured. The limited capacity of the national secretariats to raise funds is another reason for the lack of funding. There is discussion about whether the regional WANEP secretariat should provide more support in building this capacity, as a prerequisite for the achievement of more autonomy of the national networks.

Despite the problems, nearly all members consider the networks to be of added value to their work because of the knowledge that is exchanged and the perception that peacebuilding NGOs are stronger together than they are alone.

The oral tradition prevalent in Africa combined with limited internet access means that knowledge exchange in the networks studied takes place mostly in face-to-face meetings. This means that tacit knowledge gets more of a chance to be shared. However, it also means that available knowledge is documented much less, thereby limiting the possibilities for its wider dissemination and for its serving as ‘evidence’ that could convince donors and other stakeholders of the validity of local knowledge.
6.7 Concluding remarks

This chapter continued the answering, begun in chapter five, of the following sub-question that was posed at the end of Part One: *What do the knowledge and learning processes of local peace NGOs look like, what are their strengths and weaknesses, and what are difficulties and gaps in their learning practice?* Where the previous chapter outlined the variety of ways in which Southern peace NGOs try to gain, retain, apply and share knowledge, and emphasised once again the importance attached to interaction and exchange in doing so, this chapter zoomed in on one such exchange strategy in particular: networking. Networks are widespread among peacebuilding organisations in Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, the Philippines, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Knowledge exchange is often not their only objective but is always part of their aims and is nearly always mentioned as one of their most important outcomes.

In terms of the strengths, weaknesses and difficulties of these networks, a number of factors determining these emerged in this chapter. These factors, listed in section 6.4, were derived from issues discussed throughout the book that have an impact on learning and exchange by NGOs. They were grouped into the following categories:

- the capacity of the member organisations
- the relationship between members and the network
- general characteristics of the network
- governance, legitimacy and organisation of the network
- coverage and inclusiveness of the network
- the content of the network
- the context of the network
- the funding structure of the network.

These factors were subsequently applied to a case study of the WANEP network in West Africa. Issues that emerged from that application as particularly significant are:

- personal, trust and power issues among the members of the network in a given locality
- the fact that members of the networks vary extremely in their capacity and put forward diverging expectations with regard to their participation in the networks
- a lack of funding available for networking activities, particularly at the national level, and the limited capacity of the network secretariats to raise funds.
Importantly, however, what also emerged was that most of the people involved in networking within the framework of WANEP feel they have gained from it, not least when it comes to access to the knowledge, ideas and experiences of others. This is confirmed by what participants in other networks in various parts of the world have said in their interviews with me. We may conclude that despite the difficulties and obstacles to successful networking and knowledge sharing, it is worthwhile to pursue these strategies, taking into account as much as possible the factors that influence the success of networking as networks are being shaped and re-shaped.

6.8 Concluding Part Two: Connecting structure and agency

At the end of Part One the following questions were raised.

1. What factors constrain and support the learning of Southern peace NGOs?
2. How do power differences, donor relations and North-South dynamic influence the knowledge that is used and the learning that takes place?
3. What do the knowledge and learning processes of local peace NGOs look like, what are their strengths and weaknesses, and what are difficulties and gaps in their learning practice?
4. Given the structural realities in which they operate, what initiatives are undertaken to improve the learning processes of local peace NGOs? What can we learn from these initiatives?
5. To what extent do these initiatives facilitate cross-cultural, ‘third-order’ learning?

Part Two dealt with all of these, although there is more to be said about the fourth and fifth questions. Because of that questions four and five are taken to Part Three as well, in order to allow more case studies to shed light on it.

In addressing all five questions, Part Two illuminated the issues that shape the knowledge and learning processes of Southern peace NGOs. More specifically, chapter four outlined the structural aspects – power differences, North-South inequality in terms of knowledge production and recognition, and donor-recipient relations – that constrain and shape the possibilities for learning and exchange available to Southern peace NGOs and limit cross-cultural, third-order learning. Chapters five and six focused on the agency of local peace NGOs in developing knowledge strategies as they navigate within this structural context.
Structure and agency are not disconnected. Not only does structure have an impact on agency, but the reverse is also possible. Although the concept of a structure implies a long-lasting context that is difficult to change, no structure is set in stone. What, then, are ways in which the agency of actors can be increased, and how can they use their agency to help change the structure and make it more conducive to learning and two-way exchange? Interaction with those institutions and individuals that help shape the structure – donor representatives, Northern policymakers, researchers, and people in authority in the (post)conflict countries themselves – is important in order to raise the issues Southern peacebuilders have when it comes to the current structure in which they operate. In these interactions the importance of trust-based, long-term partnerships, of untied funding, and of programming flexibility can be emphasised. Best practices of international partnerships conducive to Southern knowledge generation, learning and dissemination can be quoted.

Given the important (positive or negative) role of external support that emerged time and again in Part Two, a new question is raised: How can international/external/Northern actors support the knowledge and learning strategies of Southern peace NGOs, thereby increasing their agency? This question will be dealt with in Part Three. Before doing so, however, let us return to Figure 3.5 created at the end of Part One:
The chapters of Part Two help illuminate and develop this figure in the following ways. Chapter four added depth to this pattern of interactions in the form of inequalities among the actors. It shows that some of the actors – the Southern NGOs themselves but also other NGOs in their countries, beneficiaries, knowledge institutions in the South, and local and national governments in the South – are less able to insert knowledge and ideas than others – donor governments, international NGOs, and knowledge institutions in the North. The result is that the knowledge flows indicated by the blue dotted arrows are not all equally strong, nor do they flow equally in both directions. Schematically, this makes the figure look as follows.
Figure 6.2: Strength of different knowledge flows in and around Southern peace NGOs

The pink arrows represent flows this study has not looked at in detail, and although hypotheses may be made it is difficult to make any statements about them. The thick blue arrows depict knowledge flows that are indeed strong. The thin blue arrows indicate weak links – and this is where the structural issues become clear. To a large extent they relate to North-South inequalities, which are expressed in the weakness of Southern knowledge institutions and, most significantly for the Southern NGOs under study, in the donor-recipient regimes of which they are a part. In addition to North-South issues, the weak arrows also show the weaknesses (or absence) of interactions within the South. A notable finding in that regard – documented in both chapter four and five - has been the lack of knowledge exchange between Southern peacebuilding practitioners and Southern knowledge institutions.

Chapter five dealt mostly with the blue box: learning cycles within Southern NGOs. However, it showed that these processes cannot be
seen apart from flows that go outside of this Box. Interactions with people outside the organisation – other NGOs, beneficiaries, international actors – are central to the learning processes of Southern peace NGOs. Another thing that emerges from chapter five is that some parts of the learning cycle of peace NGOs in (post)conflict countries are stronger than others. The figure below illustrates this.

![Diagram of learning cycle in Southern peace NGOs]

**Figure 6.3: Reality of learning cycle in Southern peace NGOs**

In this version of the central part of the figure that depicts the learning processes of Southern peace NGOs, the steps in the cycle that function relatively well have been made green. The pink-coloured steps do not function so well. NGOs are action-oriented and have difficulty finding time and money to reflect on the implications of their work and do research into their own work and into the situations of their beneficiaries. Thus, they are unable to produce generalised knowledge that could be disseminated to other organisations, knowledge institutions, and donor agencies, and thereby contribute to global debates and policymaking. To some extent Southern peace NGOs are able to gain new knowledge and to compare their experiences with others – often through training programmes and through networking with other NGOs, and the insights gained from those activities are applied into new programmes. But more in-depth reflection and theorising, as depicted in the pink arrows, are often lacking. Chapter three theorised that knowledge institutions could be helpful in facilitating these parts of the learning cycle, functioning as ‘scaffolds’ for deeper-level learning. However, as mentioned, little interaction between knowledge institutions and NGOs takes place in the countries visited. This raises the question, *How can knowledge institutions be better involved in supporting the knowledge and learning strategies of local peace NGOs?*
working in (post)conflict countries – and the knowledge base of these countries as a whole?

Chapter six on networking dealt mainly with the box on the extreme left side of the picture: interaction with other SNGOs. Or should networks ideally facilitate not only exchange with other SNGOs, but instead bring in other actors, thereby facilitating all of the blue dotted arrows in Figure 3.5/6.1? Perhaps that can only be achieved by international networks, not by the national and regional ones chapter six looked at. That brings us to a new question: How can global networks support the knowledge and learning strategies of local peace NGOs working in (post)conflict countries, thereby increasing their agency?

Thus, we are left with five questions to be dealt with in Part Three:

1. Given the structural realities in which they operate, what initiatives are undertaken to improve the learning processes of local peace NGOs? What can we learn from these initiatives?
2. To what extent do these initiatives facilitate cross-cultural, ‘third-order’ learning?
3. How can international/external/Northern actors support the knowledge and learning strategies of Southern peace NGOs, thereby increasing their agency?
4. How can knowledge institutions be better involved in supporting the knowledge and learning strategies of local peace NGOs working in (post)conflict countries – and the knowledge base of these countries as a whole?
5. How can global networks support the knowledge and learning strategies of Southern peace NGOs, thereby increasing their agency?