



# Power & Politics

The Consortium-building Story Continues



## Introduction

This is the second case study developed on behalf of the Start Network. The series is designed to capture the emerging story of the Consortium<sup>1</sup> and draw out some useful lessons about collaboration. It is hoped that, like its predecessor, it will be of interest to Start's members and stakeholders as well as the increasing number of individuals and agencies worldwide also working in non-traditional, complex collaborative models.

We have attempted to provide a succinct but accurate picture without simplifying or 'smoothing'<sup>2</sup>. To this end, we have interviewed a range of people connected to the Start Network, this time around seeking out the views of some of the newer and smaller member organisations as well as those of Start Network donors and advisors. Whilst we have necessarily had to be selective in deciding what to include, we hope that our selections do justice to the many perspectives within and about the Network - all of which have validity even where they appear to be at odds with each other.

The first case study closed as follows:

*"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 know whether the inherent paradoxes will prove insurmountable or will... continue to give the Consortium the challenge it needs to re-frame the game and make a serious difference to those that need it most"*<sup>3</sup>

Over a year has passed since the publication of the first case study and it is time for a re-visit. That it has been turbulent is clear - a great deal has happened and the picture is now, in some ways, very different. Having said that, there remain a number of underlying issues that were touched on earlier and this case study will explore how these issues are acknowledged (or not) and managed (or not).

It is important for readers to recognise that this is a case study focused on the **process** of developing and managing a multi-stakeholder consortium of agencies - what it takes to broker relationships, catalyse change and build robust collaborative processes. It is inevitable, therefore, that more attention is given to the members, membership issues and how the staff team works, and less to projects and beneficiaries. These are, obviously

no less important (in fact they are, ultimately, far more important) but reporting on them belongs elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

As a writing team we have tried to capture and catalyse a range of views - drawing attention to areas of interest for those at the forefront of creating new mechanisms for delivering sustainable and inclusive development. We have made three important observations from our work on this case study:

1. It takes considerable investment from all those involved if a collaborative venture like the Start Network is to maximise its potential, be truly innovative and bring tangible added value - this is a work in progress.
2. That 'success' and 'value' mean very different things to Start Network members. In order to maintain or deepen engagement from those involved, and for them to feel satisfied that their engagement has been worthwhile, it may be necessary to understand (and attempt to meet) expectations at the level of each entity rather than more generally. But how achievable is this in practice?
3. Constructive exploration of different (and sometimes quite divergent) interests and realities may have the potential for breakthrough<sup>5</sup> for individuals, organisations and, ultimately, systems. But this requires determination and organisational (as well as personal) courage. What is the appropriate interface between individuals and systems that will enable such breakthrough to occur?

We hope you find this study valuable and warmly welcome your comments and feedback.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Start Network' is used in this case study to describe the external-facing entity, the term 'Consortium' is used to describe the membership-driven processes that have evolved from the early days of the CBHA and which retain many characteristics of the original Consortium.

<sup>2</sup> A term used by professionals working on group processes to describe the tendency of groups to try and contain, rather than reveal or explore, discontent or potential areas of conflict.

<sup>3</sup> Extract from *Dealing with Paradox: Stories and lessons from the first three years of consortium-building* January 2014 ([www.startnetwork.org](http://www.startnetwork.org)).

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<sup>4</sup> Much of this information is available on [www.startnetwork.org](http://www.startnetwork.org).

<sup>5</sup> The term 'transformational' has been used often in Start Network materials and platforms.

## Actions speak louder than words

Box A: Key Milestones from July 2013 to Dec 2014

*“When we work together at Board level, it seems we can tackle a lot, but out there it is all power and politics. What do we have to do to really have impact on the sector?”<sup>6</sup>*

The title of this case study (*Power & Politics*) is intentionally provocative. It came from a statement made by a member organisation representative at a Board Away Day in December 2013. The speaker may have intended it as a throwaway line but we remembered the phrase and took it seriously. In many ways 2013-14 has been about power and politics and that has been fascinating, exciting and tough for all those involved.

*“It’s amazing to be where we are now compared to where we were a year ago when we heard from DFID that they were keen to support our capacity-strengthening programme. We now have their support both for Start Build and Start Fund. Internally, we have also moved from either combative or defensive tones between members to some real alignment and a sense of shared purpose and direction. Of course, now that there is more funding in place, the organisational politics become more evident. So our collaboration is still challenging but in new ways.”<sup>7</sup>*

So what has Start Network become since summer 2013 and its change of name?<sup>8</sup> There have been a number of milestones (see Box A), perhaps the most obvious being the moment when a significant increase in funding was secured. This not only enabled the Consortium to move once again into action rather than words,<sup>9</sup> but also gave those involved a sense of endorsement for their co-created *Declaration of Intent* (see Box G, page 11).

As discussed at the Board Retreat in May 2013 and confirmed at the CEO meeting in January 2014, the Start Network now operates through three separate but interconnected programmes: Start Fund (the most established and visible); Start Build (evolving a process-driven and decentralised operational model) and Start Beta (the least developed but with significant potential for innovation).

2013: July - CBHA changed its name to Start Network, a brand to reflect the global ambitions of the consortium. Start Fund Concept Document finalised and sent to potential donors.
Sept - Stakeholder workshop to reduce 36 capacity-building projects down to a more manageable and themed ‘Start Build’ portfolio.
Nov - CEO working group convened to design the Start Network’s future governance. Pro-bono partnership formed with Freshfields law firm, to create legal consortium agreements. Irish Aid agree to be the first donors for the Start Fund, contributing €600,000.
Dec - Start Board Away Day followed by the first public Start Network evening event: ‘The Future of NGOs in the Humanitarian Sector’. DFID announced they would contribute up to £30 million to the Start Fund over three years.
2014: Jan - The Start Network Declaration of Intent was agreed (see page 11)
Feb - Conclusion of Start Build peer review process, resulting in the approval of 8 projects. DFID Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) was formally announced, with up to £26m being earmarked for Start Build.
March - Start delegation attends Dubai International Humanitarian and Development event to engage with potential Middle Eastern partners.
April - The Start Fund officially launched with DFID and Irish Aid funding. Within the first week there was an allocation for South Sudan.
May - Board formally approved a proposal for governance reform and agreed to elect a new, smaller Board.
June - Start Working Differently (aka ‘Mega-week’ see page 19). A new Board was elected, the Assembly met for the first time, the CEO group was dissolved. The first Annual Conference took place.
July - The first four Start Build projects were approved for funding by the DEPP Board.
Aug - Recruitment launched for three independent Board members.
Sept - Chief Operating Officer joined Start Team to steer the Start Network’s transition to an independent legal entity. Start Network participation in Clinton Global initiative, New York.
Oct - Assembly approved Start Beta design and agreed to open up membership to non UK NGOs. Three Start Build projects approved for DEPP funding.
Nov - Joint Start Network, DFID and Irish Aid outreach trip to governments and NGOs in Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark.
Dec - Pilot to develop an insurance-based funding mechanism launched.

<sup>6</sup> Representative from Plan UK, Board Meeting, December 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Guttman, Christian Aid & Chair, Start Network.

<sup>8</sup> Formerly known as the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA).

<sup>9</sup> This refers to the gap between the initial funding for the CBHA from the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) ending in February 2012 and new funding for the Start Network being announced in January 2014.

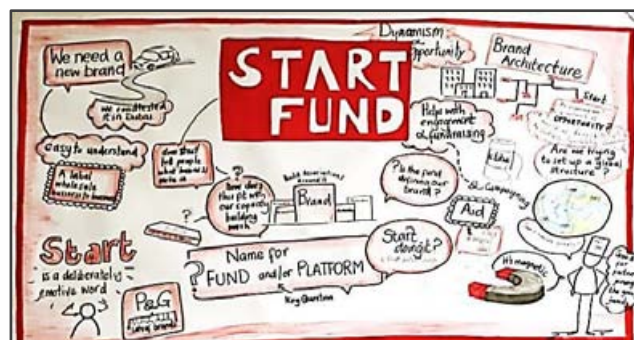
In July 2013, the Consortium Board approved a concept document for the Start Fund, which comprehensively laid out the evidence basis for the Fund and the ambitious vision of the Start Network for the first time. This document was sent to bi-lateral agencies in the UK, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland. This initiated dialogues within the UK and Irish governments that ultimately resulted in their decision to provide financial support for the Start Fund (see page 13 for more on the Start Network relationship to Irish Aid and DFID). With the funding secured (December 2013), the Start Network prepared to launch the Fund the following spring.

Although the Fund was based on the ERF<sup>10</sup> model that had been developed during the CBHA pilot, its ambition for global participation and impartial decision-making necessitated the development of a number of new systems. It was agreed that these systems would be put in place during an initial design phase, before working to scale up the size of the Fund - by incorporating new sources of funding and new types of investor - in 2015.

The launch of the Fund raised a number of new issues for the members. The most pressing of these were seen as the lack of awareness about the Fund within the member agency staff and their affiliated partners; and the limited capacity of the Network's key interlocutors to address this knowledge gap, or even to engage fully enough themselves with the process. The Fund is a peer owned and stewarded mechanism, which sets it apart from many traditional donors, and it is this aspect in particular that members need to understand in order to engage effectively. The Network is currently trialing an innovative solution to these challenges by covering the cost of four temporary Start Team members operating as 'focal points'. They are able to work more intensively with the member agencies to address their specific capacity gaps. These focal points have been seconded from member agencies, and are thus well informed about the challenges and uniquely placed to address them one by one, to build further benefits from participation in the Consortium. This has now become central to the Network's ongoing investigation into 'collaborative advantage' (see page 8).

At the time of writing, the Start Fund has enabled member agencies to respond to thirteen emergencies since April 2014 within a 45-day implementation window. Each of these projects in the pilot phase has provided an opportunity for amending and improving the process based on mistakes made and learning from what has worked well. In keeping with the Network's commitment to decentralisation, project selection decisions have taken place as close to the front line of the emergency as possible, ensuring more engagement and leadership of local actors, and that projects are responsive and contextually appropriate.

The approval process for Start Fund allocations is designed to be highly collaborative and to involve members centrally in Fund allocation decisions. The Allocation Committee acts on behalf of the wider Network to make truly member-driven decisions.<sup>11</sup>



Picture 1: Visual notes from CBHA Board Away Day, May 2013

*“Allocation committee members are adept at removing their organisational hats and working as a real collective to interrogate information, ask challenging questions and to become more trusting in the process of reaching agreement. Committee members speak with each other in ‘down times’ to compare experiences, and I also take the opportunity speak with some individual members bilaterally by Skype, phone, and in ad hoc meetings to ‘catch up’ and review - this helps me in understanding positions and being able to offer support either before or during a decision meeting when requested. I’ve noticed that over the months the group has built on the experience of each successive allocation decision which has helped target Start Fund allocations increasingly efficiently, and it is notable that the rigour and care that is applied to difficult decisions, including turning down members’ own alerts to the Fund, is unwavering.”<sup>12</sup>*

A formally established Project Selection Committee comprises five nominees from different member agencies. In their role on the committee, member-agency staff are required to represent the Network rather than their own agency. The committees are convened as close to the crisis-affected area as possible to ensure that the funded projects are contextually appropriate. Members of the Start Team also attend meetings, but as non-voting participants.

The committee agree which applications to support using the following criteria:<sup>13</sup>

**Relevance** - Is the proposal relevant to the Start Network policies, goals and strategies? Is the activity relevant in relation to the needs and priorities of the intended beneficiaries?

**Effectiveness** - Does the planned project match the most significant identified/ anticipated needs in this situation? Is the project achievable within the 45 day project time limit?

**Efficiency** - What is the reviewer’s confidence in the agency’s speed of access and delivery of assistance to beneficiaries on the ground? How economically have resources/inputs (funds, expertise, time, etc.) been estimated (based on the narrative)? Are the budgets costs justified? Can the same results be achieved with fewer resources?

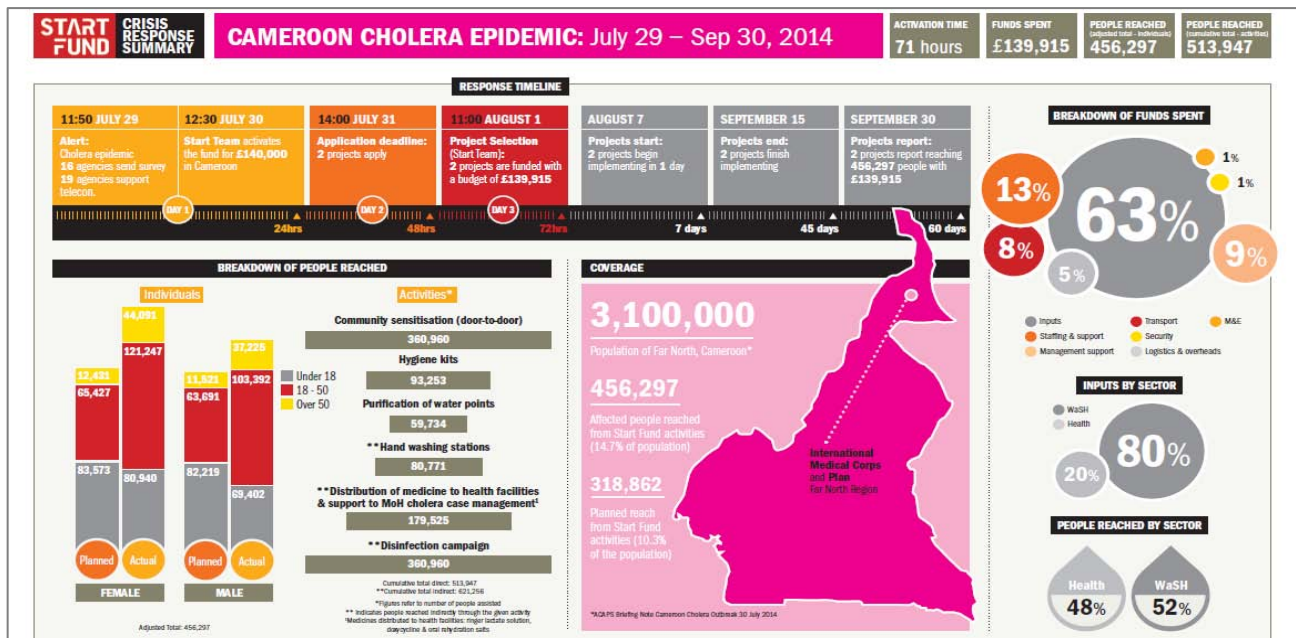
<sup>10</sup> During the pilot phase of the CBHA the Consortium tested a £4 million Emergency Response Fund (ERF) that provided predictable, flexible seed money in the first 48 hours of an emergency to members. This is covered in the earlier case study.

<sup>11</sup> For more details of this process and more recent allocations please go to the Start website: [www.startnetwork.org](http://www.startnetwork.org).

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Hotham, Start Fund Manager.

<sup>13</sup> These are based on the OECD DAC Principles for Humanitarian Action.





Picture 2: Start Fund infographic from Cameroon

**Impact** - What are the likely positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects towards helping the Start Fund achieve the best outcomes in line with the theory of change? How will impact be demonstrated?

**Sustainability** - What are the post-intervention benefits? Will the intended benefits continue when the 45-day project ends? Is local ownership/beneficiary participation part of the process?

There is no guarantee, of course, that all applications qualifying for consideration will receive funding - the committee has to prioritise and to date has worked hard to do so fairly.

Decisions of the Project Selection Committee are final. All decisions (with explanations for those decisions) are circulated to all Network member agencies within 3 hours of the end of the decision-making meeting.<sup>14</sup>

*"I have been involved in the Allocations Committee and have found the discussion in the meetings to be very effective - people have shared their personal and institutional perspectives very frankly. We have all felt very free to voice divergent views and yet to accept the conclusions and decisions reached by the group. Without exception, the meetings I have attended have, in my view, come to the right conclusion based on a balance of opinion and experience in the group. As an agency, we have not yet got funding from the Start Fund, but that does not really matter to me - because I think we are participating in an important collective effort both by agencies and individuals to find a different way of making decisions on getting resources out."<sup>15</sup>*

*"I have noticed at the Allocation Committee that those present do go beyond their own NGO in discussing the humanitarian crisis and the funding*

*application at hand. What I found refreshing was that everyone had the same idea - that we were all there to meet the crisis rather than for our own organisational self-interest."<sup>16</sup>*

*"We are pleased with the performance of the Start Fund, specifically to see the indicators which have been achieved against the original targets. For instance, we can see that responsive mechanisms which support underfunded and neglected crises very quickly are in place."<sup>17</sup>*

One of the achievements mentioned by several Start Network members is the recording of the project delivery process in the form of succinct and easy to access info-graphics (see Picture 2, above).

*"Achieving meaningful learning in a consortium is far more challenging than in a single-agency context. Mutual accountability requires more frequent reviewing and reporting and improved data uptake. It is also important that we close feedback loops to ensure evidence is consistently a part of good governance. Monitoring and evaluating with so many people involved is, in itself, an exercise in partnership building in addition to the more traditional application of technical expertise. Everything must be simple and accessible - from data collection to analysis and dissemination - without sacrificing the detail and rigour required for adaptive management. Measuring the Start Fund's delivery and being open about its dilemmas has the potential to drive learning between an expanding community of humanitarian practitioners. The biggest challenge is not recording data but investing in relationships, but the reward is a collective voice that can be more brave in shouting about its successes and failures."<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>14</sup> For an up-to-date list of project applications and those that received funding go to [www.startnetwork.org](http://www.startnetwork.org).

<sup>15</sup> Dan Collison, War Child.

<sup>16</sup> Gloria Donate, Plan UK.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Doherty, Irish Aid.

<sup>18</sup> Matt Kletzing, Start Fund M&E Manager.

The capacity building work stream has undergone radical development over the past year. Following an indication from DFID in early 2013 that a funding programme would be announced to support collaborative civil society capacity building, Start Network member agencies began submitting concept notes for both pre-existing and new project ideas. However, the overwhelming complexity of this broad portfolio of projects in varying stages of development proved to be unmanageable, and measures were taken to simplify the process, tighten quality control and generate a greater sense of ownership amongst the membership.

A workshop took place in September 2013 to review overlaps in project proposals and to build synergies between ideas so that projects could be effectively combined. This session did indeed simplify the portfolio and build a useful dialogue and a more collaborative approach to the capacity building strategy. However time constraints during the day meant that decision-making was rushed and not fully informed. The process was felt by many to be flawed.

A peer review was undertaken to identify and mitigate these tensions and to further refine the selected projects into a portfolio that members felt truly matched the ambitions of the Network.

This was concluded in January 2014 with eight proposals forming what has become the Start Build portfolio. It was agreed that projects within the Start Build portfolio would receive support from the Start Team for project development and further fundraising.

In April 2014, DFID formally announced the capacity building programme, known as the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP)<sup>19</sup>, and pledged up to £26 million over three years for the Start Network. Project leads of the Start Build portfolio have been working with DFID and Start Team and CDAC-N (Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network)<sup>20</sup> colleagues since then to develop the proposals, which has resulted in further revisions to the projects (see page 13 for more on the Start Network relationship to DFID).

By July, four Start Build projects were approved for funding and by the end of December 2014 3 further projects had been approved with 1 on the horizon for approval. It is the intention to scope out opportunities beyond the DEPP. The next three years will enable the Start Network to test ways of decentralising capacity building and evaluate how best to broaden the portfolio.



Picture 3: Visual notes from Start Board Away Day, December 2013

*"I guess our challenges and achievements to date have largely been around establishing what our members have in common and how they are going to work with each other. This is manifesting in many conversations to establish inter-agency MoUs, collaboration agreements and governance structures. They also involve reaching agreement on logical frameworks and budget parameters. We shouldn't underestimate what the agencies have been through in this respect. For our member agencies that are traditionally competitive, the fact that we now have 9 collaborative projects agreed, which involve all 19 Start Network members and a whole bunch of other partners (including academia, UN and the Red Cross) is little short of a miracle. Now we just need to implement them!"<sup>21</sup>*

At an earlier stage of development, but regarded widely as a vital third pillar of the Start Network, is Start Beta. The concept for Start Beta is well developed and the next stage is to find funding that will enable this part of the work to be as independent, innovative and unrestrained as possible - providing the innovation hub that the Network, with its transformational intentions, requires.

*"One of the key challenges that Start Network members face - that the entire humanitarian community faces - is how to change their organisational cultures to meet new challenges without undermining their organisational systems. Start Beta will take a networked approach to develop new ways of working, through which agency staff and partners can support each other directly, within existing structures but without their organisations directly mediating their co-operation. This approach isn't completely new to the humanitarian sector, but it's never been fully successful before - we know that it's extremely*

<sup>19</sup> <http://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-203044/>

<sup>20</sup> Communicating with Disaster-affected Communities - [www.cdacnetwork.org](http://www.cdacnetwork.org) - joint recipient of DEPP funding with Start Network.

<sup>21</sup> David Hockaday, Start Team.



At the Board Away Days in May 2013, it was suggested that the third work stream, which was then referred to as 'platform development', should be indefinitely suspended, because the Consortium itself provided enough of a platform for collaboration and idea generation. Since then, however, the experiences of developing the Start Build portfolio have brought to light a critical gap in the humanitarian sector around research and development.

NGOs lack the resources and the enabling environment for experimentation and idea incubation, and because of this capacity building projects are typically risk averse and tend to be closely guarded by agencies until funding opportunities arise. Members of the Network and the Start Team came to realise that if seed funding were available it could have made a real difference to the innovation, collaboration and inclusion elements of the Start Build projects. In fact, when surveyed, more than 90% of members indicated that they would be in support of a research and development fund. This would be strongly in line with Start Network's Declaration of Intent (see page 11). It was agreed that this concept should be fleshed out under the third work stream, which was re-named 'Start Beta', to reflect the experimental approach in which all projects will provide opportunities for learning and adapting.

Still in its conceptual phase, it is envisaged that Start Beta will complement the operational focus of the Start Fund and the institutional focus of Start Build, by providing the mechanisms and support needed to move new ideas from discussion to implementation. It will create incentives for innovation by providing both small-scale research and development funding, and a range of support services to help agencies incubate project ideas. Fundraising for this work stream is expected to begin in 2015, and non-traditional donors will be sought who are aligned with this vision for a new way of working.

Picture 4: Visual notes from the CBHA Away Day, May 2013



*challenging, but this is what's needed if we want to move from our 'industrial' roots into the information age.*"<sup>22</sup>

*"I am all for learning. And effort is needed to document both the good and the bad outcomes. I think there are very important lessons here for other consortia and other networks, particularly those we will be supporting in the South. I think Start Beta is a great initiative for Start in ensuring that it is truly a learning oriented network.*"<sup>23</sup>

There is broad consensus that significant progress has been made and that the programmes are beginning to work as intended - as the quotes in this section illustrate well.

*"It is not just that we are seeing growth in the sector, but also increasingly more disasters that need greater capacity to respond and to coordinate. Start is very innovative and refreshing from my experience. It is allowing for collaboration and responding to the changing environment in terms of emergencies and disasters to manage on the ground, but also to the needs of the number of agencies operating on the ground. I do not think it is completely there yet but it is definitely taking the right step towards something useful."*<sup>24</sup>

*"I think the greatest achievement over the past year has been the genuine commitment to change and the effective management of a number of disparate views on how to tackle the key problems within the sector. There were times when this seemed impossible, but to have got to the point where all member agencies have signed up to the Start Fund/Build/Beta programme of work has been an immense achievement. And the process of convincing donors such as DFID to commit to peer-assessed and managed funding has also been immense."*<sup>25</sup>

*"You know what I get a kick out of more than getting access to funds? These decision-making processes. I know they are a pain to organise, but out of all that I have seen since the launch of the CBHA, this is what makes me believe the most in our capacity to be what we want to be. So well done and consider me a 'satisfied customer.'"*<sup>26</sup>

*"I believe that there are four key achievements to date: proving the functionality of the Start Fund; achieving the Start Build funding and initiating those projects; some good communications - in particular the infographics - and having established a streamlined governance structure which seems to be working OK."*<sup>27</sup>

Whilst there is a palpable sense of enthusiasm for what the Start Network has achieved in the past year, this is not an entirely universal view, as we shall explore later. There is also a tension between the need for the Network to compromise in order to reach consensus and to be able to work within the system, whilst at the same time being a vocal and visible advocate for fundamental change of the system itself. This tension is felt keenly by Start Network members and staff, as well as by a number of external stakeholders who are watching what happens with active interest and, perhaps, some level of scepticism.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Currier, Consultant with the Start Team working on Start Beta.

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Doherty, Irish Aid.

<sup>24</sup> Savita Garg, Plan UK.

<sup>25</sup> Imran Madden, Islamic Relief.

<sup>26</sup> Saul Guerrero, Action Against Hunger (ACF-UK).

<sup>27</sup> Nigel Timmins, Oxfam.

## The Membership Model and Collaborative Advantage

*“This has been an excellent year for Start in many ways though challenging in others. Our widening membership, further engagement with funders and other stakeholders as well as a stronger core team and the move to action has reinforced the decisions we made last year.”<sup>28</sup>*

How many Start Network members would report that they are ‘satisfied customers’? Do members actually think of themselves as ‘customers’, or rather as ‘consumers’ or ‘partners’ - or none of these? Is there a consistent view amongst the membership of the nature of their relationship to the Start Network or its programmes, or do different members have quite different perspectives? How representative of the sector is the current membership? What level of allegiance does the membership have to the Start Network amid a myriad of other important institutional and intra-sector relationships?

The following organisations constitute the current membership and it is interesting to note how many have been members since the Consortium was first formally launched (in 2010) (see Box E).

Box E: Start Network Members and date of joining (as of December 2014)

Action Against Hunger March 2010	Islamic Relief Worldwide March 2010
ActionAid March 2010	Muslim Aid April 2013
CAFOD March 2010	Oxfam March 2010
Care March 2010	Plan March 2010-12 re-joined September 2013
Christian Aid March 2010	Relief International January 2013
Concern March 2010	Save The Children March 2010
Handicap International January 2013	Tearfund March 2010
HelpAge March 2010	War Child March 2013
International Medical Corps January 2013	World Vision March 2010
International Rescue Committee March 2010	

The degree of loyalty is impressive with only two member organisations having left. One of those members re-joined within a year. Only one (Merlin) was unable to remain as a member for reasons that became apparent

when Merlin merged with Save the Children in July 2013. As bare facts these make a significant statement.

Any membership model is, of course, highly challenging. It typically has to balance the need for consensus<sup>29</sup> - often achieved at the cost of innovation and bold decision-making - with the freedom to challenge and change thinking and practice. The Start Network is no exception. In a single sector coalition there is the added element of competitiveness (both for funding and for positioning). It does seem as if the members of the Start Network have addressed this to a considerable extent as evidenced by the observations of one of Start’s key stakeholders:

*“My experience of working with the humanitarian sector is that there can be an element of competitiveness between NGOs, particularly for the resources they need to deal with crises and changing demands. Competition itself is not bad, but it is good to see the Start Network and the Fund contribute to creating a different environment, where NGOs are coming together to make decisions and to say “we know such and such NGO could do a better job with this funding in the crisis at hand and so the funding should go to them”. Such thinking is not only positive for the Fund but also very important for the sector’s future where we will continue to have increasing needs alongside shrinking resources.”<sup>30</sup>*

There is a strong sense from those we spoke with that the past year has been successful - moving as it has towards implementing hard-won decisions and working collaboratively and intensively on the development and delivery of programmes of work. However, there remain a number of frustrations amongst the membership that can be summarised as three questions. How best to:

1. **Embed and integrate the Start Network’s programmes, values and ambitions** more deeply within their own organisations and with their affiliates overseas (see below)?
2. **Evolve a fit for purpose Start Network entity** that will underpin the highly collaborative membership model and due diligence in operations, whilst allowing the freedom to be a voice for change with all the risk-taking and independent thought leadership that may need (see section on *Governance: A Political Act* page 17)?
3. **Truly change the rules** (whilst operating within the rules) so that real decision-making power rests increasingly and authentically with those that need the support that the Start Network has been created to offer. (This is often described as moving decision-making from North to South - a much-cited ideal from both donors and NGOs but seemingly quite challenging to make a reality -

<sup>29</sup> As suggested in the earlier case study the term ‘alignment’ may be more useful but the term ‘consensus’ is the one still commonly used in the Consortium - the issue of terminology remains under-explored in the Start Network.

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Doherty, Irish Aid.

<sup>28</sup> Gareth Owen, Save the Children.



see section on *Mega-week and the New Questions* page 20.)

It has been a significant focus of the Start Team in the past year to try and deepen the involvement and engagement of member organisations since this is seen as critical to the sustainability, growth and impact of a collaborative model. Despite considerable investment of staff time (see page 15 for more on this), it has not proved easy.

*“The intention of our role as ‘focal points’ was to ensure the ethos of Start Network was filtered through the member organisations rather than remaining in the hands and consciousness of just a few. This proved to be quite difficult - getting through a number of ‘gate-keepers’ who sometimes seemed intent on blocking our direct access to other staff whether in the UK or in the field was one challenge. Fundraising teams tended to keep us at arm’s length as they saw Start as a rival for funding. There were some member agencies we did not even visit - we simply had no response to our approaches and after a time we gave up. Despite these challenges, there is evidence that we had a good impact over the six months - mostly in embedding Start processes and in getting engagement from a wider range of players in our sub-committees and working groups.”<sup>31</sup>*

A key issue seems to be around the notion of benefit - where the benefits are perceived as of real value to the organisation then there is more engagement. However benefit is often, but not always, measured in terms of how far the Start Network has been a source of funding. Deeper engagement is usually demonstrated by:

- A greater degree of active engagement of senior staff
- A larger number of staff engaged in different aspects of Start’s work
- Agency endorsement of Start’s work (i.e. on platforms or in meetings or to donors)
- Speedy internal decision-making
- More active involvement of affiliates and/ or partner organisations overseas
- Clear collaborative advantage where unpredictable synergies bring unanticipated benefits.

*“Individuals who are actively involved in the Start Network ‘get it’ and they are engaged and excited but our organisations are far less so. We will need to strengthen internal engagement if we are to win over our organisations and keep them engaged with Start’s work - this is key to the Consortium’s sustainability and to having the impact on the system we hope for. As a coalition, I see in it the same energy as in other coalitions that I have been involved with. But whereas the others have been almost entirely about advocacy, the difference here is that Start Network is about operational collaboration - its type and*

*phases. At the same time it is about building something new, setting ambitious goals, thinking big. Perhaps it is this complexity that makes it harder for our organisations to grasp.”<sup>32</sup>*

It may be simply a matter of difficulty in making sense of Start’s complexity (the staff team are currently considering how best to simplify the Start Network’s ‘messaging’ in order to make it easier to grasp), or it may be that some of Start’s processes are in fact quite a lot simpler than more conventional approaches, which members may find baffling. But with growing pressures on NGOs including more crises of increasing scale and complexity; reduction in income; fewer staff and an increasingly complicated humanitarian ‘architecture’, some feel that there is simply not enough time for the kinds of collaborative processes that being involved with the Start Network requires.

Perhaps it is also a matter - though not widely acknowledged - of there not being enough experience, skills or track record in this kind of collaboration. It is not ‘business as usual’ and requires some quite different behaviours and competencies. This may need to be more explicit within Start Network discussions and between the Start Network, donors and other significant stakeholders.

For some member organisations, the Start Network is seen as too ‘safe’, for others, too ‘dangerous’. Some express a desire for more clarity on the Network’s theory of change, whilst others argue that the opportunistic and non-linear process of systemic change does not lend itself to the usual ‘logical framework’ planning model. These tensions may be responsible for some level of ambivalence or reluctance to be too closely aligned with an approach that may rebound on that member’s own organisational values and operational styles.

*“The battle continues to be that of engaging our own organisations. Some of them are comfortable with innovation and uncertainty, others are more cautious, waiting to see some results and less willing to jump on board if they perceive something has an unknown future. Communicating results in terms of what has been achieved will help as will this case study for those who are sceptical. Overall I think the Start Network gives us all an amazing opportunity to listen and learn from each other - to have the space for a conversation which allows us to see which of our ways of working we can keep and where we need to adapt to be more agile and effective.”<sup>33</sup>*

Whether bold or more cautious, it is clear that all member organisations - whatever their level of engagement - need to feel that their contribution to the Network is valued and that it brings benefits to their work if they are to justify continuing or increasing their involvement. For this reason, the staff team has begun to focus more systematically over the past 6 months on understanding what members want (collectively and as

<sup>31</sup> Amanda Weisbaum, seconded from War Child to Start Team as a focal point / secondee. There is further evidence that supports this claim throughout this case study.

<sup>32</sup> Aleema Shivji, Handicap International.

<sup>33</sup> Aleema Shivji, Handicap International.

individual organisations) and what, for each of them, would constitute ‘collaborative advantage’<sup>34</sup>.

Without collaborative advantage, there is a risk that the Start Network will become less rather than more embedded within its member organisations. One of the knock-on impacts of this, should it happen, is that it could become even harder for the Network to systematically reach out to, and engage with, organisations at the field level or to actively encourage their affiliate organisations around the world to engage directly with the Start Network.

Member engagement is, therefore, both an ideological and an operational imperative. This view has been recently reinforced during the Start Network meetings in the Nordic capital cities (October 2014) where the issue of deeper/ wider member engagement was revealed as more challenging than expected - to the extent that it raised a question about whether international NGO families have the ability to generate alignment around systemic change initiatives as has been, to date, assumed.

## Brand and Brawn

A significant part of the Consortium’s brand building has been the exploration and adoption of a position statement. Initially described as a ‘Manifesto’, this was the subject of considerable debate over a six-month period whenever the Board met in the second half of 2013.

At the point when the content was just about agreed, a strong challenge was unexpectedly thrown into the room by one of the more outspoken members in the group with regard to the actual term ‘Manifesto’. The discussion that followed is quoted here verbatim (see Box F) because it shows how very differently each member present viewed the topic. It also illustrates the kind of debate that often takes place in the Consortium where some of the group are exhilarated by the chance to re-frame things and others are exasperated at the tendency to ‘navel gaze’.

Box F: Board Away Day discussion about the proposed ‘Manifesto’<sup>35</sup>

“The term ‘manifesto’ is too political”  
 “What we are doing is political”  
 “It will put people off”  
 “The term ‘vision’ is much better”  
 “The term ‘vision’ is so over-used it has become trite and meaningless”  
 “We can’t call it a ‘manifesto’ because as it now stands it just isn’t one”  
 “The question is: do we want to be bland or bold?”  
 “I think we want to be bold, but I can see that the term ‘manifesto’ is problematic”  
 “We should find another term that is equally strong”  
 “I can’t believe we are discussing this issue again - it is a total waste of time.”  
 “Of course it isn’t a waste of time, it is completely critical to what we stand for”  
 “I agree, we have to discuss it again”  
 “Would anyone in South Sudan care?”  
 “Well if we want to be bold, what about ‘Declaration of Intent’ as an alternative?”  
 “I’m good with that, what do others think?”  
 “Let’s vote on it”



Picture 5: Visual notes from Start Board Away Day, December 2013

At this point in the meeting the suggestion was adopted unanimously - was this a bold decision or something of a compromise? In any event, the Declaration of Intent was duly finalised and published under this title in January 2014 (see Box G). It now has a prominent place on the Start Network website and is quite regularly cited as the core document that underpins and informs Start’s decisions and the way it is positioned in the sector. It seems to fulfil two distinct but inter-related functions: it adds more depth to the Start Network brand and it plays its part in building the Start Network’s internal culture.

<sup>34</sup> This constitutes part of the working relationship with the Partnership Brokers Association and draws on the seminal work of Rosabeth Moss-Kanter - Collaborative Advantage: The Art of Alliances, 1994, Harvard Business Review.

<sup>35</sup> Board Away Day on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2013.

### Who we are

*We are a group of humanitarian civil society organisations. We are different, but united in our efforts to save lives, alleviate suffering and protect human dignity in times of crisis. We believe helping others is fundamental to society.*

*While we recognise and support approaches including disaster risk reduction and long-term poverty alleviation, our focus is specifically on crisis response and preparedness. This Declaration therefore outlines our collective commitment to accelerate crisis response.*

### What we stand for

*We seek to catalyse a change within the humanitarian sector so that it can meet the needs of crisis-affected people in a future of great uncertainty and complexity.*

*We seek to promote a way of working that enables the international and local to coexist. The existing system contains much that is good, but it is too top-heavy, directed, bureaucratic and technocratic. Our vision is an innovative, flexible, responsive system that is connected to crisis-affected people.*

*We seek to anticipate and meet current, emerging and future humanitarian needs. To accelerate crisis response effectively, the humanitarian system must radically change. We must build on what we have learned from experience about humanitarian action, without binding ourselves to an out-dated system that cannot meet the needs of the future. The people we serve deserve our best.*

### Our collective vision

*We collaborate because the change that is demanded of us cannot be achieved by any single organisation alone. Together, Start Network agencies can transform crisis response. We will shape a system that is:*

*Diverse: The humanitarian system must increase its diversity and tolerance of alternative approaches. We aim for a 'humanitarian ecosystem' that contains organisations of different sizes, types, cultures and modes of response, in a state of continual experimentation and growth.*

*Decentralised: We aim to shift the centre of humanitarian gravity, so that decision making and leadership take place at the front line and affected people are empowered to improve their lives. Everyone has a contribution to make to reduce the risk of crises, whether it is at a global or local level, but we need to ensure that local ownership and capacity drive humanitarian response.*

*Collaborative: Crises in the future will demand humanitarian response that involves many more people and organisations than today. We will need to do different things, and work together in new ways. Relationships across boundaries - national, cultural, organisational - will be key in rising to this challenge. We will make collaboration central to our action and not allow competition between our agencies to interfere with our common objectives.*

### How we will act

*It's not always our place to deliver the assistance that's needed. But we will have the courage to hand over this responsibility to those that can do the best job. We will collaborate to deliver our vision in three areas:*

- *Start Fund - new business models and financial mechanisms for crisis response by NGOs*
- *Start Beta - evidence, enquiry, learning and experimentation*
- *Start Build - modern, decentralised and innovative capacity building initiatives*

Whilst some might feel the *Declaration of Intent* is somewhat bland and perhaps that it suffers from being 'written by committee', the fact that it exists and that it was genuinely (and somewhat painstakingly) co-created by the members is, surely, quite significant. And it does make a public statement about the Start Network's intentions against which its achievements can, in due course, be judged.

The decision to adopt a new name and a striking logo<sup>36</sup> - taken in principle by the Board in May 2013 - was seen by many as an expression of confidence in the Consortium and a growing belief that it had an important role to play in the sector. Building a brand that will give character and coherence to intention is of particular importance in a collaborative venture of this kind, where many of the component parts already have very strong brands of their own, and this may become problematic if the overarching brand is weak.

It is also fundamental to creating an independent entity. Merely adopting a strong logo does not, however, automatically lead to clarity or coherence of message...

*"Start Network is already a very visible brand with a lot of people talking about it and a high potential for influence. It is critical that its goals and messages are really clear - and that the way Start works matches up to the rhetoric. The growing membership and increasing diversity of large and niche NGOs all working under a partnership model is hugely exciting but the messages can get fragmented and too many of the members position Start in different ways so it can be confusing. The potential for Start to make a difference will be compromised if its members cannot become aligned and coherent in what they say."<sup>37</sup>*

The new brand has clearly helped to put the Start Network on the global map and raised expectations about what it will deliver - in those ways it is widely regarded as a good thing. But, as with other issues in the Consortium, things do not stand still and recently there have been further questions raised about Start Network branding and the *Declaration of Intent* leading to some new thinking - particularly from one of the Network's Advisors:

*"In a less inter-connected world, brand identity drove organisational strategy. The key was to identify a particularly image or 'position', to make sure that*

<sup>36</sup> See front cover.

<sup>37</sup> Kate Hart, Advisor, DFID.



*position was reflected in all brand touch points and to further ensure that nothing deviated from that position, in the hope that the proposition would be chosen by consumers, clients, investors or supporters over competing options. Today, brands are working much harder to define themselves as the unique pursuit, interest or activity they enable others to participate in, drawing on principles of collaborative engagement. I call this a shift from 'brand identity' to 'brand agenda'.*

*The big question is now not "who are you?" but rather "what do you help people to do?" For NGOs the implication is revolutionary. Whereas the NGO of the past may have been something an outsider might choose to support, probably in quite passive ways, because of the great work that they do, (as mediated through their brand position), increasingly by contrast the NGO of the future is likely to be something outsiders turn to because it can help them to actively achieve something worthwhile themselves (as framed by their brand agenda)."<sup>38</sup>*

It will be interesting to see where this will lead over the next phase of the Consortium's life.

The question of 'brand' is one thing, the question of 'brawn' is quite another. Agreeing a brand seems to feel relatively 'safe' to the Network members, pushing the boundaries of the status quo feels somewhat more 'dangerous'. How much power to make transformational change in the sector does the Start Network have? How much does it want? How much would be justified and acceptable - to members, to donors and to other stakeholders? Where does the power reside within the Network and how is it exercised? What is the balance of the Consortium between its Director, its members and its donors?

Power issues are of concern within the Start Network. Do certain member organisations or individuals within the membership wield too much power (for example by repeatedly blocking decisions or by threatening to leave if...)? Is the Director, with his strong personal reputation and his commitment to pushing boundaries too unilateral in his actions and too eager to be in the driving seat? Is the independence of the Consortium compromised by its dependence on donors who shape what is possible by the conditions they attach to the funds they allocate?

However, as Martin Luther-King famously said<sup>39</sup>, power per se is not a bad thing - the question is in what spirit this power is taken and used. Is it used as a means of control or as a way of having positive influence? How power manifests and how it is harnessed could make or break the Consortium's approach since it is likely that without power (harnessed productively and used towards achieving a shared goal) the Consortium will quickly become little more than another bureaucratic funding mechanism.

What is the interface between the unacceptable use of 'power' and the need for visionary, courageous and persistent 'leadership'?<sup>40</sup>

This is a huge and continuing question for the Consortium - where does leadership come from? Who has the right to take a leadership role on behalf of the Consortium? Is it the Director's overarching task to 'front' the Consortium on platforms, to new members, to new donors? Should Consortium leadership rather come from the senior players in the member organisations? There are mixed views on this and perhaps there is no single answer - it might simply require leadership from many in a variety of forms. It might require the exploration and role modelling of new forms of leadership. If so, it is an issue that needs active exploration and some attention to avoid the risk of either falling into old patterns of conventional hierarchy, or (possibly worse) leadership by default rather than intention.

*"There is, undoubtedly, a buzz around Start and its work which means there is a certain degree of excitement and hope which I find refreshing. Sean<sup>41</sup> is fantastic and he has propelled this forward but will we be able to keep up this momentum? The energy and commitment of one person is not enough to take a fairly complex idea and push it forward. At times I feel it is moving too quickly. It requires a huge amount of time. Start Network requires quite an investment in time and energy - one we all have to justify to our bosses who expect us to deliver on multiple other responsibilities and projects."<sup>42</sup>*

The concepts of 'brand' and 'brawn' connect around the issue of what it takes to have influence and therefore the position that is chosen. In the Start Network world the context is itself very fluid and unpredictable:

*"The crisis landscape is becoming more complex. This means that the kinds of responses that are likely to be required are less and less predictable. As no one organisation or sector can hold the key to all possible types of response, this in turn means that effective response is likely to require the participation of other groups that we cannot control. The role of monitoring, evaluation and control therefore becomes relatively less significant and the role of influence relatively more significant. There is tremendous potential for the disciplines of behavioural economics, marketing and creative thinking to play a role in enlarging the imaginative space in which crisis response activities are designed."<sup>43</sup>*

<sup>38</sup> Paul Skinner, Advisor to Start Network, websites: [Agency of the Future](#); [Pimp My Cause](#).

<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther King Jr "Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change" taken from his book *Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?* published in 1967.

<sup>40</sup> The earlier case study *Dealing with Paradox: stories and lessons from the first three years of consortium-building* began to explore the issue of leadership in a collaborative model.

<sup>41</sup> Sean Lowrie, Start Network Director.

<sup>42</sup> Steve Rhys Williams, Plan UK.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Skinner.

## Donor dilemmas

*“It was a massive challenge for DFID to move to this new model - I sometimes wonder whether anyone outside DFID understands how massive the challenge was.”<sup>44</sup>*

There are currently two donors<sup>45</sup> involved with the Start Network - Irish Aid and DFID<sup>46</sup> - and both see this as an important experiment which they watch with interest. DFID’s decision to fund the Network was, as indicated above, a big one and their expectations are high<sup>47</sup> that the Start Network will provide:

- Greater efficiency
- Value for money
- Wider and deeper engagement from NGOs in the sector
- Decision-making at a more local level
- More direct funding (*‘cutting out the middle man’*)
- A forum for more strategic dialogue and
- An NGO-driven mechanism.

Funding NGO action through this mechanism is also seen by some in DFID as a way of out-sourcing risk - which is an interesting additional dimension since the Consortium itself can sometimes appear to be quite ‘risk averse’ (see pages 19-22). In addition to which, it may not always be clear exactly how much risk would be acceptable within a programme that has to conform to the strict rules and reporting procedures laid down by the respective donor governments in terms of their accountability for the expenditure of tax-payer money.

This issue is one that is beginning to be explored at the Donor Forum meetings where donors, members, advisers and staff review Start’s performance. There are hopes from all those involved that this will enable the relationship with donors to have more characteristics of a ‘partnership’, where issues are raised and ways forward can be explored and agreed. The Donor Forum is in its infancy but evidence suggests that it is already a genuine ‘forum’ for debate, engagement and robust exchange of views.

A key driver for the Network is the desire to ‘accelerate crisis response’<sup>48</sup> but an equally strong driver is to be able to work together to challenge and change the system. From the point of view of donors, system change is a laudable aim (*‘if it can help those who need help more efficiently, effectively and sustainably’*<sup>49</sup>) but the question is: which comes first? Donors tend to think that the Start Network will only be in a position to challenge and change the system legitimately if and when it has embedded its approach and has tangible evidence that there are indeed better ways of achieving humanitarian goals - perhaps in 3-5 years’ time. In other words, from the perspective of the current donors, positioning itself now as a significant change agent is premature. For this reason, their focus

(and the focus they would prefer to see in the Start Network as a whole) is on fundraising and delivering projects on the ground more effectively.

The risk for the Start Network is that this may mean it falls far short of its stated aim (see the *Declaration of Intent* page 11) and may become a real frustration and disappointment to some of its members, whilst also confirming for some more sceptical external stakeholders that the Network is really doing nothing very differently and that its commitment to system change is little more than rhetoric.

*“The influence of external stakeholders in contributing to a permissive and enabling environment for the Start Network should not be underestimated. The current humanitarian system is small and interconnected. People talk. Trust in the Start Network may be crucial for its success”<sup>50</sup>*

This is one dilemma and there are others.

Donors are very keen on enabling more direct local engagement in funding decisions and see the Start Network as potentially being able to work towards this because of its collaborative structure and its commitment to networking. However, they also feel that decentralised decision-making will only be possible *“when the time is right and such approaches will be able to work quickly and efficiently so that money won’t be wasted on endless processes”*. It is to assist in building local capacity for *“when the time is right”*, that DFID has allocated significant funding to Start Build (which is developing a more decentralised decision-making model) whilst, for the time being at least, their preference is for Start Fund to be developed and managed centrally.

Whilst the case for a centrally administered fund has been strongly made and is understood by the Consortium members, it is not uncontroversial.

*“We would like to see the membership grow and to include NGOs from elsewhere - we are keen for this to be a truly global effort. We would also like to see increasing decentralisation with decisions being made closer to the grass roots, but we would not want this to happen too fast as we think there needs to be more in place at a local level. In our view, to try to decentralise immediately would be too complicated and potentially wasteful - it needs to happen over time and, critically, depends on member organisations systematically mobilising their local partners”<sup>51</sup>*

Donors believe that, over time, the drive for decentralisation must come from the member organisations drawing in their affiliates and partner organisations both in other donor countries and in the locations where the Start programmes happen. In their view, the member organisations need to ‘step up’...

*“The Start Network being successful for us means: excellent coordination; efficient and effective*

<sup>44</sup> Kate Hart, Advisor, DFID.

<sup>45</sup> The term ‘donor’ is used here to mean external funders - however, it is important not to forget that the members also provide funding in the form of a membership fee and also some significant non-financial contributions.

<sup>46</sup> Department for International Development.

<sup>47</sup> Drawn from an interview with Dylan Winder, DFID.

<sup>48</sup> See the Start Network’s *Declaration of Intent* (page 11).

<sup>49</sup> Dylan Winder, DFID.

<sup>50</sup> Sean Lowrie, Director, Start Network.

<sup>51</sup> Dylan Winder, DFID.

*management of funds and being able to represent the NGO sector as one voice. For this to happen, it will need all Start Network members to become actively involved - we would like to get beyond seeing the same representatives of a relatively small number of member organisations. We do, however, fully accept that Start is a nascent organisation and things will bed down and evolve over time.”<sup>52</sup>*

That there is a need for change in how members work, and what it will take to move away from the current ‘cosy’ model to become more autonomous and decentralised is articulated quite strongly by the current Chair of the Start Network:

*“We must come up with a way of growing the membership that is more inclusive and decentralised... shifting decision-making away from the somewhat ‘cosy’ relationships that some in the Network have had with donors to date. Creating new forms of accountability, with national NGOs working more autonomously as part of the Network with direct access to the Start Fund, will necessitate our letting go whilst also maintaining quality. It is a huge but critical question how we are going to achieve this.”<sup>53</sup>*

It seems that it is not so much the ‘if’ (there appears to be little disagreement with the principle) of decentralisation but the ‘when’.

The Start Network as a collaborative mechanism is of strong interest to both of the current donors, and whilst neither wants to be involved in day-to-day decisions and procedures, there is a hope and expectation that they will be ‘partners’ in the way they are viewed by the Start Network membership.

*“Donors are often seen as signatories of a cheque, who remain in the background with little involvement in how the funding is being utilised. That is not our expectation. We see the Start Fund as an innovative mechanism. It has the potential to change both the sector and how organisations work in it. We want to be seen as a partner in the process along that journey, to be kept in the loop on the challenges and achievements, to have the opportunity to galvanise support from other donors and to communicate our own perceptions and satisfaction with the process.”<sup>54</sup>*

It is, perhaps, a relatively unexplored area as to how things would be different if donors were to engage more deeply as partners - in fact, at a recent meeting with DFID, Start Network and the CDAC Network it became clear that there were rather different views of the term ‘partnership’ itself. It may need more work to understand better what it would take from both the Start Network and the donors if operating more as partners is to become a reality.

The donors see it as essential that the Start Network (Start Fund, specifically) is able to draw on diversified funding sources - global and multi-donor (in terms of both location and type). This is both an ideological driver (more genuinely global and multi-stakeholder in

character) and a practical imperative (bi-lateral agencies will have diminishing funds in future and whatever is put in place needs to be sustainable).

How ‘diverse’ could the funding sources actually be? And how much of a priority is it for Start Network to find funding from new sources (as opposed to more funding from traditional sources)? Early explorations have been undertaken with potential funders from the Middle East and from the commercial sector and ‘angel investors’ and as the work becomes more operationalised there will be opportunities for approaching recipient country governments to become funders. Whilst members understand the requirement from donors for diversification of funding sources, there is some caution, even resistance, from some members on this front.

*“If we are going to break the mould and shift the centre of gravity, then a discussion on the broadening of our funding sources has to be part of it. I don’t think that as a group, we have effectively confronted the political and other complexities of getting funding from non-traditional, unusual places. If we could reconcile the different perspectives on whether it is a good thing or not to seek such sources, then it could open up other relationships and sources, but it would be a different ball game and we will need to be clear on the advantages and disadvantages of these new types of funding relationship.”<sup>55</sup>*

It will be interesting to see, a year from now when it is time to write up the next phase in the Consortium story, whether the aspiration to have a much stronger and diverse funding base has been realised - this is seen by many (not least the two current donors) as being absolutely critical not only to Start’s sustainability but to its credibility, position and influence within the humanitarian sector.

The dilemmas highlighted here are not necessarily new nor are they necessarily insurmountable - there is genuine excitement and goodwill from the current donors who do see that an additional value of the collaborative approach between the various players goes well beyond the funding issue. They are keen to see Start Network as a genuine experiment from which lessons can be drawn that will, in due course, impact the humanitarian sector. They see Start Network as also providing: an important and unique forum for exploration; opportunities for negotiating across traditional boundaries and the possibility of working through a genuine commitment to open enquiry.

Above all, the donors are very eager to see the evidence that their investment in the Start Network has been justified, so they are both watching and engaging with an interesting mixture of concern, interest and enthusiasm.

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<sup>52</sup> Bob Gibbons, DFID.

<sup>53</sup> Nick Guttmann.

<sup>54</sup> Lisa Doherty, Irish Aid.

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<sup>55</sup> Dan Collison, War Child.



## Growing the team

The team has grown from three to (at its maximum) fifteen in the past year. This is largely to enable the management, development and delivery of the now-funded programmes of work and to prepare the way for Start becoming an independent entity (see pages 17-19). However, four of the team were appointed for a different purpose - identified as 'focal points', these individuals have been seconded from member agencies until the end of 2014 with direct responsibilities for building the Start Network's relationships with each of its members (see Box H).

Box H: Extract from the Terms of Reference for the Start Network secondees

Each secondment will come from one of the member agencies and will be based with that agency, but will be responsible for building capacity in another three allocated agencies (four in total) to participate in the Start Fund.

The secondees will deploy their cross-organisation positioning and brokering skills to advance the effectiveness and impact of the Start Fund and its Learning Framework. They will divide their time between their agencies and meet regularly with each other and the Start Team, to cross-fertilise ideas and develop a viable longer-term working model.

In addition to building capacity in the four nominated agencies, the secondment position will take responsibility for a concrete area of work for the Fund.

This has been something of an experiment and perhaps it is too early to gauge its usefulness or its longer-term impact - as one of the focal points suggests, this has been an interesting but sometimes challenging role.

*"On a personal level I feel the experience I have gained from the secondment with the Start Team has been extremely valuable. It has allowed me to get a better understanding of a larger number of agencies in the sector, widened my own contact network and obviously enabled me to support an initiative in which I totally believe. I truly think that the secondment model is a great one as it brings benefits both for the Start Team and for the members by bridging both view points and I have found having 'hybrid status' really helpful in starting valuable and important conversations.*

*The scheme was not, however, without flaws. Assumptions were made about what the agencies wanted/ needed and also about the degree of alignment within each agency. Member agencies operate very differently and several did not pick up on the opportunity to use secondees to more fully embed Start internally. Some could definitely have benefited more than they did. On a more strategic level, I feel that input from the secondees, who were closer to the members on a day-to-day basis, was a bit of a reality check in Start Team conversations. It is easy for the team to slip into focussing on their particular area of work, or their specific level of interactions with members, so the regular whole team*

*meetings were a useful way to provide a more balanced perspective."*<sup>56</sup>

Has it made a difference? It is early days, but one member at least sees that the focal points have played a useful role in ensuring members are not left behind as the Start team steams ahead:

*"The expansion of the Start Team has enabled things to progress faster but we need to make sure that the team doesn't take over and continues to ensure that the Network's members are integrated into all processes and decisions. The focal points have made a big difference to this. And now the new Chief Operating Officer is in place, the Start Director will be able to wholly focus on embedding the ethos and building the broader political relationships."*<sup>57</sup>

In the reports compiled by the focal points as their secondments come to an end, it seems clear that there has been considerable impact in explaining the Start Network (especially Start Fund) to key staff in member organisations and drawing them into the various consultative and decision-making processes. That the Start Fund and Start Build processes are beginning to work well and are now operating through a highly collaborative model (see pages 4-6) seems to be due, at least to some degree, to the work of the focal points. Whether the secondments have been as penetrating (for example driving towards a better understanding of individual member's priorities or embedding the idea of collaborative advantage - see page 8) is another question. Was this too much to expect in such a short timeframe?

*"Getting the local project selection committees up and running was fantastic and it really opened up discussion about Start Fund and Start Network. Many of these committees became seriously proactive after the initial meetings and teams continued to work together beyond the duration of a project as learning groups. This is (slowly!) leading to individuals and organisations on the ground actively seeking to work with other Start Network members. I believe that the focal points/ secondees can take some credit for these developments"*<sup>58</sup>

The Start Team as a whole do appear to work very well together with a shared sense of excitement about Start's vision and the part it could play in the humanitarian sector. It is also impressive how willing team members are to drop everything in order to play their part in responding to Start Fund 'alerts' - often late at night and at weekends.

But even so, there are frustrations and quite a bit of soul-searching about whether, even working very long hours and juggling many responsibilities, enough is being achieved - or being achieved as fully or in ways that are as 'transformational' as desired.

*"Attempts to define our Start Build strategy and approach have not yet materialised in a concept that*

<sup>56</sup> Audrey Laffitte, seconded to Start Team from Christian Aid.

<sup>57</sup> Nick Guttman.

<sup>58</sup> Amanda Weisbaum, seconded from War Child to Start Team as a focal point/ secondee.

*is challenging or transformative enough (which is what we seek to achieve in the Declaration of Intent). It has been difficult to get the membership that is the status quo to challenge the status quo. And I, as a partnership or collaboration broker, haven't yet been able to find time, space or skills to facilitate conversations that get us there. I have, however, just held one conversation with the Start Build Interim Steering Committee around a new document that could begin the process of challenging members and encouraging them to be more innovative and risk-taking. It needs further discussion and will then need to go to Board and Assembly where I am hopeful that we can get everyone more involved in generative ideas for new capacity building initiatives.”<sup>59</sup>*

As part of growing the team, investment has been made in offering them training<sup>60</sup> and in holding regular Away Days<sup>61</sup>. The Away Days always combine a number of different elements including:











- Team building
- Sense-making (of current issues and challenges)
- Skills exploration/ coaching (to build more confidence as collaboration ‘brokers’)
- Exploration of new ideas (for example, recent work on ‘collaborative advantage’)
- Problem identification and collective approaches to problem solving.

At a recent Team Away Day the following dilemmas were tabled (See Box I) - these give a good indication of the range of issues that concern the team in its day-to-day work:

Box I: Dilemmas facing the Start Team <sup>62</sup>

<p><u>About membership</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do we work towards system change with organisations that are very traditional?<sup>63</sup></li> <li>• How do we manage the pressure from members to simplify what we are doing so it is not overwhelming (we deal with it every day, they work with us episodically)?</li> <li>• How can members more actively in engage with their overseas counterparts?</li> </ul>
<p><u>About processes:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do the many parts of Start interconnect?</li> <li>• How can the team all contribute to resource mobilisation (aka fundraising)?</li> <li>• How can processes / procedures be streamlined and avoid outdated ways of doing business?</li> </ul>
<p><u>About current situation:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In this ‘beyond start-up’ phase and now that Start is more established, what now?</li> <li>• How can Start remain flexible and ‘nimble’?</li> <li>• How can the mission (changing the system) remain central under the pressure of delivery (of funded programmes of work)?</li> </ul>

The Away Days are designed to be focused, practical and output oriented, but this does not preclude some time spent on more imaginative activities - the assumption being that to do old things in new ways requires, above all, the exercise of some intuitive and imaginative faculties. One exercise, for example, invited the team to choose a physical object to explore and explain their individual response to how they understand the nature and purpose of the Start Team (see Box J).

<p>Box J: The Start Team is like...<sup>64</sup></p>		
	<p>...a string of sewn birds because every one is unique and yet they are similar...</p>	<p>...a candle in a holder because it brings light and fire but is also contained...</p>
		
<p>...an A-Z because it contains lots of useful information and acts as a guide to help you plan your journey...</p>	<p>...a bowl because it is a container that collects water to drink. Drops of water are like the ideas that come from members...</p>	<p>...a box of matches because it creates a spark that can start a fire but if you light them all at once it can be dangerous...</p>
		
<p>... a pair of binoculars because if you look through them one way you see the bigger picture and the other way you see the detail...</p>	<p>...a twig because it is natural, has a structure of its own and yet is part of an eco-system...</p>	<p>... a pepper grinder because the peppercorns are ground together to create something powerful - not to everyone's taste...</p>
		
<p>...a newspaper because it brings news, gives space to lots of voices with some leads from editorials and can influence thinking and behavior...</p>	<p>... an electric adapter because it is a conduit that carries a current from one place to another - it is small but essential, it connects...</p>	<p>...a tool because it has multiple uses and functions. Not always easy to find the right tool for the job but good to have lots of choice...</p>

This may seem fanciful but in a brief exercise<sup>65</sup> it seemed to bring dimension and added value to the team's appreciation of each other and to the uniqueness of each team member's views and contribution. It also led to a discussion about how the

<sup>59</sup> David Hockaday, Start Team (with specific reference to Start Build).

<sup>60</sup> For example, most of the team have completed the 4-day Partnership Brokers Training (see [www.partnershipbrokers.org](http://www.partnershipbrokers.org) for details).

<sup>61</sup> Run by the Partnership Brokers Association.

<sup>62</sup> As expressed during a Team Away Day - 29 October, 2014

<sup>63</sup> Worth noting that the initial term used was ‘prehistoric’!

<sup>64</sup> As perceived by team members (during an exercise during which they were asked to select an object as a metaphor).

<sup>65</sup> It took a mere 30 minutes!

team as a whole could get a good balance between the ‘intuitive’ and the ‘rational’ characteristics within each individual and how those who were more ‘intuitive’ could become more ‘rational’ and vice versa in order for the team to be able to provide the range of approaches and capacities needed to support the Start Network in its many aspects.

Box K: Understanding how to be more ‘intuitive’ or more ‘rational’ <sup>66</sup>

Become more ‘intuitive’ by:	Become more ‘rational’ by:
Building a wider range of experiences	Standing back - not rushing to judgment
Understanding our decision-making shortcuts	Gathering more evidence / data
Trusting our ‘gut feeling’ / emotional responses	Talking and listening to the relevant parties
Establishing a ‘worst case’ scenario	Establishing clear decision making criteria
Taking a risk and breaking out of our usual patterns	Using a rational decision making process
Being willing to learn from non-traditional sources	‘Sense checking’ as necessary

The team also have to grapple with a degree of ambivalence about how members (and even perhaps donors) see their (the team’s) role. Should they be focused more on building consensus among the membership or on shaping the work?

*“The Start Team is in a complex situation. They don’t want to be too dictatorial and they work hard to create consensus with the 19 member organisations.*

*However, I would like to see them being more assertive. There is a case for creating some balance between being more assertive both by providing more direction on the one hand and creating the climate for some collaborative processes to emerge on the other. If Start Network ends up trying too hard to be inclusive, tapping into different wisdoms to reach consensus on a particular conclusion, it will not be very productive.”<sup>67</sup>*

And, of course, when you are juggling so much, it is extremely hard to remember everything!

*“Members of any consortium often have different agendas and different ways of working. It can be quite challenging sometimes to look beyond the inherent difficulties of working as a consortium and to remember the other stakeholders such as donors. The Start Team have clearly been busy working on not just ensuring that the Fund is working in the way it should but also on inclusiveness, peer management, and bringing in new members. It is for that reason, probably, that it has sometimes overlooked the need to communicate better and more regularly with us.” <sup>68</sup>*

<sup>66</sup> Developed by the Start Team at the Away Day on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Savita Garg, Plan UK.

<sup>68</sup> Lisa Doherty, Irish Aid.

## Governance - a political act

*“The Start Network is an exciting place to be right now - we can see it has influential power. There is energy and pulse around what we are doing. I can see the benefits to my organisation of being a member - to be able to find solutions collectively and see concrete results coming through. I am on the new Board, with a mix of people from different backgrounds and different agencies. There is a positive, invigorating environment, everyone is motivated to make it work and to behave in line with the manifesto.”<sup>69</sup>*

Considerable time has been invested in the issue of governance - specifically, how to create a governance structure that is both tight and ‘nimble’ (a term used frequently by those involved). How the Start Network is structured and how it operates is seen by many as critical. It needs to be able to operate effectively as a collaborative and relatively non-hierarchical model, but also as an agent for change, able to stand for something different, apart from the bureaucracy so evident both in the larger NGOs and in the multi-lateral system.

Members of the Consortium have been learning how best to work together - putting the Network’s needs ahead (in some respects, at least) of their own organisation’s interests; accepting majority decisions as the way forward (settling for ‘alignment’ and due process rather than insisting on consensus); and learning how to challenge each other in order to penetrate more deeply into diverse (sometimes divergent) views, rather than simply to score points.



Picture 6: Visual notes from the Start Away Day, December 2013

<sup>69</sup> Aleema Shivji, Handicap International (interesting to note her use of the term ‘manifesto’ - clearly some members still hold onto the Declaration of Intent as potentially a harder-hitting and more ‘political’ document (see Page 11).



For Start Network to remain a hosted project	Underlying questions	For Start Network to become an independent entity
Gives confidence to donors - Start benefits from host agency's track record in managing large-scale funding	<i>Could Start be developed along two parallel tracks - hosted for some parts (e.g. Start Fund and Start Build) and independent for others (e.g. Start Beta - where the freedom to advocate and innovate is paramount), thereby maximizing the best of both options?</i>	More able to attract different types of donor and to develop new financial mechanisms by being seen as outside the system and having an independent voice
Reduces bureaucracy by attachment to existing HR, financial management and legal arrangements	<i>How can Start address the problem of bureaucracy in the humanitarian sector if it is itself embedded in the existing bureaucracy?<sup>70</sup> Is Start missing an opportunity to re-design more streamlined processes if they are 'piggy-backing' on those that already exist?</i>	Potential for creating the appropriate level of procedures and controls for its needs and some new approaches where appropriate
Cheaper - funds can be spent on deliverables not organisation-building and management	<i>Can the necessary resources be mobilised differently - less about money and more about members taking on different elements as their non-financial contribution to membership?</i>	Start would be in an ideal position to pioneer a new low-cost, distributed approach to delivery
Gives some instant credibility and endorsement for a relatively new entity by its association with a well-established and respected organisation/ brand	<i>What are the challenges of a 'brand within a brand'? Having worked so hard to build the Start brand - how can this best be optimised so that Start really does become a 'force for change'?</i>	Avoids Start being too strongly aligned with and/ or identified as part of 'business as usual' and able to be positioned as 'cutting edge'
Provides some security for Start enabling it to take risky/ bold positions and innovative decisions without jeopardizing its day-to-day work	<i>How can Start best build on what a host organisation is able to offer without being aligned/ confused with it?</i>	Able to be more nimble and to construct a fit for purpose organisation that is tailored to Start's specific values and aspirations

The whole issue of governance has been explored using a 'straw man' approach (or, more accurately, a number of straw men) and a decision was made earlier in the year to restructure the accountability and decision-making processes.

The new arrangements give ultimate decision-making authority and the setting of strategic direction to a newly constituted Start Assembly (composed of all the member organisations) that meets four times a year. Meanwhile the Board has become a smaller body composed of six member representatives<sup>71</sup> and will have three external trustees (appointed by, and accountable to, the Assembly). The independent trustees are appointed to bring new perspectives and expertise to support innovation in what Start Network does. They will have equal voting rights. The Board<sup>72</sup> meets monthly at present and carries responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the agreed strategy.

There is, of course, the on-going question about whether or not the Start Network might/ should/ must become an independent entity. There are strong

<sup>70</sup> Drawing on Einstein "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

<sup>71</sup> It is understood as part of the Terms of Reference that those on the Board represent the interests of all the member organisations not those of their own organisation and it seems as if the current Board members work quite hard (challenging each other when necessary) to ensure that this is the way it works in practice.

<sup>72</sup> Current Board members are from Action Against Hunger, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Handicap International and Oxfam.

arguments in favour of, and against, this idea (see Box L).

As part of the investigation into what form an independent entity might take, there were a number of meetings with a consultative group that included key players who were not from the humanitarian sector but who could add new dimension and value from their specialist perspective.<sup>73</sup> This group were largely in favour of the Start Network becoming an independent entity - specifically with regard to its need to engage with new types of donor and to be somewhat 'un-hooked' from the current humanitarian modus operandi. So the discussions were more about what form such independence might take - what the legal options were - rather than the principle of independence per se.

Their assumption that independence is both necessary and a good thing appears to be at odds with some of the larger member organisations and, more recently, DFID has made direct funding contingent on the development of a satisfactory risk management and control system, as well as requiring additional donors to be in place by 2016. DFID and Irish Aid are clear that they can only provide funding through a well-

<sup>73</sup> Rob Williams, War Child; Richard Broyd, Waypoint; Robert Stirling, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer; Paul George, PriceWaterhouse Cooper; Ros Tennyson, Partnership Brokers Association; Jean Michel Grand, Action Against Hunger and Richard Miller, ActionAid.

established entity with a strong financial management track record rather than a new entity.

By the middle of 2014, conversations about Start Network governance had come to the conclusion that strategy in a consortium model is fundamentally political in nature. There are too many variables and too much uncertainty for a conventional approach to strategy to be effective or even relevant. The nature of the uncertainty can be usefully expressed as a series of tensions - here are three examples:

- Government donors to the Start Network view all their grant recipients through a risk management paradigm whilst the Start Network's *Declaration of Intent*, upon which its work is now based, is about systemic change, which is de facto a risky endeavour
- The *Declaration of Intent* puts forward the vision for a decentralised self-organising humanitarian ecosystem. Most Assembly members understand this to mean that Start should become a network of networks. Yet Start's current donors feel the current network should 'walk before it runs' so there is a reluctance to support Start moving to a network of networks model any time soon.
- The on-going internal debate around Start as needing to be, for now, a centralised resource, has led to some scepticism that it will operate any differently to existing mechanisms - it will hold on to power. At the same time there are concerns about whether the Start Network can effectively challenge or change anything without acquiring some form of power.

Is this an impasse? Or is there a way forward that gives the Start Network the stability and functional viability it needs to raise and handle significant funds whilst also allowing for flexibility and innovation in thinking, approaches and practices?

*"It is a major issue deciding how to take this forward. There have been discussions of a 'network of networks' with a vision of a regional roll out. With a commitment to 'shifting the power' of decision making to the regions and local capacity building, some kind of network of networks seems integral to moving forward. What is not clear is how this should be done and how quickly it should move forward. There is the obvious challenge of balancing shifting decision-making (and thus ownership) to the regions against the real issues of accountability. These are all new challenges and may not be solved easily or quickly."*<sup>74</sup>

*"Anything that can change the humanitarian system for the better has to be way above any threshold of 'worthwhile'. What is really interesting with the Start Network is the collaboration of so many organisations, who compete day to day within the existing system... but who recognise its limitations for their mission and want change. For me the strength of the Network comes from the support and participation of its member organisations and its donors - which gives its innovations great credibility*

*and potential for real influence. Success would be a real contribution to material positive change in the humanitarian system. I don't know precisely what that would look like. It could have grown to be a well-established part of the global humanitarian architecture or it could have ceased to exist, but have been a very important catalyst."*<sup>75</sup>

## Mega-week and the new questions...

To put the new governance arrangements in place and launch with something of a 'bang', the Start Team planned for a week of events that would properly mark the important first meetings for these new decision-making bodies. The events were positioned as 'Start Working Differently' but as the plans became more complex, it became known, at least informally, as 'Mega-week' - a name that has stuck, indicating that the week was something of a turning point (and people still refer to it enthusiastically, some 6 months later).

Publicising new governance arrangements was not the only driver for the week. It had become increasingly apparent that decisions made by the existing Board (comprising one representative from each of the 19 member agencies - an inclusive but somewhat cumbersome decision-making body) were often technocratic in nature and reached by settling for the lowest common denominator. This had led to a number of important issues, upon which the Network's development was contingent, being smoothed over and not fully acknowledged or addressed.

Take, for instance, the Start Network's *Declaration of Intent*<sup>76</sup>, which took nearly a year to be agreed. To reach agreement across so many agencies and then to embed the *Declaration* within each member organisation was no small task - it required deeply political debate going right to the heart of individual agency mandates and interests, where each member had to review and, in effect, reveal their motivations for joining the Network. The *Declaration* requires some serious buy in at many levels of the member organisations if it is to be actively adopted and adhered to - if it is to have 'teeth'.

There was no existing mechanism for reaching a larger number of people from each member organisation. It was this that led to Mega-week's activities being anchored around a conference that would, if all went well, become an annual event bringing delegations from each member organisation (beyond the usual faces) together with other stakeholders and key players from the sector.

Such a rich and diverse group of people working together through an intense and well-managed day, would, it was hoped, generate momentum and excitement about the Network, by providing those

<sup>75</sup> Paul George, PWC - an advisor to Start Network on governance arrangements.

<sup>76</sup> See page 11 for further reference to this and for the full text of the *Declaration* itself.

<sup>74</sup> Imran Madden, Islamic Relief.

present with the incentive to adopt the *Declaration* and a real opportunity to have a say in the Network's future.

So what happened? The week began with the first Start Network Assembly composed of the former Board members - the place where strategy would be set, and new ideas would be generated. The Assembly elected a smaller, more agile six-person Board, whose role it would be to activate the Assembly's ideas (see pages 17-19 for more on the governance structure). It also decided on the most pressing issues to be discussed at the upcoming conference later that week.

At the conference itself, active participation was encouraged from all delegates through the use of interactive voting terminals, which enabled the audience to respond in real time to the proposals being put forward by member agency representatives. By the end of the day, five strong recommendations had emerged from this process:

1. The Start Network's long term direction of travel will be toward a network of networks
2. The Start Fund will be a single global funding system
3. National NGOs should become part of the Network
4. There must be commitment to bringing in local voices now
5. The Start Network aims to leverage its collective power for innovation and learning.

The process of agreeing these recommendations laid bare two significant areas of tension within the membership. These were the:

- Disconnect between the Network's strongly stated worldwide, local focus and its current London-based INGO membership base and
- Divergent views within the membership about how the Network should effect the change it seeks - whether through the acquisition of more power to influence the system or by devolving power to local actors as soon as possible.

There have been suggestions subsequently that the new Board should develop a theory of change that will enable the Start Network to reach its agreed long-term goals whilst effectively navigating these critical tensions. As mentioned earlier, some feel this is the way forward whilst others feel it may inhibit a more opportunistic and exploratory approach.

The conference fulfilled its primary objective of launching new, more efficient ways of working for the Network, and it generated a buzz that has since been built on. More importantly, the Start Network became more widely accepted as a serious player with both its member organisations and the wider Humanitarian sector.

Mega-week also included the first Donor Forum, aiming to balance the (actual or perceived) tension between the donors' requirement for oversight and influence with the Network's own ambitions to be autonomous and proactive. What emerged, in fact, was that the donors wanted to be considered active partners in the Start Network's journey, and were actually quite keen to help mobilise the means to realise its transformative agenda (see section on *Donor Dilemmas* pages 13-14).

Against some odds, the success of Mega-week suggested that the Network had garnered enough support to be confident of its ability to achieve its objectives.

No one ended Mega-week under any illusions that the next steps will be easy or quick. There has been no room at all for smugness. The key questions and tensions are still there - though now they are so much more nuanced that they are, in some senses, new.

*"This year, the priority has been to create a roadmap for the Network overall and for the three streams - Fund, Build and Beta. Next year's focus has to be on broadening the membership, working with other networks and international organisations - though we must be careful about how we position ourselves relative to such networks - and achieving diversity in funding. Expansion will mean we can be more responsive to humanitarian disasters, putting the right people to work in the right places at the right time for immediate, efficient and effective local disaster responses. We can bring in different skill sets, not only for rapid response but also build capacity and preparedness of partners."*<sup>77</sup>



Picture 7: Visual notes from the Start Network Conference, June 2014

<sup>77</sup> Aleema Shivji, Handicap International.





Picture 8: Montage of photos from the Start Network Annual Conference, June 2014

One such new/ old question is about the transfer of the centre of Start Network gravity to the South through a systematic process of decentralisation, and here there may well be differing views within member organisations - where some CEOs, for example, have a stronger vested interest in their organisation retaining control (since this links so strongly to being funded), and their Humanitarian Directors feel equally strongly that decentralisation is of paramount importance no matter what the implications for HQ.

*“There is an ideological dimension to this issue, as well as a pragmatic one. It remains the case that power is largely tied to money, and funding... and there are those who feel the Start Network can be more effective by remaining a single global entity, with a single fund, and a single global membership structure. On the other hand, there are those that see the world as multi-polar, with various centres of power, money and influence, and some of those interviewed set out a compelling case for there to be multiple Start Networks in regions (or countries). Multiple Start Networks could coalesce INGOs and other stakeholders around ‘hubs’, and attract local funding which could then in theory be aggregated centrally or managed by a single process.”<sup>78</sup>*

*“Start Network critics say we are just rearranging the deck chairs<sup>79</sup> and that is not a way of working that comes from the southern networks but something thought up by head office managers in big agencies. I am encouraged by the number of decisions on project*

*allocation that have been made in country, closer to the action, rather than at the remote committee level. That’s not quite shifting the centre of gravity but it is step in the right direction.”<sup>80</sup>*

It feels increasingly important to both expand and diversify the membership. Drivers for this expansion are several, including the need to:<sup>81</sup>

- Enable the Start Network to secure more (and new) funding for the Start Fund
- Demonstrate credibility to donors and the NGO community through a global membership which includes agencies based in the ‘global South’,
- Put ‘southern’ INGOs on an equal footing,
- Increase reach and impact of the Start Network’s activities through a larger local footprint
- Ensure that the *Declaration of Intent* goes beyond a series of rhetorical statements.

There are areas of concern however to do with: a continuing lack of clarity about the Start Network’s current strategy and structure, and the arrival of new members leading to even less focus; the risk that more members would simply mean that funding would be spread too thinly, and that any expansion of the Start Network would divert funding away from individual NGOs or current programmes; and a real fear that engagement with members organisations from the South will be little more than ‘token gestures’

<sup>78</sup> Ben Emmens *Start Network - Proposed Membership Policy*, September 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Presumably a reference to rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic as it was sinking.

<sup>80</sup> Dan Collison, War Child.

<sup>81</sup> This list is drawn from: Ben Emmens *Start Network - Proposed Membership Policy*, September 2014, which was based on in-depth interviews with Start Network members.

Concern remains about how strongly to push the ‘transforming the sector’ element in the Start Network *Declaration of Intent*. As discussed earlier, some see it as central and are deeply concerned if it is pushed to the margins, whilst others see it as secondary, and a position to be taken only when more has been achieved that will give depth and validity to the transformational proposition. There is, however, a third perspective:

*“Conversations about transformation rarely achieve anything transformational, particularly when held by the incumbents. True transformation comes from focussing relentlessly on a core problem and enabling all relevant stakeholder groups to make the best contribution they can to solving that problem alongside you.”<sup>82</sup>*

There is also the developing notion of the Start Network enabling others by brokering new approaches and relationships:

*“We very much want to encourage the Start Network to help shift the role of Western NGOs into more of a nurturing and advocacy role with their in-country counter-parts, and hope that Start will be able to provide a channel for direct funding since this is something it would be very difficult for us to do. This may well be the work of a decade or more - we know it will take time.”<sup>83</sup>*

So the Start Network has come a long way in the past year - but there is no room for complacency. There is a lot to do and a lot to prove as evidenced by the contradictory/ complementary perspectives of the representatives of three of the member organisations, below.

*“Islamic Relief joined the original CBHA as it had a clear mandate to start discussing and changing the way the humanitarian system works. It was clear at that point in time that the old ways of working had run their course and that we needed a collective response to the monolithic challenge of changing a global system. The Start Network is a result of the*

*belief and efforts of the member organisations and in particular a number of individuals driving it forward. The Network is a manifestation of part of that vision of change; it is the beginning of a long process. It is about changing attitudes initially but processes and modalities in the medium and long term. People talk about this being a 20-year process at least.”<sup>84</sup>*

*“I still feel our rhetoric and behaviour are often divorced from each other. Is our primary goal the re-invention of the system and enabling more power and decision making in the South, or is our real aim to create as big a fund as possible? Our rhetoric is the former but our behaviour is the latter. For example in a debate about increasing membership in a General Assembly meeting Sean was asked who he saw us approaching to increase membership by “a handful”. He suggested some Scandinavian, an Irish and a couple of Middle Eastern NGOs. That list can only reflect a reality that money is the priority. As a collective I worry that we are ducking the hard decisions - we either need to admit we are about the money, or we need to change our behaviour.”<sup>85</sup>*

*“Now we are more secure, the NGO pathology is starting to show - this pathology is to do with being risk averse, technocratic and hierarchical. There is a risk that Start could lose its way grappling with this pathology and I believe it is up to the Board and membership to make sure this doesn’t happen. Start has to get things done but not at the cost of ‘dreaming big’. We need to take some bolder risks, keep up the momentum and make the space to be where we want and need to be. We also need to model the behaviours we want to see in the sector as a whole - and mean it!”<sup>86</sup>*

*“I think Start Network is a wonderful and important adventure because together we are challenging the way things have always been done because we believe they can be done better. We have to keep faithful to our shared vision and not get side-tracked by individual organisational constraints or unexpected difficulties.”<sup>87</sup>*



Picture 9: Visual notes from the first Start Network Assembly, June 2014

<sup>82</sup> Paul Skinner, Advisor to Start Network.  
<sup>83</sup> Bob Gibbons, DFID.

<sup>84</sup> Imran Madden, Islamic Relief.  
<sup>85</sup> Nigel Timmins, Oxfam.  
<sup>86</sup> Gareth Owen, Save the Children.  
<sup>87</sup> Nick Guttman, Christian Aid & Chair, Start Network.



## End Note

by Sean Lowrie<sup>88</sup>

At the end of 2014, it is clear to me that the Start Network is extremely well positioned. The various different initiatives that are underway are evidence that the members are ready and willing to experiment and to implement new approaches that are only rhetorically addressed in other places within the humanitarian system. Moreover, if the Start Network members can continue along this collaborative road, despite the inevitable challenges and anxious-making moments, other economic sectors will look to the Network as an example of how to address seemingly intractable systemic problems.

The Start Network has become a positive and authentic agent for change - indeed its influence is considered by some to be its greatest achievement to date.

Start Network members have all been struggling with real challenges in the NGO business model and within the current humanitarian systemic architecture. The tensions and dilemmas evidenced in this case study are not unexpected and could be considered natural, particularly for a sector whose purpose is to protect vulnerable people in a world undergoing radical upheaval. Yet there is a powerful and compelling common interest across the Start Network's contemporary (and, presumably, future) members: that we **must** accelerate the response to humanitarian crises around the world.

For the Start Network's current membership this imperative has resulted in a new way of thinking about the NGO business model. This includes experimenting with collective decision-making, acting as a catalyst for change and brokering relationships across traditional organisational and sectoral boundaries. There are now several parts of the business where Start Network Members collaborate rather than compete. There are other areas where the Members still compete, but this also provides benefits since such competition acts as a driver of innovation. Fundamentally the Start Network approach involves seeing traditional organisations less as self-contained, self-sufficient machines, and more as entities with porous boundaries where non-traditional collaboration occurs every day to achieve greater goals.

For over a decade the humanitarian system has been caught like a deer in the headlights. The scale of need for humanitarian action already stretches the capacity of the current NGO business model to breaking point, and NGOs deliver 75% of all front-line humanitarian crisis response. The Start Network can help both its members and the wider humanitarian system evolve. We are not a 'closed club' but a new model, a work in progress. The Start Fund, for example, will soon be a multi-donor pooled-funding



Picture 10: Visual notes from the CBHA Board Away Day, May 2013

mechanism without precedent, and will provide the means to create new rules, procedures, incentives, and ultimately new behaviours.

The evidence of global level transformation is all around us. The need for change in the humanitarian sector is undisputed. The Start Network provides the means for its expanding body of stakeholders to evolve on the terms they set and I hope that in 2015, Start Network will increase its impact dramatically. This is both an exciting and a frightening prospect and puts us under considerable pressure... but there is simply no choice - the next generation is depending on us.

<sup>88</sup> Director, Start Network.



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The piece has been richly informed by the insight and analysis of all those we interviewed (see footnoted references in the text), all of whom we warmly thank for giving their valuable time and sharing their honest reflections.

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<sup>89</sup> [www.endlesspossibilities.eu](http://www.endlesspossibilities.eu)