

Networks and Policy Influence in International Development

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Networks: more than the latest buzzword?

"Power does not reside in institutions, not even the state or large corporations. It is located in the networks that structure society." (Manuel Castells, 2004)

"We are some way from being able to structure public and organisational power in ways which really harness network potential..." (McCarthy, Miller and Skidmore, 2004)

The term 'network' is now a buzzword - from the Internet to the G8 to anti-globalization protests to Al Queda, we hear that networks are the most effective organizational model. So too in the field of international development. New streams of literature on networks are emerging from researchers on social capital, organizational management and globalization. Practitioners are setting up networks all over the place. Do they work? Often, yes - they can improve the use of information in the policymaking processes. Networks deserve some of the hype. But no, they don't change the basic rules of economics, politics or human nature.

Why does this matter now? 2005 is widely seen as a pivotal year for international development, there is a focus on Africa at the G8 in July, the UK's Presidency of the EU in the second half of the year has a focus on international development, the Millennium Development Summit is in September and the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong is in November. There is a lot of policymaking going on! Europe will play a key role. But, do European policymakers on international development get the right information they need? At the right time? In the right way to be useful? How can networks help in this process?

Why networks matter

Networks are broadly defined as structures that link actors (individuals or organizations) who share a common interest or a set of values. They can be formal or informal. Networks related to information and policy processes include epistemic communities, communities of practice, knowledge networks, global public policy networks, and others.

There is a lot of evidence that networks can help improve policy processes through better information use. Networks may help to: marshal evidence and increase the influence of good quality evidence throughout the policy process; foster links between researchers, CSOs and policy-makers; bypass formal barriers to consensus; channel civil society resources and expertise into the policy process; broaden and sustain the pro-poor impact of a policy.

A good example is the Huairou Commission (see Leavitt and Yonder 2003 for detail). Until the mid 1990s grassroots women's groups were essentially kept out of discussions at the global level. In less than ten years, the Huairou Commission has gone from an informal, loose coalition into a global network of over 11,000 grassroots women's groups. It has resulted in a more legitimate platform for grassroots women's groups to exchange ideas, develop joint projects and contribute to global policy discussions.

But it doesn't always work. In Ecuador, twice in the last 5 years, well organised networks of indigenous peoples and peasants have played critical roles in removing highly questioned governments from power. In both cases, however, they have failed to bring about changes in the policies they opposed; and the new governments have maintained the status quo. Although it had a clear effect on politics, their organisation at the grassroots did not translate into the capacity to influence policies.

How networks help: six key functions

There are certain functions that networks can play in linking information to policy processes. The work of Stephen Yeo suggests that networks can fulfil six, non-exclusive functions - in this case in terms of

information and policy influence. They can act as:

Filters: filter networks 'decide' what information is worth paying attention to - they provide a way for unmanageable amounts of information to be organised and used in a productive way. For example, the Development Executive Group provides its members with information on project opportunities, employment opportunities or experts' information.

Amplifiers: Amplifiers help take a new, little-known or little-understood ideas and makes them public, gives them a weight or makes them understandable. Many advocacy or campaigning NGOs, such as the Jubilee Campaign, are amplifying networks. The FairTrade Foundation, for instance, works through a network of its brand's licence holders to amplify the fair trade message.

Convenors: Convening networks bring together people or groups of people. This function goes beyond filtering and amplifying and requires an ability to reach very specific audiences in several sectors and levels. For example, Coalition 2000 in Bulgaria brings together CSOs, government institutions, the private sector and donors in various coordinated initiatives to fight corruption.

Facilitators: Facilitating networks help members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively - including other network functions. The MediCam network in Cambodia helps its members by facilitating their access to services and facilities such as meeting rooms, a specialised library, communication means, training opportunities and access to policymakers and donors.

Community builders: Community building networks promote and sustain the values and standards of the group of individuals or organizations within it. The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) is a network that aims to promote best practices and minimum standards of learning accountability and performance among humanitarian agencies.

Investor / Provider: Investing networks offer a means to provide members with the resources they need to carry out their main activities. The African Capacity Building Foundation, for instance, provides resources in the form of technical assistance, skills and funding to its policy research partners.

It is important to emphasise that these roles are not exclusive - networks can play more than one role. Indeed, networks usually have to carry out several functions simultaneously in order to maximize their chances of influencing policy processes. Of course context matters and the specific mix of network functions required will vary.

It is also vital to note that each function requires a different structure and way of operating for maximum effectiveness. This means that networks designed for - and effective at - a certain role may not be good at other roles without reform. Introducing new functions to certain networks might be counter productive to the achievement of the network's original objective or to both old and new. Specific networks will need to carefully consider how many and which functions they can carry out given their structural characteristics. Fortunately, there is some overlap in the structural characteristics required for success in the different functions.

But, what are the structural characteristics linked to these different functions?

What do networks need to do: some keys to success

Network success if influencing policy is rarely straightforward. But we do know more and more about what works. There tend to be however 10 commonly cited 'keys to success' that can help maximize policy influence. These are:

- 1. Clear governance agreements - to set objectives, identify functions, define membership structures, make decisions and resolve conflicts.
- 2. Strength in numbers - the larger the numbers involved the greater the political weight given to networks.
- 3. Representativeness - is one key source of legitimacy (and thereby influence).
- 4. Quality of evidence - affects both the credibility and legitimacy of arguments.
- 5. Packaging of evidence - is crucial to effective communication.
- 6. Persistence - influence often requires sustained pressure over a long period of time.
- 7. Membership of key individuals - especially influential figures in the policy arena.
- 8. Making use of informal links - these can be critical to achieving many network objectives.
- 9. Complementing official structures - by their nature, networks add most value by complementing

rather than duplicating official structures.

- 10. Good use of ICTs and other networking opportunities - ICTs are opening up great new potential for networking.

There are often tradeoffs here - and different keys are more or less important to open different types of policy door. Or the door may be locked: power dynamics or other policymaker considerations may matter much more than the evidence. In developing countries, the challenges of networking are significantly greater than in Europe. Economic, social and political environments are more difficult. Capacity is more limited. Resources are even scarcer.

Development, Europe and 2005

Simon Maxwell at the Overseas Development Institute has promoted the idea of "policy-code sharing" to refer to this style of interactive research network, whereby research institutes operate similar to an airline alliance, "sharing ideas, modifying messages, and collaborating to achieve change". An example of such an alliance is the European Development Cooperation to 2010 project (EDC 2010) coordinated by the European Association of Development Institutes (EADI). This project makes use of various features to facilitate feedback and promote action within the network: briefing-papers; a website; public meetings; workshops and opinion pieces to stimulate debate.

The Euforic annual meeting on Information Strategies and Policy Influence is another example. Clearly, advances are being made. But, are international development actors around Europe adequately geared up for a coordinated response to the 2005 agenda? It appears not: many actors seem to be operating in isolation and the response seems rather fragmented. There is scope - and need - for European networks to do more to influence policymaking in international development.

Sources of further information:

The source of information for this editorial was a background paper written by Emily Perkin and Julius Court (forthcoming 2005) and ongoing research by Enrique Mendizabal.

For more on networks, evidence and policy influence, see the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI): www.odi.org.uk/rapid/

For more on Simon Maxwell's ideas on policy code sharing (and other discussion of 'Does Evidence Matter?') please see: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Meetings/Evidence/Evidence_Series.html

The European Development Cooperation to 2010 (EDC2010) initiative, hosted by the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI), promotes interaction across the development research and policy arenas by bringing together a broad spectrum of players to share their perspectives, learn from each other, and strengthen their working relationships. (www.edc2010.net/)