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**Paper for the 7th Organization Studies Summer Workshop 2012, 23-26**

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**“Organizations as Spaces of Work”**

**Do Networks Make a Difference? Exploration of Working Processes in a  
European Humanitarian Network**

Clara Egger\*\*

WORKING PAPER: PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT THE  
AUTHOR’S PERMISSION. COMMENTS ARE WELCOME.

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## **Abstract**

Most of the current studies focusing on network organizations analyze how interorganizational networks are created, how they develop and how they overcome the limitations of rigid and ill-adapted bureaucracies. This paper proposes a different stance and empirically studies how work is concretely carried out in NGOs network in order to assess the specificity of this new organizational space. The paper proposes a fine-grained analysis of the biggest humanitarian NGO network in Europe, VOICE, where the author spent eight months doing field observations and interviewing the network's staff and European policy-makers. The results presented here explore the nexus between work and organizations in terms of innovation, framing and mimicry processes, organizational culture, power asymmetry and organizations' pathologies. First of all, networks face difficulty to innovate. Through isomorphism, network's staff members tend to copy the structure and functioning of organizations they consider successful. Moreover, one of the key tasks of the permanent secretariat of a network is to create a specific organizational culture, which can bring rival organizations together. Finally, the research shows that networks can suffer from the same pathologies affecting other organizations in terms of power asymmetry and path dependence. These findings suggest that in future research about interorganizational networks, they also need to be considered as a workplace in order to fully understand the specificities of these new organizational spaces.

## **Keywords**

Interorganizational cooperation, organizational culture, institutional mimicry, path dependence, network organization

## **Introduction**

*VOICE is a critical but constructive partner in humanitarian aid. Through VOICE we have been able to get a clear view of the problems, vision and sensitivities of the humanitarian NGO community. Therefore, if VOICE did not exist - one would have to invent it." - Antonio Cavaco, Director General, DG Humanitarian Aid (ECHO)-*

From microbiology which describes cells as “*information networks*” to anti-globalization networks (Al Qaeda), the network seems to be the last fashionable concept. Scholars even consider it as the most efficient form of organization (Börzel 1997) and researchers from different academic fields proclaim the advent of the networking era. As a result, literature on network organization has grown quickly since the last decades. Current research focuses on the factors that make cooperation between organizations possible through networking (Schemeil 2009; Biermann 2007), on how inter-organizational network influence policy-making processes (Mendizabal 2006; Perkin and Court 2005; Sandström and Carlsson 2008; Le Galès and Thatcher 1995) and on how networks overcome the limitations of markets and hierarchical organizations (Powell 1990, Podolny 1998).

This working paper takes an original stance and aims to fill a gap in the existing literature on network forms of organization. By taking networks as workplaces, it analyzes how work is concretely carried out in such an organizational space. Based on the case-study of the biggest humanitarian NGOs network in Europe, VOICE<sup>1</sup>, it examines the specific constraints the permanent secretariat of a network has to face to fulfill its mandate. The paper also explores the specificities of networks’ working processes.

The results presented in this paper explore the nexus between work and organizations in terms of innovation, framing and mimicry processes, organizational culture, power asymmetry and organizations’ pathologies. By meeting the people that, by their daily work, make the network alive, this paper seeks to break some myths about networks in order to present a balanced account of their functioning and mal-functioning (Podolny 1998).

The first part of the paper presents the state of the art on networks as forms of organization. The second and third parts explain the design, theoretical assumptions and the methodology

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<sup>1</sup> VOICE stands for Voluntary Organizations in Cooperation in Emergencies.

adopted here. The fourth part of the paper focuses on innovation and mimicry processes existing in inter-organizational network whereas Part V and VI analyze the key role the network secretariat plays in bringing competing organizations together. The last part of the paper presents some of the pathologies that affect inter-organizational networks.

## **I-The advent of the networking era**

Since the last decades, literature on network organizations has flourished. Current research aims to define what networks are, how they develop and what do they do. However, few attempts have been made to analyze the working processes occurring in network organizations.

### **A. What is a network form of organization?**

In the middle 70's and early 80's several scholars attempted to open the black box of organizations. Two perspectives became prominent: principal-agent theory and transaction costs economics. Each theory favors a different model of organization: hierarchies, on the one hand; markets on the other. Even if it was implicit in principal agent theory, it was quite explicit in transaction cost economics (Podolny 1998). For example Williamson does not deny that other form of organizations may exist but mentions only two pure ideal-type (i.e. markets and hierarchies). According to him, other forms of organizations are hybrids of these two forms (Williamson 1991).

Sociologists first challenged the dichotomy between market and hierarchies. Powell argued that networks are not hybrids of markets and hierarchies: they need to be considered as a specific type of organization, with their own type of function and structure (Powell 1990). In his article, Podolny proposes the following definition of a network organization: “ *any collection of actors ( $N > 2$ ) that pursue repeated, enduring exchange relations with one another and, at the same time, lack a legitimate organizational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during the exchange*” (Podolny 1998). The author also adds other characteristics such as the fact that members of a network feel a sense of obligation to the other party or parties. Perrow also identifies trust as an essential attribute of interorganizational network (Perrow 1993). A last element emphasized by Podolny is the existence of a set of shared values that bring exchange-partners together (Podolny 1998).

This definition, which empathizes some of the key specificities of a network organization has proven very useful for the analysis. However, when studying how network organizations are structured it appears that the majority of them do have a “*legitimate organizational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes*”. Most of the time, this authority takes the form of a

permanent secretariat and of a Board, which are supposed to ensure that the network reach its objectives. It is important to note that the existence of a legitimate authority does not mean that the organization is hierarchical, rather that it has a specific governance system.

Given this remark, the following definition of Le Galès and Thatcher appears to be better adapted to the study of network organization. In their paper, they assume that networks are “*the result of non-hierarchical cooperation mechanisms with different degree of stability between organizations that know and recognize each other, negotiate, exchange various resources and can share norms and interests*”<sup>2</sup> (Le Galès and Thatcher 1995). This definition proposes a comprehensive vision of network focusing on its structure and also on its functioning.

Now that the concept of network is more clearly defined, we shall analyze how this concept has been used to solve contemporary research puzzles. Research on networks can be divided in two main categories. A first stream of literature focuses on how networks are created by cooperating organizations. A second body of literature deals with networks development, how they are structured and what do they actually do.

B-How do inter-organizational network come from?

Jönsson is among the first to develop a theory of inter-organizational cooperation. He presents a wide series of factors which make cooperation possible. These factors are linked to the issue at the heart of a cooperation strategy (high vs. low politics, presence of a regime, interdependence of the actors) and to the properties of the organizations entering into networks. He emphasizes the role of “*linking-pin organizations*” and, within them, of “*boundary-role personnel*” which are likely to create ties between the different institutions belonging to the network. However he does not propose any hypotheses which explain the development of such typical organizations or personnel (Jönsson 1986). Biermann praises the assets of network analysis to build a theory of inter-organizational cooperation but it only focuses on dyads – i.e. pairs of organizations (Biermann 2007). Mitchell and Lewin maintain that creating network organizations among competing firms can be a powerful way of entering a rival organization’s market (Mitchell and Lewin 1999). Holohan develops a promising analysis of inter-organizational cooperation in crisis-management operations. She shows that creating network organizations can be a good way for international organizations to cooperate without losing their autonomy and specificity. She analyzes the importance of

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<sup>2</sup> This is the author’s translation.

leadership; of a common organizational culture; and of new technologies for the development of a successful network organization (Holohan 2005).

### C. What do networks do?

Networks are frequently said to be flexible and innovative organizational spaces which overcome the weaknesses of rigid and ill-adapted bureaucracies. This new organizational space seems particularly adapted to answer to the challenges of a globalized and fast-moving world. Most of current research on networks focuses on their functions, and thus on their functionality. Analysis of network's failure is absent from the literature (Podolny 1998). In his work, Podolny reviews some of the key functions of network organizations as emphasized by the literature. Networks are said to promote learning by promoting the rapid transfer of "*self-contained pieces of information*" (Podolny 1998). By joining a network, an individual organization can gain from the legitimacy and status of its partners. Economic benefits are also important. Williamson (1991) states some of the conditions under which network forms of organization decrease transaction costs.

Some sociologists claim that one of the major assets of the network form of organization is its adaptive capacity with regards to unanticipated environmental changes. Networks foster greater communication than the market does, thus network forms of organization are said to facilitate greater coordination in the face of changes that may be difficult to interpret and to understand. At the same time, scholars argue it is easier to modify the composition of network organizations to respond to those changes since boundaries of networks are more flexible than boundaries of formal organizations (Podolny 1998). Other benefits have also been pointed out by resource dependence scholars. They posit that organizations can lessen external constraints or uncertainty by strengthening their relationship with the particular sources of dependence (Podolny 1998). This perspective is also shared by scholars working on the influence inter-organizational networks have on international decision-making process. For example, Schemel demonstrate that, in order to be recognized as reliable partners by intergovernmental organizations, NGOs need to gather in networks. Once formed, these networks can have access to the decision making process of IGOs and increase their chances to get funding (Schemel 2009). Perrow (1993) identifies a number of social welfare benefits circulating in small firm networks. According to him, small firm networks provide autonomy, decrease inequality in the distribution of wealth, and create a great sense of community (Perrow, 1993). Other researchers have analyzed the structure of ties of networks. Granovetter analyzes how information spreads in community or social networks. He shows that ties that matter are

“weak” ties. According to him, a network is made up of strong and weak ties. Strong ties are those we have with close friends or family (frequent and intense relations). Weak ties concern only relatives which people rarely meets. These are strong ties when there are *ties-bridges* which enable to build links with other networks and to develop ties with a variety of communities<sup>3</sup> (Granovetter 1973). Uzzi has shown that the various levels of embeddedness of firms in the American industry sector can explain the variation in the survival rates of the firms (Uzzi 1997).

Policy studies scholars also pay attention to the way the internal characteristics of a network can have an influence on its ability to build links with other types of organizations. Perkin and Court, in their review of the literature dedicated to networks, identify ten factors that contribute to increase the impact of lobbying strategies of networks (Perkin and Court, 2005). Sandström and Carlsson maintain that there is a causal link between the level of integration and homogeneity of a network and its capacity to influence decision making process (Sandström and Carlsson 2008). Mendizabal and, after him, researchers of the Overseas Development Institute emphasize the major functions of a network (filter, amplify, invest/provide, convene, community building, facilitate). The author also points out getting right priorities has an impact on the global performance of an inter organizational network (Mendizabal 2006)

The review of the literature focusing on network organization reveals that research on networks is already rich. However, it is striking to note that most works focus on their functionality. Moreover, networks are very rarely studied as workplaces. Analyzing the working processes occurring within a network will offer the opportunity to study what the permanent staff of such networks concretely does and the role it plays in developing the network. Such a study will offer a more balanced analysis of these new organizational spaces, focusing on their specificities, their assets but also on their limitations.

## **II- Taking networks as specific workplaces**

This paper aims to fill this gap and intends to open the black box of networks taken as specific workplaces. Two questions are raised: **what are the specific constraints the permanent staff of a network has to face in its daily work? How do staff member handle them in order to fulfill the network’s mandate?**

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<sup>3</sup> Such a view is shared by scholars focusing on the role of linking-pin organization (Jönsson 1986). Crozier and Friedberg speak of the role of the “*marginal sécant*” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1992).



The research presented in this working paper is guided by two hypotheses. First of all, it is assumed that the *raison d'être* of an inter-organizational network is to overcome inter-organizational rivalry in order to exchange various resources and to reach a common objective (Le Galès and Thatcher 1995). Therefore, the role of a secretariat – the permanent staff of a network – is to create the conditions that make the fulfillment of the network's mandate possible. In order to do so, *the staff of a network will seek to find the most efficient form of organization by copying the structure of organizations they consider successful (Hyp. 1)*. In this race to innovate, the secretariat of the network will face several difficulties. Innovation appears to be a risky process for small structures which depend on the support of the organizations they represent. Thus networks often copy the structure of organizations they deem successful, or they want to influence (Di Maggio and Powell on isomorphism 1983).

Secondly, it is frequently assumed that the NGOs milieu is a highly competitive one. Organizations compete for funding, legitimacy and survival (Cooley and Ron 2002). Therefore, it is paradoxical to note that NGOs networks are created and are resilient. In this context one of the main roles of a secretariat is *to create a common identity that eases inter-organizational rivalry and enables organizations to be part of the network without losing their own specificity (Hyp.2)* (Holohan 2005).

From a theoretical point of view, our research aims at building links between different albeit complementary theories. First of all, our principal theoretical framework is provided by institutional theory. As March and Olsen have shown in their seminal work, the present research rejects an economic view of institutions as rational actors. Rationality is always bounded. Standard operating procedures, norms and cognitive processes existing in organizations determine their collective behavior (March and Olsen 1989). This paper also assumes that the environment in which organizational networks operate determines their choices in terms of strategy, organization, structure and working processes. In the view of organizational ecology scholars it is assumed that, as the environment changes, organizations adapt themselves to fit this new environment. Adaptation is essential to organizational survival. Organizations that fail to adapt to a new environment risk being marginalized if not shut down.

Another useful theory for this research is the principal/agent theory. According to this theory, the creation of organizations rests on a delegation process occurring between one or multiple principals (the creator-s) and an agent (their creature). Principals delegate competencies to an agent, and make this delegation strategy explicit in a contractual form. Principals accept to

delegate competencies because control mechanisms are created to prevent their agent to exceed its powers. However, it has been shown that agents strive to increase their autonomy. Most of the time, the mandate of an agent is vague and incomplete. Delegation provides the agents with a great room of maneuver since principals are reluctant to create expensive monitoring mechanisms (Hawkins, Lake, Nielson and al 2006).

### III-Methodology of research

The research presented here takes stock of the tradition of sociological analysis of workplaces, such as the fine-grained ones presented by Crozier (Crozier and Friedberg 1992). Since this research aims at improving our knowledge of how work is concretely carried out in new organizational spaces, I have chosen to ground my analysis on a case study. Several authors emphasize the need to carefully choose the cases at the heart of the analysis. However, the present analysis does not seek to identify correlation mechanisms or to establish a theory about how work is done in networks (Seawright and Gerring 2008). On the contrary, by studying a typical case, it is hoped that this paper will pave the way for further research on this topic. Table 1, based on the work of the Overseas Development Institute presents a list of the criteria that have guided the choice of the case (adapted from Mendizabal 2006).

**Figure 1: Selection criteria for the case**

| List of criteria (Mendizabal 2006)                          | Presentation of VOICE   |
|---|---|
| <i>STRUCTURE</i>  |   |
| Presence of a permanent staff                               | Yes   |
| Localisation (Easy access to the network's permanent staff) | Brussels (link with the EU institutions + open secretariat)   |
| Membership  | 83 members in 2010 representing 45% of EC partners and coming from 16 European countries. Great diversity of members. |
| Strategic capacity  | Numerous strategic documents + strategic organs (Board, secretariat) 3 + 1 Working groups                             |
| Ressources  | Important financial resources + limited human resources   |
| Communication (type, visibility, frequencies)               | Bi annual newsletter, monthly internal letter, website, advocacy documents  |
| <i>FUNCTIONS</i>  |   |
| Filtering   | Yes   |
| Community Building  | Yes   |
| Amplify   | Yes   |
| Convene   | Yes   |
| Invest/Provide  | Yes   |
| Facilitate  | Yes   |

Given the criteria presented in table 1, VOICE appears to fit our goals. VOICE is the biggest and the most influential humanitarian NGOs' network in Europe. It gathers some 83 major European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide coming from all the European countries which have a long tradition in disaster relief. Table 2 displays a list of VOICE members in 2010.

Figure 2: List of VOICE's members (2010)

| <b>AUSTRIA</b>                 | <b>GERMANY</b>  | <b>NORWAY</b>              |
|--------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| CARE Österreich                | ADRA Deustchland  | Norwegian Refugee Council  |
| Caritas Österreich             | Arbeiter Samariter Bund Deutschland                     | Portugal                   |
| Hilfswerk Österreich           | CARE Deustchland-Luxemburg                              | Medicos do Mundo           |
| SOS Kinderdorf Intl            | Deutscher Caritasverband                                | <b>SPAIN</b>               |
| World Vision Österreich        | Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe                              | Accion Contra El Hambre    |
| <b>BELGIUM</b>                 | Johanniter-Unfall- Hilfe                                | Caritas Espagnola          |
| Caritas Secours Intl Belgium   | Malteser Intl   | Intermon Oxfam             |
| Handicap Intl Belgium          | Medico Intl   | Medicos del Mundo          |
| Medecins du Monde Belgium      | Plan Intl Germany                                       | <b>SWEDEN</b>              |
| Oxfam Solidarités-Solidariteit | Welthungerhilfe   | Church of Sweden           |
| <b>CZECH REPUBLIC</b>          | World Vision Germany                                    | International Aid Services |
| People in Need                 | <b>GREECE</b>   | PMU Interlife              |
| <b>DENMARK</b>                 | Medecins du Monde Greece                                | <b>SWITZERLAND</b>         |
| ADRA Denmark                   | <b>IRELAND</b>  | Lutheran World Federation  |
| ASF Dansk                      | Concern Worldwide                                       | Medair                     |
| Folkehjaelp                    | Trocaire  | <b>UNITED KINGDOM</b>      |
| DanChurchAid (DCA)             | World Vision Ireland                                    | Action Against Hunger      |
| Danish Refugee Council (DRC)   | <b>ITALY</b>  | Action Aid                 |
| Mission East                   | Caritas Italiana  | ADRA UK                    |
| Save the Childre Denmark       | CESVI- Cooperazione e Sviluppo                          | CARE Intl UK               |
| <b>FINLAND</b>                 | CISP Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli | CAFOD                      |
| FIDA Intl                      | <b>LUXEMBOURG</b>                                       | Christian Aid              |
| Finn Church Aid                |   |                            |

|                                 |                        |                                   |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| World Vision Finland            | Caritas Luxembourg     | CORD                              |
| <b>FRANCE</b>                   | <b>THE NETHERLANDS</b> | International Medical Corps UK    |
| Action Contre la Faim (ACF)     | CARE Nederland         | International Rescue Committee UK |
| ACTED                           | Cordaid                | Islamic Relief Worldwide          |
| CARE France                     | Healthnet TPO          | Marie Stopes International        |
| Handicap Intl France            | ICCO                   | Mercy Corps                       |
| Médecins du Monde France        | OXFAM Novib            | Merlin                            |
| Première Urgence                | World Vision Nederland | Oxfam GB                          |
| Secours Catholique              | ZOA Refugee Care       | Plan Intl UK                      |
| Secours Islamique               |                        | Save the Children UK              |
| Secours Populaire Français      |                        | Tearfund                          |
| Solidarités Internationales     |                        | World Vision UK                   |
| Télécoms Sans Frontières        |                        |                                   |
| Triangle Génération Humanitaire |                        |                                   |

Based in Brussels, VOICE is the main interlocutor of the European decision makers in the realms of emergency aid, relief, rehabilitation and disaster preparedness.

VOICE is also a major actor of European humanitarian policy and its secretariat plays an active role in representing the interest of the NGOs community. What is striking when studying VOICE is the contrast between its limited human resources (only 3 permanent members in the secretariat) and the wide number of activities and functions it implements.

This paper is based on the observations made when I was employed as a Communication and Advocacy Assistant, during an immersion period of eight months from February 2010 to September 2010. The position occupied is probably one of the most accurate to do participatory observation. This method, which is mainly used by sociologists, aims at reaching a “mutual understanding by sharing a common condition” (Foote Whyte 1959). It is particularly suited to analyze working processes occurring in organizations (Crozier and Friedberg 1992). The other staff members of the secretariat were aware of the objectives of the research, in order to enable me to work transparently and to respect scientific ethics. The position of Communication and Advocacy Assistant enables me to reach a fine-grained

understanding of the functioning of the network, thanks to the variety of its assignments and to the permanent connection with its external environment<sup>4</sup>.

This position is an asset to do research on the working processes of the network. From there it is easy to observe the network's daily life and to understand how it concretely works. Access was also granted to a wide number of strategic documents which were analyzed in detailed in order to get a sense of the working dynamics and organizational culture of the network. The assistant also has very close relationship with NGOs members. At the end of the immersion period, eight non-structured interviews were organized with VOICE's members, secretariat and Board as well as with European decision-makers. These interviews complemented the results of the participatory observation and to check their validity.

Even if it does not enable scholars to compare different cases in order to find regularities in the working processes of NGOs networks, this research paves the way for a detailed analysis of networks taken as workplaces. The results presented in the next session explore the nexus between work and organizations in terms of innovation, framing and isomorphism, organizational culture, power asymmetry and organizations' pathologies.

#### **IV- Institutional isomorphism and innovation in network organizations**

Analyzing the structure and governance of VOICE reveals some of its key specificities and explains why it enjoys such an added-value compared with other NGO networks. Firstly, the network has a unique mandate and benefits from a solid representativeness due to the creation of a specific EU humanitarian policy. Secondly, VOICE is both a legitimate and efficient inter-organizational network in the eyes of the European Commission due to its centralized structure and working processes.

##### **A. VOICE : a double legitimacy**

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<sup>4</sup> Firstly, the Communications and Advocacy Assistant experiences a great diversity of missions, which enables her to be in regular contact with all the other members of the secretariat. She works with the Communication and Advocacy Officer to define the communication policy of the network (website, newsletter, thematic papers...). In her advocacy missions, the assistant works in close collaboration with the secretariat's Director, Project Officer and Communication and Advocacy Officer. In order to fulfill these tasks, the assistant receives a two-weeks training focused on the network's history, values, functioning and mandate. The author was warmly welcomed by the secretariat's staff and gained access to first-hand information on VOICE's strategic decision, but also on the feelings of the VOICE's secretariat.

The assistant has also the opportunity to frequently attend to high-level meeting between the VOICE's secretariat and the VOICE's Board, various members and external interlocutors (EU's civil servants, other NGOs, UN's staff). To take but one example, the assistant attended to the VOICE's annual General Assembly, various working groups and Board meetings.

As Barnett and Finnemore have shown, it is important to look back to the history of organizations in order to understand their current functioning, assets and pathologies (Barnett and Finnemore 1999). VOICE's history is closely linked to the European integration and to the development of an autonomous humanitarian policy. It was created to represent the interests of humanitarian NGOs at the European level, and to provide European institutions with a legitimate interlocutor. In 1992, when a dedicated office in charge of humanitarian aid was created, the humanitarian NGOs felt that a specific network was needed in order to deal with these issues. Rufini, the first coordinator of VOICE, seized this opportunity (*"when a special office is created inside the European Commission, the humanitarian NGOs feel the need to do the same thing"*). For NGOs, the creation of VOICE was a financial imperative since few States possess a ministry or an agency in charge of financing humanitarian projects. Most of the time, development assistance appears to be more profitable for States since it opens new markets for national firms. The birth of ECHO is a unique chance for NGOs to get their programs funded. Consequently, they don't hesitate to invest in a permanent structure toppling their network, which is in charge of building links with this new donor. Since its creation one of the main concerns of the VOICE secretariat is to appear as a key interlocutor for the EU while representing the variety of interests of the NGOs community.

Having a unique mandate is a matter of survival for a network's secretariat. The salaries of its permanent staff depend on the payment of membership fees by the network's members. The secretariat of VOICE has strived to obtain and maintain a double legitimacy to survive: towards its members on the one hand, and toward the EU commission on the other hand.

VOICE's constitution shows to which extent the secretariat of the network is deeply concerned by its attractiveness, and its capacity to retain its members. VOICE is said to increase the efficiency of humanitarian aid by making cooperation between NGOs easier. It enables information sharing among members, and between the EU and its partners; it also develops common positions in order to defend the specificity of humanitarian aid; it positions itself as the main interlocutor of the EU on humanitarian issues (NGO VOICE 2011). However, VOICE does not only aggregate the positions of its members: it is said to act as a multiplier of NGOs' claims since it represents some 80 European humanitarian NGOs (NGO VOICE 2010). It is clear that the VOICE's secretariat is forced to sell its services to the European NGOs, which are very prone to "forum-shopping" on the very competitive market of inter-organizational networks (interview 2010). This is why, when speaking to the

European institutions, the secretariat emphasizes its legitimacy and efficiency, portraying itself as an interface between the EU and the NGOs.

The legitimacy of VOICE rests on its diversity and representativeness. The reform of the European governance in 2000 has paved the way for a greater access of civil society organizations to the European Commission. A paragraph of the White Book on European Governance is dedicated to the consultation process, which should be at the heart of the EU decision making process (European Commission, COM(2001)). It is argued that the EU needs a reinforced culture of consultation and of dialogue, should build links with networks and increasingly use expertise to improve its decision making process (European Commission, COM(2001)). When the White Book mentions the need for a greater participation of civil society, it also adds some essential conditions for a greater access of civil society groups to the EC. Civil society groups need to be representative and to face up to its responsibility (European Commission, COM(2001)).

By adopting flexible membership criteria, the secretariat has become an essential interlocutor of the EU, since the network reflects the diversity of the NGO community in Europe. In 2010, VOICE was the only European network that gathered 45% of the ECHO partners having a Framework Partnership Agreement<sup>5</sup> with the Commission. The added value of VOICE is linked to what Perkin and Court call “*strength in number*” (Perkin and Court 2005). With 83 members coming from 16 EU countries (as well as Switzerland and Norway), it makes plain the differences in size and capacities within the European humanitarian community (49 “small”, 12 medium, and 20 components that can be considered as the most important players of the sector.

#### B- Institutional mimicry in a inter-organizational network

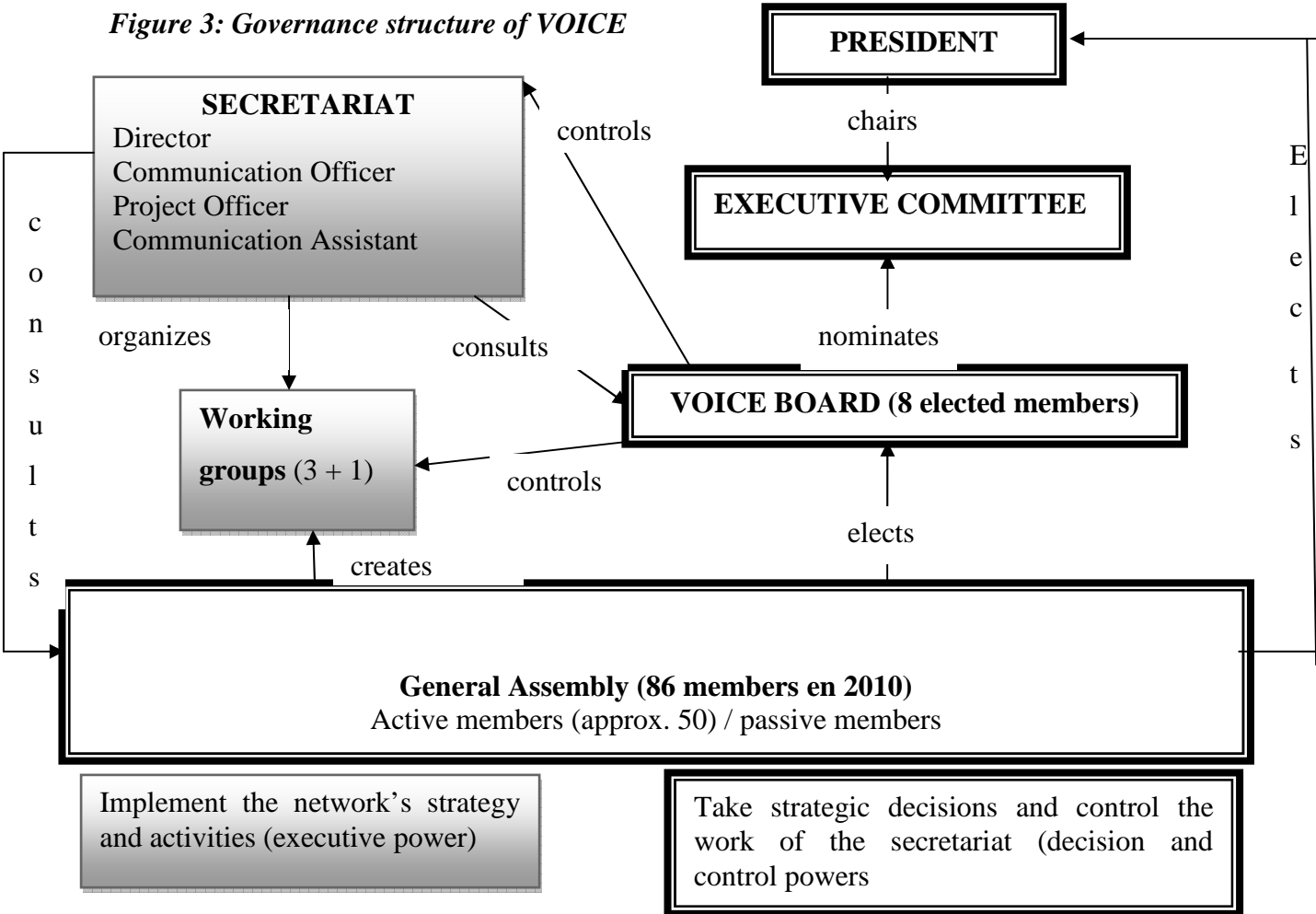
One of the key specificity of VOICE is that its structures and functioning can be explained by a will to be the most efficient possible in the fulfillment of its mandate: gaining access to the European institutions on the one hand, and influencing the European humanitarian policy on the other hand. The powers of the General Assembly (GA) and the election of the Board (ie the strategic organ of the network) confer on the organization a democratic and, thus legitimate character. Moreover, the autonomy of the secretariat enables the network to be flexible and efficient.

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<sup>5</sup> The Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) is a contract that links ECHO to its partners. NGOs that want to apply to EU funding need to sign a FPA with ECHO.

The VOICE GA is made up of all the VOICE members. Its meets annually in Brussels during the Forum, a two-days event with the Board meeting and a public event during the first day and the GA during the second. The GA is an essential event of the network’s life: it gives to the members an opportunity to meet each other, which is rare because of the geographical dispersion of the NGOs and because of the high degree of turnover in NGOs. The GA is also the place where all the strategic decisions are made. The powers of the members are very large (in terms of strategic decision and of control of the other organs). The GA elects the Board, which is the organ which leads the network. The Board is in charge of adopting all the strategic decisions and controlling the work of the secretariat. Within the Board, an Executive Committee made up of the VOICE’s director, the president and the treasurer is responsible of the daily management of the network.

Figure 3: Governance structure of VOICE





Finally, the secretariat is the most essential organ of the network. Its size contrasts sharply with the large range of activities it implements. Even if it is composed of four employees and an intern, the Secretariat implements directly or indirectly all the activities adopted in the annual work plan and in the 4-years strategy of the network. The missions of the permanent staff of the network are very diverse. Each member of the staff needs to be flexible and to adapt herself to various activities. The VOICE administrator is in charge of the functioning of the network in terms of administrative, logistical and financial tasks. The Project Coordinator manages the ECHO grant, the whole staff of the secretariat (in the name of the VOICE Director) and follows technical issues. The Advocacy and Communication Officer prepares and delivers advocacy messages towards VOICE's external interlocutors. It also defends the interests of the VOICE's members, represents the secretariat in collaboration with the Director and provides the members with information about the recent developments of EU humanitarian policy. Both the Project Coordinator and the Communication and Advocacy Officer organize and manage working groups, which are at the heart of VOICE's activities. Currently the secretariat manages three working groups, plus an *ad hoc* one (aimed to fulfill a single and specific objective). The secretariat plays a great role in ensuring that the network focuses on its key missions and on the activities for which it has an added-value. Contrary to other networks, VOICE members appreciate that "*there is a clear strategy that is different [...] if we compared with other groups, platforms... It does not work in all directions, there are not 36 000 working groups*" (interview, 2010). The VOICE secretariat knows that, to survive in a competitive world, the network should focus on specific missions and the permanent staff knows what the right level of information for its members is. Emails are rare but always relevant, thus members pay attention to them.

The secretariat Director is an essential person in VOICE. Her powers are very large in order to implement the mandate of the network. She oversees all the activities put in place by the network and her work is controlled by the Board and the GA. Moreover, the director represents the network toward external interlocutors. To these wide powers, personal factors should be added. The current director of VOICE has led the network since its independence in 2001. It is under her direction that the network has gained the status of privileged interlocutor of the European institutions on humanitarian issues. Her personality is strongly associated with VOICE. There is a "*Kathrin footprint*" (interview, 2010). The VOICE director

has gained a clear strategic vision, a great social capital<sup>6</sup>(Bourdieu 1982) and a solid knowledge of the European humanitarian policy thanks to the time she has occupied this position. Kathrin Schick is often consulted by the members and she is frequently invited to high-level conferences. She has a very clear vision of what the network's objectives should be. She knows how to deal with the European stakes and has learnt to make the most efficient use of the limited resources of the Secretariat in order not to "dilute" the specificity of the network. She is also aware of what NGOs want when they join a network and constantly adapts the network's messages to the needs of the members.

This prominent role of the Secretariat is at the heart of VOICE's added-value. Contrary to what Podolny states, network organizations can act as agents and do not always "*lack a legitimate organizational authority*" (Podolny 1998). On the contrary, by joining VOICE, NGOs delegate advocacy some of their competences in advocacy to the secretariat. This delegation process is expressed as a form of contract in the VOICE Statutes<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the VOICE secretariat acts as an agent of the NGOs. In order to be successful in its advocacy strategies, the VOICE secretariat has chosen to copy the structure of the organization they want to influence. As European States delegated power and competencies to the European Commission (EC), national NGOs delegate some of their competences to the VOICE secretariat. NGOs adopt what Coleman has called a "corporate approach" (Schneider, Dang Nguyen and Werle 1994). This approach seeks to implement collective actions by creating an organ which is given resources to fulfill specific objectives in the name of its creators.

It is striking to note how networks have difficulty to innovate. They often copy the functioning and structure of the organizations they want to influence or they consider successful. The creation of VOICE reveals the phenomena of institutional mimicry that Di Maggio and Powell have put in light (Di Maggio and Powell 1992). As the EC or other IOs, the secretariat enjoys a considerable room of maneuver and autonomy. The creation of such an agent can be explained by various factors. First of all, NGOs rarely have access to the EC unilaterally. The creation of a secretariat enables them to rely on a specialized and expert agency which has the time to develop advocacy strategies aimed to influence the EU

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<sup>6</sup> The term "social capital" has been defined by Pierre Bourdieu as a "capital of social relations which can be used, when needed, as useful supports, capital of integrity and of respectability which is essential to attract and retain the "good society" trust." (Bourdieu 1982 : 133). Such a capital can be used for a political career or to get an advancement.

<sup>7</sup> Statutes for the establishment of VOICE under Belgian law, article 22 "*The Board of Directors shall appoint a Director, to whom it shall delegate responsibility for all the daily executive and financial management of the association, under its supervision and general control*", p.7.

institutions. Such a specialization is advisable since the relations between the VOICE secretariat and the EU institutions are regular, repetitive and imply a solid knowledge of what the institutional access points are (Hawkins, Lake, Nielson et al, 2006). This role of the secretariat is reinforced by the minimal control mechanisms put in place by the principals. The control powers of the Board depend on the secretariat's will to produce activity reports. The specialization of the secretariat and the lack of knowledge NGOs have of the EU humanitarian policy increase the power of the secretariat and reduce the powers of its members. The secretariat does not hesitate to use this power asymmetry to ask for more autonomy and for more competences. Since VOICE is a useful agent, NGOs tend to accept it.

In the case of VOICE, the three types of institutional isomorphism emphasized by Di Maggio and Powell (1992) are mixed. First of all, Di Maggio and Powell use the concept of coercive isomorphism (1992) to explain how organizations adjust their structures and functioning to the organizations on which they depend. VOICE is highly dependent on the Commission for two reasons. First of all, its very survival depends on its capacity to be perceived as a legitimate actor by ECHO and thus to have access to the Commission decision making process. Moreover, the VOICE secretariat is financially dependent on ECHO since the salary of the Project Coordinator is paid thanks to an ECHO Grant.

Another type of isomorphism, the mimetic isomorphism, occurs when organizations copy the functioning of organizations they consider successful in an uncertain environment. The networks market is a highly competitive one (Cooley and Ron 2002). Sources of uncertainty are numerous. The VOICE secretariat is always confronted to new problems (emergence of news actors, of new policy issues on the agenda) and its existence is always conditional (Nielson and Tierney 2003). The survival of the network depends on the payment of membership fees by its members which face budgetary constraints due to the financial crisis and to the decrease of aid budgets. Therefore, the VOICE secretariat has chosen to copy the delegation process used by States when they create IOs since it considers such a delegation process as a successful one. IOs enjoy a large degree of autonomy and very few are disbanded by their principals.

Finally, given that NGOs staff and ECHO's civil servant tend to share the same professional background, values and academic training, normative isomorphism occurs between VOICE and ECHO. The VOICE secretariat shares a common understanding of policy problems and of their solutions with ECHO. These shared values have even led VOICE to defend the specificity of ECHO and of the EU humanitarian policy during the creation of the European

External Action Service (EEAS). The EEAS was supposed to integrate all the tools of the EU foreign policy in a single service. Both VOICE and ECHO perceive such an evolution as a threat to the independence and to the specificity of humanitarian aid. During the debates about the types of services that should be included in the EEAS, VOICE prefer defending ECHO's specificity whereas allying with development NGOs to defend the specificity of humanitarian and development policies.

### C- Implications on the working processes in VOICE

The analysis of the VOICE structure shows that networks have difficulty to innovate. Networks always exist in relation to the organization they want to influence. Thus VOICE seeks to duplicate the EC structure for normative and coercive reasons. Moreover, since it operates in an uncertain context, it seeks to copy the functioning and governance structure of organizations it consider successful. This has numerous implications on the working processes of the network. First of all, the secretariat has learned to speak the EU language and VOICE's resolutions often adopt the EU's wordings and structure. Moreover, the network's staff has a good command of the formal codes of the EU's administration: VOICE's director is frequently invited to high level meetings and informal receptions where the lobby is able to deliver its messages. This socialization is also reinforced by the fact that the staffs of a network's secretariat and the EU's civil servants share the same expertise and the same academic background. Mutual understanding is also made easier by the figures of the alumni. Alumni are people who leave an organization to work in another (Schemeil 2004). They play a great role in creating links between different organization and in fostering inter-organizational cooperation. In the case of VOICE, it is not rare that the staff of a network has started working for the EC or has left its position to become a European civil servant. Moreover, most of the staff working at ECHO has a long experience of work in European humanitarian NGOs (interview 2010).

Such a similarity between the VOICE secretariat and ECHO members of staff can create tensions and dilemma for the network. The VOICE secretariat often defends ECHO when it is attacked by its members even if the network's mandate focuses on the defense of its members' interests and not on the ones of the Commission. The VOICE secretariat is sometimes reluctant to openly question the functioning of the Commission since it does not want to threaten its friendly relationships with the Commission's staff.

### V-The reign of the equals?

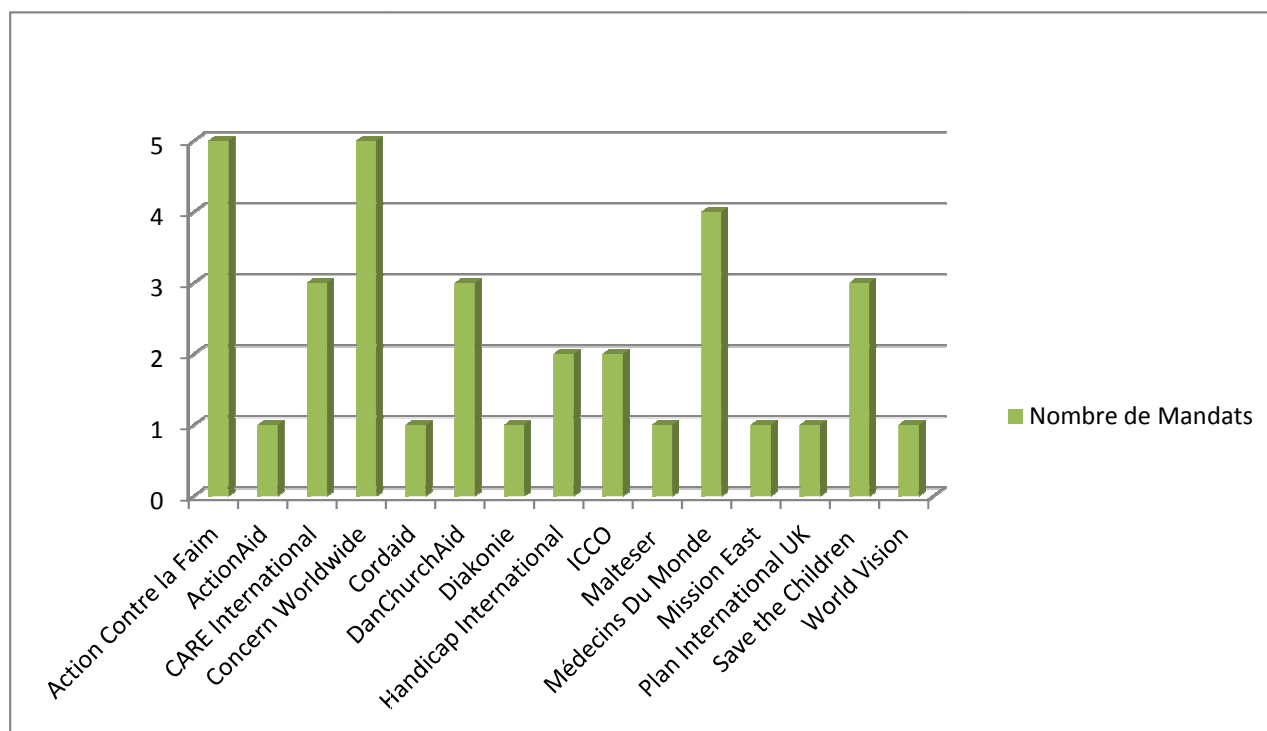
In the definition of a network organization, it is often assumed that hierarchy is absent. Members are considered equals and they voluntarily exchange resources (Le Galès and Thatcher 1995; Podolny 1998). Reality seems to be more complex: when we analyze the distribution of power existing in networks. We find out that the *de jure* equality stressed in VOICE conceals a *de facto* inequality.

First of all, the General Assembly should not be considered as a homogeneous organ. Members do not have the same resources and capacities to equally contribute to the network activities in the same way. There are active members who shape the life of the network and passive members which “*are there without being there*”. Their “*free-rider*” strategy (Olson, 1965) is not sanctioned: these organizations benefit from the network legitimacy, have regularly access to first-hand information and can use credible advocacy messages for their own campaign.

To this inequality, a practice of consensual vote and tacit consent should be added. The GA is not a place where members debate; strategic discussions occur in small committees within the Board. The GA can amend documents proposed by the Board but members rarely dare to question the competences of the secretariat and of those of the Board. This functioning is not inconsistent: it can be seen as a way to reconcile the imperative of efficacy and of representativeness, a key issue for all network organizations.

This inequality of resources leads to a low level of turnover in the organizations elected in the Board, as figure 4 shows.

**Figure 4: Number of mandates in the VOICE Board per organization (200-2010)**



To be elected, an organization needs to achieve some reputation and a high social capital (Bourdieu 1982). Such a capital of diverse and high-level social relations can be used to access to a high position in the network's strategic organs. However, more than the mobilization of the network's members, it is the quality of the links between a member organization and other organizations that can make elections easier. Thus, it does not matter if a member organization has frequent relations with a small number of similar organizations (i.e. having their headquarters in the same State, or being specialized in the same issues). The ties that count can be weak – in the sense that the organizations' leaders meet rarely – if they link organizations from different professional networks. In VOICE, the members belonging to an NGO family (i.e. Médecins du Monde, Caritas, Care...) possess this kind of *ties-bridges* (Granovetter 1973). A family has members in different States and is therefore embedded in different kind of networks (national, professional...).

The secretariat plays a great role in preventing this asymmetry of power to threaten the life of the network. First of all, the secretariat is aware that this inequality of power can lead to the fact that active members use the network to promote their own interests. Therefore, the secretariat has created socialization mechanisms for the Board members. New members receive a crash training on their role and responsibilities from VOICE's director and from the

Board “old members”. Very quickly, the organizations emphasize their mandate in the Board. This behavior is not spontaneous: it stems from socialization techniques that can be found in transnational network (Risse-Kappen 1995), be they professional trips, repeated meetings or dinners in Brussels.

The secretariat also encourages new members to apply to the Board. It always tries to come to a representative composition of the Board in terms of nationality of the organizations, field of expertise and size. It also plays a crucial role in having “its” candidates elected. Most of the time, members do not know each other and it is not rare that they call the secretariat to get advices on the candidates.

Last but not least, the secretariat has also imagined other ways to reduce this power inequality. For example, it can use the bi-annual newsletter to shed the light on a member; or it can spread at the European level some of the most successful initiatives of its members. It plays an essential role in promoting the “small members”, for instance by paying for their travel costs to Brussels.

## **VI- The more, the better? On the need to conciliate network’s members diverging interests**

Representativeness is another key asset of inter-organizational network (Perkin and Court 2005). However, this “*strength in number*”(Perkin and Court 2005) can become a weakness and the diversity of members can threaten the integration of the network.

In its advocacy activities, VOICE faces a paradox: if all the members agree with the general objective of defending the specificity of the European humanitarian aid policy, few are ready to compromise in order to reach a common position. This paradox reveals one of the limits of inter-organizational cooperation in the NGO sector. Each NGO survives in a highly competitive market by emphasizing its specific mandate (Cooley and Ron 2002). It is therefore highly risky for them to adopt a common position, which tends to mask their own added value. In this context, one of the key tasks of the secretariat is to create a common organizational culture while allowing its members to keep their specificities.

The experience of the working group on civil-military relations is one of the best examples of the diversity of the VOICE members. Created in February 2008, after a seminar organized by the network on this issue, its objective is to “*contribute to preserve the humanitarian space by promoting the humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law (IHL)*” (NGO VOICE 2008). The terms of reference are very vague: key concepts are never defined and the

size of the group is not limited. Thus, the atmosphere during meetings is often very tense and the consensus is hard to reach. The members of the group took more than eighteen months to write common recommendations to the EU on these issues as well as a common lexicon. This episode has left its mark on the secretariat history and the staff often remembers the difficulties and tensions triggered by this process (interview, 2010). Positions defended by NGOs members were highly heterogeneous: the Nordic NGOs marked by a tradition of strong partnership with their national State do not define neutrality in the same way than French NGOs do. The latter absolutely refuse to be assimilated to the French national policies. This heterogeneity of positions is associated with a refusal to compromise on the principles on which the existence of an organization was grounded. The *raison d'être* of an NGO is the mandate that it has decided to follow. Denying or changing these principles amounts to question the existence of an organization. It is therefore essential for organizations to defend their “interpretation” of the humanitarian principles. In the case of the civ-mil working group, the secretariat has actively attempted to strike a balance. It has raised awareness among the members on the importance of sharing the same identity and the same principles by organizing training sessions on these issues.

Since its creation, the secretariat has aimed to create a common identity by asserting the specificity of humanitarian NGOs compared to organizations specialized in development or peace building. Even if, in theory, members create working groups, the secretariat always initiates activities on issues which are likely to create a common organizational culture. For example, the secretariat has always refused to create working groups on country issues. It considers this theme cannot lead to the sharing of a common organizational culture and identity (interview 2010). It prefers creating partnership with other humanitarian organizations to building links with NGOs platforms specialized in development or peace building issue.

In order to create this common humanitarian culture, the network closely cooperates with ECHO, the European Commission office in charge of humanitarian aid. The legitimacy of the secretariat relies on the way it has gained the confidence of the European Commission by adopting an expert attitude. The majority of the activities set up by the secretariat serves a double objective: answering to the needs of the members and being perceived as a legitimate partner by the EU, and more especially by ECHO. Therefore the information spread by the secretariat is always focused on humanitarian policies. Training session and advocacy messages all tend to emphasize the alleged humanitarian NGOs specificity. Lastly, if the



secretariat has succeeded in fostering a common sense of identity, it is mainly because members perceive the secretariat as a successful agent.

Since its creation VOICE has developed a specific organizational profile. VOICE is an expert organization, centralized and highly efficient in the fulfillment of its mandate: creating a community of EU humanitarian NGO and being a key partner of the European Commission in the definition of the European humanitarian policy.

## **VII-Pathologies of networks**

As Barnett and Finnemore have shown, international organizations may develop pathologies, which can make them less effective agents (Barnett and Finnemore 1999). On the contrary, the literature on networks tends to focus on their assets and on how they overcome the limitations of rigid and ill-adapted bureaucracies (Podolny 1998). The last part of the paper contributes to shed light on some of the malfunctioning of network organizations.

First of all, it has been noted that one of the key tasks of the secretariat has been to create a shared organizational culture among its members. The profile of VOICE reveals the major evolution of the NGOs sector since the last decade. NGOs tend to be less vocal in order to be considered by IGOs as professional and expert organizations (Joachim, Reinalda et al 2008). However, contrary to individual NGOs, which cannot survive without the support of public opinion, VOICE has developed by cutting itself off from every activity that does not correspond to its vision of what a professional organization should be. As a result, VOICE has no link with the media, the academics, or the European public opinion. If VOICE is well adapted to interact with technical and competent institutions (as the Commission is), it faces difficulties when it needs to develop relations outside a closed professional community. Within this community, groupthink can develop and prevents the network from developing relations with two emerging actors of the EU humanitarian policy: the European Parliament (EP) and the European Council (the Council).

With its current profile, VOICE is not able to seize the opportunity of dialogue offered by the EP or the Council. Both institutions have a vital need of information to assert themselves as relevant actors of the humanitarian policy. However the EP and the Council do not offer the same access to interests groups.

The EP is generally considered as an “open” institution (Quittkat 2002). However, the EP does not enjoy a great expertise about humanitarian issues. This institution mainly enjoys budgetary and control powers which have an impact on humanitarian aid policies since the

adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. However, even if the DEVE Committee is the major organ in charge of development and humanitarian issues, other commissions such as the Budget and External Affairs Commissions play a role in determining what the EU humanitarian aid policy should be. The secretariat has therefore too limited resources to seek access to three different commissions. Moreover, having a seat in the DEVE Commission is not considered as a priority or even as rewarding for political parties. Michèle Striffler, the permanent Rapporteur for Humanitarian Aid in the EP argues: « *first of all I was above all interested in agriculture. But as nobody wanted development and humanitarian issues, I took them* »<sup>8</sup>.

The access to the Council mainly depends on the priorities of the European Presidencies. To take but one example, the Swedish presidency (during the second semester of 2009) was concerned with humanitarian issues and develops a dialogue with VOICE. On the contrary VOICE tends to fear the “weak” presidency (such as the ones of new member states) since the secretariat knows that those States lack a strong humanitarian tradition. Moreover, the Council is often considered as a “closed” institution (Quittkat 2002). The functioning of the council is inter-governmental and members states tend to defend national interests and not European ones (Quittkat 2002). It is therefore difficult for European networks to have access to such an institutions. The VOICE secretariat has therefore chosen that seeking access to the Council was the role of its members NGOs which can lobby their national government.

The analysis of the relations between VOICE and the European institutions reveals phenomena of path dependency (Pierson 2000). VOICE is victim of groupthink and tends to be prisoner of its relation with ECHO. This pathology is revealed by the inability of the network to perceive changes in its environment. VOICE does not seem to be aware of the fact that the EP and the Council will determine the future of the EU humanitarian policies. The VOICE secretariat does not consider developing relations with the EP and the Council as a priority. Thus, it fails to develop a proactive strategy in order to be recognized as a key interlocutor for both institutions.

Expertise is not a useful resource to build links with these institutions. Parliamentarians and permanent representatives of the member States are in a learning process about EU humanitarian policy. They are not informed enough to think about, and to understand the stakes of the EU humanitarian policy. Moreover, the politicians of the EP and of the Council are not bureaucrats: their career depends on the support of the European public opinion and on their electoral successes. As a result, they are more reactive to spectacular mobilization which

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<sup>8</sup> <http://michele-striffler.com>

can have an impact on the European public opinion. The secretariat does not feel comfortable with such a register of action. Its legitimacy and credibility rely on its expertise and its moderate behavior. Moreover, the secretariat hardly uses innovative means of communication which are a key element in the efficiency of network organizations (Holohan 2005). Campaigns aimed to the European public opinion are considered by the secretariat as having a negative impact of the network's reputation. The secretariat reacts with suspicion to the media's solicitations and does not seize the opportunity offered by high-profile events to spread its messages and raise the awareness of the European public opinion. For example, it is one of the rare networks which do not ask questions to the candidates to the European parliamentary elections. Without reforms, VOICE faces a dilemma: does the secretariat need to develop new modes of action even if it threatens its privileged relation with ECHO? Or shall VOICE choose to focus on its relation with ECHO and run the risk to become a marginal actor of the EU humanitarian policy?

The governance structure of VOICE can also lead to negative side effects on the functioning of the network. Literature on principal agent theory focuses on three risks triggered by the delegation process (Nielson and Tierney 2003). First of all, the agent can hide information to its principals. It is often the case in VOICE, since the secretariat filters the information coming from European institutions and selects what it choose to let its members know. Secondly, agents can hide actions that the principals would sanction if they were aware of. In the case of VOICE, when no French members were elected at the Board in 2010, the secretariat gives a prominent role to a French NGO in order to give French NGOs a chance to influence the network strategic decisions. Such a behavior is not allowed by the French statutes since the Board is the only body in charge of determining the strategy of the network.. Thirdly, principals can face the "Madison's dilemma"-in which the delegation process may give powers to the agent that can be used against the principal. There is always agency slippage between what the principals want and what the agent concretely does since the interests of principals and agents are not coincident (Nielson and Tierney 2002). The confidence that the VOICE's director enjoys enables her to play a powerful role in the network, which often exceed her mandate. During the Board meetings, all the documents that need to be approved (such as the annual Workplan or the General Policy Resolution) are prepared by the Secretariat. Faced with the reputation, credibility and successes of the Director, few members dare questioning her work and decisions. Moreover, the NGOs members of VOICE form a "collective principal" which faces difficulty to coordinate. These

coordination problems and the absence of common views between the VOICE members increase the room of maneuver of the VOICE secretariat. Thus, the secretariat tends to develop the network's positions in an insulated manner, based on what it thinks the interests of the members are and without formally consulting them. However, the secretariat never takes excessive risks: it knows where its right of initiative ends and consults its members when stakes are important.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the case study of the most influential humanitarian NGOs network in Europe, this paper seeks to examine the specificities of the working processes existing in network organization. The results presented here are based on a long immersion period of the author in the network's secretariat. They tend to confirm the hypotheses made.

First of all, the staff of a network is concerned with legitimating the existence of this network (and thus its own existence). Since the legitimacy of an organization is based on its results, the network's permanent staff members copy the functioning and structure of organizations they consider successful or they want to influence. It is striking to note that the structure of VOICE is similar to formal organizations' ones, and more especially to those of the EU. This has numerous implications for the work of the secretariat. Resolutions adopted by the network often take up the EU language. The network's staff has a good command of the formal codes of EU administration: VOICE's director is frequently invited to high level meetings and informal receptions where it works as an interest group and is able to deliver its messages. This socialization is also reinforced by the fact that the staffs of a network's secretariat and the EU's civil servants share the same expertise and come from the same academic background.

Such a similarity is due to the fact that NGOs join a network such as VOICE not only to exchange resources, but to delegate competencies to the network's secretariat. They transfer competences in terms of advocacy strategy and pool resources to fund a specialized agent which is in charge of developing relations with the European institutions and of influencing the EU decision-making process. To ensure the efficiency of such a delegation process, NGOs copy existing delegation mechanisms such as those that exist between States and intergovernmental organizations.

The second major constraint that determines the specific tasks of a network's secretariat stems from the need to create a common organizational culture, which can smoothe inter-

organizational rivalry, and ensure the survival of the network. Power and capacity asymmetries as well as the diverging needs of the member organizations can threaten the integration of a network organization. One of the key roles of the network secretariat in this context is to devise socialization mechanisms which lead to the creation of an organizational culture, proper to the network. This culture should bring organizations together in order to fulfill a common objective. However, organizations should keep their specificity and their added-value in order to survive at the individual level.

Finally, this paper proposes new insights on the pathologies of network organizations. It appears that networks can be resistant to change once they have created a specific and successful identity. Such a path dependency phenomenon can prevent the network from adapting to changes in its environment. In the long run, networks can become marginalized and disappear. Thus it is not always true that networks are adaptive organizations with flexible boundaries (Podolny 1998). Agency slippage (Nielson and Tierney 2003) is another risk for a network secretariat. The autonomy that a network's secretariat enjoys is always conditional. Members accept it if they feel that the secretariat is successful in fulfilling the network's mandate. This autonomy can have side effects if the network's secretariat carries out its own objectives without consulting or even representing its members' interests.

The research has shown that the secretariat of inter-organizational networks plays a prominent role in ensuring that the network reaches its objectives. It is therefore paradoxical that such an important object has received so little attention from the scholarly literature. This paper also offers a new definition of network organization. It appears that networks do not always *lack a legitimate authority* to implement their mandate (Podolny 1998). Networks are not always successful: they can fail to adapt to unanticipated changes in their environment. By studying them as workplaces some of their failures and malfunctioning are made manifest. Since this research focuses on a specific case, its results have only a limited reach. However such a case study paves the way for further research that will hopefully confirm and complement these results. However, this paper has also shown that, in further research focusing on network organization, attention should be paid to the permanent staff of such new organizational spaces.

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