



Resource Centre for
Development

International Networks for Knowledge Sharing

Lessons Learnt?



Introduction

Knowledge – A Precondition for Development

SDC's theme for 2004 is "Knowledge and Development" reflecting the view that knowledge is a key to improving deplorable living conditions that exist in the developing world and for ensuring a more equitable global development. At a first glance, the connection between knowledge and development looks straightforward but a closer look reveals surprising complexity. There is a clear knowledge gap between the North and the South. The disadvantaged and the poor of the South still do not possess the basic knowledge they need to improve their living environment, and accessing this missing knowledge is beset with difficulty.

There is a knowledge gap between the North and the South.

In response, a huge development sector - comprised of a myriad of specialist organisations and committed individuals in the North and the South - is trying to make it easier for developing countries to reach a higher level. Yet within the collective effort of this development movement, the same mistakes are made again, wheels are constantly being reinvented, and incompatible standards and procedures hamper efficient and effective progress.

There is still much room to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of development cooperation.

The Network – a Seductive Paradigm

The network paradigm is a seductive vision to solve all the above ills in one go: why not connect the North with the South and cross-connect all the involved actors with networks? With such linkages, activities could be coordinated, knowledge could be shared between North and South as well as within and among the countries of the South, best practices could be exchanged, and common standards and procedures developed. Many have succumbed to this alluring vision and countless networks exist in the development sector.

Have these networks really achieved their objectives? The results are inconclusive. While some networks attain considerable impact in their sectors, others have been more bureaucratic institutions, pushed by considerable donor funding. Some are quite dynamic, others static. All networks require a big effort from all parties involved and are often suspected of being excessively expensive. What can we learn from existing international networks for knowledge sharing?

Three Networks as Illustrating Examples

In this publication, three different international networks for knowledge sharing are presented. All three have a longstanding experience in their respective areas:

- The Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN, formerly HTN)
- The Collaborative Working Group on Solid Waste Management in Developing Countries (CWG)
- The Building Advisory Service and Information Network (basin)

These three networks vary quite a lot and focus on very different thematic areas. However, there are some general insights that can be derived from those three cases that could be helpful for other international networks.

International Networks for Knowledge Sharing – A Definition

What is an "international network for knowledge sharing"? There are many different definitions for networks. In this publication, the term "network" is used for institutionalised partnerships between institutions or organizations and may even take the form of a legal entity. The network partners are still autonomous and contribute their resources voluntarily. They share a common vision, objectives and rules. The network partners have a set of common activities and regular events are organized. According to this definition, networks are more institutionalised and organised than unregulated exchange mechanisms or communities of practice. The networks in this publication are named "international" because they include partners from the North and the South.

Vision, Mission and Goals

The creation of an international network is always a decision of a few involved people. As the stories of RWSN, CWG and basin show, networks rarely start from nothing but are built on informal networks that already exist. The motivation behind the setting up of a network can come from a number of directions; to deepen collaboration, to avoid duplication, to better disseminate information and knowledge, to learn from existing experiences, to get a better impact in the sector. In the three case studies, a common factor was the perceived need of professionals to do a better job. This is the driving force that leads to the creation of many networks.

Behind networks lies the perceived need of professionals to do a better job.

Once the decision is taken to set up a network, reality quickly catches up with the initiators. A common vision is needed that describes the network's mission, its shared values and its basic functions and mechanisms. This helps to bring all partners in tune with each other and serves to hold the network together over time. The formulation of a vision is an important first step, but it is already the point where conflicts may appear due to different interests and cultures.

The network must clearly define its thematic niche by analysing the context. What knowledge is needed? What knowledge is available and what are other networks doing? Where is the knowledge missing? In addition, the partners should identify thematic areas where they have particular strengths. The intersection of the specific strengths and the knowledge needed

will finally determine the niche where network will be active, and this niche should not be too wide. A network that does everything is nothing doing right.

A networks that does everything is doing nothing right.

Yet this rule of thumb can trap networks in paradoxes. To be effective they have to focus on a few areas, but from the outset the network partners bring in a whole variety of interests. In addition, recent years have shown a donor tendency to push networks to embrace wider thematic areas or to take up other issues. What happens then is that the networks start to hide behind the latest development jargon but to continue to do what they have always done. Networks can also fall victim to the current trend for sustainable, integrated, comprehensive approaches, losing their clear focus and setting goals that are too broad to reach in a meaningful, demonstrable way.

To find the right focus will always be a challenge for networks, and if they must stay focused on a well-defined issue, they must also reconsider again and again whether they are on the right track. A list of activities that the network is not going to do is already a first step and often helps to get a better focus. There is a simple test to show whether a network is focussed enough or not: If the overall goal can be explained with a few simple sentences, it is focussed enough. Given this conclusion, donors supporting networks will have to learn that they should always push for sharper focus and not for greater diversity.

Governance Structure

International networks require systems of governance that consider the difficulties of international collaboration: the members of a network are spread all over the world, the distances for face-to-face meetings are long, the flights are expensive, time zones hinder communication, and different cultures (with diverse working styles) come together. Under such circumstances, a clear, transparent and simple governance structure is advisable.

Centralisation versus Decentralisation

An important question for international networks is the degree of centralisation or decentralisation. Who should have responsibility, and how much? Should there be a secretariat? Should there be regional sub-networks? There is no blueprint for the ideal network structure and the governance structures of the three case studies vary quite a lot. Nevertheless, there are some core elements that can be found in every network.

At the top of many international networks is a well-reputed chairperson, who has a representative and strategic role. A steering committee or management board occupies a more active role, being responsible for strategic questions and operational planning. Some networks are tempted to enlarge such committees too much, aiming for a good representation and looking for strong connections with the most important stakeholders. Yet the result of big committees is often that only half of the members actually participate in the meetings. This devalues the committee and frustrates those who participate. It is therefore advisable to keep the steering committee small.

In order to stay in touch with a major circle of stakeholders there is still the possibility to create a virtual committee of patrons or a supporting committee with no executive function. The members of a respected advisory committee could support the network on demand.

The secretariat has a central role in international networks. Because of the complexity of international networks, an official but small secretariat is recommendable. A node is needed for network coordination, where the actions of a network come together. Without this node, a network partner will take over this essential role unofficially. It is a major challenge to ensure that the secretariat does not

become too strong, crowding out the engagement of other network partners. The secretariat should always strive to motivate the partners to be active and to support them in their work. If the secretariat remains small, this has the added advantage that associated costs can be kept within certain limits.

Regionalisation

Many international networks for knowledge sharing that were initiated by Northern organisations remain North-driven. Working towards a better balance between northern and southern partners can be a difficult process, as the Northern partners have to loosen their control over the network, while the Southern partners have to assume greater responsibility and develop ownership.

An emerging trend is the stronger regionalisation of the international networks, with regional alliances forming part of global networks. The regional networks are closer to the needs in their areas and the cultural diversity is less significant. As the financial flows of bilateral and multilateral donors are increasingly channelled directly to Southern countries, regional alliances will have better access than global networks to such funds.

This new direction reflects the recognition by donors that northern partners must be encouraged to hand over the leading role step by step to the South. In this way, the needs of the South will be more effectively understood and addressed. In this changing landscape, the northern partners in international networks are more likely to play the part of facilitators or coaches of southern partners. They will also remain important conduits to information and knowledge in the North.

Many networks now face the challenge of how to hand over more responsibility to Southern partners.

Legal Status

What legal status should international networks have? There are some international networks that are not legally registered. As they need a legal roof for fundraising purposes and for submitting project proposals to donors, they are hosted by an organisation. Other international networks are legally



registered in one country, some even in several countries, as this is sometimes a more appropriate means of accessing funding. A legal registration has

the advantage that the partners of a network are forced to clearly put down their objectives and to agree on a structure for the network.

Members and Partners

The members or partners are the heart of any network. Success and failure depends on their motivation and the capacity they can devote to the network. As the three case studies show, most networks start with a few members and the question is soon raised whether the network should be enlarged or not. If a network is very open to new members, multiple perspectives come together in the network and the network can address a large audience. However, with too many members, the familiarity that creates trust and commitment can be lost. If a network is too closed, its impact is restricted and many are excluded from the knowledge and information that the network generates. There is no simple answer to this issue and every network has to find its balance between openness and restriction, taking into account its governance mechanisms and executive structure.

Different Membership Levels - The "Onion-Model"

One model that might help to manage the question of openness versus restriction is the "onion-model", consisting of a group of core members, surrounded by several layers of differing types of membership. Basically, the core group will decide on the goals, strategies and activities of the network. The members in the outer layers have progressively less influence on matters of executive control but can still access to the information and knowledge that the network generates.

Up to now, the three networks provide information and knowledge without charge to their members and to other interested organisations and professionals. But maybe the issue of membership fees should be taken up in future discussions about the funding of networks. An international network for knowledge sharing provides various services to its members - like a professional association. It should not be taboo to discuss whether the members of a network should also pay something towards services that are often quite costly.

Clarify roles of actors

It was already mentioned above: an international network should have a clear and simple governance structure that clarifies the rights and duties of every member according to their capacity, strengths and interests. A good example that illustrates this division of work is basin, where the partners divided up the responsibility for different areas of sustainable building among themselves and avoided duplication in this way.

An international network stands or falls depending on its core, a committed group that feel responsible for the fate of the network. It is then completed by a wider circle of more passive partners. And this is acceptable. Active members should not complain about their less active colleagues because both groups play important roles. Passive partners may share their insights with others and get more involved at a later stage. Over the years, the roles and level of activity of the various partners in a network will change anyway.

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Networks are not free from power struggles. There are always stronger and weaker partners, active and passive members. In particular, the secretariat and the core group have more power in a network than other members. This cannot be avoided but should be made transparent and discussed. One way to reduce the influence and power of an individual or a small group of partners might be to rotate the duties and responsibilities in a network.

To conclude this section: for a network to succeed over the longer term, the relationships between the partners must be mutually advantageous without affecting the autonomy and independence of members.



Master the Change of Generation

Like other organisations, international networks face the challenge that the founding members get older and ultimately retire. This is a critical phase where a lot of knowledge often gets lost and networks are well advised to ensure that the knowledge of the older generation is handed over to the newer one in a controlled and timely fashion. The best way to do so is to take younger members on

board as apprentices. These new recruits acquaint themselves with the network by working together with more experienced colleagues. This approach has the added advantage of ensuring that the tacit knowledge within the network is not lost. The older generation will have to learn that handing over means preparing in advance, loosening the grip on control and giving room for new ideas and spirit.

Management

Networks can only achieve good results for their partners or members and other stakeholders if they commit to professional management. Effective management is characterised by the mastery of various tools. A few are illustrated below.

Operational Plans

Every international network needs some kind of operational plan that breaks down the vision or mission into concrete strategies, objectives and actions. Good management means that each year, an operational plan should be developed with clearly defined objectives, activities, responsibilities and a schedule. Typical pitfalls should be avoided. Objectives (what will be achieved in a certain time) and activities (what are we going to do to achieve the objectives) should not be confused. A responsible partner should be designated and a due date fixed for each activity. And finally, the set objectives should be realistic and achievable.

Marketing

Some knowledge management professionals are convinced that “attention management” should replace knowledge management. As there is so much information available in the information age, only the content that commands attention will be perceived and acted upon. This is a lesson for international networks. They have to raise the attention for their activities with good marketing. In some circles, marketing has a negative image – being

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interpreted as a way to manipulate consumers so that they buy products they never wanted and do not need. But marketing can also be considered as important means to raise attention and to navigate through the jungle of information. That’s why networks need a good marketing strategy for their services.

Strategic Thinking and Innovation

Even if a network is well organised and managed this is not a guarantee for longstanding success. Networks are like other organisations and companies exposed to a continuously changing context. As a consequence a network needs entrepreneurial and strategic thinking. What does this mean? Basically, the answer is quite simple; strategic thinking takes place if the partners of a network constantly raise the question “what do we have to undertake today so that the network is also successful in the future?” A network should continually explore new ideas and opportunities for its further development. This is quite challenging, but only those networks that are able to adapt to changing context are able to ensure their long-term viability.

The strategic question is: “what do we have to undertake today so that the network is also successful in the future?”

Monitoring and Evaluation

The outputs and impact of knowledge networks are difficult to measure. This is a fact. Nevertheless, to manage a network without continuous monitoring is like flying an airplane in fog without instruments. If a network and its members do not



know where they are and in which direction they are going, it is not possible to manage the network. In addition, reliable monitoring is also necessary for

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fundraising, as donors are predominantly interested in the outputs and impacts that result from their investments. Although it is not an easy undertaking, there are feasible ways to monitor the performance of a network. Some indicators are easy to trace, like the number of visitors at a website of the network or the number of times documents are downloaded. Another way of giving a picture of activity is the systematic collection of success stories - and failures - that are induced by the network. And finally, direct surveys among stakeholders, members or partners of a network give additional insights. Nowadays, there are many tools available online that are both cheap and simple to use. A continuous monitoring does not replace periodic and comprehensive external evaluations of the management structure and processes as well as of the network's activities.

Funding

The three network studies show that funding is very often a complex mix of different types and with varying time periods: the networking budgets of the partners are made up of different blends of core funding, programme funding, project funding, and special funding for certain activities. In addition, some networks have no central budget, and every partner has to find funding for network activities independently. This complexity of financial support is a reality that networks have to live with, since bilateral and multilateral donors have quite different requirements and formats for their funding arrangements. The funding complexity also lends certain robustness to international networks, as they rarely depend on support from a single source.

On a less positive note, this complexity makes fundraising and network management difficult. Those difficulties however should not be an excuse for a lack of transparency or excessive administration, and the members of the network should always try to get a clear overview who is getting how much money and what is done with it. Only in this way can good coordination be achieved.

Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is THE core activity international knowledge networks: they store information and knowledge, they validate and document existing experiences and best practices, they assimilate and disseminate lessons learned, they create new knowledge, and they improve access to information and knowledge. The three case studies show that there are various methods for accomplishing these tasks.

Tools for Knowledge Sharing

Regarding international networks, the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are particularly promising tools for improving the quantity and the quality of communication. They offer many opportunities to communicate independently of time and geographic location and to present information in engaging, convenient formats. The three case studies use a variety of tools:

- Website describing the network and providing network-related news
- E-Mail for day-to-day interaction
- Electronic discussion groups and mailing lists
- Electronic publications for download from websites
- Yellow-pages or knowledge maps to find the right experts or organisations
- Electronic conferences on the Internet
- Videos, CD ROM and a variety of other multimedia supports
- Phone conferences

Useful as they are, ICTs cannot replace face-to-face contacts and more conventional means of communication. Whilst ICTs continue to offer an ever-widening range of options, regular meetings, workshops or conferences are still necessary. Face-to-face meetings are important to generate

trust and to keep the community in a network alive, and they are vital conduits for sharing tacit knowledge. Face-to-face events should have a certain rhythm. In all of the three cases studied, the members meet at least once each year.

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Other traditional ways of knowledge sharing still remain important, including all paper-based documents - from regular magazines and newsletters to books and other commissioned publications. In many places in the world, only small minorities have access to the Internet and feedback continues to show that the demand for paper-based documentation remains strong. However, it can be expected that the demand for paper-based documents will decline gradually in the future.

All three presented networks also provide some kind of question and answer service that can be accessed by e-mail, fax or traditional mail to get specific answers. In the example of basin, frequently asked questions are even collected and added to the network's knowledge database.

In summary, all three presented networks use different tools to share information and knowledge. Using this approach, they consider – maybe unconsciously - that people communicate and learn in various ways. Some may prefer reading, some may prefer talking things through and some may prefer just listening to others. Most people combine multiple learning techniques in practice, and such compound preferences are highly personalised.

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Preconditions for Knowledge Sharing

In many discussions on knowledge sharing, the various tools and their application are topics of interest. Yet the experiences of the three presented networks show that several soft factors should not be neglected.

A basic prerequisite for knowledge sharing is mutual trust among the members of a network. People will only share knowledge if they trust each other. Trust has to be maintained again and again through intensive communication and shared experiences. The partners of a network should take care that trust is not lost. It can be destroyed very quickly and it can take a very long time to build up again.

An aspect of trust is a culture of giving and taking in the network. Each partner has to be aware that he or she cannot only benefit from the network but has to contribute as well. It's give-and-take, just like in our personal networks. Friends who only take and never give anything back will eventually be disliked.

A basic prerequisite for knowledge sharing is mutual trust.

A precondition for the build up of trust is setting a good balance between openness and restraint within the knowledge network. The network should be open to the outside, and there should be a dialogue between internal and external perspectives. Otherwise the knowledge network will stew in its own juice. However, if it has too many members, coordination will become more and more difficult, and maintaining familiarity and trust among the network partners will also be more of a challenge.

If these soft factors are taken into consideration, a common spirit can grow that offers the familiar comfort of a hometown, where everybody is happy to meet people. With this spirit, international networks become vibrant and dynamic organisms in the development community that facilitate knowledge sharing.



Outlook

Three different international networks for knowledge sharing, three different stories: what are the lessons learnt? There is no doubt that the challenges that led to the setting-up of these networks still exist, as does the need to increase North-South and South-South knowledge flows. There is still too much duplication in development cooperation, too many mistakes are made over and over again, and wheels are still being reinvented. Although networks are born out of thematic preoccupations, more attention has to be devoted to their governance structures, their management systems and the ways in which they share their knowledge.

This short summary of the experiences of three international networks give some hints where added emphasis might increase the effectiveness of international networks in general. Some of these observations may sound trivial and straightforward, but often

International networks will have to operate in a context that becomes more and more dynamic and competitive.

networks get into difficulties precisely because they do not manage the basics well.

For many international networks the next few years will be challenging, as their operating environment becomes more and more dynamic and competitive. The struggle for scarce resources is growing in importance. Some networks will disappear, the more competitive and dynamic ones will survive, some networks will merge, and others will break apart. This process is perfectly normal; networks should not be seen as static, rigid backbones of development cooperation but as evolving organisms adapting to their changing environment.

There are many lessons to be learnt from existing international networks but learning is a cyclic, time-consuming process. If this publication has contributed towards learning what really makes a network perform, then the goal of this publication is achieved.

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