

Theory to Practice

Response to Commentators

Article

Public Administration Review

Nancy C. Roberts
Naval Postgraduate School

March | April 2010
Volume 70 | Number 2

Spanning "Bleeding" Boundaries: Humanitarianism, NGOs, and the Civilian-Military Nexus in the Post- Cold War Era

Clearly, the threat environment has created challenges for those working in peace operations. Separate organizations, in keeping with their unique mandates, are attempting to respond to threats by coordinating with other organizations to get their work done. But as I summarized in my article, interorganizational coordination has proved very difficult for a whole host of reasons.

Solutions advanced to cope with the "coordination nightmare" abound. As noted in the two commentaries by Dorff and Cerami, suggestions include better training, leadership, and communication; streamlined organizational processes and procedures; team development and coordination; appreciation of cultural differences; and redesign of organizations to make them flatter, leaner, and more adaptive to change. No doubt these suggestions and others can and do help. However, as Galbraith (1973) underscored in his information-processing approach to intraorganizational design, these mechan-

isms of coordination have their limits and can only take us so far. At some point, environmental turbulence overwhelms an organization's ability to process information about the environment. I believe this is where many organizations are today, especially those engaged in peace operations. So what can be done?

Redesigning the U.S. governance architecture is one alternative, as Dorff suggests. Our current governance structure was designed for 18th-century operations. It is not unreasonable to think it needs to be updated for the 21st century. Unfortunately, most suggestions for governance redesign rely on the same fundamental building blocks—organizations (and, in the worst case from my perspective, a meta-organization with a chain of command and clear lines of authority that still requires Galbraith's mechanisms of coordination). Organizations are fine for some work, especially those whose workflow features routines and standard operating procedures, but I have my doubts that

they will be better information processors than they are now for complex tasks and a chaotic environment no matter how organizations are reconfigured to form a new governance structure.

Network researchers have proposed another option: create network organizations that retain the advantages of markets (e.g., adaptation to the environment) and the advantages of hierarchy (e.g., common purpose). This option also has possibilities, but we still read about problems with the management of accountability, the management of legitimacy, the management of conflict, the management of design (governance structure), and the management of commitment in network organizations (Milward and Provan 2007). Even more worrisome from my perspective are our not-too-subtle efforts to order networks and make them like organizations that can be "led," "managed," and "controlled." We started by creating network organizations to solve the problems of inter-organizational coordination and ended up creating organizations to solve the coordination problems of networks.

So let me offer another option for your consideration. Why don't we just let networks be networks and stop trying to force fit them into our view of organizations? Communities of practice are moving us in this direction. They attract people from all organizations, sectors, and even nations who see value in coalescing around a common theme or issue of mutual interest. Their coordination is online and occasionally face-to-face, and their focus is information sharing and trust building to sustain network activity.

The next step would be to support these communities of interest with *web-based platforms* to facilitate their interactions. More than a portal, these platforms would not only encourage information sharing and

coordination, but they would enable data collection and analysis to inform problem solving and decision making in the community. Operating like the Internet or Wikipedia, they would be *open source, self-organizing, peer production systems* that no one owns, everyone uses, and anyone can improve. They would function with minimal standards, self-select, co-create, and enable unity of purpose and effort rather than require unity of command and control. The most likely place to test such open-source platforms would be in the simpler cases found in quadrant one, such as humanitarian and disaster relief operations where the threat level tends to be lower and the domain consensus higher.

Unfortunately for the people involved in the disaster, such a test case is emerging out of the ruins of Haiti. STAR-TIDES (Sustainable Technology Advanced Research-Transformative Innovation for Development and Emergency Support) helped catalyze information sharing through the use of a platform linking USSOUTHCOM and the civilian technology community in support of Haitian relief efforts. It quickly attracted and energized an even larger, worldwide, open-source community of interest (www.star-tides.net) to assist in all facets of the recovery. For example, the Coast Guard launched medical evacuation helicopters in Haiti using data derived from the open sources tools manned by volunteer graduate students in U.S. universities on the east coast. Data were reported to be timelier than what was available through official channels (<http://star-tides.net/node/622>).

The CORE Lab at the Naval Postgraduate School is working on two additions to support such a platform. The first is FIST (Field Information Software Tool)—an iPhone that enables those on the ground to enter, structure, and analyze data for the purpose of im-

proving situational awareness (FIST Master Brief). The second is software that adds data analytic and integration capabilities as seen in the Palantir Technology video on Haiti (<http://www.palantirtech.com/government/analysis-blog/haiti>). The video illustrates how data layering and fusion enable the analyst to identify what resources are needed, where, and when in response to a disaster. Web-based, open-source platforms with multiple applications such as these show great potential in enabling and facilitating coordination in some of the most challenging conditions we face around the globe. Although they have their startup costs and challenges, as do all innovations, I believe they offer a promising pathway to avoid the worst coordination nightmares that many of us have experienced during peace operations.

References

- Galbraith, Jay R. 1973. *Designing Complex Organizations*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing.
- Milward, H. Brinton, and Keith G. Provan. 2007. Essential Tasks for Network Managers. *Forum on Collaborative Governance*, 57-63. Washington, DC: IBM Center for the Business of Government.