

STIMULATING AND BUILDING COMPASSIONATE AND HUMANISING NETWORKS FOR PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE SAFER AND HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES: RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY ON THE LOCAL NETWORK OF CARE (LNOC)

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There is a current burgeoning interest in networking as an approach to working more effectively in under-resourced communities. This study explores networking as a critical strategy to strengthen relationships among social actors and mobilise assets and resources to address challenges of health, safety, injury, and social justice in disadvantaged communities. The Local Network of Care (LNOC), is used as an illustration, to reflect on the operational processes and values of the network to engender and build just and sustainable safer communities. Primary sources of data include newspaper clippings, LNOC social contract, institutional annual reports, monthly agendas, attendance registers, and reflective notes of members of the LNOC. The findings illustrate that building a humanising, cohesive, supportive and trusting network can contribute to strengthening agency and transforming individuals and organisations. Additionally, it can contribute to sustainability, building safer and just communities, and mobilise assets and resources of the network to help mitigate psychosocial and economic challenges.

Keywords: *networking, community, case study, safety promotion, COVID-19, community building*

1. Introduction

Non-profit organisations (NPOs) in South Africa, as elsewhere, play a crucial role in ameliorating the multiple challenges and inequalities which are ubiquitous in disadvantaged and under-resourced communities. However, their future is under threat because of a fragile economy, and limited funding and support (*20 Years on: The role of non-profits*, 2014). Networking among social actors is a viable and practical approach to work more effectively in low-income contexts. Lardier Jr et al. (2019) concur that such community organisational structures serve as a vital mechanism to bridge the gap in under-resourced spaces and working toward collective community change. Essentially, a network can be regarded as a partnership for combined or collective action and is often used interchangeably with ‘coalition’. Networking is defined as reciprocal relationships between organisations and/or individuals representing diverse organisations, and/or groups within communities, where resources, ideas and information are shared to achieve common objectives (Bunger, 2010; Butterfoss & Kegler, 2009; Rodriguez-García et al., 2011; Simons & Taliep, 2018). Network partners can comprise of diverse social actors or stakeholders, including non-profit organisations (NPOs), non-government organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), local government structures, small businesses, community policing forums (CPFs) and informal structures such as neighbourhood watches, and interested community members.

The contemporary upsurge in community support for health, violence, and crime prevention programmes has also triggered an expansion in the theory and research around community

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coalitions and networks. Choy et al. (2016), for example, developed a theoretical model examining how a community coalition, “Get fit Kaua’i”, operating in a rural island county in Hawaii, facilitated a built environment policy and infrastructural changes that promote physical activity. However, there remains a dearth of research informed by theory, and on the effectiveness of community networks or coalitions and their development (Haithcox-Dennis et al., 2013; Kegler et al., 2010; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006).

The utilisation of networks and networking are vital to working with local communities, building partnerships with statutory bodies (Gilchrist, 2009), and may be used as a stratagem of a broader research or intervention programme. Networks enhance community building that endeavours to tackle complex health and social challenges. Networks together with diverse stakeholders and representatives of community organisations mobilise and combine their resources to improve and nurture intergroup relations to build capacity that addresses community challenges such as, violence, disease, crime, and racism to generate positive and sustainable community transformation (Gilchrist, 2009; Morris & Luque, 2011;). Through networking, organisations are more able to serve the community and clients/participants, build new relationships, acquire new knowledge and skills, increase their public profile, enhance organisational influence, and increase the ability to reallocate resources (Hambrick et al., 2018). Networks function as an inextricable link of fostering connectedness and communication with social actors to deal with the inescapable tensions and disagreements that arise from this work. A key feature of networking is that “participation in decision-making is democratic and inclusive, enabling people to contribute as equal citizens and to learn through their involvement” (Gilchrist, 2009, p.41).

The success of a network or coalition can be ascertained by the accomplishment of its mission, aims, and objectives, in particular, by appraising the internal functioning of the network, and external community-level changes (Haithcox-Dennis et al., 2013). The view that external level change is the ultimate indicator of success is not fully justified since many networks are unsustainable, measurement of network-building factors differ across studies, and there is no conclusive evidence that these factors definitively predict success, because of the difficulty in inferring causal relationships between factors and outcomes (Haithcox-Dennis et al., 2013; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). Some studies found the following internal indicators to contribute to the success of a network or coalition: encouraging firm leadership, fostering active participation among members, promotion of collaborations among various member agencies, enacting formal governance processes and facilitating group cohesion, “group size, membership diversity, resource mobilisation, roles, norms, cohesion, culture, conflict resolution, decision making and leadership development, committee functioning, staffing, communication, participation, ownership, empowerment, synergy, and quality of strategic plans” (Haithcox-Dennis et al., 2013, p. 112). This study reports on the internal functioning of the LNOC that was re-energised to systematically strengthen and develop convivial relations among local organisations, structures, and service providers to engender safety, health, social justice and peace in the community.

Challenges are inevitable in networking, and may include: dealing with conflict or difficult partners, losing control or autonomy, straining relationships, disagreements about network aims and objectives, competition for funding, not receiving credit, and it is a time-consuming process (Hambrick et al., 2018; Simons & Taliép, 2018). Campbell and Erbsstein (2010) also identified similar challenges within REACH, a community coalition aimed at supporting the development of youth in the Greater Sacramento region, California.

Coalition building has become common practice in community-based efforts that necessitate a long-term investment of time, energy and resources. However, measuring the effectiveness of coalitions is challenging due to their inherent complexities.

This qualitative reflexive case study draws on the Community Coalition Action Theory (CCAT). This theory, developed by Butterfoss and Kegler (2002), is grounded in decades of

practice and research literature, experience, insight, and expertise of the authors in coalition research. The CCAT provides a comprehensive framework to allow for an increased understanding of the driving force behind inter-organisational collaborative relationships, the phases of collaboration, and the intricacies of how community coalitions work in practice. In other words, CCAT ascertains the internal factors within the coalition that offers a methodology for assessing the efforts of the coalition and which provides the impetus for the actioning of community change (Kegler et al., 2010). CCAT postulates that coalitions or networks develop in stages, comprising of formation, maintenance and institutionalisation (Kegler et al., 2010). These stages comprise multiple constructs and related propositions that provide a framework for building a successful network or coalition, and serve as a foundation for evaluating coalition fidelity and success. The fifteen constructs include stages of development, community context, lead agency or convening group, recruitment of coalition membership, processes, leadership and staffing, establishing organisational structure, member engagement, pooled member and external resources, assessment and planning for action, application of strategies, enhancing community capacity, evaluating results, and health/social outcomes (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2009). Each proposition finds expression in specific notions such as, coalition development is cyclic, and occurs in specific stages (Proposition 1), are greatly affected and shaped by contextual factors during all stages (Proposition 3), collaborative, collective and formalised decision-making by engaging members and combining resources, contribute to collaborative synergy (Proposition 5), and active participation provide community members and organisations with opportunities to enhance and build capacity and social capital, which can be used for other health and social issues (Proposition 21) (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2009).

The current study aims to reflect on networking as a key strategy to strengthen relationships among service providers to address issues of social justice, health, safety, injury, service delivery related challenges, and to mobilise limited resources in disadvantaged communities in the Strand, Western Cape. The above aim will be actualised through the following objectives:

1. To reflect on the relationships among organisations, stakeholders, individuals, and institutions within the Local Network of Care (LNOC);
2. To reflect on the barriers and enablers that hamper or contribute to the success of the LNOC, and
3. To reflect on the operations of LNOC during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methodology

2.1 Background of LNOC

The LNOC was originally established in 2015 but later dissolved due to a lack of funding. Being familiar with the continuing lack of adequate resources and diminished capacity of many local organisations working within the field of health and safety promotion, the South African Medical Research Council-University of South Africa Violence, Injury and Peace Research Unit (SAMRC-UNISA VIPRU), who was previously invited by local organisations to join the initial network, engaged with previous members and organisations to revive the LNOC initiative. A meeting was convened inviting all the social actors and the LNOC was re-established in 2017. Many social actors joined, and the City of Cape Town became a key stakeholder in supporting the formalisation of the network.

The LNOC aimed to develop a compassionate coalition-based network to systematically strengthen relations among service providers within the Strand area by combining scarce resources in local communities and sharing resources and learnings from each other's experiences to engender safety, social justice, peace and health. This network was intended to serve as a multi-sectoral skills and services platform to address challenges in the local

communities in the Strand area and was part of the broader community engagement approach of SAMRC-UNISA VIPRU.

2.2 Setting and LNOC profile

The LNOC members represent social actors from the Strand area, and meetings are held at the Phambili Community Development Centre, a non-governmental organisation in Broadlands Park, a peri-urban, low-income coastal town situated in Strand, Western Cape. The Strand area consists of approximately 55 558 residents, of which 22, 4% are children, aged 0-14 years, and 10.5% are elderly aged 65 and older, with a population density of 601 persons/km² (Statistics South Africa, 2011). These communities represented by LNOC, are characterised by high rates of unemployment, minimal infrastructure, and elevated levels of intentional and unintentional injuries (Taliep et al., 2020; Van Niekerk & Ismail, 2013).

LNOC consists of a network of 69 active local organisations and social actors representing health, NGOs, NPOs, CBOs, local government, faith-based structures, and individuals from the Strand and surrounding areas. During the first two years, member organisations participated in developing a social contract to foster a multi-sectoral partnership and enhancing collaborations among network members with the belief that together we can be more efficient in addressing local challenges. This was achieved through regular monthly meetings, hosting numerous capacity-building training workshops, sharing information on available funding, resources and external training, co-organising community events, and participating in other networking opportunities.

LNOC meetings are hosted monthly and begin with a prayer and welcome by a rotating chair, followed by a check-in process, review of action points noted in the previous meeting, research agenda items which encapsulate capacitation and training, organisational progress, success and challenges and support required, poverty alleviation, solidarity economy initiatives, fundraising and sponsorships, news on upcoming events and support, and culminates with a check-out process. In the check-in process, participants are asked to provide feedback on any perceived benefits or advantages they derived through their collaboration and association in the network, their organisational activities, any help they require with a particular issue or client/community member, and any challenges they encountered. Other network partners are then given an opportunity to share their suggestions on how the organisations might address the challenges they are encountering or offer support to solve the issue. To elicit collective ownership and commitment by LNOC members, we solidified the inter-organisational partnership through an interactive workshop on the formulation of a social contract, the development of a database and a booklet containing summaries of all the network partners outlining their web address, vision, mission, the mandate of the organisation, areas of assistance and support, and contact details. Researchers keep reflective notes on the meeting proceedings. Networking continues among the different organisations after the meeting.

2.3 Data sources and analysis

The corpus of data (ranging from 2018 to 2020) for this study includes our reflexive notes [RN]¹ as researchers spanning over 2 – 3 years, newspaper clippings [NC] and local community newsletters [CN], the LNOC social contract [SC], institutional annual reports [IAR], the monthly agendas [MA] and attendance registers [AR], which we kept for our reporting purposes.

The data were analysed using document analysis. Document analysis is a systematic technique for evaluating both printed and electronic documents and material, including advertisements, agendas, attendance registers, minutes, diaries and journals, newspaper articles,

¹ This and the next four square bracketed letters are the analysis and reporting codes used for presenting the results.

press releases, photographs, organisational or institutional reports, and various electronic communication methods (Bowen, 2009). In document analysis, the data is scrutinised and interpreted to draw out meaning, gain understanding, and produce empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009).

Document analysis was complemented by thematic analyses to generate the research findings. The four researchers analysed the transcripts independently. We followed the guidelines for assessing and reporting inter-coder reliability in content analysis studies (Lombard et al., 2010), and also the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) which encompassed: 1) reading and revisiting transcriptions; 2) reading and revising the researcher's noted observations; 3) cross-referencing all documentation utilised with the noted observations; 4) extrapolating and undertaking preliminary indexing of emerging themes from all the documents; 5) clustering these themes according to patterns across all the documents analysed, and 6) refining and labelling themes. The analysis undertaken by each researcher was examined not only for consistency and conformity, but also, to ensure uniformity in the identified thematic categories, as well as verification of the analyses.

2.4 Reflexivity and ethical considerations

As community activist researchers, and representatives of an academic institute, with differing research experience (ranging from an intern to more than 20 years in the field), we were consciously aware and remained reflexive of our own positionality as academics and the power imbalances that may come into play when partnering and collaborating with communities in engagement activities. Reflexivity can be defined as a continuous self-reflection process where researchers examine the influence of their values, beliefs, and behaviour on the data collection and interpretation process (Hughes, 2014). One of the ways the four researchers' maintained reflexivity, especially around privilege and power throughout the process, was through reflective notes, a rotating chairperson for meetings, and involving LNOC members as equal partners not only at monthly meetings, but all activities involved within the LNOC group. It is important to note that the reflexive notes for this paper are contemplations of the researchers, and not that of the entire collective. "Quieter" members' voices or perspectives might not be apparent in the reflective notes. Galdas (2017) highlights the importance of providing adequate details on the mechanisms utilised to minimise bias, which in qualitative research includes rigour and trustworthiness, important to the reflexive and subjective feature of this paradigm. In this study, rigour was achieved through prolonged engagement, reflexive journaling, and triangulation of data as indicated above (Creswell, 2007).

This study forms part of a larger community engagement study, The Ukuphepha Child, Safety Peace and Health Programme (UCSPHP), for which ethical clearance have been obtained from the University of South Africa.

3. Findings and discussion

The current study aimed to reflect on networking as a key strategy to strengthen relationships among organisations and service providers, and collectively mobilise assets and available resources to address safety, health, social justice and injury-related challenges in disadvantaged communities in the Strand, Western Cape. The following themes emerged from this study: (1) Networking as an egalitarian and transparent hub of coordination; (2) Co-sharing, co-learning and participatory engagement; (3) Engendering capacitation and training to strengthen agency and organisation; (4) Equity in participation, embracing voice and plurality of knowledge; (5) Promoting social justice, sustainable community building and praxis, and (6) Reimagining networks and readiness beyond COVID-19.

3.1 Networking as an egalitarian and transparent hub for coordination

Interaction with other organisations, institutions, structures, and stakeholders, has been identified as an inextricable and essential distinctive feature of networking (Gilchrist, 2009).

The LNOC served as a hub or system for coordination among multiple stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness of responses to local challenges. The following quotes demonstrate why LNOC was initiated:

We have discovered that multiple organisations work in silos, reaching only small numbers of people within disadvantaged communities... There is [a] need to know ‘who does what in the Helderberg’, and to join [as a collective] and address the social issues. (NC, 22/3/2018)

There is a need in the community for NPO’s to reach out and help where they can. The need is bigger than help available. There is value in coming together – to reach a larger audience. (RN, 10/8/2018)

The hub reflects a multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary composition, which includes representatives from health (e.g. Phambili Community Development Centre), local government (e.g. Department of Social Development and City of Cape Town’s Directorate for Social Services), the justice system (e.g. Department of Correctional Services), police and security structures (e.g. South African Police Services and Community Police Forum), institutional/academic structures (e.g. Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa and Boland College), religious entities (local churches and mosques), child and youth safety (e.g. PATCH and Building Bridges), social services (e.g. Girls and Boys Town.), early childhood development (e.g. Fundi Rainbow Educare Centre), and arts and culture (e.g. Falcon Angels). The network also includes “*people who work as social activists, community workers or volunteers that would like to make a difference*” (NC, 22/3/2018). With an open-door policy, the above-mentioned sectors and organisations are constantly evolving, allowing for expansion regularly.

The social contract, developed to elicit collective ownership and commitment by LNOC members, provides a framework of the implicit rights and responsibilities as well as the commitment and accountability agreed upon by each organisation and its members. It was generated to specify the types of behaviour that are to be encouraged or discouraged allowing for honesty and transparency with no hidden agendas; helping each other and not hesitating to seek assistance; providing a platform to discuss tough issues, and co-operate rather than compete with each other. The agreement, which bound the LNOC members together for the common good of the community, is attained through the following objectives as stipulated in the social contract:

Developing an integrated approach to safety and injury challenges within local communities; Developing a unified approach to the issue of street people, address social challenges that could result in people migrating to the streets’ and reintegration; Support to LNOC by the SAMRC-UNISA Violence Injury and Peace Research Unit and the City of Cape Town to ensure that it is operational and functional; Providing capacity building training, and logistical support for monthly meetings. (SC, 2018)

The collective is governed by the social contract and does not operate with any form of monetary exchange or gain. Through the collective, workshops are conducted and skills are transferred at no cost to engender capacitation within LNOC, and foster transformation within the community. This space acknowledges and affirms the work and contribution of each organisation. Members noted that “*LNOC has a lot of different organisations, and [Name] needs*

all the other organisations to succeed” (RN, 14/9/2018), and “LNOC is good to build trust and relationships” (RN, 10/8/2018).

Whilst the SAMRC-UNISA was requested to drive the coordination of meetings, no decisions are made and taken unilaterally, except with the consent of the collective. The notion that all people, especially those with lived experiences, have vital forms of expertise necessary to bring about meaningful change is foregrounded. Our process of community engagement (CE) is rooted in a community-based participatory approach that is transformational and reflects a reciprocal process of engagement embedded in co-learning, co-management and co-sharing, thus promoting or enhancing advocacy and social justice (see Taliep et al., 2018). The collective is an autonomous, dynamic, humanising network that embraces an engaging and participatory ground-up ethic and ethos that champions safety, health, social justice well-being, compassionate solidarity and sustainable community building.

3.2 Co-sharing, co-learning and participatory engagement

Networking is an important element of community responses that involve multiple diverse actors collaboratively working together across sectors focusing on sharing information, resources, skills, and providing support to member organisations (Rodriguez-García et al., 2011). It was agreed that achieving the objectives of the LNOC was contingent on the improved organisational capacity of LNOC members through the provision of training opportunities, technical assistance, and on-going support. LNOC members are actively engaged in a collaborative process, and partner organisations and stakeholders support each other in multiple ways. This is illustrated in the following excerpt on LNOC from News24 (Gordon, 2018) and a local community newsletter:

We believe that if we work together, we would be able to be more effective in addressing the multiple social challenges communities face. We thus decided to resuscitate the network last year with the City of Cape Town coming on board as a member. (NC, 22/3 2018)

The LNOC gives people and organisations the opportunity to cross the border and take hands. Reliable advice is offered through knowledge and skills. LNOC serves as proof that together, the dream can be achieved for a healthy, safe, and peaceful Strand community. (CN, 1/3 2020)

An important monthly agenda item focuses on organisational challenges or barriers, and action-oriented support. A case study by Thompson (2007) which focused on a community coalition that operated in an older, deteriorating neighbourhood in Kansas City, Missouri, followed similar processes where it was noted that the reviewing and updating of the action plan was a standard agenda item in their monthly meetings to ensure continuous updates, feedback and accountability. A noteworthy example is a discussion we had on the 16 Days of Activism for no violence against women and children, which is now 365 Days of Activism. It emerged that the number of child abuse cases has increased in the area, and dealing with this increase was challenging due to the limited resources in the community, as demonstrated in the following quote:

A representative from PATCH [who] specialises in child and sexual abuse cases noted that there was an increase in cases... each day, every day, every month awareness should be raised. ... [Another member suggested that we should] provide information and increase knowledge on how to apply for protection orders as it is important that people are informed of the process. [Name] suggested the [names of] people who could assist. (RN, 14/2/20)

The hub, thus, focused on co-sharing through the provision of support to community organisations to foster and mobilise community-level action (see Rodriguez-García et al., 2011). The provision of support and collaboration aims to equip and develop community members and groups to reclaim their communities (Thompson, 2007). Organisations within the LNOC initiative mutually decide on planning and resource sharing and invite other organisations from the collective by providing reciprocal support for an organisation's events, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

[Name] indicated that October is Mental Health Awareness month and they need help to organise an event toward the end of November... A lot of people are struggling with depression in the community. For this mental health event, they want to bring in massage therapists, get people to share information and tips on coping with depression. ... [Name] suggested that our research interns can facilitate a workshop on mental health and coping. (RN, 4/8/2019)

Similar to reports by Rodriguez-García and colleagues (2011) organisations within the network linked others with external stakeholders, which benefitted the LNOC group as a whole through the provision of access to opportunities for funding, and resources, such as office equipment and computers, and capacity building on key safety and health issues within the community, as well as organisational development, support for networking and coordination as indicated in the following newspaper report:

The role of the respective organisations is to share information, ideas and resources with one another.... We also make organisations aware of, for example, job opportunities and services, funding opportunities and training offered by the City," the public health researcher said. "Many of the partners have already benefited through the network. (NC, 22/3 2018)

[Name] mentioned the sub-council grants and the budget allocated to different wards. She encouraged all the NPO's to register and apply for grants from the City of Cape Town and local sub-council. (RN, 10/8/18)

Resources and information are exchanged by all partners, and collaboration ranged from joint proposal writing for funding, information on grant writing, fundraising opportunities or strategies, organisational building and development, free internal and external training opportunities, employment opportunities, information on campaigns and support ranging from referrals in instances of substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, homelessness, gender-based violence to addressing behavioural challenges with youth, amongst many others.

Communication is a vital key to the success of a network and should be seen as the main artery of operations (Zinn, 2012). Partners engage and converse with each other using multiple platforms, such as emails, web-based communication, and regular meetings once a month. We developed a web-based group with all LNOC partners using the WhatsApp Web Messenger, a popular free messaging app accessible via telephone that allows all group members to send texts, voice recordings, share documents or other media, and make phone calls or have a group chat. Engagement among network partners was enhanced through communication. It was decided that *"all opportunities will now be posted on the WhatsApp group and via email"* (RN, 7/6/2019). The platform is used to share information on *"jobs, community news, and activities ... by LNOC"* (CN, March 2020).

Similar ideas were reported by others indicating that a key benefit is the ability of a coalition's communication channels to become a way of sharing information about resources and opportunities (Campbell & Erbstein, 2010). Another study reported findings, indicating that Twitter was the preferred medium as a networking tool that supported inter-organisational partnerships among NPO's in their study (Del Giudice et al., 2014). Members are notified in

advance of upcoming meetings, and action points are sent via email and social media (a WhatsApp group chat). Importantly, it was noted that the communication platform enhanced participation in LNOC as noted in the following quote:

Because people received the WhatsApp message the meeting was well attended. (RN, 7/6/2019)

A key barrier to effective communication when using social media platforms is that boundaries of group chats can easily become blurred where personal chats or unrelated or irrelevant information are shared on the group, or the working group becomes a social platform. In addition, some LNOC members have limited access to data and unnecessary information can be costly due to mobile data being depleted. This could create unnecessary apprehension for organisations or group members where important discussions become lost between the unnecessary inconsequential conversations. Thus, due to the number of organisations on the group, there was potential for it to become messy and overwhelming with what would be shared in terms of information. Whilst messiness is part of growth and sharing, this messiness needed to be managed, and agreed-upon rules and regulations about what would be shared were put in place. The platform admin explained and reiterated to the members the purpose of the group as alluded to in the following quote:

[Name indicated that] the WhatsApp platform is for work only and not personal matters ... [and emphasised the need to] verify information before posting it on the group. (RN, 13/3/2020)

The misinformation in communities makes the work very challenging, for example, fake news on WhatsApp. It is thus important to get the right information out and we should have discussions on how this can be done through the appropriate platforms. (RN, 14/2/2020)

Thus, information shared and discussed in the group focused on the matters related to the social contract and the LNOC group and had to be relevant, respectful, accurate, and reliable. Another barrier regarding online communication is the sharing of unverified information. As demonstrated in the excerpt above, we emphasised the importance of accurate and verified information before sharing, and steering clear from fake news, particularly during COVID-19, where such news may add to the anxieties of people.

3.3 Engendering capacitation and training to strengthen agency and organisation

In addition to information and access to funding opportunities, LNOC members and their outside networks provided numerous training opportunities. Cicognani et al. (2020) note that such training and capacity opportunities should be seen as strategies for emancipation. A good example of how the different organisations collaborated to strengthen capacitation and engender agency was in the case of unemployed and/or substance-using women. A member of the Phambihli NGO highlighted the plight of these women and asked the network for assistance. Different organisations within LNOC offered and provided training and support for these women. The following excerpt demonstrates how the hub engendered agency:

They started a group for unemployed women to teach them life skills, computer skills, and the group started with 25 women. Sunflower is a group formed for ladies who are using drugs in the community and also concerned with parents who neglect their children. They go into the community and identify mothers who are unemployed and put their information in the City of Cape Town [employment] database [shared by another LNOC member]... Some of the ladies from Sunflower have found employment. (RN, 10/8/2018)

Training workshops included, for example, Principles of networking and coalition building, formulation of a social contract, NPO governance, coaching and leadership training, which led to the development of the *Women for Change* group, computer literacy skills, organisational capacity building, human trafficking, substance abuse (also offered to families of abusers in the local communities based on a referral from network partners), and child protection training, as attested to in the following quote:

It was confirmed that PATCH will provide a training session [on child and sexual abuse] at the meeting of the 17th of April 2020 ...It was also suggested that the event be moved to a bigger venue so that more people can be invited and join the group. (RN, 14/2/20)

The building and support of local organisations to enhance their capacities helps to consolidate their internal networks (African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes [ACCORD], 2008). For example, one of the network members organised a workshop on funding and the registration process as suppliers to be eligible for future local government funding:

Today we decided that we will invite the local councillor to set up a meeting with LNOC, let him know about the activities that the NPO's are doing, and let him come and speak about the budget for grant and aid. ... [Name noted that] the budget is out and resources can be distributed. So people need to hold the councillor accountable for allocating the resources where needed. She has a community organisation database which she would like to share, so NPO's need to make sure that they are registered on the list, and she emphasised the importance of registering. (RN, 14/7/2018)

A workshop was held on 20 July by [Name] (Vendor) and [Name] from Grant and Aid office [who] spoke about the vendor registrations, and that assessments need to be conducted. [Name] is an expert on grants and aid ... [and] responded to questions asked by the people. [Name] had a whole session with all districts about grants and aids. [Name] has copies of vendor forms. (RN, 10/8/18)

Beyond physical support, the hub also provides a safe and supportive space for members working in communities where challenges are often very overwhelming and progress slow; a space wherein which members can see they are not alone, wherein which they can feel comfortable to express their challenges and gains. This is particularly highlighted in the following thoughts shared by some of our members: “*We are working towards bettering the community*” and “*I feel inspired again, after meeting today*” (RN, 13/3/2020). The hub as a supportive structure thus provides a space of encouragement, affirmation, validation, and motivation.

3.4 Equity in participation, embracing voice and plurality of knowledge

The LNOC is founded on principles of equity, participation, shared values, and a humanising ethos, and encourages members to take collective ownership of the network. Similar principles were shared in a study by Lardier Jr et al. (2019). Through the use of interviews with key informants of a community-based coalition situated in an under-resourced community in the north-eastern region of the United States, members felt that not only did they have a voice within the coalition and its operations but also a collective voice within their community. Equity and participation are primarily achieved through a check-in process, whereby LNOC invented a space for all members old and/or new to share their organisation's profile, achievements, and

challenges in the meeting. The collective fosters respect for autonomy and plurality of knowledge and voices as can be seen from the following excerpt from institutional reports:

Our network can be described as an energetic safe space, where relations are nurtured, capacities are enhanced, voices and knowledges are respected and affirmed, co-learning and resources are shared. We see ourselves as advancing a compassionate coalition, that will provide support for and sustain projects that engender safety, health, social justice, peace and well – being. (IAR, 2019)

Members are, therefore, allowed to articulate in the language of their preference, and the translation is provided if requested. LNOC is a multicultural, non – sectarian, non – partisan, diverse cultural network, which engenders a decolonised ethos, and operates within a safe and participatory space, cognisant and respectful of subaltern and differing opinions. Members of organisations representing multiple cultures and traditions of knowledge, share their own rich tapestry of narratives and experiences. This promotes a sense of acceptance and affirmation of agency, that respecting and sharing of all forms of knowing, learning, and reflections, are integral and critical contributions to the knowledge base. It provides a space where experiences can be shared and knowledge can be transferred (Lardier Jr et al., 2019). As a collective, the LNOC is not prescriptive and committed to democratic decision-making procedures.

The successes, as well as challenges with community work, are shared. Together, possible solutions are identified. In the process, different organisations (with their resources) are introduced to each other and various support networks are formed. (CN, March 2020)

All the LNOC meetings are chaired voluntarily by a rotating chair, and this idea is supported by all members. This prevents any one particular organisation to be “in charge”, and negates any power dynamics between the different members. Interestingly, it may also enable an individual to enhance their skills and confidence in different settings. We have an “open-door, open-chair” policy in terms of membership. Everyone is welcome to join at any time. This egalitarian way of functioning appealed to all the members, and LNOC was then later officially launched. The collectively developed social contract elicited collective ownership and commitment to our aim of working together instead of in silos, to enhance safety, health, and social justice in the local communities. As noted by Gilchrist (2009), our suggestion as activist researchers and members of LNOC, was to facilitate local NGOs, NPOs, stakeholders and local government structures to work cohesively, communicate effectively, and address challenges and tensions that are inherent in this kind of work. As a collective, LNOC “*speak with one voice to bring substantial progress in issues raised and to be of service to our community*” (AR, 2019).

Feinberg et al. (2005) note that hierarchy and centralization may not be optimal in certain contexts, and cite by way of example that a community-based coalition or network may function optimally when horizontal relations allow for sharing of information, the building of trust and cohesion, as well as harmonisation. This way of working has contributed to the respectful, amicable and harmonious inter-relations among partners since the inception of the LNOC.

3.5 Promoting social justice, sustainable community building and praxis

LNOC provides a community-building platform, a democratic safe space, where people feel that they belong to a group through mutually supportive relationships, allowing for the amplification of forms of active citizenship (see Walker et al., 2017). McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9) define a *sense of community* as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together”. During the 3 years in which the LNOC

members have been active, they have had an opportunity to develop relationships, increase their interaction with multiple network organisation members, get to know organisation's work in the community, and also recognise similar goals and aspirations to bring about change in their community. This realisation of common goals and aspirations with other members in the LNOC initiative creates a sense of community where members feel they belong for the greater good.

The multiple organisations within LNOC are engaged in advocacy work and community-level action to address local challenges that are health and safety-related. LNOC has provided access to safe spaces and services for community members via the network partners. Partner organisations with links to specific local safety and health services provide access to multiple services for referral purposes, such as counselling, substance abuse treatment, education, social welfare services, etc. Illustrations of the advocacy and social justice work as a result of LNOC are noted below:

Our Institute was approached by one of our LNOC partners to provide them with training on conducting community-engaged research for their proposed intervention targeting at-risk youth in Broadlands Park. They noted that they have only worked on a referral basis thus far and realised the need to do primary prevention at community level and did not know how to engage with the local community. We had an information-sharing meeting and provided them with a copy of our community engagement manual. They subsequently conducted a household level intervention. (RN, 5/9/2018)

[Name said that] there is no database for lost or missing children. There is no proper profile for missing children. He went to check if his NPO is registered in the database and to get a printout. He wants to plan a meeting... in the area to check if children are registered/not registered/missing ... [Name from] Pink Ladies, [offered] to help with missing profile database... (RN, 10/8/2018)

Other activities initiated by the LNOC members included “Facilitating the access to medication by Phambili since the elderly are unable to go to the local clinic” (RN, 10/8/2018); “Linked the organisation working with disabled people to job and capacitation opportunities” (RN, 10/8/2018); “Hosting (sic) a men’s event to raise awareness of the challenges of being a man, [and] manhood” (RN, 14/9/2018); organising “gift bags for the elderly [comprising] ... facecloth, soap, toothbrush, toothpaste” (RN, 14/9/2018); “recruit [people] through the SAMRC-UNISA (sic) and [Name] run the leadership courses, and [name] started the business/entrepreneurship training” (RN, 12/10/2018); recruit and assist “20 female community activists... [to obtain] a 10-month contract in the Women for Change programme” (RN, 12/10/2018); facilitated “employment [of others] in the Walking Bus project” (RN, 12/10/2018); supporting local campaigns such as the “health awareness campaign” (RN, 14/2/2020), and “establishing parenting support groups” (RN, 14/2/2020).

3.6 Reimagining networks and readiness beyond COVID-19

As community activist scholars who are constantly engaged with and (normally) in communities, we realised the value of existing networks during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was important for us to reflect on re-imagining networks beyond COVID-19 and their sustainability. COVID-19 plunged the world into a crisis, but also highlighted the possibilities of networking as a key asset to coordinate resources and provide support, and foregrounded human agency and solidarity. The pandemic brought with it multiple psychosocial and economic challenges and prompted the LNOC to mobilise and provide much-needed support for the most vulnerable communities in the Strand. In the LNOC WhatsApp group organisations were sharing information on food security, messages of safety and health such as social distancing and hand

washing, free counselling services, applying for Government relief funding, access to legal services and free community testing for COVID-19, amongst others. These were then shared with the broader community.

Through their efforts, representatives of LNOC displayed courageous, agentic, altruistic, and cooperative behaviour, even when they were at great risk of contracting the virus themselves. COVID-19 has seen the mass mobilisation of community solidarity behaviours. Clarke (2002) postulates that communities in crises or adversity tend to develop helping and supporting behaviours unparalleled during normal times. He terms this a sense of ‘We-ness’ that he believes typically emerges during times of catastrophes or disasters. This is supported by Kegler et al. (2010) who found that in times of disaster, a motivation to join community-building efforts arose. LNOC members were active in setting-up soup kitchens and food collection points in designated areas, assisted the elderly and vulnerable with medication and food deliveries, sourcing donations for the various communities in the Strand area as well as provide well organised and essential community support and care swiftly from the outset as indicated by the following quotes:.

[Name], the representative from a youth development group in Nomzamo expressed that new possibilities has been brought on by lockdown. During level 5, the organisation diverted from the usual, and started feeding homeless people as shelters were overflowing. ... She noted that there is a need for trauma counselling for the learners to help them adjust to the new norm as we don't know how long this will still continue. She requested that assistance be provided with finding counsellors who are willing to help in whichever way they can (even virtually as the schools have e-labs). [Name, co-author] noted that he will forward information to her and I [co-author] mentioned that various contact details for counselling services have been posted in the WhatsApp, but that I will repost them on the group chat. (RN, 26/06/20)

Since the Early Childhood Development centres were closed, [name from the ECD coalition] mentioned that many of the teachers don't have any income and they are struggling. [Name] proposed that she draw up a list of names and contact details of these teachers and network partners offered assistance in the form of food parcels. (RN, 26/06/20)

The above response by the LNOC initiative resonates with the aims and objectives of the LNOC, espoused in the social contract. The emphasis of the LNOC cooperating in this manner for the common good, pooling resources, is what was envisioned, and provided the impetus for the re-energisation of the initiative in 2017. The responses of the LNOC collective were swift and resourceful, and because they had a pulse on the ground, they were able to reach hard-to-reach vulnerable communities quicker than the government, and often they were the only form of support during COVID-19 that reached certain pockets in the communities.

Beyond Covid-19, the sustainability of existing networks is vital, and as a collective, we are aware of the fragile nature of networks and consciously strive to make a success of LNOC as demonstrated in the following quote:

LNOC is a platform to communicate. We need to reach out to one another. I feel very positive. So we need to bear in mind the impact that LNOC can have for us in the future, for the next person who might be a future leader/contributor to the community. (RN, 14/9/2018)

A key barrier in networking that we faced was sustaining participation and interest, and beyond COVID-19 it would be important for us to look at ways in which we ensure commitment and regular attendance. The following quote provides an overview of attendance:

There has been a disappointment in the number of organisations attending LNOC meeting. There is a social contract that each organisation has signed, so ... we all check-in and adhere to the rules in the contract. Weather does play a part in the lack of attendance, but overall LNOC is a relaxed and safe space, but we need to formalise things a bit more. (RN, 14/9/2018)

Perhaps this could be ascribed to our open-door open-chair policy which contributed to the flexibility in the “coming and going” of organisations. Competing priorities and limited staffing to attend meetings could be additional barriers. Similar challenges were reported by Zinn (2012) in a Community Safety Network (CSN) where they had difficulty in retaining involvement of members continuously.

Another obstacle to the sustainability of networks is limited funding. Lardier Jr et al. (2019) identified the lack of funding, or rather funding cuts, as a challenge within community coalitions because organisations tend to not be willing to collaborate due to scarcity of resources and fear in competing for funding. Similar barriers regarding the competition to funding were noted by Simons and Taliep (2018). It is for this reason that LNOC motivated for the existence and sustainability of the network to not be dependent on the availability of funding, but rather on mobilising and sharing assets and resources and generating a social contract that emphasises commitment, mutual support, and collaboration that strengthens the network, and help promote and build compassionate and sustainable communities.

4. Conclusion

This study presents the authors reflections on stimulating and building compassionate and humanising networks for promoting sustainable safer and healthier communities. The researchers through a reflexive critical lens explicated the objectives by foregrounding the values and ethos embedded in the LNOC, including expounding on the emerging themes and how it translated into praxis. Reflecting on the themes and precepts such as Networking as an Egalitarian and Transparent Hub for Coordination, Co-sharing, Co-learning and Participatory Engagement, Engendering Capacitation and Training to Strengthen Agency and Organisation, Equity in Participation, Embracing Voice and Plurality of Knowledge, Promoting Social Justice, Sustainable Community Building and Praxis, and– Reimagining Networks and Readiness Beyond – COVID-19, illustrate the potentialities and possibilities of forming local networks of care – coalitions, that embrace participatory and engaging forms of connectedness, commitment and collaborations, and become transformative, compassionate and sustainable, within the constraints of challenges that are normal within any network. The voices from individuals and of organisations resonate with the themes and precepts of the LNOC and the reflections of the researchers.

The global pandemic – COVID-19 signalled a national lockdown, and a sense of anxiety and fear of the unknown in the nation and communities. Amazingly, the LNOC collective applied their ingenuity and found innovative and pragmatic ways of ensuring that vulnerable persons and communities received the essential care and support, by way of forming coordinating task teams to manage food security through the distribution of food hampers and soup kitchens, keeping the network and communities connected via social media platforms such as WhatsApp chat groups, to provide safety and health messages, and opportunities to access multiple forms of services ranging from legal to psychosocial support. The pandemic not only exposed the

vulnerability and fragility of individuals, humanity and networks, but also demonstrated a sense of belonging, community connectedness and community solidarity. The pandemic has poignantly heralded an opportunity for members of local networks of care – coalitions to share their collective experiences to reimagine how networks can continue to build egalitarian systems of governance, organising, partnering, advocating social justice, and promoting safety, health, peace, transformative and sustainable communities, including, the readiness and preparedness to mitigate for present and future challenges and contagions. Further reflexive and evaluation studies that engage more critically on the perspectives of networks or coalitions can contribute to enhancing their efficacy, systems of governance, service provision, and engender the building of compassionate, transformative and sustainable communities.

5. Limitations

This study is limited to the context of the LNOC initiatives and activities in Strand, Western Cape, and it cannot be generalised to other contexts or communities. Further research that engages with multiple organisational and social actors' voices and perspectives is recommended to enhance our insights on the value and role of community – based networks. This study thus serves as a steppingstone to further research on the operations of the LNOC by exploring the experiences, perceptions and views of the wider group.

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