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# The multiple balancing act of virtual communities in peace and development

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The devastating conflicts in many developing countries have triggered many NGOs to devote increasing attention to conflict prevention, conflict transformation and post-conflict development. In each of the prominent conflict countries (like Afghanistan, East Timor, Kosovo), several hundred foreign NGOs are active. They come from different corners: humanitarian NGOs, human rights organisations, development institutions, and NGOs specialising in peace building, mediation or reconciliation.

Once in a conflict area, the different organisations have to cooperate with each other. For that, they need to understand each other. They discover that their work overlaps, that they should share information, that their staff needs similar preparation before being sent there, that they can learn from each other and that they can complement each other. They all possess specialised knowledge, which would in fact help others to fulfil their specific tasks if it were shared. Development organisations realise that they need a clearer grasp of conflict dynamics, and peace and conflict oriented organisations conclude that sustainable peace can only be reached if some economic development takes place.

This situation has given rise to a large number of networks which try to bring together experience from different types of organisation to help each of them to face the challenges of conflict-torn societies.<sup>1</sup> Many of these networks try to create virtual communities to improve the exchange of information and experience and to enhance the cooperation between the members. In many cases, however, this does not immediately help to achieve the aspired results.

Effective maintenance of peace and conflict resolution needs collaboration and communication between all stakeholders. Two initiatives set up in an attempt to do this are the CODEP Network and the FriEnt partnership. A number of problems are common to all virtual communities especially in the initial phase of their existence.<sup>2</sup> The cases of CODEP and FriEnt illustrate many such challenges, and lead us to a ten-point checklist that can be used to assess a community or to build a network.

## **Case 1: Conflict, Development, and Peace Network (CODEP)**

CODEP, the Conflict, Development and Peace network, was founded in the UK in 1993 as a multi-disciplinary forum for academics, organizations and practitioners involved in exploring the causes of conflict and its impact on people's lives. It was created in the belief that sharing ideas about policy and practice would help members challenge thinking on international responses to conflict and contribute to the development of good practice. CODEP aimed to reduce violent conflict and support those worst affected by it through the improvement of policy and practice in conflict, development and peace work carried out by UK NGOs, academic institutions, consultants and government departments.

CODEP organised regular conferences and roundtable discussion meetings. Next to that, information dissemination was undertaken via the CODEP website. The website contained a database of organisations engaging in conflict, development and peace work. It also contained conference reports, an agenda of events, and a virtual meeting room. In addition, CODEP published regular newsletters, to which a large number of people subscribed.

Members of the network organised in thematic working groups, although it appears that these were not yet fully developed when the network ceased to exist in 2003, mainly due to lack of funding. Some CODEP activities were continued elsewhere: the organization Peace Direct has taken over care of the database of institutions and of the compiling and spreading of the newsletter.

### **Objectives**

From the start, CODEP's objective was an open-ended information exchange which would, as the network developed, help participants synchronise their efforts or undertake cooperative work. However, 'cooperation or coordination never materialized on any major level, indeed competition between agencies and the need to remain independent and distinct in focus were more apparent.'<sup>3</sup>

CODEP's constituency and context changed drastically over the ten years of its existence. The field of conflict studies and peace building grew rapidly, and more organizations began to give thought to the integration of development and conflict policies. CODEP's *Legacy and Learning Report* summarises the developments between 1993 and 2003 as follows:

*There was a proliferation of NGOs, academics, interested individuals and interested groups for CODEP to link with and these were within themselves increasingly diverse. Conflict focussed programmes and trainings became common, DfID and CHAD were created from the old ODA bringing new funding patterns and spheres of influence. The number, location and nature of conflicts being addressed changed, the relationship between governments and NGOs changed and trends on how to respond to conflict changed (for example where there was once a trend for creating separate conflict departments, there is now a move to mainstream a conflict-sensitive approach across development practice). This context will continue to change and any future networking initiative must be fluid, responsive and challenging in addressing changes.'*<sup>4</sup>

After 9/11, the context changed further. The discourse, at least in the political domain, became dominated by issues of security. In response, CODEP decided to reorient itself towards a forum for dissent towards the policy of the UK government. Soon after, however, its funds dried up.

### **The Community**

People from a wide range of (mainly UK-based) NGOs and academic institutions participated in the network. These include World Vision, British Agencies Afghanistan Group, Conciliation Resources, Alliances for Africa, International Alert, ActionAid, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Department of Peace Studies (Bradford University), Eritrean Relief Association, Centre for Conflict Management (Norway), Comic Relief, Arab Resource Collective, and the Centre for Defence Studies).

A clear common denominator linked the participants: the desire to develop thinking about conflict, development and peace work. However, there are some signs that the network was too broad and diverse to allow meaningful and innovative exchange. Indeed, CODEP's *Legacy and Learning Report* states, 'diversity in terms of people attending, topics, issues and format was prioritised above focus and uniformity'.<sup>5</sup>

For some participants the group of members was perhaps too large and diverse, inhibiting openness. The report states that although 'agencies within the sectors have continued to value the exchange of information, (they often) preferred to do this in smaller, more confidential forums where they could talk more candidly'.<sup>6</sup>

The network's aim to diversify beyond the UK and include Southern organisations and diaspora representatives was never realised; as such, its innovative capacity, which may have been augmented by adding more varied frames of reference and streams of thought, was perhaps limited by this relative homogeneity. Whilst adding external perspectives might further have worsened the perception that the network was too broad and diverse, internationalisation might have increased the funding opportunities for funding, from sources outside of the UK.

### **The Content**

The CODEP network came together around issues of conflict and development. The combination of these two fields was quite new when CODEP was founded and even today the conflict and development field is still in an early stages of development, both academically and in terms of policy and practice. At the same time the importance of this theme is increasingly recognized, and organizations working in the development and peace building fields are eager to develop their thought, policy and practice. This made the theme an important and suitable one for building a network and annual conferences about Conflict and Development that CODEP organized were generally well attended. The issues raised in CODEP roundtable discussions tended to be 'cutting-edge', addressing important new themes that many organizations struggled with. Like the community itself, however, these issues may have been too broad and diverse, decreasing participants' motivation.

### **Moderation and interactivity**

CODEP activities such as events, the publication of reports, and the newsletter were highly moderated. However, the online meeting room on the CODEP website never really functioned. It seems that there were not enough man-hours to invest in making the forum sufficiently attractive for online discussions. For instance, members had difficulties uploading their own documents. They did, however, contribute to the newsletter, which was widely read and appreciated. Even so, CODEP was not very interactive. Conferences were always initiated and organised by the CODEP coordinator and board, not by the members of the network.

### **Level of interaction**

Interaction of the network was relatively low. An annual conference was organized and a number of roundtable meetings were staged, but no follow-up to meetings was organised. However, CODEP members came together in varying groups to prepare meetings and process results. In addition, the executive committee of the network consisted of representatives of various organizations, who otherwise probably would not have interacted as intensively with each other as they did as a result of their committee membership.

### **Complexity and Depth**

CODEP maintains a very straightforward website, but offers many important functions, such as a basic database of organisations, a discussion room, an agenda of events, a newsletter and a number of conference reports. It functions predominantly as a facilitator of *network* exchange rather than *content* exchange. For the visitor who is not planning to directly participate in CODEP conferences, this makes the website less attractive.

### **Embeddedness**

On the one hand, especially in its early years, CODEP provided a unique and important forum to discuss the new issues facing conflict and development communities. On the other hand, the links to the participating institutions appear to have been quite thin, and as such exchanges were set up outside of CODEP when this was more convenient.

CODEP was set up in an early stage of the development of the field, as one of the first networks addressing this topic. Online exchange became available shortly after; and as a result the network was able to drastically improve its communication with members and to expand its base of participants. However, it failed to link up with similar initiatives elsewhere as these started to pop up.

### **Results**

Although the network ultimately crumbled, CODEP was successful as a pioneer in its field, contributing to the development of current thinking about peace, conflict and development. A solid results analysis based on participant interviews is lacking, but network meetings and conferences in particular provided fertile ground for this young discipline to blossom.

## **Case 2: Working Group on Development and Peace (FriEnt)**

FriEnt, the German Working Group on Development and Peace (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Entwicklungspolitische Friedensarbeit), was created in a time when CODEP was reaching its demise. Initiated in the summer of 2001 for an initial period of three years, the partners concluded at the end of this period in 2004 that the partnership should be prolonged, until at least 2007. One of the main tasks of FriEnt is knowledge management: the collection, analysis, and publication of information on research results, project approaches, best practices and lessons learned in the field of development and peace building.

FriEnt is a strong network between a small number of organisations (eight in total; see below). Every organisation has seconded a staff member to the FriEnt Team. This creates a common work force, which can shoulder a considerable amount of work. The main governing body is the Board, in which all organisations have a representative. It meets at least twice a year and decides on the general orientation of FriEnt, appoints the management of the FriEnt team, agrees upon the framework programme and monitors its implementation. Furthermore, there are contact points within the participating organisations, introduced in 2004, to facilitate the exchange of information and the smooth cooperation between the partner organisations.

### **Objectives**

The FriEnt team is expected to offer services to the member organisations and to carry out tasks that any of these organisations alone would not be able to do or which would be a duplication of efforts already taking place (e.g. country analysis in conflict regions). The main objective is to use the resources of the partner organisations in a more efficient manner, by

increasing the flow of information among the organisations, creating a ‘culture of cooperation’ rather than competition and by carrying out common projects.

The objective of the working group is thus not the implementation a single project (or a predefined number of projects), but a continuous cooperation in a relatively broad field. Within this broader field, however, specific themes and projects are defined in annual framework programmes, which provides a focus for the work of the group.

In this way, the network is regularly operationalised and translated into a concrete programme. Since the cooperation agreement is for a limited period of three years, this also adds to the emphasis on specific priorities for any given period.

### **The community**

FriEnt has been formed by an interesting group of organisations. The eight organisations come from different backgrounds: government, political parties, churches, and peace organisations.<sup>7</sup>

The group of partner organisations is an ‘organised diversity’. It is a closely circumscribed group, but half are umbrella organisations and as such are linked to many other organisations. They have a diverse background, each offering specific comparative advantages. The highly selected membership assures that the group is focused, while at the same time widely rooted in development and conflict-related grassroots work, via churches and the platforms of peace organisations.

Further organisations can be included in the partnership if all founding partners agree. However, an extension of the group is not very probable, because it would upset the carefully constructed balance between the different types of organisations.

### **The content**

FriEnt knows three fields of activity, namely:

- Information and knowledge exchange;
- Networking;
- Competence building and advice (to partner organisations).

For the period 2004-2007, FriEnt focuses on a number of main themes and regions.<sup>8</sup> The main themes include:

- Planning methods, monitoring and evaluation (of development projects);
- Conflict prevention through development cooperation;
- Development cooperation in (Sub-Saharan) countries with religious-cultural conflicts;
- Transitional Justice (in Great Lakes area and Colombia).

FriEnt concentrates mainly on the focus regions of the Middle East, Nepal, Colombia, and Africa.

This is a highly focused programme, compared to the wide range of conflicts and development issues which could be addressed. This does not exclude, however, other relevant issues which can contribute to the debate. For example, the first newsletter reported on a dialogue in peace and development in Nigeria (not organised by FriEnt), and the most recent FriEnt publication on the web is a report on an expert meeting on conflict sensible development cooperation with Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

### **Moderation and interactivity**

Since the website does not contain any interactive features, there is no need for any moderation.

In its interaction with partner organisations, the FriEnt project team is expected to take a proactive approach. Within the team, the team leader can take all decisions in areas which do not fall explicitly under the responsibility of the Board. That means that there is a hierarchy with a clear allocation of responsibilities, avoiding 'group paralysis' through divergent priorities and approaches. At the same time, the project team is placed at an arm's length from the representatives of the partner organisations: whilst the latter decide on the annual framework, the day-to-day operations are wholly taken care of by the team leadership.

### **Level of interaction**

A continuous interaction is encouraged and maintained among the partner institutions, but this is not visible on the web: interaction takes place directly between the organisations interested in a specific question.

The most visible means of interaction is the quarterly newsletter *FriEnt Impulse*. It has appeared ten times since the first issue was published in September 2002. Because of this fairly low interactivity between partners and limited sharing of information, a constant challenge is keeping network members actively involved and encouraging them to offer up to date information. There is a risk that contact points within partner organisations lose their affinity to FriEnt because of the lack of feedback they receive, and as such neglect their duties as liaison between FriEnt and the organisation in question.

### **Depository versus interaction**

The FriEnt website is nothing more than a depository of information without any interactive features or pretences. It links to member websites, but does not offer a channel to respond to the information provided. The website does not function as an 'exchange', as the information is selected and presented by the FriEnt team: it is a one-way presentation of a limited selection of publications (9 by March 2005).

The information itself which is posted on the website is often the product of intensive interaction. The website discloses the results of discussions, round table conferences, expert meetings, etc., to a larger audience.

Networking is one of the three main fields of activity of FriEnt. The Framework Plan for 2005/2006 identifies country roundtables and thematic inter-institutional working groups as the main instrument to realise this networking objective, and not the Internet; this is reflected in the static nature of the FriEnt website.

### **Complexity and depth**

The website is very straightforward with only a few headings, with more emphasis on quality of content rather than quantity. There are no short news items, only comprehensive documents.

The website gives an impression of some highlights of the common activities; but if the reader is interested in a concrete material question (or in information on peace and development

activities in a specific country), the relevant information is rather inaccessible. There is no index, no country- or problem-specific entry point to find this information.

However, one of the partner organisations, the *Plattform Zivile Konfliktbearbeitung*, has a site ('Das Info-Portal') which addresses this need; besides offering information on actual news and upcoming events, it provides access to a broad range of documents which can be accessed by a combination of key words on topics and region. So, if we look at the 'family of websites' offered by the partner institutions, it provides such features. A direct link to the 'Info-Portal' on the FriEnt website would make this more visible.

### **Embeddedness**

FriEnt is related in an indirect way to many organisations in the field. Furthermore, the fact that four of its member organisations are themselves umbrella organisations, further restricts its access to the ultimate beneficiaries in the field. The contact points in the different partner organisations have the task to shorten that distance and facilitate exchange.

Although an English language version of the website is available, beyond that the international embeddedness is limited, and the framework plan for 2005-2006 indicates that increased attention will be paid to exchange in an international context. FriEnt is still very much centred on the German (language) context. However, the newsletter 'FriEnt Impulse' contains much information on international initiatives, most of the links on the website refer to international groups, and members of the FriEnt-Team participate in many international meetings.

### **Results**

FriEnt seems to be a relatively successful network, due to the fact that it was decided to continue the cooperation after the first three years. The exchange of information has been improved, but it has proven difficult to start common projects. The ambition to reduce operational and coordination costs for the member institutions through the investment in the partnership project team still has to be realised.

## **The multiple balancing act of virtual communities**

Organizing a virtual community is a tremendous challenge. The route to success is a narrow, ever bending road. What proved successful for a virtual group at one moment may be unhealthy in its next phase of development. Trying to correct inevitable errors, one may overreact and get into the opposite kind of problems: *you might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backwards.*<sup>10</sup>

The cases of CODEP and FriEnt offer a number of lessons for similar initiatives elsewhere, illustrating that the organisation of a continuous exchange of knowledge and experience is a delicate balancing act between different dimensions.

The work of a virtual community can be highly improved if a balance is struck within the following ten dimensions.<sup>11</sup>

### *1. The community*



One needs a certain critical mass for a lively, sustained interaction. If the group is too small, the chance is great that:

- There will be little exchange, because there are too few people to participate;
- Participants' positions will be quickly known to each other and no longer surprising, so the interest to participate will rapidly decline;
- People with a similar background participate, so that opinions may not differ sufficiently to generate creative ideas;
- Only a small fraction of the potential constituency participates, so that people will turn to other forums where participation is more diverse.

If community is too large, there is a high risk that too many people with different backgrounds join and communication falter. Reasons for this include:

- Individual contributions running beyond the interest of the majority of members;
- People hesitating to engage themselves because they do not see a common denominator which brings participants together;
- An overload of messages generated. A community can drown in its own flow of information, if not skilfully channelled into different subgroups and discussion threads.

There are many other aspects that have to be considered with regard to the profile of people forming a virtual community or network. Does the network intend to bring people together within one country (or within one language area), or does it aim to be a truly international network? A national network has the advantage of a common language being used, and generally a national frame of reference can be taken for granted. On the other hand, the chances for learning are likely to be restricted where examples from other corners of the globe are less often referred to, and the common framework will hardly be questioned since it is shared by everybody: it is more difficult to practice out of the box thinking if you are all in the same box.

## *2. The content*

Not only the community but also the topic of discussion can prove to be too narrow or broad to sustain a network.

If the field of discussion is too narrow,

- It will not likely stimulate a broad enough flow of information;
- The interaction may be less creative since creativity often results from the combination of previously uncombined elements;
- It will only attract the 'usual suspects', and as a result few new links will be made.

If the field is too broad (e.g. 'conditions for peace on earth'),

- The interaction remains too vague and becomes uninteresting for serious people;
- It attracts people with unrealistic ideas, and
- It becomes very difficult to arrive at common elements binding the group together.

Another dimension to take into account in this context is how strictly the field is delineated and who determines this.

## *3. Moderation*

Communities can be 'under-moderated' and 'over-moderated': if everybody can post in the community what he or she wants without quick feedback, irrelevant interaction can become

annoying for other members, who are likely to drop out. Unmoderated interaction can lead to less intensive interaction, because nobody stimulates the discussion at critical intervals.

With one or more persons who feel a special responsibility towards the forum, interaction is kept clean and clear, discussions on governance matters can be held where necessary, and reactions can be provoked when they do not come by themselves.

Over-moderation is a risk where a moderator has a narrow view of the purpose of the group, takes decisions in an authoritarian way and stifles discussion rather than stimulating it. There is a thin line between channelling a discussion smoothly into a constructive direction and pressing people into a straightjacket, excluding any spontaneous detours, exchanges or personal remarks.

All in all, a community stands or falls with the quality and level of moderation.

#### *4. Rhythm of interaction*

Every group needs a 'rhythm' to organise its own work. If the frequency of meetings and the total amount of information circulated is too high, people will drop out because they do not have enough time to catch up with the discussion and process the information shared.

There is no clear-cut recipe for the frequency of interaction. It depends very much on how central a group is for its members: a group that is highly relevant and supportive for the daily functioning of participants can interact with a high frequency. If the concern is somewhat more peripheral for the members, a slower rhythm would better suit their needs.

If, on the other hand, a group meets infrequently in a face-to-face or virtual setting, there will be little cohesion, little mutual trust, and little sensibility of what worth sharing with the others. The interaction in the group should not overburden the participants, but be sufficiently frequent to keep the interest in the group alive.

#### *5. Objective*

Without a specific aim, community interaction quickly becomes spurious. But with a too narrowly defined objective, a community may not survive its own success. It may fall apart once the aim has been realized, without making sure that the accumulated insight is passed on.

Some virtual communities have a very specific objective. They may have been created to prepare a specific event or the next annual report, to elaborate a new strategy, or to coordinate a specific project.

These groups often function very well, because they have a clear focus, their activity is time-bound, and the participants have an obvious common interest. The problem is very often that the knowledge generated during the project is not captured and not passed on to future teams with a similar task. There is also little exchange with other teams that perform similar tasks at the same time. For such an exchange to occur, the community will have to broaden its participant base, but as a consequence, the objective then becomes more diffuse.

To harness the great potential of project-oriented communities, it can be envisaged that a larger community organises itself as a task force which sets itself a series of challenging objectives with a specified time schedule. It can also accommodate different projects, carried out by different subgroups, at the same time.

### 6. *Information depository versus interactivity*

A community can be oriented towards archiving documents or towards maintaining a continuous stream of communication.

If the community is a meeting place to exchange impressions and ventilate ideas, there is a risk of losing a collective memory and the exchange of experiences does not result in further developments. There is no concrete 'output' from the group, exchange does not lead to ideas that are elaborated and refined. Only if the exchange of information is 'captured' in one way or another and made accessible in the future, the facilities or services of the community to its members are sustained.

An increased availability of crucial documents is valuable in itself, but by far too many websites limit themselves to just that. Since the shelf life of many of these documents is normally much shorter than the authors believe, such a depository quickly loses attractiveness. Therefore, if the activity of the community consists only such a digital archive, then it quickly becomes a 'digital dustbin', of little use to the community or anyone beyond. Since there is little interaction, there is no access to the *tacit* knowledge available in the community. Such digital archives are only used frequently if they are supported by a lively communication.

### 7. *Memory*

Related to the topic of information depository versus interactivity is the *historical dimension* of a site. Are earlier discussions still accessible? Are they well summarized and described so that their results can still bear fruits?

A community that keeps every historical thread of discussion open and does not differentiate between recent contributions and past ones will quickly become dysfunctional. The 'burden of the past' can become too great if outdated contributions are not cleared away, and as a result, participants will no longer consider the community as a potential source of interesting information.

However, a site which does not allow visitors to trace the roots of a discussion and which concentrates on the present situation only, runs the risk of going in circles. Arguments may be repeated, because few people are aware of similar ones exchanged in the past. Without a collective memory, a sense of identity and purpose may be lost.

The art is not only to archive earlier interaction so that it can be retrieved, but also to use it in a way that stimulates and enriches current debates, reducing the chance that the wheel is invented again and again.

### 8. *Complexity and depth*

A community site can be relatively straightforward, or can offer all kinds of additional features. Here, again, the optimum lies somewhere in the middle.

But a site can also be over-sophisticated. If members need a long introduction first to be able to make a good use of the site, then it is obviously overdone. A site can be so complex that the user may not know any longer under which heading, button or title to look for a specific type of information. The website then becomes a kind of maze where people can spend a lot of time without ever finding the information they look for – even if they have read the

information on the site before. (The family of websites of *One World* comes close to such a maze.)

Complexity can be due to the structure of the site, but also to the level of the individual contributions. Every community can decide on the level of sophistication and elaborateness that it expects from the contribution of its members and it is up to the moderator to maintain it.

By stimulating short messages, a forum retains the character of a chat group. In such a case members will probably not expect any demanding arguments with comprehensive background information. This makes the threshold for participation low. It increases the flow of messages, but at the cost of less quality and thoughtfulness.

On the other side of the spectrum lies the ambition to put only lengthy and well-elaborated arguments on the site (an example is [www.planetagora.org](http://www.planetagora.org)). Such contributions demand much more time from the participants - time to write such contributions as well as time and patience to read them. Although the quality of contributions is probably high, such sites have a fairly high threshold to participate, and the moderators will have to invest significant efforts to convince people to contribute to the site.

An intermediate position might be to assure that there is a large number of extensive, high quality contributions, but that participants can post quick reactions to these contributions, so that the positive aspects of both worlds (elaborate texts and spontaneous reactions) can be combined. Another option is that members post short contributions but there is a link to further work by the contributor or a possibility to contact him/her.

### *9. Embeddedness*

When a new theme pops up in current affairs, we see many institutions starting up a site on such an issue - often without looking to other initiatives to avoid duplication.

Any community should be linked in an appropriate way to a wider environment, to neighbouring communities, similar initiatives in other countries or regions. If this is not the case, a community remains quite isolated. Insights achieved in similar networks might not be taken into account, resources will not be pooled, results cannot be compared, and ideas will remain less widespread.

But one can also err in the other direction. A website can be too well-linked to other sites and other communities, becoming more a portal than a tool for a well circumscribed community. It then becomes a channelling device, making the content of other communities easily accessible, but without adding much value by itself. Such a community becomes a point of departure rather than a terminal for arrival.

In the long run, participants are likely to question the very existence of a network, if its only function is to draw the attention to the work of others. People will increasingly visit the other sites directly, without any detour via the community's own home base. Compare it to the marketplace of a small town: without a link to major cities, it remains a provincial place, perhaps charming, but quickly boring. However, if the market place becomes only a bus station to leave the place into all directions, it loses its own identity and the commuters will quickly move into one of the larger towns around. In fact, this is the risk which a community runs if it is organised around a website only and if no face-to-face activities take place.

### *10. Results*

The possibility of arriving at ‘common products’ has already been mentioned as a way to capture community knowledge. These might be publications containing lessons learned from the community dialogue, joint projects or programmes, the organisation of an event, or the spin-off of a new community into a different field or region. Aiming for such a specific outcome can make a community more attractive and active, as participants feel they are working towards something concrete that will serve their interest. Being too specific about the intended outcome of the exchange, on the other hand, severely limits the creativeness of the process and the possibility for arriving at unexpected conclusions.

In some cases a common product is far beyond the scope of what a community aims to achieve. Many communities are created for the exchange of knowledge and experience per se. But there is always an implicit assumption that this exchange will lead to better results, if not through joint activity, then through the improved functioning of the individual participants who are enriched by the exchange.

For a participant to be able to ‘implement’ newly acquired knowledge, a certain learning capacity is required. If the participant is a member of an organisation, then his/her organisation has to be willing and able to change its practice to benefit from the community membership. For this, there needs to be space for continuous reflection on individual and organisational functioning, as well as an openness to change existing policy and structures.

Together, these ten dimensions describe a pathway by which virtual communities can find a way to stay on the right track to becoming and remaining an attractive tool for their members to share knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of interaction between organisations and individuals around the relatively new field of peace and development has been recognised in many places in recent years. Conflict and peace affect development strategies and outcomes, and the level of development affects the likelihood of (renewed) conflicts emerging. Exactly how these interactions take place, and what this means for the policy and practice of development and peace building organisations are issues that need to be examined further, beyond the scope of this paper. An indispensable part of this is, however, the exchange of experience, information, contacts, and research results between those working in government, academia and research institutes, peace building and development organisations in the North and the South.

Both in Germany and in the UK, an attempt was made to create such an interaction. CODEP in the UK pioneered the field, starting in 1993 when the dynamic interplay between development and conflict only just started gaining recognition and information exchange technologies such as e-mail were little used. It brought a lot of different groups together and made some important contributions to the common development of the thinking about the new field. However, as the field grew radically over the course of the 1990s into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, CODEP became unable to retain its position as an important forum and exchanges began to take place outside of it, in smaller ad hoc groups to ensure confidentiality and

efficiency. This was also a result of CODEP being ‘too inclusive’ and focusing on too many issues.

FriEnt, on the contrary, very much limited the number of participants and the issues under discussion. Of course, this has disadvantages of its own, as it excludes groups and topics that could contribute or even transform the exchange due to fresh and different insights. A final result of too much limiting could even be that the community renders itself marginal to the thinking and activities taking place in the field. But this does not appear to be the immediate future for FriEnt. The network is still flexible enough to adjust and open to including other issues if this seems useful. Even without new members joining up, FriEnt already links together many more organisations than one would think at first sight due to the fact that half of its members are themselves umbrella organisations.

Both FriEnt and CODEP show that a community functions through more than its virtual (online) aspects. Face-to-face exchanges, reported online for wider consumption, can contribute to the objective of knowledge exchange and development as well. Even so, online exchanges complement this and enable more groups and individuals to contribute and participate, enhancing the dynamics of the community. Neither CODEP nor FriEnt appear to have made optimal use of the virtual tools that are available to them.

The experience of CODEP shows quite simply that the ability to finance a secretariat is important for sustaining networks. In the case of CODEP, the drying up of funds that led to its end may have resulted from (potential) funders’ perception that it had not sufficiently adjusted to changing circumstances. Flexibility and sensitivity to changing circumstances is therefore another important condition of success. In the case of CODEP such openness to change should probably have led it to limit and focus its membership and activities more; in the case of FriEnt it may at some point in the future lead it to broaden its scope.

Defining concrete objectives also contributes to the continued (perceived) relevance of a community. In the case of CODEP information sharing and development was the only aim, whereas FriEnt’s open-ended cooperation is regularly translated into a concrete programme. Such programmes bring people together around a concrete activity and show the network’s practical relevance. Objectives such as the prevention of parallel programming can also increase the practical relevance of the network to its members, funders, and the wider community.

Some important lessons from the analysis of the two networks, then, are summarised by four F’s:

- *Focus*, in terms of both content and membership;
- *Flexibility*, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances;
- *Feasibility*, in terms of practical and concrete objectives, and
- *Finding the right balance*, within the ten dimensions dealt with in this article.

Striking a balance in the dimensions presented above, appropriate to the specific needs of a community, can make the difference between success and failure of a knowledge network. Flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances are paramount in a field that grows and changes almost daily.

## References

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## Abstract

The devastating conflicts in many developing countries have triggered many NGOs to devote increasing attention to conflict prevention, conflict transformation and post-conflict development. In each of the prominent conflict countries (like Afghanistan, East Timor, Kosovo), several hundred foreign NGOs are active. They come from different corners: humanitarian NGOs, human right organisations, development institutions, and NGOs specialising in peace building, mediation or reconciliation.

Once in a conflict area, different organisations have to cooperate with each other. For that, they need to understand each other. They also discover that their work overlaps, that they should share information, that their staff needs similar preparation before being sent overseas, that they can learn from each other and that they can complement each other. They all possess specialised knowledge that can help others to fulfil their own specific tasks. Development organisations realise that they need a clearer grasp of conflict dynamics, whereas peace and conflict-oriented organisations conclude that sustainable peace can only be reached if economic development takes place.

This situation has given rise to a large number of networks which try to bring together experience from different types of organisation, helping each of them to face the challenges of conflict-torn societies. Many of these networks try to create virtual communities to improve the exchange of information and experience and to enhance the cooperation between the members. In many cases, however, this does not immediately help to achieve the aspired results.

This article describes a number of problems which have to be solved by all virtual communities in the initial phase of their existence, building on two network case studies. These case studies will be discussed in parts one and two of the article. Next, the lessons that can be drawn from their experience are summarised into a list of ten issues that networks have to deal with. These include problems with regard to the people involved, the content of their exchange, the way they work together, and the products that result from their cooperation.

The conclusion sums up a number of lessons that similar initiatives might take into account, if they want to make a long-term contribution to the knowledge exchange between members of their constituencies; flexibility and sensitivity to changing circumstances is an important condition of success. Defining concrete objectives can also contribute to the continued (perceived) relevance of a community. It is also important to have sufficient focus in terms of both content and membership. Finally, finding the right balance in the ten dimensions dealt with in the article can make the difference between success and failure of a knowledge network. In all the dimensions, flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances is identified to be paramount in a field that grows and changes almost daily.

## About the authors



Prof. Dr. Gerd Junne holds the Chair in International Relations at the University of Amsterdam and is the Scientific Director of the Amsterdam School of International Relations. His present research focuses on different aspects of conflict transformation. He has directed research projects for the United Nations, FAO, ILO, the European Union, the VW Foundation, the Rathenau Institute, the German Parliament, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Dutch Ministry of Transport, and the Dutch National Research Program on Air Pollution and Climate Research. Most recently he carried out an evaluation of the Hivos ICT programme in Africa. He teaches courses on "Peacekeeping" and "Post-Conflict Development". He is also one of the initiators of The Network University (TNU) with international online courses on "Transforming Civil Conflict", "Gender and Conflict Transformation", "Youth Transforming Conflict" and "Post-Conflict Development".  
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Drs. Willemijn Verkoren is a researcher, lecturer and programme developer at the University of Amsterdam. She studied Contemporary History and International Relations and has done research on issues related to democratisation and post-conflict development, particularly in Cambodia and the Balkans. Her M.A. thesis on "Making Democracy Work" won two academic awards, the national prize of the Netherlands Society for International Affairs (NGIZ) and the University of Amsterdam prize for the best thesis dealing with an urgent societal problem. She works with the University of Amsterdam's International School for Humanities and Social Sciences (ISHSS) where she teaches courses in the realm of peace and conflict studies and is involved in setting up new programmes and activities in the same field. Together with Gerd Junne, she published an edited volume entitled "Postconflict Development: Meeting New Challenges" in 2004. At present, she is engaged in a PhD project about learning and knowledge sharing in the field of peacebuilding.  
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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See for instance ReliefWeb ([www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int)), ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action - [www.alnap.org/](http://www.alnap.org/)), Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Network (<http://cpr.web.cern.ch/cpr/>), CIDA – Canadian Peacebuilding Initiative ([www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/peace](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/peace)).

<sup>2</sup> (Collison, C. 2004); (Wenger, E., 2002).

<sup>3</sup> (CODEP, 2004)

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem

<sup>7</sup> The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development ([www.bmz.de](http://www.bmz.de)), which also hosts the FriEnt Team. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ, [www.gtz.de](http://www.gtz.de)), a government-owned institution responsible for German bilateral development projects, carrying out about 2.700 projects and programmes in more than 130 countries.

Two church-related development organisations: the Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst e.V. (EED, [www.eed.de](http://www.eed.de)) and the Katholische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe e.V./Bischöfliches Hilfswerk Misereor e.V. ([www.misereor.de](http://www.misereor.de)).

Political foundations: the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES, [www.fes.de](http://www.fes.de)) and Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (FNS, [www.fnst.de](http://www.fnst.de)), linked to the social-democratic party and the liberal party respectively. The think tanks of political parties in Germany are government financed (in order to assure research-based policy proposals and to create an informed public debate). They also carry out development projects and have become even more



important with the general acknowledgement that good governance, democratisation, an active civil society and a market economy are important for sustainable peace in developing countries.

Two platforms of peace organisations: the Konsortium Ziviler Friedensdienst in cooperation with the Sekretariat des Zivilen Friedensdienstes beim Deutschen Entwicklungsdienst [www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org](http://www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org), and the Plattform Zivile Konfliktbearbeitung ([www.konfliktbearbeitung.net](http://www.konfliktbearbeitung.net)). The Ziviler Friedensdienst (Civil Peace Service) is a voluntary service, supported by women and men with professional and life experience, acting in response to a request from local partners. The latter entertain a close cooperation with the Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden der Universität Duisburg-Essen ([www.inef.de](http://www.inef.de)), linking the academic community to FriEnt.

<sup>8</sup> The present members of the FriEnt team have special competencies in a number of areas and, on that basis, can for the time being provide an input on specific topics and countries. These include: the relationship between development policy and security policy; conflict economies; the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC); the action plan *Civil crisis prevention, conflict resolution and peace consolidation* initiated by the federal government; and the countries of former Yugoslavia.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.frient.de/downloads/Protokoll\\_Pak\\_050119.doc](http://www.frient.de/downloads/Protokoll_Pak_050119.doc) (in German)

<sup>10</sup> James Thurber, see <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/588.html>

<sup>11</sup> These ten dimensions are based on the analysis of networks, on literature (e.g. Collison, C. 2004) and on the experience with virtual communities of The Network University (TNU, [www.netuni.nl](http://www.netuni.nl)).