

NETWORKS AND COORDINATION IN PEACEBUILDING

Overview: Effective peacebuilding requires a structure that coordinates distinct programs' efforts toward a shared goal. Current efforts are often hindered by organizational competition, hierarchy, or miscommunication. Network administrative structures, characterized by information sharing, decentralized authority, and a lack of hierarchy, would likely bridge these gaps. This brief aims to explain administrative structures of peacebuilding and show examples of how networks can be best established.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing challenges to peacebuilding and stabilization work is coordinating diverse programs to work harmoniously. A number of recent documents and strategic plans from organizations including the United Nations, the World Bank Group, and the US government have acknowledged the need for improved coordination in peacebuilding work across multiple kinds of interventions taking place simultaneously.¹ However, the history of coordination in peacebuilding suggests more examples of significant challenges and persistent failures rather than successes.

One possible reason for this is that there is overemphasis on establishing unified strategic plans and chains of command as tools for coordination. Such approaches emphasize a hierarchical model of social organization which can limit the willingness of groups, especially local civil society groups and other non-state actors, to participate. For those groups included within the hierarchy, the strict organizational structure may limit the full potential of participants. At the same time, groups working outside of the hierarchy can create complexities that undermine the work of the coordinated strategy. This results in challenges to both getting participation in the system and delivering effective collective impact. Alternative approaches based on network organizational structures emphasize sharing information and having decentralized coordination without an inner-group hierarchy. These approaches may be particularly valuable to the peacebuilding field. This brief will introduce networks and how they operate, provide an overview of why they can address problems in peacebuilding, and identify specific tools and methods that can be useful in establishing network systems.

NETWORKS: IMPROVING DECISIONS THROUGH INFORMATION SHARING

Any collection of people or organizations working together must decide on the mechanisms by which they will make decisions. Most powerful groups are already organized around some form of hierarchy, so due to its perceived efficiency, the structures that most collective organizations adopt trend towards some kind of hierarchy. In these systems, collective decisions are made either by the group as a whole or by a subset chosen to do so, and participants in the group are then expected to abide by the decisions made.

A hierarchy is not the only organizational structure that can be used, though. Networks offer a different model of organization by operating less through formal hierarchy. Instead, they empower the individual participants in the network structure with information that can allow them to make better decisions. Formally, a network organization is defined by the following elements:²

- they emphasize direct information-sharing among the participants in the network through actor-to-actor engagement.
- they lack formal hierarchy—there is no power that allows one actor or group of actors to enforce the group's decision on individual members.
- they tend to (but do not always) have lower barriers to participating in the group and/or leaving the group.

This administrative structure has several benefits for effective coordination: the emphasis on information-sharing, the absence of hierarchy, and the relative ease of entry mean that compared to hierarchies, networks are typically better at maximizing participation and information flow within the community of participants. This also makes them particularly nimble; because decision-making takes place at the level of individual participants rather than collectively, networks typically can change collective direction more quickly than hierarchies. As will be discussed below, these elements may be particularly valuable in peacebuilding.

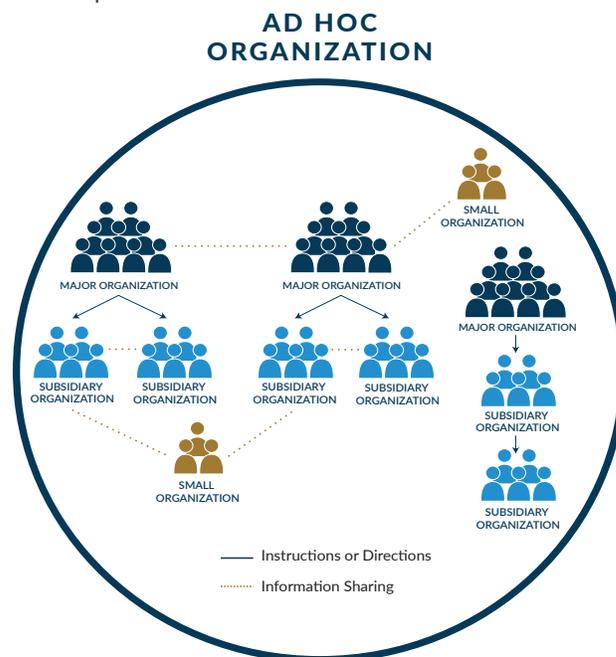
With the emphasis on information-sharing, the absence of hierarchy, and the relative ease of entry, networks are typically better at maximizing participation and information flow within the community of participants. These elements may be particularly valuable in peacebuilding.

The definition of network used in this brief is built around a specific question of administrative structure. Discussions about network organizations sometimes mix the idea of networks as defined above with two other questions: formality and single versus multiple sectors. Formality refers to how official the systems and structures of an organization are: the presence (or absence) of written and agreed-on rules and procedures. Single or multiple sectors refers to whether participants in the group are all drawn from the same sector (such as government, the private sector, etc.) or from multiple sectors. The nature of hierarchical systems requires at least a small degree of formality to establish hierarchy, and it is somewhat easier to do that in single-sector structures. Unlike in hierarchies, there is more room for network systems to be informal and multi-sectoral. However, network structures are not necessarily informal or multi-sectoral, and it is possible for network structures to display both formality and single-sector membership.

Some discussions also mix the idea of networks as organizational design with a network approach to understanding interactions. Network analysis, or social network analysis (SNA), is a valuable analytical framework that helps us understand how people and organizations within a community interact with each other. This framework is helpful for understanding organizational performance, but it can be applied to multiple institutional designs, as SNA can be used on institutions composed of a hierarchy, networks, or any other structures. For the purposes of this brief, we are focused solely on networks as institutional structures.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL PEACE THROUGH NETWORKS

Network structures have specific characteristics that can help them address the major challenges of peacebuilding. There is a fairly well-developed consensus among national and international organizations engaged in peacebuilding work that effective peacebuilding requires coordinated integration of political development, economic development, and security provision.³ Stable, sustainable peace flourishes in societies that trust their government and have a good quality of life, and where the security services are strong enough to prevent spoilers.



While this has been known in principle for 50 years, in practice both national and international systems working on coordination have acknowledged systemic failures. Research from the United Nations, NATO, and the US government assessing coordination efforts among development, security, and political actors has consistently found the same operational challenges limiting the effectiveness of this coordination.⁴ Failure tends not to happen at the level of strategic intent, but instead in the execution of administrative structures designed to achieve that intent. Attempts to establish peacebuilding coordination have tended to be led by one of two methods: ad hoc or hierarchical. In the ad hoc approach, independent entities carry out their own peace operations without an overarching authority. Through practice, these entities

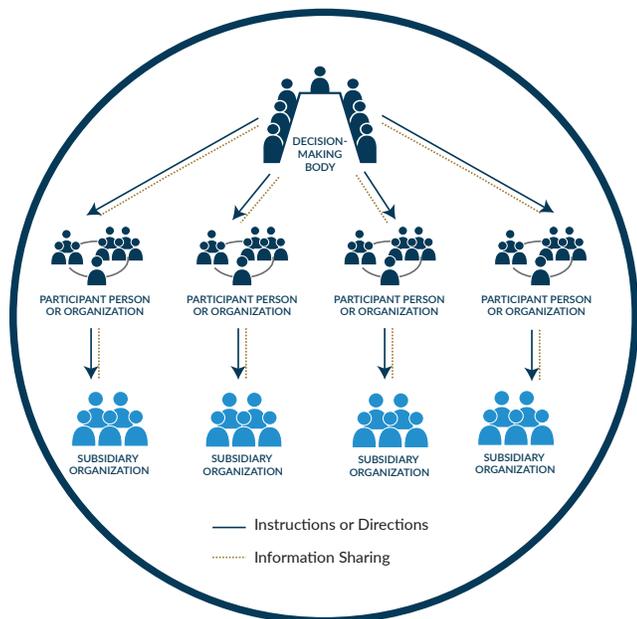
develop relationships with other actors working in the same space, creating multiple webs of peacebuilding actors and operations. However, this method tends to emphasize bilateral or limited action rather than coordination of the community as a whole. Some components of the larger community may operate in more tightly organized and hierarchical ways, while others may be more or less disconnected from the community as a whole. This approach can lead to gaps in information where there are no connections between groups.

Conversely, peacebuilding efforts may take a hierarchical approach to coordinating. In these models, information management, mission guidance, and leadership come from a single source—either a single institution acting as planner and funder or a committee making collective decisions. In practice this has often led to one peacebuilding actor, most often the military or security community, taking a central role in planning or organizing the response. The result is that the collective plan tends to emphasize that organization’s orientation. This can in turn lead to significant frustration and inefficiency.⁵ Staff working on coordination have experienced tension and frustration as they are asked to consider problems and operations from radically different perspectives than they have been trained to, and often the promotion requirements and priorities of the participating organizations are not updated to reflect the overall coordinated needs of the response as a whole. These issues create situations where those people tasked with implementing the collective plan are not incentivized or trained to deliver the collective goals the coordinating mechanism is nominally trying to deliver.

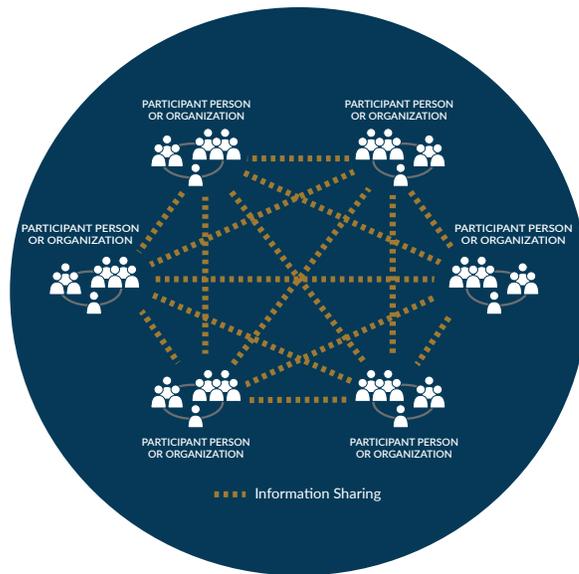
The challenges of role conflict and unwilling organizations can be compounded by coordination mechanisms built around formal hierarchy. Because hierarchical mechanisms establish some entity or organization as lead and require other participants to adopt the directions of the group, they tend to face inter-organizational friction and misalignment of incentives.

Network systems, on the other hand, emphasize participant-directed decisions; they allow participants in the network to make their own decisions consistent with their internal organizational priorities and operational cultures. In a well-functioning network, these decisions can be made in a stronger informational environment that allows organizations to better understand what other institutions are doing in the same area and/or issue space. Networks also allow for the system as a whole to identify duplicated work, work that might undermine the performance of other institutions, or important issue areas that are not being covered by the group as a whole. When they are paired with less formal organizational design, as they often are, networks also facilitate the creation of short-term bilateral or multilateral clusters working on specific issues of shared interest.

HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATION



NETWORKED ORGANIZATION



At this point it is important to note the gap between theory and practice. The above discussion treats the different kinds of organizational structures as ideal structures. In reality, most organizations are a mixture of different types of organizational designs. The most hierarchical system still has networks of relationships and information-sharing systems within it, and the most officially networked structures still often have hierarchies of some kind imported from the larger contexts they operate

in. When considering the implications of this discussion for peacebuilding structures in the real world, it is necessary to acknowledge that the different approaches to organizational design may be more a spectrum than a firm difference.

NETWORKS IN PRACTICE: TWO CASE STUDIES

The Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia

Network structures are becoming more common, and there are examples of network structures being used in peace and security across several different conflict contexts. Considering international coordination of an active response to a security challenge, one example that is particularly well-documented is the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS). From its beginning, the CGPCS deliberately operated in a network structure with constructive ambiguity about its formality and legal backing. Because it was established pursuant to a UN security council resolution, UNSCR 1851, state governments accepted the group as a legitimate and appropriate mechanism for coordinating with other states. However, because it was not in itself a UN entity, the founders and early promoters of the CGPCS did not feel bound to UN rules about coordination and the participation of non-state actors, leading groups representing the maritime industry to participate early on in CGPCS's establishment.

This ambiguity, and the diverse group of institutions, meant that the CGPCS primarily operated through information-sharing and consensus development. This structure required a fairly high degree of shared understanding of the problem and its potential solutions, as it empowered participants to block or disrupt statements. For the specific community involved in the CGPCS, it worked well: from 2009–2013, the CGPCS identified and developed tools for complementary approaches between states, navies operating in the region, the maritime industry, and civil society groups. During this period, the rates of Somali piracy fell from several hundred attacks per year to next to none.⁶

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In the case of the CGPCS, the network structure helped address difficulties of legitimacy, authority, and coordination across state and non-state actors—issues that are frequently present around international multilateral interventions. Network structures can also be useful in dealing with challenges that come up in subnational and post-conflict settings. In these contexts,

challenges caused by lack of state capacity, the need to quickly re-establish legitimacy, and the need to provide effective economic development and social services are often present.

PASO Colombia

Another example of a network structure being used in peace and security across several different conflict contexts is the PASO Colombia program, which was developed by One Earth Future to use networked approaches to help advance peace following the signing of the peace agreements between the Colombian state and the oldest guerrilla organization in the western hemisphere. With the objective of supporting the economic reincorporation of ex-combatants while promoting rural development in the regions most affected by armed conflict, PASO has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders including local communities, former combatants, local and national government officials, United Nations agencies, international cooperation organizations, and businesses. Through the principles of non-hierarchical, bottom-up coordination approaches, building on the local assets of each territory, and harnessing public, private, and international cooperation resources to develop sustainable agricultural projects, PASO Colombia developed the *Escuelas Rural Alternativa/Rural Alternative Schools (ERA)* model.

The ERAs are productive and educational collaboration hubs where participants learn while working collectively in their own entrepreneurs. The network of partners associated with each ERA provides the participants with agricultural training, technical assistance, and access to land, capital, and markets while building strong networked governance for peace. While the program is still evolving, participant satisfaction in the ERAs was high even shortly after they launched, with 90 percent reporting satisfaction with the projects after launch and 80 percent reporting satisfaction a year later. All of the ERAs successfully developed local informal networks to support their work. The ERA model currently operates in 21 municipalities of Colombia, generating 2,350 jobs so far.



ERA participants raising a building frame in Colombia. Photo: One Earth Future.

Beginning in the last quarter of 2019, PASO adapted the ERA model to help bridge the gap between delayed phases of the governmental National Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops. With funding from the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Sustaining Peace in Colombia, and in coordination with the Colombian government, PASO used its bottom-up networked approach to work with 2,000 families in ten different municipalities throughout the country. PASO built on the capacity of local organizations, and their knowledge and assets, strengthening them with productive innovations, access to markets, and technical assistance. These families were transformed from beneficiaries of a governmental program into driving partners of the development of their territories, collectively building productive chains and commercial and social networks. During the ten-month project, they built 26 collective infrastructures, the average income of their households grew 59 percent, 91 percent of the participants considered themselves able to improve their productive practices, and 90 percent of them are implementing the new commercialization strategies learned within the project.

PRACTICAL DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR NETWORKS

In the absence of hierarchy, networks achieve collective impact largely through having information flow that allows each individual actor in the network to make a decision about how to execute their work in ways that complement other actors' work. Additionally, the self-directed nature of an organization's work in a network means that participation in networks—both the actual participation in coordination and the execution of actions to advance the network goal—is maximized when actors see clear, self-interested reasons for participating. Some suggestions about developing networks in ways that maximize these principles are below.

Organizational self-interest (considered broadly)

Since a network depends on the aggregation of individual decisions shaping its work, it is beneficial if actors can see the value of their participation and the execution of coordinated actions with other actors. This can be achieved through several pathways. One common approach is the creation of network-developed public goods available to participants. As will be discussed below, this can very often take the form of information. Requiring participants to contribute information about their own decisions or actions as a condition for accessing information about other network members' information can be a valuable approach to ensuring free flow of information. Aggregating or anonymizing the data can further help actors feel comfortable that they are not disclosing inappropriate information.

Another approach that can support a clear self-interest component to networks is careful selection of the problem scope. A straightforward way to support interest in collective action is to ensure that the definition of the problem scope is of interest to the stakeholders. The selection and breadth of the problem scope is an important element of institutional design. Networks with broad or poorly defined goals are susceptible to problems arising from organizational size, community members who do not push strongly enough towards the resolution of problems, and internal political friction when members emphasize narrow political wins over the resolution of the issue. To address this, networks function best with clearly identified and narrow issue scopes. This is true for the conceptual scope as well as the geographic: the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia, discussed above, showed significantly more collective will and impact when it focused on the narrow issue of maritime piracy (rather than on other maritime crimes) off the coast of Somalia (rather than in other geographies).

A third approach is through the selection of participants: if networks suffer when their participants do not share a desired end goal, then alignment can be achieved through preselection of institutions or participants whose interests are already aligned. Because organizational interests and problem characteristics will evolve over time, it is particularly helpful to pair this approach with low structural barriers to exiting the network and, potentially, low barriers to entry, as this will allow participation to fluctuate as needed to maintain the shared interests.

Information exchange

Networks predominantly achieve their goals through sharing information about the capacities, plans, and activities of the participants. This means that network performance is dramatically improved by the establishment of information-sharing mechanisms. Websites or other IT tools, regular meetings with updates from participants, or other approaches appropriate for the community are useful to the extent that they are able to update participants about the planned and executed activities of other participants.

Information exchange is more than a technical challenge; it is a question of reciprocal trust within the network. Many organizations can be unwilling to share detailed information that they have access to out of concern that the information may reflect poorly on their performance, undermine strategic goals, or enable spoilers to disrupt work. This means that information exchange in a network can be a challenge to develop as trust needs time to develop. One way to address this is by placing emphasis on sharing aggregated information rather than individualized information from network participants; a trusted party can collect and aggregate this information. Another tactic is to maximize opportunities to

share tacit rather than explicit information. Tacit information represents the knowledge and expertise of the organization's employees and general orientations or attitudes that members of the organization may have. This tacit information is often shared primarily through ongoing personal interaction between participants.

Just as explicit and tacit information are shared via technology or through regular communication, information mechanisms should also create a culture of transparency in the network. Transparency among network members helps address previous barriers or competition among organizations. Sharing information increases network familiarity with the efforts and trajectory of the mission. This in turn cultivates the relationships and trust that are critical for network success.

Backbone institutions and their functions

A possible solution for avoiding hierarchical mechanisms and creating successful network structures is establishing a backbone support function. While the term backbone support was formalized in the collective impact theory, the function has existed among coalition-builders for decades. Backbone support is a separate organization, department, or staff serving as the infrastructure for multi-sector collaborative initiatives. Rather than leading the network, the role of the backbone can include guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, cultivating community engagement and ownership, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding. Backbones are meant to guide the long-term momentum of the network, allowing the stakeholders to own the initiative's success by facilitating co-creation and inclusive decision-making.

Many different types of organizations can play the backbone support role. However, it is important to consider the needs of the network, as a backbone should be neither self-selected nor untrusted by the network at large. Once established, a backbone can remedy some of the pitfalls faced by networks. For example, networks can suffer from lack of clarity of purpose or fail to be completely inclusive. A backbone function aids in combating these shortcomings by constantly aligning mission and purpose via clear and consistent communications. Further, a backbone understands the needs of the organizations and community through its consistent, focused co-creation and outreach.

CONCLUSION

The recognition that peace requires coordinated approaches is one that the peacebuilding community appears to come to repeatedly. It has been a theme of defense and security analyses since at least the Vietnam War.⁷ It is becoming increasingly clear that the limitations of the delivery of this coordination are less a question of having the strategic acknowledgement that it's needed and more a question of how it can be done.

Peace requires coordinated approaches. It is becoming increasingly clear that the limitations of the delivery of this coordination are a question of how it can be done. Adopting network approaches could bridge this gap.

NATO's engagement in Afghanistan provides an illustration of this, with a recent review concluding that "the importance of a comprehensive approach was recognized, but one did not materialize."⁸ Our assessment is that one reason for this recurring limitation is a prevalent over-reliance on administrative structures that don't meet the needs of complex peacebuilding for systems which support collaborative, nimble, bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding. Adopting network approaches to peacebuilding would likely be effective in bridging this gap.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See, e.g., United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018); Alliance for Peacebuilding and One Earth Future, *Getting From Here to There: Successful Implementation of the Global Fragility Act* (Broomfield, CO: One Earth Future, 2020).
- 2 Joel Podolny and Karen Page, "Network Forms of Organization," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 57–76.
- 3 United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2018).
- 4 See, e.g., Barbara Stapleton and Michael Keating, "Military and Civilian Assistance to Afghanistan 2001–14: An Incoherent Approach," *Afghanistan: Opportunity in Crisis Series* (London, UK: Chatham House, 2015); Touko Piiparinen, "A Clash of Mindsets? An Insider's Account of Provincial Reconstruction Teams," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 143–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310601114350>; Susanna P. Campbell and Anja T. Kaspersen, "The UN's Reforms: Confronting Integration Barriers," *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 4 (August 1, 2008): 470–85.
- 5 See, e.g., Sebastiaan J. H. Rietjens, "Managing Civil-Military Cooperation: Experiences from the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan," *Armed Forces & Society*, May 9, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X06297601>.
- 6 For more information on the CGPCS, see Danielle Zach, D. Conor Seyle, and Jens Vestergaard Madsen, *Burden-Sharing Multilevel Governance: A Study of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia* (Broomfield, CO: One Earth Future Foundation, 2013).
- 7 R.W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1972).
- 8 Barbara Stapleton and Michael Keating, "Military and Civilian Assistance to Afghanistan 2001–14: An Incoherent Approach," *Afghanistan: Opportunity in Crisis Series* (London, UK: Chatham House, 2015).

ONE EARTH FUTURE

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One Earth Future (OEF) is a self-funded, private operating foundation seeking to create a more peaceful world through collaborative, data-driven initiatives. OEF focuses on enhancing maritime cooperation, creating sustainable jobs in fragile economies, and research which actively contributes to thought leadership on global issues. As an operating foundation, OEF provides strategic, financial, and administrative support allowing its programs to focus deeply on complex problems and to create constructive alternatives to violent conflict.

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