Trust and Networks in the Interagency

by Nicole Alexander and Chad Thibodeau

Interagency collaboration, integration, and information-sharing have been feverishly discussed and debated topics for decades. The events of September 11, 2001, only highlighted their importance. Since 9/11, the need for a shared vision and a synchronized plan of action that forces relationships and develops and supports organizational networks to work in unison toward universal objectives has been at the forefront of thought for U.S. military and civilian leadership. Fusion cells, task forces, and public discussion on the topic have been widespread, and directives from senior leadership at agencies such as the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of State (State), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have been written and disseminated. While some argue that the interagency is no better at information-sharing and cooperation than they were before 9/11, the U.S. cannot afford to abandon this goal. Achieving this goal will best prepare the U.S. to meet both current and future national security objectives and respond to disasters or emergencies, natural and man-made.

There are four issues that inhibit interagency collaboration, integration, and information-sharing. First and foremost, there is a lack of personal and institutional trust among the interagency. Second, there are few networks among the various agencies, both at individual and departmental levels. Third, plans and strategies are often stove piped in an individual agency. Finally, there is an atmosphere of competition for resources.

Personal and Institutional Trust

The lack of institutional trust among agencies such as the DoD, State, and USAID stymies the networks that provide for the dialogue, synchronization, and collaboration required to meet national

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security objectives at places like an embassy or an interagency task force. For the purposes of this article, trust is defined as “...a bet about the future contingent actions of others...”¹ that enables individuals to adapt to complex social environments, and thereby benefit from increased opportunities.² Those individuals that are accustomed to working in the interagency environment almost unequivocally agree that the most successful interagency collaborations have been built on a foundation of personal relationships rather than institutional trust. Most successful interagency collaborations are personality based, and both success and failure hinge on the trust built among the individuals within each organization.

In their article, “Trust in Small Military Teams,” Adams and Webb describe person-based trust as the ebb and flow of one’s likelihood to be able to determine and “predict the actions of another, as a result of our experiences and interactions with that person.”³ When an individual continues to make the expected and desired actions, trust is reinforced. If the DoD continues to select the right military personalities capable of integrating into their respective organizations, those individuals can continue to build person-based trust, and over time, person-based trust can transition to institutional-based trust. Although the assignment of civilians within primarily military-staffed organizations is slightly less common, the same must be done in these cases.

Efficient interagency coordination among agencies such as DoD, State, and USAID is necessary to meet national security objectives, react to emerging threats, and respond effectively. The complex and sometimes ambiguous problems of today cannot be solved by individuals; therefore, person-based trust must be replaced by institution-based trust and the belief that any individual, civilian, or military assigned to an interagency position is “plug and play” or, essentially, another person that will get the job done. Author Piotr Sztompka in Trust: A Sociological Theory, argues: “In order to face the future actively and constructively, we need to deploy trust.”⁴ In an increasingly complex environment, DoD, State, and USAID must work actively and constructively to meet their shared national objectives.

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Because national security problems are complex and globalization is ever increasing, there exists a “network of tightening inter-linkages—political, military, economic, financial, cultural”—where “cooperation becomes a pressing need, a crucial challenge, but also the domain of uncertainties.”⁵ As mentioned earlier, trust is a bet on the uncertainties and the actions of others. Van den Bosch et al. finds that trust facilitates open communication and information sharing.⁶ When people act on beliefs, knowledge, and interpretations of their own or others past experiences and it is neither not enough or a bad experience, building institutional trust is difficult.

Institutional trust is based on two distinctly different components or dimensions: (1) a tightly interconnected and intertwined set of affective beliefs about institutional behavior, and (2) how competent the institution appears to be.⁷ Institutional trust is important in the interagency because roles and people in respective agencies change often.

Institutional trust develops when individuals know that an institution is open, forthcoming, reliable, consistent, honest, credible, competent, and has integrity.⁸ Without institutional trust, individuals must attempt to build personal trust, which is not immediate and can delay
information-sharing and high degrees of collaboration.

The State-led Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) and later the DoD-led Combined Joint Interagency Task Force-Syria (CJIATF-S) provide some insight into the effects of trust in interagency collaboration. The START relationship was based mainly on personal trust. The leaders of START had worked together on previous U.S. response teams and personally knew what to expect from each other. Because of those personal trust relationships, the information-sharing, collaboration, and synchronization among people and organizations was immeasurable. When the DoD assigned two Soldiers to work with the START, they had no previous trusting relationships with individual State and USAID members of the START. Additionally, each subsequent Soldier and START member had to work from scratch to build relationships that inevitably never led to a truly trusting relationship that furthered the ultimate goal of whole-of-government collaboration and interagency synchronization and information-sharing. It was the same with new civilian personnel with no previous personal relationship with the START group. The DoD, State, and USAID staff of the START was changing anywhere from every six weeks to every six months. If there had been institutional trust from each individual, the transition could have been easier because the remaining individuals would have had a reasonable level of trust in the new people on the team.

Even though the military members of START had provided exposure and dialogue for the DoD-led effort, as the CJIATF-S began to stand up, the lack of institutional trust meant that personal trusting relationships had to be built before there was complete integration and collaboration.

The Importance of Networks

In the interagency task forces that address humanitarian assistance disaster relief (HADR) situations or complex crises, such as the Syrian Civil War and the fight against ISIS, the networks that bind the organizations will only support the larger U.S. objective. As in the UN mission in Kosovo, in the Syrian crisis and the fight against ISIS, it is essential for all responding U.S. agencies to not only assert themselves into the role of guiding the Syrians, but also to create deep-seated networks and collaborate among agencies to help the Syrian population reestablish networks and collaboration. Just as trust aids information flow, a network for that information to flow through helps collaboration and synchronization of operations and programs. In an environment such as Syria where defense, diplomacy, and development are so crucial to national security objectives, a network of people and organizations working together toward one goal make the process more efficient and effective.

There are at least five main components of the U.S. government and about 50 individual agencies, bureaus, and departments within those components that are direct participants or assist the START and the CJIATF-S to meet U.S. national security objectives. This web of agencies and organizations requires networked collaboration and synchronization similar to what was needed in the municipality of Banshik, the model UN Civil Administration (UNCA) in Kosovo. There, the municipal advisor and his deputy believed that to attain the goals of the intervention, the UNCA required innovation and responsiveness that was only possible through cooperation with other organizations.
In her account of the success of Banshik, Ann Holohan finds that the factors that build a successful network organization are leadership, degrees of formality, social embeddedness, and accountability in the organization. Holohan points out that “in order to work together, they had to acknowledge that they were all part of a temporary organization, to trust one another enough to exchange information and to solve problems in a collaborative or cooperative way.” These factors and the acknowledgement of their roles in this temporary organization are crucial for the success of a task force such as the START and the CJIAF-S or for an embassy during a HADR situation.

**A Cross-Cutting Cleavages Approach**

Anne Holohan’s case study on Kosovo also provides an excellent example of how organization and unified action can positively support objectives and goals. The successful intervention strategy in Banshik was only successful because of the ability of the cast of individuals and individual organizations to use a “cross cutting cleavages” approach to strategy as opposed to a stovepipe mentality. Alternatively, the stovepipe mentality and associated actions that were executed in Holohan’s Thezren case study exemplify how ineffective and inefficient uncoordinated action can be.

The foundation of the “cross-cutting cleavages” approach stems from trust. While personal-based trust can support this approach, institutional trust would be considerably more advantageous. The “cross-cutting cleavages” approach to strategy forces relationships and develops and supports networks from the organization to work in unison toward universal objectives, an approach rarely observed in the current interagency environment. What is most often observed is a stovepipe mentality and stove piped action and activity; each organization working independently, each with the best of intentions, and each with its own objectives. It is only by sheer serendipitous circumstances, often because of personal relationships, that organizations’ hard work coincides and sometimes helps each of them to reach strategic goals.

**The Tragedy of the Commons**

The “tragedy of the commons” is a term that economist Garrett Hardin used in the late 1960s to describe a finite amount of resources that are desired by two or more groups. One group will often attempt to monopolize the resource at the expense of the other group. The two groups are not often adversaries, at least not to begin with; it is the resource they desire, not that they do not want their neighbor to have that resource for one reason or another. The most effective and efficient solution—to work together to split the resources—is rarely the chosen solution. More often than not, the lack of trust and understanding of the two normally friendly neighbors lead each group to attempt to dominate the other and its access to the resource. While Hardin used the term to describe tangible resources that two or more groups compete for, it is also applicable to the relationships among interagency organizations.

Interagency organizations compete for resources and also for relevancy. Agencies know there is only a finite amount of money that is allocated to address a particular situation or support the activities in a particular geographic location. Often leaders ask, “How are we going to show relevance?” While on the surface, the leader may be pushing the team to show results, he or she may also create a sense of competition, because if a team, an organization, or an agency is not relevant, then it is not needed.
HADR in the flood prone areas in the Philippines offers an example of how to overcome the “tragedy of the common.” HADR is almost always best addressed by joint, interagency solutions, and often competition among agencies would only inhibit response and support to the affected areas. USAID often has food, potable water, and medical supplies prepositioned to meet the immediate needs of the population. But it does not generally have the transportation assets required to move them, especially when the natural disaster has had an effect on the local infrastructure of the affected area. The Joint Special Operations Task Force in the area has elements from the U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force with the necessary land, sea, and air capabilities to move USAID supplies, in addition to pallets of supplies of their own to help aid affected individuals. U.S. Embassy personnel in Manila worked feverishly to account for U.S. citizens living in affected areas and liaised with their respective counterparts from the host nation. The optimal solution to address the immediate and long-term needs of HADR responses is one that uses the most appropriate and pragmatic resources and capabilities of each of the agencies and its personnel. If in a HADR the agencies subscribed to the “tragedy of the common,” no one agency would be able to provide the required resources, and the result would be chaos and continued hardship for those affected by the disaster.

Overcoming the Issues

While there are myriad options to overcoming these issues, we offer the following: access and sharing of information and intelligence, institutional education and advocates, physical system integration, and parallel rotations among the agencies. Access, information-sharing, intelligence, and education should require only minor changes in doctrine, guidelines, and mind-set. Integration of physical systems and changes to agency substructures and rotations will require more robust changes and possible also have fiscal requirements. Regardless of ones preferred parlance, the definition of intelligence or information is the knowledge about a particular subject that is collected in order to draw conclusions about that subject. There is a chasm between the information that military and civilian members can access in the interagency environment. Much of the “unclassified” and “sensitive but unclassified” information that agencies such as State and USAID work with is considered too sensitive for the military, which leads to a lack of information-sharing. On the other hand, the military have the most security clearances in an interagency environment and thus have the most access to “secret” and above information. This security clearance chasm can lead to an inability or unwillingness to work together, misunderstanding, as well as a belief that two individuals are not working toward the same goal. While we do not propose that every military and civilian person working in the interagency environment have the same security clearances, we do propose that individuals of similar status working on similar or joint ventures and goals have mirrored access to all information. Common access to information would inevitably lead to more individual and institutional trust, a better and shared understanding of both problems and potential solutions, and ultimately more effective and efficient goal realization.

Sztompka says it best: “The complexity of institutions, organizations, and technological systems, and the increasingly global scope of their operations, make them impenetrable to ordinary people, but often also to the
professional experts.”

Even other U.S. government employees cannot always fully understand the complexities of agencies and departments—what they do and the value they add to the a whole-of-government approach to meeting national security objectives. There is a perceived lack of shared values among agencies, especially the defense, diplomacy, development, and intelligence agencies. Agencies such as USAID are based on the idea that international aid can diminish the threat of communism and help countries prosper. This concept directly meets a national security objective. The guiding principle is not “to do good things,” but rather “to diminish the threats.” The preconceived notion of a lack of shared values and objectives leads to distrust and exclusion from networks that are crucial to whole-of-government efforts. An increase in education about the values and goals of agencies will help build the institutional trust and networks needed.

Two of the ways to assist with interagency education and integration are liaison officers and cells. A preeminent organizational theorist Richard Daft describes the importance of horizontal integration, which is what is needed within the U.S. government. As described by Daft, true integration is through the quality of collaboration between departments. Integrators or liaison personnel and coordinators are necessary when there is a highly uncertain environment, and there are requirements for information processing to achieve synchronization and goals. This describes perfectly the situation agencies tasked to meet national security objectives face on a daily basis.

These liaisons require a specific type of person. This person must be respected in his or her own community and agency and must not be “cast-away.” Liaisons and integrators require the ability to synchronize, educate, and foster collaboration, often with little authority. They must use expertise and persuasion to achieve their goals. As Daft describes it, they “must be able to get people together, maintain their trust, confront problems, and resolve conflicts and disputes,” in the interest of meeting national security objectives through a whole-of-government approach.

There is also a requirement to populate and continue the education socialization in the interagency. Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, describes three “laws” to spread an epidemic, message, or idea—the law of the few, the stickiness factor, and the power of context. Of importance in this discussion is the law of the few and the types and characteristics of people necessary to spread the idea. Gladwell describes these people as connectors, mavens, and salespeople.

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A connector is someone with a special gift for bringing the world together. They generally are part of many different worlds, subcultures, and niches. Their personalities are very specific; they are intensely social and gregarious. The maven is someone who accumulates knowledge; they are genuinely interested and curious and are motivated to educate and help. The salesman has the skills to persuade the unconvinced. They are not necessarily pushy in the way that turns people away, but they are pushy enough to convince people.

To help spread the idea and value of whole-of-government approach, leadership from departments, agencies, and bureaus must themselves be or must identify these types of people. They will help educate and synchronize across the U.S. government and the more of them, the better. It is also a responsibility of the people that serve as integrators or that work in
task forces and in interagency environments to understand their roles as connectors, mavens, and salesmen. Each individual within the interagency and joint task force environment has the responsibility to and must act as a connector as much and as often as possible in order to make the network denser and more interconnected.

Physical and system integration, especially abroad, must be addressed to better facilitate trust, network development, and coordination. As an example, one of the authors assigned to the Embassy in Sri Lanka and the Maldives was surprised to learn that the DoD and USAID were not collocated but, in fact, a mile away from each other. As duties required the captain to work with both State and USAID personnel, much time was spent physically transiting from one meeting to another to another, from one building to another, and often back again. While some of engagements were State-centric and others were USAID-centric, many included elements from both. Key personnel within each organization developed relationships and had “business” with each office in the mission in order to overcome the physical and system separation. The majority of the personnel in each organization did not have significant interaction with their counterparts, even though inevitably their interests and goals were similar.

Lack of system integration is another barrier to coordination and integration. The number of email addresses, various systems access requirements, and phone numbers necessary to view information and talk among the departments highlight the system separation in the interagency. In an embassy abroad, business cards had three DoD email addresses, two State email addresses, one USAID email address, and three phone numbers, only two of which could actually reach the card holder. As a result of personnel and office location changes and different servers for the embassy and USAID systems, it was difficult to contact an unknown colleague whose experience and expertise might prove highly beneficial to addressing a shared concern and a common goal.

Integrated systems will also help address knowledge management across the interagency. When systems cannot “talk” to each other and portals cannot be shared, the lack of information-sharing only increases. As part of the START and the CJIATF, a Civil Affairs knowledge management team was brought on to address this specific issue. Most of the reporting and programmatic data of the U.S. government response to the Syrian crisis was being stored on State’s OPENNET systems. Without access to that system, no one else in the interagency could see any of the reporting unless they were on a specific email list. The knowledge management team eventually worked with a National Geospatial Agency-funded program, Protected Internet Exchange, that could collate and store the unclassified reports and information and be accessed from anywhere with internet access.

Creating a common and ubiquitous system that allows for access and storage for all U.S. federal agencies and a global address list would address these systemic integration issues. This interconnectedness or at least interoperability would help create denser networks and enable collaboration.

Adjusting rotation lengths and regional reassignments are the final recommendations that can address issues of trust and, networks. Military rotations within the interagency average nine months in length. In comparison, host-nation counterparts will live their entire lives in the area interagency personnel deploy to for a few short months. The short rotations make it
difficult to build personal trust, let alone support the idea of institutional trust. In a recent rotation to the UN mission in South Sudan, a Danish lieutenant colonel supervisor was on a 12-month assignment. Due to the personnel moves and short assignments of U.S. military members, the Danish supervisor had four different Army Civil Affairs captains serve under him during his tenure. While an extreme example, this is not completely uncommon for military members in any assignment. Longer rotations for military members working in interagency positions would build stronger networks and trust. Where possible, similar to State and USAID colleagues, short unaccompanied assignments should be adjusted to permanent accompanied assignments. In areas where the security situation does not permit families to accompany service members, the U.S. should implement continuity of assignment, whereby service members become masters of their region and assignment as opposed to a jack of all trades and all regions.

Historic deployment data for special operations officers suggests there is approximately a 1:1 dwell ratio—in layman terms, for every year that a service member is deployed, he or she can expect approximately one year at his continental U.S. duty station. With this in mind, individual service members should not be expected to be separated from their families for years at a time in order to build relationships, networks, trust, and expertise in a particular area. However, assigning the same individuals to the same area to work with the same counterparts from the interagency and the host nation would prove instrumental in building interagency networks and trust, as well as enabling cooperation. Members of other agencies such as State and USAID should also be re-assigned to areas in which they have previously worked. In theory, individuals from each organization and agency would replace the individual that replaced them perpetually, as would their interagency counterparts, and continue to work with the same host nation counterparts in support of common goals.

**Conclusion**

There is a recognized issue with interagency integration and collaboration. While addressing these issues by implementing these recommendations may not completely solve the problems, they are major steps in the right direction. The future is going to be ever more complex, and these complex issues must be addressed with a whole-of-government approach. The U.S. interagency must make every effort to cooperate, communicate effectively, understand fellow organizations, and put the right people with the right skills in positions to realize common goals. To effectively address national issues, the U.S. must eliminate stove piped and parallel activities and replace them with concerted efforts and cross-cultural, interconnected, and networked action. To build institutional trust and developed networks, interagency partners must share access to information, mirror rotations, provide area expertise and reassignment, and employ technological interface commonalities. If implemented or addressed, these recommendations may serve as the catalyst to create a cascading effect of trust, interconnectedness, and network density.
NOTES


2 Ibid.


4 Sztompka, p. 12.

5 Ibid.


8 Ibid., p. 103.


10 Ibid., p. 6.

11 Ibid., p. 20.


14 Sztompka, p. 13.


17 Ibid., p. 128.


19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., p. 70.