Partnership: The Critical Pivot in

International Networking and North-South

Relations in NGO Development Work

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Introduction

As part of building a global civil society, the last two to three decades have witnessed a proliferation of formal and institutional networks and networking activities in the field of international development, primarily involving non-governmental organizations involved in development work (NGOs). It would be rare these days to find an NGO which is not involved in at least one formal network finding their involvement in networking as value added to their capacity of undertaking effective development work.

As networking and networks are becoming increasingly popular and as their value and importance are increasingly recognized by NGOs, international development assistance agencies, and other international organizations, some attempts have been made in recent years to study the *social* phenomenon of networking essentially as a human communication activity as distinct from a logistical or electronic linkage.

Focus and Purpose of this Paper

There is great diversity among networks in terms of types, mechanisms, structures, functions and activities. However, regardless of this diversity, experience with networks

indicates that networking in development work is based on a social phenomenon that involves sharing and working together on common issues and for the mutual benefit of all members. Networking amongst NGOs is building relationships with one another in the struggles around social and development issues. It is these features that characterise the social phenomenon in networking.

The social elements of sharing, mutuality and building relationships invoke the concept of *partnership* and represent a key development paradigm in North-South cooperation in development work. Applying the principles of partnership in networking is one of the critical factors for the effectiveness and sustainability of collaborative international development work.

The overall purpose of this paper is to relate the unifying concept of partnership to international networking in the context of a more equitable North-South relations in NGO development work. In so doing, this paper will present a rationale for operating development networks that involve Northern and Southern NGOs on the concept and principles of partnership, explore and identify the most common features of networking as a way of working together, examine how these features relate to the concept of partnership and, from that, analyze more systematically the notion and principles of partnership as a way to make networking more effective and sustainable.

The focus of this paper is on formal international institutional and thematic networks involving NGOs in development work rather than on other types of networks, and the analysis is pegged on networking as a social phenomenon of working together.

What is Networking

Before relating the concept of partnership in international networking and North-South relations, I will highlight the nature and purpose of international networking from a cross-section of perspectives of and analysis by different authors who have written on this subject. After presenting a vista of perspectives, a set of basic common features of networking will be identified.

At a general and broad level, Budd Hall defines international networking as follows:

> International networking happens when organizations or activists in part of a city, country, continent or globe communicate in a variety of ways with other parts of a city, country, continent or globe from the basis of common interest. (Hall, 1994, p. 11).

Virginia Hine explains some of the major reasons for the emergence of networks:

> Since the early 1960s, there has been an intensification of effort by the powerless in nations around the world to organize themselves to effect social structural change. No matter what the "cause", the goals, or the beliefs, and no matter what type of movement it is -- political, social, religious -- there is the same basic structural form and mode of functioning. Wherever people organize themselves to change some aspect of society, a non-bureaucratic but very effective form of organizational structure seems to emerge (Hine, 1984, p. 11).

Networking is an alternative form of organization -- non-bureaucratic and non-hierarchical -- for individual and organizations to work together on common issues and for mutual benefit. "Networks are emerging as alternatives to bureaucratic hierarchies as ways to get things done in a complex world" (McInnis 1984). The important ways in which networks differ from bureaucracies, as pointed out by McInnis, are:

- Authority tends to be decentralized, residing in individuals with pertinent information rather than in those who occupy assigned positions.

- Policies and boundaries tend to be fluid rather than fixed.

- Personnel tend to relate, among themselves and with others, as equals rather than subordinates or superiors.

- Procedures tend to be people-oriented as much as they are task- or institution-oriented.

- Styles tend to be sociable rather than officious

- Structure tends to be polycentric rather than monocentric.

Based on his rich experiences with both thematic and institutional networks in Latin America, Mario Padron posits that the crux of networking is *sharing* and the willingness among NGOs to learn from each other in the capacity of being "not any more valuable than any other member, but just one among the many participants" (Padron, 1991). He cautions, however, that "sharing may be one of the most demanding requirements in development work, yet it is the most essential common denominator developed by the poor in order to provide for each other and live under adverse conditions."

In elaborating on Padron's notion of sharing in networking, Paul Engel, based in the Department of Communications and Innovation Studies at Wageningen Agricultural

University in the Netherlands, and drawing from his experience in agricultural research networking, argues that networking is

> ... more than simply working together -- more than the mere collaboration of individuals and institutions on the basis of common interests. Networking has to so with achieving 'social synergy', as Haverkort and Ducommun (1990) put it. Networks represent 'community of ideas', a space for like-minded people to interact on the basis of not only of common interests but of conflicting ones too, building mutual trust and learning to accommodate each other's need."

In attempting to explain the advantages of networking, Paul Engel argues that

> Our knowledge, technologies and practices are not created by individuals in splendid isolation, but socially, as a result of interaction with each other. Our fascination with networking for development purposes reflects the fact that we no longer feel that there is only a single source of knowledge for dealing with a given problem, but rather that there may be as many sources of knowledge as there are people involved...(Engel, 1993, p. 131).

In his review of international networks, Jan Ruyssenaars from NOVIB, a Dutch co-financing NGO which has been supporting networks for many years and which itself participates in several international networks observes that

> Networking is labour-intensive. The frequency and quality of the communication between the participants is of vital importance. This does not just mean communication of newsletters or telecommunications (both important) but also regular personal meetings of the network members. (Ruyssenaars, 1992, p.18).

Rajesh Tandon, based in India, who has coordinated some thematic and institutional NGO networks and who is an active networker in many local, national and international networks lists the major characteristics of a network. To summarize, these characteristics are:

- An informal and flexible mechanism without centralized planning

- Valuing the experience of all members : "No one in the network is considered as the expert; different members have different experiences, all of which are worth learning from."

- Encouraging the initiatives by any of the members and evolving a sense of shared responsibility and ownership over the network and its management and ensuring its democratic functioning.

- Working in the context of a shared vision and common purpose.

- A capacity to mobilize the network's membership and their resources quickly around a common issue.

- The need for animators, convenors or coordinators to act as 'nodes' (Tandon, 1989, p. 15).

Through his experiences with various development networks in Latin America, Francisco Vio Grossi, a popular educator from Chile, views a network as:

> An open and flexible space for people to meet, share experiences, promote common goals, respect diversity, practice cooperation and solidarity and enjoy life. People may participate in the network at different points in accordance with their particular needs. It provides a permanent learning process based on the democratic practices of generating and disseminating knowledge, hence, a new way of deepening democracy. (Grossi, 1989, p. 20).

Viewed by Ingals as cited by Eric Mensah, in a network there is shared power, shared knowledge, shared experiences and collaboration for the greater benefit of all expressed by the term synergy, or synchronized energy. (Ingals, 1973).

Networking in the NGO community involves a wide range of activities depending upon the nature, purpose and structure of the network. A given network may be involved in one or more of the following most common networking activities:

1. Exchanging and sharing of information, ideas, experiences, and research findings

2. Convening meetings, workshops and seminars on particular issues

3. Engaging in advocacy and lobbying work at the political and policy levels with various international organizations and institutions, governments, media, and public opinion.

4. Strengthening the institutional/professional capacities of members through exchange visits or/and training

5. Undertaking joint research studies

The operational structure through which networking takes place varies according to the type and purpose of a given network. In international NGO networks, the two most

common forms of networking structure take the shape of a "spider web" and a "fishing net". As explained by Hall, " a spider web network has a clear centre and many webs of communications. Partners communicate with each other but the 'flavour' and direction is worked out by a strong centre. A fishing-net network has many 'nodes' or knots with communication occurring along any of the lines between. Leadership is able to come from a number of locations in response to various needs" (Hall, 1992, p. 23). These two forms of networking involve horizontal and democratic forms of communication flow.

Partnership as it Relates to Networking in the Context of North-South Relations

The key words that have been used by the various authors cited above to describe networking and networks include *sharing, working together, cooperation, collaboration, solidarity, mutual learning, autonomy, equals, shared power, shared knowledge, horizontal communication, common purpose, common issues, common interests, shared vision, mutual benefit, democratic practices, decentralized, non-hierarchical, people-oriented,* and *social synergy.* These same terms are part of the vocabulary in the discourse around the concept of partnership between Northern and Southern NGOs and represent the major characteristics of the notion of partnership.

From the foregoing profile of networking and its specific features, it becomes evident that the unifying concept underlying networking is the notion of *partnership.* Many characteristics of a partnership relationship are inherent in effective and successful networking. Hence the notion of partnership is intimately related to the essence of networking and is integral to networking.

An understanding of the notion of partnership is particularly helpful in understanding the conditions necessary for making networking more effective. It is particularly helpful in understanding international networking which involves cooperating with diverse organizations from different socio-economic and cultural settings and separated by geographical distance.

The notion of partnership takes on added significance and critical importance in international networks that involve NGOs from the rich North and the poor South and where, in many situations, the Northern NGOs are also donors that support the work of their Southern NGO counterparts. The conceptualization and principles of partnership become even more critical in the effective functioning of networking in networks that are *initiated* and *managed* by NGOs/donors from the North. Such networks are vulnerable to developing unequal power relations that may lead to patterns of domination by Northern organizations and a lack of mutual accountability within the network defeating the very purpose of networking.

Related to this kind of a situation, Jan Ruyssenaars from NOVIB explains the complexity

of issues that are normally experienced in international networking from the point of view of a donor organization. He argues that

> ... our specific roles, e.g., donor, advocacy group, service oriented organization, etc. lead to differences in approach in networking culture and organization, and that there are pitfalls, contradictions, and collisions because of interest and different roles, etc. That this is complicated by factors like differences in class, gender, race, culture, religion, job experience, since we deal with intercultural cooperation with respect for the autonomy and integrity of all parties involved....We believe that we must share these concerns at all levels between the local and the global, and that participation, transparency, and accountability between all levels is conditional to our work (Ruyssenaars, 1994).

It is precisely in this context that networking based on genuine and equitable partnership can serve as a means and a mechanism to address and resolve such concerns and issues.

What then are the implications of partnership in the more specific context of networking involving Northern and Southern organizations? What are the salient issues in North-South partnership? What does partnership really mean and entail? What are the main elements of partnership and their respective indicators? What are the critical conditions and mechanisms of partnership? A systematic and a clearer understanding of the notion of partnership and the application of its principles can help to make networking more effective, more efficient, and more sustainable.

The analysis of the concept of partnership in this paper draws on a study of partnership and organizational strengthening commissioned by Partnership Africa Canada (PAC) and undertaken by Sulley Gariba, Yusuf Kassam and Louise Thibault which was based on examining a sample of partnerships between Canadian and African NGOs in Southern and Francophone West Africa (PAC, 1995). For several years now, PAC has been promoting the collaboration between Canadian and African NGOs on the basis of a partnership relationship. This study built on a previous research study undertaken by PAC in collaboration with the Pan African Institute for Development in 1989 entitled "Partnership: Matching Rhetoric to Reality (PAC, 1989).

The concept and principle of "partnership" began to emerge in the international development community starting in the early 80s in the context of changing approaches and perspectives in the North-South relations in the NGO community. Since then, an increasing number of both Northern and Southern NGOs have begun to examine more closely what the notion of partnership really entails and to use partnership as a fundamental principle in building their relationships with each other.

In the context of the North-South issues and relations pertaining to development work, partnership is defined as

> a sharing of power, resources, information and experience based on equitable arrangements regarding trust, accountability and exchanges" (PAC, 1989, p.13).

Several factors can be cited to account for the emergence of the concept and principle of partnership. First and foremost has been the whole issue of the distribution of resources between the developed and developing countries and the relations between Northern and Southern Governments as well as between Northern and Southern NGOs. Secondly, Northern NGOs, particularly those that also provide both institutional and project funding to the Southern NGOs wield a lot of power in defining and guiding the development agenda resulting in an unequal donor-recipient relationship with their Southern counterparts.

With the phenomenal growth and strengthening of Southern NGOs over the past two decades, both Southern and Northern NGOs have been reviewing their fundamental roles in North-South relations. Southern NGOs individually and through the formation of various networks amongst themselves are becoming increasingly clear and vocal about the kind of role Northern NGOs should play in the South, the nature of their development interventions, and the kind of relationship they wish to establish with them. They want to change the unequal donor-beneficiary type of relationship to one of greater equity. The Southern NGOs have been increasingly articulating their objections to being the object of manipulations from the North and what they have perceived as donor-driven agendas. They resist the imposition of Northern theories and perspectives of development. They are demanding control of their own development priorities and respect for their own institutional autonomy. They are demanding *mutual* respect, *mutual* accountability, transparency and flexibility in their relationship with Northern NGOs. They want to participate in all the decisions about the nature of development assistance and other development interventions from the North.

These issues inherent in the traditional donor-recipient and top-down North-South relationship in development work are, in one form or another and to varying degrees, replicated in North-South networking. It should be noted that formal institutional networking is essentially a Northern concept and it has been popularized by Northern NGOs. Furthermore, as noted by Padron, "Networks generate power, but the redistribution of this power is even more crucial than its accumulation and so, its management demands great self-awareness" (Padron, 1991, p.18). In a similar vein, Casasbuenas observes that "the resources the network can command, can be clearly identified to avoid mystification. As reciprocity ... is often cited as a fundamental condition for successful networking, the contribution of money should not imply more power within the network than the contribution of time and/or ideas. This aspect has been particularly painful in the experience of many networks" (Casasbuenas, 1994).

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The sharing of power and resources is very critical in achieving greater equality in the different facets of the relationship between Northern and Southern NGOs. Comparatively, the Northern NGOs have more financial, material and human resources. As alluded to earlier, those Northern NGOs who also play the role of a donor have more power that derives from money, and this fact creates an unequal relationship with the Southern partners.

Many Southern NGOs, on the other hand, are under-resourced and their institutional and organizational capacity is not well developed in comparison with their Northern counterparts. This situation constraints Southern NGOs to enter into a more equitable partnership with their Northern counterparts.

Lack of adequate institutional capacity of Southern NGOs in networking with their Northern partners has several specific implications on their participation in networking with Northern NGOs. Often, their active and equitable participation in the network is constrained by lack of adequate financial resources and under-developed institutional capacity. As a result, they find themselves faced with several disadvantages that marginalize their role and participation in networking.

Such disadvantages and constraints include the following:

- Inadequate technical capacity in communications such as telephone links, facsimile communication, xeroxing facilities, electronic networking, etc.

- Inability to participate in a network's workshops and other meetings.

- Inability to take on leadership roles in the management of networks and in some networking initiatives and activities.

- Inability to actively participate in the governance, management and decision-making affairs of a network.

One of the ways, therefore, that can be used to facilitate a more equitable and sustainable partnership between Northern and Southern NGOs is to strengthen the institutional capacity of Southern NGOs. Thus, institutional strengthening which, among other things, serves to empower Southern NGOs to engage in a mutual, more equitable and sustainable partnership relationships with their Northern counterparts becomes an integral part of the process of partnership building.

Arising out of the issues that surround North-South relationships in development work, the idealized profile of a partnership relationship, as outlined by the 1989 PAC study, is characterised by the following features:

- Shared values, purposes and goals

- Solidarity

- Long-term commitment of working together

- Sharing of resources, information and experience

- Two-way exchange of ideas and information

- Mutual respect and trust

- Reciprocal accountability and transparency

- A sensitivity to the political, economic, cultural and institutional environment of each other

- A joint decision-making process to ensure reciprocity, trust and mutuality (PAC, 1989, pp. 12-13).

Before analyzing these features under the framework of the basic "Elements of Partnership in North-South Networking" in the following sections of the paper, it needs to be stressed here that networking, like partnership, is a method and a process of building relationships with each other in order to learn from each other and to work together on some common issues. Engel makes an important distinction between networking activities and other activities that are *product* or *service* driven. He argues that

> Networking, in contrast, is an activity in which we positively indulge in dialogue, are encouraged to exchange ideas and experiences, are urged to take the time to listen to each other and to work towards a new way of understanding old problems ... Any attempt to manage networks which overlooks this fundamental characteristic is doomed, for it misrepresents the reasons for networking, the social needs and forces behind it. This is not to deny the importance of specifying products and services in the realm of networking. (Engel,1993, p. 135).

Elements of Partnership in North-South Networking

Partnership involves a complex set of relationships at different levels. The dynamics of partnership are determined by many factors and elements and their interactions with each other. Based on the Gariba, Kassam and Thibault study (1995), the analytical framework for the operationalization of the concept of partnership can be adapted to apply to networking that involves Northern and Southern NGOs. The application of this analytical framework of partnership to networking is based on the fact that since the essence of networking is sharing through partnership, factors that strengthen genuine partnership relationships contribute to the effectiveness and sustainability of networking. Under this framework, the functioning of effective North-South networking can be viewed on the basis of seven main elements of partnership as summarized below.

1. Compatibility

Partnership in networking has a stronger chance to be strengthened if the member organizations manifest one or more elements of compatibility such as values, vision, philosophy, world view, and solidarity, or if they are similar kinds of organizations or are engaged in the same sector/s of work. In networks that consist of heterogenous organizations in terms of differing philosophies and purposes, the partnership bonds tend to be rather weak.

The act of networking implies an underlying sense of solidarity among its members. However, when the notion of solidarity is perceived and explicitly stated as a central guiding principle by the network's member organizations, the resulting relationships have a greater likelihood of fostering equitable partnerships in networking activities. Networks that consist of popular organizations or are part of or represent popular or social movements tend to manifest a strong sense of solidarity and therefore have a greater propensity to forge vibrant and equitable forms of partnerships.

2. Means of Partnership

The strength, vibrancy and effectiveness of a network are influenced by its means of partnership, i.e, the range of a networks's activities such as information sharing and exchange, advocacy work, policy dialogue, meetings and workshops, research studies, technical assistance, and institution building. Networking that is confined to only one single activity may offer limited interactions between members resulting in weaker bonds of partnership and networking. The greater the number of activities as means through which

the members interact and work with each other, the stronger and more sustainable the network can become.

As was pointed out earlier, the institutional strengthening of Southern NGOs intended to facilitate the active and equitable participation in the network's activities, management and leadership is a critical part of building genuine partnership and productive networking. In addition to the need for an overall institutional strengthening and regardless of the type of network to which a Southern NGO belongs to, specific types of networks require specific capacity-building interventions by the Northern members. In a network that involves policy dialogue and advocacy work, it would be necessary to provide some training to Southern organizations in doing this kind of work. In a network concerned with information sharing and exchange, it would be necessary to equip and train the Southern partners in the appropriate information and communication technology.

Lastly, as part of institutional strengthening of Southern NGOs, international North-South networking should facilitate South-South linkages among the Southern NGOs.

3. Operational Principles

For networking to function more effectively, it needs to operate on some basic principles of partnership. The operational principles that are necessary for effective partnerships in networking include mutual trust and respect, mutual accountability, transparency, common objectives and goals, flexibility, sensitivity to each other's context (political, economic, social, cultural), respect for member organization's autonomy, and a policy statement on partnership.

While the principle of mutual trust and respect is the basic assumption that is made for engaging in networking, genuine mutual trust and respect in practice is demonstrated by operating on the basis of mutual accountability and transparency. This takes time to develop, requires a strong sense of solidarity, and demands intensive personal contacts between network members, and involvement in many collaborative activities.

In spelling out the goals and objectives of a given network, it is helpful also to have a written policy statement developed jointly by both the Northern and Southern partners on the philosophy and principles of partnership it espouses. Such a statement can help to guide the building of desired relationships between network members in undertaking various networking activities. The articulation of partnership principles contributes to paving the ground for engaging in meaningful and flourishing networking.

4. Operational Mechanism

Another factor that determines the quality and sustainability of partnership in networking is the operational mechanism or structure through which network members work together. This operational *mechanism* as distinct from operational *principles*, consists of such elements as personal contacts and visits, joint decision-making structures, periodic review process on networking relations, joint evaluation of network activities, study visits, and means and methods of communication and consultation.

The establishment of a decision-making structure with the equal and democratic participation of Southern organizations to govern and manage the activities of a network constitutes perhaps the most critical element in instituting equality in a networking partnership.

Since partnership relationships in networking are in a constant state of evolution and change due to both internal and external factors, a periodic review process to re-examine partnership relationship is helpful in sustaining partnerships. Such a review process serves to provide an open forum for resolving any problems and misunderstandings that may arise in the partnership relationship, and the review process itself strengthens the partnership bonds.

When networks want to evaluate their activities, outcomes and impacts, that evaluation needs to be carried out *jointly* by all the members of the network as part of enhancing equitable partnership and building mutual trust, mutual accountability and transparency. A joint and participatory evaluation exercise becomes particularly critical in networks where Northern organizations are also donors. If the function of evaluation is assumed by the donor NGOs alone which happens quite frequently, a role that confers considerable power and control in the hands of the donor NGOs, then this role creates the traditional and unequal donor-recipient relationship, not a partnership.

Personal contacts and the frequency of communication between the member organizations through personal visits to each other's organizations, and communication by telephone and fax are critically instrumental in nurturing an effective networking partnership. To nourish and sustain networking requires a commitment of considerable time and financial resources on the part of both the Northern and Southern members of a network.

5. Extent of Nature of Commitment

In the case of North-South networks which are initiated by Northern donors, the extent of commitment to networking with their Southern partners and the provision of technical assistance needed for strengthening their institutional capacity has important implications on the sustainability of partnerships. A long-term commitment to supporting networking activities is instrumental in building stronger bonds of partnership and in creating the necessary environment and conditions that facilitate a process of mutual learning and mutual action among the network members. As part of the long-term commitment, Northern donor partners also need to have the capacity to endure the problems, crises and adversities that from time to time are experienced by the Southern organizations.

6. Outcomes

If networking is carried out on the basis of equitable partnership, the Northern and Southern members stand a greater chance of deriving *mutual* benefit from the outcomes and impacts of networking. In international networks that do not run The mutual benefits ranging from mutual learning, information sharing and exchange, policy dialogue and advocacy, capacity-building, increased access to other resources, increased institutional credibility, and domestic and international recognition would in turn serve to empower and strengthen both the Northern and Southern members.

7. Sustainability

Several factors can determine the sustainability of North-South NGO networks in terms of its continuing and effective operation over the long-term, the fulfilment of its goals and objectives, its communication linkages and flow, its decision-making processes, and its impact on development issues. The sustainability of networking, first and foremost, depends on the extent to which the partnership relationship is guided by the different indicators of an equitable partnership as outlined above. Secondly, a network has a greater chance of being sustained if the institutional capacity of the Southern members is strengthened. Thirdly, the sustainability of a network depends on the extent to which the network has built the capacity and provided skill training for Southern partners in specific networking functions, e.g., research capacity, policy dialogue, advocacy, information exchange, etc.

Assessing the Nature of Partnership in North-South NGO Networking

In order to provide an analytical framework for determining the nature of a partnership relationship in international networking involving Northern and Southern organizations, the following partnership and networking matrix can serve as broad guidelines. Since building partnership involves a complex set of interactions, this matrix should be seen as flexible and adaptable to different networking situations in international development work.

MATRIX ON PARTNERSHIP IN NORTHERN-SOUTHERN NGO NETWORKING

ELEMENTS	INDICATORS
1. Compatibility	♦ extent to which values, vision, world view, philosophy, and political ideology are shared ♦ extent to which shared values shape development orientation ♦ commonality or complementarity of sector of work or profession ♦ extent and nature of solidarity on issues (specific, global)
2. Means of Partnership	The range and diversity of means, including: ♦ institutional strengthening ♦ technical assistance ♦ South-South linkages ♦ information sharing & exchange ♦ policy dialogue ♦ mutual advocacy ♦ collaborative research studies
3. Operational Principles	♦ mutual trust and respect ♦ mutual accountability ♦ transparency ♦ common objectives and goals ♦ openness ♦ flexibility ♦ sensitivity to each other's context (analysis, reflection) ♦ respect for partner's autonomy ♦ policy statement on partnership

4. Operational Mechanism	◆	extent of personal contact and visits
	◆	joint decision-making process and structures
	◆	frequency of review of partnership relationship
	◆	nature of evaluation (whether joint and participatory or not)
	◆	study visits, knowledge of each other's context
	◆	means, methods, and range of communication
5. Extent and Nature of Commitment	◆	duration of relationship
	◆	extent to which commitment is long or short-term
	◆	enduring capacity
	◆	institutional strengthening
	◆	technical assistance
6. Outcomes	◆	extent to which benefits are perceived to be mutual
	◆	extent to which relationship brings other opportunities
	◆	exchanges
	◆	increased access to other resources
	◆	increased institutional credibility
	◆	domestic and international recognition
7. Sustainability	◆	Extent to which operational sustainability of partnership is guided by the different elements of partnership
	◆	Extent and nature of institutional strengthening of Southern partners
	◆	Capacity building and skill training for Southern partners in specific networking functions, e.g., research capacity, advocacy, information exchange, etc.

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