COLLABORATION IN A CRISIS: CROSS-SECTOR RESPONSES TO THE EBOLA PANDEMIC

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Key findings

In crisis situations, cross-sector work is essential. Crises demand agile responses, but they are too messy for a replicable model of cross-sector collaboration. Rather, each collaboration must be re-imagined, responding to the specific circumstances. This case study of the Ebola Private Sector Mobilisation Group (EPSMG) – a collaborative response to the 2014 Ebola pandemic in West Africa – looked at how cross-sector work was enacted during the crisis.

The case highlights the importance of latent networks, describing how they were mobilised and how they remained adaptive amidst rapid change. The discord of the crisis created the conditions for innovation. People called on existing relationships, quickly creating a network across organisations that was able to mobilise resources. But the real challenge lay in continuously adapting to the rapidly unfolding pandemic.

Background

The 2014 West Africa Ebola pandemic was extensive, severe and complex, causing approximately 11,325 deaths primarily in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone (CDC, 2016). It began on 28 December 2013, when 'Patient Zero' died of an unidentified haemorrhagic fever in Guinea (CDC, 2016). By March 2014, lab tests confirmed Ebola in Guinea and by May, the disease had spread to neighbouring Liberia and Sierra Leone. In June, Médecins Sans Frontières declared that the outbreak was "out of control" calling on the international community to mobilise (DuBois et al., 2015). A "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" (PHEIC) was declared by the World Health Organization on 8 August 2014 (WHO, 2014) at which point, the case incident curve had begun to grow almost exponentially.

The EPSMG was established in August 2014. What started as an informal one-off meeting of 11 London-based companies operating in the region, evolved to include over 100 companies and almost 50 public bodies and NGOs (Knight, 2016). Although the EPSMG was never established as a formal organisation, it functioned as an information hub allowing public and NGO sectors to access companies facilitating the collaborative mobilisation of resources through in-country groups. By the end of the crisis, EPSMG companies had donated over US$21 million to response organisations, and given more than 50,000 litres of chlorine, four million latex gloves and 55 vehicles.

Post-crisis, the EPSMG received much acclaim for its role in the international response (Nabarro, 2015; Murray, 2016) and there has been interest in understanding what future collaboration initiatives addressing global public health challenges could learn (EPSMG, 2014). As a case study of cross-sector work, the EPSMG offers valuable insights into the factors enabling fast and effective collaboration.

Emerging themes

The EPSMG network mobilised connections across organisations. Many of these connections were drawn from unrelated professional activity or based on working relationships from previous roles. People called on their trusted personal and professional contacts to respond to needs. By activating latent relationships based on trust and embeddedness within the situation, a new network was created to adapt and respond to the rapidly changing crisis.

Information was shared from many perspectives, enabling adaptive leadership and action co-ordination to mobilise resources. Each stage of the process was revisited as the crisis evolved, calling for reinterpretation.
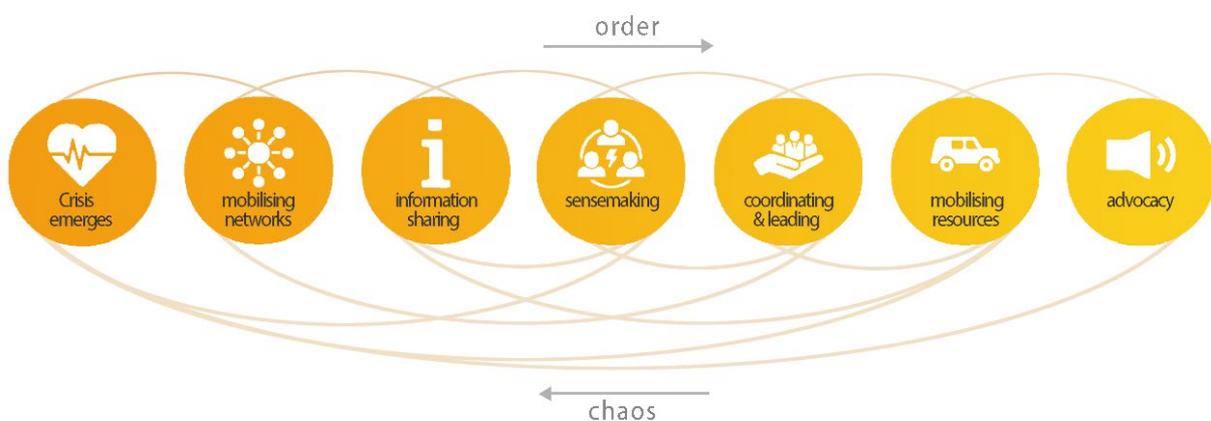

Figure 1. The iterative process of the EPSMG: the unfolding crisis brought new information, forcing reinterpretation and adaptive planning as the group made sense of the chaos.

This case offers a new view of cross-sector collaboration. The process was not linear or bound by professional roles, as may be expected and, therefore, there is no formula for replicating it. Rather, it was context-dependent and shaped by sensemaking. These are likely to be features of all effective cross-sector collaboration, but their importance was heightened in this extreme case, due to the urgency.

Effective cross-sector work adapts to the context

The factors aligning to make the EPSMG effective were unique. Members had to find creative solutions for working together. Each country sub-group independently made its own system for sharing information, mobilising resources and supporting advocacy. The urgency of the pandemic removed many of the typical obstacles to collaboration allowing a simple approach that was expedient and unconstrained. For example, standard operating procedures that made collaboration difficult were revised, and information was openly shared.

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> "There was no constraints or limits for sharing information at that time because, as I mentioned previously, nobody knew exactly what would happen in the following weeks." (Participant)

However, the removal of obstacles alone was not enough. The context was changing so quickly that a continuous flow of information was needed in order for responses to be appropriate. The collaborative network was important in gaining a clear picture of what was happening on the ground, especially prior to the mobilisation of the international community. Up to date information about the number of cases, the transmission of the disease, and current efforts was vital, but this needed to be interpreted in context.

Context in cross-sector collaboration does not pertain solely to the nature of the problem. For the EPSMG, the contexts needing to be understood included the institutional setting, geography, historic power imbalances, inter-organisational tensions and, importantly, the interpretation of the crisis by different actors. The dynamic and interdependent nature of these factors added to the complexity of the unfolding crisis.
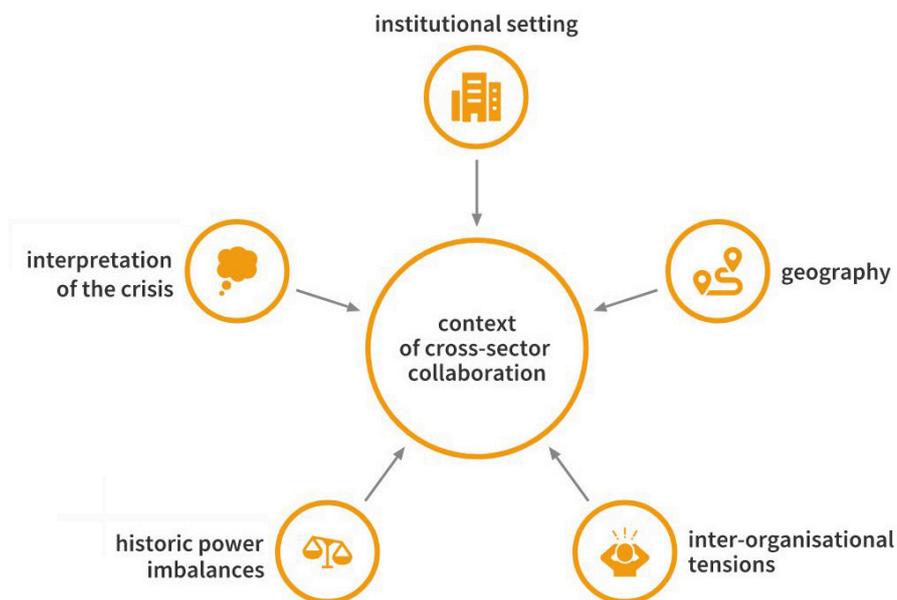

Figure 2. The dynamic context of cross-sector collaboration during the Ebola crisis

How actors interpret a crisis when working across sectors is critical to the collaboration process and must be considered as part of the context of cross-sector work. When the EPSMG is considered with this wider view of context, we see that the collaboration was effective because actors worked together to create a shared understanding on the context.

Cross-sector work during crisis is entirely dependent on broader contextual factors and therefore it must continually re-envisioned each time it is enacted to meet the unique circumstances in which it unfolds.

Bryson et al. (2015) describe successful outcomes in cross-sector collaboration as contingent on three factors: legitimacy, trust and leadership. EPSMG members' collaboration was grounded by these elements. Participants leveraged trusted relationships - established through shared experience or common identity - and the legitimacy necessary for leadership came from their embeddedness in the situation. An additional factor was 'shared sensemaking'. That is, members needed to establish a mutual understanding of the situation, amidst the chaos.

The uncertainty of the situation had created an 'epidemic of fear'.

> "Political leadership were terrified. There was remarkable hardship, things, things were helter-skelter, chaotic, confused. People were dying in large numbers. No capacity would deal with the situation. Public health emergency was declared. Curfew was declared in Liberia. Government leadership was challenged. Political leadership was challenged. We declared state of emergency because of the outbreak. The military was deployed. And so the situation was terrifying, actually." (Participant)

Shared sensemaking helped participants reach consensus about what actions to take, and when. Together they were able to determine what was required and set about finding innovative ways to support the crisis response and share what was learned.

> "I learned a lot about Ebola in a couple of days, to work up what the risk was and what we could and couldn't realistically do, and what the level of fear should be." (Participant)

Airstrips were made available, earth-moving equipment flattened fields to build temporary hospitals, and supply chains were leveraged to purchase essential goods like protective equipment. Existing communications and engagement pathways were repurposed for information sharing. Co-ordinating these actions was made possible by shared sensemaking; sponsors and champions could lead and coordinate, within and across organisational and sector boundaries, with aligned goals.

Achieving shared sensemaking involved an iterative process of interpretation and action. It was important to observe the impact of any actions taken, to make informed decisions about how to proceed. This was not easy when operating across organisations. This supports the expanded definition of cross-sector work offered by Stott et al. (2018): when engaging in cross-sector activities, individuals or organisations may in fact be creating, maintaining and disrupting collaboration simultaneously. The negotiation of action creates opportunities for iterative cycles of change, innovation, creativity and learning, which can themselves be disruptive (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014).

Trust, resulting from prior working relationships or collaborations, was critical to the shared sensemaking. During the Ebola crisis trust was seen to be portable, as EPSMG members

called on existing relationships and networks. Trust cleared the way for action by enabling shared sensemaking and consensus.

> "Human beings like the London Blitz, are very capable of working together in collaboration with strangers, competitors, enemies when it's actually in everybody's best interest to do that". (Participant)

Implications and future research

The process of achieving a shared collaboration agenda is complex (Stott et al., 2018) and even when the stars align, as they did for the EPSMG's collaboration, meaningful action is not easy. While the recent renewed academic focus on cross-sector work is of value, its emphasis on the creation of frameworks as "quick fixes to complex problems" is flawed (Stott et al., 2018: 34). Cross-sector work during crises must remain adaptive. There is no single best approach to working together across sectors during a crisis. The context is always fluid, and working relationships are impossible to replicate.

Cross-sector work can inspire innovation, creativity and learning. It can also disrupt the status quo. Collaboration is often an uncomfortable process, but participants committed to cross-sector organising should be prepared for tension and transformation in equal measure.

There would be great practical value in further research that considers the disruptive nature of cross-sector work in practice. Other studies of collaborative process across sectors would provide interesting comparisons to this case, showing how different contexts lead to different ways of collaborating.

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About the project

This research is a qualitative analysis of the Ebola Private Sector Mobilisation Group*'s* collaboration, which evolved in response to the 2014 Ebola pandemic in West Africa.The findings were based on interviews, documents and media analysis as well as a reconstructed timeline of the EPSMG collaboration, within the wider international response. In addition, this study also draws on personal experience of the Ebola Private Sector Mobilisation Group gained while the researcher was working in West Africa for a member company during the pandemic.

This research is carried out by the Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. It was designed and conducted by graduates of the MSt Social Innovation, with the support of faculty and fellows of the programme. The Centre is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. We welcome your feedback and ongoing support. The views of the authors do not represent those of their employers or CJBS. If you wish to discuss this research or access the full report, please contact the Centre at: socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk.

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