

**RESOURCE DEPENDENCY AND NETWORK ENGAGEMENT:  
THE CASE OF NONGOVERNMENTAL AGENCY NETWORKS  
AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This article attempts to use a resource dependency perspective to contextualize organizational decisions to engage in nongovernmental agency networks. It draws upon the experiences of organizations engaged in networks addressing various challenges arising from the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa. Ultimately through interviews with agency representatives on the usage of networks, the article aims to develop a further theoretical and applied context for shaping an understanding of such networks and their roles in addressing societal crises such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The article concludes with a proposed research agenda to further engage theories related to resource dependency into a comprehension of current and potential work of nongovernmental agency networks.

## **INTRODUCTION/ BACKGROUND**

Increasingly in recent years, network theory has played a significant role in shaping our understanding of the conditions in which agencies interact (O'Toole 1997; Provan and Milward 2001; Jennings and Krane 1994). Changing expectations of government's role in service provision, an increasing recognition of various potential roles that a multitude of agencies might play in various sectors, and improvements in the methods and tools available to individual and organizational interactivity, have led to enhanced awareness of the opportunities presented by networks. Despite the emergence of literature on networks, we are still in the early stages of conceptualizing the dynamics related to their existence and organizational choice regarding whether to engage in them.

Much of the growth in interest related to networks and their development stems from a recognition that agencies by themselves are not able to address many of the dynamics that arise from many current complex situations. As a result, there has been an interest in the roles of networks of agencies that might be in a position to respond to major societal challenges. One situation that has surfaced in the past twenty years has been the emergence of HIV/AIDS as one of the more complex dilemmas currently facing human-kind. Since HIV/AIDS first surfaced on the global scene in the 1980s, millions of people worldwide have been infected with the HIV virus, numerous lives have been lost due to AIDS, and both social and economic systems the world over have found themselves devastatingly impacted by the impact of HIV/AIDS. As Hunter (2003) observes "although still in its infancy, it is clear now that in the next ten to fifteen years, AIDS will claim more lives than any other human epidemic."

With one of the largest HIV-positive population in the world, South Africa's struggle with HIV/AIDS has impacted most segments of society. As a result of both the extent of the impact of HIV/AIDS, and the inability of government to address the dilemma alone, South Africa's nongovernmental organizations have over time begun to address many of the challenges related to the complexities brought about by HIV/AIDS. Many of these organizations in turn have chosen to build alliances and networks with other agencies engaged in addressing various components of this crisis.

This article is an attempt to understand the dynamics underscoring the network processes of nongovernmental agencies, with a specific emphasis on agency considerations relevant to their engagement in networks. We focus our efforts on explorations of the roles of networks vis-à-vis the South African HIV/AIDS pandemic. Our effort is guided by several key goals. We first aim to further understand the potential applicability of theories of resource dependency upon our understanding of network formation and sustainability. By exploring factors of agency interaction and questions of environmental linkage, we aim to consider various contexts for resource dependency in a context driven by conditions of the larger environment. Second, we aim to further understand some of the dynamics related to both network formation and network sustainability among nongovernmental organizations, particularly those engaged with a crisis at the scale of the impact of HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

We begin with a presentation of the literature examining the theoretical areas of resource dependency and agency networks that frame this study. We continue with an in-depth examination of the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa, and an attempt to establish a context for understanding the evolution of networked structures between NGOs as they

attempt to address this pandemic. It is here that we present an overview of the crisis and an understanding of how current research strategies suggest that it has evolved. Next, we introduce the methodology for this research project, and the findings from the effort. The findings include the presentation of organizational profiles of agencies that we interviewed for this effort. The interviews provide information on mechanisms for engagement by a specific group of nongovernmental agencies and networks that have been responding to the issue of HIV/AIDS vis-à-vis network formation among these agencies. We conclude with an examination of various potential areas for further research on the growth and evolution of networks, particularly as they respond to a crisis such as HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The framework for our exploration of networks and the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa is grounded in both theories related to agency networks and resource dependency. We view the linkage between these two areas as vital, largely because we view resource dependency as a useful framework for comprehending the role and decisions of agency actors as they interact in wider frameworks of organizational collaboration, and ultimately make decisions pertaining to the longer-term development of their institutions.

## **NETWORK THEORY: EMERGING PERSPECTIVES**

Network theory has been emerging as a framework for understanding how agencies interact for several years. In particular, fields such as sociology, management, and information systems have adopted network approaches to explore various

foundations for both individual and agency interactivity. In the field of public administration, however, the discussions related to network theory are relatively new and largely driven by recognition of shifting expectations of the governmental sector versus the private and independent sectors. It has evolved alongside an increasing interest in the emergence of agency coordination in the delivery of various social services (Jennings and Krane 1994). Its importance is that it enables organizational theorists to assume a wider view of how groups of organizations might interact, versus examining organizations on an individual level, or as Tolbert, Salancik, and Andrews note, it “corrects a tendency in organizational theory to focus on the trees rather than the forest” (1995, 345).

Increasingly, the emergence of network theories is a reflection of the realization that inter-agency partnerships, often across sectors, will lead to the best means of addressing increasingly complex problems.

Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti (1997) define networks as “a select, persistent, and structured set of autonomous firms (as well as nonprofit agencies) engaged in creating products or services based on implicit and open-ended contracts to adapt to environmental contingencies and to coordinate and safeguard exchanges” (914). This definition lends itself to a framework examining the operating processes and origins of specific networks. *Select* suggests a subset of organizations from within a larger agency environment. Ongoing interaction between these agencies is suggested by the term *persistent*. Finally, *structured* refers to the interaction patterns that are based on labor division by otherwise independent entities within the network.

Despite its increasing frequency of usage, the concept of networks has given rise to some concerns. One concern has focused on the fact that there is a need for more

research looking at the political implications of networks and some of the political discourse that might impact the larger environments in which networks are situated (O'Toole and Meyer, 2004). Another concern relates to a realization of a lack of alignment between emerging patterns of literature in network theory, and a need to further clarify some of the linkages between the perspectives (Berry et al, 2004). Finally, issues of managerial and evaluative challenges related to networks have surfaced (McGuire, 2002; Provan and Milward, 2001) These areas of question might be used as useful points of departure for further understanding the complex nature of networks, with a specific emphasis on elements of network formation.

#### **RESOURCE DEPENDENCY**

Our second area of emphasis focuses on issues of resource dependency, which is grounded largely in explorations of the interactions of organizations vis-à-vis their larger environments. According to this perspective, while the internal factors of an organization have a role in organizational survival and sustainability, more important are “the situations in which organizations were located and the pressures and constraints that emanated from those situations” (Pfeffner and Salancik, xii). Environments have both resources needed by organizations and constraints which limit the options for organizational activity.

Theories of resource dependency however do not solely have the organization at the discretion of the environment. There are some things that the organization can do to minimize or increase the environmental impacts largely in relation to alter potential impacts. Strategies such as cooptation (refs), engaging in joint ventures with other entities, or engaging strategies to alter the legal, political, or social environment in which

an organization might interact are three of the strategies that organizations might use for the altering of structures and systems.

Organizational roles vis-à-vis their environments are seen as being interactive and both impacted by the environment and having a role in shaping the environment. Change among organizations within a resource dependency framework is based largely upon organizational responses to the external environment instead of internal factors within the agency.

Pfeffer and Salancik formalize their discussion of these internal connections through a discussion of linkages among the organization, and explore in depth the roles of linkages vis-à-vis the organization. According to them, there are four primary benefits to specific organizations from linkages. First, is an information provision role of linkages. Linkages provide information for the organization about the larger environment as a result of lessons from other organizations in the environment. Second, is a communication role. Linkages help provide information to another organization upon which the primary organization depends. Third, linkages provide a mechanism for providing exposure to potential sources of commitments of support from organizations in the larger environment. Finally, linkages provide a means for legitimizing the focal or central organization of an analysis by stabilizing organizational changes with the environment and reducing uncertainties with the environment (pg 145-147).

Such linkages are critical in discussions of networks as they provide the connection between the organizations within the network and play a critical role in shaping how various connections between agencies are shaped and developed.

## **HIV/AIDS IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN IMPACT AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

Our examination of factors of networks and resource dependency is contextualized in the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa. According to the United Nations Program on AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO), South Africa has an estimated 5.5 million people living with HIV, which is second to India's estimated 5.7 million infections and there are an estimated 1700 additional people infected daily. With little change, it is estimated that between 6 and 10 million South Africans (from a population of 47 million) may die of AIDS in next 10-15 years.

The South African context for understanding the roles of NGO linkages with the agency networks, particularly through a resource dependency lens is of value for several reasons. First, many NGOs in South Africa were founded in direct response to many of the societal challenges of the Apartheid era and post-Apartheid transformations. Now, over a decade following the nation's first fully democratic elections, many South African NGOs find themselves wrestling with various issues of legitimacy maintenance in relation to the achievement of agency goals. Many people in townships have not witnessed change as rapidly as they would like, and as a result are beginning to question the effectiveness of many of the NGOs – particularly those aligned with the government - - that promised rapid societal transformation.

Second, support from the private funding community and individual governments helped with the rapid growth of nongovernmental organizations during the years following the transition to an inclusive government in the 1990s. NGOs were seen as having played a major role in encouraging the transitions and were seen as having played a major role in the initial years of the transition. However, in recent years, private and

public international support for South African NGOs has dwindled as the widespread assumption has been that many of the more pressing challenges have been addressed. Thus, agencies at an individual level are engaged in focusing on strategies related to securing additional resources, particularly in light of a decline in support from many international donors.

Third, many of South Africa's nongovernmental organizations find themselves in situations of managing social crises that were unanticipated at the time of South Africa's transition – foremost among these is the impact of HIV/AIDS on South African society. During the initial years of transition – HIV/AIDS was not recognized as having as major of an impact on South African society as it ultimately grew to have. Many have recognized that the responses related to this pandemic requires interactivity to a degree that other challenges have not.

These three factors illustrate some of the complexities NGOs in South Africa face – particularly as many of them find themselves confronting a crisis to the scale of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The recognition of the complex nature of these challenges, as well as the various constraints, from sources in the external environment help to establish a context through which many of these organizations find themselves addressing various challenges.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We focused our examination of agency network decisions vis-à-vis the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa on organizations that were located in the Western Cape province of the country. This province is home to slightly over four million people, and is anchored

by the city of, Cape Town. To identify organizations to participate in the study, we examined Act 21 registered organizations located in the province. These organizations, by virtue of their Act 21 status are registered charities that are recognized by the government. We initially identified organizations that were located in the city of Cape Town and that noted that they worked with the issue of HIV/AIDS as part of their overall scope of activities.

Ultimately through our scanning of organizations we were able to identify eight that fit within our categories of selection. We reached out to each of the organizations, shared information about our study, and requested a phone interview with a representative from the organization. Five organizations responded. Organizational profiles were then downloaded from organizational websites and these profiles provided us with initial background information on each of the five organizations. In January and February of 2005, we conducted structured phone interviews with agency representatives on various factors related to the networks in which they are engaged, and their choices to engage in such networks. Following an analysis of interview responses, we developed a series of five profiles of organizations and their engagement in specific agency networks. The interviews explored areas of network and partnership formation, benefits, challenges, and successes within these organizations. The interviews also enabled us to explore factors related to organizational roles within the larger environment, particularly when they were part of a network of agencies.

Several months following the initial interviews, we conducted on-site field interviews with representatives from these and other organizations addressing the HIV/AIDS issue in the Western Cape province. This provided an opportunity to gain

further insight into the environmental conditions to which these nongovernmental agencies are responding through their networks as well as clarify additional questions we had about network formation processes and decisions to engage in networks.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILES**

This study was built upon the experiences of five organizations in the Western Cape province of South Africa that were engaged in addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa. Each of the organizations served as a focal point of our explorations and discussions regarding network processes – ultimately enabling us to focus on questions regarding agency roles in relation to the networks of which they were a part. Profiles of the organizations help illustrate both their activities and their roles in relation to network processes.

The first organization, Mamelani, is a registered South African charity that supports educational programs in disadvantaged communities. Through primarily educational outreach, the organization helps South Africans address a range of the problems that communities face to address challenges still left as a result of the nation's Apartheid legacies. The organization has general wellness programs, a preschool initiative, a shelter for boys, and an education fund to pay for the school fees for children from families that cannot afford to pay such fees.

The second organization, Fikelela, is an HIV/AIDS outreach program of the Anglican Church. The organization was founded in 2000 with the vision to provide an active Christian response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa. Fikelela aims to mobilize the Anglican community to make a sustained positive contribution to the

reduction of new HIV infections and to implement HIV/AIDS education and care in partnership with other agencies. The organization's many projects include a children's center which is focused on children who are HIV positive, and the provision of support for the growing number of women who have assumed roles as foster mothers in communities and are caring for children orphaned due to HIV/AIDS. One unique program conducted by Fikelela is its coordination of a ministry for many of the members of the refugee community now living in Cape Town who are HIV positive. Finally, Fikela has a peer education program that provides peer education training, life-skills training and parenting workshops that are aimed at helping parents to talk to teenagers about sexually transmitted diseases.

The third organization, Lifeline/Childline Western Cape is committed to the prevention of child abuse through the education and empowerment of children, teachers and parents. Lifeline/Childline projects entail numerous counseling services, including counseling in areas of bereavement, trauma (particularly for victims of violence and crime), and HIV/AIDS counseling, which is done in partnership with the Department of Health.

The fourth organization, Wola Nani was established in 1994 and works towards improving community acceptance of people with HIV and AIDS by combating discrimination and developing community based responses to prevention, support and care. Wola Nani's project base includes a family and community support center in the township of Khayelitsha that offers training and services to individuals and families infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. It also includes a drop-in center in Cape Town that provides counseling, referral information and nutritional support to HIV-positive people,

and projects focused on skills development and income generation as a response to the chronic unemployment and widespread discrimination against people living with HIV in South Africa.

The fifth organization, the Western Cape Networking AIDS Community of South Africa (WC-NACOSA) emerged from a national conference in 1991 and has a history that is firmly rooted in the lobbying for and development of the South African National AIDS plan. Currently the core focus of the organization is in providing capacity support and mentoring services to HIV/AIDS organizations in the Western Cape Province. WC-NACOSA is a network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community based organizations (CBOs) working to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The organization provides mentoring, capacity building and networking services. Part of its role and a significant portion of its activities, are focused on helping to develop other networks of organizations that might be involved in responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis.

In our interviews with the organizations, the number of projects that have emerged to respond to the crisis of HIV/AIDS in recent years within each organization surfaced as a common characteristic. The multitude of activities shared, spoke to the numerous factors related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic within many segments of society. The rapid development of multiple, simultaneous programs, observed several of the interviewees, was one strategy for attempting to address this pandemic.

## **FINDINGS RELATED TO NETWORKS**

Our research yielded several different issues within the network and partnership formation amongst the organizations. Agency representatives noted several networks

with which they had some affiliation that were working on issues of HIV/AIDS. Those mentioned included: Children Affected by HIV (CHAIN), the Multi Sectoral Action Teams (MSATS), WC-NACOSA, Strengthening Urban Networks (SUN), and the AIDS consortium of Khayelitsha. All of these networks have emerged since the year 2000.

Agency representatives interviewed were asked about the reason for engaging in networked activities, to help provide a framework for such engagement. Five areas emerged from our interviews. First, were areas related to addressing a diminishing base of resources. Agency representatives noted that there were a number of resource issues that were noted as being related to the roles that networks provided in their activities, and that added to the degree of necessity related to network formation. Networks provided access to resources – in some cases through funding that came through networks and their partners.

Second were issues related to the growth of the HIV/AIDS crisis. For each of the interviewees, the rapid growth of the HIV crisis necessitated both the development of agencies as well as networks among agencies. Because of the scope and impact of the pandemic, many agencies recognized that they simply could not assume an approach to providing services in a vacuum. The number of people directly and indirectly impacted by HIV/AIDS is great, and the number of services needed both at an individual and a community-level are so numerous. As a result, everyone interviewed recognized the value of working in coordination with other agencies – a recognition that ultimately called for networked approaches. Some NGOs provides services that their partners do not have and cannot provide.

Third, relates to factors of information sharing and distribution. Two representatives cited that this enabled organizations to benefit from the best practices and other lessons learned by other organizations. Information sharing and dissemination through network activities was also seen as a means of helping to reduce duplication.

Fourth related to issues related to matters of training and development. Training and development surfaced as one area of work that was noted by interviewees as being an outcome of network activities. Several areas noted as being covered in such training areas included training geared towards training of staff in skills development, exchanges and training of counselors.

Fifth, pertained to matters of advocacy, particularly in relation to government policies pertaining to HIV/AIDS. In South Africa, particularly given the criticism that the government has found itself under in relation to its responses to HIV/AIDS this issue of advocacy has risen to paramount importance for the roles of agency networks.

#### **CHALLENGES RELATED TO NETWORK ENGAGEMENT**

Interviewees were asked to respond to challenges that they perceived related to the engagement of networks and network processes. The opportunities noted by network representatives were not however, without their share of challenges. The foremost challenge noted by respondents stemmed to inter-organizational politics, which were at times cited as linking to basic personality differences between individual representatives to networks. Such politics at times, some argued, led to expansion of network mission to a stage where the scope of agency activities may have been too large at a given time.

Ultimately, this added to factors of organizational coordination, which influenced factors of engagement.

Many organizations are at different stages of development, as a result, some representatives found that meeting together is not always productive, particularly as the realities of different organizational needs have surfaced, often on comparison to stages of organizational development. . Several organizational representatives noted that agencies are at a stage of development where agencies had various levels of engagement. Size of member agencies in networks impacted some of the roles of various agencies in their ability to access resources.

### **Usage of Resource Dependency Framework for Contextualizing the Emergence and Roles of NGO Networks**

Our usage of a resource dependency framework enabled us to articulate network formation challenges in several frameworks that were of use to enable us to shape an understanding of dynamics related to organizational challenges and developments.

We discovered through our interview processes a number of common goals among the organizational approaches for addressing the issue of HIV/AIDS, including care for the orphans, care for HIV positive adults, prevention work, mobilizing churches and reducing stigma, people gaining an understanding of what it means to be HIV positive, people to take themselves responsibly, empower the HIV positive people so that they can be independent, and assist some of them with income generation.

Resource dependency provides a framework for contextualizing the environmental factors that organizations might find themselves impacted by. A strategy

for organizations to deal with the environmental influences is one that incorporates dynamics of the environment into organizational consideration. One strategy noted in the literature on resources dependency is to frame inter-organizational alliances to address opportunities and challenges in the environment in a coordinated manner.

Our exploration into agency decision-making in relation to nongovernmental agency networks leaves us with four areas of further research for our work. First our interactions with agencies and networks of agencies in South Africa left us with a number of questions related to the roles of organizations with various levels of formality – ranging from the more formal to the less formal. Our discussions were with representatives from registered Section Twenty-One Organizations. Representatives from each organization mentioned partnerships that have emerged with organizations that are less formalized entities, serving to a degree as lesser formalized organizations. Thus, this issue of formal versus informal organizations is an area of further exploration that as we consider agency network processes.

Second, are issues pertaining to the context through which resource dependency frameworks were articulated and have been developed. Resource dependency has been shaped within a context of primarily for-profit institutions. A set of questions and areas of exploration continue to exist related to resource dependency vis-à-vis agencies within the nongovernmental area. While this article was an attempt to frame such work in such a context, there is much more that needs to be achieved in exploring some of these dynamics related to resource dependency in nongovernmental agencies and their networks.

Third, stems from a challenge related to developing empirical processes in relation to the development and tracking of data resources. Agency-level data relevant to the nongovernmental sector and particularly in non-U.S. contexts is relatively scarce. As a result, the development of strategies for understanding agency and agency-network data is open to further development.

## **Conclusions**

With a continuation of pressing challenges in communities, interagency networks will grow into their roles as solutions and approaches to help with the growth and development of approaches to address those roles. Agency decisions related to the engagement into various networks stem from a variety of factors, many of which we have attempted to examine here, not the least of which relates to factors of resource dependency.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa provides a useful context for examining many of these processes, in particular, as related to many of these factors of engagement of processes of examining responses to the crisis of this scale. Organizations responding to the crisis of HIV/AIDS in South Africa are working in an increasingly complex environment, with rapidly changing flows of resource availability. To address resource issues, an increasing number are finding themselves in scenarios where they are involved with addressing various dynamics related to resource availability. The engagement of many of the organizations in networks, an increasing phenomenon, provides us with a framework for better understanding such a factor.

There is a great deal of additional work that will be required as we further understand dynamics related to networks and their roles in agency processes -- particularly as the complexity of issues continues to rise. Agency choice, in addition, will continue to surface as a set of challenges related to the development and growth of such areas. The crisis of HIV/AIDS in South Africa, along with other nations of the world provides a context for continued approaches to exploring the roles of the organizations, the networks in which they choose to engage, and their incentives for engaging in such networks.

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