

## Networking for learning: The human face of knowledge management?

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*The Pelican Initiative.* The Platform for Evidence-based Learning and Communications for Social Change is a community of people with a shared interest in exploring the linkages between evidence, learning, communications and social change. By sharing practical experiences, tools, methods, discussion papers and resources, the members wish to find out more about three different types of learning:

- (1) from and for policy-making;
- (2) in and across organisations; and
- (3) between and among a multitude of actors and stakeholders in society at large.

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This Policy Management Brief has been designed to summarise and complement electronically shared materials and to foster debate on aspects of evidence-based communications and learning.

*We know a lot more today than we used to about what works in development. In the face of the mounting clamour for accountability and for measuring the impact of development cooperation, evidence-based planning and 'knowledge management' have both received more attention in recent years. But simply documenting, managing and archiving the abundance of knowledge generated by development partners and stakeholders is not enough. Nor is investing in hardware and software in a dehumanised context. Knowledge and evidence need to be contextualised, enriched, interpreted, debated and disputed – 'set free', if you like – in order for learning to occur among a multitude of stakeholders with divergent interests and world views. One way of doing this is by networking. This, in turn, may or may not foster complex processes of social change and development.*

*Can we therefore say that networking is the human face of knowledge management? And that this human face is the link between static evidence and knowledge, between knowledge and collective learning, and between collective learning and social change? If so, what do we know about what works, what does not work and what could work when it comes to networking?*

*This brief is intended to contribute to the debate on networking for learning by exploring its potentials and limitations. It draws substantially on discussions and resource materials shared through the Pelican Initiative, as well as other literature and practical examples, and seeks to identify some entry points into this field for policy-makers and development practitioners.*

## What is networking for learning?

There are many reasons why formal and informal networking takes place. Although the *learning function* of networks may only be one such reason – others being advocacy, influencing policy decisions or gaining access to financial resources – one could argue that human interaction around issues and evidence always leads to some sort of learning. This is particularly the case when networks are issue-driven rather than coordination-focused, and when structures are fluid and open rather than rigid and confining. To explore the learning function of networks, it is therefore more interesting to look at the *networking process* rather than at networks themselves as the ultimate outcome of human interactions around evidence and knowledge.

According to Bohm's definition, dialogue – an essential part of networking – emphasises questions, enquiry, the uncovering of one's own assumptions and those of others, and a collective search for truth (GTZ Mapping of Dialogue, 2006). Networking is more than mere dialogue, however. It also encompasses more action-oriented elements such as policy influence, advocacy, negotiations, a search for common positions and social change.

It would be impractical to come up with a definition that embraces all notions of networking and especially the 'learning function' of networking. But what is clear is that networking is about organisations, institutions and individuals joining forces around a common concern (Creech/Willard, 2001:19). It is also about building relationships for sharing knowledge, goods and experiences and for learning from each other with a common goal in mind (Padron, 1991; Plucknett, 1990; Engel, 1993).

## What drives the interest in networking?

There are many driving forces behind the current interest in networking, which puts it at the very core of modern development cooperation. Some of these, as reported in the literature, are listed below (See Box 1).

Moreover, as wider multi-stakeholder participation becomes the norm in development cooperation, support for networking within and across state and non-state actors (i.e. civil society, the private sector, etc.) also becomes more important.<sup>1</sup> As more and more donors move towards sector-wide approaches (SWAPs) and budget support, or try to harmonise their efforts through large basket funding initiatives, there is an increasing need at country level for a multitude of actors to interact on a sector basis rather than individually as stand-alone actors or organisations (Ørnmærk, et al, 2006).

Finally, there is now a tendency for countries to look more broadly towards 'drivers of change', recognising the need to go beyond individual champions or agents of reform to include structural features as well as formal and informal institutions in understanding and supporting the development process.<sup>2</sup> Networking for advocacy and learning, support for the establishment of communities of interest through 'learning platforms', and general social movement-building has taken on an added importance in this approach. Networking shifts the focus towards more transparent policy-making, incentives for public action, and political mobilisation based less on local and ethnic realities and more on common issues and interests. The concept of drivers of change also takes account of relationships of power and inequalities in the operating environment of formal and informal institutions and agents.

### Box 1. What drives the interest in networking?

- The emergence of information and communications technology (ICT) in the 1980s and 1990s has made (global) networking much easier.
- A sense of urgency: the growing complexity and interrelatedness of major social, economic and environmental problems and the failure to solve issues like HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation and poverty makes multi-stakeholder learning unavoidable and relevant.
- A sense of frustration among public and academic actors because of the marginalisation of many research endeavours and the failure of research in recent times to have much of an impact on public policy.
- Private-sector experiments with knowledge management and its impact on the private sector have aroused the interest of the public sector and civil-society organisations in networking.

*Creech & Willard (2001)*

- Civil society actors want to improve their performance by means of collective action, when their work is hampered by a perceived lack of access to knowledge. Networks fortify creativity and critical thinking through dialogue and exchange.
- Civil society actors want to upstream in terms of analysis and activities, to join forces and to search jointly for new ways of understanding and intervening in circumstances that are complex and defy simple analysis.
- Finally, they want to upshift their impact, to take the focus of their activities to a higher policy level, enabling them to participate in public and/or government debates on development, and also to influence policy-making.

*Engel (1993), in the context of civil society  
(see also: Nunez & Wilson-Grau, 2003)*

## What does the process of networking entail?

Almost all networking is characterised by four types of activities: learning, information exchange, advocacy or advancing interests and positions, and network management (see Figure 1).

Most learning-oriented and issue-driven networks have fluid borders: membership is open (i.e. the network is easy to join and leave) and issues and members overlap with other networks. For example, various members of an advocacy network of civil-society organisations focusing on human rights may belong to another network dealing with gender equity and women's rights.

It has been claimed that it is this inter-linking that truly fosters the cross-fertilisation of ideas and sector-wide learning. Nevertheless, this fluidity may appear chaotic to development partners willing to engage in and support networking for development. There is also a danger of a few strong organisations or individuals dominating several inter-linked networks, thereby 'ring-fencing' policy articulation in a certain field.<sup>3</sup>

A comprehensive, comparative study of 28 Latin American networks underlines that their greatest value stems from learning together and advocacy (Pinzas & Ranaboldo, 2003). These two functions lie at the very heart of networking, whereas other activities – such as management and information sharing – are basically instrumental.

## What is it that makes networking for learning successful?

### ◆ *Pertinence*

Different actors and networks place very different interpretations on the pertinence of networking efforts, i.e. the adequacy and relevance of what the network does within a particular socio-political context. Since the members have many interests and backgrounds, there is a need to search for a 'strategic fit': the project goals must address needs and issues perceived to be significant by all the important members of the network (Ashman, 2003). Clearly, pertinence is closely related to the changing needs of members and the sectors in which they work. As such, it needs to be reassessed or even re-negotiated among members on an ongoing basis. The more a network is successfully able to demonstrate and communicate its value as a space for learning, innovation and advocacy, the more successful it will be in continually renovating and revitalising itself (Pinzas & Ranaboldo, 2003).

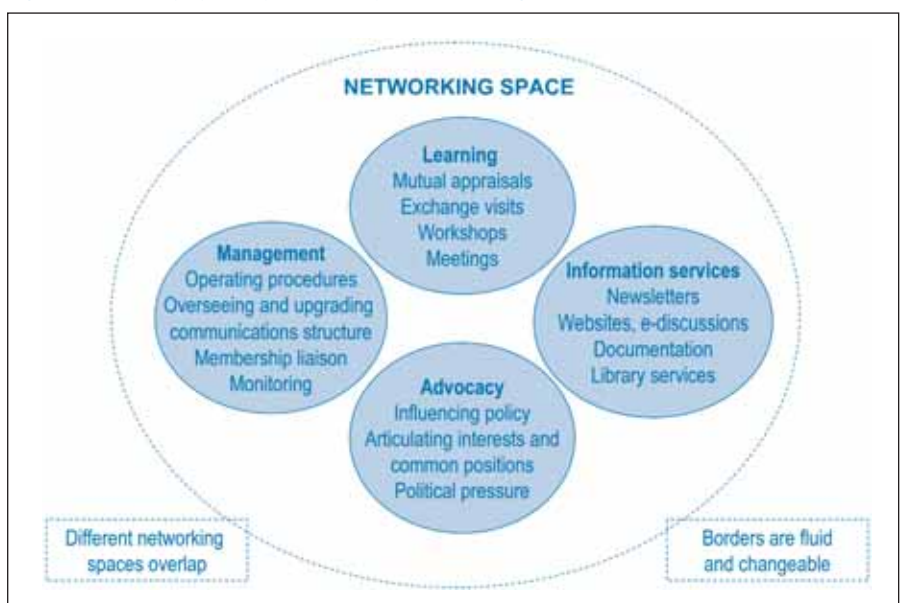
### ◆ *Added value, specialisation and focus*

At the same time as networks continually change and adapt to the socio-political context and the needs of their members, they also need to focus on specialist fields in order to be of added value. Many networks do not stick to their priorities well enough, but branch out into other topics and thematic areas. Those networks that do focus, whether they concentrate on a limited number of well-defined themes or limit themselves to a well-defined sphere of social and political interaction, generally achieve more tangible results. In other words, while networks need to be open to a diversity of views and ideas among their members, they also need to stay focused on their defined field of interaction.

### ◆ *Optimum diversity of learners*

An important issue to consider is how diverse and inclusive a network should be. This may depend on the network's set goals, its main activities, and the types of learning through which the members try to attain these goals. If the focus of the group is on retrospective learning (i.e. making sense of past actions and detailing lessons that can shape future actions), a wide diversity of learners can potentially provide a rich common understanding of contexts, trends, opportunities and constraints. For action-oriented learning, on the other hand, a wide diversity of learners may make it more difficult to agree on what information is needed and how it should be collected. It may also be more difficult to agree on priorities, either due to differences in priorities (for example, different information needs among policy-makers and development practitioners) or to funding considerations (i.e. who should pay for these activities?).<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1. Four key types of activities for networking



◆ *Facilitated learning*

Networks need to pay systematic attention to designing and facilitating learning processes among their members, widely sharing knowledge and experiences, and making proposals based on these. They need to be open to a wide range of ideas, experiences and knowledge. Learning will remain limited if the interpretation of evidence is restricted to a very narrow 'like-minded' group without sufficient local or on-the-ground representation. This is not to say that members of very homogeneous networks cannot learn from each other about specific topics. However, in terms of more cross-cutting development issues, the participation of grass-roots organisations and other local development actors is essential. The level of openness to other communities of practice and ideas is demonstrated by the ways in which the network validates and disseminates experiences, as well as by its readiness to develop strategic alliances with other actors and networks.

◆ *Minimum institutional stability and capacity of members*

Several studies have indicated that a successful network requires a minimum of institutional stability and an effective capacity of individual members taking part in networking activities. However, over-institutionalisation can also prevent learning, as it restrains the network's vitality and shifts members' attention away from the issues that brought them together in the first place. The question of institutionalisation, as well as the role played by members, is explored in more detail below.

**What is the role of network management?**

**Network management** addresses issues of performance and activities, such as planning, design, moderation or facilitation, implementing learning and sharing methodologies, developing strategic alliances, handling resources, and monitoring work plans. This is often done by a secretariat or 'facilitation team'. Network managers will also have to decide on a long-term operational strategy in relation to the institutionalisation or 'formalisation' of the network. A decision to keep the network more or less formal in nature may be a question of strategy. The formality of a network should not be confused with its vitality (see below).

The following are among the critical success factors relating to network management:

- **Formulating and focusing on common issues and learning objectives.** Given the need to stay focused, the management board should try and achieve consensus on issues that need to be discussed in the network, negotiate common positions as and when necessary, and summarise divergent views and shifts in the external operating environment to encourage further

debate. An eagerness to learn from a potentially endless list of relevant topics often leads to fragmented and unfocused networking. In order to make networking effective, the network needs to focus on a limited number of topics, prioritise these and make clear plans so that they can contribute to its identified learning objectives (Guijt et al., 2003). This will also help to attract funding for running the network.

**Box 2. COEP:\* A Brazilian poverty-reduction network thriving on personal chemistry and the knowledge of its members**

COEP is a Brazilian network of networks that is active in all Brazil's 27 states, as well as at a municipal level. It is committed to building a just and inclusive society for all, free of hunger and poverty.

The members of the network include government agencies, private-sector and civil-society organisations and parastatals. Members are encouraged to support and participate in development projects that combat poverty. The network is also involved in many advocacy-oriented activities aimed at mobilising resources to end poverty and promoting cooperation among its members.

The network had 800 member organisations in 2004 (up from 30 in 1993). Since membership of the COEP is voluntary, this huge growth is a sign of its success. The network makes good use of the substantial technical resources and diversity of its membership, and relies on different electronic networks.

While its guiding principles are clear and its statutes detailed, the network relies heavily on informal power, i.e. personal chemistry and the knowledge of its members. Although the COEP is non-partisan in political terms, the issues it deals with are inherently political. Membership of the COEP is institutional, but its quality depends on the individuals involved. Even though it has some strong personalities among its members, the network has remained largely free of divisive conflict and personal interests. It is exactly these paradoxical characteristics that enable the COEP to do what it does, and that provide structure and vitality.

*\*COEP stands for Comitê de Entidades no Combate à Fome e pela Vida*

*Saxby, J. 2004. COEP - Comitê de Entidades no Combate à Fome e pela Vida. Mobilising against hunger and for life: An analysis of capacity and change in a Brazilian network. (ECDPM Discussion Paper 57C). Maastricht: ECDPM. [www.ecdpm.org/dp57c](http://www.ecdpm.org/dp57c)*

- **Choosing the right network manager / network organiser.** A network does not require a director. Rather, it needs an organiser, a person or body with the power to convene and stimulate (Padron, 1991). The success of a networking process depends more than anything on this individual. The role of a network organiser includes:
  - (a) managing the flow of information across the network;
  - (b) keeping the members engaged by encouraging contributions and shattering illusions that block the process;
  - (c) balancing the need for consultation with the need to push forward with the performance of activities listed in work plans;
  - (d) monitoring the network's financial health (Creech & Willard, 2001, Wielinga, 2001).
  
- **Shared ownership of 'outputs'.** The impetus to participate in the network must come from the potential members themselves, who should take responsibility for the network and enjoy partial ownership (Bernard, 1996). If this is not the case, the network will become rigid and the active members will gradually turn into a passive audience. The on-line discussion of the Pelican Initiative<sup>5</sup> has highlighted the difficulty of moving from concentrated leadership and facilitation to shared ownership and a communal responsibility for networking. Especially in those cases where a network is supported by external parties, the time frames and resources are often insufficient to allow this transition to happen.
  
- **Avoiding 'egocentrism'.** An excessive interest in learning only from members' own experiences and debates may lead to isolation and blind network members to relevant experiences elsewhere. Awareness of what is going on elsewhere, for example in other networks, is crucial for identifying new topics, directions and opportunities for collaboration. Healthy competition with other networks may also help a network to grow, and will inevitably strengthen its members' abilities to contribute and compete (Engel et al., 2003).
  
- **Striking the right balance in the institutionalisation process.** Networking often goes through a process of institutionalisation in which interests, capabilities and expectations of working together are explored; where interactions take place between members and regular communication techniques emerge; and where objectives and structures may be redesigned.<sup>6</sup> Networks with less formalised institutional structures are more flexible, and hence better able to adjust to new issues, circumstances and challenges. Small and relatively informal networks can operate and be effective for a time with the support of a relatively small number of individuals who donate their time or who are 'loaned' by their employers on a continuous or rotating basis. However, as networks grow, they often reach the limits of the capacity they can mobilise by voluntary action. It is at this point that they need a small secretariat with dedicated staff and a small operating budget (Taschereau and Bolger, 2006).

### Box 3. Networking for supply chain innovations

The *Participatory Market Chain Approach (PMCA)* is a model developed by the International Potato Center (CIP) for strengthening networking and learning within supply chains. Seeking to enhance competitiveness and market access for small farmers by means of better collaboration with other actors, the PMCA promotes networking between different actors in the supply chain – farmers, middlemen, marketing experts, researchers, retailers, local politicians and representatives from the food-processing industries – to generate innovations from which all actors can benefit. The PMCA consists of three stages:

- (1) generate interest,
- (2) create trust,
- (3) foster collaboration among supply chain actors and support research and development (R&D) organisations.

In Peru, the innovations have included instant mashed potatoes made from native varieties, a new brand of potato chips, and two daily news bulletins on prices and supply volumes for potato varieties traded on the Lima market. The PMCA is currently being used in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uganda and Laos.

For R&D organisations, the PMCA creates an exciting learning environment, where action-oriented networking produces new effective partnerships that improve research and development outcomes over time. One big problem with this networking approach is the need for capable facilitators with the skills for chairing highly interdisciplinary discussions with a clear focus on market demands.

*Bernet T., Thiele G. and Zschocke, T. 2006. Participatory Market Chain Approach (PMCA), User Guide.*

*CIP, Papa Andina, Lima, Peru.  
<http://papandina.cip.cgiar.org/fileadmin/PMCA/User-Guide.pdf>*

### What sort of pitfalls are involved in networking for learning, and how can they be avoided?

Even with the best of intentions for creating all-inclusive learning and exchange opportunities for stakeholders, the political climate and other contextual factors may interfere. These risks need to be carefully considered, especially in countries where resources are scarce and actors operate in highly politicised and/or donor-dependent settings.

◆ *Networking as tickets to financial resources and political influence*

As we have already mentioned, the learning function is only one aspect of what motivates networking. At a grass-roots level, it is common for social networks to be formed among people of similar social status, education and wealth as a means of gaining access to informal finance (Hogset, 2005). Informal, and even more formalised grass-roots networks are also often formed along ethnic lines in many developing countries, something which is often reflected in the structuring and formation of parallel civil-society alliances, consortia and networks, at both lower and higher levels.

Especially in resource-scarce, politicised and conflict-ridden operating environments, networking may be used and ring-fenced by a small number of dominant groups as tickets to donor-funded programmes (e.g. around sector reform initiatives). A proliferation of networks as power blocks or gatekeepers may also occur along ethnic and political lines. This usually diminishes the learning function of networks at the expense of other roles, and limits access to resources and influence to a number of like-minded or more privileged members and organisations.

One way around this is to clearly separate the roles and funding opportunities for individual organisations from those of networks. A second option is to set up transparent and rigorous selection criteria for support.

◆ *Networking in information-sparse environments*

Despite the many new opportunities for forming global, regional and even national networking alliances offered by better access to ICT, regular access to the Internet and e-mail remains limited in many developing countries.

A national survey of media use performed in Kenya in July 2006 showed that only two per cent of inhabitants of rural districts said they had used the Internet in the past seven days. Even in Nairobi, Internet use was low, at 14 per cent. On the other hand, around 50 per cent of the sample in both rural and urban areas reported having sent a text message or used a mobile phone during the same period.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, there is still a need for supporting innovative approaches to networking in order to 'democratise' information flows and make multi-stakeholder consultations truly representative.

Moreover, in situations where it is hard for the majority of people to gain access to appropriate and actionable information, *information-hording* rather than *information-sharing* also means a concentration of power and influence. Many networks operating in information-scarce environments still suffer from a culture of information-hording. As a consequence, network members become more dependent on the 'informed centre' of

the network instead of taking on a shared responsibility. In other words, information flows become primarily unidirectional – from the centre to the outside – instead of being bi-directional and multifaceted. The learning potential is clearly limited in such networks, as is the network's ability to feed a representative range of views into policy processes.

Despite recent improvements, many government agencies in developing countries still operate with poor systems of knowledge management and information dissemination. They also lack the ICT infrastructure they need to support such systems. More importantly, many countries still lack the requisite freedom of information legislation that stakeholders need to hold their decision-makers accountable. Similarly, their citizens lack the claim-making capacity to argue for better access to and use of information. Moreover, country-level data and the findings of research and M&E exercises undertaken by international donors and research institutions rarely reach local stakeholders for wider public debate or an open discussion of findings. In many cases, reports remain 'grey' (i.e. internal and unpublished) because of restrictive internal procedures, lack of resources, or a lack of time set aside for proper public dissemination and debate.

In their vision of a 'post-study' world, Rist<sup>8</sup> and other evaluation experts predict a future in which one-off studies and evaluations are a thing of the past. Instead, databases are continuous and virtual, analyses are performed by multiple stakeholders

**Box 4. Social and institutional sustainability: lessons learned from local radio stations**

Drawing on lessons learned from the setting up of local radio stations in Latin America, Dagon (2005) distinguishes between social and institutional sustainability. He concludes that *'(...) owning the decision-making process and participating in programming are key elements for social sustainability, while institutional sustainability is the result of internal democracy and a favourable political environment.'*

In terms of networking, social sustainability can be achieved by encouraging shared ownership among network members, a clear sense of identity and by working with content that motivates and is fully relevant to members. While a network is to some extent more dependent on external factors for its institutional sustainability, much sustainability can be achieved by being clear and transparent about the 'governance' aspects.

*Dagon, A.G. (2005) 'Sustainability is not just about money' ID 21 Insights 58*  
[www.id21.org/insights/insights58/arto6.html](http://www.id21.org/insights/insights58/arto6.html)

and findings are posted more or less immediately on the Internet rather than being published after long delays in scientific journals. This type of 'evaluative knowledge', coupled with reliable feedback loops, cannot be bureaucratic, Rist claims. Instead, the knowledge base needs to be more communal – thereby diminishing the gatekeeping role of outside experts and the informed few.

Networking for learning and action based on evidence would clearly play an important role in this scenario. For it to work in practice, however, further investments need to be made in both national infrastructures for networking and access to appropriate information.

◆ *Networking in politically hostile environments*

Linked to the above pitfalls are the political threats that organised forms of networking may be perceived to pose to ruling political elites. The existence of political contestation, institutional pressures and vested interests, as well as the nature of power relations in a country, influence the policy process and the production of knowledge and research. In this sense, research and knowledge generation is itself an inherently political process (Young & Court, ODI, 2004). Putting the findings of research to use by a larger and more diverse group of stakeholders by means of networking and debate could be perceived to amplify such potential threats. In politically fragile states and during sensitive pre-electoral periods, relations between state and non-state actors are typically characterised by mistrust. There tends to be more of a reluctance to support organised forms of networking and the sharing of information on topical issues through networks, consortia and alliances.

As a consequence of a politically hostile operating environment, formalised networking around a particular issue runs the risk of being discredited, deregistered or in other ways silenced by ruling political elites. This is particularly the case when powerful networks are formed along ethno-political lines and less on the basis of cross-cutting issues and common interests. To avoid such situations, and to keep networking learning-oriented, openness and the inclusion of key policy-makers and decision-makers are both important factors. It is also vital that there should be a clear focus on commonly identified learning objectives. Trust can be gradually built up over time by the formulation of clear terms of engagement and a jointly formulated and agreed code of conduct.

The legitimacy of a network helps to overcome political interference with its operations. However, legitimacy is not something that can simply be declared. Rather, it has to be earned and consolidated over time.

Networks that meet stakeholder expectations for effectiveness and efficiency are generally seen as legitimate (Brinkerhoff, 2005). The ability to earn legitimacy and to forge a collective identity is linked to a number of factors. Taschereau and Bolger (2006) have identified these factors as the quality of network leadership, the credibility and profile of its members, the extent to which a network's vision is seen as compelling, its ability to respond to constituent and collective network interests, and its track record in producing results. Legitimacy that is earned over time enhances the network's capacity to bridge gaps between stakeholders, e.g. between civil society, the government and the private sector, and to exert influence.

Figure 2 summarises the means of overcoming some of these risks and challenges in networking for multi-stakeholder partnerships at the sector level.

**What are the roles of the network members?**

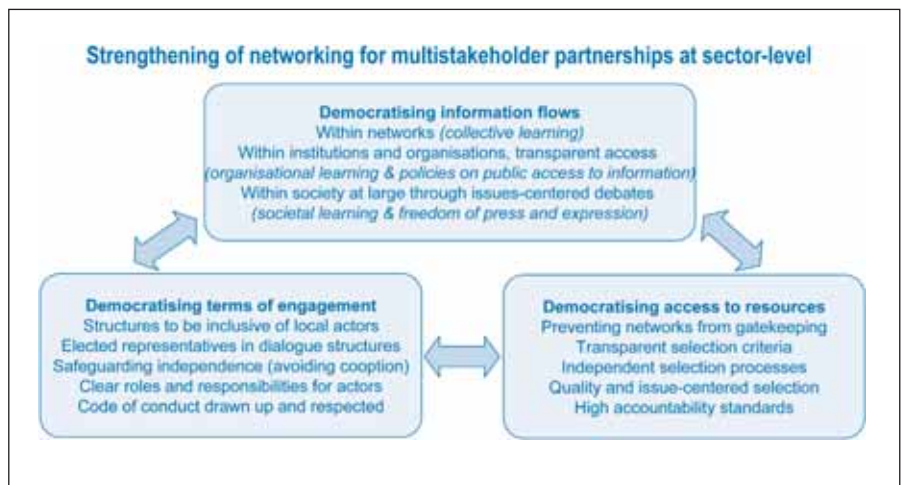
Members of successful networks would appear to share three basic characteristics:

- common attitudes and dispositions;
- an ability to contribute skills, access, time or money;
- a commitment to networking.

The literature highlights the following attributes:

- **Daring to share:** Network members need to be open, and willing and able to learn from each other. This may seem obvious, but in practice members must have confidence in their work and 'dare to share' it with others (Padron, 1991). Networks cannot flourish without trust. In practice, this means that networks and partnerships are more likely to be effective if they are founded by groups or networks of people and organisations

Figure 2. Key areas for strengthening networking (Ørnekmark et al., 2006)



that share a history of working together, and have formed relationships based on mutual trust (Ashman, 2003).

- **Capacity to contribute:** Members must be able to contribute skills, access to facilities (such as ICT) and time or money. If somebody is busy implementing a deadline-driven project or programme, with little time set aside for reflection and learning, he or she cannot be expected to engage actively in a learning network (Guijt et al. 2003). It is also vital to secure the support of senior management (Ashman, 2003).
- **Commitment:** Network members must be motivated by self-interest and consider networking as having a potential added value for their daily work. The golden rule for success is starting from one's own resources. Initial self-reliance guarantees continuity (Engel, 1993). This does not mean that no funding is needed for networking activities. However, if learning is to take place, funding must not be the reason why organisations or individuals decide to join a network. The initiators in particular need to be committed, as setting up and running a network takes a lot of effort. Budgets are often tight and it may well be difficult to produce tangible results from the outset.

### What is the donor's role: a sponsor or a fellow-member?

Even though initiating networking for learning does not require a high level of financial investment, effective networking requires a major investment in time, facilitation and adaptive management. This is why many networking initiatives require and depend on support from donors. Donors have at least two roles to play in networking for learning:

- **As a sponsor:** most networking initiatives would not materialise without the availability of financial resources. Almost all the literature stresses the need for at least seed money during the start-up and early operating stages, for example when an informal network wishes to formalise its structure. Some authors stress that long-term commitments are needed from donors, as recurring operating costs should not be underestimated. Despite this, networks are often funded like projects, which means that they receive support for a period of 3-4 years. Assuming that a network needs between five and ten years to mature, this means that funding stops as soon as it becomes most productive. Lack of funding at this point may lead to inactivity and a failure to recoup the investments initially made in the form of time, energy, and money (Kalaugher & Visser, 2002).
- **As a member of the network for joint learning:** The goals of a network may conflict with a donor's role as a funding agency. The more donors take the lead in defining goals, targets, partners and outcomes, the more they will tend to drive the network and reduce the openings for stakeholder ownership and sustainability (Ashman, 2003). There is also a danger that

active donor participation in networks will limit the level of openness in terms of learning from what does *not* work in a particular situation. However, at a national and especially at a sector level, donors also have a place and a responsibility – albeit a more modest one – to engage in continuous learning together with other stakeholders about the change and reform initiatives in which they are engaging. The role played by donors differs depending on the nature and purpose of the network (see Figure 3, page 9).

Clearly, the challenge for donors is to strike the right balance between the above roles, depending on the network's nature and purpose. This means combining sustained financial support with the lowest possible level of interference with the operation and management of the network. Evaluations of donor experiences and the sharing of lessons are urgently required. This could provide a much needed practical insight into the way donor agencies can more effectively promote networking for learning.

### Why and how does networking end?

#### ◆ Transformation

Networks are rarely formally wound up. Just as networking on a particular issue or interest starts and grows over time, networks may transform or merge with others over time, as issues and members' interests change. Where a more formalised network is contributing to a specific policy process or outputs over a limited period of time, the network itself may disintegrate at the end of the period in question. However, the members of the network may remain in contact with each other on similar topics in different networking spaces and *fora*. Rather than being indicative of a network's inability to sustain itself, the disappearance of a network may be a sign of its vitality and ability to respond to its operating environment.

#### ◆ Better learning opportunities elsewhere: voting with their feet

Another reason why a learning-oriented networking comes to an end may simply be that the members do not feel they can learn any more from other members, and therefore move on to other networking initiatives. This possibility is increased by the greater global availability of information and communications technology (ICT), which has created numerous on-line opportunities for cross-border networking.

Many principles of networking for learning converge with those of 'open space technology'. This methodology was developed to allow groups, large and small alike, to self-organise so as to effectively deal with complex issues in face-to-face meetings.<sup>9</sup> Open space



technology encourages people to take responsibility for their own learning and output. If someone is in a place where they feel they are not learning, or able to contribute, they vote with their feet. In other words, they simply leave and move on to another group where they think they might get or add more value and feel more engaged. Similarly, networks need a certain level of organisation, effective facilitation and management. However, for learning to occur, people need to be present because they want to be there, not because they have been told to be there.

◆ *Loss of energy and vitality*

A network must preserve its *vitality* in order to retain its essence (Wielinga 2001). Each network develops an operating structure as a complex of agreements, procedures, institutions, culture and material circumstances. A network may be said to be vital when energy is released by the interaction created by its structure. The opposite is the case, i.e. a network is inert, when it loses its flexibility. This is what happens when procedures and controls begin to predominate over enthusiasm and satisfaction. In fact, the more static and institutionalised a network becomes, the more likely it is to lose its emphasis on learning and advocacy as it starts to focus more on systems, membership coordination and access to resources.

◆ *Over-reliance on external donor funding and agenda setting*

The more dependent a network is on external seed money, agenda-setting, management and facilitation, the more vulnerable it is and the more likely it is to end prematurely when the cash runs out or donor priorities shift. There may also be situations in which the network itself starts to compete for the same funding as its members. A network set up by an external donor primarily to feed into its own learning or policy-making process may also lack sufficient membership motivation to enjoy long-term sustainability. This is particularly the case when donors see the formation of a network as ‘the answer to their latest priority’ (Taschereau and Bolger, 2006). On the flip side, organisations may join a network to promote their activities or services to the donor, and not to engage in genuine learning and share experiences.

It may therefore be more prudent for donors to support, boost and upscale *existing* networks, or to act as a catalyst for identified networking needs among particular stakeholder groups, rather than to create parallel structures and institutions which are rarely able to sustain themselves over time.

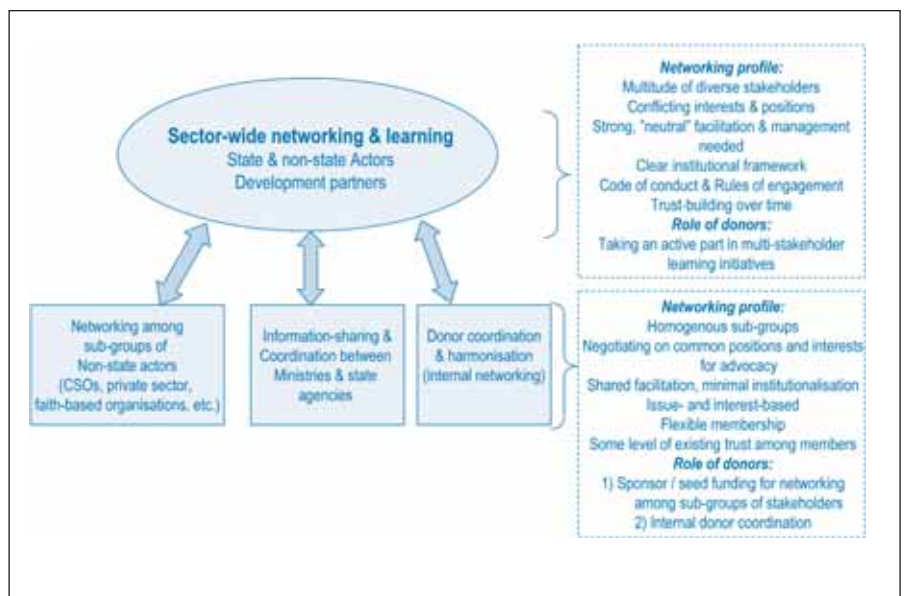
**How can networking for learning be monitored and evaluated?**

There is no reason why we should not evaluate the performance of a network as rigorously as we do the performances of other, more formal types of social organisation. Funding agencies rightly expect the networks they support to specify their expected outputs and impact, and to define indicators for measuring these. The challenge, therefore, is to develop a framework for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) that takes account of the specific characteristics of networking.

Various authors and researchers have experimented with models and concepts that address the specific M&E needs in relation to networking and networks.<sup>10</sup> In many ways, these differ from traditional approaches to M&E by being more learning-oriented.<sup>11</sup>

Although Ashman (2003) has come up with a set of factors and questions which can be used as indicators for monitoring and evaluating networking (i.e. management, strategic fit/programme goals & outcomes, donor relations, mutual trust, joint learning), he does not make clear how these relate to the basic evaluation questions of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Nunez & Wilson-Grau (2003) make some rudimentary comments and point towards the need to take account of a network’s internal achievements (e.g. cementing relationships) as a goal in itself. Crech & Willard (2001) experiment with a comprehensive framework by using elements of common project planning and evaluation approaches: SWOT analysis (i.e. identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), results-based management, logical framework approaches, outcome mapping, appreciative inquiry and

Figure 3. The role of donors in sector-wide networking (Ørtnemark et al., 2006)



methods taken from the discipline of human resource management. Using ingredients taken from these approaches, they have created three frameworks, for planning, monitoring (used quarterly, to track activities in so-called *progress journals*) and evaluation (both annually and at the end of a project).

Church (2004) suggests three tools for evaluating different aspects of networks:<sup>12</sup>

1. **The weaver's triangle:** this is a simple exercise to distinguish what people do from why they do it. The triangle has three component parts: (i) the overall aim, (ii) the objectives, and (iii) the activities, and distinguishes between action and process aims.
2. **Contributions assessment:** this tool reveals the resources to which a network has access, and enables the network to ascertain how they might be shared, multiplied or exchanged. It seeks to identify the vitality of the network for its members, and to involve people by linking with their passion and drives.
3. **Channels of participation:** this is an easy way of defining 'categories' of membership, and seeing how members contribute to the network. The categories are expressed as three concentric circles, with the outermost ring standing for more remote relationships with the network and the innermost ring indicating a more active and involved relationship.

**Outcome mapping** focuses on people and organisations, in particular on changes in the behaviour, relationships, actions and/or activities of the people, organisations or networks working on a particular project or programme. It also looks at their influence and roles in different development processes. It is thus a useful framework for monitoring and evaluating interventions which have an influence on networking.<sup>13</sup>

Guijt et al. (2003) suggest a list of general good M&E practices for evaluating networking for learning. These include:

- (i) investing time and resources in M&E design;
- (ii) building M&E into management practices;
- (iii) engaging key actors in the reflection process;
- (iv) using both quantitative and qualitative methods;
- (v) looking at specific learning goals;
- (vi) asking the five key evaluation questions on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability;
- (vii) investing both time and other resources in the implementation of recommendations.

## Why invest in networking for learning? And how?

This brief has sought to demonstrate the benefits of learning through networking in the form of better informed and more inclusive development cooperation. Networking helps to channel knowledge and experience gained from local initiatives to higher levels of shared understanding and policy advocacy. It also creates a framework for human interaction and the interpretation of knowledge by a multitude of stakeholders. This brief has also sought to illustrate how investments can be made to enhance and monitor the learning function.

Importantly, networking for learning should not be limited to organising meetings and workshops. Current networking efforts stem from a variety of sophisticated strategies for sourcing (i.e. identifying and interpreting) and sharing knowledge and experiences, and for systematically learning from them. In addition to bringing people together for opportunities to interact face-to-face with each other in discussion fora and learning platforms, networks may also involve combinations of web-based, electronic, printed, interpersonal and mass media. Content may be shared in the form of words, pictures and artistic or popular expressions; it may be either conceptual or practical.

### Box 5. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

#### *Traditional M&E approaches*

- Tend to look narrowly at specific project deliverables.
- Look at specific network outputs and outcomes as predefined in a logical framework.
- Rarely involve more than one leading organisation in a joint discussion of network achievements.
- Analytical framework tends to look at the organisational performance of institutionalised aspects of the network.
- Outputs and outcomes are fairly predictable.
- Achievements may be overlooked by using a biased set of assessment indicators and assumptions.

#### *Learning-oriented M&E*

- Takes account of the value of new relationships.
- Includes process outcomes that emerge during networking.
- Involves network members consistently in discussions of outcomes and achievements (i.e. both foreseen and unforeseen).
- The analytical framework tends to apply more of a systems approach to capture overall network performance and experience.
- Assumes that networks are fluid and their trajectories not easily predictable, nor are their exact outputs and outcomes.
- Captures unforeseen achievements and spin-off actions by adopting a systems approach to M&E.

These are some of the reasons why it is important to invest in networking, followed by a number of ways of making networking more effective:

- **Networking is a tool for boosting development performance.** It enables actors to improve their performance by collective action, to cope with the growing complexity of development problems and to contribute to policy debates at different levels. Hence, investments in networking are contributions to *institutional development*, and to developing intra- and inter-organisational problem-solving abilities.
- **Networking takes time.** It takes time to build relationships, trust and ownership, and to gradually build a shared standpoint and effective ways of planning, operating and facilitating networking activities. Seed funding for a brief start-up stage can have a catalytic effect in mobilising members and additional resources. However, a network needs to have a long-term philosophy or strategy in order for this to be effective. Networks cannot be funded as if they were short-term projects, with support provided for three to four years within the conventional confines of project planning. Networks need *long-term and stable commitments*, not only from institutions and private individuals, but also from donors.
- **Adaptive management and flexibility.** Learning-oriented networks need to be governed in a way that creates scope for *diversity in their membership*, as well as *shared ownership and responsibility*. Over-institutionalisation often leads networks away from the issues that brought the members together in the first place, as the emphasis moves away from issues and towards controls and administration. The network loses its vitality as a consequence and the secretariat or centre of gravity starts to compete with members for funding resources, causing conflicts of interest.
- **Donor-driven networking agendas are often unsustainable.** Donors can play varying roles in learning-oriented networks, depending on the issues under discussion and the specific learning objectives. However, in general, a network's main funding agency must behave more like a *sponsor*, supporting existing initiatives or needs for networking without interfering with the flow of events. This should not, however, be confused with lower accountability standards. There are ways of closely monitoring financial, managerial and technical performance without interfering with the wider dynamics of a network. Parallel networking initiated primarily to meet a donor's need for inputs on a specific issue or policy process is often less sustainable and less vital than supporting the broadening of an existing informal network and making it more inclusive and transparent.
- **Knowing how the network relates to formal structures and the socio-political context.** It is important to know in advance what effect support for a network will have on other institutions, networks and socio-political factors in the country in

question. Will it undermine or strengthen the debate on the topic or change process at issue? What risks does the institutionalisation of a network entail (e.g. a shift in focus from issues to administrative controls, a loss of vitality, competition with members, etc.)?

- **Adopting a learning approach to M&E.** Networks can be monitored and evaluated just like any other investment in development. However, traditional approaches to M&E need to be adjusted so as to capture a network's specific dynamics and emerging outcomes, including relation-building between members and other less obvious outputs. Measures of impact also need to take a long-term view. However, the results of a learning process can be framed in terms of (joint) capacities, process outputs and value added. Evidence-based learning and the effectiveness of networking – for example, in the form of changed member practices – will have to be systematised in order to demonstrate the transformative capacity of networking.

## Notes

- 1 *Stepping up efforts relating to, and investments in, networking for learning is crucial in order to implement the commitments made in the 2005 Paris Declaration, such as reducing the reliance on project management units, increasing the use of existing country systems, and operationalising systems for mutual accountability.*
- 2 *DFID developed both the concept of 'drivers of change' and the rich literature on it. To access the literature, see the Governance & Social Development Resource Centre: [www.gsdr.org](http://www.gsdr.org)*
- 3 *Lessons drawn from practical experiences with network assessments and the inclusion of non-state actors in policy dialogue in Kenya (C. Ørnekmark, 2003-2006).*
- 4 *These points on diversity in networking were made by Robert Arthur of the WorldFish Centre in Cambodia during recent discussions of the Pelican Initiative. Please visit the website at <http://www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican> to consult the archives of the Pelican Initiative.*
- 5 [www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican](http://www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican).
- 6 *For a more detailed description of this process, see: Engel, P. & Van Zee, A. (2004) 'Networking for Learning: What Can Participants Do?' Zeist: Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO).*
- 7 *Steadman Media Poll, 2nd Quarter, 2006. Media use in Kenya.*
- 8 *Ray Rist, World Bank, Presentation at AfrEA conference, Cape Town, December 2004.*
- 9 *See [www.openspaceworld.com](http://www.openspaceworld.com).*
- 10 *For example, Ashman (2003), Nunez & Wilson (2003), Creech & Willard (2001) and Church et al (2002).*
- 11 *The term 'traditional approaches' refers to approaches specifically developed for and applied to formal types of social organisation. For more information on learning approaches to M&E outside the context of networking, see Engel, Paul; Charlotte Carlsson (Ørnekmark) and Arin van Zee: Making evaluation results count: Internalising evidence by learning. ECDPM Policy Management Brief 16, August 2003.*
- 12 *Separate brief documents describing these tools can be found on [www.healthcomms.org/comms/eval/eval-tool-intro.html](http://www.healthcomms.org/comms/eval/eval-tool-intro.html)*
- 13 *See the IDRC's website, [www.idrc.ca/evaluation](http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation), and [www.outcomemapping.ca](http://www.outcomemapping.ca) for further information.*

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