Inter-Agency Working and Co-operation: Learning from Collaboration in the Humanitarian and Security Sector Space

Abstract

Any discussion about an increase in inter-agency working particularly within the wider humanitarian aid and security sectors raise questions about the need for more collaboration. One key reason is the synergy required to effectively manage more complex and conflict ridden work environments whilst aiming to achieve increasingly difficult organizational objectives. Such organizations face greater management complexity, relentless pressure to meet the needs of often traumatized populations whilst providing a capable service, and dealing with the ever-increasing rate of situational change. Organizations whether from the not-for profit, public or private sectors are turning to external collaborations to improve their capabilities and their knowledge base. The key concept of absorptive capacity involving the various agencies ability to recognize, learn from and utilize new knowledge is identified as an important factor to support for example, distributed
leadership. This exploratory paper builds on extant research and provides a heuristic framework to support further research to prompt the need for necessary growth in collaborative working and to aid in the management of the increased complexity and difficult work encountered in hazardous zones by inter-agency organizations.

**Key words:** humanitarian space, security sector, inter-agency working, collaborative leadership, and knowledge management

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**Author:** Roger Darby, PhD

Course Director and Senior Lecturer

Centre for Defence Management & Leadership

Cranfield University, UK

Email: r.darby@cranfield.ac.uk

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**I. Introduction**

Any discussion about an increase in the complexity of managing inter-agency working particularly within the wider humanitarian aid and security sectors raises questions about the need for more collaboration between agencies (Metcalf et al., 2012; Kaiser, 2011; Dunning, 2008; Luscher & Lewis, 2008). This paper focuses on this topic for three main reasons. Firstly, this research is timely given the increasing number and levels of complexity of international projects in hazardous zones across the globe. Further, there has been an on-going often fractious debate in international humanitarian law relating to the distinction between the military domain and the non-military
domain fusing into what has been termed the humanitarian space (HPG, 2010; Bruderlein, 2000). The management of such a ‘space’ requires a mixed range of expertise to support various agencies working together effectively; it also requires shared leadership, logistical management and political support to collectively achieve the necessary objectives. It is argued here that within the humanitarian aid and security sector some challenging issues are simply too big for one agency or sector to handle alone. Further, it is argued that this increased complexity and the difficult work encountered in hazardous zones by inter-agency organizations prompts the need for a necessary growth in collaboration (Buchanan-Smith & Scriven, 2010; van Wijk et. al., 2008; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Darby & Williamson, 2012).

Secondly, these issues have been compounded by recent research in the humanitarian sector highlighted for example by Buchanan-Smith & Scriven (2010) and Archer & Cameron (2013), about the substantial increase of demands on individual leaders and the call for more collective leadership where skills and responsibilities are more appropriately distributed (Kempster, et al., 2014). Further, research has also emphasized the value of a leadership team or leadership organizational culture that supports collectivity, participation and collegiality (Hiller et al., 2006; Smillie & Hailey, 2001). As an example, recent research into the UN highlights the need for leadership that requires a combination of multiple attributes that are seldom found in one person and supports the notion of the development of a leadership team linked to mechanisms of collective accountability (Hochschild, 2010; Featherstone, 2010).

Thirdly, the paucity of research in the humanitarian space, as highlighted by Bolden (2011), Salmon (2004) and Harris et al. (2007), provides grounds for further study, which, it is argued, leadership literature has not adequately addressed. Research has also not fully taken into account the role of collaborative learning and knowledge management (KM) in influencing the efficacy of leadership from an inter-agency working perspective (Tauxe, 2000). The use of research on collaboration, KM and organizational learning is used here to provide a heuristic framework to present additional guidance. Additionally, this exploratory paper focuses on examples of inter-agency working within the humanitarian aid and security sectors to highlight salient issues and to provide a framework for further research.

In practice, reality seems to suggest collaborative leadership is problematic when related to inter-
agency working. Therefore, the core proposition posited here in this paper is that inter-organizational collaboration and knowledge transfer can act as an enabler to support collaborative leadership and organizational learning in an inter-agency working context.

For the purposes of aiding clarity to the approach taken in this paper, the following definitions of key concepts are used:

**Collaboration:** “... a co-operative, inter-organizational relationship that relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control but is instead negotiated in an on-going communicative process.” (Lawrence et al., 1999, pp. 78). “...as any joint activity by two or more organizations that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when the organizations act alone.” (Kaiser, 2011, pp. 2).

**Collaborative leadership:** “… the leadership required to get results across organizational boundaries. And that also means the leadership required to get value from the differences (in culture, experience, or skills) that lie in the organizations that sit either side of that boundary. This requires leaders to be able to: build relationships, handle conflicts and share control.” (Archer & Cameron, 2013, pp. 10-11).

**Knowledge management:** “... an emerging set of organizational and operational principles, processes, organizational structures, applications and technologies that helps knowledge workers dramatically leverage their creativity and ability to deliver business value.” (Lee & Yang, 2000, pp. 83).

II. Inter-Agency Working and Leadership

It is argued in this paper that collaboration and learning can support good management practice to effectively and efficiently manage increasingly limited resources. For example, such tangible resources may include finance, technology, plant and machinery; or intangible resources like knowledge, expertise, reputation, ‘know-how’ and added ‘value’ (Barney, 1991; Spender, 1996; Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2005; Allee, 2000; Andriessen, 2003). A central issue in this dynamic is
the question of leadership in such situations. Notions of what leadership is in the humanitarian space are affected more and more by situational context and what is happening in conflict, post-conflict, developing or even failed states. Concomitantly, it also raises questions about the nature of leadership and the effective use of human and social capital in organizations within the aid context (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapirt & Ghoshal, 1998; Hailey, 2006; Barney & Wright, 1998). For it can be posited that due to these changing circumstances, leadership is not now necessarily purely determined by position of authority but rather by an individual’s expertise, the needs of the team and the capacity to influence peers, at any given time.

III. Leadership and Collaboration in the Humanitarian Space

Traditionally, research in the leadership field has focused on a number of issues that have included key variables such as, a definition of what leadership is (Vroom & Jago, 2007); situational leadership (Northhouse, 2007; Hersey, 1985; Hersey & Blanchard, 1984); incorporating the attributes and behaviors of leaders (Likert, 1961; Blake & Mouton, 1964); contingency theories highlighting interaction between leaders, followers and changing leadership styles (Fiedler 1964; Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Kodama, 2006); what constitutes a good leader; and the relationship of the leader to subordinates and followers (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Yukl, 2002). Further, there has been a concentration on strategic leadership and how leaders impact organizational effectiveness (Ho, 2009; Lakshman, 2007); and to more recent challenging perspectives of traditional leadership (Grint, 2005; Collison, 2005; Benson & Blackman, 2011).

This research addresses the question of leadership from a different perspective but one that is relevant to inter-agency working in the humanitarian space. It is suggested the nature of the leadership is going through continual change. This is often dictated by the task, which may be fundamentally new or different from previous assignments given the particular emerging context. Those different contexts will require a variety of expertise and skills aided by greater flexibility and adaptability in both the individuals and the organizations required to work together. This involves the notion of leadership as an activity that can be distributed, shared or practiced in collaboration and has been proffered as an alternative viewpoint to a more traditional approach to leadership (Archer & Cameron, 2013; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Harris et. al., 2007; Grint, 2008, Whitby, 2006). This perspective identifies leadership as being distributed among individuals, members of
teams or organizational units who increasingly share responsibilities, roles, functions and activities (Timperley, 2005; Woods, 2004). Although, this concept of distributed leadership is not particularly new (Pearce, Conger & Locke, 2008) or without contention (Currie & Lockett, 2011), it still offers an alternative position where leadership is more readily seen to be de-centralized and distributed amongst individuals and functions within for example, the process of inter-agency working.

In addition, this sharing of leadership by design is more contrived due to circumstances dictated by the situational context and through the interactions of multiple actors (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Bennett et al, 2003; Spillane et al., 2007). This further challenges the view that leadership is about one particular individual who single-handedly develops a vision to which followers to aspire (Timperley, 2005; Yukl, 2002; Badaracco, 2001). It also highlights Gronn’s (2000, 2002) approach, which has raised the issue of disenchantment with purely individualistic notions of leadership and see leadership more in a holistic way rather than the simple aggregation of individual contributions. He has further argued that distributed leadership is the result of the interactions of individuals and networks and, in combination with the expertise available and relationships developed, will affect the leadership and output that occurs. That involves a multiplicity of leaders with a collection of unique and disparate skills that enables communities to develop and prosper. To further support this approach, more contemporary research has identified the notion of ‘Tri-sector Leadership’ which argues that due to the critical challenges that profit and non-profit making organizations face, they require them to work together to be successful. However, this can only be achieved if leaders are able to engage and collaborate across all the different sectors (Lovegrove & Thomas, 2013).

In practice, the reality seems to suggest distributed leadership is problematic when related to inter-agency working in the humanitarian space (IASC, 2001; 2006). Furthermore, recent research relating to the UN has identified the concept of integration as not clearly understood between UN and non-UN staff (Metcalfe, et al., 2011). Further, there appears to be great skepticism amongst many UN and non-UN staff in humanitarian organizations that such integration can actually support humanitarian aid. The detractors argue that integration distorts the distinction between humanitarian, military and political action, and supports subordinate humanitarian priorities to satisfy political demands, placing humanitarian action at major risk (Metcalfe et al., 2011). This it is
suggested, compounds a climate of mistrust and a negative and biased approach maintained by the followers and detractors of UN integration, and by association, it is argued here, of collaborative leadership in that milieu.

IV. Examples of Inter-Agency Working in the Humanitarian Space

The examples below further provide an illustration of inter-agency working within the humanitarian space that highlights the disparate nature of the multi-agencies involved in an aid project. This includes maintaining national security, capacity building, information exchange and technology transfer (Stoddard & Harmer, 2010). However, agencies face barriers to co-operation, for example, when associated with politics, strategies, legal issues and policy frameworks (Bermeo, 2004). This is compounded by evidence that suggests, regularly it is the fragmented, disjointed leadership and management practice which often hinders and on occasions, negatively stops the achievement of set objectives (Buchanan-Smith & Scriven, 2010).

![Inter-Agency Working – A Question of Distributed Leadership?](image)

*Figure 1: An example of an Inter-Agency working context*

In Figure 1, the focus on the context of humanitarian aid and security sector support can be used to assess the influence on the practice of collaboration where the functions of the leader could be shared across a range of individuals *(or inter-agencies).* Further, the interactions of the various individuals most important to leadership across a group *(i.e. of agencies)* enable the project
objectives to be achieved. Given that context, a number of benefits of distributed leadership resonate with inter-agency working: for example, as an enabler to more effective and faster change management (Harris et al., 2007; Platow, Reid & Andrew, 1998); increased capacity building (Timperley, 2005); encouraging more innovation (Spilane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004); more effective decision making (Whitby, 2006) and increased collaboration and the sharing of leadership practice (Inglis, 2004; Grint, 2005).

**Case Study: Kidnapping in Darfur, north Sudan (2010):**

Darfur in Western Sudan remains one the world’s worst humanitarian crises with a total of 4.7 million people affected by the on-going conflict. Many of these people rely on aid provided by local and international organizations. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to operate. Over the past few years, violence towards aid workers has seen a marked increase with humanitarian staff becoming the targets of direct attacks. Compound break-ins, car jacking and robberies have become commonplace, perhaps an even more worrying trend though is the recent increase in the number of relief workers kidnapped and abducted. According to UN statistics, between January and August 2009, a staggering 50 staff from UN or aid organizations were reportedly kidnapped or abducted in Darfur – kidnappers have seized six groups of foreigners in Darfur since June 2010, a trend that was virtually unheard of before.

**Case Study: Insecurity in Port-au-Prince, Haiti (2010):**

In Haiti, after the devastating earthquake on January 12th 2010, insecurity and the complete breakdown of law and order in the main city Port-au-Prince hampered rescue efforts. The UN and military recommended, and in some cases enforced curfews and restricted zones in certain areas of the city for mainly personal safety reasons.

Fears have arisen over a dangerous power vacuum in the aftermath of the disaster. With food and medical supplies delayed, there were widespread reports of mounting desperation and looting. Footage from the US broadcaster CBS showed young men roaming the streets of Port-au-Prince armed with machetes and hunting for food.
The UN humanitarian spokeswoman, said: “People who have not been eating or drinking for almost 50 hours and are already in a very poor situation, if they see a truck with something ... or if they see a supermarket which has collapsed, they just rush to get something to eat.”

The country’s 800-strong police force “are not visible at all”, said Wimhurst, and aid convoys have been warned to travel only with security escorts. The situation is exacerbated by more than 4,500 criminals who fled from two prisons destroyed in the city.

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Case Studies: Adapted from Darby & Williamson, 2012.

The case studies above highlight real examples of inter-agencies working in hazardous environments. These real examples illustrate the complex array of situations that such agencies and employees find themselves confronted with. They further show the varieties of leadership required. However, it is argued here, appropriate leadership is dependent for success on the element of collaboration between the various agencies working together in unstable and fast changing hazardous environments.

V. Collaborative Working & Knowledge Sharing – Aiding More Effective Leadership?

It is further argued in this paper, that the prism through which leadership has been viewed has not fully taken into account collaboration, KM and organizational learning with the need to link to the overall inter-organizational learning infrastructure (Crossan & Hulland, 2002). Extant research has identified weaknesses in theory building and empirical research on leadership and the limited view of collaboration and knowledge processes whilst largely ignoring knowledge assets and organizational context (Von Krogh et al, 2012; Gourlay, 2006). This has been compounded by a great deal of the research on organizational knowledge creation being focused on leadership as a central activity undertaken by a restricted few in the more senior positions of an organization. Indeed, initial concepts of leadership in organizational learning were based on a restricted notion of a ‘dominant coalition’ involving a senior management team which had a significant negative impact on organizational learning (Hambrick & Mason, 1984).

Yet, as alluded to previously, whilst leadership literature has also focused on the behaviors of leaders, followers, and their interrelationships, it can be argued that leadership can also be viewed
as a catalyst for organizational learning and therefore as an aid to more effective inter-agency working (Carmeli et al., 2013, Atwater & Levi, 2011; Nonaka & Toyama, 2005). This supports the proposed core proposition in this paper that inter-organizational knowledge transfer can also act as an enabler to support collaborative leadership in an inter-agency working context. Developing that linkage adds to findings from recent research that suggests leadership has a high correlation with all elements of an organizational learning system, which in turn has a high correlation with organizational performance (Carmeli & Waldman, 2010; Lakshman, 2005; Srivastava, et al, 2006; Zarraga & Bonache, 2003).

In particular, research in the area of KM and collaborative learning has provided a useful framework for assessing the relationship between leadership, collaboration and inter-agency working (Park & Ungerson, 2001; Lawrence et al., 1999). More specifically, research that has studied inter-organizational collaborations in which learning is an explicit objective provides insight into how this could be used to support collaborative leadership in an inter-agency context. Building on applied research undertaken by the KM Forum at Henley Business School (2009) and Van Winkelen, (2010), which addressed the issue of inter-organizational collaboration as the unit of analysis, the research focused on the individual’s perceptions of the value derived, their own role and activities, and the dynamics of the collaboration. Using an in-depth qualitative study of learning-based inter-organizational case study organizations from the private, public and non-profit sectors, relevant findings highlighted that multiple forms of value are evident when collaboration is undertaken including, individual capacity building, operational value, affirmation, reputation and relationship building and learning how to collaborate more effectively.

KM shares common ground with organizational learning in recognizing the importance of knowledge to the success of the organization (or the successful management of inter-agency projects). This is supported by previous empirical research which show that an organization may significantly improve its knowledge and capabilities (including leadership skills) by leveraging the skills of individuals both from an inter- and intra-organizational perspective; and the importance of knowledge transfer mechanisms to utilize the learning from the collaboration (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008). However, learning in organizations as a consequence of individual learning and knowledge transfer in the overall learning network is noted as a difficult challenge.
Figure 3 below provides a useful framework drawn from further research findings which highlight the importance of inter-organizational transfer mechanisms to effectively use the learning from the collaboration (i.e. inter-agency working), linked to the roles individuals perform in transferring the knowledge (which may include a leadership role).

Figure 3: Factors influencing inter-organizational knowledge transfer

(Adapted from: Easterby-Smith et al. 2008)

What is of particular interest for this research is the ‘Inter-organizational dynamic’ variables, as further research has also shown the barriers to the effectiveness of knowledge transfer and the complexities involving various, diverse boundaries, culture and divergent processes are clearly apparent in many inter-agency working situations (Holmqvst, 2004; Szulanski, 1996). More specifically, Currie and Lockett (2011) and others, have further contended that inter-organizational knowledge transfer experienced in inter-agency working is significantly affected by four factors which support the findings of Easterby-Smith et al., (2008) identified in Fig. 3: power relations (Gosling et al., 2009); trust and risk (Ko et al., 2005); structures and mechanisms (Hagedoorn & Narula, 1996) and social ties (Bell & Zaheer, 2007). The model has been adapted in this research to...
add a fifth important variable that of collaborative leadership (Archer & Cameron, 2013) to enable effective knowledge transfer.

The relevance of the research undertaken by the KM Forum (2009) offered a dual-track approach which firstly, emphasized the importance of intra-organizational knowledge transfer mechanisms to exploit the learning from the collaboration in conjunction with the role individuals’ perform in transferring knowledge. Secondly, it also highlighted a ‘collaborative space’ which provides a useful framework for this research and encourages a more context-based approach on how forms of collaborative leadership interact together within a particular ‘hybrid configuration of practice’ (Gronn, 2009; 2010), which is alluded to in Figures 1 and 2. This is supported by von Krogh et al., (2012) who draw attention to the importance of the ‘intersection’ between distributed leadership and centralized leadership when examining leadership in organizational knowledge creation which is seen as dynamic, dependent of individual contributions, and subject to providence (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009).

Further research by Benson & Blackman (2011) can be used to build on the work of Easterby-Smith et al., (2008) and the KM Forum (2009), which looked at shared leadership in a particular commercial inter-agency working context to gain more insight into the management, leadership and stakeholder behaviors within an organization. It involved participant observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis of company accounts, briefing documents and company websites using a 5-year longitudinal case study approach. Relevant themes that emerged included: a shared vision or purpose (Grint, 2005); appropriate contexts and structures (Whitby, 2006); managed, effective relationships (Timperley, 2005); the appropriate blend of skills (Grint, 2005); and trust (Storey, 2004). All of which resonate with Easterby-Smith et al., (2008) findings particularly in relation to inter-organizational dynamic factors influencing inter-organizational knowledge transfer.

Further, in relation to organizational response, it is argued that a salient issue also to be noted relates to learning in organizations and the necessity to recognize the value of ‘absorptive capacity’ – the ability to recognize the value of new knowledge and to assimilate and use that knowledge (Zahra & George, 2002; Lane et al., 2001). This can be exemplifies by organizations identifying and using collaborative leadership competencies in an inter-agency working context. For it can be
argued, absorptive capacity and inter-organizational knowledge transfer are interrelated and that an organization which is good at absorbing external knowledge should be good as well at diffusing the knowledge within in own boundaries (Holmqvist, 2004). However, a further challenge can be highlighted with regards to organizations that have also been able to both absorb and diffuse knowledge outside of their boundaries in, for example, an inter-agency working context.

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

The focus on the nascent humanitarian space was identified as a timely area for further study, particularly given the contemporary global context involving evidence of states in increased flux and transition. As a corollary, it was argued that this necessitates more effective collaborative working between different agencies to meet ever more challenging humanitarian aid and security needs across the troubled regions of the world. This exploratory paper has highlighted a growing increase in inter-agency working which raises questions about the need for more collaboration and synergy between agencies to effectively manage more complex and conflict ridden work environments. More specifically, it has highlighted the challenging issue of managing collaboration and learning to support the role of collaborative leadership in an inter-agency working environment within the humanitarian space.

This study focuses on the issue of absorptive capacity and for organizations (i.e. agencies) to recognize the value of new knowledge and to assimilate and use the knowledge more effectively both inter and intra-organizationally. This draws attention to considering knowledge that resides in individuals who work within an inter-agency context, as a key organizational asset that needs to be utilized more effectively, as for example, in the area of collaborative leadership. Previous research has focused on how leadership impacts knowledge creation in an organization. However, this paper has provided a different perspective and has drawn attention to the need for further discussion about involving the role of learning from collaboration between various agencies to enable collaborative leadership in an inter-agency context. Furthermore, it also requires shared leadership to play a key pivotal role to enable effective inter-agency collaboration. However, it was shown in practice, evidence suggests collaborative leadership is problematic in the inter-agency context and therefore provides a rich area for much needed further research.
This paper has also drawn attention to the need to move away from one dominant description of leadership and give more consideration to collective forms of leadership, particularly when required in perilous environments. It provided typical examples in Fig. 2 where disparate agencies require a multiplicity of knowledge, skills and participation to meet collective objectives. Concomitantly, research findings were shown to support the critical links between leadership, organizational learning, KM, strategy and performance and added support for further research within this area.

However, one thorny problem remains which is the question of an understanding of collaborative leadership. This lack of clarity of the term may present an ongoing research problem as well as the ontological status of leadership itself. This includes shared leadership apparently caught between individuals in preference to a relational ontology (Bolden, 2011; Carson et al., 2007). Indeed, the question can be posed as to whether collaborative leadership in practice is still very much an aspiration?

This lends support for further critical analysis of a clearer definition of collaborative leadership. Extant literature on shared leadership tends to be largely dominated by descriptive and normative rather than critical perspectives. Building on extant research, the intersection between the factors encouraging a more context-based approach on how collaborative leadership interacts and is influenced by particular ‘hybrid configurations of practice’ (Gronn, 2009; 2010) and illustrated in Fig. 1; with ‘inter-organizational dynamics’ influencing knowledge transfer (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008) to support the development of a ‘collaborative space’ (KM Forum, 2009; van Winkelen, 2010), provides a relevant area for further research into how collaborative learning and KM can enable collaborative leadership in an inter-agency context, particularly within the humanitarian space.

Figure 4 below provides a heuristic framework adapted from extant research to support a way forward for future study. Overall, a key focus relates to the concept of absorptive capacity (Zahra & George, 2002) and the capability of organizations to identify, learn from and utilize valuable knowledge, to support the role of shared leadership within the inter-agency context. It encapsulates the inter-organizational contextual factors (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008) including the motivation for organizations to participate in collaborations and the need to gain or share further expertise,
which is vitally important when working in dangerous environments. It covers *individual knowledge sharing behaviors* (Truch, 2004) to assess how individuals (*i.e.* leaders) see their own role in collaborations and to ascertain their own style in collaborative activity to support distributed leadership. And it addresses the issue of *organizational responses* (Knight & Pye, 2005) in relation to possible systemic failings in knowledge transfer back into and between organizations particularly in relation to examples of learning from collaborative leadership in the field.

![Figure 4: Factors including collaborative leadership influencing inter-organizational knowledge transfer](image)

This exploratory paper has raised the issue of the need to rethink the way organizations within the humanitarian space manage their organizational learning structure and systems more collaboratively. The outcome of which is to support the necessary role of collaborative leadership to meet increasingly complex and diverse objectives within the sector. Such shared knowledge on collaborative leadership can be seen as a means to leverage knowledge through organizational learning. It is argued, organizational learning embraces both cognition and action and through the process of leadership, sharing. Such sharing of knowledge is valuable both to the individual and the organization but requires appropriate resourcing and a long-term management approach. Further, the need for alignment between an organization and its rapidly changing contextual environment is
a dynamic process and places more emphasis on the quality and central role of leadership. This suggests encompassing a much more eclectic approach to managing increasingly diverse and complex aid problems in the humanitarian space in the future.

The message to agencies working in the humanitarian space seems to chime:

“Learn to collaborate, collaborate to learn... collaborate and learn to share leadership”.

References:


Tagged with: collaborative leadership • humanitarian space • inter-agency working • knowledge management • security sector
One step forward, two steps back? Humanitarian Challenges and Dilemmas in Crisis Settings

ABSTRACT: With the end of the Cold War, both the concept and [...]