

What strategies should we adopt for 2014-2016? Some food for thought

By Jean Blairon, 2013

The International Network is coming to the end of its first three-year strategic plan supported by the PROGRESS programme. This situation puts the network in a position whereby it must do some strategic thinking, bearing in mind the dual nature of the issues at stake:

- on the one hand, the Network should carry out a rigorous self-assessment: have we done what we said we were going to do, why and how?
- on the other hand, the Network must seize hold of this opportunity to determine, based on the **observed or anticipated impact of its future strategies**: if we should continue going in the same direction, should we expand our options, should we call them into question or consolidate them with the implementation of compensatory measures, to avoid some of these effects?

External evaluators are probably best placed to deal with the difficult matter of anticipating certain effects, whereas gathering information on and interpreting the observed effects falls more to grassroots workers themselves, by virtue of their direct involvement in the action.

Our contribution to the strategic review is therefore limited (to the issue of anticipated effects) and should be seen as mutually reinforcing (in terms of what significance grassroots workers will give to their analysis of observed effects). Our work is based on the overview provided by Dynamo international, which collates all initiatives undertaken in 2011 and 2012 in light of the "strategic objectives" the Network had set itself.

The rationale behind our approach is therefore: taking into consideration the projects implemented and directions taken are there any issues to which grassroots workers should pay attention?

The first test

Let us note from the very outset that the definition of future strategic objectives will be the first visible implementation of the **new power structure** decided upon by the Network: who will do what in relation to these decisions? How will the different management sites interact? How will they operate for themselves within the new configuration?

Questions pertaining to allocation (of roles), coordination (processing circuit) and operations (Dynamo's new Board for example, how the Pilot Group will be run following the election of new representatives, the Dynamo International team itself, etc.) all deserve to be studied in light of this strategic context which represents a **significant challenge**.

Anticipating some of the effects of specialisation/localisation?

Taking into consideration its desired growth, the Network has decided to reorganise the way it coordinates certain initiatives that it believes will be instrumental for its future (training, communication, member support, etc.). Without going back over the assessment-related questions raised in our review at the end of 2012, here we would like to draw your attention to the possibility that the Network's intrinsic nature will change due to this development.

The practices of the "training" department (understood in the broad sense) can be viewed along the lines

of a synergy-based network, as described by J. Fastrès:

*The synergy-based network is a variation of the coordination-based network and focuses on the same type of services (community-based outreach services (AMOs), support services for persons with disabilities, etc.), which have the same objectives but are working in very different environments, with different realities and which strive to break the isolation they suffer from by pooling their thoughts on their experiences, practices, methodologies, training, etc.*¹

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility to envisage that departmentalisation/specialisation/localisation will eventually lead to two different network rationales (Advocacy network/synergy network) which will end up co-existing side by side, or perhaps partially disconnected.

A strategic direction involving "anticipated compensation" could **more closely intertwine the reflective and practical aspects in a systematic way.**

The current work on community-based action could be considered as a springboard for this future direction, given that it involves gaining greater perspective on the way in which members of the Network interact with and act within their environment.

A first step in fostering this dovetailing effect would be to organise, as part of a "training" programme, comparative strategic analyses of member's lines of action. A seminar bringing together, for example, three equally balanced national delegations, to carry out a comparative critical analysis of actions, options, strategies, policies, reference theories, etc. could be a useful approach.

Holding seminars of this kind would also demonstrate the Network's maturity: if the initial "test" for an advocacy-based network involves proving that it can overcome the differences within it in order to formulate common recommendations, the second involves becoming capable, as a group, of learning from these differences as part of a balanced, reciprocal relationship.

These proposals should allow us to avoid a situation whereby some live as though they are pounding the streets, whilst others feel as if they are up-to-date/on the right page.

Communicating, but not to the detriment of meeting together

It is obviously essential that the "intermediaries" circulate information amongst Network members (website, newsletter, etc.).

Here too, it is necessary to be vigilant because the "communication" objective is often understood to be implicitly evident.

The first thing to watch out for is never to forget the contemporary controversy which goes hand in hand with the information society: do we believe that it is the experience of cooperation that leads to significant information sharing amongst members or do we believe that it is communication which "creates" (is enough to create) cooperation?

We are deliberately setting out this issue in the simplest way possible, which is of course oversimplifying the matter, because from this basis we believe that we can carry out a relevant critical analysis of the

¹See J. Fastrès, « Typologie du travail en réseau », ainsi que plusieurs articles, regroupés dans intermag, <http://www.intermag.be/lien-champ-associatif-institutions/91-typologie-du-travail-en-reseau> .

collective dimensions of communication. Too often, this becomes a matter for a specialist department or a superstructure; in some cases, even the communications department ends up dictating decisions (we undertake initiatives that the communications department considers to be "marketable") or defining directions.

The second thing to watch out for relates to ways of avoiding insignificance (sometimes, communication that takes place can get drowned out because there is so much of it) or impropriety: communicating on an initiative is not the same as doing it; carrying out successful communication on a project does not in any way prejudge its impact.

We believe that two lines of thinking should be investigated:

- the role of communication in relation to action (producing recommendations, even to the Parliament, cannot replace effective "progress" of the cause of populations);
- the role of communication in terms of building belonging: does communication make members want to find out more? Does it help other members to share in these experiences? Does it make the Network more present to members as an entity which is larger than the sum of its parts?

A third point deals with the relationships between the work of intermediaries and real meetings:

- are these separate, disconnected circuits or coordinated circuits?
- What priority is actually given (who is behind the driving wheel)?
- Does the work of intermediaries adequately take into account members' experiences (their expectations, limitations, constraints, etc.)?

Internal development and society-based action

In some cases, the two challenges (the development of the Network as such and the societal change it brings about) are cumulative (for example, the size of the Network may increase its influence; this can lead to new members joining); but we would be mistaken to believe that this is always the case.

External constraints (for example, Network survival, dual constraints it may be involved in, including the support it receives, which could condition the group's thinking to fit into certain "moulds") can have an impact on the inside (through conflicts between members).

A difficulty in trying to change the environment can lead many groups of players to take on the persona of victims, or to become self-centred, confined, whereby a ritual of joint celebration takes precedence over taking effective action.

Paying particular attention to this issue could prove to be a judicious preventive approach.

Renewing a strategic plan can, indeed, lead to an artificial change of priorities and this can be one of the rather overwhelming external constraints: pursuing a new cause is not always more relevant than continuing to further projects that have already started. This process of renewal can come as a destructive ethical dilemma: conform to survive, stand up for independence and run the risk of disappearing because of a lack of support (we say dilemma because the two choicesequate to a way of disappearing).

It is therefore important that projects planned as part of the three-year plan allow us to escape from this dilemma, whilst leaving room for internal development and societal action to remain cumulative.

For example, something that comes to mind (this is obviously just an example to illustrate watchfulness)

is collectively producing a **White Paper on life and work in the street**, on a global scale.

Each platform could produce, according to a common "terminus a quo" (a starting point), for example the end of 2013, a review of the national situation, with reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, based on questions such as:

- what have we achieved to date?;
- opportunities not to be missed, weaknesses to strengthen?;
- what is it that grassroots workers see and society refuses to see?;
- the local effects of globalisation which have an impact on populations for the benefit of whom it is developed ;
- non-respect for legislation in spite of official declarations;
- future priorities.