



formerly



## **Dealing with paradox**

**Stories and lessons from the first three years  
of Consortium-building**



## Once upon a time...

*“Guidelines and rules can’t deal with paradox. Stories can. Stories validate the specific circumstances people experience at the same time as inviting them to look from another point of view. Rules alienate people who want to think for themselves, whereas stories invite them to creatively reframe their dilemmas.”<sup>1</sup>*

A number of Humanitarian Directors from some of the larger agencies started to meet informally, often in pubs, to talk about common interests and questions. These meetings came to be known by the group as ‘Useful Gatherings’. The need to meet was prompted in part by the UN changing its co-ordination of humanitarian assistance – which, it was felt, risked more fragmentation, and complexity for NGOs. Humanitarian Directors were finding it increasingly difficult to make coherent sense of the bigger picture. One thing was clear, however, that funding was beginning to flow very differently and in ways that were making it harder for NGOs to do their work in traditional ways.<sup>2</sup>

## The Consortium is born

The UK government’s Department for International Development (DFID) put out a call for proposals to strengthen the capacity of NGOs for disaster response. The Useful Gatherings group saw this as an opportunity to form a consortium to submit a joint proposal for a radical new way of thinking about investing in the humanitarian system. The members of this ‘club’ were not selected scientifically, but were drawn in opportunistically through the group of people and organisations who were around the table in those first conversations.<sup>3</sup>

*“What has transpired from those early informal meetings was (and still is) ground-breaking, and is seen as such. It has been an exercise in demonstrating the tangible benefits of strategic collaborative advantage in a sector that is known for its independence and competitiveness. Our early meetings fed an appetite to work together and to rail against all the competitive stuff whilst not feeling forced into a one-world viewpoint. I am extremely proud to have been part of the founding of this.”*

*Gareth Owen  
Save the Children UK*

The initial group<sup>4</sup> decided to expand the number of British-based agencies involved thereby increasing both range and reach. The process of bringing together the 15 agencies that became the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA) and submitting a proposal to DFID took only 9 weeks. A useful example, perhaps, of how time constraints (i.e. the need to formulate and submit a proposal within a given timeframe) can assist collaborative ventures in becoming more focused and goal-oriented.

*“Initially we were a small but strong group that met informally and erratically to share our frustrations and ideas – away from the more formal structures that were in place at the time. When the prospect of funding from DFID became a reality we decided to bid as a group.*

*This was really quite remarkable and till the last moment we were not sure whether we would be able to hold it together. But we did. I think the people we were dealing with at DFID were really quite surprised that our collaboration lasted right through the protracted process of putting in the application, to securing the funding and then to delivery. We showed conclusively that we really could work together and get beyond our individual organisations interests in the decisions we made.”*

*Nick Guttman  
Current Chair of CBHA / Start Network*

The proposal to DFID outlined ways to invest in the capacity of aid workers operating in front line NGOs by proposing collective ownership and management for emergency funding. The DFID funded two-year pilot project, worth £8 million, offered the opportunity for a different way of working. DFID relinquished some control and the NGOs offered to make difficult decisions in a process of peer-managing a common financial resource. The ‘prize’ was considerable: greater efficiencies; improved NGO strategic culture; better collaboration between DFID and NGOs.

Most importantly of all, this approach offered the potential to save more lives and to alleviate suffering more effectively. There is no question that the Consortium was driven from Day 1 by people with a deep and shared commitment to humanitarianism.

## Building a collaborative model

Whilst it was agreed that the Consortium did not constitute either a partnership or a joint venture there was emphasis in the early discussions and documentation on the Consortium operating in the ‘spirit of partnership’. This spirit was defined as: *co-operation, mutual support and respect... and Consortium Members committing themselves to carrying out activities in relation to the DFID Programme through a spirit of strengthening and complementing each other while respecting each Member’s specific identity.*<sup>5</sup>

1. Simmons.

2. We have chosen to tell this as a narrative, an unfolding story, in which paradox is a continuing theme. For a little more about the methodology please go to Endnote on page 20.

3. Some people remember the story differently, and suggest that DFID had a stronger hand in encouraging NGOs to collaborate than this version would suggest. In this more donor-led version, DFID sought ways to reduce transaction costs and wastage from large numbers of overlapping NGOs active in humanitarian action.

4. Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, Christian Aid, CAFOD and ActionAid.

5. CBHA Consortium Agreement Final Version (1 March).

Box 1: Summary of what it takes to collaborate<sup>6</sup>



*"I didn't operate as a traditional Chair – rather I attempted to strike a good balance between facilitating and leading the Consortium founded in a strong belief in working for the greater good. As a group of Humanitarian Directors, we were naturally very close through our unity of purpose and sense of vocation. But even so, that did not mean it was ever easy – for CBHA to be successful we had to be courageous enough to go into the unknown."*

*Matthew Carter  
Former CBHA Chair*

Leadership and what it means in a collaborative model is a topic we will return to later.

**Structure, location & staffing**

From the start, all the member organisations were regarded as being on an equal footing within the Consortium – each member having one vote regardless of size or operating turnover. The Board of the Consortium meets on a monthly basis and is composed of a senior representative, or a nominated deputy, from each member agency – typically the Humanitarian Director. Since July 2012, there are strategy meetings twice a year for the CEOs of the member organisations as a group.

Save the Children UK was elected by Consortium members to be the lead agency. In effect this meant acting as 'host' to the Consortium enabling it to function without having to create a new, independent entity. As the lead agency, Save the Children UK is responsible for: providing the formal contact point for DFID; employing Consortium staff and being 'authorised to act for the Consortium in terms of committing it to any obligations and liabilities in implementing the project that have been agreed and authorised by the CBHA Board.'<sup>7</sup>

Box 2: advantages & challenges of being 'hosted'

Advantages / strengths
Provision of an established structure and services enabling a focus on activities / content rather than management
Capacity to manage large-scale funding and give confidence of financial probity to donors
Immediate 'gravitas' for the Consortium by association with a well-established agency
Challenges / risks
Over-complex protocols and bureaucratic procedures for a new entity trying to explore different models and approaches
May convey the sense of a 'safe' rather than a 'bold' entity
Potential for co-option (actual or perceived) into the host organisation's culture / values / operational style rather than an independent / neutral position

An individual on secondment from one of the member organisations ran the secretariat for the first few months. It proved surprisingly difficult to hire a permanent Director -

The early commitment to a joined-up and highly collaborative approach does not mean that it was easy to achieve equity and / or consensus:

*"It took a lot longer than anyone expected to strengthen the Consortium once it was formed, whilst also negotiating with DFID around the terms of the project and its delivery. But I was not in the least surprised. Apart from the demands of bringing together very different entities – including some humanitarian 'giants' used to working autonomously – it was a precarious balancing act to undertake the routine / contractual stuff whilst almost pushing that to one side in order to safeguard the visionary nature of the experiment. From the start it felt very important to build in a strong 'learning' component and I am pleased we did that."*

*Chris Cattaway  
Lead consultant for CBHA formation*

It was recognised that the task ahead was pretty daunting and the decision to appoint a Chair who had widely recognised experience in managing complex collaboration and who was from outside the initial group was an extremely important one.

6. Illustration created during the Board Away Days– May 2013.

7. CBHA-CHSF Theme A Statement of Intent (18 May 2009).

the first attempt failed to make an appointment and it wasn't until a headhunting firm was engaged that the permanent Director was employed, starting in September 2011, six months after work had begun.

*"Hiring someone of Sean Lowrie's calibre as the Consortium's Director was hugely important. He is brave, creative, passionate and committed. It was a great – but not uncontroversial – choice."*

Gareth Owen  
Save the Children UK

The Consortium's secretariat – known as the Programme Management Unit (PMU) – was designed to be minimal in terms of staffing although it was expected to carry a wide range of responsibilities and, perhaps inevitably, had more of a role in shaping the Consortium than the initial remit might have implied.<sup>8</sup> Towards the end of 2011, a PMU Advisory Group was established to act as a sounding board for the PMU between Board meetings. This suggests that the PMU required more active and on-going support in managing a large and complex workload. One could deduce that running a consortium is more demanding than it might appear to those not in the driving seat.

## Relationship to DFID

From early documentation it is clear that various options for the role DFID would play in relation to the Consortium were discussed. These include DFID:

- Exploring a 'strategic collaboration' with the Consortium rather than a more typical transactional relationship
- Suggesting they should be part of a steering group
- Being given 'observer status' at meetings.

In the event, DFID took on a more conventional role as the pilot got underway – they were not present at Consortium meetings, for example.

Whilst there is no explicit reference in the DFID documentation to the Consortium helping to challenge and change the NGO: donor relationship, this is something that does underpin a number of internal discussions about the Consortium's strategy. In the Consortium's 2012 Engagement Survey, there are a number of references to members' interest in: *'getting the balance right with potential donors; being bolder with DFID and taking the time to nurture a more valuable and strategic relationship with DFID and other potential donors'*.<sup>9</sup>

## Initial focus of work and early challenges

The Consortium was formed to fulfil *"the aim of working together to reduce suffering, mortality and morbidity in conflicts and natural disasters by strengthening the capacity and ability*

*of the 'third pillar' – the NGO sector – to deliver appropriate high quality, effective and timely humanitarian responses."*<sup>10</sup>

Funding of £8m was duly received from DFID – an unusually large donation to a consortium rather than an individual NGO – the programme of work and an evaluation of its achievements is summarised in Box 3.

In August 2010 the Pakistan Floods pushed the Consortium into the limelight. Having deployed £750,000 a couple of days after the crisis became apparent, the Consortium was asked by DFID if it would programme a separate tranche of UK money worth £1m. Then in October, the Consortium was asked if it would handle an additional £20m in funding for economic regeneration activities in rural communities.

The last offer was highly controversial for the Consortium and pushed the relationships within the Consortium to the limit. The tension was about how unanticipated decisions were being made and on what authority. The original vision of the Consortium was to explore a two-year pilot, carefully negotiated, planned and delivered. Suddenly, within the space of three months the budget had tripled, and the Consortium was catapulted into operating as a broker for field-level collaboration.

*"At one of the Consortium's toughest moments – the breakdown in relationships and the subsequent confusion and anger generated by the decision to carry out emergency response work in Pakistan, through a smaller consortium, with decision making that challenged the ways business had been done until then – it seemed as if everyone disagreed with everything. There was a massive dissonance.... Yet this was also one of the periods of the most intense learning and growth (in the sense of understanding not funding!) and we got through."*<sup>11</sup>

Mariana Merelo Lobo  
Action Against Hunger

So a central paradox from quite early on was around the core purpose of the Consortium (and to some extent it remains central to the continuing debate about the Consortium's purpose). Was/ is the Consortium a sophisticated, collaborative approach to wise expenditure of humanitarian funding? Or, was / is the Consortium a unique forum for challenging the traditional way of delivering humanitarian aid?

The navigation of this tension in 2010 and early 2011 was conducted via three consultancies:

1. An independently facilitated retreat by two very experienced conflict mediation and partnership consultants. The concluding workshop in January 2011 was described as a 'moment of truth', but no decisions were made about the ambition or vision of the Consortium.

10. CBHA Consortium Agreement Final Version (1 March 2010).

11. At this time a one-day workshop was set up by the PMU for the Consortium Board. It was facilitated by Vicky Cosstick and Rachel Houghton of ChangeAware and is seen as having played a critical part in going from breakdown to breakthrough.

8. Initially there was a team of 3 full time staff: Director, Coordinator and Finance & Grants Manager.

9. Interesting to note that a DFID: NGO Forum is now in place that is facilitated by the the Consortium's Director.

2. A strategy formulation process that began with a data collection survey across the membership by two ex-McKinsey consultants. It concluded with another workshop in April 2011 that provided some deeper understanding, but again the workshop did not result in any agreement about the ambition or vision.
3. A team of three senior consultants who facilitated a two-day strategy retreat in September 2011. This retreat opened the Board's eyes to the range of possibilities available to them, but it didn't conclude in consensus about the ambition or vision for the future.

At the same time as the Consortium was struggling with formulating its strategy and learning how to manage internal tensions, a terrible drought emerged in the Horn of Africa. It was agreed to put 40% of the annual budget into the response well before the crisis became prominent in media headlines. This was a brave decision when there was uncertainty about the severity of the crisis; disagreement between members about the future of the Consortium and when financial security was suddenly threatened by DFID's decision not to continue funding (see below).

### Evaluating the pilot

*"The CBHA added value beyond the expected project outputs through the collaborative approach especially around the Emergency Response Fund. It also added value through the concentrated focus on areas such as capacity building and surge capacity. This focus allowed the CBHA to move the agenda forward on humanitarian competencies and capacity in the sector. Peer to peer exchange and discussion at the humanitarian director level meant that the CBHA served as an incubator to move the capability agenda forward."<sup>12</sup>*

See Box 3 overleaf.

The final evaluation of the pilot phase also made the following very significant deduction:

*"The evaluation concluded that the CBHA had strengthened the third pillar through demonstrating that a collective of NGOs was able to address critical issues such as capacity building in the sector and rapidly advance the agenda. ... More importantly the CBHA model demonstrated that a consortium of NGOs was able to allocate resources in a rapid, fair, and effective manner, with low overheads, even when this meant that some of those around the table got nothing."*

### Additional achievements of the Consortium's first phase

In addition to a review of achievements undertaken as part of the evaluation of the DFID funded pilot (see Box 3), there are a number of additional achievements from this first phase identified by the Consortium. These include:

#### Financial issues

The pilot provided new insights into the funding-to-delivery process and an opportunity to assess the efficiency with which the funding reached identified areas and how this approach compared with other funding mechanisms in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and differentiation. In addition, it became clear that whilst the funding from DFID had provided the prompt for the setting up of the Consortium, it was not critical to the Consortium's continuation when the funding was withdrawn.

#### Collaboration issues

Working together offered an important opportunity for the organisations to understand each other more deeply and to earn trust over time and through experience of each other's reliability. One example of this in practical terms is the move towards peer-reviewing each other's funding bids and reports. The Consortium had also demonstrated its capacity to work through serious challenges. The controversial development of a specific consortium for Pakistan, for example, was seen by some members as an erosion of trust with communication channels at cross-purposes and gave rise to suspicions of a 'hidden' agenda. Addressing this challenge positioned the Consortium and the PMU as being willing to learn and to adjust its ways of working in the light of critique.

#### Governance issues

The Consortium Board is composed of senior staff rather than CEOs. As such, it was seen as a rather new governance model with key decisions being made by those involved more directly in operations. This was regarded, on the whole, as a positive thing and it is clear that being a Board member is taken very seriously, though there is also some evidence that certain Board members felt there was a considerable gap between their own and their CEO's commitment to the Consortium with some CEO's actually dismissing the Consortium as irrelevant.

#### Diversity issues

Whilst some experienced the diversity within the Consortium as a challenge (citing radically different views on risk-taking or how best to relate to donors or whether the Consortium should be about project delivery or a change strategy), it was generally accepted that the Consortium had been able to support the creation of more relevant capacity building programmes based on the diversity of member organisations and the sharing of different kinds of expertise and experiences.

It appears from these additional pilot outcomes that the Consortium, after only two years, was already an experiment that many external agencies (donors and others) were watching with interest.

Box 3: Intentions (as defined in 2010) with a summary of how each was evaluated at the end of pilot (2012)<sup>13</sup>

<b>Mechanisms</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Evaluation Overview</b>
Emergency Response Fund	Establish quick release fund and application process	Described as a very strong component in the pilot phase with the Consortium described as being 'beyond bias' <i>"the fastest external mechanism for financing the member NGOs' response to emergencies."</i>
Capacity building initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish set of core competency &amp; leadership behaviour frameworks</li> <li>Build development leadership &amp; management competencies of existing staff</li> <li>Establish a Humanitarian Leadership Trainee Programme</li> </ul>	<p>Significant achievement cited as <i>"for the first time, a core humanitarian competencies framework has been developed, endorsed and utilised by a group of INGOs with networks that jointly cover the globe."</i></p> <p>Training programmes were deemed to have either met or exceeded targets</p>
Increase available HR surge capacity	Annual financial allocation to each Consortium member to enhance rapid response capability	Capacity amongst members deemed to have increased with member agencies actively using the funding allocated for this purpose.
Strengthening logistic system	Utilising Helios software (open source supply chain software)	<p>Partially achieved</p> <p><i>"This objective was unrealistic in terms of the actual activities planned; nevertheless to a limited extent it helped some organisations understand their procurement process needs and how to address them"</i></p>
Learning & Evaluation system creation and integration	Two focus areas: effectiveness of the support for & initiatives of the Consortium, and an assessment of the 'added value' of the Consortium approach in comparison to other humanitarian initiatives.	There are references to a good level of learning outputs and on the processes used. Does not address specifically the issues of effectiveness and added value from operating as a Consortium.

*"I think the Consortium's members sometimes miss seeing how many key people and organisations on the outside are really interested and excited by the Consortium, what it is doing and aiming to do. Sometimes there is a stark contrast between the attitudes of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in that respect.*

*Marieke Hounjet,  
Advisor, CBHA / Start Network*

13. Based on Cosgrave, Polastro, van Eekelen.

## A critical moment

*“CBHA should show its added value. It should focus on what it stands for rather than what it stands against. We could have done more work exploring what is new, innovative and added value from the CBHA and how we are doing it together.”<sup>14</sup>*

In June 2011 DFID announced its decision to conclude the pilot (in March 2012) and not to extend funding for the Consortium’s work. This decision caused some genuine consternation amongst the Consortium members and staff team – not least because the pilot had received such a strongly positive evaluation in its mid-term progress report<sup>15</sup> and the HERR report.<sup>16</sup> So here is another paradox – a formal evaluation of work that suggests a very high level of achievement (both in terms of deliverables and in terms of influence) that led to a decision to (effectively) close the programme.

The Consortium was thrown into crisis – the DFID decision shocked all those involved. Consortium members had all been expecting a significant scale-up in the resources allocated by DFID. All the evidence pointed toward the Consortium as an effective mechanism. It became quickly evident that the decision was a result of a policy shift in DFID, established by a new government and the in-coming Secretary of State for International Development and was not a reflection on the Consortium’s work on the pilot.

Some thought this was a potentially terminal blow for the Consortium, others thought that it was the best thing that could have happened.

*“In retrospect, it is clear that the CBHA members had some difficulty in agreeing a vision for the future and agreeing ways of responding to unanticipated opportunities, because in the minds of many, CBHA was little more than a DFID creation. Believing, therefore, that it was not possible to define a CBHA future in isolation of DFID’s thinking about that future. When CBHA was given notice that the DFID relationship was going to be severed, it was a tremendous opportunity to establish our own vision for the future. I will always look back on the crisis of June 2011 as the moment CBHA began to change for the better.”*

*Sean Lowrie  
Director, CBHA/Start Network*

Was there a valuable and viable future for the Consortium that was worth working for? Since members later agreed to continue to fund the PMU, and decided to draw up a new Consortium Agreement with the specific DFID references removed, the answer (even though some voiced reservations and some Consortium members left) seems to have been a fairly robust ‘yes’.

## The Consortium is re-positioned

*“Yesterday the Board endorsed a new transformative vision for the Consortium. This was a huge accomplishment and marked the culmination of months of effort. During those months, the Board seemed to have withdrawn its engagement due to the uncertainty in both funding and vision. Basically, the Board was asked for a ‘make or break’ decision: declare the collaboration over, or start something bolder and bigger than before.”*

*Log book entry<sup>17</sup> of Sean Lowrie  
Director, CBHA /Start Network*

Once the decision to continue the Consortium with a new strategy and focus had been made, the PMU worked (together with a number of external specialists) to draft a number of discussion papers<sup>18</sup> including several designed to encourage ‘blue-skies thinking’ for review at the Board retreat in September 2011. The rationale for the retreat was that: *DFID funding has been the fundamental glue holding the members together... CBHA must reinvent itself.*<sup>19</sup>

*“The first day consisted of a re-affirming of the value of the CBHA: if CBHA hadn’t existed, it would have been necessary to invent it. On the second morning there was more tension and it became obvious that a lot of ‘corridor conversations’ were taking place during the breaks. As facilitators, we realised that unless the big decision about the future of the CBHA was tackled directly, the offsite would be a complete waste of time. We also felt that this decision was one for the Chair and fellow Board members to make, exercising the binding powers of a Board.*

*At lunch we took the Chair aside and he agreed to run the afternoon session. We also secured the agreement of Sean and Marieke (the PMU team) that they would not attend this special Board meeting on the basis that, given that it was their futures on the line, their presence might cramp debate and could be difficult for them to sit through.*

*The crunch point of the closed meeting was how to bridge the gap: there was a good chance of funding on the other side of the chasm, but no prospect of funding until the chasm was bridged. Any bridge had to cantilever out over the void! By the end of that session, the Board had crystallised a view that member organisations should provide a year’s funding for the PMU to continue to campaign for an independent, quick-response, humanitarian fund: in essence, to replace the DFID funding for the PMU. The Consortium hadn’t crossed the chasm: but it had started to push out the bridge.”*

*Simon Loveday  
Co-facilitator of the 2011 Board Retreat*

14. Minutes of the Consortium Board Meeting, June 8 2011.

15. Featherstone.

16. Humanitarian Emergency Response Review.

17. Sean Lowrie completed the process to become an accredited partnership broker, as part of this process he submitted a log book of his brokering practice over a period of 3 months.

18. 18 papers in total – which caused some Board members to feel overwhelmed with too much data and too many angles to think about at once.

19. CBHA September Retreat 29th to 30th September 2011 concept note (Version 5).

This was a watershed moment and it is important not to underestimate the significance of this decision. It is clear from a study of documents from this period that some of those involved at Board level had some strong views and anxieties:

*“Organisations in the CBHA will not – or cannot – invest enough to deliver the vision and the PMU cannot compensate for this.”*

*“Partnership / collaboration / networking / platform is an emerging idea with little solid knowledge within most traditional organisations.”*

*“The DFID G-RAP<sup>20</sup> will kill us with a thousand small cuts.”*

*“It is money not vision that keeps people around the CBHA table.”*

Divergent views of what is or is not possible remain within the group and are still expressed (see below). Nevertheless, at this important turning point in September 2011, the Consortium did reach clear agreement to pursue 3 clear programmes of work:

- The development of radically new funding streams for the Consortium’s work
- Growing the capacity building work and
- Building strong platforms for influence and impact.

### The situation in May 2013

In May 2013, the whole Board spent one full and two half days together at a residential retreat. Unlike the earlier retreat (September 2011), this event was characterised by an explicit commitment to process as well as business. An external facilitator with experience of partnership building<sup>21</sup> was invited to help shape and carry the process. Unusually, and to considerable effect, two illustrators<sup>22</sup> were also present throughout and created large images (‘living minutes’) of the work. These were very much appreciated by the group both as a more vivid record of their discussions and as an acknowledgment of diverse views and opinions within the group.

From the beginning, there was a palpable sense of engagement from the group with very little ‘fence sitting’. Understandably some of the newer people for whom this was their first Board meeting were somewhat quieter as they got the measure of the group and what was expected of them.

20. Global Resilience Action Programme designed to “help aid agencies, companies and other key partners to work more closely together, sharing skills and innovations to ensure responses to future emergencies are more effective”. <http://consultation.dfid.gov.uk/globalresilienceactionprogramme2012/>.

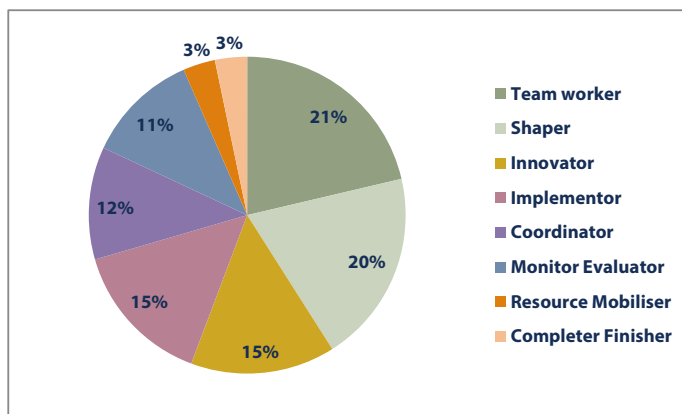
21. Ros Tennyson, selected because she is: a partnership specialist, part of the PBA team providing partnership brokering support to the Consortium and had already been asked to be author of this paper.

22. From Endless Possibilities – see references section.

### Understanding the nature of groups

The Board and staff team completed an exercise to explore the ways they operate individually within a team or group (or partnership).<sup>23</sup> One of the Board members asked for the findings (i.e. each individual’s scores) to be shared across the group in order to learn more about each other and to get a picture of the balance within the Board and PMU between different preferences. A summary of the results are as follows:

Box 4: Team / group role preferences of the current Consortium Board and staff group<sup>24</sup>



The characteristics of this particular group – as revealed by this exercise – was referred to at various times during the rest of the event. Indeed, the exercise began to inform some Consortium decisions such as how to make a good combination of types in each of the working groups – making sure, for example, that each one had a ‘completer finisher’ to be sure that work was actually completed.<sup>25</sup>

Any group effectively “serves as a container in which the individuals regress, evolve and the group gradually matures”.<sup>26</sup> The fact that this group got through a clear dip (in terms of energy, focus and productivity) in the second part of day 2 and went on to be decisive and energised by the last session on the final day may itself be an indicator of the Consortium operating as a maturing group.<sup>27</sup>

One take-away for the Consortium members and the PMU from the Away Days may be that even a basic understanding of (often unconscious) group processes can be very helpful in staying objective and focused when things seem to get difficult.<sup>28</sup>

23. Loosely based on Belbin Team Roles – see [www.belbin.com](http://www.belbin.com) for more information.

24. Note: This should be regarded as an indicator from which to build – a more comprehensive process would be likely to be more accurate.

25. The group quickly recognised the risk here – namely that this could put a great deal of pressure on the few ‘completer-finishers’ on the Board and / or could let others off the hook in terms of needing to be better ‘completer-finishers’ themselves.

26. Bion.

27. A useful reference in this regard is: Theory U by Scharmer.

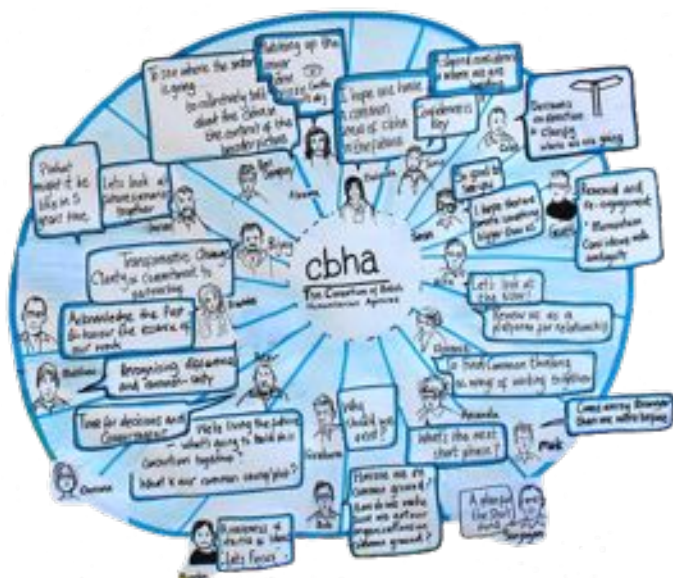
28. A useful reference in this regard is: The Anti-Group by Nitsen.



## Tangible and intangible outcomes

The Away Days arrived at clear alignment on ways forward for each of the 6 key topics needing decisions and in the final session a high level of satisfaction was expressed. Those present commented on the ease with which decisions were made (after a somewhat tortuous series of discussions the day before) about next steps as well as on their sense of the added value of working in a collaborative model with the focus on the partnering process as a central element to the way the Away Days were conceived and managed.

Box 5: Expectations of those present at the Board Away Days – May 2013



There was an interesting moment when the group was asked for their reflections on the Away Days, one of those present (who was representing their organisation at a Consortium Board meeting for the first time) said that whilst he had found the process quite baffling in some respects and he did not agree with every decision made, he felt that this was OK since he was very comfortable with the Consortium's whole approach and direction. What he was describing was a strong sense of alignment rather than agreement – this seemed to characterise the general view and appeared to indicate that the whole (the Consortium) was genuinely taking precedence over the parts (individual organisational interests).

## Key issues in the story so far

*“Several attributes emerge, either as characteristics that the CBHA has exhibited to date and that should be preserved / reinforced, or as potential weaknesses that need to be introduced/strengthened in the way the CBHA works from now on. These characteristics are: trust; space for reflection, imagination, judgment & innovation; flexibility & responsiveness; clear, respected accountabilities; a ‘light’ bureaucracy and clear additionality.”<sup>29</sup>*

### Terminology

There is a continuing discussion about the right term for the entity. Is it a Network? An Alliance? A Partnership? A Consortium? The terms ‘network’ or ‘alliance’ may be perceived as too loose for an entity that undertakes complex programmes of work and aims to raise and manage significant levels of funding whilst ‘partnership’ is viewed by some as being too loaded and / or indicating a level of legal engagement that is too restrictive. The term ‘consortium’ is one used frequently by DFID and it appears that this was the initial prompt for adopting this term over any other. Whatever term is used to describe it, there is a significant interest from the member organisations and the PMU to work more intentionally on the collaborative process – and to this end, lessons have been drawn quite routinely over the past year from partnership / partnership brokering theory and practice.

### Membership

The Consortium is founded on the assumption that all those involved as its members come to the table with something to offer and something to gain from the association. The Consortium now includes a wide range of NGOs - both in terms of size and in terms of mission. There is an interesting question about which organisations have influence and of what kind. On the surface, it seems quite clear that the larger agencies (Save the Children, Oxfam) have quite a bit of weight in their way of working within the Consortium. Perhaps, because of their size, track record and connections they can take enable the Consortium to take more risk, perhaps not. Perhaps the larger organisations have too much at stake, too much to lose, too much ‘skin in the game’ and in spite of a certain expectation (from them and others) of being able to prevail, the reality is somewhat different.

*“I represent one of the smaller agencies in the Consortium and often feel as if, because we are smaller and not threatening, we can play an important catalytic role. I have the total endorsement of my Executive Director in how I work within the Consortium and so I have been empowered to act naturally, to contribute spontaneously and to help us all to get beyond simplistic agencies perceptions about each other. We all need to be ourselves in this humanitarian work and we mustn’t be afraid of the paradoxes and challenges of co-existence in collaboration*

*with a multitude of people representing a diversity of agencies”*

*Mariana Merelo Lobo  
Action Against Hunger*

There is quite a notable difference in terms of potential contributions, expectations and drivers that underpin each organisation’s involvement. These are broadly outlined in Box 6 overleaf.

It is clear that the main agenda for the Consortium is very much outward-facing (the programme objectives of the pilot) and it is these things that largely take the time and are the explicit focus of attention. However, there are other features that are at work here – these are more inward-looking in character. It seems that a key value for those involved in the Consortium is to build a more robust day-to-day alignment across what might be seen by some as traditionally competitive boundaries. In addition, several Board members speak of the value in having a strong ‘consortium-view’ that they can use within their own organisations to help shape internal thinking and practices. It seems likely that it is these last two elements that held the Consortium together when it could easily have fallen apart when funding from DFID was withdrawn.

### Role & remit of the PMU

*“It is becoming ever more clear that genuine collaboration (for instance, collaborations that align with the key partnering principles of equity, transparency and mutual benefit) is not ‘business as usual’ – it is a whole new way of doing business. All those involved – partners, donors, beneficiaries and other stakeholders – would do well to understand this and to really think through the implications in terms of how they relate to and what they expect from partnership as opposed to single agency working relationships.”<sup>30</sup>*

The role of the PMU is absolutely central to the Consortium and it is the subject of some debate within the Consortium as to the levels of autonomy, decision-making authority and / or thought leadership it should have. The original person specification for the Director position asked for someone with diplomacy, gravitas, influence and a facilitative approach to decision-making. This is in some contrast to the list of activities and tasks which are quite technical and functional in character.

Perhaps from the start there has been ambivalence about what the Director / PMU should do. Is the PMU a secretariat providing the coordination and support for the Consortium to deliver on its project commitments or is the PMU a change agent seeking and seizing new opportunities to challenge the status quo in order for the Consortium to reach its more ambitious game-changing goals? It seems that, for the most part, the member organisations do not want or expect the PMU to play safe – most believe that the Consortium would not have survived without the determination, dedication and courage of the team. But this is not without its moments of

Box 6: Different positions of Consortium members according to size of organisation<sup>31</sup>

Larger organisations	Mid-size organisations	Smaller organisations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have significant resources of their own and momentum in their own large-scale initiative.</li> <li>• Tend to be wary of the Consortium’s potential as a competitor for resources.</li> <li>• They are doing relatively well from business as usual so may have less interest in challenging the status quo.</li> <li>• They may expect to hold sway because of their size (and the smaller organisations can feel they have too much influence).</li> <li>• Can be more willing / able to take risks and take a leadership role in seeking change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have some resources they are willing to invest in the Consortium because they see mid to long-term potential value from the association.</li> <li>• In the current climate they are being heavily ‘squeezed’ both by donors and in their efforts to fund-raise from the public.</li> <li>• They may be most in need of significant change but may feel too vulnerable to acknowledge this.</li> <li>• Some (specifically the faith-based organisations) tend to have more regularity of income and thus less fluctuation in their resource-base.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have limited resources and tend to be more specific / niche in their focus.</li> <li>• Cannot invest much in the Consortium and may feel their time is not well spent if their involvement does not translate quickly into new resources for their work.</li> <li>• They potentially have a lot to gain in terms of influence, recognition and resources</li> <li>• Can be more flexible and open to new thinking as their bureaucracy is minimal</li> </ul>

exasperation and friction as reflected below:

*“Many agencies commented unprompted in interviews what a difficult job the PMU has. However there were split views as to whether the current role and remit of the PMU fits CBHA’s requirements with quite different views behind this – from some who felt that the PMU needed more decision-making power to others who felt that the PMU assumed too much decision-making power. The key dimension here is the spectrum of the PMU role from facilitator through to decision-maker, and where member organisations want to position the PMU on this spectrum.”<sup>32</sup>*

*“If we had restricted ourselves solely to what our Board wanted us to do, then I think we would be in a very different place right now. Obviously it is hard to know whether it would be the same, better or worse but it would certainly have been different. For example, at our 2011 Board Retreat we were told that we should not do research. However, the fact that I have reviewed literature, made connections between different pieces of knowledge, statistics and experience has been very useful and has made CBHA a highly respected actor when it comes to NGO financing. It has also made a strong impact on DFID and, ultimately, the Consortium members seemed to be delighted when we pulled this off.”*

*Marieke Hounjet  
Advisor, CBHA/Start Network*

*“I have great admiration for what the PMU does but I also have a concern that the team spends too much time thinking big at the expense of grounding us in solid principles of how the Consortium will do business. There are many possible solutions to the problems we are seeking to address and sometimes decisions are made too fast and without enough consultation*

*and rigour. The procedural stuff is critical if the Consortium is to really achieve big goals and hard critical thinking should be at the heart of what we do.”*

*Graham MacKay  
Oxfam GB*

It isn’t only a question of boundaries in the sense of how much autonomy the PMU should have, it is also an issue of how much anxiety the PMU has to carry on behalf of the Consortium – it is clear that the team can often feel as if the whole existence of the Consortium rests on their shoulders.

*“This has been a roller-coaster of a week. I experienced a lot of challenge, excitement and learning and felt a lot of possibility. If successful, my partnership brokering efforts will create a complex web of relationships. It is about creating an eco-system, not about creating well-functioning partnerships, though perhaps I do need to focus on a smaller number of well-functioning partnerships as the foundation for the eco-system.”*

*Log book entry of Sean Lowrie  
Director, CBHA/Start Network*

*“This was a pivotal week for CBHA that concluded with an astonishingly positive result in that the CEOs not only endorsed the creation of a global fund, but they offered to help raise funding!”*

*Log book entry of Sean Lowrie  
Director, CBHA/Start Network*

Perhaps it is fair to describe the PMU staff as both ‘warriors’<sup>33</sup> and ‘worriers’<sup>34</sup> at one and the same time. This is to be expected, since warrior-ing and worrying are characteristics of many of those operating as partnership / collaboration brokers – whether as individuals or as a team. Studies of

31. This has been devised from comments made by different members of the Consortium during the Away Days either in the open sessions or in 1-2-1 conversations. Note that we use the term ‘resources’ to imply a range of contributions beyond simply cash donations.

32. CBHA strategy retreat report – Annex 4: Conclusions from the strategy process Stage 1 (May 2011). Theme 6: Governance (20 Sept 2011).

33. The idea of the staff as ‘warriors’ emerged from a pattern in the language used in a number of strategy documents and position statements.

34. The notion of the staff as ‘worriers’ emerged both from reading the log book of the current Director and from conversations with the Director and the Advisor for Knowledge, Impact and Collaboration before, during and after the Consortium Away Days.

partnership brokers in action<sup>35</sup> suggests that those on the periphery of complex collaborative initiatives have very little notion of what it really takes to manage the process well and, above all, to hold one's nerve under considerable and sustained pressure from a number of directions.

The Consortium members and the PMU are to be congratulated for having navigated through this minefield remarkably well to date, to the extent that there is a level of confidence in working together (or at least, having 'got the measure' of each other) so that outstanding issues (of boundaries, behaviours and / or responsibilities) are able to be more openly challenged and discussed.

### Attitudes to risk

In 2011 when the Board was reviewing the proposed strategy, there was an equal split between those member organisations that saw the Consortium fundamentally as a project delivery mechanism compared to those that saw the Consortium as an agency for transformational change. The latter view is expressed forcefully in a pre-Board paper.<sup>36</sup>

*"The CBHA could push the boundaries and make a transformative contribution to the international humanitarian system, but this challenge to the status quo will involve all the typical ambivalence to organisational change. Yet this is not simply an organisational change process or a consortium formation process between 15 bureaucratic organisations.*

*The CBHA is comprised of non-governmental organisations, each of which was formed out of an emotional reaction by civil society to injustice and suffering. Deep in the soul of the CBHA agencies lies the humanitarian imperative. The thousands of individual staff members of each CBHA agency, and their tens of thousands of private donors believe in the humanitarian imperative and expect the organisations to take decisive action in a turbulent world.*

*The strategy formulation process of the CBHA will be a political event.<sup>37</sup>*

*Sean Lowrie  
Director, CBHA / Start Network*

Views about the future of the Consortium now are not, perhaps, quite as polarised as they may have been in 2011 – things seem to have moved on. A reading of more recent materials suggests a more nuanced set of options:<sup>38</sup>

- Option 1: Doing humanitarian work in the same way but better;
- Option 2: Developing a robust model of brokering collective action;
- Option 3: Working through practical demonstration to change the rules of the game.

The next few months will reveal which of these three options – or combination of options – provides the foundation for the way forward.

### Managing divergence

Many of those involved in development partnerships / collaborations spend a great deal of time on first finding, and then closely adhering to, the shared vision. This can have the effect of individuals and entities feeling unable to bring divergent views or discomforts to the table and can make for a level of dissatisfaction and frustration.

*"It feels as if it is somewhat unacceptable to be critical or to raise uncomfortable issues for deeper discussion. But the reality is that those in the Consortium – however much they share and have in common – have vested interests and can bump up against each other. Disagreement is fine – what people need is to see that Consortium processes are fair and that divergence of view is navigated objectively. This is what brings the added value of working collectively."*

*Graham MacKay  
Oxfam GB*

As part of our exploration into what may be seen as paradoxes within a collaborative model, it is worth highlighting some divergent views expressed during the Away Days in May 2013.

### Box 7: Divergent views within the Consortium

"The NGO model is broken"	"The new NGO world order is exciting"
"Let's fix the system from within"	"Let's replace the system"
"We are here for the big idea"	"We are here for the money"
"We'll walk away if..."	"You don't get rid of us that easily!"
"Today, we took several steps backwards"	"Today, for the first time we really talked"

Apparently two people experiencing exactly the same world (cf the first two quotes above) or exactly the same day (cf the last two quotes above) can understand things completely differently. There may be many factors that make for this difference including: level of investment of the individual; mood – often caused by outside factors; degree of tiredness / sense of well-being; a tendency to either seeing a glass half full or a glass half empty; leaning towards a focus on outputs versus a focus on process (or vice versa) and so on.

The point here is that neither view is right or wrong, they both have a genuine reality and, therefore, are at some level

35. *What do Partnership Brokers Do – A Study of 250 log books of those operating as partnership brokers worldwide*, PBA, 2012.

36. Extracted from the Board Strategy Review, 2011.

37. CBHA Strategy Discussion paper prepared for the Board (9 Dec 2010). More reflectively, the Consortium Director who wrote the strategy discussion paper commented later: "I wrote this about 3 or 4 months into the job, and with the clarity of hindsight, I now see it was far too soon to raise this idea with the Board. I still believe it to be true, and really hope the Consortium will get to a place where the members feel they are able to debate, hold each other to account, and yes even argue about their future."

38. These have been deduced from conversations with Board members and staff team during 2013.

both true. The question for those involved in a collaborative model is whether contradictory perspectives can be constructively incorporated rather than being brushed aside and / or leading to an impasse or even relationship breakdown. It is a working hypothesis of the author that the most exciting partnerships / collaborations are those that truly relish diversity, using apparent divergence as drivers for innovation and building from contradictions to alignment rather than (all too often forced or coerced) agreement.

### Commitment to collaboration

However the Consortium is defined, and whatever contradictions may continue to exist as to its focus and remit, there seems to be a striking commitment to a collaborative model.

*“One key choice for CBHA agencies – isolation or collaboration. The future of the CBHA will be linked to a key choice by its membership: to revert to a more individualistic model where market and political forces will shape the future, or to collaborate around areas of mutual interest and attempt to collectively shape the future.”<sup>39</sup>*

It is also important to note that whilst there is a voiced commitment to collaboration and members have for the most part stayed loyal to, and engaged with, the Consortium over the past year without seeing any immediate financial return, the collaborative model is not an easy option – and those tasked with coordinating and driving it (i.e. the staff team forming the PMU) can easily feel daunted by the challenges of managing the collaborative process.

*“I’ve caught myself analysing the Consortium many times. When do people respond to emails? What do they respond to? What are they interested in? How can we best connect with them? How much time do they need to review something? How can we ask them to fit even more into their busy schedules? With hindsight, I think we should have asked the Board and the members exactly these questions up-front. I am, of course, painfully aware that most of the collaborative work individuals in NGOs do, is done on top of their ‘day jobs’. This must have a huge impact on the sector and I wonder often whether CBHA can help to change this for the benefit of the sector as a whole.”*

*Marieke Hounjet  
Advisor, CBHA/Start Network*

### Leadership in a collaborative model

Whilst there is some literature about power in partnerships and collaborative ventures (usually exploring its highly destructive potential), there is far less on the issue of leadership (although the two can be easily confused). Collaboration in which equity is a fundamental principle, as in the Consortium, cannot mean that there are no leaders, for without leadership of some kind it is highly likely that either the group would play safe by going for lowest common denominator decisions or that virtually nothing would get done.

It seems that the concept of leadership in a collaborative model needs something of a re-think since conventional patterns of leadership (that arise from role or status) are more likely to undermine rather than enhance the sense of shared responsibility so central to any form of collaboration.<sup>40</sup> In a collaborative model it seems that leadership is not related to role / status per se but rather it has to be both earned and shared. In the most effective development partnerships, leadership roles ebb and flow between different players during the life of the collaboration – with those most suitable either leading parts of the whole or leading the whole but for a limited period of time.

The issue of leadership in this Consortium is an interesting one and could usefully be the subject of a specific discussion among the membership. Clearly there is a paradox for the PMU (as explored earlier) – being a unit that, on the one hand, is required to provide an administrative hub to serve the Consortium’s membership and agreed priorities whilst, on the other hand, being required to play a significant lead in shaping the Consortium’s evolving agenda and public voice. The notion of ‘servant leadership’ may be pertinent here.<sup>41</sup>

It seems that leadership is as important in a collaborative model as it is in more hierarchical models – perhaps it is even more important. Leadership arrangements work best when they are explicit and where there are opportunities for different styles of leadership to be deployed at different stages of a collaborative cycle (i.e. over time). Ideally, leadership roles are identified and allocated to those best able to undertake them effectively on behalf of the group.<sup>42</sup> The most useful question for those involved in any collaborative group to ask during the life cycle of the collaboration may be: *what leadership is needed now?*

39. CBHA Landscape Mapping – discussion paper prepared for the CBHA Board retreat (September 2011).

40. Whilst those with role status can usefully act as champions or ambassadors for a partnership, if this slips into dictating what the partnership will do then any sense of collaboration disappears very fast.

41. Greenleaf.

42. This is, typically, far more to do with individual capacities than with their representative role – i.e. someone is invited to be the spokesperson for the Consortium because they are an excellent communicator not because they represent the largest member of the Consortium.

## What does 'success' mean?

Equally as challenging as the issues of leadership and governance in a collaborative model is that of reaching agreement within the group about what constitutes success. It is likely that those involved will want more from a collaborative mechanism than they expect from a more conventional (single agency) mechanism – otherwise why go through the struggles or the transaction costs involved in making a collaboration work?

It is clear that the success of the Consortium to date has depended on a number of individuals whether operating as members, consultants, staff or in other capacities. Several of those interviewed spontaneously commented on how proud they were of the Consortium and / or how privileged they felt to be involved with it over a number of years.

*"I think the CBHA's success, specifically since the DFID pilot period, has been the product of a strong marriage between the inter-agency collaboration and the dedication, imagination and drive of the PMU. I think inter-agency partnerships are inevitably slow, clunky, fragile and therefore not always the optimal platform for innovation and boundary spanning - both of which the CBHA has done. This has been achieved in great part because of visionary and brave leadership from Sean and Marieke.*

*Having said that, without the Consortium members behind them, challenging, validating and giving legitimacy to their explorations, the duo would not have been able to sustain the journey for very long. The Consortium has been the wind in the sails, but they have provided both the steering wheel and the rudder."*

*Lola Gostelow*

*Independent consultant & advisor on governance for CBHA*

Successful collaboration depends on the hard work, courage and insight of many. But it also depends on many other factors (see Box 8 overleaf).

Is it realistic for a consortium-in-transition to pay attention to all these things in parallel? If so, how might this be done whilst also maintaining the light touch several Consortium members see as a very important Consortium characteristic?

*"In my view, the single greatest achievement of CBHA till now is the respect and maturity in which Humanitarian Directors from competing organisations have worked together through both good and difficult times with the belief that working together as a Consortium enduring change can be achieved that will alleviate suffering and save lives in humanitarian crises."*

*Rose Caldwell*

*Former Vice-Chair of CBHA*

Box 8: Critical success factors for high level collaboration<sup>43</sup>

<b>Efficiency / Effectiveness</b>	<b>Attitude &amp; Competencies</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear, well articulated <b>shared vision</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals involved have the necessary <b>collaboration mind set</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration is <b>well managed</b> with role descriptions, clear accountabilities and regular reviews for any staff / consultants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals involved have the necessary <b>knowledge and skill set</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration has strong / appropriate <b>communications</b> in place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is tangible evidence of each organisation's <b>engagement</b> – including clear and informed handovers to those new to representing their organisation at the table</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is <b>senior management buy-in</b> from each collaborating organisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness to devote enough time to <b>relationship building, development and maintenance</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Systems in place</b> to support a collaborative approach</li> </ul>	<b>Results / Productivity</b>
<b>Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The collaboration is highly <b>action / results oriented</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All those involved <b>have understood and acknowledged</b> what each organisation brings to the collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual <b>organisational goals</b> are achieved alongside the achievement of <b>shared goals</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual <b>expertise and preferred ways of working</b> are understood and incorporated consciously and constructively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The collaboration is <b>maximising value</b> to each organisation involved – and this is measured</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those involved are <b>flexible</b> (whenever and wherever they can be) and <b>clear about their constraints</b> / non-negotiables (if there are any)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through joint advocacy, collaboration is <b>achieving wider impact &amp; influence</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration <b>processes are understood and adhered to</b> by all partners</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programmes of work are <b>jointly designed and implemented</b> or are undertaken on behalf of the wider group by agreement / mandate</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All organisations have a <b>genuine voice</b> at the table and their <b>contribution is respected</b></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Leadership roles are shared</b> as needed between those who are collaborating</li> </ul>	

43. Source: Hundal / Tennyson. This tool was referred to at the Board's Away Days (May 2013) in order to illustrate the importance of assessing success more broadly – in terms of value / value added of the collaborative model as well as in terms of resource mobilisation and project deliverables.

## The story continues...

*"There is a compelling need to change the sector and Start Network cannot be timid. We need to have a 'can do' attitude and to get really serious about who can help us to change the rules of the game."*

Gareth Owen  
Save the Children UK

The Critical Success Factors Check List (Box 8) is a generic guide intended to highlight what needs to be in place for any collaboration to maximise its potential and achieve goals that could not be achieved so effectively by other (non-collaborative) means. It is quite a long list, but our view is that there may be some additional success factors for this Consortium that could usefully be added to such a checklist. These include:

- The role of the coordinating / central team<sup>44</sup> (operating to its full potential as a 'broker') is fully explored, clarified and supported
- Business and governance arrangements are conducted in a manner that is fair, rigorous and orderly without becoming unduly bureaucratic
- Members make (and abide by) clear decisions about decision-making
- The group feels confident about (rather than avoiding) the contribution of 'difficult' conversations to clarifying and strengthening collaborative resolve
- The group commits to a continuing exploration of, and experiment with, the art and science involved in collaboration as a way of keeping the collaboration buoyant and purposeful

As we complete this piece of work (end of July 2013) the Board has just agreed to adopt a new name: Start Network. The bold decision to develop an energetic new brand reflects the tangible sense of the Consortium's potential that Board members feel. There is a strong Start Network Manifesto nearing completion and strategies are in place for the three areas of activity: financing, capacity strengthening and boundary spanning.

*"I think that the 'dry spell' (the period without funding) has been possibly one of the richest periods in the Consortium's life, as far as collaborative work goes – this needs to be anchored for the future steps of the Start Network. The fact that we have been moving things along, to make things work, even without resources has indicated a shift in the individual and collective awareness of the Consortium that there is something else, bigger*

*and stronger than the simple affair of tapping into funding. And that process is rather powerful I find, and provides an exciting precedent for the rest of the Start Network future story."*

Mariana Merelo Lobo  
Action Against Hunger

Box 9: Summary of programme plans<sup>45</sup>



There are very promising funding discussions about the Start Fund with several governments, including DFID, as well as some non-traditional funders. And it is planned that the Start Fund will evolve into a network of locally governed funds for civil society crisis response – this represents a very significant commitment to new practices in the humanitarian sector.

44. In this case the Programme Management Unit (PMU) – perhaps worth noting that as the Consortium has developed, this may no longer be a particularly useful name to convey the range of functions (incorporating both service and leadership functions) the team undertake.

45. This image was created at the time of the Board Away Days in May 2013 – however the three elements of work are those that were defined as priorities at the earlier Board retreat in September 2011.



*"Start Network will be successful if we can continue to build collaborative action in support of what we all stand for in a spirit of mutual responsibility and respectful behaviour. We need to operate with protocols and governance arrangements that make our genuine, potentially game-changing, pro-local brokering role a reality."*

*Graham MacKay  
Oxfam GB*

The hope and expectation is that the Consortium will learn from its collaborative experiences to date, build boldly on its strong foundations, face the inevitable (and very real) challenges that success and money can bring with them to create a strong yet highly de-centralised approach to aid that resides in the hands of those for whom it is intended. This could be truly transformational and a remarkable consequence of those initial visionary conversations between Humanitarian Directors at their 'useful gatherings' of several years ago.

*"If we can hold together no matter what comes next, we can really have huge influence on the global humanitarian architecture and make a serious difference to how aid is delivered in future."*

*Nick Guttman  
Chair of CBHA/ Start Network*

## Key Milestones

<b>2008:</b> Completion of BOAG financing study	February: The Consortium Pakistan floods early recovery programme is successfully evaluated & closed, publication of revised Humanitarian Core Competency Framework, publication of CONTEXT (national staff development programme) materials,
<b>2009:</b> Inter-agency meetings about forming a consortium	March: DARA present final evaluation results of the Consortium pilot, DEC Trustees agree not to co-opt the Consortium ERF. Members extend the Consortium agreement
<b>2010:</b> February: the Consortium comes into existence	May: Board decides to engage CEOs to promote the fund idea
June : First ERF fund disbursement for Kyrgyzstan conflict	July: Video of fund is launched, The Consortium CEO meeting to agree further scoping of the fund
July: ERF Fund is activated for Pakistan floods	September: Merlin suspends membership to the Consortium, the Consortium receives Irish Aid funding for transition period
August: Core Humanitarian Competency Framework is agreed & the Consortium receives additional £1M DFID grant for Pakistan floods	October: the Consortium presents global humanitarian fund to European donors, Plan suspends membership to the Consortium
November: Six-agency consortium for £20m Pakistan floods recovery formed	November: the Consortium CEOs agreement to continue with the ambition to develop a global humanitarian fund
December: Pakistan After Action Review & the Consortium submits evidence to DFID Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR)	December: Proposal for global humanitarian fund is completed, Board agrees to expand membership with five agencies to 18
<b>2011:</b> February: ERF Fund is activated for Somalia drought	<b>2013:</b> January: 2012 Engagement Survey results show higher satisfaction scores than the equivalent survey in 2011 (notably in relation to confidence in direction). International Medical Corps UK and Handicap International UK become members. The Consortium presents evidence on humanitarian financing for NGO forum meeting with DFID. Board endorses proposal of Early Warning Early Action consortium, led by World Vision, to ECHO
March: the Consortium appears in HERR final report recommendations	February: Relief International and War Child become members.
April: ERF Fund is activated for Horn of Africa drought response (months before the famine declaration)	March: Muslim Aid becomes member
June: PMU presents on emerging forms of collaboration at World Conference of Humanitarian Studies at Tufts University, Core Competencies Guide is published, DFID announcement not to renew the Consortium MoU in March 2012	April: PMU tests Start Fund at DIHAD conference
September: Board agrees to cover PMU budget until end 2012 (despite no known source of further external funding)	May: Board Away Days: clear strategic decisions (which focus more on collaboration elements), Board adopts the name Start Fund
October: Surge capacity learning workshop with external stakeholders	June: the Consortium submits evidence on the future of humanitarianism to the International Development Select Committee. The Consortium facilitates NGO forum meeting between DFID and NGOs. The Consortium agrees capacity strengthening strategy
<b>2012:</b> January: Successful completion of staff development programmes in Indonesia, Bolivia, Bangladesh, Horn of Africa & UK	July: CEO meet: satisfaction on progress to date & commission governance options review. The Consortium finalises Start Fund Concept Document, submission to various government donors. CBHA is re-branded to Start Network

## Endnote

*“Learning case studies themselves become change agents by being:*

*engaging (inviting active challenge and debate);  
questioning (challenging underlying assumptions and  
provoking a more penetrating analysis);*

*open-ended (inviting readers to arrive at their own  
conclusions)*

*and complex (mirroring the real life situation and  
encouraging those involved to become more effective  
decision-makers).”<sup>46</sup>*

### Why was this piece of work undertaken?

The request to the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) was to capture the story of the Consortium at the end of its first three years – a period during which the Consortium: was formed; delivered some highly successful projects; had its funding cut; survived the funding crisis and is now working to create and implement a far-sighted new vision and strategy.

This piece of work is part of an on-going collaboration between the Consortium and PBA, through which the PBA provides knowledge, tools, skills and mentoring to the Consortium staff team to support the partnership brokering element of the Consortium’s work, and the Consortium provides invaluable data for PBA’s learning agenda (an on-going enquiry into the added value and challenges of partnership brokering within complex collaborative ventures).

The focus on partnership **brokering** is because, during the three-year period, the staff team (PMU) has come to define itself more explicitly as having an inter-mediating or brokering function – and this is increasingly perceived by others, whether Consortium members, actual / potential donors or other external agencies, to be the case.

We see this as a story as well as a learning case study. By which we mean, this is not designed as a detached, academic exercise but rather as an interpretation of data by the author working through her own assumptions, observations and experiences. Those who read it are welcome to disagree with its observations and conclusions. It should be regarded as a prompt for further dialogue and exploration.

Only 16 days in total (desk research, interviews, writing, revisions, design) have been allocated to this piece of work, spread over a 3-month period – intentionally keeping it low-cost, light touch and with a sense of being a ‘work in progress rather’ than an evaluation. It is, therefore, a snapshot of the Consortium captured at a moment in time, it is not exhaustive. It is also not the final word. The intention is to make this story widely available in the spirit of sharing the experience and also to update the story on a regular (perhaps 6-monthly) basis.

There is no doubt that there are exciting, possibly turbulent, definitely ambitious and potentially innovative times ahead. With so many internal and external factors in play, not even the most far-sighted can really know whether the inherent paradoxes will prove insurmountable or will, in the author’s view more likely, continue to give the Consortium the challenge it needs to re-frame the game and make a serious difference for those who need it most.

If this story gives those involved an opportunity to reflect on their history as a Consortium, to bask (however fleetingly) in the Consortium’s undoubted achievements in challenging circumstances and to build confidence about implementing an ambitious strategy then it will have achieved its main goal. If it enables others (in the UK and far beyond) to review their own collaboration experiences; make their collaborative efforts more effective or to take the bold step of building a comparable collaborative model then it will also have achieved its secondary goal.

*“Learning case studies may have a number of objectives including:*

*providing a vehicle for internal and external reflection that may contribute to productive change; reaching and influencing external stakeholders and contributing to the theory and practice of partnering as a mechanism for sustainable development.”<sup>47</sup>*

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