Mapping - the way forward

Drew Mackie - ⏰ Thursday, August 6, 2020

Where we are

The development of the mapping stream has been problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, although I have a specific brief to fulfill, there has been no general agreement on how the map (or maps) will fit into the programme and the 'products' that we deliver. This has led to a situation where we have several maps in development but no plan for their use.

I have been preparing a set of awareness and training document for partner use and possible member distribution. The idea was that these would be used during a period of awareness raising and map exploration, but the Covid crisis has severely restricted what we can do at this stage. This has also been true of the proposed survey programme. It is generally agreed (and borne out by current experience on other projects) that organisations are having a hard time continuing their operations and have little interest in completing surveys - especially where we have not been able to prime them in face to face workshops - and Zoom events are a poor substitute for this process.

In lieu of data collection through survey I have turned to researching the partners and their current collaborations by examining their websites which list their operational links with other organisations. This has allowed me to create a set of maps that are based on what the members of the map say about themselves and their collaborations and starts to show some emerging patterns. These are static maps. They depend on the data as it exists and there is no automatic mechanism for their updating and management, but at least the give us maps to demonstrate principle and to allow participants to play with.

I have used a simpler mapping system (Graph Commons) for the internet exploration. This allows easy creation of basic maps and a basic level of analysis of centralities and clustering. The maps can easily be converted into the sumApp/Kumu system for further detailed work and continuing management.

To summarise the present situation we have:

- a set of awareness and training documents
- a set of partially verified maps drawn from internet research that can be used for training and further exploration with partners and interested member groups

It's crucial that we are able to test the use of these documents and maps with member organisations. At the moment we have two mapping experiments running:

- the sumApp survey issued by the Refugee Council. This was attached to a longer survey that they were carrying out anyway and it seemed like a good idea to piggy back on that as an early mapping opportunity. In the event this produced a rather cumbersome survey that has had a disappointing response. Subsequent workshops based on the subject of resilience have allowed us to raise the awareness of the mapping process and seemed to elicit interest with some group representatives. Again the Zoom framework is not ideal to take this forward and I'm looking at how we produce self-learning online materials to support further work.
- Inclusion London used a network map in paper form to support their campaign against Greenwich Council's reduction of support for disabled people's independent living. We held a well attended workshop in Greenwich that expanded the map - demonstrated in real time by adding to Kumu and projecting the emerging map on the wall. The subsequent intention to hold further mapping workshops and to use the map to recruit more campaign supporters has proved impossible during Covid lockdown. With members assistance we're now looking at the accessibility aspects of the map.

We had hoped to have the partners well along the awareness track supported by hands on workshops to explore the accessibility and use of the maps. This has not happened and my impression is that:

- Ezechias is keen to keep the mapping programme moving and is probably the most knowledgeable of all the partners

in terms of what network mapping is and what it can and can't do. We have developed an initial map based on Refugee Council workshops and expanded through internet research.

- Tracey and particularly Jon understand what the mapping is doing and are keen to explore its use as a campaigning tool.
- The Consortium has a well developed directory of linked groups, but are, I think, sceptical of how much further a map may be able to take their network, feeling that, to be any use, it has to be 'more than a directory'.

Where we want to be

Although this is recognised to be an experimental project - and exploration of the potential use of network maps and other digital tools - it will have to result in a spectrum of products and directions that may benefit the partners. Of course the whole exercise may conclude that there is no practical role for these methods but we really need to test their use in practice. In order to do this we need to have tested the mapping method rigorously and widely. The final report should be a useful guide but also a clear assessment.

Completed maps involving the partners and their members

The goal of the mapping stream is to have an overall map showing organisations and their collaborative connections within each partner network and to explore overlapping and shared organisations that bridge between networks. These can be used to identify possible new collaborations, influential organisations and clusters of organisations that might be targeted in campaigns. Without the map we can't demonstrate any of these initiatives or explore the possibilities for partners.

Broad awareness and capability of implementing the methods that survive testing

We would hope to leave the partners with a basic awareness of what netmaps can do and some competence in their use as well as an enthusiasm to keep them up to date.

Shared understanding and methods

We should have explored the ways that the partners and their member organisations might use the maps and tailored the mapping product to their needs. The best way to do this is through hands on workshops where we can provide the tech and concept input while they contribute their operational and strategic knowledge. Once we are through Covid, this may be possible

A clear way forward

We need to give partners a clear picture of the mapping journey. I know the process covers more than mapping but that is liable to be the most difficult concept to promote and will have a steeper learning curve to grasp the operation of the maps.

How we get there

Awareness

We need a set of awareness raising tools. The biggest hurdle in the acceptance of the network mapping approach is understanding why that perspective is valuable and useful. An initial attempt has been made to produce a slide deck with voice over and I will develop more of these to cover the content in the documentation. I hope these can be used by the partners to work with their members.

Ultimately, its the partners who must be fully on board and enthusiastic if they are to transmit that enthusiasm and understanding to their members.

Training

The partners must be able to demonstrate the use of the software to their members as well as being able to use it carry out strategic analysis. Training both online and (we hope) face to face is essential here. To assist this process I am producing a Training Manual which will include the scenario development approach that we have mentioned in previous workshops. The Slipham model is already there to used as a training tool. I have already added organisations to reflect the membership of the partner networks and we need to add more. Again this will become a tool that the partners can use with their members in training and policy testing.

Map development

Although we have an initial set of maps largely culled from the internet, we need to develop these into the online system where map members can control their own data and the map manager can manage them continuously. This is ideally done through online survey and we need to create and implement this as soon as possible.

Practical applications

We need to test the maps against their possible use. This needs a number of activities to be in place:

- a clear understanding of the role of netmapping
- confidence in deploying the software and distributing associated surveys
- a cohort of network members primed to respond and to communicate the mapping message to others
- initial demonstration maps and accompanying awareness and training materials
- a clear offer to possible respondents as to what they might be able to do with the eventual map
- promotional material to use on partner and member websites

Evaluation of results

I refer to evaluation here as the use of the map itself as an evaluation tool for the partner networks. rather than its use to evaluate the NetEquality project. The maps can provide metrics on:

- the centrality of organisations and their potential to spread information and to influence the network
- changes is the overall connectivity of the network
- the emergence of clusters of interest and collaboration

Ultimately, both the partners and their membership organisations will need to understand these and be able to use them to set goals and form actions.