

# **The Origins of the European Coalition for Vision: Exploring the Formation of a Network**

**Karen Heard-Lauréote**

**University of Portsmouth**

## **Abstract**

Despite growing interest in EU-level transnational networks there is little understanding about how these form. This article investigates the formation of one network – the European Coalition for Vision (ECV). Using document analysis of 100 email exchanges, 12 semi-structured interviews and observation of 5 ECV meetings, it identifies environmental and organisational triggers, most important to the creation of the ECV. Findings show that while environmental triggers played a role in ECV formation, organisational triggers were crucial. In particular, the presence of network leaders, a network entrepreneur and a network mentor were vital for the successful creation of the network.

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**Keywords:** transnational societal networks, process of network formation, European Union politics.

## Introduction

In conversation with his line manager one day, a senior NGO employee said: “...*I need something else to do, something else which is bigger and bolder and brighter”<sup>1</sup>. The line manager replied: “...*well...why don't you go and try and do something in Europe*”. Although the employee: “*didn't have a clue how to go about doing anything in Europe*” (Int.B), he decided to try creating a new EU-level vision and sight loss network<sup>1</sup>. Today, this network is formally established as the European Coalition for Vision (ECV). EU-level networks and especially public-health networks, like the ECV, have become increasingly prevalent in the EU. Examples include the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), EuroHealthNet, European Public Health Network, and the European ESTHER Alliance. It is puzzling that, despite the growing role of such networks, “there is still considerable uncertainty about [their] formation” (Provan, Beagles & Leischow, 2011, p. 4). Arguably, it is the limited access of researchers to early developmental stages that hinders the investigation of network formation.*

To address this limitation, this article focuses on ECV formation; a network, which “exists to raise the profile of eye health and vision, help prevent avoidable visual impairment and secure an equal and inclusive society for those with irreversible blindness or low vision in Europe” (ECV, 2016). The network comprises “professional bodies, patient groups, European NGOs, disabled people's organisations, trade associations representing suppliers and research groups” (ECV, 2015). Selecting this as a case study offers a unique opportunity to explore a new public-health network and illustrate the conditions under which these emerge in a EU context. Practical considerations also underpinned this selection. The researcher acts as a policy adviser for the ECV and has professional contact with its key members. As a result, she had the access required to carry out the research and to interview members. By focusing

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<sup>1</sup> This anecdote provides an insightful illustration of how random, serendipitous and out of the blue the ECV's formation was and thus how difficult it is to research such networks like the ECV.

on the ECV, this article seeks to illuminate the key organisational and environmental triggers that create contemporary transnational networks. Moreover, it finds that although environmental triggers were important, certain organisational triggers were not just significant, but crucial, for the ECV's formation. Although the ECV calls itself a coalition and an alliance, for the purposes of this article it is defined as a policy network.<sup>2</sup> By doing so, the article draws on literature in the theoretical context of the policy network approach. It explores developments in the early period of ECV formation; from October 2012 to February 2014. The first date corresponds with the initial proposal made to establish the ECV as a "new expert forum". On the second date the ECV was formally launched. It is proposed that looking at how the ECV evolved over time presents an excellent opportunity to study the embryonic processes of network formation. Throughout the article, the social science method of process-tracing approach is employed to chart the process of ECV network formation, explore its evolution and narrate its stages of development.

The article adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore the ECV as a case study. It uses three complementary tools; documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Although the article's main study period is October 2012 to February 2014, the analysis includes all available documents up to October 2014. This was to provide a "buffer" period of eight months after the study cut-off date to ensure significant discussions were not interrupted mid-way through.

The documents accessed include: a) approximately 100 email exchanges (every email disseminated via the ECV email distribution list up to October 2014); b) other documentation spanning the same period, including all those documents circulated as email attachments to

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<sup>2</sup> Policy network is understood here as "sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared if endlessly negotiated beliefs and interests in public policy making and implementation." (Rhodes, 2006, p. 426).

the email exchanges noted above (comprising approximately 100 documents); c) observation reports of all ECV meetings that occurred during the study period, plus documents accessed as an observer of these meetings (meeting agendas and minutes, and ECV member organisations' web-based documentation).

During interviews, the actions, values and beliefs of individual network members was emphasised because the way network members think and feel about the ECV's origins may have influenced its formation. In total, 12 semi-structured interviews took place with the original members involved in ECV formation, amounting to 85% of the available sample. Of the two remaining members, one declined to be interviewed and one withdrew from the study post-interview. The interviews took place either face-to-face in London (3), by Skype (7) or by telephone (2), lasted on average 45 minutes and were used in order to reveal original network members' perceptions. The reports generated from participant observations<sup>3</sup> of 5 ECV meetings were also included as primary sources for the documentary analysis.

Participant observation facilitated the first-hand collection of data and allowed the real world observation of network creation. It also yielded information, which interview participants may not have wished to—or could not—discuss and also helped overcome instances where interview participants may not have been aware of certain factors (Harrison, 2001, p. 81). Observation consequently provided a way to “look beyond the ‘public’ and ‘official’ versions of reality” (Burns, 2000, quoted in Harrison, 2001, p. 87). The study adopted a thematic coding approach supported by NVivo. This involved identifying passages of text from documents collected via these three methods linked by a common theme or idea allowing the text to be indexed into categories and a “framework of thematic ideas” to emerge (Gibbs 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> The author is an observer member of the ECV network and participated in ECV meetings in this context. Original members of the network were identified via the email distribution list and as part of a snowballing technique whereby interviewees were asked to identify other initial network members.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section one offers brief contextualisation by establishing the ECV's composition. Section two briefly explores network formation triggers in the literature and argues that far too little academic attention is paid to network formation in political science generally; and public administration specifically. Section three focuses on important environmental triggers and argues that the potential threat posed by competitor sight loss networks, the learning opportunity and best practice example of an effective national-level eye-health and vision network and the impact of the release of new sight loss data have all been important in creating ripe conditions for the ECV's formation. Section four argues that certain organisational triggers were not just significant, but crucial, for ECV's formation such as the input of network entrepreneurs, a network mentor, the input of an experienced networking organisation, developing a shared identity around a common problem, and a shared desire to access the EU.

### **ECV Network Actors**

#### **Table 1 here**

As depicted in Table 1, initially, the emerging ECV network comprised 14 members representing five main types of actors: national, European and International-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs), European-level manufacturing/retailers/industry organisations and European-level organisations representing health professionals and clinicians. One year on, membership rose to 18 members as new European-level NGOs and academic/research organisations joined. By the end of the third year, membership was almost stable with the addition of just one more member to make 19 at the end of the study period. Only eight of the members were constant throughout the three-year period of study (UKVS,

IAPB International, AMDAI, IGA, EUROMCONTACT, EUROM1, Optical Confederation and ECOO) and these organisations are considered the core of the ECV's membership right up until the time of publication.

Some significant trends in ECV membership are apparent from Table 1. First, academic and research organisations joined later than other membership categories. This is due to the ECV's interest in the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2010 study, which was presented at one of the ECV's early meetings. This demonstrated the network's growing interest in data sources evidencing sight loss and visual impairment. The GBD results were part of the findings from the Vision Loss Expert Group, a global collaboration between 79 ophthalmologists and optometrists, led by Professor Rupert Bourne of Anglia Ruskin University's Vision and Eye Research Unit hence the latter's membership of the ECV by October 2013.

Also by October 2013, five new European-level NGOs had joined the ECV and this represents the clearest area of growth for ECV membership during the study period. This can be explained by an increased effort over the first year on the part of the ECV's initial core NGO members (namely RNIB and IAPB), to actively seek out EU-level vision-related organisations. This was intended to improve the ECV's representativeness, which would in turn improve its ability to achieve its core aim to raise the profile of vision and eye health and prevent visual impairment in Europe. Four of these new European-level NGOs (IDF Europe, EMHF, AGE Platform Europe and EGS) subsequently became stable network members.

Some noteworthy early members were no longer active in the ECV by October 2014; most significant is the case of the RNIB. As discussed in section four, the RNIB was the home

organisation of the individual most commonly recognised as being the one who generated much of the initial momentum to form the ECV. When that member of staff left RNIB to work elsewhere and a new Chief Executive took over and the approach to the ECV completely changed. Indeed, Int. K noted that the ECV “was never a particularly popular idea here in RNIB...it felt like a coalition looking for a purpose rather than a cause that needed a coalition to get behind it”. Nevertheless, the ECV survived the loss of this member and was able to attract new ones to replace it, such as the European Guide Dog Federation and Age Platform Europe. None of these are as strong national-level NGOs as RNIB however.

### **Network formation in the literature**

Academic interest and literature in transnational networks and network governance at EU level have increased in recent years and this interest spans the whole breadth of the social sciences<sup>4</sup>. There is an especially high level of interest in interorganisational networks (Robertson, 2011; Agranoff, 2003; Bogason & Musso, 2006; Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004; Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997). However, far too little academic attention is paid to network formation in political science generally; and public administration specifically (Krueathep, Riccucci, & Suwanmala, 2010; Bulkeley et al., 2003, p. 240; König & Bräuning, 1998, pp. 445-6;). Indeed, McGregor (2004, p. 285) talks of a ‘lack of guidance’ within policy network literature “as to theoretical or conceptual frameworks to explain how a network of relationships and interactions for a policy issue emerges” (McGregor, 2004, p. 385).

The literature that does exist informs this article by pointing to the significance of various

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<sup>4</sup> For a summary of abundant literature on the network approach see Heard-Laureote (2005).

triggers, that may kick-start network formation (c.f. Raab, 2002; Toke 2000; Krueathep, Riccucci, & Suwanmala, 2010; Henry, Lubell & McCoy, 2010). But these triggers are often explored in isolation rather than in the context of a framework, like the environmental and organisational trigger categories developed in this article's empirical section. Nonetheless, the triggers explored elsewhere in the literature can be categorised in a way that matches the framework elaborated later in this article.

For environmental triggers, studies have found that network formation requires *inter alia*; a ripe external setting such as an active political culture (made up of the informal norms and values in a political system) (Raab, 2002); formal institutional structures such as the regulations governing a given policy field and that field's decision-making processes (Raab, 2002); and a strong external coordinating function for the emerging network in the delivery of governmental programmes (Toke, 2000). Where networks are involved in implementation, clear and definable programs requiring implementation (Krueathep, Riccucci, & Suwanmala, 2010) are required as well as the inclusion of actors responsible for implementation within the decision-making network to reduce uncertainty. As such, in politicised situations, problem solving is made easier in networks thus stimulating their development (Raab, 2002).

Second, for organisational triggers, studies have found that network formation requires *inter alia*; a high internal management capacity within the network (Krueathep, Riccucci, & Suwanmala, 2010); similar belief systems among network actors (Henry, Lubell & McCoy, 2010) such as the perception of a situation as a crisis (Raab, 2002); an environment which promotes discursive practices such as face-to-face interaction for consensus building (Tomlinson, 2010); and the presence of actors with strategic capabilities or the existence of one or two focal actors within the network (Raab, 2002).



Third, triggers can be identified in the literature, which point to the benefits of being part of a network, which act as drivers for their formation. These include; the opportunity of burden sharing - by operating as part of a network, individual actors can get assistance from others on complex issues such as legal compliance and technical advice (Weiss, 1987); increased access to resources individual actors achieve by operating in a network (Weiss, 1987); information resources which spur mutual dependence among network actors (Mattila, 1999); intense (informal) communication, diverse knowledge, and trust relationships (Raab, 2002, p. 619); and reduced uncertainty in decision-making (Weiss, 1987).

It is also worth highlighting that individual organisations are more likely to access policy-makers via a network, because advocacy messages are amplified in network settings (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). The Commission's own NGO partnership document says it "encourages organisations to work together in common associations and networks at the European level since such organisations considerably facilitate the efficiency of the consultation process" (European Commission, 2000, p. 9). In fact, the Commission's call for societal organisations to work together as networks for better consultation goes back to 2001, marking the publication of the White Paper on Governance and a year later the Minimum Standards for Consultation.

Perhaps the most recent Commission (2010) publication to the period in which the ECV network formed, is the Smart Regulation Strategy. Here the Commission highlighted that stakeholder consultations are fundamental to all stages of the policy cycle. The subsequent review of Commission consultation procedures identified the costs and difficulty of reaching relevant stakeholders for their input and further emphasised its preference for engaging with

networks to improve its consultation processes. The Commission's 2012 Regulatory Fitness and Performance programme (otherwise known as REFIT) underlined again the importance of reaching those directly affected by policy implementation and that this might be best done by targeting collective groups of stakeholders. As such, the Commission's preference for networks presents a key environmental driver for network formation.

Although the literature discussed points to potentially relevant triggers for network formation, none of these studies offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the organisational and environmental conditions that foster network formation like the one offered here. This is problematic because there exists no basis on which to understand how networks originate. The proposed framework for capturing the triggers for network formation is inspired by the organisational studies literature, where research into network formation is more common (Provan, Fish & Sydow, 2007; van Raak & Paulus, 2001; Human & Provan, 2000; Sydow, 2004; Koza & Lewin, 1999). Despite the budding literature in this field, however, these studies, "...offer only a limited understanding of...what conditions, both environmental and organisational, might lead to the need for and ultimate emergence of a network' (Provan et al, 2011, p. 4).

What some organisation studies scholars have proposed is that network formation and network evolution are contingent on internal pressures in *and* between organisations and on external pressures like? (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003). These so-called organisational triggers refer to the influence, incentives and pressures of the network member organisations involved in the network building process, whereas the environmental triggers refer to, for example, key external events such as policy changes that occur as the network establishes and becomes formalised (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003). These triggers are arguably instrumental

in “spurring a group of otherwise autonomous organisations to begin interacting with one another in collaborative ways” (Provan, et al. 2011). They are thus important in understanding network formation and subsequent evolution. This study complements the work of Provan et al (2011) and Agranoff and McGuire (2003) and others by offering a more complete and nuanced understanding of the environmental and organisational triggers for network formation. The next section turns to the empirical observations of these network formation triggers.

### **Empirical observations: The key triggers of ECV network formation**

For the purposes of analysis and developing empirical indicators, the key triggers of ECV network formation have been disaggregated throughout this article into two distinct categories of environmental and organisational triggers. Notwithstanding the use of disaggregation as a heuristic device, it is clear that sometimes triggers are both environmental and organisational in their nature (cf. the presence of a network mentor and a network leader). The following discussion explores the two categories in detail and uses supporting evidence to justify each trigger’s inclusion as a factor generating network formation processes.

#### *Environmental triggers for network formation*

Environmental triggers for network formation are those occurring outside the network contributing to its formation and development and are, for the most part, beyond the control of the network and its members (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). Despite occurring externally, these environmental triggers can have a significant influence on the activities and long-term sustainability of the resulting network because they determine the focus of the network’s work and the agendas it may seek to respond to. This exploration of triggers for ECV

network formation found that while environmental triggers were important, they were not decisive for actually launching the network. The following section briefly introduces the three environmental triggers – the release of new sight loss data, a model example of network formation to emulate and the role of competitor networks –, which were most important to the formation of the ECV.

*New sight loss data release:* “...One of the things that kicks this type of coalition off is the release of figures” (Int.E). Indeed, the availability of new data can arguably provide a strong incentive for interested actors to coalesce in response to the problems highlighted. In the context of sight loss the release of two particular data sets was significant. First, the WHO released its Action plan for the prevention of avoidable blindness and visual impairment 2009-2013<sup>5</sup>, which underlined that, a) worldwide approximately, 314 million people were visually impaired, b) of which 45 million were blind and c) 50% of Europe-based visual impairment was preventable.

Second, in 2013 the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study was released (GBD, 2010) and quantified the burdens of 291 major causes of death and disability. Vision loss (including visual impairment and blindness) was found to remain a significant cause of disability globally. Several ECV member organisation representatives considered the release of new sight loss data like these a significant trigger for ECV formation and development. Indeed, it had a noteworthy effect on ECV members who began to think “crikey, you know we’ve really got to sort this out” and “My God that’s pretty bad, let’s try and do something about it” thereby spurring on the ECV’s development at that time (Int.E).

*A model example of network formation to emulate:* The emulation of other established and

well-functioning networks provides an additional environmental trigger for network formation processes. Interview data (Ints. A, D & H) suggests that the success of the UK Vision Strategy (UKVS) was another key environmental trigger for ECV formation. This national-based initiative presented an opportunity for learning from example. Launched in 2008 and reviewed in 2013, the Strategy - developed in response to global discourses on improving vision and eye health - set a strategic framework for improving the UK's eye health and outcomes for people with sight loss.

There are three obvious ways in which the ECV emulated the UKVS. Firstly, the UKVS brought together a wide range of actors - over 650 organisations and individuals<sup>6</sup> representing local and national-level professional bodies, clinicians, the voluntary sector, civil society organisations, and government agencies joined the network. The ECV has always attempted to emulate this inclusive membership. At its initial meeting, it was suggested that ECV members “be drawn from the widest possible range of stakeholders”.

Secondly, the UK example demonstrated to the ECV that a broad coalition is “do-able” (Int.A). “There were 760 different voluntary organisations supporting blind people in the UK alone ...never mind industry, professional bodies, groups, medical royal colleges...yet within a year of announcing the consultation...they had a first draft [UKVS] ...and I thought well if you can knit those... maybe it could work at the European level” (Int.A). Moreover, the UKVS “success” hinged on it bringing “together for the first time... all the different stakeholders involved in eye health”; particularly to get the optometrists and ophthalmologists “in the same room” given that they have a reputation of “fight[ing] like cat and dog” (Int.D). Attempting something similar at the EU-level appeared much more feasible

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<sup>6</sup> Including some ECV members i.e. the Royal, National, Institute for the Blind (RNIB), Optical Confederation.

as a consequence of the UK success.

Thirdly, the UK Vision Strategy demonstrated that the wider the membership of a coalition or network is, the more credibility it has and the greater its potential for being listened to by policy makers. In sum, the ECV was developed "... replicating what we'd done in the UK – learning those lessons and all speaking with one voice" (Int.H). Interviewee A agreed, "[the ECV was] just taking a leaf out of (the UK Vision Strategy)...book". Hence, for the ECV, the lessons learnt from the UKVS were considerable; "it raised...the political awareness of eye health and the political priority", it resulted in people "*actually* doing something" (Int.D).

*The role of competitor networks:* The emergence of a new network - which is perceived as a competitor in terms of its core mission - can provide an incentive for another group of actors to coalesce and form an alternative network. In the case of the ECV, the launch and early development of the European Forum Against Blindness (EFAB) added impetus to the ECV's own efforts. EFAB is a sight-related network, which was established around the same time as the ECV.

When the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) did consultancy work for the ECV, EPHA warned the ECV that it was operating in an environment of competing interests and named EFAB as its main competitor, which risked diluting its own advocacy role. Although EFAB was made up of only four main stakeholders, some ECV members pushed for a merger to remove the threat of this rival. For other ECV members a merger was not a priority: EFAB "will run out of steam, people will get bored of it. Let them get on and let it wither away. Taking EFAB in may be more of a risk"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Observed, ECV member, ECV meeting of 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013.

Unlike the EFAB, the ECV has been able to bring two traditionally hostile professions - the optometry and ophthalmologist groups - together into one network. Indeed, the ophthalmology section of the European Union of Medical Specialists (UEMS) and the EGS both joined the ECV by October 2013 after some active wooing on the part of key ECV member organisations.

The presence of the competitor network EFAB, acted as a catalyst for bringing together traditionally antagonistic groups within the ECV. This cemented the ECV's position as one of the major networks advocating for vision and sight loss prevention.

The three environmental triggers discussed – release of new data, a successful example to follow and the pressure of a competing network – could equally be seen as likely precursors for any type of political activity or network. But the application of the thematic coding approach to the qualitative data collected for this study suggests that the organisational triggers were far more important, indeed crucial, to the success of the ECV.

#### *Organisational triggers for network formation*

The empirical evidence points to a range of organisational triggers, such as the existence of network entrepreneurs, network mentors and network leaders, which are under the control of the original members and which assisted the emergence of the network. The following sections explore each of these triggers in turn.

*The role of network entrepreneurs:* The long-term success of initiatives to build networks is not a given and networks may fail for a number of reasons including lack of interest/buy-in from potential members, time and resource constraints, and an inability to coalesce around

shared problems. Indeed, network formation processes are often kick-started and assured over time by the role of key actors, who by exerting their influence and providing momentum drive the process forward (c.f. the role of entrepreneurs in the formation of firms in McQuaid, 1996). Such actors can be described as network entrepreneurs (Rubin, 1999, p. 335). These are individuals instrumental in organizing, facilitating and managing a network from the outset, and doing so with considerable personal initiative and risk. These traits of enterprise and risk taking can be best explained in relation to the network entrepreneurs involved in the ECV case. The initiative of the two key network entrepreneurs discussed in more detail below was evident in their ability to scan the EU health network horizon, and identify and grasp the opportunity to act and initiate a network independently. However, such entrepreneurs undertook considerable risk, since there was no guarantee that there would be enough interest from the vision and sight loss community. Equally, there was no guarantee that entrepreneurs could gather the necessary financial or other administrative support from potential network members.

ECV members diverged when naming the primary network entrepreneur. As far as a group of NGO-type members was concerned, a neutral broker bringing together diverse actors was crucial whereas for industry and manufacturing-type member organizations, a strong and forceful industry-focused voice was the key. With regard to the former, Allen (of The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)) was identified as the key “shaker and...mover” (Int.E). For another member, the ECV was about “...(Allen)” who was the “inspiration” behind the network “and his boss (...King) thinking this is something [they wanted to do] and they pursued it” (Int.A); not so much as an “organisation-owned agenda” but as a personal initiative.

But ECV member organisations representing industry and manufacturing usually singled out



Nevin of The European Council of Optometry and Optics (ECOO). He was described as a “very active” network member, who with his affiliated organisation ECOO, “gave a lot of time and resources to make things happen”. Even though people disagreed as to who the 'entrepreneur' was, everyone agreed that it was vital for one person to generate the momentum to successfully create the network.

*The importance of mentoring:* The role of a mentor in introducing individuals to networks is well documented (cf. Fombrun 1982) yet the presence of an effective mentor is also a key driver in creating new networks. In the case of the ECV, the contribution of the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) and its then Secretary General; Kosinska, was identified as a second significant organisational trigger for the formation of the ECV. Both EPHA (comprised of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups) and Kosinska acted informally as the ECV network's mentor – defined here as an experienced and trusted advisor. Indeed, advice, guidance and support to nascent networks and coalitions in the public health sector are an offshoot of EPHA's advocacy work. EPHA's own agency in seeking out networks to assist with their formation processes suggests that this trigger can also be considered an environmental one. Nonetheless, it is discussed here as an organisational trigger because of EPHA's significant role as an active and engaged member of the ECV in its own right and not just on the basis of its contracted consultancy work.

The EPHA/ECV mentoring relationship began in early 2012 when the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) and RNIB –two of the then ECV lead organisations - undertook an initial audit of the main European public health players, particularly in the vision and sight loss community. EPHA was identified therein “as a potential target we could...talk to, see how they could help us” (Int.B). In parallel, the ECV's RNIB network

entrepreneur met Kosinska, one of the most experienced European health advocates based in Brussels. This meeting has been identified as a key catalyst for ECV formation and development. In particular, the “encouragement and advice” Kosinska, provided was often described as instrumental; “... she’s an impressive person...she’s impressive. And obviously her networks and her knowledge of how health works in Europe...I mean very impressive...”(Int.A). The EPHA Secretary General was also described as being the one that “gave [EPHA] that sort of bite” and that she “was the person who gave you...the feeling actually you know if you were working with her your message would be carried forward” which was “important” (Int.A). In sum, the counsel, direction and backing of EPHA and Kosinska were fundamental to the ECV’s formation.

The mentoring relationship between EPHA and the ECV was formalised when the original ECV network members contracted EPHA<sup>8</sup> to “undertake a piece of work to map advocacy strategies, health access points and the public health agenda in Europe” (Int.M) in early 2013. EPHA was also instrumental in emphasizing to the ECV the critical importance of establishing one single effective eye health and vision coalition at the EU and so transnational level, where constituent parts do not compete against each other<sup>9</sup>. Overall, EPHA’s consultancy involvement has been described as “an important catalyst” in triggering the emergence of the ECV and: “...I think the relationship with them was important” particularly at the outset to the point of wondering whether the ECV would have got off the ground without EPHA’s involvement in those early stages (Int.A).

*The role of a network leader:* The contribution of network leaders to enhancing network effectiveness has been discussed elsewhere (c.f. Kenis & Provan, 2008). It is posited here that

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<sup>8</sup> Particularly by four members: AMDAI, RNIB, IAPB and the Optical Confederation who initially financed EPHA’s activities.

<sup>9</sup> Observed, ECV member, ECV meeting of 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013.

the presence of a network member organisation, formally or informally recognised by other members as network leader, is key to network formation processes. In the case of the ECV, the presence of a bigger and more established partner organisation with the capacity to take on a leadership role during the initial stages constitutes a third trigger of network formation processes. The role of the IAPB Europe as a network leader and experienced networking organisation was a significant organisational trigger for ECV formation. Established in 1975, IAPB positions itself as “a coordinating, umbrella organisation to lead international efforts in blindness prevention activities” (IAPB 2015). Senior IAPB staff were determined to do more to influence eye health in Western Europe. Consequently, increased efforts were made to get interested eye health community actors to “do something”. This led IAPB Europe leaders to link up with Allen, one of the key network entrepreneurs, at the ECV’s initial October 2012 meeting.

The IAPB is highly experienced in coalition building and network formation and its skills had a positive impact on the ECV’s own development (Ints.A&E). It is not just IAPB’s experience, which has been important for the ECV network formation. IAPB has also been perceived by the network as a neutral broker; palatable to both industry and NGO-type members. Indeed, as the ECV evolved and the role of the original entrepreneurs declined, there was an increasing accord amongst ECV members that IAPB and its Chair, Ackland were the key triggers or “the vehicle that was able to carry” the ECV network forward.

“...[W]e had no natural leader [at the start]... some of us moved that...Ackland should take it on because he was already active across Europe...and therefore the best champion to take...[it] forward and also acceptable to all members...he wasn’t partisan” (Int.H).

In sum, the empirical evidence suggests that the IAPB adopted a leadership role during the initial stages of ECV formation and did so as a long-established and experienced network coordinator. Moreover, the other network partners welcomed the direction given by a leader organisation.

*The existence of a shared identity:* The importance of developing a shared identity for network formation has been well documented (cf. Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Weiner & Alexander, 1998; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). In the case of the ECV, all original member organisations, which attended the initial October 2012 meeting did so on the basis of a shared interest. The aim was to:

“...look ahead and consider whether, together, we could have greater impact on improving vision and eye health, preventing visual impairment and supporting those with visual impairment across the EU and through the European Commission”<sup>10</sup>.

The attendees “unanimously supported” the proposal to establish a transnational network, which aims “to raise the profile of vision and eye health” and prevent “visual impairment in Europe” (IAPB, 2012). As one network member organisation representative confirms:

“I guess at heart it was really a reality that something had to be done and we had a series of willing partners and organisations who had all come to the table ... I guess all with different motivating factors, but with a great degree of enthusiasm around getting things done. So I guess that was quite a crucial factor - that willingness across

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<sup>10</sup> IAPB published notes of a meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012 and a proposal to establish a European coalition for eye health.

a series of different organisations to get things done”. (Int.C)

Moreover, these organisations shared a desire to first, raise the priority of European citizens’ vision and eye health on the list of economic and health policy priorities, second, tackle the present and future scale and cost of preventable sight loss and third, protect and support the rights of people with or at risk of sight loss (EPHA, 2013). The development of a shared identity had an inescapable pragmatic dimension, centring on the recognition that “we can do something better together using the same resource than we are all doing apart...” (Int.H). The gradual promotion of sight loss prevention as an “economic” or “workforce” issue was integral to constructing a shared identity among ECV members (Int.B).

However, it was not a given that such a shared identity could or would ever emerge. In the end,

“...all it needed was for people to say ‘but we’re as frustrated as you are, and none of us is getting anywhere, what about it’. And this as I say required...particularly in the case of ophthalmologists and also some optometrists who were a bit sniffy about other things...that actually holding our noses and getting on together was probably going to be the only way that our ... interests were going to get any traction” (Int.H).

Eventually, a shared willingness did emerge and “...everybody thought yes, it’s a good idea, we should do more...”(Int.A), and, fortuitously, this positive disposition manifested itself at “the same point in time. I guess that’s the reason why it eventually happened” (Int.G).

*The existence of a common problem:* The identification and mutual acknowledgement of a

common problem or “domain consensus” is a situation whereby the “possession of a domain permits an organisation to operate in a certain sphere, claim support for its activities and define proper practices within its realm...” (Hudson, 2004, p. 83). Network member organisations thereby agree the boundaries and scope of their activity. Applying similar terminology to the ECV case, this network began establishing the parameters of its domain and clarifying its potential operational sphere at its first meeting in October 2012, where, the Coalition’s proposed activities were discussed.

Three issues emerged. First, there was a clear willingness from the outset that the emerging ECV would highlight the inadequacy, incompleteness and fragmented nature of then available eye health, vision impairment and sight loss data. Increased information and data exchange were seen as key to tackling this overarching data deficit. Second, there was recognition that vision impairment and sight loss figured low on the EU-level political agenda – it was barely mentioned on DG SANCO's website. A good number of interviewees noted a “lack of awareness” (Int.I) and that there was “no strategy” (Int.B) at EU-level. A number of interviewees referred with irony to historical efforts to tackle blindness, visual impairment and eye health in the poorest countries, while activity in Europe, Western Europe particularly, and North America had been very limited; “so our feeling was it was a gap on our map and...this seemed to be an opportunity to fill that gap and do something useful in the European Union” on the whole (Int.A). Network members therefore shared a desire to work towards getting eye health formally recognised as a major economic and public health priority for the EU. Third, there was a perceived need to enhance the consideration of eye health in all relevant policies at the EU-level. This aligned with the EU’s Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach established in 2007. At its first meeting in October 2012, the ECV bought into the HiAP approach and asked that the Commission take account “of eye health

and the need to prevent avoidable blindness and low vision in all relevant policies and legislative proposals across DGs” (IAPB, 2012).

By June 2013, the original ECV members had clearly identified their domain of action and highlighted the common issues around which they were able to coalesce. These issues were formally recognised in the draft constitution and, by September 2013, in the EPHA advocacy strategy. The ECV member organisations were already working on these problems individually and were soon able to recognize themselves as part of a network, which was also playing a role in the eye health community (Provan et al, 2011, p. 7).

*The existence of a shared desire to solve shared problems at the EU-level:* The management of uncertainties, problems and controversies is well understood as a driver for network interactions (cf. Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004). In the case of the ECV, the original member organisations perceived themselves individually as relatively ‘small fish’ in the EU advocacy and lobbying ‘pond’, with little capacity to access EU decision-making. “[A]ll of them on their own have limited influence and limited budget to spend on European activities...individually all of those organisations lack credibility at the European level...” (Int. C). Accessing the EU as part of a coalition like the ECV was therefore seen as a viable option. The benefit of working as part of a coalition was “...quite obvious; self-interests become diluted when you’re working in a much broader coalition, and you’ve got a lot more credibility...you’ve got a lot more logos on a page to capture a politician’s attention...” (Int. C).

At the same time as the ECV was beginning to formalise itself as a network, sight loss and visual impairment were being increasingly linked to EU-level discourses on general ageing

populations and the active and healthy ageing agenda. The European Commission proposed that 2012 be designated the European Year for Active Ageing. The link between eye health and ageing meant that interested societal organisations redirected their lobbying and advocacy activities from the national to the EU-level. Some key original ECV member organisations had already gradually increased their presence at the EU-level. For example, ECOO moved their secretariat to Brussels in late 2010 and made “some small wins” and started to “achieve a few things” by working on a series of policy positions:

“So the internal appetite...to do more was growing...but it became quite apparent from some of our meetings with the key decision-makers in Brussels that we would have a lot more credibility if we were coming along with other organisations within the vision and eye health space” (Int.C).

Although traditionally a UK-based organisation, the RNIB, one of the ECV’s early members, was considering doing “...more, collectively, in Europe; particularly Western Europe and the EU” (Int.A). It thus became interested in exploring “whether having a European-wide agenda would actually benefit people in the UK” (Int.A). Similarly, IAPB Europe wanted to “do something useful in the European Union” (Int.A). As another interviewee noted, “we needed to...bring it[eye health] up the European agenda and hopefully start to access some research funding and...we needed to do something at the European level”. (Int. G). In short, the drive to tackle eye health at EU level constitutes a key trigger for network formation in the ECV case.

## **Conclusion**



The starting point for this analysis was the gap in understanding in both the political science and the public administration literature about network origins and formation processes. This is a significant oversight given the high level of policy interest in such transnational networks and the substantial impact (membership, leadership etc.) that these processes are likely to have on later network effectiveness. The “past” is a primary shaper of new choices because networks develop in a path dependent manner” (Bruun, 2002, p. 163); as such their initial formation (including the environmental and organisational triggers for their creation) impacts their subsequent development. It is this process that “establishes network traits that might turn out to be persistent as the network evolves” (Bruun, 2002, p. 163) and thereafter affect their future effectiveness and success such as their ability to influence policy.

The oversight is even more important when the increasing prevalence of networks in the EU, is considered, particularly in the public health sector. Studies like this one provide an opportunity to increase our knowledge of network formation processes and offer in-depth insights into their triggers. This is particularly relevant in the context of the EU - a case of multi-level governance where networks play a major role in policy making (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Against this backdrop, the aim of this article was to contribute to research on network formation by focusing on the formation of one network - the ECV.

Using interviews, document analysis, and participant observation, the article has captured and analysed the perceptions of network representatives by providing an original empirical insight into the processes of ECV network formation. As such, the article has made a start with applying this combination of research methods to understanding network formation. It has outlined key organisational and environmental triggers that are expected to be part of

such processes more generally. These triggers are summarised in Table 2 below. The main environmental triggers identified are the existence of competitor networks and best practice network models to learn from as well as the release of new data sets. In exploring these triggers, the article has demonstrated that significant external pressures can provide a catalyst for actors to coalesce as networks. But the creation of the ECV has shown that they are not crucial for network formation. Indeed, for the ECV the decisive triggers for network formation were organisational ones. Those explored here are the presence of a network entrepreneur, network mentor and network leader as well as the existence of a shared identity, the existence of a common problem and a shared desire to access EU funding as a means to solve this problem. So while environmental conditions are important for triggering network formation, it is organisational triggers that are *instrumental* to “spurring a group of otherwise autonomous organisations to begin interacting with one another in collaborative ways” (Provan, et al. 2011).

### **Table 2 here**

This article has set out to make an in-depth study of the core triggers relevant to transnational network formation by looking at a single case study (the ECV). The findings have, as a result, underscored how these triggers work in this specific case. In order to make these findings generalizable, future research should apply the triggers, as summarized in Table 2, to comparative cases in order to test their broader applicability and generalisability. This should be done in two steps: first, we need to learn more about how transnational networks form in the EU context and, second, whether the same processes are present internationally. This is important, as this article has shown that only by exploring the relevance of the environmental and organisational triggers it is possible to have a better understanding of the general

processes linked to network formation. Future research could also explore whether the response of ECV members to the triggers shapes the ever-evolving structure and outline of the new network and its effectiveness. Finally, it will be important to conduct additional qualitative work into each of the organisational and environmental triggers identified here.

As this discussion has demonstrated, there are overlaps between the two categories of triggers.

Disaggregating these and studying them individually may achieve further insights.

For example, having established that the role of EPHA as a network mentor was a crucial organisational trigger for ECV formation processes it would be interesting to explore its role in facilitating the formation of other EU-level health networks, such as, the European COPD Coalition<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, and to help establish patterns of generalizability, the triggers could be tested in other cases and, even, in comparative contexts across novel as well as well more-established networks to corroborate or contradict this article's findings. Such comparison could also bring out the relevance of these triggers in network formation processes in wider, non-EU contexts.

**7672 words (excluding references)**

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<sup>11</sup> COPD stands for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease.

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