

RESOURCE GUIDE FOR NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

ESTABLISHING NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

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CIVICUS



AFFINITY GROUP OF NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS
AGNA

3 **Establishing a National Association**¹

“It is important to understand that the (conceived) association will never cover up all the shortfalls within the sector, hence it is important for (potential) members to contribute effectively to the sustenance of the sector. It’s important to know the vision, needs and aspirations of the (potential) members so that the association would aspire to fulfil those needs.”

National Association of NGOs, Zimbabwe (NANGO) response to 2007 AGNA questionnaire.

The process of launching a national association often begins informally. National associations emerge and become operational in the context of networking among civil society leaders and practitioners who recognise their common challenges, interests and aspirations. Often these processes begin informally, and then take on a more structured approach as they evolve. This section of the Resource Guide outlines the key questions that those taking part in these evolving discussions will need to answer, in order to set a direction and framework for the new national association.

The principles and model outlined in section 2 lead to a set of questions to pose to prospective members of a national association, in the process of formation. As the section suggests, the right answers will change significantly over time, as all the factors affecting the strength and potential of the national association develop. But early answers are necessary, in order to form the basics of a functional organisation.

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

- **What do we want a National association for?**
- **What unites us?**
- **Who should be in the National association?**
- **What can I expect from my organisation’s membership?**
- **What can I expect of other organisations? What can they expect from me? What is our contribution?**
- **What are our shared values?**
- **What are our agreed norms of behaviour?**
- **How will decisions be made?**
- **Should we have a Secretariat?**
- **How will we resource the National association, and why?**
- **What will we do together, as a National association?**

¹ This section of the Guide combines segments of a previous version of the Guide with extracts from ‘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

3.1 What do we want a national association for?

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

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

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

With little or no experience to date of what a national association might bring for them, participants may need prompting with suggestions of the ways it might benefit their work or needs. **Aspirations need to be balanced against the capacity of the organisation, which may be small at the start, so achievable short-term objectives are important** (see Quick Wins in 2.10 above).

Clearly expressing the mission of a national association is instrumental in building trust and confidence among other civil society practitioners, in particular easing misconceptions that national associations create the risk of competition, duplication and marginalisation of other civil society organisations' work.

CASE STUDY BOX:

Examples of different answers to 'What do we want a national association for?'

Here we provide three brief case studies that explain the impetus behind the establishment of three different national associations, one set up in response to favourable conditions and two set up in respect to a threat.

NCVO

National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) founded in 1919, is the oldest national association. It was set up after the first World War, thanks to a legacy from slain soldier Edward Vivian Birchall, who recognised the need to bring voluntary organisations together and into closer collaboration with government. Over the years it broadened its mission and changed its name to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. Today, it has over 10,000 members and its vision is of a society in which people are inspired to make a positive difference to their communities. This requires a vibrant voluntary sector and volunteers who deserve a strong voice and the best support. NCVO aims to provide that voice through policy and campaigning activity, and support through training and capacity building.

CEMEFI

The mission of El Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía (CEMEFI) is to promote the philanthropic culture as well as the social responsibility in Mexico. At the time of its founding in 1988, there was little coordination in the sector and almost no coordination between the NGO sector and business or government. CEMEFI was the initiative of a Mexican philanthropist who invited three to five other institutions to set up the initiative with him. The aim was to unite the third sector, deepen the rights of civil society and change the vision of the government vis-à-vis the non-profit sector. It does this through mobilising resources for the sector, strengthening the legal framework, building the capacity of NGOs and creating platforms for engagement with the government and the business sector.

NFN

The NGO federation of Nepal (NFN) was established in 1991 to promote and protect social justice, human rights and pro-poor development. Unlike some of the European case studies this association has an explicit political agenda – that of creating a democratic and just society and reducing poverty. It envisions a democratic and just society through a vibrant and strengthened NGO movement striving for economically sustainable, socially equitable and environment friendly nation. It aims to achieve this through organising and mobilising people to promote democratic and just society; strengthening the NGO movement; and safeguarding the autonomy of civil society and its work as an agent of change.

3.2 What unites us?

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

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

3.3 Who should be in the National association?

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

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

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

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

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

Every effort should be made to ensure that a wide variety of NPOs are present in early discussions, so that their definitions are the ones that count. However, it is also important to recognise that not everyone will be there. Those with a detailed knowledge and understanding of the NPO sector need to be aware of the critical absences, and ensure that absent organisations who might feel excluded and resentful are included in definitions and encouraged to engage at later stages in the process; and that those who are powerful or significant influences, but are absent from early meetings, are included or encouraged at later stages. Any feeling of resentment, or of competition for power and influence, will undermine the legitimacy of the national association in the eyes of its actual members, its prospective members, and external bodies such as government.

The initiators of a national association may be faced with opposition from other civil society organisations and leaders who feel threatened by the idea of the new national association. It helps to anticipate who might oppose the idea and how you plan to respond. may need a category of their own.

CASE STUDY BOX:

Poland: OFOP

In Poland those working to set up a national association were confronted with opposition from within the sector. There were already a number of strong players involved in advocacy around the third sector. They did not want to make space for a federation which they believed could replace them. However the initiators felt strongly that there was a need for a mandated national association. They pursued the vision despite the withdrawal of some members just before the launch, the personal conflict and the attempts by some to block Ogólnopolska Federacja Organizacji Pozarządowych (OFOP).

For OFOP the lessons learnt focus on identifying key partners, working with these partners, engaging leaders and building slowly. Another important lesson is the need to secure start up resources.

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

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

The collective discussion of what the national association is for (3.1 above) will help leaders to define projects and programmes that address felt needs and desires. Equally important is the ability of all prospective members to answer the question for themselves, as clearly as possible, 'What can my organisation expect to gain from membership?' So the national association needs a 'Membership Proposition' that spells this out as clearly as possible. This will not be easy at early stages, as actual demonstrations of benefit will be rare; it will need to focus on prospective benefit, and then be adapted as the national association builds experience, and members understand better what they have already gained, and prospective members can observe more clearly what they are missing.

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

This is particularly important because, with an over-emphasis on material benefits for members, they can be led to believing that the national association is a service institution, rather than something they own and are part of. This was so important in Estonia that the national association moved away from a clear Membership Proposition:

"Before, when we listed those benefits, they were like clients – they expected something after paying the fee. Now it's more equal; we do things together; it's not that head office is under their instruction in the same way – of course, there's a division of labour, staff members have their duties, but it's more healthy this way."

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

A well formulated Membership Proposition is the basis of any drive to encourage organisations to join, and can be used in leaflets to emphasise the value of membership. It can also be used if and when members are being asked to pay a membership fee: a reminder of all the benefits of membership, articulately stated, makes a big difference here.

3.5 **What can I expect of other organisations? What can they expect from me? What is our contribution?**

A national association is a collective organisation: it functions because members make it function. There may be a secretariat, but its real activity comes from members' engagement and participation, their contributions of knowledge and skill, their participation in decision making and governance, their contributions to measurable outputs.

In this context, the easy approach for a member is to sit back, and let others do the hard work. But if all members do this, nothing happens, and the national association fails, which is not in their interest. It is a classic example of philosophy's 'free rider problem'.

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

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

3.6 **What are our shared values? What are our agreed norms of behaviour?**

Posing the questions is important during the stages of formation (covered in section 2.7). The questions must then be repeated at intervals during the life of the national association, to ensure that – as the virtuous circle repeats itself – the various ways in which members become closer to each other, understand and trust each other better, and move to different levels of cooperation, coordination and effectiveness, all resulting in deeper levels of shared values, are captured and explicitly recognised.

Section 2.7 noted that norms of behaviour are difficult to establish in the abstract, so may be hard to discuss at very early stages of formation. Some experience and observation of particularly valued behaviours, and particularly problematic behaviours, is needed to document agreements between members on these. However, leaders and coordinators need to note these early learnings, so that they can be reflected back to members when the discussion does happen.

3.7 How will decisions be made?

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

As indicated in section 2.5, all participants and prospective members need to feel confident that decisions will be taken with their views adequately taken into account. At the first stages, this probably means that decisions need to be taken in the larger meetings to which they come; it will be too early for them to be confident in (s)electing a board or steering committee to take decisions on their behalf.

However, a newly-formed network or association takes time, dedication and coordinated effort to grow. It requires the willing involvement of civil society practitioners in establishing the structures and devising policies to help the association to flourish. Groundwork is needed and (particularly with distributed leadership in mind) it may be helpful for the first meeting to (s)elect a small group of participants to do some work before the following meeting: drafting some ways forward, perhaps communicating with some organisations absent from the first meeting, etc. We have called this initiating group the 'core group'.

This group, it should be clear, would go no further than drafting; any work they do would be brought back to the next meeting for discussion, amendment and approval. It would be helpful if, in addition to ensuring its members have the willingness and ability to contribute in the group, the meeting ensures that a range of 'voices' of organisations is present, to give people confidence that, if they are not in the group themselves, someone there will be speaking in broadly the way they would choose themselves.

TOOLBOX:

Tips when setting up a core group

- Try to involve a diversity of skills (e.g. strategic, planning, media, team building) and a spread across networks as this help build the base
- Involve recognised national NGO leaders as this provides a powerful base to start from
- Involve a member with experience in interfacing with the state as most new organisations need to engage with and establish their legitimacy with the state
- Ensure you have a mix of recognised leaders and people with time to do the work
- Ensure you involve people who are good at building networks and relationships
- Secure a person with legal expertise to assist you in drafting the necessary legal documents
- Ensure the representation of marginalized groups (e.g. women, minorities, people with disabilities) as well as a range of the types of civil society organisation that you would like to become members of the association
- Try to co-opt as many people as possible into doing something to broaden the ownership base

INFORMATION BOX:

Many existing national associations have difficulties in engaging with two distinct sub-sectors of civil society, namely: faith based organisations and labour unions. The inclusion of representatives of these two groups in the core team can help to strengthen relations and build bridges in areas where traditionally there have been weaker relationships for national associations. Inviting and involving them from inception facilitates trust-building and sends a clear message that the nascent organisation does not seek to dominate civil society, but rather to create a space where different actors, with at times divergent agendas, can meet and find a common ground and interest.

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

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

3.8 Should we have a Secretariat?

Coordinating bodies can be run very cheaply indeed, if the members provide all the human resources needed to enable it to function. If they are run through working groups of members, coordinated by a Board or steering committee, and if leaders of groups are prepared to do the necessary administration to make meetings happen, take minutes, etc, they can be almost cost-free.

However, most find that a Secretariat is a helpful addition. There is a danger in this: **it becomes easy for members to expect the Secretariat to do everything, resulting in members becoming inactive and passive recipients of services.** The member-energy that lies behind all successful coordinating bodies is lost, and members find they are simply resourcing another office.

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

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

There are similar considerations if one member offers to act as the Secretariat, at least to start with. This happened in Serbia: *'We should have set up a Secretariat from the start. In the way we did it, being attached to [member organisation] for ten years, it might have been better to be more independent earlier.'*

3.9 How will we resource the National association, and why?

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

- **Should members make a financial contribution? Membership fees are some times considered to be the ultimate test of members' commitment to the national association, and to some extent this is true. However, members' time commitment is as important an indicator as their financial willingness, and for some this might be a more appropriate way of demonstrating (and resourcing) their commitment to the cause. However, most coordinating bodies do also have a membership fee system. Fees are usually on a scale, with larger members paying significantly more than the smallest members, whose contribution may be more tokenistic than significant. The scale of fees, or**

members' willingness to agree to them, has a direct relationship with the Membership Proposition – what members can expect to gain from the national association. So, in Nigeria, 'Until 2010, membership fees were 2-3% of our budget; now we've got it up to 25-30%. I'd say that before now we've not given members the right kind of benefits, so it's been hard to ask them for money. So fees must depend on the membership proposition, the benefits, and outcomes for members. You need to justify the fees, so we had to give them the benefits they wanted, then we could ask them to renew membership with increased fees.'

- Should the national association consider grants from government? Several coordinating bodies have opted to refuse grants from government, on the basis that a large part of their work is to represent the NPO sector. They wish to ensure both the reality and the appearance of independence from government. Those that do receive grants from government often have a rule that these grants will not exceed a certain percentage of their income, so that the national association's existence is not entirely dependent on government, and it can guarantee its own survival if the government were to seek to influence it through threatening to discontinue funding.
- Should other foundations or multilateral funding bodies be approached for support? This is a realistic option for many coordinating bodies, but also one they approach with caution. As with government grants, overdependence can be a problem, and rules that any foundation or other grant-making body will fund no more than a certain percentage of the national association's income can be helpful. For the Pakistan NGOs Forum, 'We have an experience, that [multilateral agency] funded us. We've decided now not to get money from outside – too much influence. We want to be free, have our own agenda. No money from government either; we have our own agenda on creating a conducive environment for NGOs. We couldn't be seen by government as being funded from outside – we had to be able to say we were purely Pakistani.'
- Should the national association charge for its services? Many coordinating bodies do charge a fee for, for example, attending training courses or receiving publications. This is helpful in providing a source of income that is independent of outside influence, and not dependent on Assembly negotiations of membership fee levels, which are notoriously difficult. However, a national association needs to consider the extent to which service fees exclude some of its more needy members from its services, and take care when setting prices to ensure that this does not happen. Subsidised training fees for very small organisations, alongside surplus-generating fees for the larger ones, are possible; the extent to which there are competitors also providing services will determine whether surplus generation is a genuine reality.

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

3.10 What will we do together, as a National Association?

The section 3.1 above covered the process of determining, in a broad sense, what the national association would exist for. Having done this, a more detailed exercise is necessary – at regular intervals through its life – to develop strategies and work plans.

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

3.11 The National Association's founding documents

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

Core question	Core agreements → documents		
What do we want a National association for?	Purpose statement	Strategy	Work programme
Who should be in it?	Membership description ('Who we are')	Membership categories and criteria	Membership application and decision procedure
What unites us?	Membership description ('Who we are')	-	-
What can members expect?	Membership proposition	-	-
What are members expected to contribute?	Member agreement/charter	-	-
What are the shared values?	Values statement	-	-
What are the agreed norms of behaviour?	Member agreement/charter	-	-

Core question	Core agreements → documents		
How will decisions be made?	Organisational and governance structure	Constitution	Terms of reference for key bodies
How do we resource the NA, ensuring ownership and independence?	Membership categories and fees; Funding applications; Discussions with government	Financing strategy	-
How do we deal with: difference? member types and sizes? different agendas? different needs?	Membership categories; Governance structure	Strategy	Communications plan
Strategy & plans:			
On what (if anything) do we want to engage with government?	Membership proposition	Strategy	Work programme
What do we want to learn from each other (or together from others)?	Membership proposition	Strategy	Work programme
Is regulation/self-regulation an issue for NPOs?	Membership proposition	Strategy	Work programme
Do we want the NA to be a channel for donors' funds to members? (see section 5, 'Relationships with Donors')	Membership proposition	Strategy	Work programme