

# Managing by Influence for the Common Good: India's SAMBANDH Network

By Santosh Passi, PIDP Fellow<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** *This paper reviews the institutional design of a network of NGOs in Northern India and analyzes the reasons for its success. Essentially, it is due to the remarkable ability of the network's low-profile leadership to avoid the traditional top-down management style and instead, manage by influence. They did so by (i) ensuring that members strongly shared common purposes so as to strengthen the network's cohesiveness, (ii) "empowering" members through provision of effective common logistical, informational, and training services, and (iii) engineering a policy coalition giving members and non-members highly visible roles and full credit for their contributions. The paper also argues that external donors should adopt a similar management style in their relations with the network, as the traditional top-down project design approach would be antithetical to the very reasons for the network's success.*

## Introduction

This paper is about the SAMBANDH Network, a voluntary association of 44 non-profit development-oriented organizations based in the State of Uttaranchal, India, and its success in influencing policy at the State level. Using the AIC framework<sup>2</sup>, the paper examines the reasons for the network's success so far, and reflects on its future sustainability in light of aid agencies' growing support.

The network originated in 1995, when the Indo-German Society for Social Services (IGSSS) identified the need for a mechanism to strengthen the capacity of local NGOs in watershed development. To that intent, IGSSS helped bring together the local NGOs into a network, which initially had the narrow mandate of organizing training and workshops for its members. IGSSS also supported the network's central secretariat by financing one full-time staff as the network's coordinator and related office support.

The SAMBANDH network was formally registered under the Societies Registration Act 1860 in January 2000. The network's General Body consists of all the member organizations. Major policy decisions including election of the Executive Board are taken at the General Body Meetings. The network operates through a three-tier structure i.e. it has an Executive Board, a Central Coordinator, and District Coordinators. The Executive Board consists of a seven-member committee, with representatives from different Districts/Regions of the State of Uttaranchal; the Board reviews the progress, frames strategies and provides overall guidance to the Central Coordinator who officiates as Central Secretariat.

The Central Coordinator is a contractual full-time staff with honorary membership on the Executive Board. The Central Secretariat is the hub for co-ordination, information exchange and other network activities at the State level and is linked to each of Uttaranchal's regions through a District Coordinator and District Co-ordination Committees.

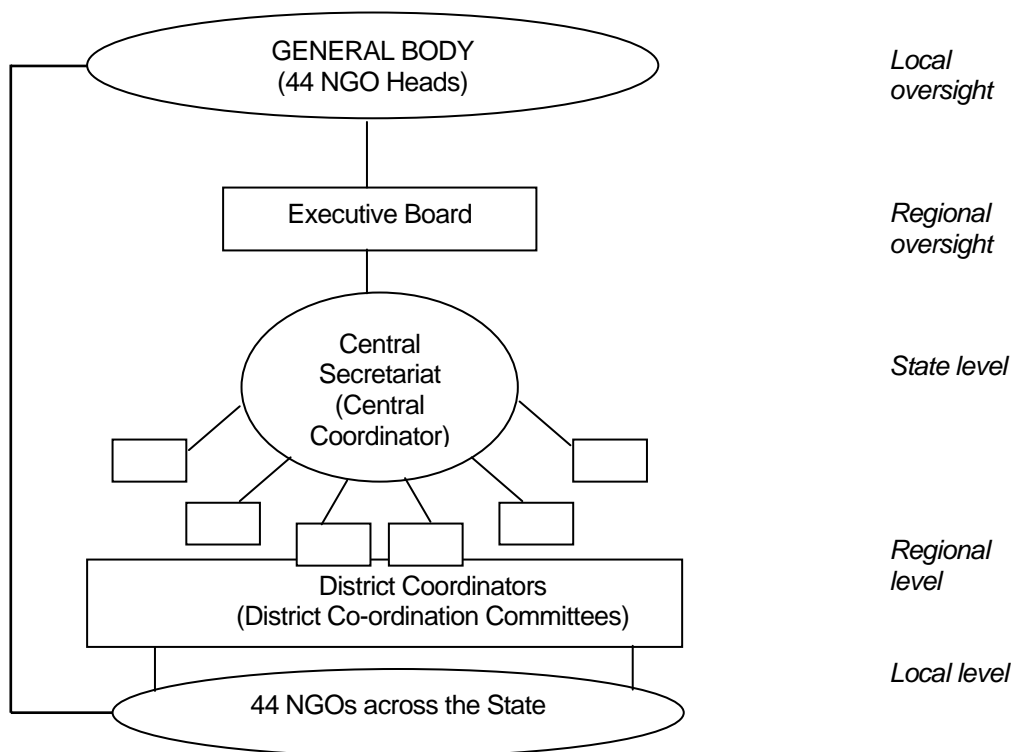
Any registered organization committed to mountain (including watershed) development is eligible to become a member of the SAMBANDH network. Its membership has increased over time through a process of careful screening of applications: recommendations from two existing SAMBANDH members are a must before new membership can be extended.

---

<sup>1</sup> Final paper prepared for the seminar "Institutional Design for Sustainable Development", Fall 2005, and edited by Professor Francis Lethem, Duke Center for International Development, Duke University.

<sup>2</sup> The AIC methodology of Institutional design is an analytical framework that not only deals with an organization's internal arrangements, but also systematically focuses on its linkages with other external entities whose resources or supports it needs, and on ways to ensure that its enabling institutional environment will be supportive of its purposes.

## Network's structure



## Members' profile and their expectations from the network

The membership of the SAMBANDH network covers a broad spectrum of voluntary organizations working within the development sector. Their reasons for becoming members has been analyzed according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs <sup>3</sup>:

*Security needs:* A small percentage of members looked towards SAMBANDH as a means to gain access to financial resources. They expected this to occur mostly indirectly through access to information and opportunities that would help them strengthen their capabilities.

*Affiliation needs:* The largest percentage of members looked upon SAMBANDH as a platform for mutual sharing of ideas and experience and for mutual support. A major incentive was that most of these organizations were working in relative isolation in remote regions of the State and wanted to reach out to like-minded people, and to find a way to participate in the larger policy debates.

*Esteem needs:* A small percentage of members, usually relatively 'large' organizations that were self-contained and sometimes even had their own networks (i.e., a group of NGOs they themselves supported) felt for various reasons that they should also become part of a larger network though in a passive capacity.

---

<sup>3</sup> This section is based on a survey of the network members' past experiences and expectations carried out by the author in 2003.

As suggested above, the high proportion of those motivated by the need for affiliation was explained primarily by the mountainous nature of the State. Indeed, in the Uttaranchal hills, the topography determines to a large extent the growth and nature of voluntary organizations. Accessibility to the region, access to information and resources, and availability of skilled staff are some of the constraints that limit the size, reach and spread of the voluntary organizations. The topography also poses constraints to potentially interested external aid agencies in providing support to such small and scattered organizations.

In sum, establishment of the SAMBANDH Network responded to a genuinely felt need for some kind of cooperative mechanism that would allow these various organizations to pool some of their expertise and resources, way beyond what would have been available to a single one of them, and to develop their individual capabilities. In addition it had the potential of providing another benefit: namely a forum through which its members could articulate their collective voice so as to have an impact on larger issues as explained below. The SAMBANDH network thus met two of the key criteria of successful institutions: there was a demand for its services, and it was seen as legitimate.

### **Dealing with an increasingly threatening external environment: the need for an effective policy advocacy mechanism**

Uttaranchal acquired the status of an independent State in year 2000, as a response to intense local political pressures. This new socio-political context presented new opportunities as well as challenges for the voluntary sector.

One of the key challenges was how NGOs would be able to retain their identity and autonomy. Indeed, because of its limited economic resources, the government of Uttaranchal had begun looking for donor support to finance its development activities. And to that intent it had established a number of State-owned development enterprises (SOEs), which started competing against the small NGOs that had been working in the development field for many years. The threats to the NGOs were the following:

First, the NGOs were reduced to the status of project implementing agencies, and had to work under the government's guidelines. This severely restricted their own creative space and their ability to negotiate and develop long-term relationships with the local communities -- thus posing a fundamental challenge to their *raison d'être*.

Second, there was an erosion of the voluntary spirit among their staff. Indeed, the NGOs faced the constant challenge of how to retain their experienced staff, who were attracted by the higher remunerations offered under the better funded Government projects.

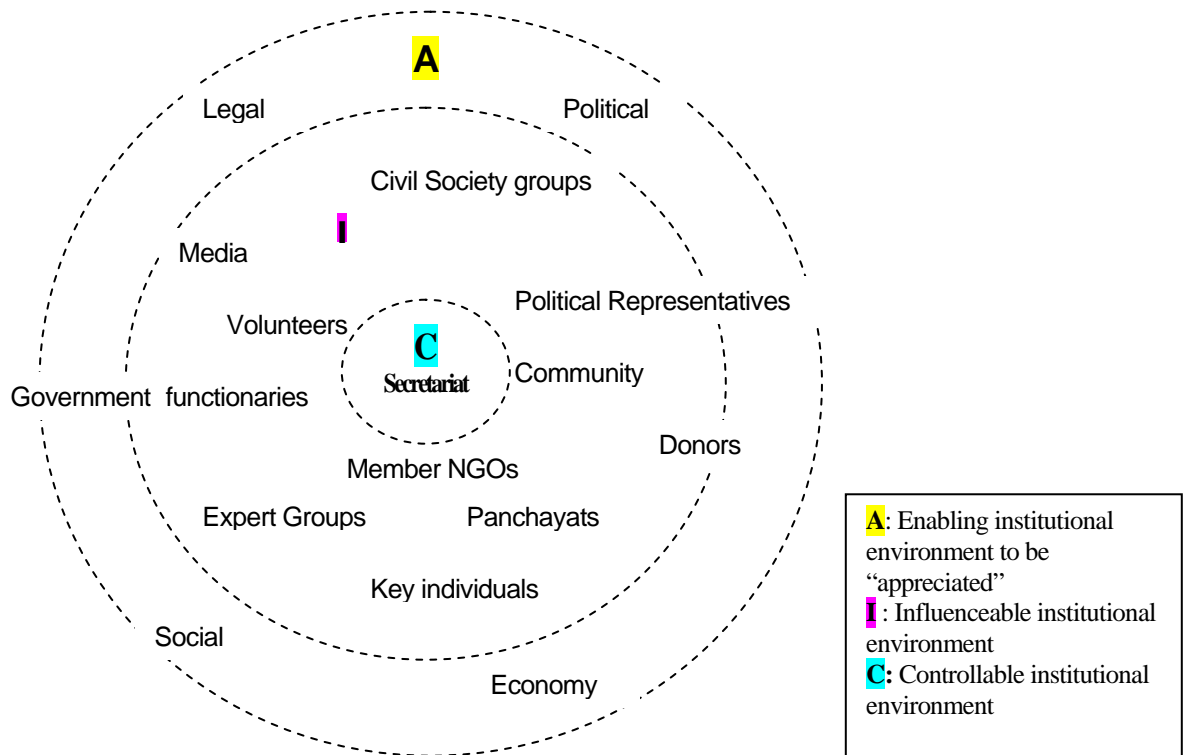
Third, when government sought out NGOs to be their partners based on patronage, the NGOs felt that their space to negotiate on critical policy matters had been further squeezed.

Fourth, as a result of the government's initiatives, there had been a mushrooming of opportunistic NGOs, more interested in obtaining well-remunerated contracts than in performing voluntary work. This unfortunate development had attracted the media's attention, generated negative reporting, and resulted in undermining the image of the voluntary sector as a whole. The issue of their credibility became very important to the established NGOs.

The following case illustrates a situation where the network's intervention had been needed, but also where it had failed to meet members' expectations. In Uttaranchal, the issue of rights over *Jal Jangal Jameen* (water, forest and land) had been historically associated with the population's identity. But in recent years these traditional rights had been denied to the mountain dwellers, who became alienated from the government and had agitated to achieve statehood. But once they had achieved it, the new State's

political representatives proved to be quite inexperienced in the exercise of political leverage vis-à-vis the dominant State bureaucracy. Thus, contrary to the population’s expectations, the policies adopted at the initiative of the civil servants (many of whom were from the plains, not from the mountains), often turned out to be a mere reproduction of earlier policies under the parent State before separation. For instance, when the first draft water policy was announced, it evoked negative reactions from a large section of the State’s intelligentsia and individual organizations. But these reactions remained sporadic, and lacked the political weight necessary to influence the policy makers. There was thus a clear divide between local aspirations and the official policy, but no institutional mechanism to bridge the gap between the two. And even though the network had existed since 1995, admittedly essentially to strengthen its members’ capacity for development work, it was quite slow to react. In fact, it took almost a year for it to come up with an appropriate public response to the draft water policy, and to launch a public communication campaign that was effective enough to be at least heard by the State. Clearly something needed to be done to improve the network’s leadership capacity to influence its external institutional environments (see chart below).

**The SAMBANDH network’s three institutional environments**



**Redesigning the network’s internal environment to better manage by influence**

*a. The need for change in leadership:*

Until 2001, the network’s President had been Executive Director of a large NGO, and there were allegations that he had used the network as a platform for pursuing his personal interests, rather than those of the membership. Furthermore, his management style had been “control”-oriented, and thus inappropriate for managing an association of peers – which requires managing by influence. Not surprisingly, and triggered by the network’s poor performance in the face of external threats, he was replaced at a subsequent meeting of the General Body, which elected as his replacement the head of one from among its more ‘neutral’ members. It was a wise choice, as the new President chose to act in a non-partisan and non-dominating manner, and to limit his role to overseeing financial matters since donor

funding was routed through his NGO's account. As a result of this change, the network's leadership thus shifted to a group of smaller NGOs and the Coordinator.

*b. Emergence of the Central Secretariat as a neutral ground*

The network's office located at Dehradun, the State's capital city, is central to the network's structure. It is occupied by the network's coordinator and an office assistant, and houses a library, computer, phone, kitchen and a place for visiting members to rest. Soon, it became the transit point for the smaller NGOs from remote regions, whenever they had to visit Dehradun. In addition to providing these highly valued logistical and information services, the central secretariat was also increasingly seen by its members as providing a neutral ground for sharing, demanding and negotiating in a relaxed environment. This low-key approach to "empowering" its members was in clear contrast with the traditional patron-client relationship that had previously existed between support NGOs based in Dehradun and small NGOs located in the field. As a result, the members now felt a greater sense of "ownership" of the network: they viewed it as "their" organization providing them with concrete benefits, and they were glad to support it – the very essence of a relationship of "mutual influence".

*c. The role of informal women groups*

The increasing interactions of women members that took place at the Secretariat's offices led to the emergence of an informal group (a Women Forum) within the SAMBANDH network. The Forum took part in the consultations called by Government in early 2004 regarding the Draft Women Policy. Following that, the Women Forum took the initiative of organizing regional and state level workshops, invited various grassroots activists and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to make sure that their members would understand the policy and policy making processes.

*d. Additional donor support*

In recognition of the Women Forum's efforts, ICIMOD, the International Center for Mountain Development, Nepal, invited representatives of SAMBANDH to receive Training of Trainers (TOT) in policy advocacy. This exposure further reinforced SAMBANDH's realization that its partners and other organizations in Uttaranchal were not sufficiently aware of the techniques and methodology of lawful advocacy to protect the rights of rural communities. Also, after seeing the success of the Women Forum, IGSSS, which had been providing minimal but committed support towards running the network's Central Secretariat and training activities, agreed to expand its support to event-based policy activities.

### **Designing the policy advocacy process**

Now that we have reviewed the network's structural changes, let's examine the process that it adopted towards policy advocacy, again in light of the AIC methodology.

***"A" stage: Achieving a shared vision:***

In year 2003, the annual meeting of the network's General Body focused its agenda on the "future role of the SAMBANDH network". This agenda had not been chosen in a top-down manner, but was the result of repeated expressions of concern within the network that it needed a strategy to respond to the challenges facing the voluntary sector. The agenda had also been inspired in part by the findings of the already mentioned survey undertaken at the initiative of the network's leadership in order to better understand the nature and expectations of its members. The overall feeling was thus that it was urgent for the network's survival to be able to respond to the evolution of its enabling environment, and to ensure that its priorities continued to meet the members' expectations.

From the two days of reflections at the annual meeting, a clear consensus emerged on the network's purposes that was agreeable to the different members, large and small, and affected them all in one way or the other. It was agreed that the network should:

- Find ways to restore NGO credibility;
- Become a strong policy advocate on issues related to land, water and forest; and
- Strengthen its members' capacity.

After the meeting, two follow up workshops were organized, one on "Network building" and the other on "Policy advocacy". For both, external experts from other networks were invited to share their experience. By the end of the workshops, a core group of network members and supporters had emerged, with the Network Coordinator in the lead.

By coincidence, in September 2003 the Draft Water Policy for Uttaranchal was released by the State government. It triggered an immediate response from the network, which, at its December Board meeting, immediately undertook a review of the draft policy. It soon became apparent that the affected communities were unaware of the policy's implications. It was therefore decided that SAMBANDH would make use of its extensive network to facilitate the spreading of policy information amongst the various communities and mobilize them for action.

#### **'T' stage: Creating a coalition of NGOs**

1. One of SAMBANDH network members – the People's Science Institute (PSI), had been actively engaged in water issues in the past. They had suffered a setback when government hadn't taken notice of their earlier campaign. When the network sought their technical support they seized the opportunity to revive their efforts, which included preparing a critique of the draft water policy. In addition, they agreed to translate and simplify their analysis for wider dissemination in the form of booklets and pamphlets.
2. Jointly with PSI, the SAMBANDH network organized two perspective-building workshops, one each for Kumaon and Garhwal regions on March 12 and 15, 2004. Careful attention was paid to elicit participation of key individuals and organizations that were working on water issues, even though they were not members of SAMBANDH.
3. The workshops met with moderate success, but at least they generated the interest of the SAMBANDH District Coordinators who agreed to take responsibility for generating a grass-roots movement by distributing the pamphlets among community members and representatives in their respective areas.
4. Another impetus came when a Delhi based consulting group joined in their effort. The Government of Uttaranchal had asked their support while framing the draft policy. However when the draft policy was released, the consultants were dismayed to discover that only the 'form' rather than the 'spirit' of their recommendations had been incorporated. Their dissent found an appropriate platform within the SAMBANDH campaign, while the Network benefited from their technical expertise in drafting policy documents.
5. By this time the network was realizing that to elicit a response from the community at large, it needed to broaden its appeal. So as a first step they named their consultative process "*Sajha Abhiyan*" which echoed the spirit of collective striving towards a common goal while at the same time playing down their own visibility. Thus by disassociating itself from the campaign, SAMBANDH was able to elicit participation from organizations even with different political orientations.
6. A major milestone was achieved when SAMBANDH called on June 12, 2004 a special State level meeting of the key voluntary organizations that were individually engaged in water policy advocacy on their own. Contrary to expectation, the meeting was well attended—which demonstrated how much can be achieved by a low-profile organization using its moral authority

as the source of its leadership, as well as the power of common values<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the various NGOs and participants agreed to share their own draft policy proposals with SAMBANDH, and to form a State Coordination committee in order to work out a common viewpoint paper that would be presented to the government.

7. Encouraged by the response of the larger civil society, SAMBANDH urged the District Coordinators to seek District level recommendations and letters from Panchayati Raj (local village council) representatives on the draft policy. The matter was becoming urgent as the 2nd draft of the water policy had been released by the Government in May 2004 and was to receive cabinet approval soon.
8. The State level workshop was organized on September 23-24, 2004, and was an intense exercise that drew more than 60 representatives from Panchayats and social organizations from all over the State. In the two-day workshop, discussions at different levels finally resulted in an agreed alternative draft water policy ("*Lok Jal Neeti Ka Masauda*"). It was signed by all and, in a true sense, became a public policy document. From a single platform, different stakeholders including community and Panchayat representatives, CBOs, Civil Society organizations and individual experts presented their viewpoint and, together, appealed to the government to listen to their views.
9. A public procession, under the banner of *Sajha Abhiyan* then took place in front of the Chief Minister's house to hand him over the alternative draft policy. Unfortunately, the Chief Minister was not there and the police forcefully stopped the rally. But it was too late: the campaign had already taken the form of a movement. People were subjected to collective arrest and were taken to police lines. It is only after obtaining the assurance of an appointment with the Chief Minister that the public relented.
10. Finally, a delegation led by SAMBANDH met the Chief Minister and apprised him of the process that had gone into the formulation of the people's alternative draft policy. They requested that *Sajha Abhiyan* be allowed to testify at the hearings held by the cabinet committee specially formed to review the water policy. The request was granted, and the SAMBANDH network and its partner organizations were invited for consultation with the political representatives.
11. This meeting in the context of Uttaranchal past practices must be seen as quite significant for the voluntary sector, given the huge divide that existed between politicians and bureaucrats. Indeed, NGOs had usually been consulted by the bureaucracy in a perfunctory manner, merely to meet procedural obligations, but they had seldom been taken seriously. The framing of policies was indeed supposed to be the responsibility of the politicians, though in practice they were not heavily involved or adequately apprised of their implications, as became apparent from their surprise during the meeting with the NGOs, and from the defensiveness of the bureaucracy.
12. With this meeting and its impact on the design of the water policy, the network had achieved another success: it had met its three strategic objectives of restoring NGO credibility, influencing policy and strengthening its members' capabilities.

### ***"C" stage: Managing by influence to generate commitment***

A network is basically a co-ordination of differing interests, a process of managing diversity, differing opinions and expectations, without actual control over its members. The network's previous leadership had failed to understand that a top down, control-oriented management style that may be appropriate in some public and private organizations, is rarely likely to succeed in voluntary organizations, where peoples' commitment is driven by their sharing of the organization's goal. This will be even more so for the management of a "network" as its member organizations are not even within its institutional boundaries, and there is hardly any flow of funds or disciplinary measures to hold the members together. In other words, what ties the members with each other is a purpose higher than their own narrower

---

<sup>4</sup> This observation is in reference to the moral question posed during the meeting, namely as to "how can we expect the community to cooperate if we, NGOs, can't come together ourselves for a common purpose?"

institutional interests. This had been fully understood by the SAMBANDH Coordinator who believed more in developing relationships of trust rather than in formal communications. Her main strength lied in being able to elicit the members' participation essentially because they could see the selflessness of her motives. Thus she would respond to the members' communications more out of personal affiliation rather than as an institutional obligation.

In addition, the network's unthreatening leadership skills were of tremendous help when it sought to take advantage of the strengths of non-members. Indeed, when it asked for the latter's support for the *Sajha Abhiyan* campaign, it obtained it easily. And during the campaign it had the generosity and wisdom to offer to share its platform with other organizations rather than attempt to keep all the visibility for itself. It also promoted resource sharing among members, with for example one member writing a pamphlet while its publication cost was borne by another.

### **Achieving sustainability: some reflections about the role of donors**

There are a number of donor policies and practices that can help to strengthen networks. However, the donor-network relationship is a complex one: too much guidance and direction may detach a network from its roots and undermine the trust patiently built with its members. And too much financing may undermine the network's selflessness and ideals.

In the case of SAMBANDH, it thrived most of the time despite (or perhaps thanks to) a meager budget, with frequent periods of funding gaps. Those were the times when network staff would go without pay on a voluntary basis -- which subsequently helped them acquire the moral authority they needed when asking for the support of other network members. My understanding is that donor support should best be limited to core funding and not be allocated to projects, perhaps with the exception of discreet event-based support. The latter indeed may be critical as it should allow the network to evolve and redefine its agenda--though it may also backfire politically, in case the foreign origin of its funding were used by the network's adversaries to undermine its credibility. More generally, donors should have the wisdom to trust the network's demonstrated leadership rather than support narrowly defined projects with targets they would closely monitor. Ideally thus, donors should aim at establishing some kind of long-term partnership with local networks, and be prepared to manage it through reciprocal influence rather than attempt control. This makes particular sense since, besides support for the network's secretariat's expenses, the things that network members often value the most may require the least amount of funding. This is not to say that a network such as SAMBANDH does not need external financial assistance: actually it does, and external financing will remain critical until the network finds alternative or self-generated sources of funding.

Providing such support also assumes that donors will have the expertise necessary to identify a network's real leadership, which is not an easy matter since, as illustrated by the SAMBANDH network case, the real leaders are those who hold the network together, who manage by influence rather than control, who prefer the back seat rather than high visibility, and allow others to articulate the network's views ... and to take credit for it.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, establishing a NGO network is a major managerial challenge, as it primarily requires appreciative skills and the ability to manage by influence, rather than the more traditional "control" approach to managing. Furthermore, ensuring a network's longer-term sustainability will require some funding. As such funding may be difficult to obtain from financially strapped local NGOs, it will require the support of external donors who, in turn, should have the skills to manage by influence so as to avoid undermining the network's identity and values.