

Praxis Paper 29

Establishing a national coordinating body for non- profit organisations

Research report

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Executive summary

Establishing a national coordinating body or umbrella organisation for non-profit organisations isn't an easy task. It involves bringing together many disparate organisations that may, on the surface, have little in common – or that may be competitors. It requires members to agree on their common purposes and build trust in each other – which may be a time-consuming process.

And yet, establishing a coordinating body may bring many benefits, from giving members opportunities to learn from each other to lobbying the government with one voice in areas such as regulation of the sector.

This report draws on work from all over the world, notably original interviews with leaders of relatively established coordinating bodies, materials produced by coordinating bodies themselves based on experience, and the Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA) Resource Guide for National Associations. Although originally written for and funded by the King Khaled Foundation in Saudi Arabia, the advice here is applicable to any country and potentially to regions or specific sectors considering establishing an umbrella organisation.

The report does not seek to provide ready-made answers but rather to guide the formulation of the questions potential participants in a coordinating body should ask themselves and each other as they explore founding a coordinating body.

It also identifies the core principles that make a network effective, including:

- **Ownership, trust, and confidence** – Participants need a sense that they help drive the group rather than being clients of it. They need to trust their fellow members and have confidence in the coordinating body and its processes.
- **Time** – It takes time to develop that sense of trust, confidence, and ownership.
- **Distributed leadership** – As a non-hierarchical organisation, different members should take on different aspects of leadership.
- **Transparent, accountable, shared decision-making** – This may take different forms at different stages. In the early stages of forming a coordinating body, there may need to be consensus between all members, and as trust grows, a board and/or secretariat may be able to take on more of the decision-making as long as it is done in a transparent manner.
- **Common purpose** – Members will need to establish shared understanding on why they are coming together. Initially goals may be simple, lowest-common-denominator ones.
- **Boundaries** – A coordinating body will need to establish not only what organisations should be members but which ones shouldn't be. This may include governmental bodies, commercial organisations, or organisations with a narrow definition of the public good.

Key messages:

- There is no single formula on how to create a coordinating body; prospective members have to build the structure appropriate for them and the context within which they operate.
- Nonetheless, many countries' coordinating bodies have common features and have gone through similar processes in their formation and ongoing management.
- The questions that founding member organisations ask themselves and each other, as laid out in this report, can be used as the basis for a series of foundational documents.
- As the body evolves and members develop trust in each other and in the coordinating body, it will be necessary to revisit its structures and decision-making processes.

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1. Introduction

The King Khaled Foundation (KKF) decided in 2012 to explore the potential for founding a coordinating body for non-profit organisations (NPOs) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It contracted INTRAC to support the process, including reviewing the lessons to be learned from countries where a coordinating body already exists. This report summarises those lessons.

The report draws on existing materials on coordinating bodies, primarily materials those bodies themselves produced based on their own experiences, as well as on a series of interviews with leaders of coordinating bodies that were relatively recently formed (Annex A lists interviewees). I (the author) have both direct employment experience and a range of consultancy experience working with coordinating bodies and other networks, alliances and confederations of civil society; I also draw on these experiences for the purposes of this report.

I originally intended to visit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia prior to carrying out work for this report. This would have enabled me to write this report in the context of the operating environment for NPOs in the kingdom, including local expectations of them. For reasons external to the project, this visit did not take place. The report does not, therefore, attempt to contextualise the lessons from others in the specific situation of NPOs in the Kingdom. It should be seen only as a starting point for work with these NPOs.

As will be seen from others' experience, as outlined in this report, a vital ingredient in the successful founding of a coordinating body is the *process* of discussion amongst its prospective members: the basis of the coordinating body must be internal, felt experience and need. This report therefore aims to guide the *types of questions* that prospective members should try to answer, rather than provide practical models that could be translated directly, without adaptation, into the situation of Saudi Arabia's NPOs.

The first section of this report outlines existing materials that could be of direct use to KKF and Saudi NPOs. The report does not attempt to repeat the content of these materials, so please consult the original sources.

A second section draws on these materials, interviews, and other experience to identify the core principles that lie at the heart of any effective network, exploring their value and the reasons for their importance, and outlining some experiences that illustrate their application.

The third section proposes the core questions to ask during the process of exploring or founding a coordinating body and suggests the range of core materials that might arise from these questions to form the founding documents of the coordinating body.

A short final section summarises the main points of the report.

2. AGNA Resource Guide for National Associations

Many countries have some form of coordinating body that brings together a broad range of civil society, non-profit, or non-governmental organisations. Set up for a variety of reasons, in varied settings with different civil society needs and priorities, they nevertheless have many common features and have gone through similar processes in their formation and continuing management.

Many of these coordinating bodies have come together under the umbrella of CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation to form the Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA). Currently AGNA has members from 60 countries. In 2006-08 they pooled their learning to produce a 'Resource Guide for National Associations', with a stated purpose to 'enable the board and staff

of existing national associations to manage their organisations more effectively, and also to guide civil society leaders in countries where national associations of NPOs and NGOs do not exist.' AGNA wrote the guide to 'reduce the learning curve, avoid re-inventing the wheel and strengthen national associations around the world.'¹

The Resource Guide is an extremely helpful handbook for those attempting to form national associations or coordinating bodies. This report tries not to repeat its many areas of good advice and guidance, but to supplement them by offering some frameworks. Readers of this report are strongly advised to also download the Resource Guide and make use of it alongside this report. The guide is available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/52310193/Resource-Guide-for-National-Associations-How-to-establish-a-national-association>.²

The Resource Guide focuses particularly on form and structure for coordinating bodies. There are outlines of approaches to institutional shape; membership criteria and composition; member services; vision, planning and strategy; resourcing; relations with government; etc.

In any national situation, each of these areas is dependent on the nature of dynamics between the members and prospective members, as well as on the range of organisations that are or might become members. Therefore, the remainder of this report offers frameworks for understanding how to find the structures, given the particular context of NPOs in a country, which would enable a coordinating body to find its feet and thrive.

3. Core principles for effective management of a coordinating body

This paper is written on the understanding that a coordinating body is a shared venture. Its participants 'own' the coordinating body collectively, each having – or developing – a sense of responsibility for its success.

This is different from a service organisation, which – though designed to benefit all of the participants – is owned and operated by a single body. It would be possible for KKF to set up an organisation that delivers many helpful benefits to NPOs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, providing for example training or liaison with government bodies, purely by running such an organisation itself. But a genuine coordinating body is owned and jointly managed or governed by all its members, as is AGNA.

This requires close attention to the dynamics of relations between members and between each member and the collective body. Successfully developing a coordinating body or network requires the founding members to step away from the norm of hierarchical control and focus instead on working in ways that build and support this sense of collective ownership and responsibility.

3.1 A model for understanding the dynamics of networks

An effective and successful coordinating body, or indeed any network or alliance, needs to be built with care. The easy part is constructing the documents that guide the organisation and set the rules; the more complex aspects are about the relationships between organisations within the

¹ Full disclosure: At time of writing, the AGNA Resource Guide is being revised and updated, and CIVICUS has contracted me to do some of this work, which will draw in part upon this paper.

² A new URL may be needed to access the revised guide, but it will be accessible through www.civicus.org/10-what-we-do/agna

Travelling the Virtuous Circle: CONCORD

CONCORD is the confederation of international development NGOs for the European Union. Its members are themselves networks: national umbrella bodies; European groupings of, for example, faith-based organisations; and 'family' organisations such as Oxfam International.

When CONCORD was new, there was a high level of mistrust between the national umbrellas on the one hand and the European groupings and 'families' on the other hand. So a decision-making structure was created that ensured all types of organisation were represented on the board. The board and staff were also scrupulous in always consulting the whole membership, on even quite minor matters. This was important to ensure that no group of members felt excluded.

After four years of operation, the members had worked closely with each other on a number of important programmes. In a strategy review, many of them complained: 'We spend so much time being consulted about everything that we never have time to do the work together that we exist for.'

An investigation showed that, after a period of low trust levels at the beginning, members' experience of working together meant that they now trusted each other much more. Therefore, the decision-making system, designed to deal with low trust levels, was no longer appropriate.

The decision-making process was revised accordingly; members agreed they should only be consulted on major policy matters, because otherwise they trusted the board and working groups to make the right decisions on their behalf.

CONCORD has gone on to be a high-performing confederation, representing its members to the European Union on a host of policy issues.

Lesson

Each element in the virtuous circle needs to be reviewed regularly. Each time a network goes around the virtuous circle, it operates with a deeper level of trust and more confidence that it can be effective. Strategies can become more ambitious and decision making can be based more on trust. In CONCORD's case, a decision-making system designed in the early stages to accommodate low trust levels was no longer appropriate but had not been reviewed. It was holding back CONCORD's strategy, resulting in frustrated members.

3.2 The importance of time

Starting with the early stages of formation of the coordinating body – and even the first discussions about its *possible* formation – participants begin to travel around the virtuous circle. The development of elements of the virtuous circle may feel tentative at first, but each time the formation discussions, and later the new coordinating body, achieve some progress, each of the elements deepens a little. This enables the coordinating body to go to a deeper and more productive level.

However, this process takes time and considerable patience. Slow beginnings may feel frustrating but can be essential for building relationships, trust, and confidence; easing worries; and negotiating common purpose. Organisations that may not have been familiar with each other or

that were suspicious of each other need substantial space and time to find common ground and convince themselves of the benefits of working together.

Several of the national associations interviewed for this report emphasised that it took them much longer than they had expected to set themselves up: two years in Nigeria, over two in Serbia. In countries emerging from national conflict, this was particularly challenging. All interviewees asserted the importance of giving time to the process; all could cite early successes that contributed to eventual progress.

'You can't have a federation by force. When we first started, we were criticised: 'Who are you to do this? Who authorised you?' So we withdrew. But then, after a year, people started coming to us, asking us why we didn't start it after all. You need a critical mass of organisations willing to contribute. It always takes one organisation and a committed core group to get it started.'

– Dubravka Velat, NGO Federation of Serbia

3.3 Ownership, trust, and confidence

The future of a coordinating body depends on its members – and organisations being consulted even at early stages – developing a sense of ownership of the whole enterprise. While the initiative to form a coordinating body must come from somewhere, and often comes from an individual organisation, it is important at an early stage to involve others in the development of ideas, common ground, and agreements. A successful coordinating body will have members who speak about it as 'we,' not as 'they'.

This is best achieved by involving as many organisations as possible in early consultation meetings and then giving as many as possible some responsibility for the next stages of progress. Establishing working groups for specific tasks, or delegating responsibility to individual organisations for drafting key elements of the next steps, can be a helpful way forward here. A steering group, established at the first meeting, can help an initiating organisation reinforce the message that the initiative is not theirs alone. It helps particularly if the steering group has participants from a number of different types of organisation: faith-based and secular, larger and smaller, etc. The lesson from Serbia: *'You need a critical mass of organisations willing to contribute. It always takes one organisation and a committed core group to get it started.'*

In Estonia, building trust took time and was developed from working together. As Urmo Kubar of the Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations put it: *'It has to come up from inside, from the need. They have to do it themselves, and it has to build from what they find important. Every country has different needs, even when they're similar historically or culturally ... [In Estonia,] there's now a good tradition of working together, of trust. Also of course there are some different values, disagreements – that's pluralism! But yes, now they function well together ... The trust issue is important and the reason it hasn't worked in [another country is] because there they couldn't get over the fact that they compete with each other for money and attention.'*

Participants may begin with low levels of trust in each other. It is important to address this, probably indirectly, by ensuring that different types of participants, with perhaps different ideological starting points, have plenty of opportunities to explore what they do have in common and using this as a starting point for establishing some of the values, norms, or activities of the coordinating body.

A focus on common ground and how to negotiate difference is central to finding the focus of the coordinating body and will help establish trust between members over time. This, in turn, will help build confidence in the coordinating body itself. It is likely that organisations will begin with low expectations and perhaps some scepticism about the value or potential of the coordinating body. Taking the time to explore the common or varied needs and priorities of participants will help build

confidence that the exercise is worthwhile and convince participants that investing a little more time could pay off.

It is tempting, when faced with scepticism, for leaders to promise great things for the coordinating body. The danger here is that participants will then develop unrealistically high expectations of what the coordinating body can achieve, which could then be disappointed when things move – appropriately – slowly. So defining achievable objectives is important in building confidence (see ‘Quick Wins’ below) alongside providing a sense of longer-term vision.

With attention to the other elements described below, organisations’ sense of ownership of the coordinating body, levels of trust in each other, and confidence in the potential of the body will grow over time. This is a constant feature of coordinating bodies and networks: even very mature networks still need to give attention to helping members build their trust and confidence, and to maintaining systems that encourage engagement and ownership.

3.4 Distributed leadership

One of the core principles of an effective coordinating body or network, and a key way in which it differs from the hierarchical organisations that most people are used to, is that leadership does not sit in one place. The power and potential of an effective network lies in the fact that different members take on different aspects of leadership. While there may be a head of a secretariat steering the coordination of the whole body, and while there will be a chair and a board or other governing body, many other members will be leading aspects of the coordinating body’s work through chairing of working groups, task forces, activities that subsets of members wish to pursue with each other, etc.

Encouraging distributed leadership contributes to members’ sense of ownership of the coordinating body, which in turn feeds their commitment to investing time in its success. It is, though, a challenging way of working: members commit because they want to, not because they have to, so motivation, support and encouragement are the key words. Members who feel compelled are likely to fail to deliver and/or drift away from the coordinating body.

This means that people with responsibility for leadership or coordination are facilitators and enablers, not managers; they exert leadership through motivation, not control. This is an absolutely central lesson from other coordinating bodies.

Urmo Kubar of the Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations expressed it in this way: *‘Over time, it’s important to prove that you have people’s trust, are being useful. You have to be, of course, a nice person – humble, interested in others, definitely not like saying how important you are and so on. No-one will want to work with you like that. You have to see yourself as serving organisations, not the boss. It’s important to keep that attitude; that’s crucial. It’s all about servant leadership... Leadership is something you earn; you can’t take it. It’s about the opposite of ego. It won’t work out if that’s what it’s about. So you have to find nice people who are inspirational for others AND efficient!’*

Or, as a CONCORD staff member put it recently in an interview as part of a review of the roles and responsibilities of that organisation’s secretariat: *‘It’s all about taking pleasure from – being motivated by – enabling others to shine.’*

One implication of this, which is vital to the development of a sense of ownership amongst members, is the importance of reflecting back to members *their* responsibility for successes, rather than the leader’s role: every time the coordinating body achieves a success, the members need to hear: ‘Well done; we did this because we worked collectively.’

The extent to which the coordinating body can distribute leadership also depends on the levels of trust and confidence built amongst the membership, as well as on how clearly the body has established its basis for unity, its purposes, and goals. In the early stages of the development of a coordinating body, when members may have different understandings of the coordinating body's purposes and goals, and when levels of trust between members are relatively low, it will be difficult for some members to trust others to take the lead on particular areas of work. One way of overcoming this is to ensure widespread consultation on key decisions so that each leader is clearly building on agreed ways forward. This helps to clarify the direction of the coordinating body, build communication and discussion amongst members, and move by degrees towards a situation in which individual members or groups can be left to take action without consultation on the basis of strong common understanding of the direction the members would wish to take.

Distributing leadership in action: International Disability and Development Consortium

At the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC), leaders made a point of focusing attention on developing a basis for unity and building relationships over time. During this period, an elected steering committee made decisions on behalf of the consortium's members but always consulted extensively first. For major decisions, it waited for the annual assembly and discussed matters with the members before reaching a collective decision. After seven or eight years, the steering committee established some working groups and asked other members to lead them; the working groups are now responsible for developing the consortium's policy positions on a wide range of issues in disability. Because all members had the time to develop a strong understanding of the others' views and perspectives, they can do this without always consulting. The other members trust them to represent the consortium responsibly.

3.5 Transparent, accountable, shared decision-making

One of the most important ways of building trust and ownership amongst members is to ensure that decision making is carried out in ways that members consider legitimate, taking into account different members' perspectives and needs.

At the earliest stages, this might mean making all significant decisions – even very operational choices – in assemblies of members, with all members present. A next stage might be to have a steering committee or board, (s)elected by the members so that they have confidence in its decisions and ideally composed in a way that ensures all significant types of voices amongst members are heard. To build trust, it is important that this committee or board communicates not only its decisions but its rationale for making them. The coordinating body's constitution must also enable the wider membership to hold the committee accountable for its decisions and actions.

As the coordinating body's experience grows, the steering committee will find it increasingly possible and necessary to delegate more of its decisions to a secretariat or coordinator and/or to groups of members – enabling more of the distributed leadership discussed above. This needs to be paced according to the level of trust and confidence of the membership. It must also be set in a framework of accountability, through the steering committee, to the membership as a whole.

3.6 Basis of unity: Common purpose and goal

Central to the very first stages of developing a coordinating body is to establish why the potential members might want a coordinating body at all. The reasons are initially likely to be disparate and somewhat uncertain, but usually revolve around a desire to improve the quality of the sector's work, to secure better or more funding for the sector, or engage in effective dialogue with

government. In each of these arenas there is potential for competition between participants, as well as collaboration, so the benefits of collaborative action need particular emphasis.

Elements of the basis of unity usually include both common beliefs or values and aspects of common purpose. The latter links closely with the eventual strategy and programme of action of the coordinating body (see section 4.11). One or more of the following may emerge from discussions (see also sections 4.1 and 4.2):

'We come together as members of the coordinating body because we all...	Strategy/programme
...believe in the value and importance of NPOs to society in our country'	
...believe that helping the poor and/or marginalised is a duty of our society'	
...believe that open democracy is critical to building our country's future'	
...want to improve the quality of work of non-profit organisations in our country'	Learning/training programme for skills/knowledge of non-profit workers
...want to improve the enabling environment (tax framework, legislative arrangements, etc.) for non-profit organisations in our country'	Research on enabling environment in other countries; engagement with government on tax, legislation, registration, regulation
...want to engage with government on long-term policy and planning for the social sector'	Policy discussion amongst members; representation of common perspectives to relevant government departments
...want to build the reputation of the non-profit sector amongst the general public'	Publicising examples of non-profit organisations' good work
...want to develop standards of structure, performance and behaviour that help to identify genuine NPOs'	Consultation amongst members about minimum standards; development of framework

Participants will initially have different perspectives, priorities and needs; it may take several meetings to reach a collective understanding of the lowest common denominator on which all can agree. Since, at this stage, members will have little or no experience of what the possibilities actually are, this might be at quite a basic level. This is fine: the group needs to start somewhere. With a focus on something simple to achieve together, they can develop experience of successfully working together, and deepen their common ground, mutual trust and basis of unity over time. Patience is important.

3.7 Shared values and norms of behaviour

There are two types of values that are important for a successful coordinating body:

- **Values that bind the members**, in terms of the way society and the country should function, help contribute to the basis of unity and purpose of the coordinating body. Members may vary quite widely in some of their values, so at the early stages a focus on their commonalities is important. The more work they do together, the more members will be able to identify their common values; so, as with other elements, the understanding of common values will deepen as the coordinating body goes through several rounds of the virtuous circle. Many coordinating bodies have a statement of common values as a key part of their membership application process: applicants are asked to sign an agreement with the values of the collective before being allowed to take part.
- There are also values related to **the ways in which members behave in relation to each other and to the coordinating body** as a whole. These are hard to develop in the abstract

but will be needed as members' experience of the coordinating body grows, Some behaviours will be particularly valued, while others will be seen to cause problems for other members; therefore, rules or guidelines will need to be developed. These may relate to mutual respect between members or to adherence to agreed positions.

3.8 Understanding each other, sharing skills and approaches

A key role for the coordinating body is the responsibility to convene: enabling the whole community to come together and talk. Sometimes there will be a specific purpose to these gatherings: developing a collective approach to a particular problem or policy position, or enhancing members' understanding or skills in a particular area of their work. However, even when this is not the case, there will be many benefits both to the members and to the coordinating body.

The more members talk to each other, the more they learn about each other. This indirectly helps strengthen the quality of dialogue and enable the coordinating body to reach more sophisticated levels of common understanding, approach and strategy.

As they talk, members will find areas of common interest and learn from each other in areas such as how to deliver particular types of work effectively. This may be an intentional part of the meeting but is often a by-product of discussion both in formal sessions and outside them. While this is, of course, primarily a direct benefit to the members individually, it is also beneficial to the coordinating body, because members will deepen the value they place on the coordinating body each time they benefit from the learning of others in a space convened by the coordinating body. This will in turn increase their commitment to give time to it.

3.9 Ad hoc relations between members

Informal conversations in spaces convened by the coordinating body sometimes result in whole new working relationships between organisations away from the coordinating body itself, sometimes resulting in major collaborations, partnerships, and consortium activity. Several interviewees for this report suggested that, while it is almost impossible to measure for evaluation purposes, these ad hoc relationships made a substantial contribution – possibly the greatest – to the impact of the coordinating body.

Ad hoc relations between members: EuroNGOs

EuroNGOs, a network of European sexual and reproductive health and rights NGOs, organises an annual conference for its members and their allies from other parts of the world. The focus is usually a topical policy issue but there is always – consciously – plenty of time for members to engage with each other informally. Event evaluation forms always indicated that members learned a lot from each other in this way. But it was not until an external evaluation asked members to talk specifically about relationships established at the conferences that their true importance emerged. Every annual conference had resulted in at least one new partnership or project consortium, through which members clubbed together afterwards to deliver new projects and programmes together. Some of these had major results in their fields – and their origin could be traced back to the network's convening role at the conferences and to the conscious decision to make space for informal contacts.

As in section 3.8, these strengthened individual relationships are primarily a benefit to the individual organisations involved but the closer working relationships make it easier for them to work together in other circumstances as well, which can benefit the coordinating body when they work within it.

3.10 'Quick wins': the value of shared successes and individual benefits

One of the best ways of encouraging members to devote time and energy to their coordinating body is to demonstrate its positive value to them. Coordinators and leaders need to be able to quickly show that some action taken by the coordinating body contributes positively to the collective good or to a wide range of the individual members.

'The most important question was: "Does anyone need what you do?" And training was the obvious answer at that time, even more important than the law, taxation issues, etc. ... So we started [with] training for NGOs [on] information on funding opportunities from foreign foundations. Then advocacy followed later, on laws, taxation issues ... Later the trainings became less important, [partly because] others started providing that.'

– Urmo Kubar, Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations

Where the coordinating body has decided to address something external collectively (interviewees particularly cited engaging with government on the tax framework for NPOs or the legislative and regulatory framework), it is important not just to work for a big, longer-term goal, but to demonstrate small achievements along the way.

Quick Wins: BOND

BOND, the network of UK-based international development NGOs, has a very diverse range of members. So, early in its existence, it needed to demonstrate its value to different types of member. Small organisations particularly wanted access to affordable training in basic skills, so BOND organised a programme of training in project planning, evaluation and other areas. Medium-sized organisations were keen to improve their access to and understanding of major donors, so BOND organised a funding working group that enabled members to share knowledge and skills, provided direct access to key donor personnel, and created quick changes in the way the government donor related with NGOs. Larger organisations were more concerned with policy engagement with government; BOND identified a particular need for policy dialogue and enabled its larger members to work together and engage directly with government on behalf of all BOND members. Each type of member could find something, from which they gained quickly, that helped cement their belief in the network's value.

If the coordinating body has decided to address the more internal needs of its members, perhaps through a programme of learning and training, this needs to be designed in a way that each different type of member can recognise as being of value to them individually.

3.11 'Unity with diversity': Difference, inclusion and boundaries

Several coordinating bodies describe themselves as having (or striving for) 'unity with diversity'. This expresses one of the central conundrums of a coordinating body, which by definition has a wide range of different types of organisation amongst its membership and is finding ways of uniting them.

They may differ in terms of organisational size, ideological or religious motivation, sectoral focus (in education, health care, community development, etc); but they come together because they want to achieve something in common.

Many coordinating bodies express the positive aspects of diversity explicitly in their purpose statements or other forms of self-description. They emphasise the richness that diversity brings to their discussions, the potential to learn from each other, and the strength and rigour of any agreements amongst members (given the sometimes complex discussions from different viewpoints to achieve agreement).

But difference also presents challenges. In early stages, it may be hard to get beyond the lowest common denominator in agreements on purpose and basis of unity. Discussions may focus on the ways in which members differ and disagree, rather than those on which they can find common ground. Some types of organisation may feel excluded from decisions or under-represented in governance, while others may seek to dominate decision-making bodies. Some may feel that training programmes are designed for other types of organisations, not themselves.

So leaders and coordinators need an early understanding of the main features of difference between members and participants, particularly those that cause tension, arguments, and feelings of exclusion. These should then guide the design of the coordinating body's governance structure to ensure that all the main types of organisation – particularly those most likely to feel excluded – have a voice in key decisions. They should also guide the design of programmes for the coordinating body, particularly those that are intended to benefit members individually: training should be offered that directly address the needs of each type of organisation, for example, so that all feel they are benefitting from membership in the body.

Some differences may run so deep that the best solution for the coordinating body is to exclude some organisations. This can help define the boundaries of membership, because some types of organisation may be so different from the others that their presence as members of the coordinating body would make agreement on the basics impossible or would divert policies into directions or areas that are unhelpful for most other members.

The most common exclusions for other coordinating bodies, usually defined by written membership criteria, cover the following:

- Governmental and quasi-governmental bodies, whose presence would make development of policies that may differ from official government lines difficult.
- Organisations whose interests are commercial, rather than for social or public benefit, whose presence may prevent the development of policies that are genuinely in the interests of the non-profit sector.
- Organisations with a narrow definition of the social or public good. All coordinating bodies include organisations *motivated by* religious principles to do good, for example, but many exclude those whose aims are *religious conversion*, or those who exclude from their programmes people of other religions. The same may apply to ethnic, gender or class exclusions in an organisation's programmes. Each country, culture and therefore coordinating body will have its own boundaries here; the discussion of an appropriate values statement will help identify them. The existence of the values statement will then help to determine future membership applications.
- Organisations whose behaviour is disruptive, disrespectful or otherwise inappropriate in the context of discussions within the coordinating body. This is usually impossible to identify in membership criteria, but many coordinating bodies have a statement of agreement on appropriate behaviour (see 3.7), which will include a procedure for the withdrawal of membership as a sanction for breaches of the agreement (which in their experience is rarely needed).

The coordinating body should strive to be as inclusive as possible and should design its structures and programmes to maximise a sense of inclusion for all types of organisation that might

appropriately want to be members. But it also needs to decide what the boundaries of membership should be, to enable a reasonable and constructive way forward for its main purposes and goals.

3.12 Core principles: summary

Managing or developing a coordinating body is an art, not a science. There are some rules and documents that appear to provide ready-made answers, but the essence of success is in *process*. This is because success is impossible without a strong sense of ownership, which tends to come with steadily increasing levels of trust and confidence between members and in the coordinating body itself.

Ownership, trust and confidence are the key words; building them is a never-ending process and each of them depends on many other elements. So not only must attention be paid to each of these key elements, allowing *time* for them to build is important.

‘Start slowly, know what you really want to achieve; and, being a membership-based structure, have a variety of different actors representing the sector.’

– Basak Ersen, Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TUSEV)

All the elements of the virtuous circle laid out in Figure 1 (pg. 6) are interrelated. Lack of transparency in decision making will disaffect members, encouraging them to believe that the coordinating body is ‘theirs’, not ‘ours’. Trust in each other comes from creation of spaces for dialogue and plenty of opportunity to interact inside and outside formal discussion. Early successes (and their reflection back to members as ‘our achievement – thank you for your contribution’ rather than ‘I did this for you’) breed confidence and energy for the next stages of activity.

If all the elements are given attention, a virtuous circle will be created through which all elements deepen over time and consequently the coordinating body will strengthen and thrive. If any one of the elements is ignored, it will act as a barrier to progress and may cause members to regress, lose interest in ownership, and diminish their trust and confidence.

Importantly, the way each element is handled at different stages of deepening is dependent on progress in the other elements. A deeper level of trust enables different (and more distributed) forms of leadership and decision making. Deeper understanding of each other enables more sophisticated common strategies and a deeper basis of unity. Therefore, each element must be revisited regularly. Even the most mature body must regularly revisit the appropriateness of its decision-making structures to reflect the levels of trust its members have.

This section has aimed to point to some of the main features of each element of the virtuous circle that may need attention in the early formation stages of a coordinating body. The next section uses this as a base to identify the core questions to pose to participants in formation meetings and online dialogue. It goes on to suggest a framework of founding documents that answer these questions and set in place all the main ingredients for a new coordinating body.

4. Core questions for the formation process

The following set of questions to pose to prospective members of a coordinating body draws from the principles outlined in Section 3 as well from the AGNA Resource Guide.

As Section 3 suggests, the right answers will change significantly over time as all the factors affecting the strength and potential of the coordinating body develop. However, early answers are necessary to form the basics of a functional organisation.

This section outlines the main questions and some of the options and challenges in answering them. It concludes by suggesting a set of founding documents that reflect the answers in a way that gives the coordinating body a framework for beginning its life. Questions covered here include:

- What do we want a coordinating body for?
- What unites us?
- Who should be in the coordinating body?
- What can I expect from my organisation's membership?
- What can I expect of other organisations? What will my organisation be expected to contribute?
- What are our shared values?
- What are our agreed norms of behaviour?
- How will decisions be made?
- Should we have a secretariat?
- How will we resource the coordinating body and why?
- What will we do together as a coordinating body?

4.1 What do we want a coordinating body for?

The absolute basic principle is to establish what would make participants want to engage in a coordinating body. This may take a substantial amount of discussion.

Some may want to learn their 'trade' better, either by engaging with others already working in their field and exchanging experiences, successes and challenges, or by employing an external trainer and learning together from them. Others may place a priority on engagement with government on the legislative, registration or fiscal framework for NPOs, and recognise that they can make more progress by doing this collectively than individually. Some may worry that 'NPO' is a term being used illegitimately by some organisations or individuals, in a way that undermines the reputations of others, and want a framework of standards that more clearly demonstrates the difference between legitimate and illegitimate NPOs. Others may face a constant struggle to finance their work and may be seeking common approaches to prospective donors or information from other members on how to be successful in fundraising.

It is not necessary, particularly at early stages, to find activities that *all* members want to engage in. But it is important that all, or nearly all, can find something in a portfolio of activities that would meet one or more of their needs and desires. So a portfolio needs to be constructed on the basis of a diversity of members' different answers to the basic question. The selection of activities within the portfolio needs also to be careful not to exceed the boundaries that current levels of trust and confidence allow; prospective members may not be confident enough to allow others to speak for them to external bodies, for example, and this may need building up in non-controversial areas before more complex matters are tackled.

With little or no experience to date of what a coordinating body might bring for them, participants may need prompting with suggestions of the ways it might benefit their work or needs. Aspirations need to be balanced against the capacity of the coordinating body, which may be small at the start, so achievable short-term objectives are important (see Quick Wins in 3.10 above).

4.2 What unites us?

It is helpful, early in the process, to reinforce the idea that participants have some common bonds. These may include a common understanding of what an NPO is, what its key features are, and how they differ from other types of organisation. Other commonalities may include beliefs about the benefits to society of a strong NPO sector; about the values for which all NPOs stand (or should stand); or about minimum standards of structure, behaviour and performance.

These shared values can be explored in discussion; this will also raise and clarify areas of diversity between participants. Some exploration at this stage of reasons for valuing diversity is helpful, as this helps participants welcome being in the same room together in spite of differences. It will also alert coordinators and leaders to areas of potential conflict arising from differences, help them prepare for these, and design approaches that either resolve or avoid them (avoidance is not a bad thing: after some rounds of the virtuous circle, it may become possible to resolve differences and conflicts in a way that would not have worked at earlier stages).

4.3 Who should be in the coordinating body?

A coordinating body, by its nature, is designed to be broad and inclusive. So efforts should be made, early on, to define membership boundaries that enable as many legitimate NPOs as possible to participate in and 'own' the body.

This does imply being clear from an early stage about the types of organisation that would *not* be welcomed as members. So boundaries need to be drawn that define these types of organisation. This would need to include a decision about the 'nationality' of an organisation and how it is handled, as well as the boundaries of 'not-for-profit' (social enterprises are a common cause of difficulty here: businesses, but with a social purpose) and the minimum requirements to be considered a legitimate organisation.

This discussion will lead towards some complications. Several national coordinating bodies exist where strong coordinating bodies already exist in each of the country's regions. They have needed to decide, firstly, whether the regional bodies can be full members, or whether they have some form of associate status. It is possible for a national coordinating body (such as in Pakistan) to have *only* regional coordinating bodies as members, and for the regional coordinating bodies to have NPOs as their members, so that NPOs are members of the national body indirectly, rather than directly. Whether or not this approach is taken, the founders of the national body will need to consider how to handle organisations that are not part of a regional body but want to be part of the national; it is rare for regional bodies to have identical membership to national bodies, and a way of handling the differences is important. Some potential members may also be national in scope, so not fit into a regional framework; they may need a category of their own.

In Lithuania, the national coordinating body is composed of *sectoral* coordinating bodies, each covering areas such as communities, youth, women, environment, culture, and so on. Here, complications similar to those for Pakistan and its regions arose.

There may be some organisations which, participants feel, should not be full members of the coordinating body, but whose presence would add value to it. So some have a 'full membership' category for its core members, usually meaning that they can vote in assemblies and general meetings; and other categories (such as 'associate' or 'friends of...') for less core but valued organisations that typically do not have a vote on core policy positions.

Every effort should be made to ensure that a wide variety of NPOs are present in early discussions, so that their criteria for membership are the ones that count. However, it is important to recognise that not everyone will be there. Those with a detailed knowledge and understanding of

the NPO sector need to be aware of the critical absences and ensure that absent organisations that might feel excluded and resentful are included in definitions and encouraged to engage at later stages in the process – particularly if they are powerful or significant influencers. Any feeling of resentment or of competition for power and influence will undermine the legitimacy of the coordinating body in the eyes of its actual members, its prospective members, and external bodies such as government.

All of this will help to ensure that the coordinating body is perceived as welcoming, not excluding, elitist or exclusive. Leaders and coordinators may want to initiate a membership drive in the early stages, consciously seeking out and inviting organisations to participate or apply for membership. Not all will choose to join, though; some organisations may need to see a demonstration of success in areas that matter to them before they consider joining.

4.4 What can I expect from my organisation's membership?

The collective discussion of what the coordinating body is for (see section 4.1) will help leaders define projects and programmes that address felt needs and desires. Equally important is the ability of all prospective members to answer the question for themselves, as clearly as possible, 'What can my organisation expect to gain from membership?' The coordinating body therefore needs a 'membership proposition' that spells this out as clearly as possible. This will not be easy at early stages, as actual demonstrations of benefit will be rare; the proposition will need to focus on prospective benefit. It can later be adapted as the coordinating body builds experience, members understand better what they *have* already gained, and prospective members can observe more clearly what they are missing.

A membership proposition can focus not only on direct material gains (new skills from training, for example) but also the benefits of participating in decision making and exchange with other members, or being included in access to government decision making bodies. These benefits may seem indirect and elusive but they are real to those who are participating actively. So leaders and coordinators may need to talk with individual members about these less concrete areas and build an understanding of felt benefit as well as focusing on concrete deliverables.

This is particularly important because an over-emphasis on material benefits can lead members to believing that the coordinating body is a service institution rather than something they own and are part of. This was so important in Estonia that the coordinating body moved away from a clear membership proposition, according to Urmo Kubar: *'Before, when we listed those benefits, [members] were like clients – they expected something after paying the fee. Now it's more equal; we do things together; it's not that head office is under their instruction in the same way. Of course, there's a division of labour – staff members have their duties – but it's more healthy this way.'*

A well-formulated membership proposition is the basis of any drive to encourage organisations to join and can be used in promotional materials to emphasise the value of membership. It can also be used if and when members are being asked to pay a membership fee: a reminder of all the benefits of membership, articulately stated, makes a big difference. Nonetheless, it's normal for members to have diverse motivations for joining.

'Many join for different reasons. Some for capacity development, some wanted to share their own experience with others or network in their own [specialist] areas. Access to conferences, access to funding, technical support for proposal writing, some for collective advocacy, some to market their own programmes to other members. So they all have different reasons. It's not easy to clearly map out. But we try to map our work against members' expectations.'

– Oyebisi Babatunde Oluyesi, Nigerian Network of NGOs

4.5 What can I expect of other organisations? What will my organisation be expected to contribute?

A coordinating body is a collective organisation: it functions because members make it function. There may be a secretariat but the body's real activity comes from members' engagement and participation, their contributions of knowledge and skill, and their participation in decision-making and governance.

In this context, the easy approach for a member is to sit back and let others do the hard work. But if all members do this, nothing happens and the coordinating body fails, which is in nobody's interest. It is a classic example of philosophy's 'free rider problem'.

So some agreement is needed amongst members about what it is reasonable to expect from each other to make the coordinating body a success. Many networks and coordinating bodies document this in the form of a members' charter, which lays out these agreements and which new members are required to sign when they join.

Some recognition is needed of different members' different capacities to contribute but it is equally important to assert that even the smallest, newest organisations have perspectives to bring to the coordinating body that are valuable and valued, respected by other members, and recognised as contributions to the collective output of the body.

4.6 What are our shared values? What are our agreed norms of behaviour?

These points were covered in section 3.7. Posing the questions is important during the coordinating body's formation stage. These questions must then be posed again at intervals during the life of the body, because as the virtuous circle repeats itself, member organisations will become closer to each other and understand and trust each other more. This will enable the body to move to new levels of cooperation, coordination, and effectiveness, resulting in deeper levels of shared values. These shifts must be captured and explicitly recognised.

Section 3.7 noted that norms of behaviour are difficult to establish in the abstract, so may be hard to discuss at very early stages of formation. Some experience and observation of particularly valued behaviours, and particularly problematic behaviours, is needed to document agreements between members on these. However, leaders and coordinators need to note these early learnings, so that they can be reflected back to members when the discussion does happen.

4.7 How will decisions be made?

In order to make progress in any of these areas, a consensus will need to be reached, very early in the process, about how decisions will be made during the formation period. Before long, further consensus will be needed about how decisions will be made in the established coordinating body.

As indicated in section 3.5, all participants and prospective members need to feel confident that decisions will be taken with their views adequately taken into account. At the first stages, this probably means that decisions need to be taken in the larger meetings to which they come; it will be too early for them to be confident in (s)electing a board or steering committee to take decisions on their behalf.

However, groundwork is needed and (particularly with distributed leadership in mind) it may be helpful for the first meeting to (s)elect a small group of participants to do some work before the following meeting: drafting some ways forward, perhaps communicating with some organisations absent from the first meeting, etc. This group, it should be clear, would go no further than drafting; any work they do would be brought back to the next meeting for discussion, amendment and approval. It would be helpful if, in addition to ensuring its members have the willingness and ability to contribute in the group, the meeting ensures that a range of 'voices' of organisations is present, to give people confidence that, if they are not in the group themselves, someone there will be speaking in broadly the way they would speak themselves.

When the time comes to decide on the governance structure of the coordinating body, a number of considerations need to be made:

- There would need to continue to be an assembly or general meeting of members, which has the power to (s)elect and deselect a board as well as responsibility for approving strategies and key policies. Normal experience suggests that these powers are very active at early stages in the life of a coordinating body, making many operational decisions, but that they move towards more strategic and oversight functions after some trust and confidence (as well as sheer workload) have built up.
- A (s)elected board needs to be small enough to function effectively but large enough to contain a range of the key voices of members. Some coordination bodies have a simple, open election; others structure their board in a way that ensures the relevant voices of segments of the membership are present. Where this happens, it is possible for just the small organisations or education organisations, for example, to elect their representatives to the board; however, experience suggests that ownership is stronger if, even within specific election categories, all members vote.
- The terms of reference of the board and general assembly need to be clear, particularly on the accountability of the board to the assembly, so that the whole membership has a sense of ownership over the decisions taken by the board between assembly meetings. The terms of reference should also be explicit about how board meetings are going to be transparent, for example by circulating minutes or descriptions of board decisions at meetings of the general assembly.
- Some coordinating bodies have found it helpful for the assembly to (s)elect the chair, who would chair both assembly and board meetings and possibly be a key spokesperson for the coordinating body. This helps give the whole membership confidence in a key leadership position. However, others have chosen to give the board the power to select a chair, on the grounds that the board members are likely to know the possible candidates better than the members as a whole and are therefore more likely to select the strongest candidate.

4.8 Should we have a secretariat?

Coordinating bodies can be run very cheaply indeed if the members provide all the human resources needed to enable them to function. If they are run through working groups of members, coordinated by a board or steering committee, and if leaders of groups are prepared to do the necessary administration to make meetings happen, take minutes, etc, coordinating bodies can be almost cost-free. Members do need to recognise, though, that the alternative to finding financial resources is the investment of human resources.

However, most find that a secretariat is a helpful addition. There is a danger in this: it becomes easy for members to expect the secretariat to do everything, resulting in members becoming

inactive and passive recipients of services. The member energy that lies behind all successful coordinating bodies is lost and members find they are simply resourcing another office.

So it is important that terms of reference are drawn up for the secretariat that clearly spell out its administrative, facilitative, and enabling functions, and make it equally clear what it will *not* do because members should be doing it.

Some consideration may also need to be given to the location of the secretariat. Particularly in the early days, a single member may be able to make a valuable contribution by offering office space; this needs to be considered carefully, because while the offer may solve real resourcing challenges, the coordinating body may become too closely identified with this one organisation, and this could damage its reputation for being even-handed. The identity of the coordinating body, as perceived by both members and external observers, needs to be genuinely collective.

There are similar considerations if one member offers to act as the secretariat, at least to start with. This happened in Serbia. Dubravka Velat of the Federation of NGOs of Serbia recently reflected: *'We should have set up a secretariat from the start. In the way we did it, being attached to [member organisation] Civic Initiatives for 10 years, it might have been better to be more independent earlier.'*

4.9 How will we resource the coordinating body and why?

If the members decide they need a secretariat, and set its terms of reference appropriately, it will then need to think about how to resource it. There are a number of factors to consider:

- Should members make a financial contribution? Membership fees are sometimes considered to be the ultimate test of members' commitment to the coordinating body, and to some extent this is true. However, members' time commitment is as important an indicator as their financial willingness, and for some this might be a more appropriate way of demonstrating (and resourcing) their commitment to the cause. However, most coordinating bodies do also have a membership fee system. Fees are usually on a scale, with larger members paying significantly more than the smallest members, whose contribution may be more tokenistic than significant. The scale of fees, or members' willingness to agree to them, has a direct relationship with the membership proposition – what members can expect to gain from the coordinating body.

'Until 2010, membership fees were two to three per cent of our budget; now we've got it up to 25-30 per cent. I'd say that before now we've not given members the right kind of benefits, so it's been hard to ask them for money. So fees must depend on the membership proposition, the benefits, outcomes for members. You need to justify the fees, so we had to give them the benefits they wanted, then we could ask them to renew membership with increased fees.'

– Oyebisi Babatunde Oluseyi, Nigerian Network of NGOs

- Should the coordinating body consider grants from government? Several coordinating bodies have opted to refuse grants from government on the basis that a large part of their work is to represent the NPO sector. They wish to ensure both the reality and the appearance of independence from government. Those that do receive grants from government often have a rule that these grants will not exceed a certain percentage of their income, so that the coordinating body's existence is not entirely dependent on government and it can guarantee its own survival even if the government were to seek to influence it by threatening to discontinue funding.
- Should other foundations or multilateral funding bodies be approached for support? This is a realistic option for many coordinating bodies, but also one they approach with caution. As with

government grants, overdependence can be a problem, and rules that any one foundation or other grant-making body will fund no more than a certain percentage of the coordinating body's income can be helpful.

'We have an experience that [a multilateral agency] funded us. We've decided now not to get money from outside – too much influence. We want to be free, have our own agenda. No money from government either; we have our own agenda on creating a conducive environment for NGOs. We couldn't be seen by government as being funded from outside – we had to be able to say we were purely Pakistani.

– Mohammad Ismail, Pakistan NGO Forum

- Should the coordinating body charge for its services? Many coordinating bodies do charge a fee for, for example, attending training courses or receiving publications. This is helpful in providing a source of income that is independent of outside influence, and not dependent on assembly negotiations of membership fee levels, which are notoriously difficult. However, a coordinating body needs to consider the extent to which service fees exclude some of its more needy members from its services, and take care when setting prices to ensure that this does not happen. Subsidised training fees for very small organisations, alongside surplus-generating fees for the larger ones, are possible; the extent to which there are competitors also providing services will determine whether surplus generation is a genuine reality.

Most coordinating bodies are resourced by some combination of all four sources. The particular political and NPO-financing environments make different answers appropriate for different situations.

4.10 What will we do together as a coordinating body?

Section 4.1 covered the process of determining, in a broad sense, what the coordinating body would exist for. Having done this, a more detailed exercise is necessary – at regular intervals through its life – to develop strategies and work plans.

For most coordinating bodies, these strategies and plans include a combination of learning/training programmes; a programme of engagement with government on the regulatory and fiscal environment for NPOs (and sometimes on social policy matters); and a system for quality enhancement or self-regulation for NPOs, to enable them to ensure transparency, accountability and legitimacy in their work and develop appropriate and effective relations with their donors and beneficiaries.

4.11 The coordinating body's founding documents

With some level of answer to all of the above questions, it is possible to compose the main documents needed to establish the coordinating body. The following is suggested as a structure for these:

Core question	Core agreements → documents		
What do we want a coordinating body for?	Purpose statement	Strategy	Work programme
Who should be in it?	Membership description ('Who we are')	Membership categories and criteria	Membership application and decision procedure
What unites us?	Membership description ('Who we		

	are')		
What can members expect?	Membership proposition		
What are members expected to contribute?	Member agreement/ charter		
What are the shared values?	Values statement		
What are the agreed norms of behaviour?	Member agreement/ charter		
How will decisions be made?	Organisational and governance structure	Constitution	Terms of reference for key bodies
How do we resource the coordinating body, ensuring ownership and independence?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership categories and fees • Funding applications • Discussions with government 	Financing strategy	
How do we deal with difference? (Member types and sizes; different agendas; different needs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership categories • Governance structure 	Strategy	Communications plan
Strategy and plans			
On what (if anything) do we want to engage with government?	Membership proposition	Strategy	Work programme
What do we want to learn from each other (or together from others)?	Membership proposition	Strategy	Work programme
Is regulation/self-regulation an issue for NPOs?	Membership proposition	Strategy	Work programme
Do we want the coordinating body to channel funds to members?	Membership proposition	Strategy	Work programme

5. Summary and conclusion

The AGNA Resource Guide for National Associations is a valuable resource for anyone considering establishing a coordinating body; it is essential reading and this report does not attempt to replicate its many useful lessons. This report, instead, focuses on those aspects of managing and establishing a coordinating body that are more process-focused.

It suggests a model to show the interaction of the key principles and elements affecting the effectiveness of a coordinating body or other network, outlines how each of these might be handled in the early stages of development of the coordinating body, and then uses these as the basis for a series of questions that participants in the foundation of the body would need to be able to answer. It concludes with a proposed set of documents that would form the founding 'manual' of the coordinating body.

This report lays out many of the main considerations that those considering forming a coordinating body would need to take into account to provide the basis of a guide to the process. It is important to repeat that this report does not offer specific answers; it is vital that these emerge from the interactions of the prospective members themselves. Every context is different, every group of organisations has different dynamics, and – most importantly – ownership arises from going through the process itself, not from downloading a ready-made solution.

ANNEX A

Interviews conducted for this report

Country	Organisation	Interviewee	Interviewee's role
Estonia	Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations (NENO)	Urmo Kubar	General Secretary
Kyrgyzstan	NGO Coalition for Democracy & Civil Society	Dinara Oshurahunova	President
Lithuania	NGO Information & Support Centre	Martinas Zalatauskas	Executive Director
Nigeria	Nigerian Network of NGOs (NNNGO)	Oyebisi Babatunde Oluseyi	Executive Director
Pakistan	Pakistan NGO Forum (PMF)	Professor Mohammad Ismail	Secretary
Serbia	Federation of NGOs of Serbia	Dubravka Velat	Executive Director
Turkey	Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TUSEV)	Basak Ersen	General Secretary