

Supporting networks: Ten principles



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‘Networks are not magic bullets. They can do what they have been designed to do, but to adopt new functions they need long-term investments.’

Networks are seen by some donors as the solution to all their worries. In Ethiopia, for example, I worked with some civil society networks which feel they are being slowly transformed into smaller, poorer versions of project-era donors. The network donors and their members demand that these civil society networks play a role in resource allocation, capacity development and other development interventions that may keep the former spending and the latter occupied.

The problem is that networks are not magic bullets. They can do what they have been designed or developed to do; but to adopt new functions they need long-term investments.

First, I want to address the value of networks: why should donors support networks and why should the various actors of the development world join them? Second, what should we look for when developing mechanisms or programmes to support networks?

The roles of networks

What is the point of a network? As with many concepts in the development sector, networks have become, in some cases, a one-size-fits-all solution for the delivery of aid and the promotion of civil society and its values. However, there are many ways in which network members and supporters can benefit, not only through their own learning, but through the use of networks to share that learning, broadening the knowledge base.

They provide, for example, a way to gather, assess and share knowledge and learning. They can be cost-effective ways to access or provide goods and services to a large constituency or membership. Networks can also promote the sustainability of interventions by developing strong springboards. When they are member-driven, networks can support the ownership of development research, practice and policy. They can develop and promote one strong voice and give their members and supporters the credibility to allow that voice to be heard in the policy process. And, of course, networks can provide both direct and indirect access to financial support.

Two network roles make them particularly worthy of support: community development and learning among the members, a *support role* in other words; and developing and amplifying the voice of the members, or an *agency role*.

These roles are, clearly, better delivered by networks than by organisations acting in isolation. Nonetheless, it is critical that networks and their supporters clearly understand, and respond to, the reasons for their formation. Failure to do so can lead to unexpected and un-resourced changes in the functions of a network, its capacity to fulfil them and even to damaging conflict between the members and the secretariat, as was the case of some of the networks we have studied in Africa, Asia and Latin America. To better define the role of the network, the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) group at ODI has adopted a network functions approach. This focuses on six main functions that best describe the strategies and activities of networks:

- Community-building, to promote and sustain a cohesive group.
- Filtering, to help members find their way through often unmanageable amounts of information.
- Amplifying to make little-known or little-understood ideas more widely understood;
- Facilitating learning and the main activities of their members.
- Investing or providing resources, capacities and skills to their members.
- Convening to bring together members from different communities.

Networks are capable of carrying out one or more of these functions simultaneously (and many activities would fall under more than one category) but they must also recognise that there are important trade-offs between them. Each function requires specific skills, resources and systems, and overlooking these trade-offs can drive networks away from their original roles.

When is a network not a network?

One of the main problems that networks face today is that they do not operate as networks at all. It was clear in the case studies of the

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Ethiopian networks I worked with last year that this is, in general, because of lack of investment in the all-important community building function. Members often deal with the secretariat as a service provider, but do not deal with each other. This threatens the sustainability, as well as the effective fulfilment, of the network's roles. In some cases, networks actually compete for funding and policy influence with their own members.

It is important, however, not to dismiss networks as funding mechanisms. They can be funders if they are able to develop the right organisational competencies. In fact, the allocation of funding by networks, even if this is not their main function, can be vital for the effective fulfilment of other functions and, in particular, to motivate participation by members. It is also important to avoid adverse selection problems that can lead to members joining a network to access funds, rather than to contribute to its core functions and common values. Funding should be conceptualised as part of the network's community building, facilitation and capacity development strategies.

Principles of engagement

Recommendations can often be confused with keys to success: I do not think these exist. But there are principles that decision-makers should consider:

1. Networks are complex and there are no templates for success. Expect setbacks.

2. Work with networks to agree on their functional balance and support that balance.
3. Interventions to develop a network cannot be conceptualised as 'logical framework' projects – other approaches such as outcome mapping can provide a better alternative.
4. Support networks to function as networks with and through their members rather than to deliver specific services that could be delivered by their members or other types of organisations.
5. Do not treat networks as traditional NGOs or civil society organisations, and do not allow funds to undermine community building functions.
6. When networks carry out a funding role, ensure they have the necessary skills and that other functions are not affected.
7. Network support timeframes should take into consideration the different stages of network development.
8. Provide appropriate support for the network and its members to develop the right competencies and skills to collaborate.
9. A culture of knowledge and learning is a cornerstone of network development.
10. Sustainability should be judged against the need of the members for the network.

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Related resources and useful links

Related resources

- Mendizabal, E. (2006) *Understanding Networks: The Functions of Research Policy Networks*. ODI Working Paper 271. London: ODI.
- Mendizabal, E. (2006) *Building Effective Research Policy Networks: Linking Function and Form*. ODI Working Paper 276. London: ODI.
- Ramalingam, B., Mendizabal, E. and E Schenkenberg van Mierop (2008) *Strengthening humanitarian networks: Applying the network functions approach*. ODI Background note. London: ODI.

Useful links

- <http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Projects/PPA0103/Index.html>
- <http://www.odi.org.uk/research-areas/index.asp>