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Organizational Learning and the Role of Networks in the Child Protection Sector

CPC Secretariat
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Introduction

This paper was prepared as a prelude to the Child Protection in Crisis (CPC) Network strategic planning meeting. It briefly addresses some of key issues of organizational learning in the humanitarian and child protection sectors, looks at the role of networks in learning, and presents a series of questions and thoughts to stimulate discussion and reflection on how to help professionalize the child protection sector and the role of the CPC Network in that process. Its intended use is to stimulate thinking in the field, to ask questions, and push thinking forward.

The ideas presented are based on research from secondary literature, as well as interviews with individuals working in the protection and humanitarian sectors, for a broad cross-section of organization types, and thus with different learning needs and perspectives. Many thanks are extended to those who participated for their time and thoughtful reflections on the topics at hand.

Comments and feedback are welcome.
Learning and Learning in Organizations: Theory and definitions

There has been increased attention, in recent decades, to organizational learning, including within humanitarian response and the child protection sector. More and more, organizations want to become learning organizations, and the humanitarian field at large is seeking to learn more, learn better, and then apply what is learned. Efforts to improve efficiency and efficacy within humanitarian response, such as the inter-agency humanitarian reform initiative and the cluster approach, speak to a broader approach to improving performance through inter-organizational approaches to coordination and learning. Models from other sectors on learning and its application within organizations have been adapted to the humanitarian community; yet, learning remains an unclear, ill-defined concept with vague and inconsistent application. Learning lacks a standard definition within the sector and in many organizations, creating a challenge to measuring and understanding the process by which it occurs and its impact in changing, for the better, operational response. Too often, learning is confused for acquiring and disseminating knowledge.

This segment of the paper will consider organizational learning in the humanitarian and child protection sectors. Definitions of learning; the relationship between types of knowledge and learning; how learning happens in theory and practice, including needs for and challenges to learning; how learning is applied through good practices and lessons learned; and finally, monitoring and documentation of learning in these sectors are reviewed. Examples are provided throughout to support the information presented, as much in the realm of learning remains anecdotal.

Defining Learning

In both the humanitarian and child protection sectors, there is no standardized definition for learning. Organizations and donors may have their own specific definition; though many still do not, rather relying on informal or individual understandings of learning rather than a formal, sector-wide definition. Table 1 contains the learning definitions, formal or informal, from seven child protection oriented organizations:
Table 1. Definitions of Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Definitions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning is the process by which <strong>individuals, teams, organizations, and groups of organizations create, transfer, and use knowledge</strong> in order to achieve positive change and realise their goals. (where knowledge means familiarity, awareness or understanding gained through experience of study)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning is defined as a broader process of <strong>acquiring knowledge or skills</strong>, as well as the resulting modification in behaviour. Learning is often a <strong>self-generated individual activity</strong>. The list of learning activities includes, but is not limited to, observation, life experience, on-the-job training, mentoring, coaching, apprenticeship, stretch or rotational assignments, training, etc. Learning can be a <strong>passive</strong> (ex watching an education programme) or <strong>active</strong> (ex practicing an instrument).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning takes place through <strong>experiential learning</strong> and <strong>research</strong> and how those are combined in practice and policy in a specific way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning is a <strong>continuous adaptation of program approaches to the changing needs of the community we serve through reflection and consultation with different stakeholders.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning organization <strong>captures and disseminates knowledge</strong> gained from <strong>experience, generates evidence through research and evaluation for what does and does not work</strong> in development, and uses evidence to <strong>guide program and policy decisions.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning is operationalized in two ways: 1 – it’s the process of application of <strong>competencies</strong> to support quality implementation of their programmes; 2 – it’s an <strong>on-going, guided, structured informed reflection</strong> on implementing interventions, which feeds into an ever increasing knowledge base (that can be shared with current and future staff).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding issues related to child care and protection through sharing of experience.</strong></td>
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</table>

The definitions all vary in: their word selection, whom is doing the learning (italics), what the learning process is and what components contribute to the learning (bold), and what is the desired outcome (underlined). However, they share some similarities. All involve some form of change at the end of the process, though only three mention a larger purpose or objective for the learning: to improve programmes or policy. Generally, the word knowledge is included, though it, too, is not always clearly defined. Most take an active approach to learning, focused on experience and using action-oriented verbs to describe their approach, though one specifically refers to passive learning, which is, in practice, reportedly a large component of current learning approaches within humanitarian and child protection organizations.

These different definitions and understandings of learning may be reflective of the varied needs and perspectives of organizations within the humanitarian and protection fields. Yet, it may be important, if not necessary, for organizations to formally define learning and its components, as a step towards understanding what is meant by learning, who does it, how it happens, and how to measure it to ensure it is happening. An operational definition may be an important next step in continues efforts to professionalize the fields of humanitarian response and child protection practice, one that includes these
components in order to have a shared and common understanding, at least within an organization if not more broadly across organizations, on what learning means and how to capture and use it.

Furthermore, in creating learning definitions, the direction – that is learning for improvement or positive change – of learning and its outcome ought to be considered, if not explicitly stated. Of the definitions above, only the first definition mentions directionality. Not all change is positive and learning can be misunderstood (learned incorrectly) and/or misapplied, resulting in negative or unintended outcomes. Thus, it is prudent to outline from the start a definition and process that strives for positive learning that is mindful of consequences.

A sector-wide understanding of what is meant by learning is also of particular relevance, especially given the substantial involvement of the sector and its players in emergency response - where actions are taken quickly and reflection (and learning) on process often happens afterward. Convening the appropriate and relevant child protection actors to come to develop a sector definition may also encourage similar discussions in organizations still looking to define learning for themselves.

Knowledge & Learning

Learning can occur for many reasons, organically or with specific objectives in mind. However, to date, it seems much reliance within the humanitarian and child protection sectors has been that individuals would learn, automatically and naturally, in doing their work and that this learning would be translated and applied into action at an organization-wide level. This approach poses certain challenges. It relies heavily on tacit knowledge, that is, the knowledge that ‘people have in their heads based on experience, beliefs, values, and wisdoms that they make take for granted or may have absorbed almost sub-consciously’\textsuperscript{1}. Conversely, explicit knowledge is based on written, processed, and shared information that can be recorded, archived, and stored by an organization. Knowledge acquired from assessment, reports,\footnotetext{\textsuperscript{1} T. Beck and J. Bolton, “Chapter 2: Learning by Field Level Workers”, in ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action in 2003, ALNAP: 2004, available at: http://www.alnap.org/resource/5208.aspx.}
monitoring exercises, and evaluations are types of explicit knowledge. Both of these types of knowledge have their benefits and drawbacks in contributing to organizational learning\(^2\).

Tacit knowledge relies too heavily on the individual; learning isn’t necessarily retained within the organization. However, individuals are quite likely to learn from their experiences. It provides people the ability to think quickly on their feet, and pull on past experiences to respond to a current situation, which can be of great benefit in emergency response\(^3\). It does, however, make consistency and quality control difficult to maintain.

Explicit knowledge faces the dilemma of disseminating the information and then determining whether it is used, and whether learning actually occurs. It is critical to note that dissemination does not, in fact, equate to learning, but rather, only the sharing of information. Currently, most learning in the humanitarian sector is dependent on dissemination and reading of materials; however, knowing and reading does not automatically translate to knowing how to apply that knowledge and alter actions\(^4\). For learning to take place, organizations must determine how to unite these two forms of learning - one organic, one that is more structured - in a way that learning is passed from individual to the organization, and then back from the organization to other individuals.

The Learning Spiral

Learning is generally thought of as cyclic, a process where learning occurs, a change is made, a new approach is tried, monitored, measured, and then adapted. This spiral (see Figure 1) has been replicated many times in slightly different formats, but generally reflects a learning process that allows for absorption of the thing learned, application, a trial period, and then a time to re-assess and make further improvement.

\(^2\) Several operational agencies mention “mentoring” in recruitment or formal learning related documents or web postings. However, no persons interviewed for this research indicated mentoring is taking place on a regular and systematic manner. Many did, however, suggest that creating consistent mentoring processes or pathways within their respective agencies would be highly desirable.


The learning spiral is well adapted to learning within an organization in a programme or project context, and when applied, can lead to successful improvement of a project. Box 1 illustrates an example of a non-governmental organization (NGO) that was able to successful go through the spiral and change a project for the better as a results of taking action on findings learned from monitoring visits.

Box 1. Successful learning through monitoring visits resulting in project and organization change

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An NGO undertook a sponsorship programme within a community, which involved providing direct support to specific children within households to cover school fees and medical costs. Through monitoring visits, the NGO staff realised that the programme was in fact creating tensions between those children who were sponsored and those who were not receiving school and medical support.

The NGO used this information to change their programming approach to sponsorship. Rather than sponsoring specific children within households, the organization changed its practice and opened the programme to the entire community. They began offering comprehensive services to all, based on need. Now the entire community could benefit from aspects of the programme, such as support to improve teaching and learning environments and improved water and sanitation facilities. The programme also expanded to include livelihood interventions for households that had had sponsored children, benefiting entire families rather than the individual child.

If learning is reflected as a cycle, knowing what is needed for learning to happen and how it happens are important steps to rotating through the process.

*Learning within the Child Protection Sector: Getting through the cycle?*

Within the child protection sector, learning still appears to happen primarily in an arbitrary manner. An understanding seems to have evolved on the importance of learning and the role it can play in improved response, but lagging behind is its actual prioritization. In action, learning is not allotted the time or financial resources of a priority issue, particularly not to individual staff members (both at HQ and field-level), where it seems, most learning is still taking place. Too often, though organizations believe learning is important, it gets set aside when vying with other competing priorities for time and resources; or, already overworked staff are expected to take on learning in their individual time.

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6 Interviews, August 2011.
Needs and challenges to learning within humanitarian organizations also support this perspective on the current organizational approaches to learning. Learning needs identified through interviews include: resources (financial and human); time; organizational (management) culture: commitment and attitude towards learning; relevant and accessible information and resources; and opportunities for connecting and building networks. Interestingly, most focus on internal organizational issues. In particular, both operational and donor staff felt that organizations need a level of judgement-free openness in order to truly be able to challenge their current practices (including seeming successes – from a funding standpoint) and assess whether a change in approach could result in improved and more appropriate response. Challenges matched the needs, in terms of resources, time, organizational commitments, and funding structures that are too rigid to allow for learning mid-cycle or that limit focus to concrete outputs and limit incentives to invest time and resources in learning.

Further, while some organizations have frameworks for learning, mainly based on staff performance reviews and work plans, few have plans for measuring learning – again most focused on staff performance\(^7\). This lack of formal measurement poses a challenge for organizations trying to incorporate learning into their feedback loops without knowing if, what, and how learning is occurring. However, most organizations do document learning, usually through reporting. It can be presumed then, in the absence of formal definitions, that individuals are applying their own understandings and experiences in this reporting. This again speaks to an arbitrary approach to learning that heavily relies on individuals and their experiences.

This approach is also indicative of the informal nature of learning that is often reported. The literature and humanitarian professionals often report that learning usually occurs informally through discussions, advice seeking and mentoring activities, sometimes after meetings, at coffee shops, or restaurants. This informal learning through advice seeking seems to be amongst the highest ranked and most often mentioned ways that humanitarian workers claim they learn\(^8\). The frequency of this occurrence identifies

\(^7\) Interviews, August 2011.

a need to try to capture this informal, and yet very valuable, learning to share in a more systematic way, not dissimilar to how to capture tacit knowledge and transfer it successfully. One NGO, for example, is reportedly developing a process attempting to capture this informal process by defining learning, and its criteria, and then implementing a documentation strategy for its staff to record their experiences and contribute to a shared knowledge base for the organization. In another example, Box 2 shows how an informal group came together to discuss a challenge that wasn’t a priority for individual organizations, and what resulted from this informal learning process was the documentation of learning and work that influenced future sector guidelines.

Box 2. The Informal Donors Technical Group (IDTG)

In 1998, mid-level, technical staff at two agencies began meeting informally to exchange information on how best to respond to needs of children being orphaned or otherwise made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. The sector as a whole was struggling to determine how to respond to the orphan ‘phenomena’, and there was a strong desire amongst technical personnel at the two organizations to collaborate to determine a response. At that time, the issue or orphans and children made vulnerable by the disease was not yet a priority for donors and operational organizations alike. HIV was considered a health issue and response was focused on prevention of transmission. However, as the epidemic evolved, it became clear, especially to technical practitioners, that they needed to address with impacts on children and families.

Thus began what would eventually become informally known as the ‘informal donors’ technical group on orphans and vulnerable children’.

The consultations began as an informal process of exchange among donor organizations that continued for several years, until 2004, eventually expanding to include twelve other organizations. The group would meet every six months and exchange information, compare notes, and share experiences. As their collective experience increased, members contributed significantly to the development of guidelines and principles that have become global reference points for policies and programming for children affected by

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9 USAID, “Informal Donors Technical Group” in OVC Update 1 (August 2001); Interviews, August 2011.
HIV/AIDS, as well as helping to shape the initial international consensus on priority action in this area. For example, the principles in *The Framework for the Protection, Care and Support of Orphans and Vulnerable Children Living in a World with HIV and AIDS* evolved out of the work of this informal group.

The functions of the informal donors technical group, which was never formalised, were eventually taken on by formally established mechanisms, like the Global Partners Forum. It is the group’s informal nature, the gathering of technical-level staff from across organizations to discuss and work towards a finding a common and collaborative solution, and an openness of discussion and depth of sharing between organizations that may have truly benefited the group and assisted with its success.

**Best Practice and Lessons Learned: Identification and Application**

Best practices and lessons learned are seen as institutional approaches to applying learning to create change. The identification and source of these practices and lessons is important to understand however. Some shy away from the ‘best practice’ approach for a lack of clarity as to how and why it is a best practice (or conversely, is it the only practice, and therefore the best)\(^\text{10}\). Often, organizations identify best practices and lessons from research, reports, consultations and exchanges with colleagues, assessments, standardized guidelines (ex SPHERE), and monitoring exercises\(^\text{11}\). However, independent evaluations are perhaps the most common and frequent source of identification of these. The fact that these are the primary sources for identifying these practices and lessons underscores the importance to having a strong, reliable, and valid evidence-base to draw from. It also underscores the need for organizations to ensure that when these sources are available, that their staff are actually *learning* from them, and not just receiving them.

However, this leads to a challenge: identifying lessons learned and implementing them are two distinct processes. While consensus is that humanitarian organizations are generally good at identifying the lessons, there is also consensus that they struggle significantly at putting them into practice, and are thus

\(^{10}\) Interviews, August 2011.

“accused of being very poor learners”. In the learning cycle of lessons learned, humanitarians face a block at the last step, translating that learning to action (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. A lessons learned learning spiral (without application of the learning).

There are numerous reasons for the blockage in the spiral between identifying and applying lessons learned. It’s possible that the information is simply not being absorbed, let alone applied, or there could be a flaw in the system of sharing lessons learned and good practice that results in difficulty applying to them. Donor reporting requirements, and a lack of flexibility to change programmes when new evidence or learning becomes available have been identified as making this process more challenging still. Box 3 provides two different examples: one of how learning can become blocked after lessons are identified, and the other of how learning can be overlooked in a rush to respond.

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14 Interviews, August 2011.
Box 3. Blockages in the lessons learned cycle: What is done (and not done) with lessons learned?

One NGO has faced difficulty in applying lessons coming out of the protection and livelihoods work it was undertaking. Lessons learned were accumulating from their programming and they knew there were gap areas and approaches that were not successful, but they struggled to act upon these lessons in a cohesive way that could lead to positive change for programming. The reasoning is believed to be two-fold, and similar to struggles faced by many organizations in the child protection sector: first, the lessons are being drawn from several different programmes and places but are not being consolidated or collected in one place to understand a larger picture of the need (and motivate action); second, and related to the first gap, while learning is identifying these lessons and need for change in practice, organizations hit a wall if they lack the capacity to address them.

Numerous evaluations, toolkits, guidelines, and good practice guides have stressed the need for community participation and participatory approaches in programming from the design stage, including in humanitarian response. However, as has been seen from the tsunami response where many organizations responded with their standard package of what communities need post-disasters, this is not always applied. Many agencies undertook shelter construction efforts without consultation and incorporation of community needs, skills, and opinions. Many of these programmes have since been evaluated poorly, and community members, too, did not understand why their skills and abilities were not incorporated into the response. Rather than living in camps for 2 years, they could have contributed, indeed, rebuilt their communities themselves, with assistance. Many similar stories exist, and thus the lesson of community participation at all stages, and lack of its application, is perhaps one that encounters the largest blockage in the cycle.

These examples recall an important point: should learning occur, it does not automatically mean improvements in ones programmes, responses, or policy-making. Learning is bi-directional, and a lesson learned can be not applied, applied incorrectly, or applied inappropriately. Unintended consequences are commonly thought of as the result of implementing a programme, but they must also be considered in

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the context of applying learning to change existing circumstances. Globalization of practices also creates opportunities for practices to be implemented in the wrong context, particularly in the ‘rushed’ response approach of emergencies. One donor reported that this situation occurs too often in setting where more time to consider local, more appropriate responses are available\textsuperscript{16}. The example in Box 4, demonstrates how a successful learning approach resulted in good data being distributed and digested incorrectly resulting in inappropriate actions.

\textbf{Box 4. Unintended consequences from evidence-based learning}

The \textit{Children on the Brink} series, began in 1997 and expanded into a partnership between two organizations, provided the first estimates using a standard methodology across countries of the numbers of children who were “orphans” (i.e. had lost one or both parents) and the number who had become orphaned due to AIDS. This series was quite successful in raising awareness about the fact that AIDS was resulting in many children losing one or both parents. Despite the fact that the documents explained that the large majority of orphans were living in households, the impression that many in the wider public formed based on the press coverage of the “orphans” statistics was that vast numbers of children were living outside of family care due to AIDS. This has encouraged many groups, such as churches for example, to support the inappropriate development of orphanages, which have proliferated in sub-Saharan Africa.

Many of the challenges and needs to learning identified above address changes that need to be made at an internal level, requiring organizations to address their learning culture including attitudes, approaches, and prioritization of learning. There are also issues surrounding reporting and funding process that could further encourage and prioritize learning within the sector. There are indications that these steps are beginning. For example, in one donor’s latest round of request for applications, a specific question was included on whether the proposed contained a potential learning that would be of significant interest to the agency. In addition, one NGO, as part of a major organizational re-structuring, is developing a new internal system for how it develops, shares, and applies lessons learned. Definitions and criteria are being

\textsuperscript{16} Interviews, August 2011.
developed that will be applied in reporting cycles, and all programme evaluations will undergo a quality
control assessment. Those meetings standards will be synthesized and shared. Furthermore, a lessons
learned database is being developed where lessons from evaluations will be stored and searchable by
thematic area and be made available to all staff. These are positive efforts towards changing internal
approaches and practices of learning.

Further, external agents can also play a role in unblocking this stage of the cycle. Box 5 describes how a
survey conducted by an outside organization on the partnering practices and relationship of 25 NGOs
across Europe and the USA has provided powerful insight into how partners in the Global South feel and
rank the international organizations they work with.

**Box 5. The Keystone INGO Partner Survey 2010.**

In 2010, Keystone, in association with Bond, InterAction and NIDOS, undertook an NGO partner survey of
25 northern NGO based in Europe and the USA. They anonymously surveyed over 1,000 staff of partner
organizations in the Global South. Respondents were able to provide feedback, and ratings on NGO
performance in areas such as: financial support, non-financial support, capacity building support,
relationships, understanding & learning, and administration. Organizations received an average score, for
each category assessed within these areas, and were provided a ranking of where their score was
situated in quartiles. For example, an NGO may have received a score of 5.1/10 for learning questions,
yet this still constituted the top quarter (showing there is much work to be done in this particular area),
while conversely, a score of 7.1/10 for encouraging their global south partners to review their work with
stakeholder would only situate that NGO in the third quarter (second from bottom). These findings were
made public in a synthesis report. In addition, specific feedback and summaries are provided from partner
responses. Each of the 25 NGOs also received an organization-specific report, which included rankings of
where their performance stood amongst the 25. While these reports were not made public, some
organizations have chosen, amidst discussion and debate, to make their findings public for transparency and to promote learning\textsuperscript{17}.

Organizations have reported that internally these reports have caused great debate and discussion on partnering practices and are stimulating internal changes. Serious lessons, both good and bad, were learned from the survey results that have received attention at senior levels at some organizations. It is believed the external attention given the reports, and the benchmarking process and comparing organizations to one another, has helped prioritize the findings at senior management levels. While findings may not be surprising to individuals within the respective organizations, the process of clearly documenting what organizations are doing well and not well, and comparing them to others in their sector, is reported to have helped push forward and re-energize the application of learning in the surveyed areas.

As seen in the aforementioned examples and discussion, organizational learning and knowledge, and internal cultures and management strongly relate to how, and how effectively, organizations learn and translate that learning into action. When considering a holistic view, these comprise two of three areas that overlap and contribute to organizational learning. The Venn diagram in Figure 3 portrays these two areas (top and right circles) as part of a holistic approach to learning that encompasses internal and external factors; approaches and tools for knowledge and learning\textsuperscript{18}. Knowledge and learning tools, effectively applied, have the potential to improve efficiency and effectiveness within organizations.

\textsuperscript{17} The synthesis report and more information on the survey, including individual organization reports that were made public can be found here: http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/services/surveys/ngos.

There are, however, some aspects of learning in organizations and within the sector at large that can be encouraged and facilitated externally, as was demonstrated in the example in Box 5, and through building relationships and collaboration (left circle of Figure 3). Convening communities, building relationships, and working in partnership and collaboration to learn and effect change are critical for a field to grow, and for learning and lessons within organizations to be shared amongst each other to avoid constant recreation of the wheel. Networks can be an effective way to facilitate this shared, inter-organizational learning and address some the needs and challenges discussed above. They are a way to, “connect people with something to share to people with something to learn”\textsuperscript{19}.

Humanitarian Networks and their Functions

Networks have long been a part of the development and humanitarian sectors; dating back to the 1960s when researchers in the agricultural sector around the globe would share thoughts, letters, and papers by postal systems. They can play important roles in linking and connecting like-minded groups; advocating for changes in policy or response; establishing partnerships between sectors and locales; and for sharing information and encouraging debate. However, nowadays the word network is oft used, overused, and misused, making it difficult to find a uniform definition and understanding of what actually is a network. Even amongst researchers on the subject, such as the group at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), which has conducted much of the research considering the use and role of networks in the humanitarian field, the definition is ever evolving.

For the purposes of this paper, a network will be defined as: “formal or informal structures that link actors (individuals or organizations) who share a common interest on a specific issue or who share a general set of values”, with the further understanding that a network is in fact different from an organization or project and should, therefore, be created, maintained, and approached differently. The network is its members, and the relationships and interactions between them.

The Network Function Approach

Over the last several years, researchers at ODI’s Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme have developed the Network Functions Approach, with a focus on humanitarian networks, in response to the seemingly simple questions: what do networks do, and how do they work? An explanation of this approach, with particular attention paid to the role and functions of networks, with a

lens on the child protection sector, follows. Child protection specific examples are presented, as are broader humanitarian situations. Considerations and application of this approach for the CPC Network are presented.

Networks can be said to have four elements: a purpose, role(s), functions, and forms. Understanding these, their definitions and applications, is essential to determining the kind of network desired and how best to support, grow, and maintain it.

Network Purpose

First, a network should identify its purpose that clearly addresses why it exists. There are many kinds of networks: policy based, advocacy, knowledge, communities of practice, to name a few. Clear articulation of why the network has come together and what it is working on is important, and should be distinct from how it will accomplish these ends.

Network Roles

Second, the role of the network should be identified. The role of the network is to consider how it will achieve its purpose and be of value to its membership. Networks are seen as taking on two roles: either a support role, or agency role.

- **Support role:** network exists to support its members by providing resources to facilitate members’ work. Members themselves act as independent agents of change, with the network secretariat supporting this work, but not having the ability to influence or itself affect change. (Figure 4a)

- **Agency role:** members give the network the ability to pursue, on behalf of the network members, a specific change itself. The network becomes the main agent of change. (Figure 4b)

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While some tasks are far clearer or better suited to one or the other of these roles, networks often play both roles in performing their different functions.

**Network Functions**

Presented in 2006, based on research on networks in other fields, Mendizabal identified six network functions, each different though interrelated, and non-exclusive. These functions are:

- **Filtering**: allows a network to take unmanageable amounts of information (about people, experts, events, and facts) and to be organized and used in a productive way.

  *Ex. The Better Care Network (BCN) is an example of a filtering network. Providing the most extensive library of better care resources materials, separated by topic, each topic contains an extensive set of materials for the subject, as well as a list of “recommended documents” for that topic, allowing quick and easy access to the priority documents in each field. (See Box 7, below, for more details on BCN as a filtering network).*

• **Amplifying**: take an idea or a message from a private or complex state and transfer it to a public or simple – or understandable – one. More clearly related to the roles that media play. Within the amplifying function, different roles can be served, such as dissemination, communication, or use within groups for management purposes.

*Ex. The Reuters Foundation humanitarian news site AlterNet plays a large amplifying role in disseminating information on humanitarian situations, and communicating these in forms understandable by general public*\(^{28}\).

• **Investing/Providing**: these networks provide members with resources they need to carry out main activities (internal investments); or can invest or provide resources to third parties (external investments).

*Ex. The organization RedR, with a clearly stated objective of ‘providing well trained and experienced staff to relief agencies’ is an investor/provider network, both internal and external, through the training it provides to both member and other organizations*\(^{29}\).

• **Convening**: networks that bring together different individuals and groups. This might be to come together to carry out a common objective, for example, researchers from different sectors or locations to plan and carry out research. Convening networks require multiple other functions listed here to work, in addition to have specific definitions for audiences and tools, and thus can be thought to represent a higher state of network functioning.

*Ex. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) is very much a convening network, and identifies convening, that is bringing ‘together different, distinct people or groups of people with distinct strategies to support them’ as one of its guiding principles*\(^{30}\).

• **Building Communities**: these networks promote and sustain the values and standards of a network of individuals or groups. These networks focus more on bringing together individuals,
organizations, or communities, and sustaining these to strengthen the community as a whole.

This function focuses more on network members and their needs.

Ex. The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) provides an example of a community building network, which brings together members to strengthen relationships and provides platforms for discussions, sharing, and growth between members.

- **Facilitating**: help members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively. This can include activities such as publishing papers and guidance, providing mentorship, or organizing conferences and meetings.

  Ex. The Humanitarian Practice Network is a practitioner-to-practitioner network that undertakes many of these activities in playing a facilitating function. It regularly publishes good practice reviews and network papers to share good practice and experiences between its members, organizes meetings and discussions and strives to improve humanitarian response through its actions by contributing to learning of individuals and organizations.

Since 2006, these six functions have evolved, as different considerations are taken. In 2008, Ramalingam et al. changed the facilitating function to *Learning and Facilitating* to reflect the need for humanitarian organizations to learn collectively. Learning and facilitating networks would thus aim to strengthen accountability and learning amongst members as part of facilitating efficiency and efficacy. In 2011, the functions have been revised into five themes, seen in Figure 5. In this revised version, learning and facilitation are removed. It is argued that facilitation is necessary for a support network to play that role, and thus it facilitates the functioning of that role, but is not a function in and of itself. Similarly, learning is not listed as a network function as it is seen as included in all the functions, a cross-cutting necessity that

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31 For more information on ALNAP, see: [http://www.alnap.org/about.aspx](http://www.alnap.org/about.aspx).
is not distinguished by the authors as a separate function. Maintained throughout, however, is that for each function, a network must recognize which role it plays, supporting or agency.

**Figure 5. Evolution of the Network Functions Approach**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Filtering</th>
<th>Amplifying</th>
<th>Investing/Providing</th>
<th>Convening</th>
<th>Community Building</th>
<th>Facilitating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Community Building</td>
<td>Filtering</td>
<td>Amplifying</td>
<td>Learning &amp; Facilitating</td>
<td>Investing &amp; Providing</td>
<td>Convening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences in categories between generations in bold

* Knowledge management functions refer to the ability of networks to acquire, filter, exchange, and disseminate knowledge. Amplification and advocacy functions help networks place issues on the global agenda, amplify the voices of their members or constituents, put pressure on stakeholders, and enhance members’ legitimacy and status. Networks mobilise resources to manage resource dependencies, provide an efficient channel for aggregated funding, and provide funding and services to enhance the work of members through, for example, capacity development.

Within the different functions, networks can play either a supporting or agency role. Generally, filtering, internal investing/providing, community building, and facilitating are considered to be more inward activities, suiting a supporting network role; whereas amplifying, external investing/providing, and

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convening look more to external impact and suggest an agency role would be more appropriate for these network functions.\(^{37}\)

While many networks will take on multiple functions at once, it is important to note that not all networks have the capacity to take on all functions simultaneously, or even to play each function at all. This depends on their purpose, structure, set-up, and the commitment from membership and the leadership of the network, as well as the maturity level of the network itself. Many of these areas relate to the form a network takes.

**Network Form**

Form addresses how a network will work. Form includes critical structural and organizational aspects the network, and thus encompasses many characteristics.\(^{38}\) A streamlined list of areas to consider for network planning includes: membership, governance, organizational arrangements, stewardship, and resources.\(^{39}\) Membership and governance will be addressed in detail for their particular importance in the network planning and development process.

- **Network Membership:** As previously discussed, networks are built and exist based on the relationships of their members, and thus member selection, role, and function is vitally important. Members must agree with the network's vision, purpose, must have shared interests and binding threads to bring them together as a community. Within a network there are different levels of members: those in leadership positions, those who are active and represent the network externally, those affiliated, and those who are passive members. All play different roles, and the decision to include members and at what level is necessary when considering the roles and functions a network will play.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.


• **Governance**: The governance structure of a network is dependent on many factors: how formal and flexible is the network, its roles, and its functions. As such, there is no one common structure. However, when moving towards formalising a network’s governance structure, 12 different issues have been suggested for consideration, including: establishing a vision, guiding, and principles; clearly defining the roles of members and decision-makers; clarity on who has authority to lead and make decisions within the network; the network structure; documented functions of the secretariat amongst others.

These two areas are of particular strategic importance for newer networks or those seeking to formalize and strengthen their government structure as they impact the total functioning of the network.

**Utility of the Network Functions Approach for Child Protection and application for the CPC Network**

The Network Functions Approach holds much utility for networks within the child protection sector. The structure and directness of clearly identifying network roles and functions and then outlining the how these will be achieved in practice is useful given that the sector itself is young and evolving, is looking to develop a solid evidence base, lacks globalized standards, and still struggles at times to establish its position as a first-round priority area in emergency response. Networks, with their unique position of not being held to one organization’s hierarchy, structure, and principles, but rather being the composition of many in a shared understanding, can help address these issues. A network ought to be able to address and solve problems that one organization itself simply cannot. The CPC Network is positioned to be one such network – a network that can address and help solve challenges within the child protection sector that individual organizations and institutions cannot do themselves.

**The CPC Network: Purpose, Role, and Function**

The CPC Network was established in 2008 as a mechanism to strengthen and systematize child care and protection in crisis-settings through collaborative action of humanitarian agencies, local institutions and
academic partners. It has since evolved into a multi-organization network with members and partners around the world engaged in different, but related, activities focused on learning, evidence, and change.

Already in its work, the CPC Network performs both support and agency roles. Similarly, there are activities of all six network functions that are currently carried out by the CPC Network. Of the current work undertaken by the CPC Network, a reflection of its functions might be primarily convening and community building, followed by facilitating and investing, and lastly filtering and amplifying. For example, the CPC Network promotes partnerships at the country level between policy-makers, researchers and civil society in order to facilitate both policy development and policy implementation through the use of the best evidence available (facilitate/community building functions, support role). It brings together country-level teams through sub-networks, which are linked to regional and global level initiatives as well (convening function, agent role).

Further, the CPC Network efforts to directly support evidence-informed child protection systems have focused primarily on national capacity-building activities. In keeping with a ‘learning by doing’ approach, and learning together to better work together in a sustainable and empowered way, the CPC Network has established Program Learning Groups in the countries it supports, consisting of steering committees comprised of key decision-makers and technical working groups comprised of child protection practitioners and academics in an effort to ensure evidence leads to practice and policy improvements.

As the CPC Network expands, conscious decisions on which role to play and when, and which functions to take on will be necessary, especially given the diverse membership and settings in which the CPC Network operates. Generally, those interviewed for this paper considered all six functions as important, needed within child protection, and as functions that can contribute substantially to strengthening the sector. While there was not clear consensus on which of the functions were more in need than others, ‘convening’ consistently ranked high (top 3) amongst all respondents. This broad spectrum importance on

40 For more information on the CPC Network, see: http://www.cpcnetwork.org/about.php.
41 Columbia University, for example plays both a support role as the CPC Network Secretariat and an active role in supporting research, training and capacity development.
network functions may be indicative of gaps in the sector that require inter-organizational attention, or they might also reflect that the network’s membership has varied priority areas. In considering which functions to take on, it should be recalled that while networks can take on all functions and all simultaneously, it requires a supporting structure, resources, and capacity to sustain, lest the network spread itself too thin.

In addition to sector needs, future function priorities of the CPC Network should reflect those of the members, and these may differ amongst type of members (donor organizations versus operational ones); and location/focus of work (global south implementing member organizations versus members at a headquarters capacity) with an organization of its current structure. For example, Box 6 outlines an example from the child protection response in Haiti where a clear amplifier gap was apparent, at no fault of any particular group or organization.

Box 6: Need for amplifier as part of child protection response in Haiti

The earthquake that devastated Haiti in January 2010 resulted in the plight of children – and the child protection sector by extension – being focused on at an even greater level of magnification than usual for emergencies. The general public were very concerned and people began to respond, including individuals and organizations inexperienced in child protection practices. A difficulty given the magnitude of the emergency and the numbers involved in the response was providing adequate and proper guidance, in line with good child protection practice and principles, particularly given the lack of sectoral minimum standards. Experienced practitioners and professional organizations were faced with the double challenge of responding to the disaster and dispelling misinformation being shared by media and well-intentioned but inexperienced groups. For example, the initial hype surrounding transporting children out of the country took ten days before NGOs and agencies were able spread the message to media that these were not promoted or safe practices, and to desist from encouraging them. Similarly, dispelling support for constructing orphanages or sending goods when airspace was already limited and lacking, demonstrated the lack of understanding and awareness of child protection emergency response amongst public, media, and even organizations and government institutions; and the difficulty the sector faced in
spreading the message early and quickly. It’s not that efforts failed, or due to a lack of effort, but more reflective that child protection, and thus its related knowledge and practice, hasn’t yet managed to be mainstreamed as a first response.

While this may be reflective of a larger sectoral-gap, it is important that the CPC Network reflect on what role and functions the network will take on, to address sector and member needs (these may not always overlap), and which it will leave to partners, or seek to partner with to address.

Conversely, there are identified uses for networks within the child protection sector; and needs and gaps for learning within the child protection sector, that the CPC Network could consider taking on through their work and identified functioning of the network. Reported uses for networks universally included sharing and advocating good practices, sharing of experiences, and identifying needs and gaps. Given the reliance within the sector to learn from evaluations and reports, there is an opportunity to take on filtering and amplifying functions, or knowledge management. The child protection sector lacks a one-stop source housing the library of sector grey literature and documents that reportedly are useful to learning and a common usage for network. This, in the view of some, has resulted in constant repetition and recreation of materials – such as guidelines, toolkits, and trainings – and lack of application of what has been learned.

However, important in this would not only be to provide the information, but filter it in a usable, approachable manner, given the volume of information available. This also addresses the learning needs mentioned previously on having relevant and accessible information, feedback, and resources. Box 7 describes The Better Care Network approach to filtering as an example of how certain functions can be undertaken together in a simple manner, in this case amplification and filtering.

43 For more information on the Better Care Network, see: http://www.crin.org/BCN/; Interviews, August 2011.
Box 7: The Better Care Network: an excellent filtering network

The Better Care Network (BCN), established in 2003, and became began as an informal network of roughly 200 practitioners exchanging documents and experiences on needs of children without adequate family care through a listserv. It has since grown to about 2,500 members, and houses an extensive collection of resources available on better care issues (amplifying the information in this sector). The BCN library is built through documents shared by the roughly 50-member advisory group and member contributions. The BCN Secretariat vets these for methodological rigour (though not opinion of the findings) before inclusion in the library. BCN then filters the information shared in their libraries, highlighting to members who may not have the time to read everything or sift through dozens of documents, which key reports to read within each sector. For instance, of the 59 documents in the Children Affected by Armed Conflict and Displacement library, a streamlined list of four documents are recommended from amongst them.

Network functions can also address other child protection sector learning needs. One of the primary ‘ways learning happens’ identified both in the literature, in interviews, and through known anecdotes, is through sharing of experiences, discussions, often informal. How can this be captured to help promote learning? A second identified need was opportunities for making connections and building networks. The CPC Network already plays a strong convening and community building function. Can it capitalize on its strengths to help address these gaps? Alternatively, can it partner on a broader level to do so in tandem with other inter-agency efforts that seek to improve efficiency and efficacy in response, through other efforts?

The Child Protection Working Group (CPWG) is the entity responsible for cluster coordination and “ensuring a more predictable, accountable and effective child protection response in emergency situations.” It consists of a cluster of organizations that have come together voluntarily to address gaps and improve child protection response. Their primary role is of coordination, both at country-level and the global-level. The CPC Network works the CPWG and there is an opportunity, in moving forward, there

appears to be an opportunity to develop a “value added” partnership if their respective roles and functions are considered carefully. If the CPWG is the sector’s coordinating body for more effective and efficient response, there might be an opportunity to complement this work by providing evidence, promoting learning related to, for instance, emergency response assessment, disaster risk reduction, urban contexts, and country level coordination outcomes. An example of this type of intra-sectoral cooperation can be seen in the combined efforts of INEE and the education in emergencies cluster, briefly summarized in Box 8.

### Box 8. INEE and the Education Cluster Working Group

Created in 2000/2001, INEE began as a small network of professionals scattered in different organizations and locations, trying to create a community, and has grown to a network of over 6000 members. INEE was integral in the establishment of the cluster, lobbying for its establishment when the sector wasn’t originally included in the humanitarian reform’s cluster approach. After the creation of the cluster, INEE played a large role in supporting the cluster, particularly through its governance structure. Together, the two entities have been able to introduce minimum standards for education in emergencies into SPHERE, originally developed by INEE with the input of thousands of members (individuals and organizations). The strength of INEE’s governance structure is considered crucial for its success, and its ability to navigate its partnership with the cluster.

An important distinction to bear in mind when considering the different roles and functions is that the INEE is in fact a network, while the education cluster (and its working group) is a group of organizations; thus, their purpose and objectives will differ, even with a shared goal of improved learning and action leading to better response in the sector. INEE remains a go-to source for education in emergencies information and learning, including communities of practice, for advocacy, and for strengthening work and cooperation in the education in emergencies sector. The cluster complements this by taking on the coordination role in its mandate and delivering services in emergencies – roles that a network, by definition, does not undertake.
The CPC Network and Network Forms

It is difficult to undertake the above discussion on roles and functions without discussing the network’s membership approach. Within child protection, globally, the question will be ‘will everyone be involved, or only those meeting certain criteria that can contribute to the goals, roles, and functions of the network’? Some take the perspective that network membership ought to be approached with the intention that being a part of the community is an opportunity for the network and member and is not simply a networking opportunity.\[45\]

Closely connected, is the structure or governance of the network. The more formal the network becomes the more important the need to have strong and identified governance structure, one that specifies levels and roles and responsibilities. As a network expands, questions as to its structure arise. What specific role will it take? Recently, the CPC Network has created a global Steering Committee to provide strategic leadership and support the network at large. What should the newly formed Steering Committee seek to achieve and how? How will its role be understood in light of country-level steering committees in countries where the network is operational? As the CPC Network expands, it will continually need to consider and evolve its thinking on how its structure will impact its functions, and how best to address governance in its operational countries as well as globally.

Networks and Learning: Potential Roles for the CPC Network in Child Protection

When re-examining Figure 3, the overlap between the three areas of learning tools and knowledge demonstrate where relationship building and collaboration efforts across organizations, such as networks, can contribute to the other segments of learning and knowledge development. The CPC Network

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\[45\] Interviews, August 2011.
has strength in its varied membership, which provides an opportunity to capitalize on these areas of crossover. In particular, as a learning organization, the CPC Network can not only facilitate and convene relationships, but it can also contribute to the evidence base needed to inform good practice. Further, in considering various aspect of organizational knowledge, the network might consider whether in addition to supporting evidence on programmes and systems, whether focusing on learning itself might be an area of contribution for it within the child protection sector. Considering the lack of knowledge on learning within the sector, even internally within organizations, as well as the genuine desire to learn and better apply lessons and individual efforts to do so, the CPC Network might consider whether part of its learning role is to help the sector, and institutions within it, to analyse how they learn and help them learn better. Would a survey similar to the NGO partner study, that focused on learning specific to the sector, garner similar momentum within organizations to consider their internal roles and processes to better support learning and action based on it? Can the network create within itself that open and judgment free space for organizations to constructively critique their programming approaches and emergency responses in an environment ‘safe’ from risk, and then segue that environment into real, positive change within the sector? Can the network be the middle space between informal and formal learning, in learning how to capture tacit learning consistently and how to use explicitly learning effectively? These are sector-wide gaps that no one organization can address and that interagency bodies, such as the CPC Network, must consider as part of their role within the sector.

Additionally, while the above address gaps and challenges to the sector both globally and at an organizational-level, there exist, too, learning challenges and gaps at country or field level. The connection between learning and ‘capacity building’ cannot be overlooked. Developing capacity in the global south requires a learning-centred approach. While organizations can focus on their internal partnering processes and development of their country offices or local NGO partners, and undertakings such as the NGO partner survey can assist these, there is a role for engagement of policy and academic institutions in the global south in capturing and applying learning, in addition to developing capacity. Strengthening partnerships with academic institutions, think tanks, and research organizations in the global south, can not only strengthen the operational capacities of these institutions, but also strengthen
the quality and growth of an evidence-base for child protection programmes and approaches. Operational research cannot rely on international organizations and institutions. Growth of a sectoral evidence base increasingly needs to come from global south institutions, with the capacity to undertake the rigorous, technical research required. Particularly when considering a systems approach to protecting children from violence, exploitation, and abuse, strengthening the technical capacities of the institutions who will develop, build, implement, and monitor these systems is crucial for a sustainable, inclusive approach that capitalizes on existing, local protection mechanisms. Global south-north partners must be both teachers and learners.

Finally, as a learning organization in a sector without a clear understanding of what learning is, the CPC Network may want to consider defining learning for itself, and how this definition guides it work in creating reliable evidence bases to affect change. This understanding of learning would also inform which functions, and what role within those functions, the network plays at its different levels: in country, and globally. Learning occurs differently in those two settings, and an exploration of whether a common, uniting definition and approach to learning can be established, or whether a two-pronged approach is best, is not only a consideration for the CPC Network, but operational agencies within the child protection sector as well.

Learning within the CPC Network

One thing to note, while considering how organizations learn, how they measure and apply that learning, and how the network might facilitate and encourage this process, is to maintain that the network itself, as a collective of relationships between individuals and these same organizations, must consider its own learning. The network, too, should have mechanisms to monitor, document, and apply learning within its own roles and functions to continually improve and strengthen its own capacities, either as a support or agent role, in nurturing relationships between members and meeting their evolving needs.

It will be good practice to include periodic reviews of roles and functions, allowing consideration if they are still relevant to the members needs and the networks goals. This strategic planning exercise as can be
viewed as an opportunity to include learning for the network itself by including a mechanism for later self-
reflection and evaluation. As members and their focus shift, as the sector grows and changes, the
functions and roles that the network wants to play – that its members want it to take on – may change.
The CPC Network could take this opportunity to prepare for that time, and position itself for internal
learning as well, with the flexibility and adaptability required to promote that.

Another point to consider, a lesson learned from another network in the humanitarian field, is to document
the development and planning process as the CPC Network grows: how decisions are made, the different
and changing functions and roles take on, membership processes, and governance structure decisions.
Such information is valuable to any institution, and can be lost when the founding generation of members
eventually leave the leadership roles at the network. Creating a network history and institutional memory
that can be shared and passed to the ‘next generation’ can help keep the network moving forward during
times of turnover.

*Looking forward: Opportunities for leadership for the CPC Network*

Going forward, as the CPC Network grows, it becomes critical for reflection on roles and functions, sector
needs, and where its strengths lie in addressing them. Further, if learning – including developing capacity
of its global south partners and members – is an identified priority and focus area for the CPC Network
and its members, the child protection sector has huge gaps and needs for leadership and direction in this
area. As a network, the CPC Network has the ability to consider the sector as a whole, map out where
child protection is heading or should be in the next 5, 10, 15 years even, and then discuss and determine
amongst in membership and within its functions and abilities, how to best help the sector reach those
goals. No individual organization can take this on, but a network, with its collection of members, and
working with partners, has the potential to make a significant contribution to the professionalization of the
field of child protection. The strategic planning meeting can be seen as another step in that process.