START NETWORK

Realities Behind The Rhetoric

Exploring what it takes to deliver the vision

PARTNERSHIP BROKERS ASSOCIATION

LEARNING • TRAINING • TRANSFORMING

The case for this case study

Ros Tennyson[1]

" A major deliverable for Start Network is what we are discovering daily about collaboration. The only 'failure' is the failure to learn."[2]

In 2013 we began the process of collating the story of an emerging consortium – what is now the Start Network. The purpose was to record the journey of evolution of an organisation reconfiguring itself with a bold collaborative agenda, and a mission to change the way the humanitarian sector functions. This collation of stories, data, pictures, processes and multiple perspectives has taken its form in three case studies. The first case study, *Dealing with Paradox*, tracks the organisations foundation, through a funding crisis, and to the point of a re-branding and re-building to become an international, collaborative network focused on doing business differently. The second study, *Power & Politics*, picks up the story a year later. Following it through funding success and subsequent growth (personnel, members, programmes) the case study looks at the challenges of this scaling up, to a collaborative organisations brand, intent, and member and donor engagement.

In this, the third case study in the sequence, we have tried to provide a vehicle for people to speak about Start Network from their individual positions[3] and day-to-day experiences – whether in the form of 'think pieces' (the more formal contributions) or in selected quotes (from log-books, blogs and interviews). The intention is to hear the many different voices and views at the heart of the delivery of Start (the staff team) as well as those on the operational fringes but on the experimental front line (the advisors). This case study has been written collectively – all we have done (apart from designing the methodology, assigning tasks and forcing the pace as deadlines approached) is to try and provide a framework and a connecting narrative to make it accessible and useful to others working to make multi-stakeholder consortia, coalitions or networks effective.

In this case study we have intentionally not sought the views of either the membership or of the donors. Not because they are not important – they are central and critical as the earlier case studies made abundantly clear – but we felt that the time was right to explore a different perspective. The day-to-day reality of managing a collaborative model is an area that is generally under-researched and rarely exposed. An exploration of the operational part of Start Network offers a unique opportunity to put those realities under a microscope for the benefit of others aspiring to innovate and reach scale through a collaborative model.

We have clustered the materials under three key headings:

- Managing the (almost) Unmanageable
- Triumphs and Transaction Costs
- Holding onto the Vision

What this case study quickly reveals is a reality that is both complicated and complex. There is a phenomenal amount being done against a backdrop of constant pushes and pulls that make systematic delivery a growing challenge (leading to long hours, sleepless nights and, sometimes, short fuses). The achievements are remarkable but the (human) costs are, for several, on the edge of unbearable.

Despite this tension, no-one in the Start Team or in the Advisory Group feel anything less than rampant enthusiasm for the vision and ambition of Start Network – nothing less than to challenge and change the very foundations of the humanitarian imperative. It is a mark of this deep passion and commitment that some staff were writing their contributions to the case study long after midnight during 'mini mega week' and advisors were sending in their think pieces whilst working on the front line in the very contexts that Start Network is most determined to reach as the deadline we had set for submissions closed in.

Start Network is designed to challenge and change humanitarian practice and systems – needing to be innovative and experimental to achieve this whilst also ensuring coherence, continuity and compliance. This is, in itself, hugely challenging and demands a willingness to be self-critical and to challenge the assumptions and behaviours in all those involved.

"We have to transform ourselves individually and organisationally to be ready to be part of transforming the sector in order to be able to ripple and amplify outwards into systems and societies."[4]

It continues to be a real privilege for the Partnership Brokers Association to be accompanying Start Network on this extraordinary journey and doing what we can to help navigate the terrain without a route-map. On this, our third case study, we have been humbled and impressed by the dedication, imagination and sheer persistence of the staff team. They have exceeded our expectations of what they would be able to produce in the midst of their madly busy days – both in terms of quantity and quality.

1. Development Director: Strategy & Services, Partnership Brokers Association and Collaboration Advisor to Start Network.
2. Director, Start Network – speaking at the staff retreat (September 2015).
3. This includes both meanings of the word 'position': their personal standpoint, or view, and also their role with(in) the Start Network.
4. Shveta Shah – Manager, Start Engage & DEPP programme.

"The case study series is important for a three reasons. First, it is as close as we have to a historical record. Second, it enables us to share our emerging experience with others who wish to learn. Third, it unveils what is ordinarily hidden behind organisational boundaries. This series contributes significantly to our legitimacy as a humanitarian system change catalyst."[5]

It would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the enthusiastic support of Start's Director, Sean Lowrie, for this work. There can be few anywhere in the world leading innovative initiatives of this kind who are as passionate as Sean and who are equally willing to give a completely free hand to those coming to scrutinise in the name of enquiry. It takes some courage and, probably, some hard swallowing as he reads the text for the first time, but there will be many within and beyond the team and the membership who see this as further testimony to his courageous and bold commitment to making the world a better place.

Last but not least, I take full responsibility for the final product – having had the challenging task of editing a large amount of material and deciding how to shape the case study to best capture the story. In both the data collection and the editing, I have been assisted by my colleague, Emily Wood[6] who, when we were working together on the first case study ('*Dealing with Paradox*', 2013), made the insightful deduction that the Start Team (then just three people) were both 'warriors' and 'worriers' which still seems like a great summary of what it takes to run the Start Network.

Managing the (almost) unmanageable

This year has seen considerable growth within the Start Team - from 12 at the start of the year to 19 at the close (with a large team brought on board to work on monitoring and evaluation based in Action Against Hunger and working under contract to Start). The core team has shifted offices / desks multiple times whilst there has also been a growth in the number of key projects / activities being located in member organisations (including Oxfam, Action Aid, Action Against Hunger and World Vision) – all this bring additional challenges to holding things together.

Funding for programmes (Start Fund and Start Engage) has increased significantly – with a new bi-lateral donor (Netherlands) joining the other two (UK and Ireland) though the UK's Department for International Development remains the single biggest donor. Securing investment from other types of donor remains elusive though it is understood as something of a 'slow burn' and remains a priority. Most notably, the fact that Start Network exists and works has led to new funding coming in for what have, until recently, been described as 'ad hoc' activities (for example, coordinating the response to the Ebola crisis).

In the midst of all this activity, time has been dedicated to making the case and putting the legal framework and governance structures in place for independence from the host organisation (Save the Children UK) in 2016.

Tanuja Pandit considers the management implications of this growing portfolio of activities for the Start Network from her perspective as Chief Operating Officer – specifically appointed to provide the operational foundations upon which Start Network depends for continuity, sustainability and quality.

Building talent and creating infrastructure

Tanuja Pandit

During 2015, the Start Network has moved from its start-up phase to one of growth and greater maturity. We have tried hard to maintain the energy and focus of a social innovation while developing the ability

5. Sean Lowrie, as above.
6. Manager, Partnership Brokers Association.

to deliver consistently high quality services. This has required us to develop processes and structures and to become more systematic in our approach whilst still being fleet of foot, dynamic and responsive. We want to change behaviour and engender a new collaborative culture in the humanitarian sector and we are finding that this requires different skills and approaches to those typically involved in a more conventional start-up.

Added to all of this is the fact that the time is coming when we will break away from our host agency and become independent in terms of governance, structure and processes.

This year has been about developing plans for the future organisation while delivering existing programmes and projects, with the lines between the two being quite fuzzy. We work in a multi-layered environment, dealing with a network of agencies while based in one of them and we strive to create a new entity that has DNA from the original member organisations and yet will be flexible enough to acquire characteristics from the new ones yet to come on board. We want to create a new type of entity that jettisons the features that make the humanitarian sector slow, self-centred and ineffective yet we are the product of existing agencies.

All this creates a challenging agenda from a cultural, strategic, policy and management perspective and requires us to focus on developing the right strategy, attracting the best people and creating the appropriate infrastructure so our delivery matches our rhetoric.

This year, we have brought new talent onto our Board that now has now has 6 out of a potential 8 member representatives and 4 independents including a treasurer and we are continuing to clarify our ways of working.

New talent within the team includes recruitment in: communications; the monitoring, evaluation and learning team, and finance. The arrival of every new team member creates ripples within the team and we try to find ways to make newcomers part of our organisation and to impart our ethos. We have developed an in-house manual called Welcome to the Tribe that sets out some of our core working principles around having a flat structure, being flexible rather than rule-bound and trusting team members to work autonomously and virtually with minimal control. All good things that we often struggle to abide by!

Our recent two-day team retreat, where we were joined on the second day by the team of advisors who are helping us to create this new enterprise, was a good opportunity for the expanding team to gel with each other and was very effective in generating the camaraderie that is essential when working in a highly pressurised environment.

We are building light-touch infrastructure using cloud-based solutions that reflect our commitment to the use of technology as a differentiator. The website is arguably our most prominent profiling and communications tool and we have commissioned a small, innovative digital communications agency to redevelop it. We are very excited by the communication opportunities that a better website will unleash.

There is more rigour in our business planning process and similarly in our procurement processes and we are developing policies and processes that we can copy over into the new entity we are creating. So, right now, the challenge is to run these new processes whilst also complying with those of our host agency, a duality that we are dealing with in other areas too.

We have articulated the risk management processes that should operate at the Start Network, Member agency, Member affiliate and local partner levels and are working to finalise an inter-agency crisis management plan. This is very challenging, as we want to balance simplicity and good governance with the desire to avoid the duplication of effort that is rife in the sector. The Start Network offers a promise of a new way of working in the humanitarian sector. Collaborative working is clearly very attractive to resource-strapped donors, but it will only succeed if donors modify their attitude to risk. We continue to be committed to involving local organisations in humanitarian response and we are vigorously seeking new approaches to risk management in order to make this possible.

Building a more international membership base was a key objective in 2015, and we have invested considerable time and effort in this. We have developed a rigorous due diligence process for new members and our membership has risen to 27 by the end of 2015, of which 6 are not UK-based (although two further non-UK members joined early in 2016). As all members can

access funds, we had to bring the new members into the legal agreements that underpin the Start Fund. This took time and proved challenging for incoming members as they expected a much swifter turnaround following the announcement of their Start Network membership.

Building on this experience, we have initiated a new member process starting with due diligence, moving on to induction of new members and then legal on-boarding that will be much faster and more predictable in future. We also took time to agree the membership policy for those operating in federations and alliances.

Questions that have particularly exercised me this year include how to:

- Best resource collaboration without duplicating effort or being perceived as a competitor for resources to our members?
- Build more understanding amongst our members of what collaboration means in practice and why it may be necessary sometimes for their own organisation to take a back seat for the greater good
- Manage the balance between the Start Team's role as a broker / facilitator and the more common role of manager of a grant
- Hold agencies to account through more professional contracting without abandoning the key principles of a partnership arrangement
- Prioritise and discipline our efforts so we don't compromise our core services because we are too busy incubating new ones
- Clarify the Start Team's role versus those of the member agencies whether Start projects or services are being managed
- Keep things as simple as possible in the first iteration.

I see the Start Team as leading an experimental organisation that will grow and evolve. We may begin by being more complicated than is desirable, but we will modify, simplify and move forward. In all of our work we are holding the complexity that comes from multiple stakeholders, ambitious priorities and differences in perception of what is urgent. We risk promising too much and we probably need to recognise that this collaborative endeavour really is a marathon and not a sprint.

The Start Fund has made impressive strides in embedding highly collaborative and consensus-building processes. It has really pioneered collaborative mechanisms that manage to achieve a balance between speedy decisions, fairness and genuine engagement. Whilst much has gone well, Caroline Hotham – the Fund's long-suffering manager – suggests that the greatest driver to improving process management has come from the things that, at the time, were extremely difficult and stressful.

Bumps in the road

Caroline Hotham

My recurring question during 2015 with regard to the Start Fund – and indeed the Start Network – has been: what it is that moved us forward and has enabled traction? There are obviously many factors, but I have come to believe that greatest acceleration has always come after we've hit that metaphorical 'bump in the road'. I, for one, have learnt most at these moments because I have got a better feel for what decisions are critical and what information is important to share and what is simply 'spam' that the team should handle without consultation / approval. What follows are some examples of 'bumps'…

Bump 1: When the team did too much… The Start Team spent some days in the New Year thinking through what a lighter and more manageable Start Fund Committee system could like, in the expectation that a disbursement pot that had tripled in size overnight on 1st January would bring many more decisions for the Network to make. In this process, we unwittingly made some of our important allies and early champions of Start Fund feel that we didn't value their opinions enough to bring our ideas to them while still at the 'white board stage'. Some difficult exchanges at that time in reaction to a short paper we produced meant that I did not feel mandated to take the proposed restructure forward until the full Committee could give time to a review. It was only in July 2015 that

the Committee gave the green light to try a single Committee structure, with a roster-based, decision-making approach.

I learnt that is remains essential for the Start Fund Team to engage with our membership so that they always feel part of building the mechanism even when we believed we were saving them time and effort. The challenge to us is to enable them to engage without slowing the overall pace.

Bump 2: When our own rules prevented doing what was needed… In August, when the Fund was alerted by IRC to the mounting refugee crisis in Europe and its impact on the island of Lesbos, an alert notification[7] went out to the Network. Concerns were quickly raised by a number of agencies about Greece not being a listed as a recipient of Overseas Development Aid (a clause in the Start Fund Handbook stipulates that funds cannot be disbursed to countries not on this list). This was a challenging moment as the Start Network confronted how the rules it had created for itself were actually at odds with its vision of being a change agent and a rule-challenging entity.

Our Board intervened in the decision-making process and insisted on waiting until the Start Assembly could consider the implications at a meeting later in the autumn. I was shocked that our committed-but-slow-moving civil society network was less able to come to a quick position on this than our donor governments!

The disappointment and surprise expressed by the IRC was tangible and really uncomfortable for us. It felt inadequate to be so bound by our own rules and to have to explain our slow decision-making being due to a cumbersome governance structure. It ran counter to our whole approach and to our commitment to be at the forefront of challenging and changing the sector.

Bump 3: Challenges in integrating newcomers… In launching the new single Start Fund management and governance structure, new people joined the Committee. It was an exciting time for the Start team – fielding many curious questions about the Fund including the management realities of peer review, impartiality and collective stewardship. Some expressed surprise at the huge commitment of their time this work would take and their response was quite at odds with the views of their predecessors. It seemed to revolve around the perceived value to themselves or their organisations of such a time investment – perhaps the 'founders' of the process saw benefits from a significant time commitment in ways that the 'followers' of the process did not.

It seems that with the mounting pressure of work, we have less and less time to drill down and understand the nuances of where people are coming from and how best to engage with them. My intention was to provide an opportunity for a difficult conversation with the whole Committee rather than just 1-2-1 conversations with me. But it didn't quite work like that and as irritation among the Committee members mounted it was agreed that an external facilitator should help us to manage this conversation.

How can we as a team get better at integrating the newcomers without having to go back to square 1 or resort to external help? Can we build a dynamic pathway through different (but equally legitimate) positions? What can we realistically take on and what can we do differently when we are all so crazily busy just keeping the fund processes afloat?

Bump 4: Lack of coordination where it matters most… Probably one of the most uncomfortable bumps in the road was in October this year when the Fund was alerted with regard to the spike in violence and resultant displacement in the Central African Republic – a long overlooked and huge scale, long-term crisis. An alert was raised. The Committee's duty rota met and actually increased the envelope higher than the amount recommended in the alert with an understanding that the needs were acute and based on an assumption that agencies locally could respond.

However, a number of agency staff on the ground expressed serious concerns to the Start Fund Team about the alert being raised – stating there was a lack of coordination and that some agencies were absolutely not ready to respond. Tension quickly mounted. At what point should the issue of coordination between agencies outweigh the necessity for a quick funding disbursement to enable those agencies with the response capability to be able to do so promptly?

7. Whenever a crisis threatens or strikes, any of the Start Network members can 'raise an 'alert '. From this point – an alert cycle begins – where information is shared and decisions are collectively made on whether to release Funds, and if so, which projects to select.

What more will it take to bring members together to affirm the principles of the Start Fund, both on issues of speed and coordination? It was a reminder of what the Start Fund is for and the situation of those using it who are all too often exhausted and over-stretched individuals in the midst of coordinating crisis response and trying to make the best possible decisions under extreme stress. How can our processes help to maximise peer review and evolve trust rather than expose the lack of it? And in ways that support our collective efforts to build a culture of collaboration between members.

These bumps in the road have not dampened my energy or enthusiasm – each one has taught me something new and made us as a team consider issues more deeply. We know that for the Start Fund to operate at scale, both in terms of the volume of money it disburses and the number of organisations that can be involved, the processes need to be highly rigorous and inclusive but also as light touch as possible. Otherwise, we risk building something that no member agency is able to engage with and that a future Start Fund Team will never be able to sustain. If what we do is too complicated we will do little more than grind to a halt.

Start Engage also involves a large budget, collaborative decision-making processes and collective action and, as with Start Fund, this area of work has taken a while to find its feet in terms of balance between full engagement and project delivery against time and targets. Like Caroline, Shveta Shah – who became Manager of the DEPP project early this year – has run up against a number of surprises and challenges.

Breaking through entrenched positions

Shveta Shah

My first foray into the Disasters Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) was 20 minutes into my first day at Start, when I had to attend an International Steering Committee for the Transforming Surge Capacity project, and be immediately ready to review, absorb the views expressed and even advise. And so it has carried on. It has been a rapidly paced, creative and dynamic approach to the construction and management of this portfolio. And it has been very challenging.

INGOs in humanitarian work seem, from the outside, to operate as an exclusive club. Everyone seems to know each other and it is, typically, these existing relationships that form the basis for joint work. Coming to this as an outsider has added a significant edge to the role. This is also about where the power sits in the Start Network and who the powerful are – it's mainly older white men, not people who look like me. So the question for me in this role is: how to lead DEPP within the Start Network, when I am not from the club and I don't have the benefit of established relationships. Added to which, I don't come from or share British / Western notions of leadership and I don't have an automatic allegiance to this status quo.

All this leads me to relentlessly ask searching questions: Where and how do we find new, different and diverse collaborators from outside the club? How do we bring the club along with us on this path and how do we create two-way lines of travel between the club and these new and different outside humanitarian actors? How do we grow, develop and make more enduring relationships? How do we demonstrate openness, humility and the integrity to take on board multiple country and region cultural notions of leadership? If we cannot recognise these are of equal worth, how can we decentralise and disperse leadership? Are we ready to do this? Nearly a year later, as far as I am concerned, the jury is still out. But I've seen enough and care enough to see that this journey is important and to be willing to part of it.

Building the DEPP means bringing to life so many ideas (connected and disconnected), people and organisations. There are exciting moments but they also reveal the ambiguity that is whether our approaches truly work together for better humanitarian preparedness. The early days of the implementation phase have been beset with obstacles: contracting, recruitment, project start-up logistics, and building common understanding of how collaboration can

work between so many stakeholders. The assumption that civil society organisations have cohesive ways of working has been sorely tested and continues to be so as the organisations involved strive to work closely together, sometimes having to cope with a considerable level of discomfort.

There are incredibly entrenched positions. There are even fraught moments with flashes of disrespect for peers, despite knowing that mutual respect is fundamental to effective collaboration. People and organisations need to be willing to give things up as well as taking new things on, this is easier for some than for others. Sometimes you find the grouping of people around a key theme, area of work, or action ignites passion and a melding of ideas for a completely new form – this is when the magic of programming arises. The results of these magic moments have yet to be worked seen, but the moment of birth for such imaginative ideas gives a sense of a bright future.

A further inhibiting factor for the DEPP is how the internal world of individual INGOs plays out. The current wave of re-structuring, reviewing, and strategy development sometimes disproportionately dominates the debate and detracts from our collective focus on creating new approaches to enable more effective humanitarian work. It also can have an effect on the ability of those involved to focus on the specific crisis-affected populations whom the DEPP is serving. On the other hand, as the year has progressed and the majority of projects have moved beyond the inception phase, facilitated discussions reveal that those involved in the DEPP are finding the bigger picture discussions a good opportunity to step away from their internal challenges and are relishing the opportunity to connect with peers and to spend time reconnecting with core humanitarian issues.

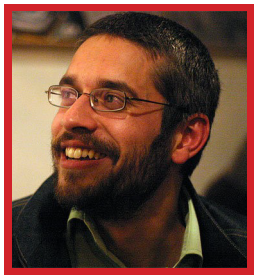
All this makes me wonder about how much time INGOs spend on their own power struggles and bureaucracies at the cost of accountability to disaster affected populations. Is there just too much distance between INGO actors and affected people and will we ever be able to help close the gap? Are our INGO members really willing to get beneath the rhetoric and work out how we can do this collectively?

There is also something of a conceptual and operational divide within the Start Team between programme management, monitoring learning and evaluation, policy, and advocacy – these seem to be artificial separations since so much of all our work is enhanced through understanding their interdependency. A more open challenge to this operational divide needs to happen sometime soon. One could see this too as an opportunity for forward thinking about humanitarian capacities and a hallmark of being involved in the Start Network. One of the great assets of Start is that we are 'doers' and 'thinkers' at the same time.

Finally, a consistent – and illuminating – theme that runs through the DEPP work is an on-going dialogue about the capacity of different actors in humanitarian work. We may claim to know what is out there and what is needed, but the reality is that we only have snapshots and pockets of understanding – there is very much that we do not know. Perhaps there is too little questioning of our own assumptions about the biases and norms we are starting from. This is the exhilarating part of the learning that comes from both the DEPP and the wider Start Network. As a collaborative learning process it is rich – although often very untidy!

The third 'leg' of the organisation is Start Labs (formerly Start Beta), still in its earliest stages having been put on hold whilst the other two programmes got established, dedicated to pursuing innovation and the kinds of experimental approaches that will enable Start to do the new as opposed to managing the old in new ways. This initiative is under development by Paul Currion who is an independent consultant and has been working as a quasi-team member throughout the year.

Embedding the experimental



Paul Currion

The Start Network itself is an experiment. Although it builds on previous experiences, the approach to collaboration taken by the members is different to anything that's been tried before.

A central idea was to leverage collective resources – but no such resources have yet been leveraged for the innovation stream, which meant looking outside the membership. We decided not to go to the institutional donors because we felt that innovative work should be funded in innovative ways.

We agreed that the most interesting potential source of funding was private philanthropy – wealthy individuals who were looking to invest their money into activities with social impact. But then we found ourselves in a Catch-22: we couldn't approach potential donors without a good pitch; we couldn't develop a good pitch without a good track record; and we couldn't build a good track record without funding to launch activities. To escape this cycle, Start Network would need to invest some of its own resources – not just funding, but also management support – and in 2015 such resources have been in short supply.

2016 will be a critical year for the entire humanitarian sector, for the Start Network, and for Start Labs. While there is a need for joint policy and advocacy within the NGO community, Start is different: it doesn't just talk the talk about working differently, it walks the walk. Working with members from the humanitarian community and partners from the private sector, Start Labs plans to run three pilots in late 2015 and early 2016. While these pilots may not have reached fruition by the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, they will have shown whether the current Start Labs model is viable. If it's not, then we'll need to learn the lessons, go back to the drawing board – and work out what to do differently next time.

I have based my career on two beliefs: first, that humanitarian principles should be universal, and second, that the humanitarian sector needs to continually evolve if it is to deliver on those principles. The humanitarian approach that is predominant was developed in the last half of the twentieth century – a completely different world to the one that we live in now. One of the reasons that the humanitarian community is rapidly losing ground and credibility is because this centralised and bureaucratic model is no longer fit for purpose.

I got involved with Start because I believe that it is the paradigm itself – what we refer to as the 'business model' of the humanitarian sector – that needs to change. Start Network is one of the few global initiatives that actively strive to bring about this level of change. This makes it very exciting for people who want to make an impact who are courageous enough to imagine something very different. The Start Network offers a new way of working at the headquarters level – and creates a vehicle for trying new ways of working all the way down to the field level. Even if we don't yet know exactly what that new paradigm is, we can see some parts of it in the different projects that Start Network programmes take.

For me the big question is how to deliver radical innovation to the humanitarian community, and that leads me to think about the structures of the community itself. I believe that Start Network is starting to offer a new kind of organising principle that can takes advantage of network effects and collaborative advantage to unlock potential within the sector. As with any process of experimentation, I don't expect to succeed the first time, or the second, or maybe even the third; but this is the only way of creating the kind of change that the sector urgently needs. This is not an easy task because it goes against the way we have worked for over a century – but if we don't move to this model, I believe that the humanitarian community as we know it won't survive.

The survival of the humanitarian community is important for the survival of humanitarian principles in a world that is increasingly hostile to those principles. Moving to a networked and decentralised way of working is our way of ensuring that those principles do not just survive, but thrive in an uncertain future.

In addition to the two big formal Start programmes and the still embryonic Start Labs, a feature of 2015 has been the invitation to Start Network to take on some additional ad hoc initiatives – building on Start's now established and recognised capability in responding fast to crises. David Hockaday who has this year moved from DEPP to a new position of Transition Manager reflects on the excitements and challenges this has brought to the team.

Responding to new demands

David Hockaday

My role in the network is mainly focussed on helping the members deliver what we used to call 'ad-hoc' opportunities (but now call 'collaborative responses'). These operational programmes have caused me considerable tension this year. I moved out of remote operational coordination in a former life around 2003 as I found being a buffer between donor and field staff is a messy and a thankless task and the idea of someone who sits many miles away from the programme actually providing coordination is as far from my personal philosophy (and that of the Start Network) as one could get. So it has been something of a challenge coming back into it again, particularly with the added complication of working through a network rather than a single organisation.

The challenges of implementation have been many but a significant one is the fact that many of those working in our member organisations still don't really know what the Start Network is. And it is easy to see how and why they get confused. The Start Network takes on a lot and aims to pioneer new processes but with regard to my portfolio we can find ourselves tripping up on the very procedures we have created.

The kinds of issues I have faced include:

- Using tried-and-tested Start Fund processes without recognising that some were inappropriate for the collaborative responses portfolio. The fact that an inconsistency was picked up by the donor and not the Start Team or the implementing partner, for example, led to some loss of credibility which is especially disappointing when the Network is still in the early stages of trying to establish itself.
- The incubation of Start Network by Save the Children UK specifically with regard to complex HR and legal issues relating to the delivery of projects. For example, a secondment agreement between the first incumbent and Save the Children International in Senegal collapsed. This deployment had taken months of negotiation and it was extremely disappointing that it didn't work out.
- Advertising a job description for a position with one of the collaborative response programmes amongst member and implementing agencies surprisingly yielded no applications. In off the record conversations with some of the partners, it became clear that it is not in the interests of Country Directors to circulate these kind of job adverts as it all too often ends up with their own senior staff leaving and a recruitment gap to be filled.
- We are not set up as a team to provide operational coordination roles. Not only because it is counter to the Start Network philosophy of decentralised and distributed leadership, but it is also arguable whether there is any legitimacy or authenticity provided by a role that is geographically remote from the programme and also outside of the normal procedures of the implementing organisations. And yet, I have had to take on a great deal of coordination.

Incentivising collaborative behaviours is extremely important for the Start Network and the collaborative response opportunities are, in principle, a great way of doing this. The creation of a set of templates, agreements and other collaboration documents will go some way to creating a franchise that implementing members can not only buy into, but also can feel empowered to lead. Establishing the role of the Start Team as 'brokers' of the initial project submission and selection process and then the implementing members as responsible for delivery (with their own resources to do so) will also provide clear boundaries and will avoid perpetual expansion of the Start Team to service each new opportunity that comes our way.

Continued engagement with UK staff and field staff will also help with socialising the aims of Start Network – it is not just a new donor with yet another set of rules and requirements – but potentially a radical and refreshing whole new approach. But this will take time and persistent engagement with the experiment alongside a sustained campaign making the case for change.

The Start Team comprises some feisty people who are perfectly prepared to say it like it is and eschew more politically correct and diplomatic interventions. Matt Kletzing, Manager: Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL), sets the bar high in terms of challenging and changing general

assumptions about the issue of M&E that is so central to the humanitarian sector.

Managing the explosion(s)

Matthew Kletzing

'Monitoring' is the driest term on the planet. It rubs like chalk in the mouth. 'Evaluation' isn't much better: it's designed to suss you out. So being an M&E specialist doesn't usually make you a very popular person. In a single organisation, it can be relatively safe because you aren't typically on the frontlines. You can hide behind programme people, popping out strategically to say, "I told you so." But just try working for / with 24 organisations. Who will hide you now? You suddenly are the frontline. "*M&E legitimates the Network*" our director warned my team recently. No pressure then.

Freeze that pane, backtrack a few steps, and look around again. An explosion is about to occur. Log frames aren't sexy enough to excite people, so you adopt the term 'learning'. For the enabler, the finisher, the catalyst, learning might just do the job: control that explosion and make yourself popular again. Brandish the term 'learning' around Start Network, re-charge your rhetoric, and your evidence might have a chance of making a real difference. Is that all it is – semantics? "*Working with the Start Network is like unicorns farting rainbows*", someone once told me.

What we know in terms of human behaviour, even more so for organisations, is that knowledge sits like dross wherever we collect it. It needs that spark to burn and carefully applied new fuel to keep it smouldering. That's where learning comes in. Talk about iteration, adaptive management, single, double and triple loop learning until you go loopy yourself. These are all attempts to cajole a rowdy and disobedient bunch of people to unlock latent potential. It's about being the best we can be and doing no harm. "*People who do development would rather do nothing than the wrong thing, but people who do humanitarian would rather do something*," said a colleague, and we all laughed knowingly.

Good enough. Better next time. That's what MEL is about in the Start Network: because timing is everything. Who cares about your report if the flood happened six months ago! We've moved on to election violence and displacement now. You have run to deliver that gold dust, but before you arrive there's been an earthquake in Asia, so are you sure you're still running in the right direction? Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning – they are all useless unless their products are used, and it's all about getting the right information to the right people at the right time to make a difference. Ultimately, that's why we so often look like a bomb squad rushing to the scene. "*What's not shared is wasted*" goes the adage.

Delivering MEL for the Start Network requires a 'partnership brokering' approach to learning. It is data collection and analysis for sure, streamlined knowledge and information management systems, visualisations, dashboards and learning events – but the service in a collaboration so complex is as much bridge-building and match-making as anything else.

We are the privileged that see everything the Start Network is doing. As alchemists, we are searching for that perfect chemical formula, but as magicians, we know intuition might just go farther, faster. So we constantly connect-the-dots between individuals, organisations, evidence, information, people. We don't have to prove we are getting somewhere, because the evidence speaks for itself, and allows us to take the Start Network to the next level. "*The largest investment ever made in learning about what works and doesn't work in humanitarian preparedness*," is the claim of our new project. Audacious or what?

In 2015, we have decentralised MEL by pushing peer-reviews down to the field level following every Start Fund response. We have hired a team of regional learning colleagues, and now have personnel presence in every major region, save Latin America. Like supermarkets, we know that we need to stop importing. "*Keep learning local*" I repeat to the team.

In 2015, we have scaled up MEL by launching a £3.4 million project to evidence and serve the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP).

We've brokered new partnerships, bringing Harvard Humanitarian Initiative on board as the independent evaluation specialists who will accompany the programme. From 2 staff to 15, MEL has transformed from a small service to a significant project. "*When it rains it pours*" and this is an arid land.

In 2015, challenges grew like shadows that shrink in the light. The Start Fund doubled its volume that means, of course, double the data. We've been stretched, struggling to scale up capacity fast enough to deliver on new commitments. A quagmire of contracting and bureaucracy set back projects six and nine months. Red tape controls explosions faster than any MEL responders. Governance structures formed or transformed – whether a new Start Fund Committee, the DEPP's Evaluation Steering Committee, or reference groups for collaborative scaled-up responses. And as every good MEL person will ask you, "*If you really want to effect change, where are your formal links to decision-making bodies?*" Evidence isn't activated until it translates into decisions. So we struggled reinventing feedback loops, orbiting but repelled by an unseen force. "*And the moon is the mother of lunatics, and has given them all her name*" wrote G. K. Chesterton.

Partnerships create partners, and few are more complicated in their power relations than marriages or collaborating with donors. Mixed lines of communication, misunderstandings, big assumptions followed by even bigger expectations. We have quarrelled, but we are committed – for better or for worse. The guinea pig of new collaborative, scaled up responses taught us new and important lessons about partnering. Collaboration creates new possibilities despite the challenges: and so we ran a field peer review with a motley crew of donor, secretariat and member agency staff, and in the backwaters of Blantyre, everyone was equal (more or less).

The MEL team has been a litmus test for collaboration in agencies, too, and we have learned – sometimes after the explosion – that models of partnership in the Network are as widely varied as the Network itself. To be effective, each different type requires different monitoring and evaluation, or you won't get to that explosion on time. "*When timeliness and thoroughness are mutually exclusive, timeliness always wins*" is our rule.

The Start Network began the year intending to internationalise, and the MEL team has provided listening posts for Start as a movement. There is a growing sense of awareness about who we are beyond London. Field teams are coming together and recognising what Start Network brings. Start is coming of age, and, as the MEL team, we mark on the wall every inch we grow. We hear this in Start Fund peer reviews. We see it in DEPP project induction workshops. We know that when our legs are tired in London our colleagues in Nairobi, Islamabad, Dhaka, Lilongwe, Maputo, Addis Ababa and Dakar are walking with ever-greater energy. This connection at the field level brings an insight: in these places, there is no difference between Fund and DEPP, between 'preparedness' and 'response'. It is the same individuals, the same heroes/heroines spanning the divide.

And so, preparing for another year ahead, major questions and new challenges threaten to detonate: are we ready for awareness that brings agency? Are we ready for our legitimacy to find its voice? Will we give up as much control as our rhetoric requires? Ultimately, will our work at Start be a challenge to the sector or a reflection of it?

In the words of Arundhati Roy, we must remember to: "*never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple; respect strength, never power and, above all, watch, try and understand, never look away and never, never forget.*"

The Start Team and the Director, Sean Lowrie, have benefitted from handholding, thought provocation and critical friendship of a number of Advisors. One such is Randolph Kent, who has recently taken on the post of Start Network's Honorary President.

Making Decisions from the Future

Randolph Kent[8]

As an Advisor to Start Network from its early days, I

8. Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Kings College, London.

bring a certain lens to what it is aiming to do. I have an extensive background in humanitarian action from a UN, NGO and, now, an academic perspective. In each of these assignments in Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda, Kosovo and Somalia, I was faced with challenges that in various ways have framed the sorts of contributions that I am able to offer.

In one way or another, all my assignments brought to the fore issues that demonstrated serious gaps in the spectrum of concerns that fall under the policy and operational label, 'humanitarian'. Of particular importance was the issue of how those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities could be more anticipatory and adaptive.[9] How to look at collaboration and innovation in ways that are not focused solely on humanitarian action but that also consider the changing organisational and leadership dynamics required to participate effectively in the 21st century.

Whether it was disaster or emergency prevention, preparedness or response, it was increasingly evident that the humanitarian sector was inherently 'reactive'. While the reactive nature of the sector now is increasingly acknowledged, the emerging reality is also that few humanitarian organisations have the will or the knowledge to become more proactive and anticipatory. This fact will pose ever more difficult challenges for those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities in a world where the types, dimensions and dynamics of humanitarian crises will increase. As my contribution to Start Network, I try to shine some light on ways to enhance anticipatory and adaptive capacities.

Directly related to the issue of anticipatory and adaptive capacities is that of exploring 'the future'. Exploring the future is not intended to predict what the world will look like in two decades time, but rather to help humanitarian actors think about the '*what might be's*'. By sensitising humanitarian actors to possible transformative factors that might relate to new types of vulnerabilities as well as to different types of responses, they may begin to shed their reluctance both to think differently and beyond their often outmoded 'standard operating procedures'.

This sort of futures work should, in my view, be used by the Start Network to enable its members to think, plan and respond in different and, hopefully, more sensitive ways.[10]

The sorts of interests reflected in the previous two paragraphs are also reflected in work that my colleagues and I at King's have undertaken in promoting new approaches to collaboration and innovation. Some of this material was incorporated in a study that was done for the Start Network.[11]

With regard to the challenges that the Start Network may have to face in the future, my understanding of the United Nations and appreciation of the operational challenges that are inherent in humanitarian operations provides, I hope, a useful lens. This is not to say that my perspectives and understanding are unique, but rather that they may serve as an additional source of knowledge at the disposal of the Start Network.

The evolution (if not quite revolution) from the CBHA[12] to the Start Network is a process that I have watched and continue to admire and support. We work on common objectives – objectives that the Start Network with its resources, membership and leadership have an extraordinary (and perhaps unique) opportunity to fulfil.

9. Exploration of this issue became the Humanitarian Futures Programme at King's College, London, in 2004.

10. We have developed a series of tools, viz, the Organisational Self-Assessment Tool [OSAT], Futures Roundtables and Testing the Future initiative, that are available to Start Network and members. It should also be noted that Start has participated actively in the Futures Roundtables and Testing the Future initiatives (and has made a generous contribution to the former).

11. The Future of Non-Governmental Organisations: Global Transformations and their Consequences (2013).

12. CBHA: Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies – the former name of the Start Network.

Triumphs and Transaction Costs

"This year has been a wild ride. Over a dozen amazing NGOs applied to join the Network, and we had to invent a process to convert those applications to full and equal membership. In the end, six did join, and two are pending. The Dutch government joined the Start Fund. Start was asked to manage three unplanned umbrella grants for DFID.

We struggled against many odds to hire more people on the team. We pushed forward to create a new type of organisation – the Start Network Company – that will nurture, cultivate, broker and service the Start Network in the years to come.

We engaged as a Network in the complex and ambiguous system change process called the World Humanitarian Summit. We struggled to get our messages heard in a highly politicised and turbulent environment for civil society humanitarian action.

Every week has been different. Every day is a constant struggle to understand the priorities, and then to deliver on them."[13]

There is no doubt that 2015 has indeed been 'wild'. As the year draws to a close there is much for the team to look back on and feel very good and really excited about. At the same time, many in the team describe themselves as completely exhausted and it is clear that working at such a frenetic pace is taking quite a toll. How well do members and donors understand the complex nature of the team's workload? How easy is it to run such an ambitious initiative where the need for procedures and member engagement risk holding back the ability to be highly responsive and fast moving? Or should that be the other way round – could it be that the fast pace takes too much attention away from creating and maintaining necessary protocols?

Is this an inevitable conflict between management and development imperatives?

In this section, we report on both the triumphs and the transaction costs of Start in 2015 – but we[14] have chosen to focus somewhat more on the latter because transaction costs are so often under-reported and therefore almost invisible – leading to a distorted picture of what it takes to collaborate effectively. And a key purpose of this case study series is to enable others to learn from Start's experience – which means those experiences need to be as full and honestly captured as possible.

It has been a full year and many highlights. To make a link between the visible achievements and the largely invisible work it has taken to achieve them, we invited some of the Start Network team to keep a logbook for one week in early November. Here are extracts from three logbooks from three relatively new team members. They provide an interesting insight into the daily life of the team.

Helen James, Communications Team

- Team meet cancelled – came up with an alternative plan to use valuable time gained
- Video & telephone conferencing – review of options. Decision made: a mix of 2 solutions.
- Pre-lunch meeting on engagement, surveying & discussion platform. Review of potential impact to engagement (huge!).
- Internal meeting over lunch to catch-up. Notes swapped and options looked at to help each other prioritise for rest of week.
- Post lunch: meeting with a colleague to look at potential learning across roles. Decision: make this a regular meeting.
- Last meeting of the day: our fortnightly Mega Week / Engagement Taskforce meeting – the most exciting one!

Limou Dembele, MEL Team

- Starting to put together a programme-level case study related to the refugee programme in Cameroon - a process designed to make sure that learning is captured.
- Need to show progress of coordination between partners, with good practice examples, challenges and needs.
- Being based in Cameroon means I can try to capture the reality as to the best of my ability. It requires lots of conversations that could be perceived as time wasting!
- Identifying the next steps: how to share and ask for input/ validation using a mechanism that encourages joint reflection and supports team effort.

Kat Reichel, Start Fund Team

- Discussions with agencies around how they interact with and implement through local partners: looking at ways to share this with other agencies at HQ & field level.
- Failed meeting attendance: technology didn't work. Frustration!
- Communications to correct misinformation: conveying that Start isn't a donor, but is a network of member organisations
- Managing data: finding the time to input data, gaps appearing when the inputs aren't happening across the organisation
- Developing ideas and engagement for the up-coming

13. Sean Lowrie.
14. The term 'we' used here means those in the Start Team and the Partnership Brokers Association who have been involved in compiling this case study.

'mini-mega week' and preparation for my colleague's presentation

- How to challenge the system when the work is through those embedded in it?

Drawing on a range of materials written by the team[15] (either in the form of think pieces or logbooks) we attempt to paint a picture of what it has taken to deliver these milestones – telling the story as far as possible in their own words.

Vitally important, is the on-going, ever-changing relationship to Network members and donors.[16]

"Members are still navigating their way around the uses and challenges of the Start Network – and discovering how the different pathologies of agencies bubble up in decision making – events and broader discussions between Members can bring these to light – but it is really difficult to get everyone to the table and build consensus."

"It is a real challenge to work collaboratively workout compromising on time efficiency."

"Processes are getting lighter at every stage…we are reducing the length of report forms, reducing the time required for members to participate in peer reviews and automating quantitative analyses so we can devote more time to qualitative analysis."

"We do need to find a way to better document and map these moments of engagement / social capital building to (easily) share with the Network – as it is just as critical as the other KPIs we track, like speed."

"To date we have not shared key information about our projects and their durations with other donors to help them encourage particular agencies to apply for funds, and to help donors select applications that close the gap (in terms of time, location and thematic focus) between Start projects and their own. Hopefully, the online Start Fund portal will provide this service."

"The beauty of the 'ad hoc' projects is the way they were designed by our members with their partners and selected by an independent peer review process. This has ensured that the programmes have been designed by the people closest to the disaster and that resources go to those people who carry out the last mile of programming."

"Our team has recently had very fruitful discussions with DFID that has led to us identifying a number of opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration. We will also be brokering partnerships with other donors and pooled funding mechanisms to further enhance our MEL processes as well as reporting on the role and impact of the Start Fund on the humanitarian financial architecture."

"As we prepare for 'mini mega week' in November I ask myself: have we put the emphasis on the right things? Have we set too much stall by one presentation or by one conversation? I know from 18 months of riding the Start Fund rollercoaster, that this week is also when powerful exchanges will happen – probably when we least expect them – they could be from a disagreement, a throwaway comment, or it could just be that over-coffee nugget of golden information."

As with any collaborative model engaging with multiple players, often long-distance, connecting with people can contribute considerably to a sense of frustration and loss of momentum. Here is one example of the kind of communication chains the Start Team deal with daily:

"An issue raised by a donor sitting in-country comes through me in the UK's Start office to the implementing agencies. From there it goes out to their field teams to find out more information. Then it comes back to me so that I can respond to the donor on behalf of the Network. This is frustrating and ridiculous enough on project-by-project basis but where it starts to get really messy is at a programme level."

A recurring theme is how to create more appropriate systems whilst deeply embedded within the existing system.

"Sometimes it feels like we are just a reflection of the humanitarian system as it plays out in the field – how do we really challenge these systems through those embedded within it?"

"Our work is still not well understood by local stakeholders and such misunderstanding easily becomes 'political'. I find there is often suspicion that Start is using collaboration as a way of mitigating. How do we get our approach across better? Are (we) on the same page? How can we use communication to incentivise, learn and inspire each other? Perhaps this collaborative approach will always have to face such communication, perception and political issues."

This view from the field is important as the Start Team are working with growing numbers of people on the humanitarian frontline:

"The committee of Network member staff that oversees the Fund and makes decisions for each and every crisis alert that comes through has morphed and grown to more than 50 individuals – of whom 25% are based outside of the UK. Among many other things, we have undertaken an inter-agency learning review of a specific Start Fund activation in Malawi and set up the first 'project selection roster' of staff in West Africa."

Complex, long-distance arrangements can all too easily fall through and when that happens the impact on the staff can be intense:

15. With grateful thanks to those quoted in this section – Alexandre Brecher, Limou Dembele, Helen James, David Hockaday, Caroline Hotham, Kat Reichel, Shveta Shah, Ian Simcox-Heath – whose words have not been attributed in order to be able to reproduce what they wrote whilst avoiding any push back from their observations being viewed out of context.

16. Covered in some detail in the second case study in the series: Power and Politics http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Power-Politics-case-study-FINAL1.pdf

"My sense of impotence around the collapse of this arrangement was a particularly new emotion. I spent many years working in complex networked environments in my former work, but the feeling of powerlessness in this particular instance was overwhelming. Not to mention the amount of social capital I had expended trying to work out the agreement in the first place."

"It's really hard to operate between the region and central levels… between projects and programme level… between communication and MEL services."

"It is an uneven and strenuous route to feeling an overall sense of progress: positive days and harder days. As someone who's done a little bit of time 'on the frontline' in the humanitarian system, I know how testing it is to be Country Director or how complicated it can be to lead an Evaluation or how deeply moving it is to sit with a group of people who have just been forced from their village. So I feel a bit sheepish to be reflecting on how emotional it can be sitting quite some steps removed from humanitarian operations – but it is actually very emotional."

"I shouldn't depend so much on colleagues – seems like sometimes a lot of wasted time talking through things – but I do! I need to be more confident in taking those decisions I can, and letting the members steer the rest."

As I write this, I'm tired, not feeling terribly positive and wondering if actually the effort of keeping so many balls in the air – and having to choose which one to drop next – is really making much difference to anything or anyone apart from raising my levels of anxiety. Meanwhile, the team and I get on with preparing for next week's Assembly meeting, Board meeting, Start Fund Council and Start Fund Committee meetings. And so it goes on…"

Sometimes the frustrations are of a more practical and functional nature:

"Before leaving for the weekend we had a desk move, apparently by no means the first for the Start team at SCUK! We now have fewer desks but more space for laptops, not everyone is happy about this."

"In the office alone – no one to bounce ideas off!"

"End of the week, so time to finish off everything I didn't get around to. Luckily I didn't have too many meetings today."

"So little time to focus on anything."

"Not enough time to explore new things – with to do list becoming ever longer."

"Peer review didn't happen due to connectivity issues – how do we engage internationally if we can't even connect!"

Through quite a bit of anxiety and frustration… a high level of enthusiasm does keep breaking through:

"So much work – but data changes how we engage and can provide insights into our work. Tracker is already showing cool stats regarding timing of alerts and engagement – super exciting!!!"

"We have only been implementing this programme for a year and early milestones have been reached in some places, there have been some unexpected outcomes and some uncomfortable learning. I am now highly focused on the more tangible results that we are beginning to achieve."

A key factor in is the growing sense of loyalty and engagement within the team (or more accurately 'teams' since there are a number of sub-teams and certain teams are located in member organisations not in the Start office).

"What a team – the best thing about the position I'm in is to work with outstanding people in the team and in so many organisations and who are literally all over the world. It's unique, and I know that, in spite of the anxieties and incredibly hard work, I am very, very lucky to be in this position."

"Being hosted at ACF-UK has allowed MEL to tap into many valuable resources available within ACF-UK's operations department, particularly for evaluation and information / knowledge management."

As Tanuja Pandit, Start's Chief Operating Officer, suggested, there is an aspiration to creating a work ethic that is highly flexible, based on individual self-reliance and with a non-hierarchical structure, modelling the best of collaborative practices. However, it is clear that whilst there is increasing orderliness in how the team works, the Director still operates as a something of an independent maverick[17] – providing the essential speed of thinking, highly responsive and ideas-generating role so critical to driving Start's ambitious goals but at some disruption to the team's need for continuity and manageable workloads.

"In practice my role is to build the future of Start by mobilising financial and other resources, creating a space of legitimacy for the Network, identifying opportunities and brokering new ideas and partnerships, whilst supporting and guiding the Team – a truly wonderful and inspiring group of people."

Sean Lowrie, Start's Director has a huge job that requires a wide range of skills and competencies – some see him as pushing the agenda too fast and from an overly ideological standpoint, others see him as just what is needed to challenge and change the sector because he is outspoken and independent in his thinking. Of himself he says:

"I see myself as an ultimate pragmatist – fighting for the survival of the sector and its incumbent organisations. But survival will only come with change. And it would appear from my experience this year, that system change requires working at the speed of the system. And the humanitarian aid system responds to crises in a turbulent world, which are coming fast and frequent. So this is not about me – it is about what it takes to change a system."

It is hard to juggle all the parts that make Start Network the multi-facetted entity that it is fast becoming. Inevitably some things suffer because others take precedence, including

17. This is widely recognised far beyond the team and seen, for the most part, as an asset by members and donors so long as there is full transparency and there are some checks and balances.

a serious risk of burnout from the pressures of work. The move towards an independent entity is seen as a timely opportunity for some re-structuring of the team and sharing the leadership role more broadly so that it becomes more sustainable.

An additional factor is that as Start Network 'grows up', the relationship to the host organisation, Save the Children (SCUK), becomes more irksome. HR and legal processes feel unnecessarily cumbersome and no longer appropriate for Start's specific needs. Start's identity being subsumed in SCUK's (email addresses, for example) is now confusing when the Network is growing fast and has its own independent identity which, essentially, needs to be unaligned. The child is ready to leave home and this has all the usual emotional and practical implications – the parent being proud of the growing maturity but at the same time reluctant to let go; the child chafing to move on but somewhat daunted by what lies ahead.

What matters most from the team's perspective as 2016 beckons?

"Unrestricted income, like that provided by the members fees, is gold dust, and provides the kind of flexibility, iteration and experimentation necessary for this kind of endeavour, that traditional sources of income simply do not. But like gold dust it is also hard to come by."

" We have gone into new opportunities as a kind of experiment and we are certainly learning by doing, but by taking on increasing amounts of new and experimental work, without additional capacity available, the Network runs the risk of a threat to its credibility to actually consolidate and deliver existing work streams. But simply expanding the Start Team has to be understood from our members' perspectives. After all the growth of the Start Team will be perceived by some members as direct competition to them and their organisational positions. It is yet another a difficult tension that needs to be addressed and sorted out."

"Communication will play an increasingly integral part in the work that the Start Network undertakes internationally. Communication will help talk about Start's ways of working as well as humanitarian change in general for a range of audiences, using different tactics and platforms. It will help inform our existing members, donors and partners, cement and advance new partnerships, influence sceptics and misinformed actors. It will help establish Start's brand and credibility in the humanitarian sector and beyond (other sectors who want to 'do good')."

"Communication will help collect and select information related to programme implementation from a wide range of humanitarian staff and partner agencies (5000 partners, over a quarter million staff in 200 countries) and package it so it has regional and international significance and usability."

"We also need to take into account our "disruptor ethos" in the way we organise and structure ourselves: to avoid being institutionalised and put into a box we need to rethink hierarchy and make management as distributed as possible."

"We have to keep reminding ourselves that we must: simplify things that are complicated; learn how best to manage emergence and complexity; ensure the highest standards with regard to transparency and good governance whilst being agile and responsive. From my vantage point it is difficult to crow about anything having gone well because it is all 'work-in-progress'. That said, we have worked extremely hard as a team, have systematised and professionalised our offering in a number of areas and we are quite proud of our various achievements." [18]

18. Tanuja Pandit.

Holding onto the Vision

Those in the Start Team have worked tirelessly to develop and deliver a rapidly expanding portfolio of programmes. As we have seen, this has been at some cost. But Start Network is about far more than new approaches to delivering humanitarian programmes, it is about constructing a fundamentally different humanitarian system. This depends on a number of factors being conceived in radically new ways including: the exploration of new sources of finance; re-framing the humanitarian imperative and purpose; engaging new and unexpected players and building an organisation and system that is more responsive to a rapidly changing humanitarian environment.

A group of specialist advisors has been working with Start Network to help to support and shape the emerging Start Network vision for the sector.

Central to this vision is the exploration of new sources of funding – diversifying income streams in ways that reduce dependence on the traditional forms of funding (without, of course, denying their central importance) and build a different way of thinking about the humanitarian sector in terms of a more sustainable business model.

Russ Bubley is a pioneer in the field of new financing and he challenges Start Network to think quite differently about money, where it may come from and what it can do.

Finding new funding models

Russ Bubley[19]

My background is in finance – designing financial products that either meet the needs of organisations that want money or that aim to excite and interest potential investors.

Working with the Start Network is slightly different. There are a number of reasons for that. What is wanted is not defined in operational terms (eg "*The Start Network wants to … improve the nature of crisis response...*") rather the desired impact is defined but the outputs to achieve it are completely open. An additional factor is Start Network's role as a collaborative project, whilst it has its own budget and funds, and its clear financial needs, it also exists at the nexus of its members, each of which have their own separate needs.

So where do we to start? Tabula rasa. What can a financial product do? What capabilities can financial products have? How could these be useful for the Start Network?

Financial products can essentially do three things: they can shift money around in time; they can transfer risks – reducing or enhancing them as needed – and they can generate new income streams. How do these capabilities relate to the types of financial needs of the Start Network? Let's consider each in turn.

Why might Start Network want to shift money around in time? Perhaps because the timing of income is uncertain, and expenses are fixed, or perhaps payment will only be made after the work has been done, or perhaps spending money now will be more efficient and effective than spending money later. Uncertain timing of income and being paid only after work has been done are problems affecting virtually all businesses and social enterprises. Spending money now because it is cheaper than spending money later is also familiar in many contexts. It's not uncommon to hear people say "*prevention is better than cure*" or "*let's nip it in the bud*".

In the context of the Start Network, all of these things arise naturally – timing uncertainty from donors, the trend towards payment in arrears from institutions, the evidence-based work showing that disaster risk reduction is more cost effective than post-disaster assistance, and the fact that rapid response to a humanitarian crisis is likely to be more impactful than a slow response.

There are lots of risks and uncertainties in humanitarian financing: expenses in non-domestic currencies, uncertainty of the level of funding that will be received for a particular emergency, no way of anticipating how many emergencies will occur and at what scale, and more challenging still, the reality that even with perfect foreknowledge of all the humanitarian emergencies in the coming year, it still wouldn't be possible to optimally allocate a budget between them – and that's

19. Founder, i for change: www.i-for-change.co.uk/

without even considering the implications of restricted funding.

Generating new money is, perhaps, the Holy Grail. There are a couple of fundamentally different approaches here: sell something you have but don't really need (or buy something you do need, more cheaply) – really this is embedding a purchase or sale into a financial product so that it is more appealing to people, or easier for them to access. Another approach is to utilise a financial product that persuades people to give you money.

In terms of selling something you have, but don't need, there can be lots of opportunity for creativity: the All England Lawn Tennis Grounds periodically sells debentures that give the holders rights to receive Wimbledon tickets; David Bowie sold future royalties from some of his albums. Applying this to the Start Network, however, is not so obvious. Perhaps the Start Network could consider selling off entitlements to cash from the rare, overfunded emergencies. Or a Start Network member could sell off future revenues from some of its child sponsorship programmes… At the very least, there is plenty of scope for brainstorming.

Using a financial product to persuade others to give you money gives room for creativity. It is possible to 'sell' either a vision or a reality. Imagine, for example, selling a promise that 50 people, relevant supplies, and expertise will be sent into an area within days of a new report of Ebola – this could be made to work with a financial product, implicitly creating a guaranteed pool of donors. Or money from a social investment could be used to start working in an area starved of funds, and in so doing to generate data and media attention that will help bring in additional money.

Coming up with ideas for new funding models is the easy bit. It is the next stages that are more challenging, and it's here that the Start Network can come into its own. To get any of these ideas off the ground requires an open space, where ideas can be thrown around, laughed at, chewed over, stressed over, and generally prodded until a consensus is reached that actually, this one just might work… and to what dizzy heights might this take the whole question of how the humanitarian sector can be better financed?

What underpins any vision and holds people together over time (remember we are talking about a marathon not a sprint) is a clear and shared sense of purpose. In its attempt to be inclusive of the diverse views and different priorities of its membership (it is, after all, a member-based network), Start has sometimes been accused of trying to do too much and / or having a lack of clarity about its principle focus.

Paul Skinner, founder of the *Agency of the Future* and the startlingly named *Pimp my Cause* has been working closely with the Start Team to assist the Network in clarifying and communicating its primary purpose and direction.

Humanitarian Free Running

Paul Skinner[20]

To all appearances John was a teenager slowly losing his way. Frustrated by a life which seemed an ill-fitting container for his energy, he would wander the local streets without purpose or hope, randomly venting his frustration by climbing neighbourhood trees, swinging onto garage roofs, teetering on fence tops, and running through disused buildings. The rules of the game were not designed for him and he had little compunction in breaking them.

One day he happened to turn on the television part way through a documentary about parkour – the style of free running that involves a whole new way of reading and navigating the built environment with leaps, vaults, pivots and rolls requiring almost military courage, balletic agility and finely tuned skill.

For the first time he could put a name to the activity that he'd begun alone as a spontaneous release valve, not even realising it was a 'thing'. He could now view his activity in the light of a narrative that made sense to him and offered the possibility of a place to fit in. The doors were open to finding others like him and learning from them as well as ultimately showing leadership in taking their pursuit to greater heights – literally. So great was the change in his self-perception that John changed his name to Kerbie. And with and through

20. Founder, Agency of the Future: www.theaof.com/

others, Kerbie became himself. As part of a community of collective pursuit.

Is it too much of a stretch to recognise something of John in the figure of the disgruntled humanitarian? Someone who knows the system as it currently stands is not equipped to meet the true needs of the people it is intended to serve? And that the rules do not necessarily encourage one to try?

My work with the Start Network this year has focussed on something that sits underneath not only communications but across the range of Start's activities: the pursuit of organisational purpose.

We can all remember occasions when as individuals we've been immersed in a purpose so engaging that we feel we lose ourselves in the 'flow'. Unaware of time passing we commit ourselves entirely to a present moment that, with hindsight, will probably stand out as among the best of our times.

That same sense of shared purpose can help us belong to something bigger; to bring all of ourselves to work; to overcome organisational convenience and to enable evolution, adaptation, stewardship and creativity. If we are clear enough about this pursuit, we can use it to drive change way beyond the boundaries of individual organisations, drawing others into our vision, forming a complex adaptive system capable of collaboration on a scale that could never be achieved through bureaucratic imperative alone.

The purpose of the Start Network was previously framed as "Accelerating Crisis Response". But this year it became clear that this could no longer encompass the collective ambition not just to speed up support for affected communities but also to more deeply change the nature of that support and the processes that provide it.

We explored whether the real problem wasn't just that crisis response can be too slow, but rather that it is often provided by the wrong people in the wrong way, with many of the most relevant sources of anticipation, preparedness and response all too often overlooked by the international system. Ultimately these questions have led to a re-definition of Start's purpose and to re-branding its major services.

The Start Network is about moving away from a system that behaves as if it is a hammer looking for nails to put itself to use, and towards a system that begins with the needs of people affected by a crisis upon which it shapes the tool that is needed.

Start is about "Connecting people affected by crisis with the best possible solutions".

In the year ahead it will be important to increase our vigilance around the vision and to accelerate how the entity's mission is embodied in the way every one involved conducts every aspect of Start's work. It will be equally important to explore what contribution our purpose can make to locating further sources of support through unexpected partnerships and to achieving greater global representation among the membership and donor base as well as with new types of corporate partner.

My belief is that with a goal that is so worth pursuing, Start Network will continue to find the right people to share the journey, even when jumping the barriers looks at first glance to be a daunting prospect.

Crucial to doing different is Start Network's willingness and ability to engage new players. The potential list is quite exciting and, perhaps, somewhat unexpected including corporations whose core business aligns with goods and services that can help turn around an emergency or hedge fund managers looking for new types of investment. These are all being explored.

An immediate priority is the need to draw in new members and donors from outside the UK to enable Start Network to become truly international. This means being open to different cultural mind-sets and approaches. To assist in this first step, Moustafa Osman, who is a disaster management expert, is playing a key role in introducing Start Network to donors in the Middle East.

Engaging New Players

Moustafa Osman[21]

21. Founder Director, Osman Consulting: www.osmanconsulting.co.uk

I advise Start Network on engaging with the Middle East, a diverse region with significant humanitarian needs as well as wealth and generosity. It is a complex region where although the language is shared amongst most countries, it is a huge mistake to assume that they are all the same in other ways. The whole region is going through massive changes at present due to many things – not least the 'Arab Spring' that started in 2011. This is leading to political, economic and social change and, most importantly, at huge humanitarian cost for example, the alarming number of internally displaced people and refugees moving in all directions, including Europe. This gives the Middle East a particular importance from a humanitarian perspective.

The rich oil-producing countries in the Gulf are already deeply involved in providing humanitarian assistance and they are strongly interested in stabilising the situation in neighbouring countries ¬¬– Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and more. It is, in my view, essential for the Start Network to engage actively with Middle East-based humanitarian partners, whether NGOs or operational grassroots organisations. Start Network is taking the initiative in proposing a new approach to partnering with peer organisations in the Middle East based on an equal footing and both sides benefitting from the complementarity of their interests, experiences and capabilities.

In its founding statements, Start Network asserts that the humanitarian system must increase its diversity and tolerance of alternative approaches to build a 'humanitarian ecosystem' that contains organisations of different sizes, types, cultures and modes of response, in a state of continual experimentation and growth. It seems that in 2015 much has been achieved in terms of diversification contributing to the roll out of Start as more than a UK-only based organisation – this includes getting a UAE trustee and looking to engage with those in the region through a more collaborative model that meets the aspirations of Middle East based humanitarian actors to be an equal partner not just donors.

However, this takes time and patience. Work in the Middle East is based on trust and whilst this is being built there will be limited tangible results in the short term. This puts a strain on more 'Western' models of short term, tangible, measurable KPIs. Another challenge is that the Start Network vetting process is quite predisposed to a Western governance system that can cause challenges in the Middle East where things are different.

Priorities in 2016 will be for Start Network to continue building relations with strategic partners and new players in the Middle East and beyond. Since such engagement is all about trust, reducing efforts in the light of no immediate results would render all previous effort wasted and make any future attempt to reconnect infinitely more challenging. Some attention to the Start Network vetting system is also important – a modified approach that achieves the same objectives but in a more culturally sensitive manner would be more likely to be successful and, ultimately to significantly support a more genuinely global 'humanitarian ecosystem'.

As indicated above, Start Network is moving to become more international in terms of its growing membership. This is a key priority for 2016. However this will not be allowed to distract the team from the strong commitment – enshrined in its co-created declaration of intent[22] – to bring challenge and change to the humanitarian sector. Alongside Randolph Kent, Start's Honorary President (see page 12), Indy Johar is another Start Advisor who brings new thinking to this critical issue.

Sector-building

Indy Johar[23]

We sit at the point of a silent crisis in the humanitarian sector. A crisis driven by the perfect storm of a growing gap between humanitarian need, stagnating humanitarian budgets, gridlock of the UN as a mechanism of change, accelerating North-North South-South gulfs driving a systemic lack of legitimacy of global representation, participation, agency and leadership.

22. See www.start-network.org/why/#.VquGg_mLShd
23. Co-founder, 00: www.project00.cc/

Last year the worldwide humanitarian aid economy amounted to about $24 billion - slightly short of the worldwide chewing gum market of $26 billion. At the same time we are increasingly recognising we are also hitting the structural limits of the current dominant humanitarian business model, which allocates restricted resources in reaction to media attention and political will as opposed to the growing humanitarian need itself. All in the context of global drivers (such as climate change, multi-polar geopolitics, population growth, economic and systemic interdependence and resource management issues) increasing the frequency, scale, complexity, novelty and duration of humanitarian crises.

Whilst the political and the economic significance of humanitarian action is increasingly being recognised and understood, within the current international humanitarian system we are woefully unprepared to undertake and drive the systemic change needed to become relevant to the growing gap of need on the ground.

This emerging gap of need will not be bridged by philanthropy and multinational NGOs, the gap in capacity and capital is too large - bridging to this future will require us to both transform & re-imagine the sector systematically from funding to intervention.

Transformation of the sector requires 4 key innovations:

1. Global Financial Markets - We must agree this scale of transformation and capacity growth will not be fulfilled by a grant economy - this future requires us to systemically connect the growing global Need to the Global Capital Markets - Catastrophe Bonds are just the poem of this future - now let us imagine the next class of Humanitarian Hedge Funds and Derivatives.
2. Preventative Investment - We must understand that these new classes of fund will focus on shifting the humanitarian economy bias from crisis management to mitigating the risk of Humanitarian Crisis - through preventative investment, along with managing the direct affects and contagion risk associated.
3. Procuring Outcomes - We must also appreciate funding will increasingly be structured toward outcomes. NGOs and INGO 'partners' will need to focus not on the efficiencies of services they can deliver but the efficiencies of delivering outcomes. This fundamentally means the sector will need to have access to an ecosystem of interventions spanning products, services, data and the conditions-makers, they will need to be driven by new economies of scope and capacity to deliver outcomes as opposed to mere scale of services and numbers of activity.
4. Data Driven - In combination, the above three trends are likely to drive the forth - a newly renewed model of deep data with rich financial and performance accountability to Outcomes with an evidence of impact.

Together this is a future which will allow us to systematically de-politicise the Humanitarian sector from the formal State Politics, History and Power by unlocking the necessary massive forms of new capital from the financial markets. However, this new marriage with the 'dark' side will require us to grow the capacity, procedures, and behaviours of NGOs to absorb this new capital and the typology of accountability and actions it demands.

The Start Network in many ways is missioned on bridging this transition by:

1. Seeking to genuinely build a global Network of NGOs Associations - from UK to South Africa, India to Canada spanning the North - South divide - collectively organising Nationally and as part of global network to ensure this new economy is genuinely fit for the purpose of addressing the growing need
2. Investing via Start labs to grow a collection of new Humanitarian Financing Instruments like the Start Fund, UK and the Catastrophe Bond to address the growing capital need - with the eventual aim of growing a network of interoperable Start Funds and capital instruments - operating with shared protocols to support this new humanitarian economy
3. Hosting the Global Network of progressive NGOs to grow the peer 2 peer learning capacity and capability needed to deliver this transition
4. And perhaps most fundamentally building a new equitable alignment - shared mission across INGOs, NGOs and Global Capital Providers to transition to a new Humanitarian Economy - which puts the Humane need at the centre of this new future.

In many ways I would argue this is a future that is coming, and it will be revolutionary - the only question is whether or not the current set of agencies will be involved in delivering this new Humanitarian Economy. This is your mission, Start Network, should you choose to accept it.

With a number of advisors warmly supporting the ambitions of Start Network, the Director has felt confirmed in his resolve that change in the Humanitarian sector is absolutely critical and increasingly urgent. Working closely with the membership – albeit representing a range of positions and views – gives a strong backbone and integrity to the mission.

Delivering the vision

Sean Lowrie

Early 2015 was conditioned for me by some challenging findings from the late autumn of the preceding year. On a trip to the four Nordic capitals with our colleagues from DFID and IrishAid we learned a number of salutary things, including that:

1. Start was widely perceived as an entirely British thing, even though the Network members had seen Start as an international thing
2. The emerging reality was that some of our INGO members were quite unable to ensure alignment of thinking about, or systematic engagement with, the Start Network in their wider 'families'. Indeed, some members' NGO families have such fractious politics that it precludes alignment on almost anything!
3. The better we got with working collaboratively, the more non-members were convinced that Start existed primarily to serve member interests. In other words, whilst we had decided to become a mission-driven Network and promote change in the humanitarian system, our external stakeholders actually saw us as a member-driven Network and a threat to non-members and...
4. Our members seemed to be unable to change these perceptions or realities

So 2015 started with two important actions.

First, the Team wrote and submitted to the Board a detailed business plan that identified the many ideas and opportunities under development. This was a full disclosure of all the possibilities and the economics of the Start Network as at January 2015. I believe this transparency led to greater ownership and engagement from the Board and from the wider membership. It also laid the foundation for us to begin to hire important new capabilities in the Team.

Second, we adjusted our communications to more specifically target external audiences, and we adopted a 'brand agenda' that clarified our purpose: *Connecting people in crises to the best possible solutions*. This was a direction of travel that I hoped would clarify the Start Network to key others and inspire people and organisations to align with us.

Our purpose is fundamentally transformative, because it does not dictate the solutions nor does it specify who provides them – thus enabling the Start Network to think about different ways and means for humanitarian action. In other words, helping local actors play a leadership role, working with new partners willing to make a contribution in humanitarian crises, and most importantly taking new business models to market to enable system change.

Although the challenges and pressures escalate in exact proportion to how successful Start Network becomes, I remain deeply committed to the vision and to its purpose for a number of reasons. More than 100 people are currently contributing to the Start Network as part-time or full-time paid employees, advisors or as volunteers. And their commitment is palpable: the Chair of the Board takes holiday leave from his job to serve the Network and our donors are real partners in the whole experiment and give us their ideas, challenges and support far beyond their funding.

Start Network is becoming well positioned with the insurance industry and is making a considerable contribution with fresh thinking about new business models for humanitarian action. Many commercial organisations are knocking on our door – wanting to get involved. I think these opportunities are coming to the Network because of the scale that we can achieve if we are bold and brave enough. That scale will come from alignment and effective collaboration. In other words, if the membership can work together at all levels and reach out to their extraordinarily diverse and impressive networks this will always be by far our greatest asset.

That said, the essential paradox of Start remains[24]: it is a positive disruptor created by incumbents.

Our members are indeed our greatest asset, but they are also our greatest challenge. The unambiguous opportunities available to the Network can only be converted into resources and agency for humanitarian action if the members learn how to work within a network model. This involves a real shift in mind-set in NGOs from seeing themselves each as self-sufficient to more of a web of organisations that are highly interdependent. If the Members can find ways to work across boundaries, not only will their agency improve, but the humanitarian system will improve as well. This is the simple reality – it is not easy, but it is possible.

A bigger, more specialised and more autonomous Start Team will be required in 2016 to help our members work across organisational boundaries and catalyse a more effective humanitarian system.

At the same time, I believe we have reached the limit of our current Start Team business model to scale further. Currently we operate from member fees and from operating fees associated with the Start Fund and Start Engage programmes. This is no longer enough – what Start Network is doing costs money, and some unfunded yet essential activities (such as our three-year relationship-building efforts with Middle Eastern humanitarian actors) are eye-wateringly expensive.

To hold on to our vision when operating under huge programme pressures, constantly changing membership challenges and with no spare cash to invest in the many and exciting new possibilities is an extraordinary struggle (and I worry constantly about the impact of my insane schedule on my family).

Over the five years we have been in existence we have never sought unrestricted core funding, and I'm very reluctant to begin now, for fear of undermining existing funding that flows. I believe that if the proposition of the Start Network is compelling enough, it can be a legitimate recipient of impact investment, or even payment for market-building activities.

One way or another to keep vision-focused, we will need to find new resources for the Start Network. To this end, my role will necessarily shift to focus primarily on resource mobilisation. Next year promises therefore to continue the Start Network tradition of fast-paced, nail-biting, emergent and exciting progress.

This case study represents an aspect of the Start Network story at a moment in time and describes a scenario that will have already changed by the time this is published. It is a snapshot, a marker in the sand – nothing more, nothing less. 2016 will bring new challenges and triumphs… we anticipate that our fourth case study (to be compiled in late 2016) will be an exploration of the process of building the new independent Start Network entity. The hope is that a tailored, fit-for-purpose governance structure will be in place alongside a de-centralised and truly inclusive collaborative model in action.

The intention of this case study has been to explore the realities that lie beneath the rhetoric, but somehow it feels as if it also raises the question: is the rhetoric is becoming the new reality?

This case study series offers the opportunity to observe a consortium in its development from the perspective of a focus on its processes as a multi-stakeholder membership model. That there is much more to learn and test is clear, and heartily welcomed by those within and around Start Network.

24. The first case study in the series was entitled *Dealing with Paradox*.