

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS: A TOOL TO SUPPORT THE ROLE OF SNA IN NETWORK SUSTAINABILITY

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5
PAGE

1. Introduction

6
PAGE

2. Setting the scene:
exit strategy and civil society

9
PAGE

3. Food Security in
the South Caucasus

10
PAGE

4. Methodology

10
PAGE

5. SNA main findings and the design
of the response plans

15
PAGE

6. Limitations in deploying SNA for
designing an exit strategy

16
PAGE

7. Concluding remarks

18 References / Acknowledgements **20** List of interviews

Abstract

Project graduation is a crucial aspect in international cooperation. However, an analysis of the literature shows that limited attention has been devoted to the issue of exit strategy during graduation. A central issue is the lack of assessment of the local partners' network to which international governmental and non-governmental organisations alike phase-over when leaving a community. This article thus presents the use of social network analysis (SNA) in this specific field, as a tool to depict project networks with precision and analyse them thoroughly to support project graduation. Drawing on an exemplary case of an implementation tailored based on an advocacy coalition, it highlights five variables that account for the success of this approach: timing, information disclosure, expectations, the role of experts and ownership of the results. Moreover, it underlines two additional factors that help to ease the implementation: clarity on the exit strategy and partners' engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within international development settings, different actors are working to improve the living conditions of humans and local communities, including international non-governmental organisations, international donors, international and national agencies, private voluntary organisations, etc. While all of them share a common will and similar methodologies, what surprises external observers is the little attention devoted to the exit strategy by international actors (Hayman 2015, Lewis 2016) compared to the strong focus on how these interventions are delivered.

It is not a matter of dependency and projects' closure per se; rather, it is the lack of reflections about it. The first distinction is between a simple exit, a graduation and a planned and intentional exit. The first "refers to the withdrawal of externally provided program resources (material goods, human resources, technical assistance) from the entire program area. 'Graduation' refers to the withdrawal of resources from particular communities, program sites or program activities" (Rogers and Macías, 2004: i) and thus does not imply any planned activity. By contrast, the presence of a strategy conveys the idea of not only a thoughtful exit but also an explicit plan. The exit plan should clarify steps and criteria, describing resources withdrawal in a way that does not jeopardise the achievement of programme goals (relief or development) (Gardner et al. 2005). Indeed, the main idea is exactly that without a coherent and comprehensive exit strategy aimed at sustainability, many communities are at risk of being worse off after than before the implementation of a given project, reflecting the so-called "do no harm" principle (UNICEF 2003). These plans rarely exist. For instance, in a joint donors evaluation of exit strategies, Heldgaar (2008) concludes that designing a fully-fledged exit and sustainability strategy is "the exception rather than the rule". It is not only a matter of praxis – as pointed out by Heldgaar – but also of public debate and academic reflexivity (Davis and Sankar 2006). Overall, the lack of publicly-available documentation on this issue (Lewis 2016, Hayman 2015, Rogers and Macías 2004a; 2004b, Bao et al. 2015, Hayman 2015, Ho et al. 2016: Simon and Ismail 2008) does not allow understanding its implications for the long-term sustainability of the project and the development of local (either grassroots or institutional) capacity.

"Phasing over" is the most common type of exit strategy, implying handing over responsibility for activities to a network of community-based organisations (CBOs) or even a single CBO, sometimes to public institutions (Roger and Macías, 2004b: 4). If we do not take into account formal delegation to public institution, in any other case phasing-over implies the existence of a network of local actors. It holds utmost importance to understand whether the existing network of local civil society is ready to manage the activities. Notably, this network does not appear out of the blue at the end of the project, but rather it emerges in the daily activities that the international

non-governmental organisation¹ undertakes throughout the project (Lewis 2016, Brehm 2004). The network of local actors is not only a list of actors; rather, it is the complex relational world that the exiting actor has to fully acknowledge before leaving. In fact, it is not only a matter of individual partners' capacity to implement the project, but rather the network capacity to do so. Given that such a network is profoundly different with or without the external donor, an exit strategy has to assess of the status of the relationships of network members in light of the project end. The assessment is important to tackle crucial issues, from the identification of potential leadership to an analysis of any threats of power relationship and from an assessment of network stability to its outreach capacity.

Moving from this specific understanding of networks, this article takes the food security field as its crucial fundament to approach the use of social network analysis (SNA) to support graduation for development programmes. SNA is a specific technique to describe and analyse existing networks (or their absence) to the greatest extent possible. Empirically, at the core of this paper lies the study of a specific implementation of SNA to support Oxfam GB graduation from Armenia and Georgia. In these two countries, the international non-governmental organisation (INGO) is engaged with a development project aiming to strengthen two alliances comprising civil society organisations in the field of food security and agriculture. Following a thorough mapping, the project under analysis has engaged 62 organisations in two countries with an online survey. The survey includes a set of standardised questions regarding relational activities and attitudes, networks within and across the public and policy domains, as well as information on actors' structure and resources (Bokuchava 2016; Dershem and Bokuchava, 2016).

The article shows the critical issue that Oxfam GB faced in implementing SNA and the perceived gains. It highlights the four variables that seem to convey the success of this approach: information disclosure, expectations, ownership of the results and role of experts. Section 2 engages with the specific conceptualisations upon which this paper is based. It clarifies the importance of a robust and sound exit strategy, presenting the rare academic work in this field. Moreover, it emphasises the features of phasing-over as a specific type of exit strategy, as well as the importance of assessing the local network implementing the project. Section 4 clarifies the participatory nature of the action research put forward in Armenia and Georgia in the field of food security, detailing the methodology adopted. Sections 5 and 6 introduce a large volume of contextual information about the project and present the main findings of SNA for the project. Subsequently, sections 7 and 8 focus on factors influencing the use of SNA in the international development sector, considering positive aspects and stressing the limitation of this tool in the specific context. Finally, section 9 sums up the overall argument and the main empirical results of our research, indicating directions for improvement in the use of SNA in the programme graduation.

2.SETTING THE SCENE: EXIT STRATEGY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

As previously highlighted, there is a very limited number of works on the issue of graduation. The paradox has been fully explained by Sarah Lewis (2016): INGOs are showing an increased interest in "understanding good practice, knowing when the right time to withdraw from a country or programme is, planning for exit, and preparing partners. Despite this desire to learn there is a lack of easily accessible information on good practice. Few organisations are documenting their experiences or sharing these externally. As a result, recent examples of how others have actually designed, managed and implemented exit strategies are lacking" (ibid: 5). The few existing documents can be divided into two strands: the vast majority comprise organisational reports describing idiosyncratic exit strategies (or plans) in a specific context (Davis and Sankar 2005, Gardner et al. 2005, House 2007, Kvinna till Kvinna 2001, Lewis 2016, WWF-UK 2014a, 20014b), while only a small minority take a wider look departing from empirical experiences, providing the reader with more transposable findings. Among the latter, there are also governmental papers (Alkenbrack and Sheperd 2005, Coates et al. 2016, Haefthen et al. 2016, OECD

¹ Given the different legal status of external institutions running the programme in the development areas instead of using the more precise "private voluntary organisation" (Lewis, 2016; Rogers and Macías 2004a, 2004b), we rely on the more intuitive INGO.

2012) concerning governmental exit strategies from bilateral agreements (Slob and Jerve 2008), which features specific issues but also conveys important information about governmental priorities concerning graduation.

Among the governmental documents, OECD (2012) identifies five principles for a good practice exit strategy: transparency, inclusion, predictability, obligation and sustainability. However, the principles are neither innovative nor very specific, since they do not even distinguish between types of exit strategies. As for this issue, the well-known technical note of Beatrice Rogers and Kathy Macías (2004b) and the less appraised full report (2004a) are probably the most cited work in the field. Departing from the work of Levinger and McLeod (2002), Rogers and Macías clarify the different types of exit strategies and provide the most comprehensive set of terminology used as a reference point in later works: phase down, phase over and phase out. “*Phase down* simply refers to the gradual reduction in program inputs prior to phase out or phase over. *Phase over* refers to the transfer of responsibility for program-related activities to organizations or, sometimes, to individuals that will remain in the project area. *Phase out* refers to the withdrawal of program resources without transferring responsibilities to other institutions or groups” (Rogers and Macías 2004b: i). In their detailed analysis, they also identify specific features of the exit strategy, namely (2004b: 2): “Identification of approaches to be used for different program components; Specific criteria for graduation (of communities) and exit (of the program from the region); Measurable benchmarks for assessing progress toward meeting the criteria; A time line, recognizing flexibility may be required; Identification of action steps to reach the stated benchmarks and identification of parties responsible for taking these steps; and Mechanisms for periodic assessment of progress toward exit and for possible modification of the exit plan”.

As it is clear from these definitions, the type of the exit strategy adopted relates to the nature of the project and thus to the specific conditions that allow sustainability in the long run. According to practitioners (Hwenha and TSI 2016, House 2007), the choice of the specific exit strategy to adopt depends on the INGO², the nature of the (closing) programme, the available time frame (Garnder et al. 2005) and the available financial, human and institutional resources that can be exploited in the graduation phase.

An additional aspect that is rarely mentioned relates the importance of project partners. “Social investors typically channel their funds through non-profit entities including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community based organisations (CBOs) to deliver social and environmental programmes in communities where such programmes are required” (Hwenha and TSI 2016: 2). For this reason, the involvement of NGOs and CBOs is crucial during graduation to allow local sustainability without external funding, which holds for both humanitarian projects as well as long-term development (Gardner et al. 2005: 7). While planning graduation is participatory by definition (OECD, 2012), the engagement of local partners in designing an exit strategy cannot be taken for granted, nor can the relationship between exiting INGO and local organisations. The diversity of scope and aims of development projects makes graduation strongly dependent on the nature and structure of local civil society. The presence of project partners, their roles and the relationships that they share strongly affects the type of exit that INGOs may choose, since it directly affects the programme sustainability. Thus, it is crucial for donors and INGOs to have a clear understanding of CBOs’ and NGOs’ activity as well as relationships. While partners’ activity can be fully gauged during project implementation, relational aspects are rarely taken into account or registered. By contrast, the use of a formalised analysis of relationship among partners (also known as social network analysis - SNA) allows INGOs and donors alike to understand both partners’ engagement with the project, the relationships that they share among themselves and their outreach with other CBOs or grassroots organisations.

Given this condition, our focus on the role of civil society in the context of development aid programmes is unsurprising. In most cases, the role that NGOs or CBOs have played and will do in the future constrains the project outputs and its sustainability in the long run. According to scholars, the mantra of gradual phasing-out – the importance of the role that civil society is called to play – clarifies the nature of the graduation, which is not a single step but rather a path and a learning process. Overall, any exit strategy implies a path towards phasing-out, through a series of steps (Davis and Sankar, 2006: 6) in which local partners play a key role. According to Coates

² This is confirmed also for the governmental level (Slob and Jerve 008). OECD (2012: 287) research “confirmed that country-level exit decisions tended to be politically motivated and did not involve a prior assessment of the sustainability of the activities supported”.

and her USAID colleagues (Coates et al. 2016): “The exit process must be gradual. Community-based resource persons, organizations, and beneficiaries must be allowed a period of independent operation with technical troubleshooting from awardees before external funding is phased out of an activity”. The period of independent operation has to be granted to existing CBOs, organisations or networks depending on the nature of the project. However, in most cases the nature of the project entails a multitude of partners that should be able to cooperate in the absence of the external donor/INGO. While there is a fair chance that the network sustainability will be an externality of the project itself, donors and INGOs should take into consideration the need to assess the project network sustainability, gauging the nature and extension of partners’ relations.

While intra-organisational networks have been studied in many contexts (Dandi and Samarra 2009), the relevance of networks in civil society is less common (Bassoli 2012, 2016; Diani 2015; Pilati 2012, 2016; Shumate et al. 2005). This article follows the aim to further understand civil society taking a definite stand favouring the use of SNA as a specific technique to describe existing networks (or their absence) to the greatest extent possible. SNA is neither a specific theory of social behaviour nor solely a technique; rather, it is a perspective used by social scientists. It “encompasses theories, models, and applications that are expressed in terms of relational concepts or processes” (Wasserman and Faust, 1997: 4). It is thus a theoretical perspective to study processes or phenomena, taking into consideration (mainly) the relational aspects of the units rather than their individual characteristics (ibidem). Put simply, networks analysis offers the possibility to depict networks with precision and describe them thoroughly. As in the case put forward by Drew et al. (2011), SNA may be very useful in terms of providing project partners, donors and the wider audience a better understanding of network properties (size, structure, outreach, density, tightness, etc.), above all when networks comprise a vast number of units.

However, the approach also registers some limitations. The analytical tools derive from mathematics and matricial calculus implying a high level of sophistication (Knoke and Yang, 2008, Scott, 2013; Wasserman and Faust, 1997). In daily practice, scholars and practitioners alike face common problems related to what we can call “standard implementation”. These problems are intrinsic to SNA and they are at the centre of many debates. Among the challenges that can be found, four in particular hold strong importance: boundaries, perception (Borgatti and Halgin 2011; Wasserman and Faust, 1997: 31-34), the selection of the interviewee within the organisation (Baglioni and Giugni 2014: 7; Diani 2014: 37), faked responses and ethical problems (Borgatti and Molina 2003). Regarding first challenge, scholars of SNA often dwelt on the issue of boundary specification. The “problem is due to confusing networks with ‘groups.’ A fundamental part of the concept of group is the existence of boundaries. [...] the distinction between insiders and outsiders is an important part of the group concept [...] In contrast to groups, networks do not have ‘natural’ boundaries” (Borgatti and Halgin 2011: 2). The second challenge relates to the organisational nature of the SNA implementation. While the agency capacity of individuals is not contested, the agency of organisation is always more problematic (Martin 2009: 10). This directly affects our effort to determine the presence or absence of a linkage between two organisations. Indeed, self-evident bonds (such as interlocking directorates) have always received the great bulk of attention since they entail a clear connection (with an ontological status) and flow of communication between two organisations. By contrast, any other kind of connection such as sharing volunteers, exchanging information, shared projects, etc. are more common but have a different ontological status. Interviews and questionnaires with presidents, project managers and key actors are often the shortcut used to determine the presence of a connection between two organisations (Baglioni and Giugni 2014; Diani 2015; Eggert and Pilati, 2014; Pilati 2012, 2016). However, what is left is the difficulty of understanding whether two CSOs are connected by choosing the “right” respondent and trusting their ethical conduct. The challenge lies in the multiple connections that exist among CSOs. The third challenge is of an ethical nature: working on relational data implies the impossibility of full anonymity for the researcher. It is true that “in the purely academic application, harm can be avoided by thoroughly disguising the data (e.g., removing names and other identifying attributes)” (Borgatti and Molina 2003. 347) to protect identities of the respondent. However, it is difficult in some settings to protect identities, since information on the structure may help any informed reader to clearly identify each actor. This directly led us to the final point on ethicality: relational research is ethical when it provides the researched individuals with useful feedback (Borgatti and Molina 2003. 348). This is the less problematic aspect in our setting, since INGOs should be willing to disclose the network information with local partners, otherwise we fall back to the problem of the transparency and engagement needed in phasing-out.

3. FOOD SECURITY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

The case under scrutiny regards a project implemented by Oxfam GB in South Caucasus. Oxfam GB is a registered charity in the United Kingdom and a member of the international confederation Oxfam³. The four-year EC-funded project (2013-2017) “Improving Regional Food Security in the South Caucasus through National Strategies and Smallholder Production” was launched in September 2013 in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and aimed “to improve food security and nutrition through its advocacy efforts and inclusion of small-holder farmers’ interests in the governance processes” (Dershem and Bokuchava 2016: 6). It will end in September 2017, while Oxfam will close its offices and all programs permanently as of March 2018. The project aimed to contribute to improving food security and nutrition in the South Caucasus through smallholder farmers’ representation in the governance processes. While the relevance and structure of the project is not a matter of our interest, it is important to highlight those features that affect the donor’s graduation and exit strategy. In fact, exit is Oxfam GB’s complete graduation from these three countries, deploying an exit strategy based on a phase-over to the two alliances and spin-off organisations, in Armenia and Georgia and abrupt stop in Azerbaijan.⁴ An overarching South Caucasus regional unit coordinates and supports the efforts of the three national teams to implement the food security project; SNA was only implemented in Armenia and Georgia. For this reason, the article will focus and present only the data related to these two countries.

The project was structured in a South Caucasus regional team comprising a Regional Programme Manager and a Regional Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) coordinator and three national teams, one for each nation. The project itself features a small staff (seven units), who manage some 3.1 million Euros of budget. The main reason for such a small workforce relates to the goals and scope of the project, notably the advocacy work and the network creation that it aims towards. In order to guarantee the process of policy advocacy and civil society representation, Oxfam supported two existing alliance networks: the Georgian Alliance for Agricultural and Rural Development (GAARD) and the Agricultural Alliance of Armenia (AA). GAARD comprises 22 organisations, while AA is smaller and gathers only 16 CSOs⁵. Both of them are the main basis for the project’s policy advocacy actions as well as the sustainability in the long run. AA and its member organisations supported the Armenian Ministry of Agriculture in the development of the “Strategy for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Armenia”, which is still pending adoption, while GAARD members provided input on the draft “Agriculture Development Strategy in Georgia”, which was adopted in February 2015. In 2016, Oxfam also created two spin-offs (Oxygen in Armenia and Bridge in Georgia) to facilitate advocacy works in the two countries, in the last part of the project and for the time to come. After the termination of the project, alliances are foreseen to play an active advocacy role in these countries.

Notwithstanding the perception of a full understanding of the internal dynamics of the alliances provided by three years of project, Oxfam decided during the mid-term evaluation (September 2015) to implement SNA to single out potential strategies for the sustainability of the project. The main idea was to deploy SNA to have more detailed information about the actual network configuration (Int. 2, 5) to explicitly design an exit strategy capable of identifying sustainable scenarios in the absence of Oxfam. In this specific project, Oxfam had to ascertain which organisation or process could allow alliances to flourish and continue their work. Therefore, it was important to identify central actors, namely those linked to the whole network, as well as pinpointing marginalised CSOs to counteract their isolation. Moreover, SNA provided Oxfam with evidence-based data on the alliances’ structure and internal dynamics. This data was more robust and allowed Oxfam to avow a partial and idiosyncratic understanding of the alliances. Hereafter, the article will present SNA implementation, along with its main contribution to the exit strategy.

³ Later in the paper, we label Oxfam, which should be Oxfam GB, given that Oxfam international is never mentioned again.

⁴ Civil society activities have been problematic for many years in Azerbaijan (Venice Commission 2014) and due to political reason (Freedom House 2016) Oxfam GB closed its country office in September 2015.

⁵ The number of organisations changed during the project cycle. Data are of 2015 (beginning of SNA implementation).

4. METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the paper deploys a participatory approach and qualitative methods to assess the impact of SNA on project graduation and more specifically on its exit strategy, living out formalised SNA since it only exploits the results of the project presented hereafter. The paper adopts a participatory action research approach (PAR). PAR cannot be canonised in the form of a single, cohesive methodological approach, because it entails considering what are usually objects of research as research partners (Berg et al. 2009; Bergold and Thomas 2012). Since the whole course of the research is co-designed with the researched actors, the approach implies a high level of flexibility and discretionary choices concerning the tools deployed as well as the aim of the research. This also implies that the case selection is strongly biased by the will of the counterparts to be actively part of the research (Rahman 2013). This research is not unique on this point; for example, the work of Lewis (2016) also relies on a PAR approach since INGOs are both actors under scrutiny and agents of the research. The article was interested in assessing the use of SNA by an INGO willing to share its data and experience. Moreover, this INGO needed to be actively looking for the research to be carried out according to scientific standards (at least concerning ethics, information disclosure and researcher independence). The selected organisation is Oxfam GB, which has its own expertise, organisational identity and routines, which strongly affects the results presented here but also offers the reader a better understanding of the potentiality of SNA when it comes to designing a proper exit strategy. Moreover, the typical PAR divide between salaried researchers and voluntary co-researchers does not apply. Oxfam hired both parties for different aims. The author was a consultant during the implementation phase of project, advising the INGO on how to proceed and providing it with background readings and suggestions for the development of SNA questionnaire. Nonetheless, this role was minimal since Oxfam GB externalised the implementation of the SNA research, leaving the author with the scientific freedom to carry out independently this research.

5. SNA MAIN FINDINGS AND THE DESIGN OF THE RESPONSE PLANS

Rather than the final outcome of the Oxfam project, the article focus on how SNA was applied, what challenges were posed to Oxfam and the domestic civil society and what its added value was according to the implementers. For this reason, it is important to understand the role that SNA played in the project. SNA was not part of the project from its design; rather, it emerged as a possibility during the project. Thanks to a regional workshop to explore network approaches (February 2015), the regional team gained a first glimpse of SNA (Int. 2, 3, 5). Notably, the regional team decided to rely on external experts to provide technical support and roll out the implementation of the SNA, with three consultants at work: one being the technical implementer and two providers of additional analysis. The former subsequently hired two country assistants to liaise with the respective Oxfam unit. The actual implementation of SNA followed standard rules: target and boundaries identification, questionnaire drafting, a pilot and revision of the tool, as well as fully-fledged data gathering and analysis. Following previous work that systematically treats civil society in relational terms (Bassoli 2012, 2016; Diani 2015; Diani and Pilati, 2011; Eggert and Pilati 2014), the research (Bokuchava 2016; Dershem and Bokuchava 2016) assessed ties of information, resource and advocacy as connecting pairs of actors into the broader relational system that constitutes the two national agricultural fields (Baglioni and Giugni 2014, Bassoli 2012; Bassoli and Cinalli 2016; Diani and Pilati 2012)⁶. Indeed, the regional team opted to focus the analysis not only on project partners (Int. 6) but rather the wider field, comprising civil society organisations and state actors working on agriculture and livelihoods sectors in Armenia and Georgia. This allows not only understanding project sustainability but also the relevance of each alliance within the national relevant field.

⁶ “Information Sharing (Exchanging e-mails, attending meetings, telephone conversations and visits), Resource Sharing (Sharing projects, exchanging staff or providing space) and “Joint Advocacy - Collecting data on problems/solutions related to Food Security, Analysis and Support of decision makers” (Bokuchava, 2016: 12). Any of these relationships could have both a formal and informal nature. As for the formal nature, interviewees were asked about the presence of a memorandum or contract.

Throughout the analyses, each actor is thus seen as a centre point from which lines radiate to other actors (namely other actors with whom interactions are established). The two networks of food security and nutrition of CSOs are extremely different, although according to Dershem and Bokuchava (2016) they have both reached a cementing stage of development. According to Pastor and colleagues (2010), this stage features operational aspects on the way to sustainability. More precisely, in this stage “frequent and mutually reciprocated connections between organizations have been established, which help to build trust, a shared vision, and more egalitarian roles by organizations within the alliance” (Dershem and Bokuchava 2016:7).

Table I: Main data on Food Security Programme

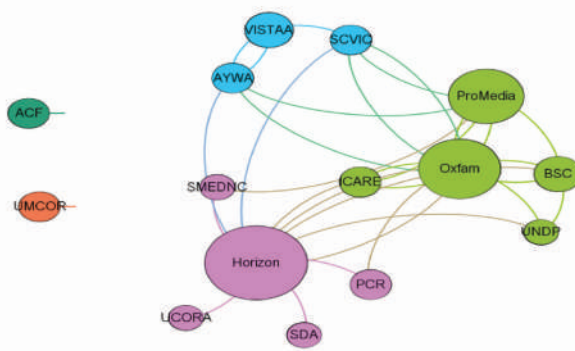
	Armenia	Georgia
Alliance member	15	21
Response rate	67%	76%
Sampled universe	65	80
Response rate	43%	43%
Mentioned organisations	123	130
Density		
Information sharing	0.011	0.017
Joint advocacy	0.013	0.02
Formal relation	0.019	0.019
Information sharing coalition only		
Isolates	2	0
Average reach	2.1	1.9
Reciprocity	24%	43%
Centrality	61%	85%
Brokerage role by Oxfam	73%	93%

Source: *Dershem and Bokuchava (2016:13-18) and Bokuchava (2016:15-16)*

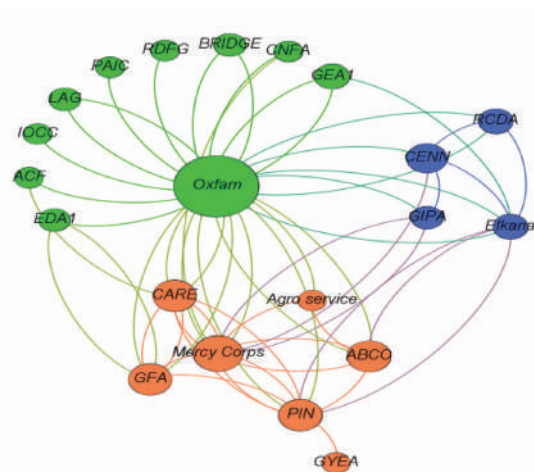
First of all (Tab. 1), not all alliances’ members in the two countries completed the survey. In Armenia, only 67% of the members provided a complete answer, compared with 76% of the Georgian alliance. Notably considering the whole statistical universe, the response rate drops to 43% in both countries. What is compelling it is not the low rate in the universe (which is coherent with many other researches) (Bassoli 2016, Eggert and Pilati 2014), but rather the limited capacity of Oxfam to convince project partners to complete an online questionnaire for the sake of project sustainability. Given that it is not possible to briefly summarise the results of the research on

three different networks here, we focus on the information exchange network. This is the baseline network for civil society, because it provides the overall pictures later specified by the other two networks. Indeed, this is the widest network and the one that should be more strongly influenced by the project activities. Based on the network metrics of inclusiveness, most alliance members shared information with each other. “However, most information sharing is one-way and not mutually reciprocated, especially in the Armenian agricultural alliance” (Dershem and Bokuchava 2016:5). On average, they tend to collaborate with each other, but two actors are isolated in Armenia, suggesting a problem of communication and project implementation. As expected, Oxfam plays a major brokering role in both countries, especially in Georgia. Finally, alliance members are 2.1 steps away from any other members in Armenia and 1.9 in Georgia, which is more tightly interconnected (Fig. 1). These highlights and more detailed information (Bokuchava 2016) allowed Oxfam to have a better understanding of the two alliances, especially regarding those connections of which is not part.

Figure 1: Information sharing in the project



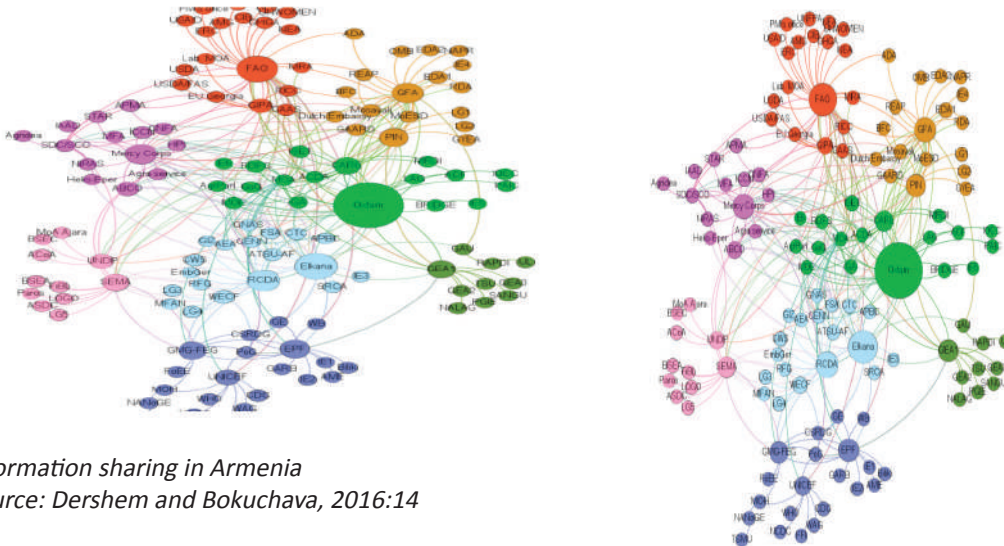
Information sharing within AA (Armenia)
 Source: Dershem and Bokuchava, 2016:13



Information sharing within GAARD (Georgia)
 Source: Dershem and Bokuchava, 2016:15

Regarding the overall situation, the food security networks (Fig. 2) comprise several major actors in separate clusters. In the Armenia network (Fig. 2, on the left), the alliance (AA) is also divided. According to Bokuchava (2016:19-20), the “specific character of the network can be explained by a combination of organizations working on qualitatively different activities within the AA. Although AA members independently demonstrate strength/centralization regarding FSN [food security and nutrition] issues AA is not their basic tool for relations”. Moreover, Oxfam also creates an independent sub-group that does not involve all alliance members, although its cluster has sufficient connections with other clusters to maintain a central position and a brokering role. On the contrary, in Georgia (Fig. 2, on the right), the GAARD alliance is more embedded in the wider network and it “successfully performs the function of a binding structure” from the centre of the network (Bokuchava, 2016:18). Once again, SNA provided Oxfam with additional information with strong implications on programme graduation.

Figure 2: Information sharing in the field



Information sharing in Armenia
 Source: Dershem and Bokuchava, 2016:14

Information sharing in Georgia
 Source: Dershem and Bokuchava, 2016:15

This information (on both the alliances and the fields) are the basis of the two exit strategies and the core issues are discussed in the response plan documentation (Oxfam GB 2016a, 2016b). The main problem in designing an evidence-based response plan relates to the discrepancy of knowledge between the consultant and the programme team. On the one hand, the programme team owned a practical and everyday knowledge on internal dynamics and external actors, albeit with a limited possibility to translate this information in SNA terms. On the other hand, the consultant had a deep analytical knowledge on network properties but a limited understanding of who was who on the ground. In order to bridge this asymmetry, the programme team had to closely cooperate with the consultant to define interventions that are based on SNA findings but also feasible before the closing of the project. Despite the extremely high level of idiosyncrasy of this exercise, it is noteworthy to highlight some examples.

Among others (see appendix for further details), three issues are at the core of both response plans: the relational aspects, the brokering role played by Oxfam and the presence of central actors outside the alliances Table 2). In terms of the first aspect, the SNA report provided important information about internal dynamics and thus Oxfam deemed it necessary to disseminate it to alliances' members and discuss it carefully throughout. This aspect cannot be dismissed without first clarifying an important cognitive aspect of SNA exercise. While a perception of partners' roles is usually shared within a project, SNA provides the network with a clear picture of individual roles. This translates into a growth of the leader's understanding of partners' dynamics, as well as an increased awareness of each partner. Regarding the second aspect, Oxfam's centrality was by far the major challenge. For this reason, different actions were foreseen: from involving two Oxfam spin-off organisations in the coordination of the alliances to improving the centrality of semi-central actors providing a leading role in sub-groups or the rotating mechanism in the governance board. Finally, the mapping exercise provides important information about the centrality of actors that are not part of the alliances themselves. The clear evidence of their role favoured wider engagement. Moreover, this exercise also helped with the gender mainstreaming of the project.

Table 2: SNA finding and response plan

Type of findings	Action to be taken
Overall picture	*° Internal presentation of SNA to increase partners' ownership of the response plan and support for the implementation of strategies.
Presence of different central actors in the three different networks	* Need to map capacities of GAARDs members to reveal the sustainability potential of alliance.
Disperse connection to grassroots organisations	*In the mapping exercise, one of the assessed topics will be the mechanism through which GAARD' members convey messages to the grassroots smallholder farmers. * Food Security Project team will carry out the CSO mapping at the grassroots level to ensure linkages with national and local CBOs. * Update smallholder farmers on a regular basis using "Municipal focal point".
Presence of central actors not part in the alliances	° Change the charter of AA to include different kinds of membership categories and new members. *Include new stakeholders in the alliances or the so-called "Board of Observers".
Limited gender mainstreaming the alliances	*A new gender-focused NGOs as a core member.
Brokering and central role of Oxfam	° Changing alliance structure: creation of a new governance board comprising three members acting on a rotational basis. ° Shifting responsibility from Oxfam to OxYgen. *Move the centrality of Oxfam to other members through assigning chairs from various GAARD member organisations to the different sub-working groups of the GAARD.
Missing relationships among members and with the board members	*Regular update of stakeholders on progress and achievements via a quarterly newsletter featuring member stories.

Source: Oxfam GB 2016a, 2016b

° Response plan for Armenia * Response plan for Georgia

6. LIMITATIONS IN DEPLOYING SNA FOR DESIGNING AN EXIT STRATEGY

The general presentation of the findings of SNA and their relevance for the response plan will now help to introduce a critical appraisal of applying SNA to design exit strategy. The issues registered are numerous: interviewees proposed different topics only partially overlapping with those present in the literature. Accordingly, we will only focus on the most recurrent ones: timing, anonymity, expectations, counterparts and the ownership of the results.

SNA is time-consuming and it has a direct impact on the timeframe of the graduation, which is a crucial feature (Lewis 2016). According to the internal report (Bokuchava, 2016: 12), the research was structured into preparatory works (September - October 2015), preparation of the questionnaire and piloting (November-December 2015), implementation (December 2015 - February 2016), analysis and reporting (March - May 2016) and follow-up: feedback from partners (June 2016). This official timeframe does not take into account the long period from December 2014 to September 2015. In the first part (11/2014 – 03/2015), Oxfam had a consultancy supporting the regional team to explore networking and what assessment methodologies exist. The timeframe was consistent and tightly managed until the beginning of the implementation, after which the research required a higher level of flexibility to allow partners' involvement in all of the different phases. Notably, SNA took almost six months of preparation, six months for the direct implementation and six months to imbue the exit strategy and be discussed among partners. It is important to stress that what was supposed to be an interim evaluation later became the tool to design the graduation with a precise response plan.

The second aspect relates to the ethical issue of anonymity. The issue was discussed at length within the programme team, although later the choice was a practical one, leaving each organisation free to decide whether to grant Oxfam the permission to disclose its name in the charts. Even though the vast majority decided for full disclosure, some organisations members opted for anonymity, producing a *de facto* semi-anonymous report where names are listed together with pseudonyms. It is important to understand the tension between two poles of interpreting the sensitivity of the issue: readability and legality. In terms of the former, without names it is impossible to understand relational data, while at the same time the disclosure of names exposes the position of each organisation. This is considered sensitive because it may highlight a peripheral position or private – not advertised – connections. Moreover permission is asked (and granted) when partners are not fully aware of the usage of these data (Int. 2). As for the second issue, once the organisation grants permission, names can be used in publications of any kind. According to some practitioners (Int. 2), implementing organisations should use a parallel approach: full disclosure within the project (to help design an exit strategy) and full anonymity in publications reaching an external audience. This did not happen in this specific project (Bokuchava, 2016; Dershem and Bokuchava 2016), although the presence of partial anonymity helped the internal discussion and fostered the partners' engagement.

Expectations always play a major role in project sustainability, whereby graduation follows this rule. SNA's aim was ambitious from the onset. Given the focus on graduation and the alliances' sustainability, the programme team designed the questionnaire to assess both alliances' network and the impact of the alliances on the overall field of food security. This double focus (internal dynamics vs. alliances' outreach) imposed a long questionnaire and should have also entailed interviewing all mapped organisations. The strong bias imposed by the timeframe and the fact that the research snowballed from the alliances' members skewed the data towards them (as is often the case). For this reason, interviewees mentioned the need for a three-stage approach to optimise SNA benefits (Int. 2, 3). "It is always better to conduct social network analysis in parallel with stakeholder analysis [...] on the onset of the implementation of the project. It would be ideal to have during the formulation of the project but, [...] the second best option would be to conduct it, in the very beginning of project implementation" (Int. 3). Notwithstanding this limitation, all interviewees agreed about the positive impact of SNA on the project and the reach of its main goal (informing Oxfam graduation). Oxfam and local partners learnt about their relationship and designed an evidence-based response plan for the exit strategy; moreover, they noticed a cognitive impact of SNA, namely increased awareness (Int. 3). Some disillusion also surfaced regarding the triviality of findings (Int. 1 and 3). Generally, the alliances' networks were quite clear from the beginning, while the field network and

the outreach capacity of the alliance was far from being clear. In this regard, SNA findings were ground-breaking, allowing the alliance to design a more inclusive exit strategy.

The fourth aspect relates to experts. While it is very common for INGOs to hire service providers to gain specific expertise, SNA proved a challenge in this regard. Consultancy was particularly important to allow the project to be framed along a more theoretical-driven approach, reflecting the so-called theory of change (Dershem and Bokuchava 2016; Int. 4). At the same time, the use of experts may have drawbacks (Int. 2) in relation to the previously-discussed asymmetry. Moreover, the data collection contracted out and managed by external figures did not help to increase the rate of return; on the contrary, it slowed down the whole process since research assistants were outsiders and required the support of Oxfam programme staff to liaise with the stakeholders. Notably, Oxfam project officers do not see this as a limitation, but rather as a lesson learnt (Int. 2). “It would be much easier now. I would not stick to the online version of the questionnaire; I would spend more time for the light conversations” (Int. 3).

The fifth and final issue relates to the low level of partners’ commitment and engagement. As for the first issue, according to a national coordinator the main reason relates to the online questionnaire: “once you received and invitation your instinctive reaction is to avoid it. This leads to a kind of poverty of the data” (Int. 3). However, regional officers do not shift the blame to partners; rather, they realised afterwards that they should have worked more on this aspect (Int. 3) to increase the response rate (Int. 2). As for the low engagement, one interviewee clearly pointed out that “ [...] this SNA was the agenda of Oxfam and the whole process was led by Oxfam. And so this was really part of us looking from our own perspective on how can we better support the alliance to become more sustainable so [...] I do not expect that there will be full ownership from the alliance because they were not involved from the beginning” (Int. 5). The limited ownership of SNA implementation was counterbalanced by follow-up activities to present the main findings and the response plan. Moreover, many other activities were foreseen as part of the response plan itself (Oxfam GB, 2016a, 2016b). Notwithstanding some limitations with jargon, the response plan was quite straightforward and directly linked to the output of SNA. Therefore, considering that the report was presented at length together with the action plan, it is unsurprising that the reaction of the partners was generally positive (Oxfam GB 2016b). This entails the full participation of the partners as well as an increasing responsibility on their behalf regarding alliance sustainability in the long run.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we have tried to highlight several aspects of deploying SNA to design an evidence-based exit strategy. For this purpose, we have presented the application of SNA in an advocacy coalition project as it was implemented by the international organisation Oxfam GB. The first and most important impact of SNA implementation was the cognitive one. All those involved acquired sensitivity about SNA implementation as well as gathering skill on its usage. The importance that team members assign to SNA is overwhelming. Indeed, they have already foreseen future dissemination activities within the Oxfam network. “We are going to develop guidelines on how to apply SNA and then we will be able to share also our own experience in applying SNA” (Int. 5). Overall, the added value of using SNA is recognised by all involved actors, although the presence of SNA from the design of the project would have helped its implementation, as well as the partnership ownership of both SNA and graduation. It is also important to note that Oxfam could start an open discussion about network assessment, thanks to SNA. Indeed, local partners could face and visualise their network with and without Oxfam fully understanding action points and co-designing the exit strategy. Thus, Armenian and Georgian CSOs are now more aware and have a better understanding of the new governance structure, with Oxfam’s presence being deemed to finish.

The cognitive impact directly links to the instrumental impact. All interviewees were satisfied with the outputs because they provided the project with several maps that could be discussed to prepare the graduation with local partners. Even though SNA did not provide additional unexpected results about the project partners, it supported an evidence-based action plan. It scientifically confirmed Oxfam’s centrality (Dershem and Bokuchava, 2016) and allowed the project to develop some action points to tackle this crucial issue, lately collected in the

response plan (Oxfam GB 2016a, 2016b). More specifically, SNA provided a better picture to shift the centralities on the closest actors (Georgia) and to the national spin-off (Armenia). The mapping also helped Oxfam spin-offs to better assess their position and determine a specific course of action to engage with alliances' members, while providing alliances with a better picture of their outreach and the need to engage new members playing a central role within the food security field. These action points of the response plans were fundamental stepping stones towards long-term sustainability (see also annex 1). SNA maps provided the perfect focal points to discuss alliance structure, outreach and impact, while posing the crucial question of Oxfam phasing-over. It supported the creation of a collective agenda along with full awareness of the closing of the project, calling each part into action. SNA thus partially helped to match three criteria put forward by Rogers and Macías (2004b: 2): identifying the approach to be used (wider engagement, shifting centralities, ad-hoc spin-off, etc.), a clear timeline (with a two-year period before graduation) and a clear "identification of action steps to reach the stated benchmarks and identification of parties responsible for taking these steps" (ibidem).

These important results are impressive, considering that the serendipitous implementation was only part of an interim evaluation. Given that the implementation of SNA was not foreseen from the onset, the capacity of Oxfam to extract this added value from the assessment partially proved the strength of the tool. At the same time, critical aspects cannot be dismissed. Oxfam officers have realised the limitations of their first SNA implementation. Interviewees confirmed that this project – being an advocacy project – would have benefitted from SNA mapping as a benchmark when implementing the project, if not when designing it (Int. 3). Moreover, they learnt from this first implementation about the importance of response rate, boundary limitations and survey prompting (which should have been managed internally).

The final set of reflections concerns the external and internal validity of the results issued by this paper. Oxfam GB represents a well-established INGO active in the international cooperation sector. This provides us with the application in the context of a typical INGO working for long-term development. Thus, the added value and the drawbacks put forward by project managers, consultants and service providers are to some extent transferable elsewhere, being typical to all SNA implementations (Int. 4). However, the specific case under analysis – being an advocacy coalition project – is quite peculiar. The project itself does not cover a wide range of international cooperation activities, mainly those activities that are part of the humanitarian programmes. To conclude, this paper represents an attempt to encourage a wider application of SNA in the field of international cooperation while providing practitioners with a set of critical aspects to take into account. Furthermore, it also represents a first attempt to modelise the impact that SNA implementation has on graduation. This attempt is very partial given that a single case is under scrutiny, although it provides important information for future research. The ongoing debate concerning the different kinds of graduation does not take into account different methodologies that can be applied. We believe that observing and analysing additional projects (with different methodologies) offers the potential to lead to new understandings and a better design of exit strategies.

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