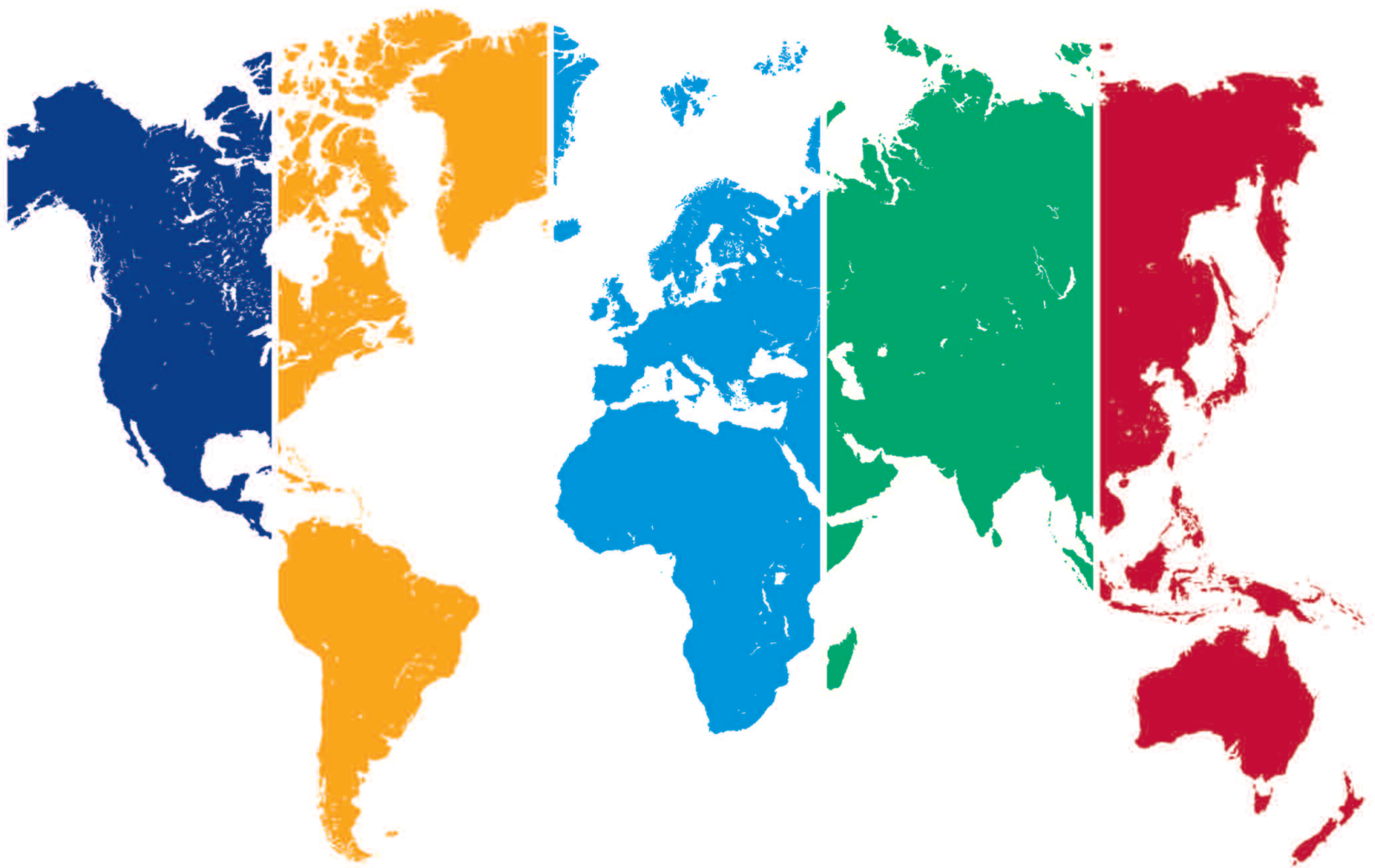


RESOURCE GUIDE FOR NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

# MANAGING NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS 2



**CIVICUS**



AFFINITY GROUP OF NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS  
**AGNA**

## 2 The dynamics of national associations: managing and leading groups of organisations<sup>1</sup>

This Resource Guide is written on the understanding that a national association is essentially a shared venture. Its participants 'own' the national association collectively, each having – or developing – a sense of responsibility for its success.

This is different from a service organisation, which – though designed to benefit all of the participants – is owned and operated by a single body. It would be possible for anyone to set up an organisation that delivers many helpful benefits to civil society organisations in a country, providing for example training or liaison with government bodies, purely by running such an organisation itself. But a genuine national association, like all the members of AGNA, is owned and jointly managed or governed by its members.

This requires close attention to the dynamics of relations between members, and between each member and the collective body. Stepping away from the norm of hierarchical control and focusing instead on ways of working that build and support this sense of collective ownership and responsibility is the essence of successful development of a national association.

### 2.1 A model for understanding the dynamics of networks

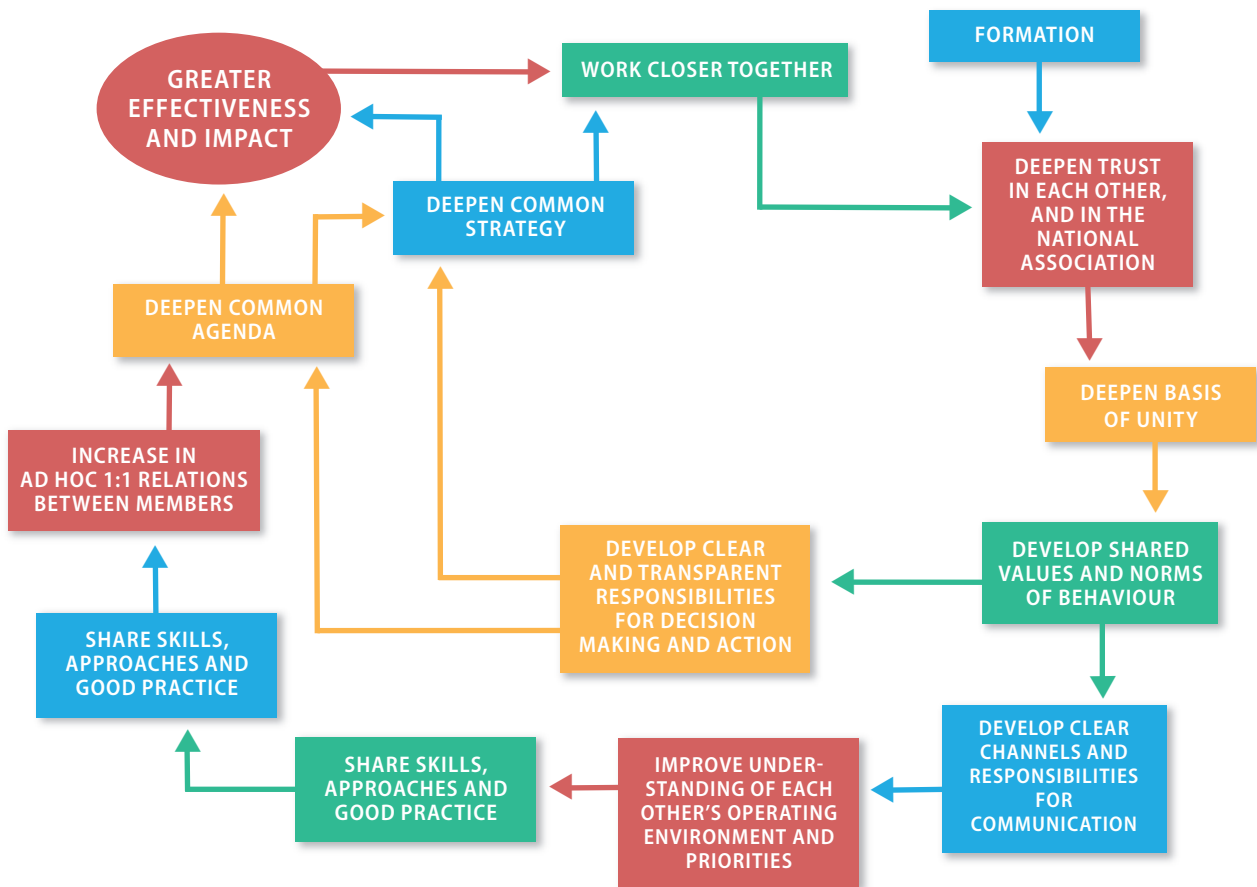
An effective and successful national association, or indeed any network or alliance, needs to be built with care. The easy part is constructing the documents that guide the organisation and set the rules; the more complex aspects are about the relationships between organisations within the network and the levels of commitment and effort that its members put into supporting and sustaining its development. These take time to develop, and there are some core principles and factors that its leaders must have in mind at all stages of the process.

The model below aims to identify the main factors that contribute to a successful network, and the ways in which they are interdependent.

Each of the factors represented here can either contribute to, or stand in the way of, development of the national association. If working in harmony, these factors enable a virtuous circle of development, resulting in ever deeper and more productive working relations. If one or more of the factors block development, a vicious circle can result, leading to conflict, ineffectiveness and at worst the eventual dissolution of the national association.

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the Guide is an edited version of part of 'Establishing a National Coordinating Body for NPOs: Research Report', by Richard Bennett for INTRAC, July 2013, commissioned by the King Khaled Foundation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



### Travelling the Virtuous Circle: CONCORD

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

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

After 4 years of operation, the members had worked closely with each other on a number of important programmes. In a strategy review, many complained: ‘We spend so much time being consulted about everything that we never have time to do the work together that we exist for.’

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

So decision making was revised; members agreed that they should only be consulted on major policy matters, because otherwise they trusted the Board and Working Groups to make the right decisions on their behalf.

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

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

Starting with the early stages of formation of the national association – and even the first discussions about its possible formation – many of these factors already begin to be felt. Many organisations may feel tentative at first; but each time the new discussions, and then the new national association, achieve some progress, the virtuous circle will help each of the factors to deepen a little, which will enable the national association to go to a deeper and more productive level.

This takes time, and considerable patience. Slow beginnings may feel frustrating, but can be essential for building relationships, trust and confidence, easing worries, and negotiating common purpose. Organisations that may not have known each other before, or who did know each other but were mutually suspicious, need substantial space and time to find common ground and convince themselves of the benefits of working together.

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

**'You can't have a federation by force. When we first started, we were attacked: 'Who are you to do this? Who authorised you?' So we withdrew. But then, after a year, people started coming to us, asking us why we didn't start it after all. You need a critical mass of organisations willing to contribute. It always takes one organisation and a committed core group to get it started...'<sup>1</sup>**

*The NGO Federation of Serbia*

## 2.2 Ownership, trust and confidence

The future of a national association depends on its members – and those being consulted even at early stages – developing a sense of ownership of the whole enterprise. While the initiative to form a national association often comes from an individual organisation, it is important at an early stage to involve others in the development of ideas, common ground and agreements. A successful national association will have members who describe it as ‘we’, not as ‘they’.

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

### **In Estonia, building trust took time, and was developed from working together:**

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

Participants may begin with low levels of trust in each other. It is important to address this, probably indirectly, by ensuring that different types of participant, with perhaps different ideological starting points, have plenty of opportunity to explore what they do have in common, and using this as a starting-point for establishing some of the values and norms, or activities, of the national association. A focus on common ground and how to negotiate difference is central to finding the focus of the national association, and will help – over time – to establish trust between members.

This, in turn, will help to build confidence in the national association itself. It is likely that organisations will begin with low expectations, and perhaps some scepticism, about the value of, or potential for, the national association. Taking the time to explore the common or varied needs and priorities of participants will help to build increased confidence that the exercise is worthwhile, and convince participants that investing a little more time could pay off.

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

With attention to the other factors (below), the sense of ownership of the national association, levels of trust in each other and confidence in the potential of the body will grow over time. This is a constant feature of national associations and networks: even very mature networks still need to give attention to helping members to build their trust and confidence, and maintain systems that encourage engagement and ownership.

## 2.3 Distributed leadership

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

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

This means that people with responsibility for leadership or coordination are facilitators and enablers, not managers; they exert leadership through motivation, not control. This is an absolutely central lesson from other national associations. An Estonian leader expressed it in this way:

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

Or, as a CONCORD staff member put it recently, 'It's all about taking pleasure from – being motivated by – enabling others to shine.' One implication of this, which is vital to the development of a sense of ownership amongst members, is the importance of reflecting back to members their responsibility for successes, rather than the leader's role: every time the national association achieves a success, the members need to hear, 'Well done; we did this because we worked collectively.'

The extent to which the national association can distribute leadership also depends on the levels of trust and confidence built amongst the membership, and on the strength of the basis of unity, clarity of purpose and goal. In early stages of the development of a national association, when different members may have different understandings of the national association's purpose and goal, and when levels of trust between members are relatively low, it will be difficult for some members to trust others to take the lead on particular areas of work.

One way of overcoming this is to ensure widespread consultation on key decisions, so that each leader is clearly building from agreed ways forward. This helps to clarify the direction of the national association, build communication and discussion amongst members, and move by degrees towards a situation in which individual members, or groups, can be left to take action without consultation on the basis of strong common understanding of the direction the members would wish to take.

## Distributing leadership in action: International Disability & Development Consortium

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

### 2.5 **Transparent, accountable, shared decision-making**

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

At the earliest stages, this might mean making all significant decisions – even very operational choices – in assemblies of members, with all members present. A next stage might be to have a Steering Committee or Board, elected or selected by the members so that they have confidence in its decisions, and ideally composed in a way that ensures all significant types of voice amongst members are present. To build trust, it is important that this committee or board communicates not only its decisions, but its rationale for making them; and that the constitution enables the wider membership to hold the committee accountable for its decisions and actions.

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

### 2.6 **Basis of unity: common purpose and goal**

Central to the very first stages of developing a national association is to establish why the potential members might want a national association at all. The reasons, initially, are likely to be disparate and somewhat uncertain, but usually revolve around a desire to improve the quality of the sector's work, to secure better or more funding for the sector, or engage in effective dialogue with government (see 'Understanding National Association' above). In each of these arenas there is potential for competition between participants, as well as collaboration, so the benefits of collaborative action need particular emphasis.

Elements of the basis of unity usually include both common beliefs or values, and aspects of common purpose. The latter links closely with the eventual strategy and programme of action of the national association (see other sections of this Guide). One or more of the following may emerge from discussions:

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

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



## 2.7 Shared values and norms of behaviour

**There are two types of values that are important for a successful national association:**

Values that bind the members, in terms of the way society and the country should function, help to contribute to the basis of unity and purpose of the national association. Members may vary quite widely in some of their values, so at the early stages a focus on their commonalities is important. The more work they do together, the more members will be able to identify their common values; so, as with other factors, the understanding of common values will deepen as the national association goes through several rounds of the virtuous circle. Many national associations have a statement of common values as a key part of their membership application process: applicants are asked to sign an agreement with the values of the collective before being allowed to take part.

There are also values related to the ways in which members behave in relation to each other, and to the national association as a whole. These are hard to develop in the abstract, but will be needed as members' experience of the national association's grows: some behaviours will be particularly valued, while others will be seen to cause problems for other members, and rules or guidelines will need to be developed. These may relate to mutual respect between members, or to adherence to agreed positions.

## 2.8 Understanding each other, sharing skills and approaches

A key role for the national association is the convening responsibility: enabling the whole community to come together and talk. Sometimes there will be a specific purpose in these gatherings: developing a collective approach to a particular problem or policy position, or enhancing members' understanding or skills in a particular area of their work. But, whether or not this is the case, there will be many other benefits— both to the members and to the national association.

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

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

## 2.9 Ad hoc relations between members

These conversations in spaces convened by the national association sometimes result in whole new working relationships between organisations away from the national association itself, sometimes resulting in major collaborations, partnerships and consortium activity. Several national associations have suggested that, while it is almost impossible to measure for evaluation purposes, these ad hoc relationships made a substantial, and possibly the greatest, contribution to the impact of their national association.

### Ad Hoc Relations between Members: EuroNGOs

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

As in 2.8 above, these strengthened individual relationships are primarily a benefit to the individual organisations involved; but the closer working relationships make it easier for them to work together in other circumstances as well, and this can benefit the national association when they work within it.

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

One of the best ways of encouraging members to devote time and energy to their national association is to demonstrate its positive value to them. Coordinators and leaders need to be able, quite quickly, to show that some action taken by the national association contributes positively to the collective good, or to a wide range of the individual members. In Estonia, 'the most important question was, does anyone need what you do? And training was the obvious answer at that time, even more important than the law, taxation issues, etc ... So we started by training for NGOs, information on funding opportunities from foreign foundations. Then advocacy followed later, on laws, taxation issues, all of which needed to be created. Later the trainings became less important, [partly because] others started providing that.'

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

### Quick Wins: BOND

BOND, the network of UK-based international development NGOs, has a very diverse range of members. So, early in its existence, it needed to demonstrate its value to different types of member. Small organisations particularly wanted access to affordable training in basic skills, so a programme was organised of training in project planning, evaluation and other areas. Medium-sized organisations were keen to improve their access to, and understanding of, major donors; a Funding Working Group was organised, that enabled members to share knowledge and skills, provided direct access to key donor personnel, and created quick changes in the way that the government donor related with NGOs.

Larger organisations were more concerned with policy engagement with government; BOND identified a particular need for policy dialogue, and enabled its larger members to work together and engage directly with government on behalf of all BOND members. Each type of member could find something, from which they gained quickly, that helped cement their belief in the network's value.

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

As members see value in different aspects of the national association's work, they increasingly recognise its effectiveness for them, invest more time in it, deepen their understanding of what brings them together (their basis of unity), and work harder to ensure it operates effectively and is well governed and managed.

## 2.11 **'Unity with diversity': difference, inclusion and boundaries**

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

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

Many express the positive aspects of diversity explicitly in their purpose statements or other forms of self-description. They emphasise the richness that diversity brings to their discussions, the potential to learn from each other, and the strength and rigour of any agreements amongst members (given the sometimes complex discussions from different viewpoints to achieve agreement). But difference also presents challenges. In early stages, it may be hard to get beyond the lowest common denominator in agreements on purpose and basis of unity. Discussions may focus on the ways in which members differ and disagree, rather than those on which they can find common ground. Some types of organisation may feel excluded from decisions, or under-represented in governance; while others may seek to dominate decision-making bodies. Some may feel that training programmes are designed for other types of organisation, not themselves.

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

**There may be some types of difference that help to define the boundaries of membership, where the best answer for the national association is exclusion of some organisations. Some types of organisation may be so different from the others that their presence as members of the national association would make agreement on the basics impossible, or would divert the national association's policies into directions or areas that are unhelpful for most other members.**

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

- Organisations that are governmental in nature or constitution (whose presence would make development of policies that may differ from official government lines difficult).
- Organisations whose interests are commercial, rather than for social or public benefit (whose presence may prevent the development of policies that are genuinely in the interests of the non-profit sector).
- Organisations with a narrow definition of the social or public good. All national associations include organisations motivated by religious principles to do good, for example, but many exclude those whose aims are religious conversion, or those who exclude from their programmes people of other religions. The same may apply to ethnic, gender or class exclusions in an organisation's programmes. Each country, culture and therefore national association will have its own boundaries here, and must define them for itself; the discussion of an appropriate values statement will help to identify them, and the existence of the values statement will then help to determine future membership applications.
- Organisations whose behaviour is disruptive, disrespectful or otherwise inappropriate in the context of discussions within the national association. This is usually impossible to identify in membership criteria, but many national associations have a statement of agreement on appropriate behaviour (see 2.7), which will include a procedure for the withdrawal of membership as a sanction for breaches of the agreement (which, they experience, is rarely needed).

So the national association should strive to be as inclusive as possible, and should design its structures and programmes to maximise a sense of inclusion for all types of organisation that might appropriately want to be members. But it also needs to decide what the boundaries of membership should be, to enable a reasonable and constructive way forward for its main purposes and goals.

## 2.13 Core principles: summary

Managing or developing a national association is an art, not a science. There are some rules and documents that appear to provide ready-made answers, but the essence of success is in process. This is because success is impossible without a strong sense of commitment, ownership, and steadily increasing levels of trust amongst members in each other and growing confidence in the national association itself. **Ownership, trust and confidence are the key words; building them is a never-ending process;** and they depend on many other factors. So allowing time for them to build is important, and paying attention to each of the key factors is vital. Advice from an interview with the Turkish national association included, *'Start slowly, know what you really want to achieve; and, being a membership-based structure, have a variety of different actors representing the sector.'*

All the factors inter-relate with each other. Lack of transparency in decision making will disaffect members, encouraging them to believe that the national association is 'theirs' not 'ours'. Trust in each other comes from creation of spaces for dialogue, and plenty of opportunity to interact inside and outside formal discussion. Early successes (and their reflection back to members as 'our achievement – thank you for your contribution' rather than 'I did this for you') breed confidence and energy for the next stages of activity.

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

Importantly, the way each factor is handled at different stages of deepening is dependent on progress in the other factors. Deeper levels of trust enable different (and more distributed) forms of leadership and decision making. Deeper understanding of each other enables more sophisticated common strategies and a deeper basis of unity. So each factor must be revisited regularly throughout the history of a national association. Even the most mature body regularly revisits the appropriateness of its decision making structures to the levels of trust its members have.

This section has aimed to point to some of the main features of each factor that may need attention at early, formation stages of a national association. The next section uses this as a base, to identify the core questions to pose to participants in formation meetings and on-line dialogue. It goes on to suggest a framework of founding documents that express the answers to these questions, and set in place all the main ingredients for a new national association.