Development NGO's. In the future, we start with ourselves.

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> 'A very large oak was uprooted by the wind and thrown across a stream. It fell among some reeds, which it thus addressed: 'I wonder how you, who are so light and weak, are not entirely crushed by these strong winds.' They replied, 'You fight and contend with the wind, and consequently you are destroyed; while we on the contrary bend before the least breath of air, and therefore remain unbroken and escape.'
>
> (Aesop n.d.)

Like people, development NGOs can be understood as "living systems" (Reeler et al. 2009, p.73); their identities manifested through a dynamic blend of principles (the Head); values, culture and relationships (the Heart); and organisational will (the Feet) (Reeler et al. 2009, pp.86-91). Also, like people, development NGOs grow, change and adapt as the world around them presents new environments, challenges and opportunities and as they reflect and learn from their experiences. However, this adaptability does not come without effort. It requires both courage and ownership from the very people who make up an organisation; its staff, volunteers, members and communities. Such virtues, this paper will argue, can only come from a deep and genuine sense of personal responsibility for the collective vision of the organisation, and, ultimately, for a better world.

At certain times, particularly times of crisis, development NGO's face a necessary transformation. This is when the living system; the head, heart and the feet of an organisation; is truly tested. It is at these pivotal moments that the human elements of NGO's, grounded in the values and character of their staff, volunteers, members or communities, are most critical. As this paper will hopefully show, for NGOs to be relevant in our changing world, they will need to undergo their own transformation and it is up to the people within these organisations to take ownership of this change. This will require many things: the most critical being the adoption of looser structures to enable flexibility and human agency; and the courage to go deep into the personal and human, to reflect, transform and take responsibility.

Initially, this paper was intended to offer a heavy critique of development NGOs. My goal was to highlight the overall failure of these organisations to deliver on their promises to the world – promises centred on improving the quality of life for poor and vulnerable people - and to link this failure to their generally poor track-record in practising what they preach, for which there is a wide body of literature, particularly from post-development theorists such as Sachs (1992), Escobar (1995) and Bawtree and Rahnema (1997), for example. The motivation for writing such a critical piece, and the postulations that came with it, emerged from my own experience working in development, an industry where burn-out is common, cynicism is rife (Kaplan 1999; Polak 2008; Lentfer 2010) and we are constantly confronted by what can be described as "Thick" problems (Edwards 2011); ''Thick' because they are so complex, politicized and unpredictable' (Edwards 2011; 2012). Like many who have spent even a few years working for an International Non-Government Organisation [INGO], a UN agency or another affiliated entity which contributes to the development agenda, the weight of being part of a sector which is accountable to so many people, and therefore so strongly scrutinised, can be heavy. This can be heightened by the stress of grappling with ever-'thickening' problems and marathon workloads which rarely reach a finish-line. An added factor is the understanding that much of what we do just isn't working, a perspective that is professed extensively in the gloomy blogs and articles of frustrated development workers (Kaplan 1999; Polak 2008; Lentfer 2010). Thus from this standpoint it was tempting, initially, for me to focus this paper on the weaknesses of development NGOs; from poor effectiveness to operational flaws to problematic organisational cultures, each for which there is plenty of evidence (Kaplan 1999; Polak 2008; Lentfer 2010), and a wide body of literature (Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995; Bawtree & Rahnema 1997; Horton & Roche 2010) to draw from.

However, a greater challenge, and indeed an even greater reward, can be found in the journey of exploring the possibilities for development NGOs, and what these possibilities could mean for their relevance in a changing world. Michael Edwards has addressed this brilliantly in his 2011 think piece, titled *Thick Problems and Thin Solutions: How NGOs can bridge the gap* (Edwards 2011). In this paper, commissioned by Hivos, Edwards (2011, p.11) praises development NGOs for having a 'healthy combination' of vision and pragmatism, which, in their unique

"intermediary" position (Fowler 2002, p.20; Edwards 2011, p.15) enables them to "become the 'transformation' agencies of the future" (Edwards, 2011, p.15). Whilst written with optimistic flavour, Edwards' think piece is immensely bold, proposing substantial shifts in the way NGO's traditionally think and work, which he deems will be critical if they are to deepen their role and relevance in a changing world. His recommendations are further examined in Section One.

The discovery of Edwards' (2011) think piece led to a change of direction for this research because it offered hope for the future. In particular, I was drawn by his bold suggestions for the rejuvenation of the development sector, and the kinds of elements he, and other contributors to the debate, believe to be necessary for development NGOs to address the world's 'thicker' problems. My interest was partly triggered by the recognition that many of these elements are already taking place in a development NGO with which I am heavily involved. This organisation, known as the Constellation, is a movement of communities and network of facilitators, bound by a belief in the strengths of communities (Constellation 2010). With members spanning over 30 countries, the Constellation embeds itself around deep philosophical principles whilst displaying a culture of flexibility and openness which enables it to "bend before the least breath of air" (Aesop n.d., in Thomas 2011), like the resilient reeds in Aesop's parable. The organisation boldly resists the patterns of traditional development NGOs and my personal experience of the Constellation and its members has led me to hypothesise that its unique way of working[1] is the reason it was able to survive near bankruptcy in late 2011. The evidence for this hypothesis is further explored as a case study in Section Three, which examines the process by which the organisation was able to overcome this crisis, applying its development approaches and philosophy *to itself*, from which it derived innovative solutions. It also explores how members and staff, spread across the globe, pro-actively took ownership for the organisation's revival, acting in solidarity around their common vision for its future. Drawing from the personal reflections of members involved in this process, as well as my own observations, the case study analyses, in depth, some of the unique strengths of this organisation's values, structure and way of

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[1] In this paper, I use the term 'way of working' to describe organisations' combined philosophy, values, structure, culture and the approach taken for every-day operations and activities.

working and the role these played in generating the kind of self-reliance and personal responsibility necessary to overcome the crisis it faced.

The case study is relevant because it offers a deeper exploration of the key characteristics of Edwards' "'transformation' agencies of the future' (2011, p.13). Firstly, it reveals, through the reflections of the staff and members involved, that genuine ownership and personal responsibility requires an ideological dimension which acts as an anchor. It requires something definable that they can attach to; a philosophical reference point. Secondly, it shows how the removal of technocratic tendencies, combined with the adoption of a decentralised model - embodied in the analogy of Brafman and Beckstrom's "Starfish organisation" (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007) - together enable this ideological dimension to flourish. It requires the setting aside of traditional command-and-control mentality, the undoing of hierarchy and the replacement of managerialism with trust. Thirdly, it is evidence that from this unique milieu of openness and depth an organisation and its people can stimulate the kind of boldness required to address what Edwards (2011) suggests is the 'thickest' issue of all, and one that has been 'consistently ignored in discussions about development and social change' (Edwards 2011, p.9); personal transformation.

SECTION ONE:

Development NGO's… "*It's not really working, is it?*"

Development, as a sector, a discipline and a community, has implications for most of life's concerns. From health to governance, justice to economics, security to sustainability; development encompasses most areas of social, economic, political and even spiritual life, thus having the capacity to greatly impact how we live as humans, both positively and negatively. Development NGOs assume a role, and therefore a responsibility, as key players in driving the development agenda. They have a collective mission to make the world a better place. Whether they strive for access to rights, equality, poverty alleviation (Korten 1990) greater freedom (Sen 1999) or a combination of these, and regardless of the methods they employ to achieve it, their explicitly stated purpose is, broadly-speaking, to improve the lives of their intended beneficiaries and the individuals and communities around them.

Unfortunately, as many of the larger NGOs reach milestones of 60 or 70 years of operation, they are also reaching what some consider a "midlife crisis" and "crossroads" (Lammers 2012), where they must consider their future viability and value. There is strong body of thought suggesting that most NGOs have far from achieved their intended mission and are thus not at a point where they could consider a comfortable 'retirement' (Currion 2011; Edwards 2011; 2012; Lammers 2012; Maycock n.d.). Instead, as Edwards poses in a special report for *The Broker Online* (2012), if they are to stay relevant in a rapidly changing world, they will need to be either replaced or rejuvenated. Further, as various respondents to Edwards' (2012) report have argued, this transformation of NGOs will need to be quite radical, starting from the very people within each organisation (Currion 2011; Maycock n.d.) This section will explore and expand upon the key elements of these proposed future pathways, and demonstrate why transformation, particularly at the personal level, is so necessary.

In her first blog posting titled "A Heartbreaker" (Lentfer 2010), Jennifer Lentfer, an aid-worker who hosts an impressive online forum aimed at raising the human dignity element of international development[2], reached out to a hundred and fifty of her former international development colleagues, friends, and acquaintances from various levels of U.N. agencies, academia and grassroots organizations, asking:

> If you personally could do one thing to change "the system" of foreign aid and development assistance, what would you do?

(Lentfer 2010)

What she discovered from the responses was widespread pessimism, disenchantment and feelings of exasperation amongst her development peers. She shared one response in particular, written with heart-breaking honesty:

> *'I am 'over' development – fed up with the whole thing, and am dealing with my own cynicism and angst about how bad I find the whole process. Part of what makes it bad is that I don't really know what a big picture solution looks like….*
>
> *Nothing that hasn't been mentioned before—good governance, leadership, systems strengthening, etc. is needed but still 50 or so years on, it's not really working. Is it?*
>
> *The question leaves me stalled.' - Noni, in India*

(Lentfer 2010)

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[2] Jennifer Lentfer's website is How Matters; http://www.how-matters.org/about/

For development workers, it may be possible to recognise our own experience in Noni's words. Whilst it is important not to generalise, it should be no surprise, from the large array of negative reports which underpin development's discourse as well as the seemingly endless conveyer belt of new methods we adopt to replace the old ones that "didn't work", that most development workers will experience these kinds of feelings at some points during their career.[3] It explains the growth in aid worker support groups[4] and organisations such as Satori Worldwide[5], a small business that 'aims to bring meaning, balance and inspiration' into the lives of development workers (Martnya & Munroe 2011). So why is cynicism so rife in the development sector? What is it that makes us so disappointed with ourselves, our organisations and our perceived failure to achieve our collective visions for a better world?

Unfortunately, these feelings are not new. In 1967, Ivan Illich expressed his own cynicism in an article he titled "The Seamy Side of Charity" (Illich 1976). In this article, he heavily critiqued the US Catholic Mission's modernization scheme in Latin America (which was also, at the time, a politically-motivated manoeuvre to curb 'Casto-Communism' (Illich 1976, p.47). His critiques stemmed from his experiences in Cuernavaca, where he opened an education centre for missionaries and foreign professionals to "challenge them to face reality and themselves" (Illich 1976, p.47). In his article, Illich outlined the way in which the generosity and good will of American churches were used to support an ideological and political mandate. He described how the missionaries, despite their deeper evangelical aims, were basically pawns in this ideological struggle (Illich 1976, p.55). He challenged the missionaries to "face the painful side of generosity: the burden that a life gratuitously offered imposes on the recipient. The men who go to Latin America must humbly accept the possibility that they are useless or even harmful, although they give all they have," (Illich 1976, p. 55).

Illich's evaluation of the development agenda and the impact it was having on those involved (from deliverers to receivers) was not alone. Numerous others (Friere 1970; Marx & Engels 1976; McKnight 1976) were critiquing the development sector for its failures, and linking these failures to a lack of meaningful participation and

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[3] For another excellent example of aid worker burn-out and the loss of the human-connectedness of development, read http://www.how-matters.org/2012/01/23/has-aid-lost-its-humanity/.

[4] e.g. Aid Workers Network; www.aid_workers.net

[5] Satori Worldwide's website is http://www.satoriworldwide.com/

insufficient investment in building human connectedness and fulfilment. In 1976, the general mood of frustration and disappointment was expressed in a poem called "The Development Set" by Ross Coggins (1976, in Lentfer 2012). With tongue-in-cheek humour, the poem particularly condemned the inauthenticity of development workers, as shown in this excerpt:

> The Development Set is bright and noble
>
> Our thoughts are deep and our vision global;
>
> Although we move with the better classes
>
> Our thoughts are always with the masses.
>
> In Sheraton Hotels in scattered nations
>
> We damn multi-national corporations;
>
> injustice seems easy to protest
>
> In such seething hotbeds of social rest.
>
> We discuss malnutrition over steaks
>
> And plan hunger talks during coffee breaks.
>
> Whether Asian floods or African drought,
>
> We face each issue with open mouth.
>
> We bring in consultants whose circumlocution
>
> Raises difficulties for every solution –
>
> Thus guaranteeing continued good eating
>
> By showing the need for another meeting.

Coggins, 1976, in Lentfer 2012

From the tone and sarcasm of his poem, it is clear that Ross Coggins did not have a lot of faith in the "development set" of the 1970's. He saw them as disconnected from the people they were supposed to be working for and with, hypocritical in their actions, inefficient and too focused on weaknesses and deficiencies. He proposed that their interest was too self-motivated and their actions self-perpetuating in order to feed the machine; "thus guaranteeing continued good eating" (Coggins 1976, in Lentfer 2012). Whilst some may perceive Coggins' words to be quite harsh, they are important because the capture the earlier stages of the wave of pessimism in the development sector, which has continued since, without, in my opinion, much remedy.

In the literature on development NGOs from the 1970's until now, there is no shortage of accounts highlighting where they have fallen short of their promises, and why. It would be too much for this paper to summarise each school of thought, but a few examples will at least demonstrate the pervasiveness of these perceptions. Korten's (1990) paper outlines what he defines as the 'generations' of development NGOs. Whilst it is arguable that the evolution was as linear as he suggests, his analysis reveals some of the underlying debate and pressures which shaped the first few decades of NGO evolution. For example, in the 70s and 80s, the new ideas of John Sommer's 1977 book *Beyond Charity* were embraced widely by development NGOs. The book, and others like it, offered a new community development model, a solution to the long-running welfare – development debate, in which welfare and relief models were being criticised heavily for their lack of investment into sustainability or generating self-reliance (Korten 1990, p.118). Nevertheless, twenty years later, NGOs were still not achieving the impact they desired. They continued experimenting with new models, most of them largely framed around economic definitions of development. In his 1997 article, *Understanding International Development*, Fowler (1997) highlights the deficiencies of the market-based growth model stating that, despite decades of development aid, 'involving hundreds of billions of dollars, millions of staff and countless projects… [it has] not made a substantial impact on the scale of poverty in the countries of the south,' (Fowler 1997, p.1).

The new millennium has brought with it new critiques of development NGOs, particularly their adoption of technocratic organisational approaches. These critiques link the growth of technocracy to NGOs' engagement with donors and the overall aid system, which has resulted in 'a strategy of institutional survival and growth through competitive tendering for increasing government funds' (Morrow n.d.). These critiques illuminate the tensions faced by development NGOs as they try to balance development imperatives with their institutional imperatives (Morrow n.d.), which are increasingly misaligned. The debate has thus moved towards NGO ethics and the gap between stated values and real actions (Wallace 2001; Roche and Horton 2010; Fowler 2002). As one writer states; 'It is… critical to explore the extent to which the values and practices they espouse in development are reflected in their own organisational structures and… in turn (how) this affects their development practise'

(Wallace 2001). From this perspective, it seems fair for us to question the paternalistic approaches taken by organisations which say that they champion self-determination and justice. Further, it is reasonable to be concerned about the rigidly hierarchical nature of those NGOs who rhetorically embrace principles of equality and fairness and advocate for bottom-up decision-making. We can deduce from these observations that development NGOs have concerningly mis-aligned. Personal responsibility for organisational behaviour has been pushed aside by structures and cultures that imply control, efficiency, rationality and effectiveness. The result is organisations that fail to practice what they preach.

With this understanding, the pervasive cynicism of the development sector seems understandable. It stems from these perceived failures and the disappointment, frustration and confusion that amount as a result. But why do these failures occur? It can be safely assumed that most of us who choose to work within development NGOs would do so, allegedly, because of our deeper ideological visions for how the world could be. Therefore, surely we are not all as self-interested and disconnected as Coggins' (1976, in Lentfer 2012) poem suggests? Where does this breakdown between our vision and our footprint occur, and why have we, the development community, allowed it to get to this point?

Edwards' think piece (2011) credits this breakdown to a misalignment between 'thick' problems and 'thin' solutions. As mentioned previously, 'thick' problems are thick because they are complex, politicized and unpredictable (Edwards 2011, p.7). They are multi-dimensional, inter-related, cross-functional and dynamic. They change over time and space and manifest themselves differently in different contexts. 'Thick' problems are highly subjective – what one community may see as a great weakness may not be such an issue to others. They are hard to measure, hard to define and seemingly impossible to solve.

'Thick' problems, however, are what development NGOs are faced with in their quest for a better world, and according to Edwards (2011; 2012); the world's problems are getting 'thicker'. It is now understood that the previously accepted notion was development as a linear economic process towards an adequate 'end-point' (Edwards 2011, p.8). The 'developed' countries were supposed to have reached this end-point and the so-called 'developing' countries must strive for it. Such a view is

increasingly inaccurate and unhelpful. This idea of 'development' is problematic and needs to be 'unpacked'. For one thing, it is indeed much more complex than economic indicators are able to demonstrate.

Development is also a deeply personal concept, which thickens it further. For example, most observers would conclude that there are millions of people in 'developed' countries who are simply not fulfilled (Grahame 2010). Depression and loneliness, social discord, inequality and health-issues like obesity and alcoholism are all examples of the 'thick' issues (or at least their symptoms) facing the developed world, despite, or arguably even because of, its material wealth. Just an hour of watching the local news-media in a developed country can be testament to the deeper issues that have arisen as a result of this relative emptiness, from the decrease in human connectedness, community cohesion, spiritual fulfilment or even, at an individual level, self-esteem. This is not to say that these issues don't exist in poorer settings as well, nor that wealth doesn't bring with it certain freedoms which give space for people to explore these human fundamentals. I suggest that the message here is, rather, that development is far more complex and its human elements considerably deeper than we have previously been brave enough to acknowledge.

In the quest to climb the development ladder, environmental protection and the sustainability of our natural resources have also been somewhat placed in the 'too-hard basket'. Edwards (2011) suggests that this is due to the fact that "social, political, religious and other cultural and ideological differences do not disappear as incomes rise" (Edwards 2011, p.9). Thus conflict and dispute around serious world issues like climate change are no closer to being resolved as we 'develop'. In fact they may be becoming even more embedded and difficult to tackle. Further, these issues are simultaneously global in scale and personal in nature. According to the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2012) to tackle climate change we need to work together at multiple levels and across geographic boundaries. The solutions are highly political, and consensus is needed across nation-states and global industries. However, perhaps more so, it also requires personal buy-in from every individual who uses electricity, runs a car or buys plastic. In this way, personal responsibility is as important as government accountability and industry standards (Dernbach 2008). Environmental issues could therefore be perceived as the

'thickest' of them all and, if ignored, have the potential to undo much of the 'development' our world has seen over the last century. In fact, I find the potential implications of ignoring environmental sustainability and climate change unfathomable and frightening.

In a changing world, development NGOs will be increasingly faced with these 'thickening' issues. What enhances this challenge is the 'thin-ness' of their response. For Edwards (2011) 'thin-ness' entails the oversimplification of complexity, the fragmentation of multi-dimensional issues and the situations where superficiality presides over depth. 'Thin-ness', he argues, is a result of 'the rising tide of technocracy that is sweeping across the world of international development' (Edwards 2011, p.7). From the evidence, it seems as if many development NGOs have been swept up in this wave.

There are many reasons for the spread of technocracy within the NGO sector, but perhaps the most veritable and pervasive is what Edwards (2011, p.10) describes as 'quantaphilia' – a fixation on measurement and growth. The pressure for NGOs to be more efficient and measureable has increased enormously in recent years. Instead of measuring values, happiness and the strength of relationships, development NGOs are intensely pre-occupied with measuring growth, outcomes and quantifiable change, which offer a 'delusion of being in control' (Thomas 2011, p. 27). However, as was famously displayed on the wall of Einstein's office in Princeton; 'Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts,' (Thomas 2011, p.14). As a result, the fixation on measuring impact through objective and quantifiable means hampers our ability to deeply understand of processes of change and the people involved (Isbister 2010; Edwards 2011).

The quantaphilia obsession is linked to the growing professionalization of development, and widespread adoption of managerialist systems and structures, which also detract from our ability to engage with the complexity and depth of development work (Wallace 2001). Many field-based colleagues I have worked with in the NGO sector have expressed their despair at the volume of reporting that is required of them, often taking away from their capacity to engage with and learn from fellow staff, partner organisations and, more importantly, the individuals and

communities on the ground. Further, my personal experience[6] as a consultant to NGOs has included feeling pressured to convey dense issues in 4-8 page reports, minimise complex processes into simple frameworks, hurry the practice of discovery to meet deadlines, and, most concerningly, to 'toe the company line', a tendency which is further ingrained by a culture of 'not rocking the boat' which prevails within many NGO settings[7]. This example of technocracy is partly related to our increasing penchant for closure and instant gratification (Edwards 2011); the need to have the answers, to be the expert, and to fix the problem.

 'Thin-ness' also relates to the language, practices and knowledge of development, which have become increasingly homogenised (Wallace 2001). Whilst platforms exist to foster nuanced debate, the interpretation and communication of development issues by NGOS still closely reflects those of the bigger players in development; the multilaterals, donors and governments (Wallace 2001). This speaks to the top-down nature of the technocratic wave and how it has influenced what comes to be accepted as 'sound' knowledge or 'good' practise. Furthermore, as development knowledge and language has become thinner, so too have the ideas, methods and knowledge of local communities been overlooked. This, in itself, goes against the very principles and aims of many NGOs, that is, to elevate the voices of the poor and marginalised. NGOs, in my opinion, are missing an opportunity here. As Edwards (2011) argues, NGOs are in a unique position to become the watch-dogs of the development sector. So why don't NGOs value local knowledge as much as they value the knowledge of academics? Despite our good intentions, could we be missing something really significant here?

SECTION TWO

Development NGOs as transformation agencies of the future:

> We cannot pretend to be agents of change if we are not prepared to change ourselves. The future needs flexibility, not stability; the future lies in collaboration, not competition; the future belongs to the network, not the corporation.

(Currion 2011

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[6] Some of the observations presented in this paper come from my own personal experience working within and alongside NGOs and UN Agencies as a professional consultant, an employee and a volunteer.

[7] From my personal experience and observations.

With the 'thickening' problems of the world, and our current tendency to turn towards 'thin' solutions, what options are there for development NGOs for the future? Should they stay or should they go? Or, perhaps a better question to ask is: if they stay, how should they change, so that they are relevant for making the difference that is needed? According to Edwards (2011) the next century requires some of the 'thickest' solutions we have perhaps ever had to fathom: alliance-building across conflicting interests; reformed systems and structures to promote greater self-reliance and sustainability; and greater personal responsibility; 'the changes in our own identities that a less materialistic worldview demands,' (Edwards 2011, p.7). In essence, there is strong evidence for the argument that the world requires its citizens to take greater ownership for its future, which involves becoming less motivated by self-interest and more driven towards a collective vision for human flourishing.

Whilst Edwards' (2011) article argues for a 'rejuvenation' of development NGOs, from my experience as a member of the Constellation I am more inclined to argue for something deeper and more courageous. In a response to Edwards' posting *on The Broker Online* (Edwards 2012), Paul Currion (2011) points out that NGO survival, as a means unto itself, is not important. It is the functions, not the forms, which need protection, and if the form is no longer valid, then, he argues, we can let it go. In this way, Currion's (2011) recommendation is for NGOs to not only acknowledge and manage the changing external environment, but also to reflect that change. Thus he proposes another possibility for the future of NGOs, which is 'radical transformation' (Currion 2011).

Indeed this is no small task. As Fowler (2002) highlights, it 'delve(s) deep into ethics and values; the processes and institutional arrangements that underpin the social system; and an individual's personal state of feelings, intuitions and experiences that give meaning to the world,' (Edwards and Sen 2000, in Fowler 2002, p.17). It thus requires transformation of people; their cultures, behaviours, values and relationships. It requires a careful blend of collective action and individual engagement, investment in new innovations and increased reverence for local knowledge. Power relations have to shift. Our emphasis on seeking the fair distribution of wealth needs to refocus towards the management of scarce resources (Edwards 2011, p.13). NGOs will need to reframe their 'organisational inertia' (Maycock n.d.); so that they are more flexible and more answerable to communities.

The discourse of development must go deeper, even venturing into the largely unchartered territories of dealing with human-connectedness, fulfilment and personal responsibility. NGOs, therefore, cannot do this alone.

What we can do, however, is carefully leverage our local connectedness and global reach, capitalising on our intermediary position between different societies and institutions (Fowler 2002; Edwards, 2011). It is from this unique location that NGOs have the capacity to act as development's watchdog, asking the hard questions (Edwards 2011, pp.11-13) and challenging donors, governments and the public to adopt 'thicker' and deeper solutions. In the same way, NGOs can play a catalytic role for reinforcing collective action, providing spaces (both physical and virtual) for meaningful participation to occur (Edwards 2011, p.13).

Of course, for development NGOs to take on these important roles, I am proposing that they will need to rejuvenate their living system; in other words, to realign their head, their heart and their feet (Reeler et al. 2009). This will require investing in a deeper understanding of the world's future needs, to identify what is possible. Technocratic habits will need to be phased out and looser ways of working adopted to allow for greater flexibility. As a result, the culture of each organisation will be tested, as will their staff, stakeholders and supporters, and this will take considerable courage, as many NGOs will risk their reputation, support and level of influence. Despite these immense challenges, perhaps what will be most critical for development NGOs will be the synergy of their head, their heart and their feet so that their dreams for transformation, both for themselves as organisations and for the world they live in, are entirely in sync. In the future, we start with ourselves.

At this point, I wonder whether this is, in fact, an impossible dream. Indeed some would argue that the notion that development NGOs could be agents of personal change and cooperative human relations (Edwards & Sen 2000, in Fowler 2002) is too idealistic and, therefore, unrealistic. For example, Neo-liberalists would argue that the model is anti-competitive and therefore won't 'stick' in our market-based economy. Taylorists would warn that loosened operating structures will result in inefficiencies and wastage. For the seasoned managerialists, particularly those who work closely with donors, governments and multi-lateral agencies like the UN and World Bank, the cultural change could simply be too much. Supporters may be

reminded of earlier liberation theories and collectivist approaches (Friere 1970; McKnight 1976; Marx & Engels 1976) which only had marginal uptake, remaining largely peripheral to mainstream development (Nederveen Pieterse 2010). All of these perspectives speak to the importance of taking what Edwards describes as 'baby steps' (2011, p.12). It also speaks to the importance of organisational transformation which is driven from the bottom-up, rather than being imposed from the top-down.

The case study presented in Section Three reveals an organisation which, I argue, is already on its way towards becoming a transformation agency of the future. Whilst it doesn't display all the specific functions suggested in Edwards' (2011) think piece, it does embody some of the general qualities and characteristics which would make these functions more possible. In fact, the case study illuminates particularly the importance of an organisation's ideological 'reference point' as an anchor for generating ownership and personal responsibility. It also explores the nature of loose, decentralised operating models, and how these assist in making an organisation flexible, resilient and open to transformation.

SECTION THREE

The Constellation, Starfish and SALT:

This case study explores the journey of a global development organisation known as the Constellation, of which I have been an active member since early 2010. It has been chosen because I believe it offers a rich example of an NGO living system which is aligned: its principles, values, culture, relationships and organisational will work together with remarkable synergy. What this case study particularly highlights is that the energy for this living system comes from the organisation's members, many of whom take ownership of its future as well as personal responsibility for the organisation's ethical and philosophical integrity.

This case study offers an opportunity to look deeper into the organisation's characteristics and to assess how these factors contribute to its ability to overcome a crisis. The first of these contributing factors is the organisation's ideological reference point or 'DNA' as they describe it. For the Constellation, this DNA is

referred to as 'SALT' (Helsekompetence 2010). As revealed in the interviews, SALT is considered by members to be the central philosophy driving all interactions within and between Constellation members and those they come into contact with in both personal and professional contexts. As an acronym, SALT stands for:

S – Stimulate, Support;

A – Appreciate, Analyse;

L – Listen, Learn and Link[8];

T – Transfer, Team.

(Constellation 2012)

However, SALT is considered by members to be more than a series of individual qualities, practices or principles, as suggested in the acronym above. It is viewed as an entire mind-set. This case study explores how the SALT principles and mind-set were applied by the Constellation in the process of overcoming a crisis. Drawing from members' reflections, the study draws links between SALT and the deep personal commitment demonstrated by Constellation members along the way.

The case study also provides a window into the kind of loose, decentralised models that Edwards (2011) advocates for development NGO's of the future. It is therefore a useful example from which other NGOs may learn. Structurally, the Constellation considers itself a "Starfish Organisation", an analogy coined by the writers of *The Starfish and The Spider* (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007), to describe highly decentralised organisations with no hierarchy and no headquarters. Examining the implications of the Starfish Model in this case study is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates bottom-up values in action, through which different legs of the organisation can determine their own level of autonomy based on their needs and desires. Secondly, as this case study highlights, it reveals a correlation between decentralisation, flexibility and resilience.

To further understand the implications of both the SALT philosophy and the Starfish model, the case study documents and reflects on a pivotal moment for the Constellation, when it faced a situation of near bankruptcy in 2011. It follows the journey through which the organisation applied its community development methods

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[8] In the SALT acronym, for the letter L, some members and national teams include the word 'Love'. There is not consensus amongst Constellation members on this interpretation of SALT.

on itself, from which it derived innovative solutions. Drawing from the personal reflections of eleven members involved in this process, as well as my own observations as a participant, the case study explores the extent to which the SALT philosophy and the Starfish model have contributed to its resilience during this challenging transition.

Methodology:

This paper aims to explore the possibilities for development NGOs in a changing world. Drawing from the literature discussed in Sections One and Two, my hypothesis is that the NGOs which will be most relevant in the future will be those that display the following two characteristics:

> a. A decentralised model and non-technocratic way of working;
> b. An ideological anchor that fosters deep personal engagement and ownership from staff and members;

I selected this particular case study because I believed, from my personal experience as a member, that it would offer a useful example from which to test this assumption.

The sources used in this research are mostly qualitative. The subject matter is highly subjective, often deeply personal, and therefore warrants a qualitative approach, which is why semi-structured interviews were carried out. There were eleven participants, each interviewed over Skype or by phone, with interview times ranging from 45-90 minutes. A semi-structured approach enabled each interview to flexibly follow areas of particular relevance to the research in more depth, using some pre-determined questions as a guide[9]. Being involved personally, I have had to be reflexive, taking into consideration my own biases and perspectives and how they affect the research. Thus I have tried to present the data in such a way that identifies when I am specifically reflecting on my own personal experiences, as opposed to when I am analysing the experiences of others. Nevertheless, there is no illusion of objectivity in this analysis; the research is presented through the eyes of an active member who was part of the process of transition. The research may have been quite different if it drew from insights of non-members or perhaps members who had

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[9] The interview questions are attached as an appendix to this paper.

left the Constellation, as these people may be been able to provide more of a critical view than existing members. This would be a worthwhile exercise for future research on this topic.

Other primary sources include blog postings, organisational records, notices and emails; shared through the online platform[10] or directly to me by members for the purpose of this research. For a different perspective I have also drawn from two books written by leading experts on decentralised models in the business world.

The case study 'unpacks' the journey taken by the Constellation, from near bankruptcy in 2011 to its rejuvenation into a new model for 2012. It follows and reflects on the steps taken and the decisions made at each point along the journey. Using the primary and secondary data it assesses the extent to which each step or decision was a factor of the organisation's decentralised model (the Starfish Model) or its ideological anchor (SALT). Along the way, lessons for the future are also considered.

In the process of analysis the data was organised as follows:

Category	Heading	Research Questions
Background	What, or *who*, is the Constellation?	How does the Constellation define itself? What is the typology of Constellation Members and the nature of their involvement? What motivates them to get involved and stay involved?
Situation, Action and Outcomes	A pivotal moment:	What happened? What were the causes of the financial situation? What process and steps were taken to overcome the crisis? What were the outcomes? What were some members' reflections?
Contributing Factor #1	SALT as an ideological anchor;	What was the role of SALT in the process of regeneration?
Contributing Factor #2	The Starfish Model;	What was the significance of the Starfish Model in this process?

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[10] The Constellation's online platform is also referred to as 'NING'.

Selection of Interviewees:

With the guidance of the Constellation's Global Support Team, the interview recruitment process was carried out as follows:

1. The research was announced on 'NING', the organisation's online forum (accessible by all active members who have internet connection).
2. Participants were asked to assess their own eligibility according the following criteria:
    i. Professionals in their industry;
    ii. Active members of The Constellation[11]
    iii. Representative of at least one membership group within the network, such as: founding members, board members, coaches, global support team facilitators, national facilitation teams or active members involved in the transition into the new structure.
    iv. Did not identify themselves as being from a marginalised population.

Below is a table with a profile of the eleven participants, with details on their background with the organisation, geographic locations at the time of the interview, and the nature of their current involvement. An explanation of roles is provided at the bottom of the table:

Number	Location	Introduction	2012 Involvement	Paid or Voluntary
1	Belgium	Founding Group	Board Member; Coach;	Mixed
2	France	Founding Group	GST Facilitator; Coach	Mixed
3	Spain	Founding Group	Board Member; Coach	Voluntary
4	India	Participant at a training workshop on CLCP	GST Facilitator; Coach; NFT Member (India); Various Work Packages	Mixed
5	Indonesia	Translator at a training workshop on CLCP	NFT Member (Indonesia); Coach	Mixed
6	India	Through a partnership	NFT Member (India); Various Work Packages	Voluntary
7	Guyana	Through UNAIDS network	Actively supports NFT (Guyana) and promotes CLCP and SALT widely in professional and academic	Voluntary

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[11] By 'active' I refer to members who understand and practise the organisation's SALT philosophy, can articulate the steps of CLC process and proactively interact with other members face to face or through the online network.

			circles	
8	Belgium	Member of an asylum-seekers community member visited by BelCompetence (Belgium's NFT)	NFT Member (Belgium)	Voluntary
9	United Kingdom	Founding Group	GST Facilitator; Various Work Packages; Coach	Voluntary
10	Uganda	Through World Health Organisation contacts	Facilitator of partnership; Various Work Packages	Voluntary
11	Indonesia	Through a partnership	NFT Member (Indonesia); Work Packages;	Voluntary

Explanation of Roles:

GST = Global Support Team – A team of paid facilitators and volunteers who carry out the organisation's main functions.

NFT = National Facilitation Team = Autonomous or semi-autonomous country-teams.
Board Members – Voluntary board (selected by nomination)

Work Packages – Mostly voluntary, these are pieces of work (small projects or ongoing) which have been distributed to members who act as project leads or contribute to working groups.

Coach – Experienced facilitators who implement partnerships by providing coaching services at a flat daily rate (all coaches are paid the same rate).

Limitations:

There were a few elements of selection process which presented particular challenges. The first was language. The Constellation generally makes every attempt to ensure that language is not a barrier to interactions between members. Bilingual and multilingual members are encouraged to contribute through translation projects, whereby blogs, forums and stories on the online platform are translated into multiple languages, including Thai, Russian, French, Spanish and Indonesian. The announcement for this research was made in English, and thus the respondents were all English-speakers, albeit only one interviewee spoke English as his first language. The research results may have been significantly different had the research included interviews with non-English-speaking members, as these members are likely to have a different experience of the Constellation as a result of this language gap. This isn't explored in any further depth in the analysis, but has been considered when reflecting on the overall reflections of the members interviewed.

The second limitation to the process was that the opportunity to participate was only shared with members who have access using 'NING', the online platform. As a result, the scope of potential participants was limited to only those with internet access. There are numerous Constellation members who are rarely online but who will have followed the Constellation's process of transition and regeneration through word-of-mouth with their country peers. It is possible that their reflections would have been quite different to those of the better-connected members, and this may have had significant implications for the findings. The research does not explore this issue in depth, but it has been taken into consideration in the reflections. A number of interviewees mentioned online access as an issue for Constellation generally and some of the strategies they use to overcome this issue are explored briefly in the discussion.

Analysis:

1. What, or *who*, is The Constellation?

The Constellation defines itself in the following statement:

> The Constellation is both a movement of communities and an organisation of facilitators. We are bound by our belief in the strengths of communities.

(Constellation 2012)

One of the unique characteristics of the Constellation is that it sees its role as facilitative, as opposed to interventionist or expert (Constellation 2012), based on the belief that that all communities can think and act for themselves and that they have the capacity to respond to life's challenges. In this way, the organisation aims to foster local ownership and stimulate local responses. In practise this requires 'unlearning' the traditional expert mentality and interventionist approaches to working with communities, which are practised by most development NGOs. The Constellation summarises this shift in the following table:

From expert…		….to facilitator
We believe in our own expertise	→	We believe in people's strength to respond
We respond to needs	→	We reveal strengths
You have problems. We have solutions.	→	Together, we have solutions
We mobilize expertise	→	We connect you with others

We instruct and we advise	→	We learn and we share

As a global movement, the Constellation endeavours to connect communities to share knowledge and learn from common experiences. The Constellation leverages from its grassroots associations and its global reach, providing mechanisms and platforms for connecting local responses - face to face, through story-telling and using online platforms. These spaces also provide opportunities for relationships to form within and between communities; thereby forming a network of support, appreciation and encouragement.

These aims are expressed holistically in the organisation's Vision and Mission statements:

Our vision

We are bound by a common vision in which -all over the world- communities are connected for Life Competence.

In a Life Competent community, people act from strength:

- to acknowledge that issues concern everyone

- to build a common vision and overcome obstacles to reach that vision

- to mobilize their capacities to reduce their vulnerabilities and risks

- to allow everyone to live out their full potential, and

- to learn from their experience and share it with others

Every community has the capacity to take action. But sometimes it struggles to do so. Facilitation teams can then stimulate and connect them.

Our mission

We stimulate and connect local responses around the world, using the Community Life Competence Process.

The organisation's members include individuals, organisations and communities spanning over 30 countries. Whilst there are some common characteristics of active members, membership of the Constellation can largely be viewed as a matter of one's own perception. Furthermore, due to the fact that it spreads both through formal and informal processes, it cannot really be known exactly how many members there are. For example, informally, some people are introduced to the

Constellation through friends or colleagues, whilst others are introduced through formal partnerships[12]. Some individuals are able to further ratify their membership by signing onto NING; however there are numerous others for whom membership is expressed simply through their practise of SALT or their feelings of solidarity with other members[13].

Of the Constellation's members, most have experience as community-based facilitators, facilitating or applying the 'Community Life Competence' [CLC] approach, which is a series of steps and tools for stimulating locally-based action for local life concerns, including HIV/AIDS, malaria, WASH and domestic violence, to name just a few. A simple description of the steps of CLC process is provided in the diagram below[14]:

Step	Question to address	Step for the community	Tools
1 **Mobilise**	*Who will join?*	Mobilize community & leaders	SALT visits
2 **Envision**	*Where do we want to be?*	Community generates its vision	Dream building
3 **Self-assess**	*Where are we now?*	Community assesses its current situation	Self-assessment
4 **Prioritize and plan for action**	*How will we get there?*	Community prioritizes and sets targets and plans action	Action planning
5 **Act**		Community takes action	SALT visits
6 **Measure progress**	*Are we making progress?*	Community measures their own progress and learns how to improve	Self-measurement of change
7 **Share and learn**	*We learn and share*	Community shares their actions and learn from other communities	Peer assist, Knowledge Fair, Knowledge Assets

(Schmitz 2011)

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[12] In the last 5 years, the Constellation has formed over 50 partnerships in 30 countries with organisations such as local women's groups, community-based organisations, UN country offices and INGOs.

[13] This is particularly the case for members who are not connected to the internet.

[14] This table was shared with links to resources for each step on the Constellation website.

The CLC approach has resonance with methods such as Socratic Dialogue (Society for the Furtherance of Critical Philosophy 2012), Participatory Action Research (Lewin 1946) and Appreciative Inquiry (Weatherhead School of Management 2012), in that it centres on dialogue and collaboration, the use of clear language, positive thinking and the levelling of power structures (Constellation 2012). It also reflects theoretical influences of thinkers such as Carl Rogers, Paulo Friere and Kurt Lewin, and the schools of phenomenology, humanism and liberation theology (Constellation 2012).

Facilitators of CLC are not employees or contractors of the Constellation. Generally, they are members and supporters who *voluntarily*[15] apply the approach in their own contexts; be it their own community, organisation or even their own family. They receive accompaniment from a Global Support Team [GST], a small group of 'staff' (some are paid, others choose to volunteer) who oversee the organisation's main functions. Other roles include the 67 'coaches', who are highly experienced CLC facilitators occasionally contracted by the Constellation to train and accompany new facilitators during the implementation of partnerships. Beyond this there are numerous other working groups and country teams (varying in their chosen level of autonomy) as well as individuals representing the private sector, the wider development community and the families and friends of other Constellation members. The community is diverse and open and it is this aspect particularly which makes the Constellation seem more like a movement, and less like an organisation.

This is particularly echoed in the interview data. Interviewees were asked; '*what motivated you to become a member, what motivates you to stay a member and what benefits have you enjoyed as a result of your involvement?*' From their responses, I have been able to identify four key motivations:

- The benefits of applying the principles of SALT and CLC in their personal life;
- Learning, development and professional opportunities;
- A belief in the Constellation's approaches;
- Shared values and sense of community.

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[15] Whilst the members are not paid facilitation fees by the Constellation, some members are paid to implement the approaches as part of their paid jobs with other organisations.

Whilst each of these motivations were mentioned by at least four respondents, it is particularly interesting to note that the sense of shared values and community had the strongest response, with seven of the eleven interviewees identifying it as a motivating factor for their involvement. As one member said;

> We accept that we all learn from each other… There are no sinners and no saints. We don't apportion any moral judgement as we go… it creates a relatively safe environment. Safe to be human. Safe to make mistakes. Safe to share dreams. It makes us more creative and more courageous. The day we say let's dream together… we can do that because we are free from hierarchy.

(Interviewee #1)

The next strongest motivation for the group was related to a belief in the approaches and principles of the Constellation and how these had affected their personal lives, mentioned by six of the eleven respondents. One interviewee shared particularly how her involvement had changed how she interacted with colleagues;

> Some of my colleagues now say I am more humble and happier, smiling a lot. I used to be not as good a person – I was pushy and rude and opinionated… the only one who is right. I thought I was superior but now my colleagues tell me that I listen more and I am a better person. I used to supervise 14 staff and many of them were not happy with me. But after SALT and CLCP they are happy with me now!

Interviewee #5

The interviewees' responses to the questions on motivation tell us something about the organisation's ability to engage members at a deeper, more personal level, rather than just professionally. From the member's accounts, it seems reasonable to infer that this community spirit and sense of belonging leads to greater personal responsibility by members for the organisation's well-being. Such an inference would be particularly put to the test during a crisis, such as the situation which the Constellation faced in 2011, explored in the next section.

2. A pivotal moment:

In 2011, the Constellation faced a pivotal moment. The organisation was facing imminent bankruptcy. Already lean and with low overheads (email to Constellation Support Team, De Rouw, M, 'Financial Situation and Implications', dated 2nd May 2011), its members did not have a financial buffer they could draw upon to see them through. Therefore, they had to face the problem, head on.

There were a number of factors which had contributed to the financial situation that the Constellation was facing. In September 2011, an explanation was published in an announcement on the NING platform, outlining the following reasons;

Reasons for the financial situation today:

1. The organization began with zero capital, but by end of 2011 had reached out in 29 countries through 48 partnerships;

2. Consistently invested time and finances in the below functions, <u>without direct revenue streams to support them</u>:

   o the growth and structure of the organization

   o technical and managerial support to country teams

   o connecting local responses through NING, newsletters and other tools

3. A large partner who did not pay a last installment, which was a significant sum of money;

4. There was a drop in partnerships due to the financial crisis as well as structural government and UN cuts for development funding;

5. Insufficient use of the wider Constellation network to address new opportunities and applications (most partnerships came from the personal networks of CST/ board members)

6. Insufficient clarity within the Constellation about what are the essential functions to be fulfilled leading in some cases to inefficiencies.

(summarised from De Rouw 2011)

Relevant to this discussion is the Constellation's business model, which was raised as a particular issue by a number of the interviewees, particularly interviewee 9, who said:

The business model of the Constellation was going to be challenged more and more as time went by…. It was somewhat inevitable.

(Interviewee #9)

From their descriptions and my own observations it is apparent that, since its early years of operation, the Constellation's business model has been akin to that of a training consultancy. Income has been generated almost entirely through partnerships with organisations that are interested in having their staff or field officers trained and accompanied through the CLC process. Over the years, around 40 partners, mostly UN agencies and INGO Country Offices, have commissioned the Constellation in partnerships. Rather than fundraising or seeking donor funding, the financial margins on these partnerships have been used to cover organisational

overheads, support National Facilitation Teams, maintain online platforms and invest in growing the global movement.

However, as explored previously, the Constellation's vision and mission are to stimulate and connect communities through the CLC process. The members see their work as much deeper than simply the provision of training services and accompaniment. It is about growing a movement. Therefore, partnerships are viewed as a *vehicle* through which this movement can grow; a means to an end, but not an end within itself. Income, therefore, has always been a secondary concern. In fact, my personal observation has been that some Constellation members view income as a 'necessary evil'. As a result, as one interviewee said;

> There is something in what we aspire to do which means that we cannot be focused on a business model that makes financial sense. We are trying to stimulate local response around the world. We are not trying to sell coaching days. We are doing things which increase the risk that we won't be able to balance the books. The ambition of the Constellation makes us less financially viable.

(Interviewee #9)

Hibernate or be more active?

When the financial situation was realised in 2011, a suggestion was made, by the founder and the board, for the members of the Constellation Support Team [CST] to go into what he referred to as "hibernation", scaling back to just 20% of their full-time-equivalent for a projected period of 3 months (email to Constellation Support Team, M. De Rouw, M & J. Lamboray, 'Financial Situation and Implications', dated 2nd May 2011). They were encouraged to seek other work or means of income to get them through the period

At the time, the CST consisted of six full-time staff, three of whom were based in the headquarters in Chiang Mai, with the other three working 'virtually' from their homes in France, India, and Belgium. Their response to the hibernation request was remarkable. They responded with an offer to increase their efforts. As was shared in a letter to the members, one CST member exclaimed, "No!.. We are not going to hibernate. Instead, we will be more awake than ever!" (email to Constellation Support Team, M. De Rouw, M & J. Lamboray, 'Financial Situation and Implications', dated 2nd May 2011). The result was an entire team of six people offering to work full-time for the equivalent of 20% of their previous salary. That was for the first three

months. Then they offered to work completely without pay for the second three months.

In July 2011, immediately after their decision to be more active, the team met in Chiang Mai to discuss a way forward for the organisation. They considered their options; whether to rejuvenate or retire completely. As one interviewee recalled from that meeting, the possibility of closure - that "no starfish lives forever" (Interviewee #1) - was considered by the group. However, as was the habit of the group, they turned to steps of the CLC process, which they believed, from experience, would stimulate solutions. Over the five days in Chiang Mai, they applied the steps of the CLC process as a team, starting with an exercise in dream-building and moving towards an action plan.

The interviews reveal that what was particularly interesting about this five day meeting was the fact that there was no pressure from any member to discuss their own concerns about the personal implications of the situation. Despite that they were significantly reducing their incomes; the discussion of personal issues was only raised in the afternoon of the fifth day, when all other topics had been covered. As one interviewee said; "There was no personal interest. This was total integrity," (Interviewee #1).

The meeting in Chiang Mai was a pivotal moment for the Constellation. It was an opportunity for the organisation to re-visit its vision for the world and for the CST to re-build a dream for the future of the organisation. It was a chance for the organisation to identify its strengths and consider the best ways to build on these strengths.

Horizontal engagement:

After the meeting, the CST set about engaging the wider membership for the next stage of the process. The NING platform was used to share the dream (in French and English) and to collect insights from members online. Emails and phone calls were made directly to members of National Facilitation Teams [NFTs] in countries like India, DRC and Indonesia, who were then asked to facilitate inputs from their own communities, particularly those who didn't have access to the internet, or where language was a barrier. Members were asked to provide feedback on what the

Constellation meant for them, both personally and professionally. They were encouraged to make suggestions for how to improve the organisation's support functions and structure, and to provide ideas for how to increase financial viability and generate new partnerships. Most significantly, they were invited to express their interest in playing a more active role in the Constellation's future (De Rouw 2011).

Responses from the wider membership were used to inform the organisation's new model and functions for 2012. During the synthesis of these responses it was revealed that many members wanted to become more active in the Constellation's every day operations and were willing to volunteer their time and expertise (many working in full time jobs) to do so.

With this new pool of resources available, and a wide range of skills and capacities to capitalise on, a few members of the CST met again, this time in Belgium[16], and, as I was in the region at the time, I was invited to join. It was here that the rejuvenation of the organisation began to really take form. The existing functions of the organisation were divided up into numerous small 'work packages' (De Rouw 2011) activities ranging from daily support tasks to individual month-long projects. In a practical sorting exercise, each work package was written onto a sticky note and then the dozens of notes sorted according to various criteria, in a day long exercise of discussion and debate. Examples of new opportunities for Constellation members included leading the process for writing for the Annual Report; managing the quality implementation of partnerships and moderating the online platform. These had all previously been carried out by the CST. For each package, there was discussion around whether it was essential to the organisation's mission or simply a 'nice to have'.

Once the work packages had been designed and prioritised, a Terms of Reference was written for each one and members invited to officially accept work packages for 2012. The response was remarkable. Today, there are over 35 members involved in what is now called the Global Support Team [GST], many taking on multiple work-packages. Nearly all are volunteers, however some have negotiated payment. This is usually for those who take on bigger roles which prevent them from earning

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[16] This was an opportunistic meeting, as two of the CST members were getting married the following week (to one another) in Belgium.

income through other means. For those GST members who receive payment, the process has been largely transparent. In the same way that all coaches, regardless of their nationality or qualifications, are paid the same daily rate, so too are GST members. There is no payment hierarchy. Everyone is valued for their contribution equally.

A promising future:

Today, 3 months into 2012, the Constellation has begun to show remarkable signs of progress, both in terms of financial viability and overall functionality. Financially, the Constellation is out of debt, and has begun implementing strategies for better cash-flow management and to generate necessary funds. More so, the efficiency of the organisation has increased. As one interviewee reflected:

> The total cost of doing business this way is roughly the same but yields greater value. We are therefore much more resilient.

(Interviewee #1)

Of the 35 members contributing to its support, many bring with them their own network of volunteers. In India, for example, the volunteer who took ownership of a work package to manage the organisation's website, has engaged members of his own local group, 'IndiaCompetence', to contribute their skills, knowledge and time. Globally, members are being equipped and empowered to engage with new partners, and to manage these partnerships autonomously or semi-autonomously.

Members' reflections:

During the interviews, members were asked to reflect on the process which was taken to overcome the financial situation. In particular, they were asked whether the process was inclusive and how well it reflected the SALT philosophy. They were encouraged to reflect on the unique strengths of the process. The responses were overwhelmingly positive:

> By far it was very democratic and the way it was announced on NING … it was very inclusive… there is no denying we are working as a team.

(Interviewee #7)

> The solution is really inclusive because it is international. We are working as a team and the richness is really wonderful because it transcends geographical boundaries. We find time to meet and work together and we share experiences. Before it was a structure that was more centralised.

> I think it was very inclusive. Really always trying to not stick within that little group [the CST], and… with the solutions that would just help that little group in keeping their jobs. It went much further than that. This was really about respecting the individual dreams in creating the bigger dream…. And inviting everyone to bring whatever they can…For me it's the commitment of people and the commitment to each other… the hope and the trust."

(Interviewee #2)

However, whilst all members answered positively, some did raise some suggestions for how the process could have been done better. In particular, the limitation to working through virtual platforms was raised as an issue. As one respondent said:

> I think it's being very inclusive as much as it's possible when you're doing it virtually.

(Interviewee #3)

> The bit that often occurs with us is that we… fragment and cannot come together again… this is one of the challenges of virtual organisations… plans get changed or left behind and lose direction. Owners feel frustrated when this happens.

Interviewee #9

The members were also asked to reflect on the outcome of the process, particularly the division of the work into 'packages', and the invitation to members to take ownership of these packages. Most reflections were positive, in principle, but raised questions around whether the allocation of people to tasks could have been improved. For example, one interviewee raised the possibility that having not looked carefully enough at the skills of those who accepted the work packages, the Constellation is putting itself at risk of inefficiencies and quality issues;

> We have a large group of people showing interest in contributing but are they able to deliver? Are we confident they can deliver?.. Interest does not mean the same thing as skills.

Interviewee #9

This is, in my opinion, a valid concern, and one that the organisation will need to be wary of as they remain open and decentralised. As some critics of strengths-based approaches argue the appreciation of strengths can mask weaknesses which, as a result, remain unaddressed (Staudt, Howard & Drake 2001). For the Constellation to remain resilient, this issue will need to be taken into consideration. As one writer suggests; 'There has to be freedom, but within a framework,' (Thomas 2011, p.27). This is a valuable lesson for both the Constellation and other NGOs considering similar ways of working.

The Constellation faced a crisis which I believe would have closed down most organisations. However, instead of focussing on the need for more funds, it reached out globally to unlock resources already existing within the organisation's membership base and its networks. As a result, the organisation has not only managed to survive, it has been rejuvenated and refreshed, realigning its living system but taking on a different form. The next two sections examine two characteristics of the Constellation's way of working which contributed significantly to this outcome.

3. SALT as an Ideological DNA:

As mentioned previously, SALT is considered by members to be both a series of separate elements and an entire mind-set. For me personally, it speaks to the deepest part of human connectedness, because it centres on how we interact with one another. As revealed in the reflections of the members, SALT is a transformative force. On NING, members report of the deeply personal way in which SALT touches their lives. Many credit the SALT philosophy for being the trigger and catalyst for change within themselves, their organisation or within their community. Furthermore, the transformative power of the SALT philosophy manifests differently to each individual, which is further evidence of its personal nature. The excerpts below come from members' blogs shared on the NING platform, describing their personal experiences of SALT;

> There are a lot of bright examples of applying SALT-approach in practice, but its theoretical background can be unclear. The only advice I can give for those who want to be aware of SALT is just to write about their impressions. You will realize that SALT is just a systematization of a human approach to life.
>
> (Dupina 2012, Russia)

> Very often, I find myself going to distant places seeking for the real meaning of life. However, through a few SALT visits to communities, in particular to the different so-called "abnormal, non-mainstream, socially marginalised" communities, time and again, I have discovered that in there lies the true and pure demonstration of "what it means to relate as human"… The countless hours and years of religious studies on the meaning of love is nothing compared to the few hours I spent with the communities.
>
> (Gloria 2012, Singapore)

> Looking back, before Life Competence, local response meant feedback after an intervention in the community - how they felt about what was shared and not really about what they could

> do for themselves. SALT brought new flavour to local response - community involvement from beginning to end. I recognize that to be successful in this process there are qualities that one must possess or reshaped, that of open-mindedness, self-awareness (being comfortable with who I am) and a willingness to try new things.

(Paula 2012, Guyana)

Today almost all members would say that SALT is an inherent part of the Constellation's identity, however, it is worth noting that the SALT philosophy was not always regarded as the 'DNA' of the organisation. The acronym was initially created to provide a philosophical foundation for practising the steps of the CLC process, but over the years has taken a life of its own, spreading widely and organically, as more and more members started to make sense of it in their own ways and share stories of its transformative power. SALT, therefore, is not just a set of principles for facilitating the CLC process; it has become the ideological anchor for the organisation as a whole, and for many of its members. This is the transformative power of SALT.

My experience of SALT has been transformative too. As a community development 'professional', I have always felt instinctively uncomfortable with the sector's tendency to focus on weaknesses and deficiencies. This is perhaps due to an awareness that, in my own life, focusing on strengths has had far greater impact on my well-being than focusing on my weaknesses. As a community development professional I have also experienced feelings of unworthiness – often wondering whether, through my work, I am in fact imposing upon other peoples' lives and communities who know far more about their own condition, and how to improve it, than I do. Like the discussion of cynicism earlier, I believe that my feelings of discomfort and unworthiness are both understandable and justified. They stem from a tension between the pressure to progress in a professionalised sector; to be valued for my specialist 'expertise', and the realisation that by subscribing to these notions I may be devaluing local knowledge and perhaps further disempowering those I wish to help. However, when I discovered the concept of SALT, I began to understand the true value that I can bring to interactions with people and communities. More so, I began to feel more comfortable accepting the value that these people and communities bring to me. I learned that listening – really listening – and meeting others as equals, leads to valuable exchanges of knowledge and

experience[17]. I was attracted particularly to the notion that through these interactions, *both* parties benefit. I discovered quickly that looking for and appreciating strengths in people gives them valuable encouragement and helps them grow. I also discovered that finding strengths can sometimes be immensely challenging and these are the moments where I, too, grow and learn. As in this case study, I found that appreciating strengths in difficult situations can unlock hidden and often very creative solutions, which may have otherwise been overlooked. However, perhaps the most transformative aspect of SALT, for me, has been the focus on human-connectedness. Through SALT, my relationships with others have deepened. From this personal experience I can infer that other members will have experienced similar benefits, which partly explains the spirit of volunteerism which resulted out of the Constellation's crisis.

Independent evaluations of the Constellation's work focus more on the application of the CLC process and less on SALT (UNAIDS 2005; WHO 2009), so there is not yet a body of literature from which to examine critiques of the SALT philosophy. Literature on Asset-Based Community Development approaches, such as the work of John McKnight (1976), as well as studies on Appreciative Inquiry (Weatherhead School of Management 2012) is a good place to start, as these approaches are reflected in the SALT philosophy. However, independent research on SALT would be a worthy investment for other organisations considering adopting similar philosophies. In my personal experience, there is often some resistance from individuals who are more accustomed to traditional top-down and needs-based approaches. I have had experiences where people have expressed concern, from a theoretical standpoint, that the approach is too 'touchy-feely', and doesn't lead to measureable impact. Interestingly, I have seen cases where these same people change their point of view once they experience SALT in practise. This is, again, the transformative nature of SALT.

4. The Starfish Model:

In a book titled *Loose: the future of business is letting go*, Martin Thomas (2011), draws from a wide range of examples in business, social change and even examines the arguably undefeatable cellular structure of Al-Qaeda, to make a case for looser,

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[17] See also Appreciative Enquiry; http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/.

more open ways of working and thinking in organisations. He argues that these more flexible approaches, whilst not new concepts, are more relevant today than ever, particularly in light of the increased complexity of the world's social, political, environmental and technological landscape, and the 'chaotic, confusing and contentious world in which we live' (Thomas 2011, p.168).

According to Thomas (2011) successfully loose organisations have particular attributes. They are able to 'develop and nurture strong internal cultures built on a high level of mutual trust' (Thomas 2011, p.168). They are agile, informal and collaborative, and 'believe in the critical importance of operating in an open and transparent way with all stakeholders.' Thomas' research supports that of Brafman and Beckstrom (2007), who coined the analogy of the 'starfish' to describe organisations that are highly decentralised, non-hierarchical and essentially leaderless. The analogy came from the discovery that real starfish, unlike spiders, have no neurological command-and-control centre. Instead, they function as a decentralised network their major organs replicated through each arm, so that, for the starfish to move, 'one of the arms must convince the other arms that it's a good idea to do so,' (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007, p.35). What is particularly interesting about starfish is that, if they are cut in half, each half grows back, resulting in two starfish. Furthermore, with some varieties, if cut into many little pieces, still each piece will regenerate into an entirely new starfish (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007, p, 35).

The constellation proclaims itself to be a starfish organisation [Schmitz 2010], and in the same way that SALT has become an ideological anchor, the starfish model has become a structural and operational framework for Constellation members. In their book, Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) offer a checklist of characteristics which can be found in genuinely decentralised organisations. As the diagram below shows, the Constellation displays all nine of these characteristics, although, I would argue, some occur more in principle than in practise. To un-pack each of these characteristics and examine them for the Constellation's context would be a very valuable exercise for understanding decentralisation. However, for the purpose of this paper, I have chosen the two which are most relevant to the Constellation's journey of regeneration in 2011 and 2012.

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The Constellation:

	Centralisation	Decentralisation	
There's someone in charge		X	There's no one in charge
There are headquarters		X	There are no headquarters
If you thump it on the head, it dies		X	If you thump in on the head, it survives
There's a clear division of roles		X	There's an amorphous division of roles
If you take out a unit, the organisation is harmed		X	If you take out a unit, the organisation is unharmed
The organisation is rigid		X	The organisation is flexible
Knowledge and power are concentrated		X	Knowledge and power are distributed
Units are funded by the organisation		X	Units are self-funding
You can count the participants		X	You cannot count the participants
Working groups communicate through intermediaries		X	Working groups communicate with each other directly
CENTRALISATION	0	9	**DECENTRALISATION**

Adapted from Brafman & Beckstrom 2007, pp. 54-55

a. There's no one in charge:

To assess the degree to which the Constellation satisfies this criteria, it is important to first understand what Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) define as having a 'person in charge'. In their description, they refer to the CEO or President of an organisation; describing them as someone who 'calls the shots' (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007, p.46), decides on strategy and has people accountable to him or her. In one sense the Constellation does indeed have a leader. He[18] was one of the founders and is recognised by other organisations as the Constellation's figurehead. He has the authority for official sign-off on administrative or legal papers, although he often delegates this authority to other nominated persons. By these accounts, he could still be perceived to be the organisation's CEO. So what makes him different? Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) put it down to the nature of the individual and their leadership style. They contrast the traditional command-and-control leadership of CEOs with what they describe as a 'catalyst' (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007). In decentralised organisation, they argue, catalysts play a key role in stimulating ideas, facilitating and empowering others to carry these ideas forward, but with a tolerance for ambiguity which enables them to take a hands-off approach (Brafman and Beckstrom 2007, p.128). They interact with others as a peer or friend, building strong relationships based on trust. Rather than rules or top-down accountability

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[18] Names are not used to protect anonymity.

mechanisms, they tend to use ideology to inspire change. To assist progress towards this change, catalysts engage and connect people, fostering highly collaborative environments where people's strengths are leveraged. According to Brafman and Beckstrom (2007), catalysts thrive best in decentralised environments and, subsequently, decentralised organisations need catalysts to progress. This mutual relationship is explained below;

> This type of leadership isn't ideal for all situations. Catalysts are bound to rock the boat. They are much better at being agents of change than guardians of tradition. Catalysts do well in situations that call for radical change and creative thinking. They bring innovations, but they're also likely to create a certain amount of chaos and ambiguity. Put them into a structured environment, and they might suffocate. But let them dream and they'll thrive.

> Brafman & Beckstrom 2007, p.131

Interestingly, there are some parallels with SALT in the description of a catalyst. For example, the catalyst **S**timulates, rather than directs. He or she **L**inks people to collaborate, fostering **T**eamwork. Whilst there is an agenda of change, there is ambiguity around the exact pathway or even direction. The organisation's direction is decided by the people, and the catalyst's role is to **L**isten and **L**earn to understand and **A**ppreciate the possibilities. He or she works by building on existing **S**trengths.

The interviews for this case study confirmed that the organisation's current figurehead plays a catalytic role, rather than a traditional CEO type role. For example, when one interviewee was asked what motivated him to volunteer his time for the Constellation's 2012 work packages, he shared;

> When I first met [the organisation's leader], he really helped me to see the strengths in me. From that time, he told me some encouraging words; like that I have so lived many unique and interesting experiences and when I share them with others it really encourages them. He showed me that I can give power to others. From that point that he told me this in 2010 I started to reflect on it, like me? I have this power? So I took on packages within the function of 'Share' so that I can share this with others."

> (Interviewee #8)

However, what the interviews also revealed was that the process of regeneration following the 2011 crisis was in fact the result of *many* catalysts within the organisation. These catalysts stimulated old and new members to take ownership of the organisation's future and then facilitated their involvement. Some of these catalysts were members of the previous support team (the CST), for whom, in a sense, this was their responsibility. However, others voluntarily took on catalytic roles. For example, members of National Facilitation Teams in India and Indonesia

took initiative to engage members within their own communities to take ownership of work packages or to join working groups. When two interviewees from Indonesia were asked how they discovered about the Constellation's financial uncertainty in 2011, they replied:

> Those who are engaged with the country team were sending out emails from the CST but translated into Bahasa Indonesia… Now the door was much more open and wider for everyone to participate. It was *we* and *they* before but now we have the license. Immediately I browsed the titles [of the work-packages].

(Interviewee #11)

> Last year in a meeting with [another member] in Jakarta. She explained that we have to be very independent because the partnership support (like from Asian Development Bank) was finishing and that we [Indocompetence] will need to be independent and possibly provide further assistance to the Constellation… non-financial assistance. This became our agenda and our dream.

(Interviewee #5)

The role of catalysts in the Constellation's decentralised model were a key part of its survival and the process of regeneration. Based on this understanding, as the Constellation and other NGOs look to the future, they would be wise to consider how they can attract and nurture catalysts to drive the organisations forward.

b. *If you take out a unit, the organisation is unharmed:*

This case study of the Constellation in crisis is an opportunity to examine the extent to which the Constellation is, in fact, decentralised to the point that you could take out a unit and it would be unharmed. The regeneration of the Constellation following crisis in 2011 resulted in the closure of the Chiang Mai office. The interviews revealed that this central hub and official headquarters for the organisation had symbolic meaning for many of the longer-term members and, for most, there was a degree of personal attachment. Some of the CST had chosen to relocate there with their families for periods of time, and many board meetings, global knowledge fairs and other key gatherings had been held in this location over the years. Furthermore, it was geographically close to a number of communities in Phayao, where the founders had drawn much inspiration for the CLC approach in the organisation's early years (Constellation 2012).

Despite Chiang Mai as a symbolic and operational hub, the organisation's functions were, in fact, not entirely centred here. Members of the CST worked through a virtual office, using collaborative platforms such as Skype, Google Docs and Dropbox. This

meant that contributions could be made to the day to day functioning of the organisation from anywhere in the world, provided there was internet access.

In decentralised organisations, Brafman and Beckstrom (2007, p.48) explain that each unit, by definition, is 'completely autonomous'. Drawing from examples of organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Peer to Peer online music networks such as Napster and Kazan, they go further to suggest that, like a starfish, if one of these units is cut off, the organisation will survive (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). Furthermore, a new organisation may grow from the separated arm. In the case study I learned that the Constellation does indeed have a number of units which fit this description, operating almost completely autonomously. Some National Facilitation Teams, for example, have become registered NGOs in their countries.[19] These teams use Constellation tools, principles and ways of working, but adapt them to their own context. They acquire new members and negotiate privately with potential partners, whilst keeping a voluntary relationship with the Constellation for mutual support and knowledge sharing. It is entirely possible that if the Constellation had closed down, with the right elements in place (including strong catalysts and an ideological anchor) some of these NFTs would have survived. In a similar way, with the closure of Chiang Mai as a symbolic headquarters at the end of 2011, the Constellation was decentralised enough to grow new units for maintaining the day to day operations of the organisation. As one interviewee said:

> The starfish organisation is such that at no point did we put in structures that had no functions… We seriously considered the option of shutting down the CST but you cannot shut down the Constellation. So it seemed stupid to shut down a CST that would be reborn anyway.

> (Interviewee #1)

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether there is no damage done to the organisation's ability to function effectively when such dramatic changes occur. Despite the positive outcomes of the journey documented in this study, there are still challenges today with financial viability, for the Constellation, and for these autonomous and semi-autonomous NFTs. Nevertheless, one can infer, based on the literature on loose and decentralised models (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007; Thomas 2011), that these issues would have been considerably worse had the organisation operated under a more traditional centralised model.

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[19] For example in Indonesia, Democratic Republic of Congo and, in 2012, in Guyana

As this case study reveals, the Constellation's Starfish model significantly contributed to its survival and regeneration from a crisis. In particular, the catalytic roles adopted by members who took personal responsibility for the organisation's future were crucial for mobilising others to engage in the work-packages for 2012. Further, the decentralised nature of the model enabled the organisation to adapt, evolve and re-form so that as one unit closed, others opened and strengthened. The Constellation's journey offers a glimmer of hope for a future where development issues will be even 'thicker' than they are today (Edwards 2011); requiring development NGOs and the people within them to be more flexible, resilient and more deeply engaged in issues of personal responsibility and human connectedness. The case study thus offers a useful example from which other NGOs can learn.

SECTION FOUR:

In the future, we start with ourselves…

> The future needs flexibility, not stability; the future lies in collaboration, not competition; the future belongs to the network, not the corporation.
>
> (Currion 2011)

As this paper has illustrated, cynicism in the development sector is understandable, given the failures and challenges we have faced so far. However, despite that the world is facing 'thicker' issues which require 'thicker' solutions (Edwards 2011; 2012), the development community need not fear the future, as there are already examples of promising practise, such as that which was presented in the case study of the Constellation.

This paper argues that a healthy combination of decentralisation and the removal of technocratic tendencies enhance the flexibility and resilience of organisations, as was illustrated through the experience of the Constellation. This suggests that adopting decentralised models and looser ways of working will enable development NGOs of the future to bend and adapt to an ever-evolving environment and to navigate the world's 'thicker' issues of environmental sustainability and climate change, to name two. Further, I have learned from the Constellation's experience that having an ideological anchor as a reference point for staff and members

generates ownership and genuine personal engagement for an organisation's future, which, in the case of the Constellation, was critical to its success in overcoming a crisis.

Given these discoveries, I am inspired to imagine the possibilities for NGOs of the future. The Constellation, through SALT, was able to generate ownership and personal responsibility for the organisation's future. Further, by operating as a starfish organisation, the Constellation was able to engage and empower members to take action, which resulted in a stronger and better resourced organisation. Thus I am inspired to believe that other NGOs facing crises can do similar. Whether their crisis is one of funding or function, or the more fundamental issue of staying relevant in a changing world, I am confident that NGOs have the capacity to foster the kind of personal responsibility and ownership that is required to achieve their vision. However, for many NGOs, and the individuals within them, this will be radical transformation. It requires an alignment of the living system; so that the values and principles of the organisation are reflected in their functions, operations and every-day way of working. Furthermore, it requires a boldness to move beyond technocratic ways of working and centralised, top-down models, and the courage to go deep into the personal and human, to reflect, transform and take responsibility. Ultimately, in the future, we start with ourselves.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions (Semi-Structured)

1. Tell me about your background and experience as a member of The Constellation:

    i. How and when did you find out about The Constellation?

    ii. What motivated you to become a member and what motivates you to remain a member?

    iii. What kinds of benefits have you (and your family or the organisation you represent) received as a result of your involvement?

    iv. Which Constellation activities, groups and/or partnerships have you taken part in, and what was the nature of your involvement?

2. Tell me about when you first heard about The Constellation's financial uncertainty? In particular:

    a. How did you find out?

    b. What did you feel / think about the situation and why?

3. (For Members): The proposed solution was to invite members to take ownership of specific "work packages" for 2012. Please share your reflections on this proposed solution, specifically:

    a. What did you feel / think about the proposed structure for 2012?

    b. How inclusive is this solution? (Explain answer)

    c. How does it reflect the SALT philosophy?

    d. Did you feel part of the solution? Why or why not?

    e. Which work packages were you interested in and why?

    f. Which work packages (if any) have you taken ownership of on 2012?

        - Describe the work package

        - Is it paid or voluntary?

        - Will you be working independently or in a team?

- What do you think you will need from the Global Support Team to carry out this work?

- Do you feel confident that you will have the support you need from GST and from other members?

4. (For Board Members, Global Support Team and Membership Assembly) The process of coming to a solution started from the Dream Building workshop in Chiang Mai, through to a planning workshop in Geneva and then resulted in the proposed "work packages" structure to take to members for 2012. Please share your reflections on this journey, in particular:

   a. Initially, what did you expect and hope, at the beginning of this process (in Chiang Mai)?

   b. How did the process reflect:

      i. the SALT philosophy?

      ii. CLCP approach?

   c. What were some unique strengths of this process?

   d. What could have been done better?

   e. What are some lessons you learned as part of this process?

   f. What are some lessons the Constellation learned as part of this process?

   g. How replicable is this process for other organisations facing similar problems? (explain your answer). Have you seen it done similarly before elsewhere? What needs to be in place to replicate such a process?

   h. How satisfied were you with the outcome (the "Work Packages" solution)? Explain your answer.

5. Do you have any other ideas or thoughts on the process of re-visiting the dream or on the "work packages" solution?

Thank you.