Structured Flexibility:
The Governance, Coordination, and Outcomes of IDRC Supported Networks

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REPORT BY INGRID SCHENK

“Network” is a term frequently met in the field of international development. Although people use the word to refer to many different types of shared activity—for example, partnerships, joint ventures, conferences, and forms of international cooperation—most would agree that mobilizing a network is often an effective way to move an initiative forward.

IDRC has always recognized the importance of networks in supporting development research, but now it has begun to systematically consolidate its understanding of these structures. Because the Centre’s inventory of knowledge on networks has been scattered and buried in reams of documentation and in the tacit knowledge of staff and partners, this learning has been difficult to muster and to apply.

IDRC is now determined to bring to light the collective knowledge that, in company with its partners, it has assembled and stored. The Centre aims to become more aware of the rich experience it has gained in working with networks during the past decade, and to share this experience more widely. A strategic evaluation will begin to unlock this information and so provide a resource that will nourish more profound discussions and effective networks in future.

For the purpose of its evaluation, IDRC defines a “network” as a social arrangement comprising either organizations or individuals that is based on building relationships, sharing tasks, and working on mutual or joint activities. A network, in other words, is a forum for human exchange. The term does not apply, in this case, to information, access, or data swapping transactions (for example, LISTSERVs). Instead the emphasis is on those links that enable people to work together to generate knowledge and to develop skills while at the same time maintaining their autonomy.

The first stage in IDRC’s evaluation is a straightforward document review that pulls together a wide sample of the tacit knowledge about networks that is held within the Centre’s literature. The study concentrates on three core issues: the intended results of IDRC-supported networks, the sustainability of these networks, and the coordination and governance of these networks.

This highlight summarizes the report “Network Governance, Coordination and Outcomes”, prepared by Ingrid Schenk. She organizes her findings – which she cautions are preliminary – around the answers to four questions.

DEFINITIONS

1. What “style” of governance has been used in IDRC-supported networks?

Schenk defines governance as the institutions, processes, and traditions that determine how power is exercised, how decisions are made and enforced, and how members pursue their interests. IDRC’s literature refers to many styles of network governance, for example, “decentralized authority”, “democratic”, “non-hierarchical”, “participatory”, “bottom-up”, “inclusive”, “consensus-building”, and so on.
Schenk seeks a single general term to describe IDRC-supported networks despite their being so changeable and operating in such varied contexts. Here for example are some network categories:

*Formal to informal.* Networks range from highly structured bodies to less-formal communities of practice, associations, partnerships, links, and connections. These can be further broken down into those dedicated to research, advocacy, policy, or some combination of these.

*Thematic to geographic.* Some networks are organized according to a particular scientific sector or discipline. Others have a geographic focus, and might be local, regional, or global. Others are multi-disciplinary, and may operate in several geographic areas, or even globally.

*Individual to institutional.* A network member could be an individual, an institution, an individual representing an institution, a government official, a representative of civil society, or a target beneficiary. Furthermore, networks can be “tiered” with core members setting the agenda while others are less active. And of course some networks may comprise only a few members while others may include thousands.

In the end, Schenk concludes that the most appropriate term for the style promoted in IDRC-supported networks is “structured flexibility”. By this she indicates that these networks seek a balance between formal management systems, which are needed to guide members toward achieving the network's goals, and sufficient informality to allow the network to adapt to any new goals that may arise.

**TACTICS**

2. What coordination approaches have been used in IDRC-funded networks?

Typically, members of research networks come from different cultural, political, economic, and linguistic backgrounds, and they bring to the group a range of skills, experience, and expectations. How can such a diverse band be managed?

First, at the strategic level, the literature suggests that any network ought to establish a core vision of its goals. Any eclectic organization tends to function more effectively when it possess a clear identity around which its members can rally. A widely-shared and coherent “common concept” of values serves to bind people and to spur cooperation.

A common strategy for entrenching such a set of values is to adopt a specific issue or niche concern, for example, a particular scientific or development problem. Often, however, a network’s core identity emerges only gradually, from the continuing interactions among members. The literature includes the suggestion that every network should begin with a “scoping phase” to allow members to define their expectations.

Second, at the operational level, networks ought to focus on leadership and on internal management.

In IDRC-supported networks, leadership capacity usually means having a strong and skilled coordinator in place. Quoting one of the documents reviewed: “In reality, it is often the coordinator who holds the whole thing together through sheer dynamism and charisma. For this reason, the choice of the coordinator is crucial.”

This choice can even influence the fundamental direction that a network takes. Schenk cites a case from the documents where two coordinators of the same network chose to pursue radically different goals, a swing that caused a shift in target beneficiaries and created tensions among the network’s key actors. Tensions may run high also when the coordinator emerges from a scientific background different from that of most members of that network. With no sharing of disciplinary culture and priorities, clashes are possible.
As for a network’s internal management capacity, two aspects influence the network’s overall effectiveness: authority relations ("Who reports to whom?") and member participation ("How they are working?").

Because networks can be so complex, establishing clear lines of authority is often problematic. One solution presented in the documents reviewed is to break larger networks into levels or tiers, enabling specific issues to be addressed within the narrow limits of each layer.

Schenk’s review confirms that understanding who reports to whom is important for reasons in addition to practical efficiency. Clear lines of authority also sustain the sense of ownership among members; that is, people are encouraged not only to perform the network’s business, but also to join in taking responsibility for its direction.

Member participation, meanwhile, is one element distinguishing the network form from other types of organizations. To succeed, any network must attract good people and keep them busy—a real challenge since networks usually are voluntary associations where authority can seldom be invoked to direct behaviour.

The documents reviewed offer several administrative strategies for boosting participation. Incentives and rewards can persuade members to meet deadlines and performance targets (and provide a basis on which to cull slackers). Ensuring transparency in financial and governance matters tends to engage and hold people. Finally, peer review systems allow members to share knowledge horizontally and motivate them to improve the quality of their work.

**RESULTS**

3. **What outcomes have these approaches yielded in terms of networking and development?**

Network outcomes concern social relationships, cooperation, and communication among network members, that is, the nature and quality of the links connecting these specialists. Development outcomes concern the production, sharing, and dissemination of scientific knowledge, that is, the coordination of work and skills used to produce substantive results.

**Networking**

One clear outcome of network communications is the fostering of an identity for the group. In many of the documents reviewed, the members themselves crystallized the network’s goals sufficiently to satisfy their own need for a core vision. At the same time, the networks have been able to project credible “brand identities” to external audiences such as donors and beneficiaries—a professional glow that subsequently reflected back upon the members as individuals.

Another outcome, which may be termed connectivity, refers to the linkages among members and to the quality of the information flow among the network’s units or levels. For example, in some cases “bridging” institutions were mobilized to make it easier for different parts of a large network to communicate.

IDRC-supported networks uphold a variety of social relationships ranging from strong personal ties to loose partnerships, all of which are underpinned by the notion of “trust”. Trust emerges largely from personal links, but is built also when the network does credible research, organizes effective workshops, follows through on its commitments, and maintains transparency and accountability in its operations.

Different governance and coordination approaches can affect network growth and resource mobilization in different ways. An interesting claim in the documents reviewed is that a network’s development is often
influenced more strongly by its political, socio-cultural, and economic environments than by the inherent merit of its task or the capacity of its members. Networks, in other words, tend to be local in character, and coordinators therefore need to take account of local needs and interests when planning for growth. Sometimes, a network’s local context sustains its growth naturally. Networks are basically agencies for “creativity and risk taking”, and the knowledge that is their core product tends to foster expansion by its essence. Activities like experiments, pilot projects, tests, trials, modelling, and so on, often lead to more of the same, especially when they are bolstered by small grants programs and when they have practical local consequences. A culture of innovation, in other words, can pay its own way.

**Development**

The documents reviewed present one striking finding: the internalization of new ways of thinking – or what might simply be called learning. Schenk cites several instances where concepts, processes, even vocabulary have made the transition from being novel and perhaps puzzling to being accepted, even indispensable. This new learning is an outcome in itself, but it is also a process in that it leads to innovative behaviours in the learners, in particular, to more effective ways of doing development research. She quotes for example from a report about the network EcoPlata:

…networking has been able to help break down disciplinary barriers at academic institutions that tend to be narrowly focused. …the result has been a “change in culture” from a technical paradigm to an interdisciplinary, intergovernmental, inter-institutional paradigm that embraces information sharing and shuns territoriality in pursuit of common goals.

Schenk argues that this process of internalization could be an important link between IDRC’s strategic intent in supporting networks and the ultimate achievement of development objectives.

**ISSUES**

4. With these approaches, what challenges have been encountered and how have they been handled?

Since networks are constantly evolving, their successful development calls for a strong adaptive capacity. Two factors help build this capacity: the management of change, and organizational learning.

**The management of change**

IDRC’s literature notes that many networks endure setbacks, or even fail, during periods of change.

*Changes in leadership or membership base.* Just as many networks thrive upon the energy and charisma of a visionary leader (often the network’s founder) so too they atrophy when that person departs the organization and the leadership falls into less committed or less capable hands. Among the solutions that networks have attempted are transitional, shared, or rotational leadership structures. In the same way, the arrival or departure of an influential member may fatally skew a network’s objectives.

*Changes in network phase or project lifecycle.* A network can become vulnerable whenever it shifts priorities or realigns the focus of its activities, especially if long-term funding support happens to be at risk. Special management skills are required to navigate these dangerous transitions.

*Devolution.* In recent years IDRC has been transferring the coordination of some networks to its regional partners. Schenk cites examples where this handover has compromised the network’s survival. In many instances the problem has been inadequate managerial capacity, but another pitfall has been the risk of a tilt in the relationships among the major stakeholders.

*Formalizing network relationships and processes.* Most IDRC-supported networks start out informally, but as they evolve members demand more structured coordination mechanisms, or “institutionalization”. Other members worry that these mechanisms might jeopardize the participatory nature of networks.
or limit the scope of their activities. IDRC’s literature offers one solution: “structured informality”, an institutional setup that allows networks to maintain high standards of administrative and financial reporting, yet retain their vigorous and pioneering culture.

**Organizational learning**

Networks are “learning organizations”, and coordinators need to take measures to continue to foster innovation and experimentation.

One such measure is *learning-by-doing*. IDRC’s approach allows researchers leeway to control their own projects, an approach that sometimes leads to delays or added costs, but one that ultimately pays off in terms of increased local research capacity. Sometimes, IDRC does involve itself by way of mentoring or giving support to specific tasks, but final decisions are expected to be taken locally.

Another measure is to advance techniques of *monitoring and evaluation*. The literature argues that feedback and adjustment systems should become better integrated into network routines, along with documentation processes that more consistently gather reliable information and that preserve learning for the future.

Schrenk cautions that evaluation systems need to maintain a healthy balance between focusing on results versus focusing on process, that is, between achieving scientific knowledge and managing the social networks that produce this knowledge.

Both learning-by-doing and monitoring and evaluation help members develop a sense of ownership of their network, plus they underpin an “organizational memory” that extends beyond the network itself and beyond the transitory participation of individuals.

HIGHLIGHT PREPARED BY PATRICK KAVANAGH, MARCH 2005