



## TRIALOG Central Training “Financial Sustainability of National Platforms” Vienna - Austria, 24-26 February 2009

Minutes of the presentation given by

**Hans Zomer, Dóchas Director**

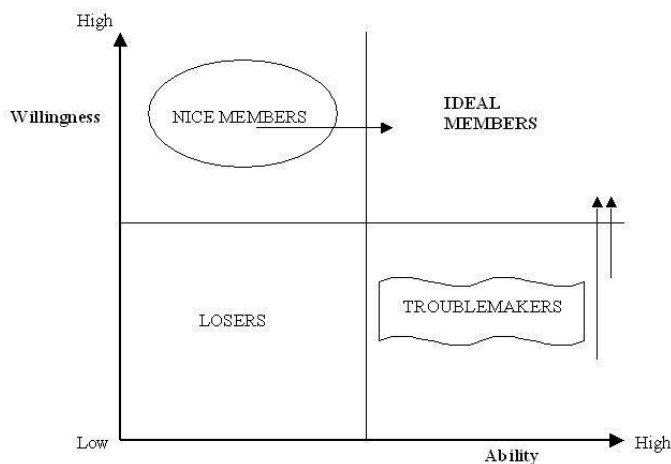
### **Dóchas strategy on sustainability**

For further information please read the full strategy document:

<http://www.trialog.or.at/images/doku/dochas-sustainability-policy.pdf>

The important point about **being sustainable** is that you have to **be relevant**. If you do something that others are interested in, people and money will come. 8 years ago, the Irish platform had very little money, although they were having an impact. The platform started in 1977, and for more than 20 years it functioned on nearly no money. What has made the platform strong is the involvement of its members, and the fact that they are willing to spend time (and a bit of money) on the platform.

Looking at combinations of ability and willingness highlights **4 different kinds of members**:



High ability/high willingness: “Ideal members”. They should be kept happy and valued, but they do not require a lot of investment.

Low ability/high willingness: “Nice members”. Some NMS platforms are these kind of people within CONCORD. They need the most time because with a little bit of help and coaching they can move into the ideal group.

High ability/low willingness: “Troublemakers”. They need a change of attitude to become interested but it takes a lot of work before such change happens - and usually that only comes when changes are made at the top of the organisation.

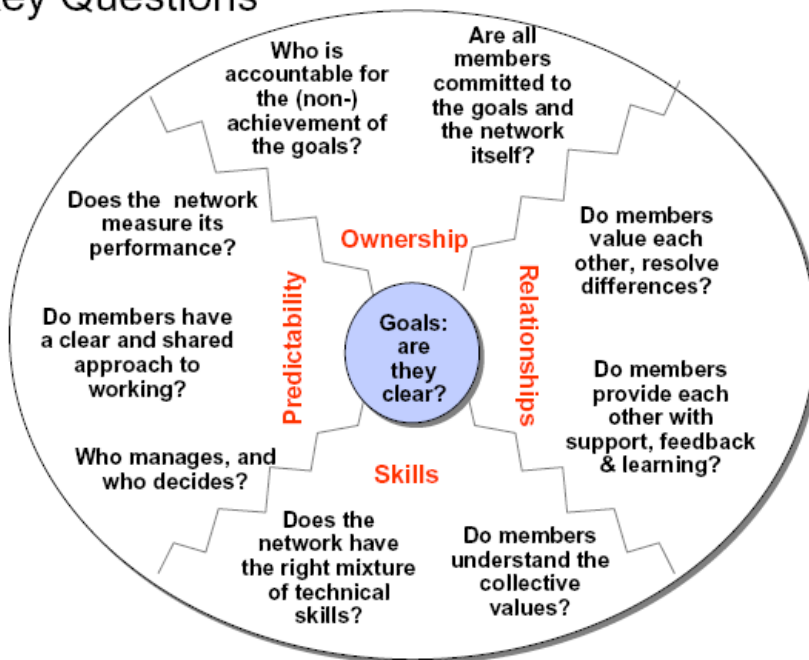
Low Ability/Low Willingness: “Losers” - forget them. Organisations that have neither the capacity nor the willingness to engage with the platform will tend to be a drain on the network’s resources.

Platforms should target most of their energy on their ‘nice’ member organisations. **Members’ commitment** is vital for the platform’s sustainability.

Dóchas currently has 39 members and the Irish government is a key stakeholder because the network is considered relevant by the government.

Dóchas is in the process of adopting a new strategy, and although the process took a long time and the final result was not significantly different from the old one, the important part was actually going through the process: Dóchas deliberately spent a lot of time and effort on engaging its members on the **key questions** that the network faces.

## Key Questions



For further information see the Dóchas **presentation on Effective NGO Networks:**

<http://www.trialog.or.at/images/doku/effective-ngo-networks.pdf>

Hans Zomer concluded by repeating his main message – that money comes if other elements are in place. If you are relevant and have a constructive relationship with key stakeholders, then money will follow.

### Further reading:

- Lessons and Recommendations for Effective Running of NGO networks, compiled by Jonah Mudehwe, Director of Zimbabwe's National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (Source: Dóchas):  
<http://www.trialog.or.at/images/doku/concept-and-practice-of-networks.pdf>
- Related Central Training documents:  
<http://www.trialog.or.at/start.asp?ID=195>

### Questions and discussion:

Some more details about the process the Irish platform went through:

The platform was actually created in 1974 but not active until 1977. One reason was because they essentially did not agree what to do apart from campaigning on 0.7% for ODA. There were internal problems that stopped the platform moving forward, and there was only an administrative staff member for the next 20 years or so. In the 1990s, lots of new members joined (Oxfam, Christian Aid, ActionAid, etc) which were part of big networks, so were used to working with others. When mutual trust among the members was created, the government started supporting the platform, and from 2002 the first money was provided by the government, and this allowed programme staff to be hired. If members understand why it is good to work together, a platform will function better.

Where does the money for core costs come from, and if the money was not there what the platform would no longer do?

Hans Zomer said the first thing the platform would have to do would be to cut his job. Dóchas would continue but at a lower level than before. At this stage though, the government cannot imagine not giving the platform money as they need the platform as much as the platform needs them. Members would also start looking for other sources of funding and there would be the option of increasing membership fees. Another aspect is that they have built up a bit of a reserve for overheads for a couple of months. The government needs to work with good NGOs and Dóchas provides them with what is almost an insurance policy, as the NGO members of the platform have to sign up to codes of conduct and quality criteria. There are an estimated 180 NGOs in Ireland and every year the platform turns down those that want to join but don't meet the Dóchas entry criteria.

How does platform staff work, and do the members meet regularly?

The staff is made up of a director, a policy officer, an information officer and an admin officer. When they looked at attendance records, they saw that a handful of members (out of 39) did not come to a single meeting out of 84 meetings (with a total of 694 participants providing an in-kind contribution of 30 EUR per hour meeting). There is one Annual General Meeting (AGM) that attracts 2/3 of the members, then there are board meetings and working group meetings. Dublin-based organisations are more easily able to attend meetings, which creates challenges for other members.

Platforms need to have a strategy and vision about what the platform will be. It has to be clear what the board will do and what the members will do – if you try and do everything, nothing is done well, and you can only be relevant if your work is done well. Those platforms without a strategy should think about this. For example in the Finnish platform, there is a 3 year plan, and the platform has started talks for the next 3 years that are very interesting – visionary discussions with MEPs, journalists and so on, all discussing the role of the Finnish platform. Each platform must see what is best for its members; know the members and understand what they need whether that is a newsletter, involvement in CONCORD working groups, links with NGOs from other areas or whatever it might be.

Is the Irish platform able to monitor policies other than development, and does it use a code of conduct?

It is easiest to influence development policy because Irish Aid understands what the platform is. Ministries of trade and agriculture listen politely but the platform finds it difficult to have any real influence. The platform does engage with the Ministry of Justice on corruption, for instance, but generally engaging at policy level on development is more direct.

The platform does use a code of conduct, and has another on how the NGO boards should work, as well as the CONCORD NGDO charter. Members of the platform have to sign up to all three and report to Dóchas about how they adhere to them. This year the platform will hold an event for the media about the code of conduct; to explain to journalists why the platform has it.