

AN APPROACH TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS NETWORKS IN ARGENTINA¹

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INTRODUCTION

In view of Argentinean socioeconomic scenario complexity taking place during the last decades, civil society has tried out multiple answers and different organizational forms have accompanied these processes. Social organizations' networks proliferation - which on different scales and purposes address multiple issues- arise as a tendency intended to be described throughout this paper.

Its purpose is to contribute to the comprehension of civil societal organizations' work, particularly the relationship they weave; by introducing concepts which enable us understand networks' complexity, and exploring into their particularities.

NETWORKS AS COLECTIVE ACTION PRACTICES⁴

Within the social science field, social networks subject became relevant during the 40's to study interpersonal relationships within enclosed community contexts. However, it is not until the 70's that different disciplines begin to develop the network idea related to collective action and social movements.

These days, there is a tendency to create different types of institutional webs, and the idea of "network" itself is recovered and re-signified from the most various spheres through which definitions-building is attempted. Bearing in mind this diversity and the recurring use of the concept, we consider important to clarify some basic criteria about *what we mean when we talk about networks*. Redundancy in the use of the concept can lead us to think about it as a "fad" and contribute to turn it into a non-content category⁵.

We understand organizations' networks as *a group of organizations, formal or informal, centred around some common aspect –thematic, territorial, organizational, etc. - where diverse ways of linking are recognized and through which different type of resources circulate*. Starting from this definition and combining it with our own work experience, we believe it is possible to enrich the analysis of networks including the collective action perspective.

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⁴ In this section, we take ideas from: Hantouch, J.; Sola Álvarez, M. (2007) "Redes de organizaciones de la sociedad civil. Practicas de acción colectiva", in *Organizaciones de las Sociedad Civil en Argentina. Similitudes y Divergencias*, CENOC, Buenos Aires.

⁵ To look deeply into the use and "trivialization" of network concept, see Rivoir, Ana Laura, *Redes Sociales: ¿Instrumento Metodológico o Categoría Sociológica?*, Revista de Ciencias Sociales N°15, Fundación de Cultura Universitaria, Montevideo, 1999.

In order for a practice to become collective action, the possibility of demanding or gaining any kind of joint benefit is needed. This type of action is distinguished by three factors: a group with an identity, a demand, and a public sphere wherein they can interact. From this perspective, networks constitute collective action practices to the extent that organizations are summoned up around a demand or cause, aimed at extending it into the public sphere, and defining in that process an identity which is not always conveyed with the same degree of clarity. Within networks, organizations do interact; they are mutually influenced and produce the necessary symbolic schemes for this type of action.

These three elements let us distinguish organizational networks from other articulating experiences, such as federations, strategic alliances or associated management, among others. Although all of them involve diverse actors linked around common problems which they decide to face up jointly, differences could be analysed from two elements: joint work temporality and the activity they prioritize as central. Thus, determining if the emphasis is placed, among other issues, on a specific project management, on the debate about a theme or policy, or the claim or support of a cause. In the case of networks, joint working tends to be projected in a longer term, and particular project management usually takes second place. Both elements characterize the link established among the actors.

In sum, when we talk about networks we refer to an organizational form, and, in that sense, it is important to highlight that even when organizational form does not determine the content, both aspects are interconnected.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF NETWORKS IN ARGENTINA

To describe the characteristics of organizations' networks, we have made use of an Organizations' Networks Guide built by the Community Organizations National Center (CENOC)⁶ as a source of information. The universe included in this guide does not refer to the whole networks which have historically existed, but those which, still existing today, could be registered. The Guide contains information about 137 networks which reaches more than 2600 organizations around the country⁷.

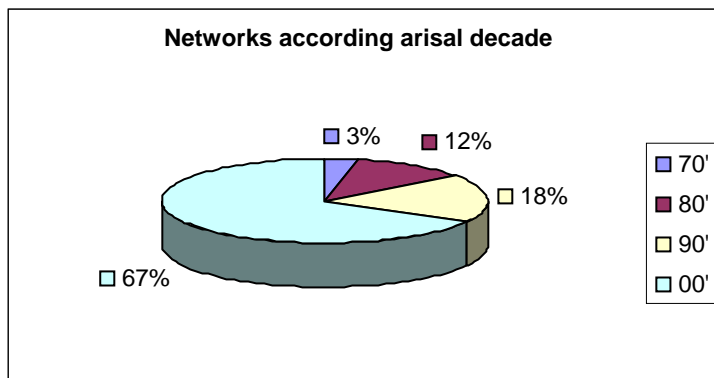
We will introduce networks distinctiveness from three different angles: their variations along time, the issues they integrate around, and their configuration sense.

- *Something about organizations' networks along time*

Regarding networks **emergence period**, it is observed that 67% of registered networks have been constituted since 2000, that is to say during the last eight years. Among the rest, 18% emerged during the nineties, 12% in the eighties, and 3% in the seventies. (Graphic N° 1).

⁶ Since 2003, the Center collects information about organizations' networks. The Guide and registration form are available in www.cenoc.gov.ar.

⁷ We consider important to clarify that throughout the paper we refer to networks mostly conformed by civil society organizations, but which, in many cases, are also integrated by social leaders, indigenous communities or individuals involved in a specific issue. There are cases where social programs or local governmental areas are also part of the collective space.

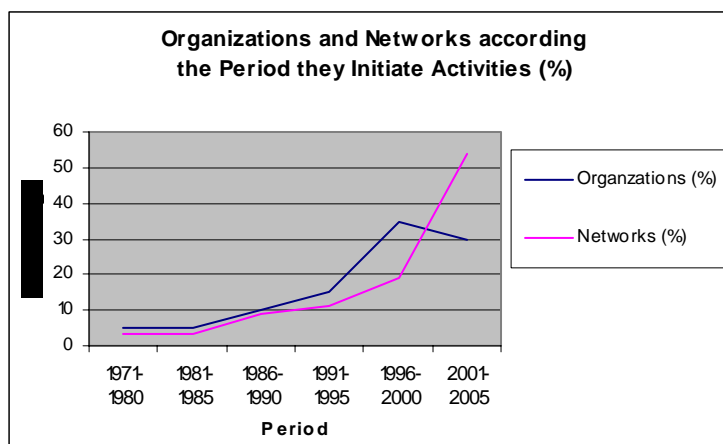


Graphic N° 1. Source: Self elaboration based on CENOC information, 2008. Universe: 60.

At first glance this data enables us to ascertain that organization's networks are a novel phenomenon, due to the fact that most of them have emerged during the last decade. Even more taking into account that, from the networks originated in the nineties, 80% were created after 1995.

This information does not necessarily refer to the number of networks originated within that historical period, but those which have lasted in time and still exist today. This means that the data, more than alluding to networks created in the last decades, refers to the continuance or "survival" of some of them. The year of creation, thus, does not indicate only the networks' emergence period but, essentially, their continuance in time.

If we compare registered **networks' year of creation** to the year when civil society organizations in Argentina initiated their activities, we will observe that they follow different paths. In Graphic N° 2 it may be noted that while the period when most organizations initiated their activities was the quinquennium 1996-2000, networks emerged, mostly, between 2001 and 2005. To analyze these tendencies in the light of social policies development taking place within the last decades it may be useful to distinguish their disparities.



Graphic N° 2. Source: Self elaboration based on CENOC information, 2008. Universe: Organizations: 7.500; Networks: 60.

The increase of focalized social policies implementation since the nineties, among other consequences, "implied a reformulation in the relation with popular sectors (...) which became visible in the emergence of new frontiers between local policy and territorial action. It also implied the multiplication of territorial intervention forms. As a correlate of these operation strategies, a very strong political framework dependant on state aid has

emerged. The new decision style produced important changes in pre-existent territorial structures, so much in community or social structures (NGO), as well as in political ones” (Svampa, 2005:78).

Hence, It could be possible to ascribe the predominance of organizations’ surfacing within the nineties, among other factors, to the worsening of people’s life quality, which gave rise to the proliferation of organizations oriented to meeting population basic needs such as food, housing, education and services providing; and, in parallel, to state action aimed at gaining organizations as counterpart of focalized policies implemented within the period⁸.

As well as in the nineties, organizations’ emergence was related to the appearance of an associative framework strongly dependant on governmental aid, something similar could be held about networks’ emergence within the last decade, related to the state operation modality in terms of social policy. Organizations’ articulation as a desirable characteristic became an assertion, and takes part in the discourses of public organisms as much as external donors. The assumption in which organizations who articulate strategies *reach more beneficiaries*, promote a *broader impact* or are even *more representative*, went so far as to constitute itself as a value bound to be imposed as a requirement in social project summons oriented to grant organizations. These management modalities have conditioned organizations, leading many of them to assemble to have access to current financing modalities, instead of assembling based on real networks’ potentialities as social integration instruments and channels for a broader participation (Cardarelli and Rosenfeld, 1998).

If we look into **each decade** and examine what networks have emerged, it is possible to identify specific characteristics within each period.

Networks created in the seventies and eighties which are still active today, centre around issues such as human rights, habitat, popular education and two of the topics strongly tackled by social movements like environment and feminism. This could be associated to the emergence and consolidation of right claim social movements in Argentina, especially those related to human rights during the dictatorial period. Although state terrorism policy and its consequent “disorganizational impact”, diverse resistance methods occurred along such period, and in the following decade, already within a constitutional context, intense protests took place embracing human rights, union, housing and educational issues (Cerrutti and Grimson, 2005).

Even when they represent a small percentage, the relevance of networks emerged in these decades which are still active today, lies in the fact that they have managed to constitute themselves into actors with leading roles within their issues of competence, establishing, in some cases, an interlocution or confrontation relationship with the state, and in some others, presenting themselves as actors with alternative political proposals. Most of them carry out their actions nationwide.

During the nineties, it is noted that most identified networks originated after 1996 (Chart N°1). This period coincides with the beginning of the crisis of the neoliberal model – which deepened from 1998 onwards- mainly characterized by a deep economic recession, the increase in poverty and unemployment indexes, and the widening of the distribution gap of socially produced goods and services.

⁸ For example, National Community Organizations Center (CENOC), a national governmental organism aimed at promoting civil society organizations’ participation in public policies, was created in 1995.

Period	Organizations initiating activities (%)	Networks initiating activities (%)
1991 – 1995	15	11
1996 – 2000	35	19

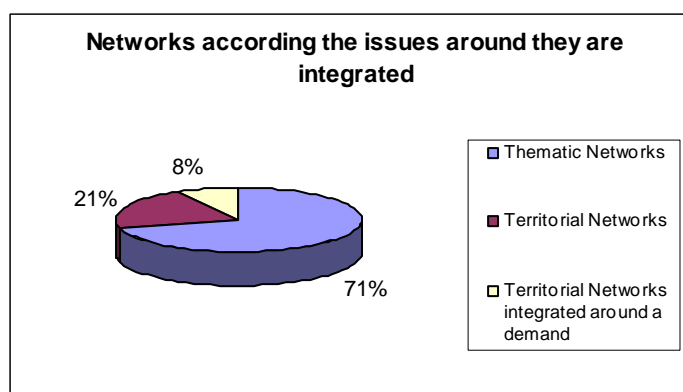
Chart N° 1. Source: Self elaboration based on CENOC information, 2008.
Universe: Organizations: 3.779; Networks: 17.

In the case of the networks originated within the present decade, from 2001 onwards, they mostly conduct their actions within the local sphere. This characteristic could be ascribed to their constitution as an actor of territorial interlocution, to the extent that many of them are linked to social programs' implementation. It coincides with new popular organization forms taking place between the late nineties and 2003: soup kitchens have grown and expanded, swap networks nodes have emerged, unemployed workers groups have emerged and expanded, neighbors assemblies have arisen, responding to the political and institutional crisis of representation (Grimson, 2005).

Regarding the linking forms with the state, they are performed mainly in local spheres; many times as the consequence of local governments' initiatives who summon up joint working for associative spaces assembly⁹. Some networks comprised within these years have been shaped as economic or social councils, productive consortiums, or worktables.

- *Something about the issues around which networks are integrated*

Regarding the **issues around which organizations' networks are configured**, on Graphic N° 3 we can see that 7 out of 10 networks are centred around a specific common theme, beyond the territory in which this theme is conveyed. In a minor proportion -21%- networks are centred around territory. There is also a small percentage of networks which, even though they have been assembled around the territory, they are centred around a particular demand. These latter are not "purely" thematic or territorial networks to the extent that both motivations seem to be present within their configuration¹⁰.

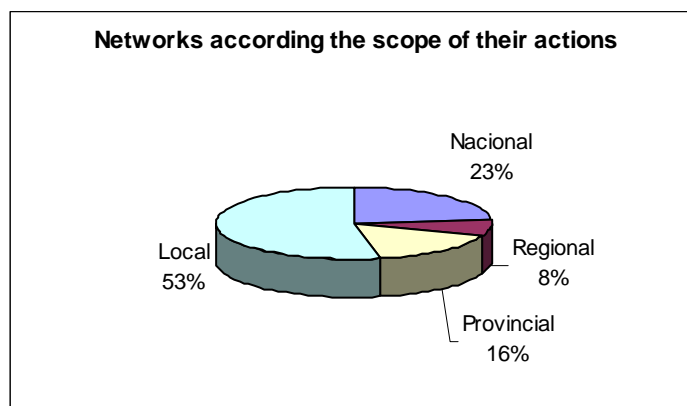


Graphic N° 3. Source: Self elaboration based on CENOC information, 2008. Universe: 137.

⁹ An exception is the case of unemployed workers movements, whose ways of articulation with the state have been extended in some cases into national spheres.

¹⁰ It is important to clarify that thematic networks' predominance could be related to the nature of the source used – CENOC Networks Guide.

In addition, if we look into the **scope of their actions**, it is observed that most networks around the country carry out their actions in local spheres; secondly nationwide networks appear, followed by provincial ones. Fewer of them perform activities in a regional sphere. (Graphic N° 4).



Graphic N° 4. Source: Self elaboration based on CENOC information, 2008. Universe: 133.

Regarding nationwide networks, it seems important to point out that probably many of them do not carry out their actions directly on the territory, but they develop strategies which enable them to reach incidence levels beyond territory. Half of nationwide networks reside in Buenos Aires City, which express the centralization of this city with regard to the rest of the country.

If we look inside regional networks, it seems interesting to highlight Patagonia as the region where more networks appear (33%), followed by Cuyo and Northeast regions. This doesn't mean that there are more networks there, but instead, these regions are those where regional action strategies prevail. The predominance of patagonic region responds to the low population within an extended territory where high levels of regional integration are expressed also at organizational levels. Furthermore, regional networks are all centred around a common theme.

As abovementioned, the issue around which networks are centred is tightly related to the scope of their actions, thus, it may be noted that all territorial networks are local. On the other hand, if we consider the scope, we may observe –contrary to our expectations - that local networks are not summoned mainly around the territory, since most networks which carry out their actions in the local sphere are centred around a common theme.

According to the aforementioned, we find that among thematic networks, most of them perform their actions outside the local sphere, that is to say they attain provincial, regional or national scope. As long as they are linked to a specific cause or demand, it seems possible that thematic networks are trying to conduct their actions beyond their own territory, looking for visibility on a wider scale. To the extent that their performance is aimed at including an issue into the public agenda or public opinion, they find purpose in expanding their action horizons searching for relationships with national or provincial actors.

When we look into the **thematic area**, that is to say the action field in which organizations' networks centre their work, it is verified that the topics around which they mainly work are Social Development, followed by Environment, Childhood and, to a lesser extent, Health. (Chart N° 2).

Thematic Area	Networks (%)
Social Development	25
Environment	10,3
Childhood	9,6
Health	8,1
Rights Defence	6,6
Social Economy	5,1
Education	5,1
Youth	5,1
Communication	3,7
Culture	3,7
Citizen Participation	3,7
Others	14

Chart N° 2. Source: Self elaboration based on CENOC information, 2008. Universe: 136.

Again, when we compare network's action fields with those of civil society organizations in Argentina, we can assert that so much networks as organizations work mainly on topics related to social development; but while among organizations that percentage represents more than half of the cases (56,7%), among networks it decreases, reaching only 25%. In fact, if we centre the analysis around the action scope based on the theme dealt with, it is observed that among those networks linked to social development and childhood issues, most of them work locally (60%); while those dealing with environment and health will do it on broader spheres, especially nationwide. The linkage to territorial problems on one hand, and the thematic specificity which demands articulation with extra-territorial actors, could explain this behavior in networks' scope.

Responding to the abovementioned social organization dynamics which characterized last decade, it is verified that most networks originated within this period -75%- work on social development issues. Unlike previous decades, it seems interesting to point out that in the last years, issues like social economy and citizen participation became relevant.

Finally, when we look into **networks' size** based on the number of organizations they are composed by, it is noted that, as indicated on Chart N° 3, most networks are made up by less than 20 organizations. These are followed by networks containing between 21 and 40, then those including between 41 and 60 organizations. Within the larger group, in turn, those containing between 6 and 15 organizations prevail, accounting for 65%.

Number of Organizations	Networks (%)
From 3 to 20	64%
From 21 to 40	18%
From 41 to 60	12%
From 61 to 80	3%
From 81 to 100	0
More than 100	3%

Chart N° 3. Source: Self elaboration based on CENOC information, 2008. Universe: 112

When we compare the number of organizations within networks with the scope of their actions, we can observe that smaller networks are mostly local (56%). However, within the networks where the organizations' number ranges between 41 and 60, the prevailing scope is national (61%). This tendency is reverted when analyzing larger networks groups -that is to say those composed by more than 61 organizations- where we can see that more than 80% perform their actions locally. This would indicate, thus, that it is not possible to establish a direct relation between networks' density and the scope of their actions.

- *Something about the sense of networks' configuration*

Within the range of collective experiences performed by organizations, it seems possible to identify two broad tendencies which could be useful to refer to the sense of networks' configuration.

A first tendency from which networks are conceived as collective action practices more associated to social movements. They present demands related to rights claiming and propose more flexible and dynamic linkage forms. They are networks who give special importance to the built of self identity as a different actor from the sum of organizations which gave rise to them. They find the sense of their practice in their collective identity recognized as a process of building of senses, through discourses, practices and positions. The values and political position are also essential to the built of network identity, and the operation forms usually arise from their concern for new forms of democracy. Even in some cases they are direct democracy practices.

This tendency could be understood from the point of social movements' definitions which refer to diffuse collective action processes in spatial and temporary terms, which feed on pre-existent social networks, so much on daily life networks as organizations' networks. From this perspective, social networks "cultivate" social movement, becoming, thus, possible resources suppliers to social movements "playing an important role in movement durability, keeping alive discussions, activities and social energy along less social mobilization periods" (Bebbington and others, 2006: 3).

The second tendency would be associated to a more functionalist, instrumental perspective, where the network makes sense out of project management and mobilizes around common activities. Not only do they find it important for their action to formalize their linkage, but also the structure which will shape the subject; usually constituting legal structures.

These networks are proposed as an articulation form where the links are essentially presented as horizontal, reciprocal and collaborative, emphasizing centralization on the building of trust bonds. They are also postulated as mechanisms to increase representative-ness, and, even in some cases, as possible ways to democratize social relationships. Unlike the configuration of collective identity, the relevance of this tendency lies in the possibility of joining within a space where the exchange of resources enables them to reach depth and continuity on organization management.

An example of these tendencies could be observed within the way which networks adopt for self-appointment; to the extent that the name represents a first step in the collective identity configuration process.

In this sense, it seems interesting to point out that 38% of identified networks mention in their name the type of institutions included. They mainly refer to organizations, but also to NGOs, institutions, groups, soup kitchens or community nurseries, among others.

Moreover, we could observe that although most networks include the word “network” in their name, there is a large percentage who adopts other forms of nomination (40%). They usually adopt names such as Forum, Movement, Table, Space and, to a lesser extent, Meeting, Platform, Collective or Union. This data becomes relevant not only regarding the identity network assembly, but concerning the possibilities of these kind of practices to constitute themselves as a recognizable actor under that name. It would indicate that even when many of them include themselves into this broader identity group called “Organizations’ Networks”, many of them don’t, revealing their stand on the meaning of this practice.

CONCLUSION

According to the abovementioned information analysis, we could summarize some general characteristics of organizations’ networks in Argentina:

- Most identified networks which are still active today have originated within the last decade, especially after 2000. This differs from civil society organizations in general, whose most relevant initiation period was at the end of last decade. In both cases, the phenomenon could be related to social organization patterns and operation models in terms of social policy prevailing in both periods.
- There are more networks centering their actions around a specific issue, than those whose actions come together from a common territory. However, it is noticeable that networks which perform their actions locally (which means in a particular territory) are mainly centered around a specific theme or demand.
- We also know that, in spite of source limitations to identify networks within territory, most networks attain a local scope.
- Regarding the issues networks tackle, we have observed that they centre their actions mainly on topics related to social development, environment, childhood, and health. The increase of networks working on social economy and citizen participation within the last years becomes also relevant.
- It could be asserted, moreover, that most networks are made up by less than 20 organizations.
- Finally, we have found out that while some networks essentially focus the sense of their practice on the collective identity built and on their gathering as an actor with political positions linked to claim practices; some others find their sense of assembly mainly in the possibilities the collective space offers them to exchange resources and deepen and broaden their organizations’ actions.

To conclude, we consider necessary to clarify quantitative analysis limitations, as it could lead us to jumping into hasty conclusions; and recognize the need of deepening the analysis in order not to fall on what Melucci calls:

“short-sightedness of visible’, which grasps the measurable characteristics of collective action (...), while overlooking cultural codes’ production and innovative practices, even when this is the main activity of movement networks, hidden within the daily life mesh, apart from being the base for their visible action” (Melucci, 1999: 14, quoted by Di Marco, 2003).

Even so, we dare to delve into the complexity of the phenomenon, introducing a first reading of networks characteristics, and trusting in the possibility of deepening into the outlook on future works. It’s in this sense that, far from showing networks as clear and univocal actors, and confining the approach to their qualities and potentials, we have intended to shed some light on their differences and heterogeneities opening up the debate about the sense of their action and the nature of their identities.

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