



Review of changes to the International Network of Street Social Workers in 2012

By Jean Blairon, director of RTA

1) What is the impact of mobilisation?

Connecting different partners by way of a "network" can be done in many ways: after all, international terrorism does it too. Exploring the meaning and value of action implemented by a group of partners can only work properly if it draws on the theme of the network both heavily and lightly: this is the case if the reticular (network) approach is the main focus (there is a lot riding on it) **and** that it is led without specifying what we understand by "network"¹ (therefore automatically diluting this focus in a prohibitive manner).

We suggested describing the International Network of Street Social Workers as a **mobilising network**², which assumes its legitimate role by putting on the political agenda **issues** which have been forgotten, denied or **possible solutions** that are more satisfactory than those that have actually been chosen.

The mobilising network finds its strength in the **intensity of agreement** on which its members "cast their lot" and in its ability to express, in a **relevant and coherent manner, a societal disagreement** regarding "the state of reality" which is established by the political agenda.

In practical terms, there are two types of mobilising action that can take place in a Network where the partners have "cast their lot":

Actions which are marked by intense agreement and strong disagreement with a level of given power: this was the case in 2012 relating to lobbying the issue of the Roma, which was given so little credit within and by the European Union. The following aspects of assessment help us to evaluate the meaning and value of this type of action³:

- * degree of diversity and convergence amongst the actors present;
- * degree of mobilisation by the organisations concerned;
- * extent to which they challenge the imposed reality;
- * degree of independence of the actor in taking up their stance;
- * capacity to get outside of the "confines" of the issue: the most frequent example is the protest

¹ The work by RTA on this subject allowed us to identify seven categories of network, and to raise numerous examples of confusion and inconsistency caused by insufficient awareness of the type and components of the category of network in which one is developing. See J. Fastrès, *Pour une typologie du travail en réseau*, www.intermag.be.

² Jean Blairon, *Dynamique associative et construction de réseau: quelques points délicats* (Dynamics of association and network building, some delicate points), <http://www.intermag.be/images/pdf/dynamonde.pdf>.

³ We would like to remind you here to what extent an evaluation can only be conducted by all protagonists of the project itself, possibly with the help, as is the case here, of an outside perspective that assumes this position: it is not up to the outside observer to determine the meaning and value of the project but to help the protagonists to stand back from their position in order to gain real thought-provoking and critical perspective on the project.

being reduced to the "political event itself" (for example, organising an extraordinary session of Parliament), without real changes taking place.

Actions whereby the Network equips itself with the ability to intervene locally in a specific situation in order to promote, generally, the rights that the Network sets itself the task of advancing. This is the concept behind our work in the Congo relating to the rights of the child. Overall, the points of assessment remain the same; here are two additional challenges:

- * avoiding playing the role of "schoolmaster";

- * avoiding the temptations linked to "spreading of best practices", this term which poorly disguises a technocratic veneer; the mobilising Network only gathers together actors involved in a common struggle: it is best not to deem that the ability to think and take action is only present and legitimate amongst some of the members.

2012 was also a reminder – and our evaluation proposal intends to highlight this – that there are **conditions for internal mobilisation** that impinge on the success of external mobilisation: an ideological agreement is not enough to give impetus to practical convergence: we must "do things together" in order to **test** (feel, as much as testing) the strength of our ties.

Sharing of practices can, above and beyond their actual content, have this effect. For example, sharing amongst members regarding a street approach to male prostitution. The challenge is not to limit our sights to the functional aspect (for example in terms of learning or hindsight regarding this content), but to include the strengthening of ties itself in the evaluation.

In terms of internal mobilisation, "internal competition" seems to work in encouraging partnerships between members on issues or particular themes. Nevertheless, the utmost attention must continue to be paid so as to avoid introducing a competitive attitude amongst members (which is always, whatever one might say, a power struggle). In evaluating tenders we must therefore put ourselves in the driver's seat and ask the following question: have we managed to remain above the specific interests of such and such a member (notably by including a solidarity-based viewpoint and the need to at least partially pursue the general interest). The type of "test" put to candidates invited to compete must therefore be in keeping with this central issue. The issue of giving "feedback" to the Network, to help members who are not successful in the call for projects, is also of key importance.

2) Three major operational issues

2.1. *In terms of decision-making bodies*

There are two decision-making centres that lead and manage the life of the network:

- the "pilot group", which includes members' spokespersons; they decide on admissions, priority areas of work, conduct overall project organisation etc.;

- the organisations of Dynamo International, the NGO which is, on the one hand, created by the Network, and on the other, responsible for coordinating it.

2012 enabled us to have a useful and relevant discussion on this dual aspect (which seems to be partially separated into two parts), examining its limitations or even dangers. The Network therefore decided to bring these two decision-making centres closer by connecting them: the Pilot Group voted for representatives to sit on the bodies of Dynamo International. We are delighted with the decision made, in that it can help the Network avoid falling into the usual traps and problems encountered by "umbrella associations": in this situation, the "administered" members become administrators which frequently create harmful confusion in terms of roles and introduces latent

power struggles in the life of the association⁴.

In 2013, we will be watching how this new set-up works, asking ourselves if it has been an opportunity for greater coherence and dialogue, if it has helped facilitate efficient "feedback" between the two decision-making centres, if overall it has helped foster greater participation.

2.2. The departmentalisation of decentralised management

The growth of the Network and the increased number of projects, with which we are delighted, de facto creates a need for another kind of organisation in terms of projects and their coordination. The Network has chosen to departmentalise itself (a department dealing with training policy, another for fundraising; others may yet be established) and to delegate part of the management linked to this departmentalised project area to a national "sub-structure": the Training Institute, in Portugal; the member support association, in Luxembourg, communication, in Spain.

Traditionally, technical support facilities can be delegated differently to operational departments. It is likely that this point on methods of delegation between the "sub-structures" and the NGO Dynamo International should subsequently undergo a specific evaluation.

We think it is essential, for these types of "department" to draw up, make explicit and public their **expectations** of the decision centres for these departments. Here is an example of expectations relating to the Training Institute.

What are the guidelines that must underpin projects, initiatives and partnerships (for example: developing a non-functionalist training policy; being anchored in the tradition of international training for adults; exploring the idea of training **policy**)? Initially, we can assume there will be implicit agreement between the department and the Network, but it is clear that the development of the project itself may lead to new questions, increase the distance between the department and the decision-making centres, which is therefore why it is necessary to re (define) the reference guidelines.

What proportion of specific projects (actions led by the Institute itself) and projects in partnerships is expected?

What is the minimum quantitative level to be attained?

What are the **tests** that will allow the Network to judge the project carried out by the Institute (e.g. coherence test in relation to the Network's guidelines; need to be "self-supporting"; relationship between projects within the Institute and projects outside; "feedback" to the Network)?

What level of transparency is there with the Network's decision-making centres and the members of them?

Then, it is important to guard against the **centrifugal effect** linked with any kind of departmentalisation. We believe that the guiding viewpoint for this prevention is, entirely in line with the reasoning of a certain Pierre Bourdieu⁵, to make sure that the Network gives more opportunity than before so that a supra-national social movement may emerge. To do so, it is essential for the mobilising organisations (the NGO Dynamo International in this case), mobilised associations (the members of the Network) and researchers (that the Network has succeeded in mobilising or which it created itself) to be united and to cooperate.

2.3. The multiplication of intermediaries

⁴See our September 2012 evaluation.

⁵See P. Bourdieu, *Les chercheurs et le mouvement social, Interventions*, (Researchers and the social movement, Interventions) 1961-2001, Marseille, Agone, 2002, p. 465 et sq. We have compared this position with others in *Des formes nouvelles de mobilisation pour l'éducation populaire ?* (New forms of mobilisation for popular education?) http://www.bxllaique.be/docs/rsc/Ble_73_Blairon.pdf.

A large-scale mobilising network should build on a set of "intermediaries" who spread the meaning and strengthen ties. Meetings are essential but they are not enough. "Non-human" intermediaries (revamped website, newsletters) are also an important element.

This is where three simple yet key assessment methods come into play: are there as many "upward" (from members to the coordinating association) and "horizontal" (between the members) as "downward" flows? Is there a balance of contributions across continents?

We must resist the temptation to interpret a possible imbalance by putting it down to a lack of commitment from the protagonists: things are obviously never that simple.

A specific assessment should perhaps be conducted on this point, as well as the emergence of a paradox within the Network: the strengthening and expansion of the network should not paradoxically mask the weakening of grassroots workers. Unfortunately we fear that global deterioration of the social and economic situation has only started to make its presence felt, and that it may lead to multiple setbacks in terms of rights, not just of people groups, but also for associations that strive to promote and defend them. It also appears that in many countries, governments are tempted to act by promoting an "aesthetic of problem solving" even if it means obtaining it through a continuous exodus of the most vulnerable populations. In this kind of circumstance, street workers will once again become "unwelcome witnesses".