

Profile of Networks

Inclusive, resilient, effective

March 2006

In 2006, IDRC completed a wide-ranging evaluation of the support it gave to research networks during the decade 1995-2005.

This assessment included a review of IDRC's documentation, interviews with key players, a learning forum, and a telephone and e-mail questionnaire survey addressed to hundreds of network coordinators and members.

Among its findings, this survey generated a profile description summarizing characteristics of 80 networks that IDRC supported during the decade.

FOCUS: INCLUSIVE

The survey found that these networks divide their attention more or less evenly among four topics corresponding with IDRC's main programs: natural resources, social policy, economic policy, and information, communications, and technology. Overlapping interests are common, the most popular blend being social policy and economic policy. A small number of networks concentrate on all four program areas.

Considered overall, the networks concern themselves with the full array of developing regions. Fully one-third take a specifically global approach. The next largest category is Latin America. About 40 per cent of the networks claim only a single geographic focus.

LEADERSHIP: STRONG ON TEAMWORK

Over half the networks operate with a shared coordination arrangement. When the topic is information, communications, and technology, an even higher number do so. The rest generally operate with a single permanent coordinator.

LIFE HISTORY: RESILIENT

Half the networks have existed under their current names for five years or less. The oldest tend to be those that concentrate on South Asia or on Latin America and the Caribbean. Just over one-quarter of the networks evolved from some earlier phase and have changed their names.

About half the past coordinators who were approached report that the networks they once headed remain active. This important finding suggests that, once networks are solidly launched, they are well able to withstand a change in leadership.

HOME BASE: STABLE

The networks are headquartered in different types of organizations, most commonly non-governmental or civil society groups, but also universities or colleges, international bodies, independent research centres, government ministries, and private sector associations. About 10 per cent are based within IDRC itself. Some even reside on-line as virtual networks.

It is noteworthy that these institutional bases tend to be stable. Almost three-quarters of the networks have stayed in the same organizational home since their start. In fact, at least 14 per cent have been in the same home since before the beginning of the survey period, that is, for more than ten years.

While IDRC-supported networks are spread around the world, their highest number tend to be headquartered South America, Central America, and the Caribbean. The next most common geographic home is Canada, which reflects IDRC's strategic goal of encouraging partnerships between Canadian institutions and institutions in the developing world.

MEMBERSHIP: LARGE AND GROWING

Almost two-thirds of networks have a closed membership policy, meaning that individuals are selected rather than being able to join without criteria. Networks with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa and networks formed since 2003 are more likely than others to be closed.

Most networks are accessible to both individuals and organizations as opposed to one or the other exclusively.

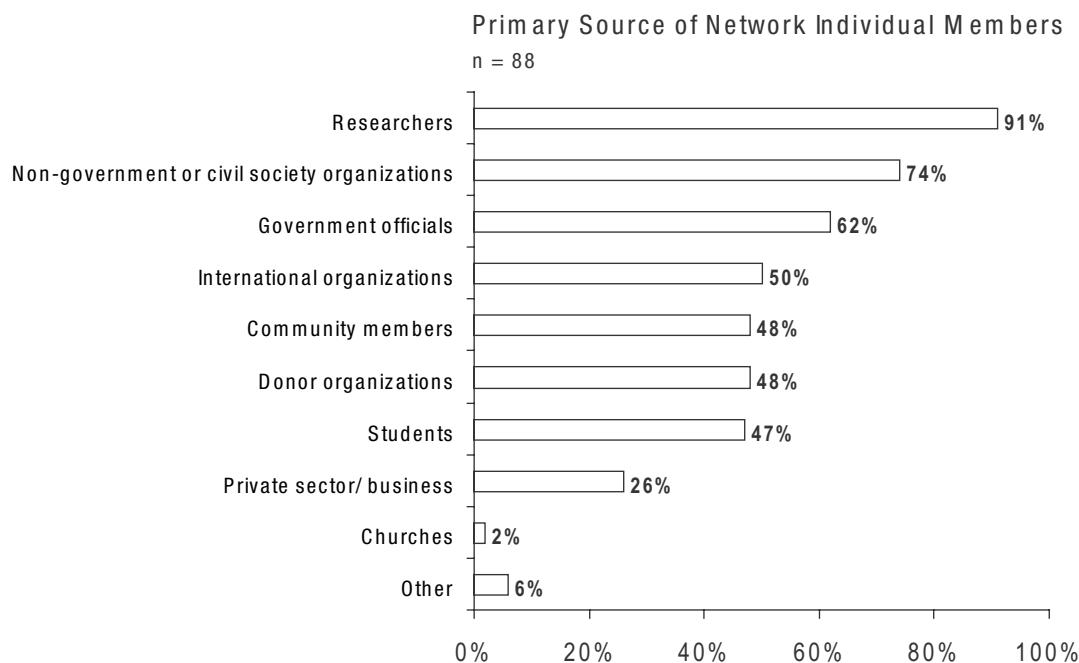
In terms of individual members, networks tend to be pretty large. Almost 40 per cent have more than 50 members, and the average number is 247.

The average number of organizational members is 39. The categories of organizations that typically join an IDRC-supported research network are – unsurprisingly – more or less the same types that serve as institutional homes.

Perhaps simply because they have had more time to grow, older networks tend to be larger. In fact, during the period under study, the majority of the networks saw their membership increase, and very few reported a decline.

Reflecting again the impact of IDRC's strategic focus on fostering North-South partnerships, overall, three-quarters of individual network members and three-quarters of organizational members come from developing countries.

Individual members emerge from a spectrum of occupational sources. This graph provides a breakdown:



Older networks tend to include more students and government officials, while those from the Middle East and North Africa are the least likely to have any government representation.

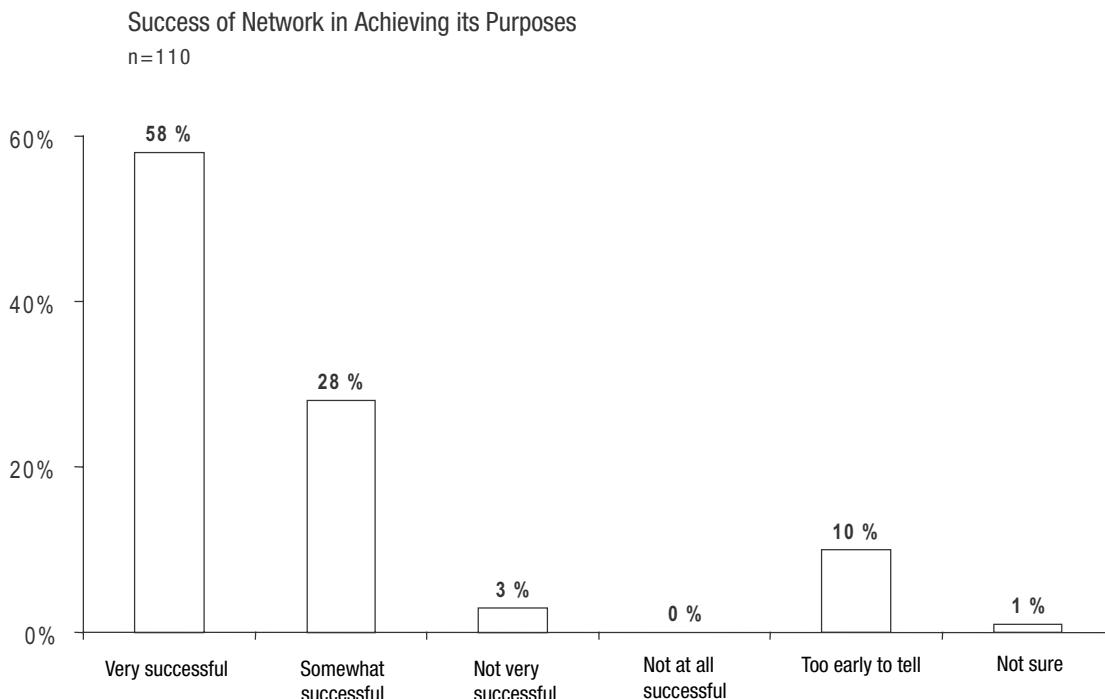
PURPOSE: ACHIEVED

A network's purpose or objective (as opposed to its topic of interest) may include skill-building, advocacy, creating awareness, simply "doing research," and so on.

Many networks report having multiple objectives; in fact, most declare four or more, the most often mentioned being skill-building and public advocacy.

Overwhelmingly, the purpose that networks cite has remained stable over time. Only about one-third report any change in fundamental objectives. The reasons for change include shifts in public policies or in personnel, or natural evolution such as a graduation from data gathering to building research capacity.

Perhaps the most striking discovery of the survey is that – whatever their category or objectives – 86 per cent of networks claim to have been either “somewhat successful” or “very successful” at achieving their purpose. Only a very few networks report having little success. This graph dramatically illustrates the finding:



COMMUNICATION: WIRED

IDRC-supported networks seldom hold face-to-face meetings, with most reporting only a few such gatherings each year; however, one in five networks report talking by telephone daily or weekly.

By far the most common medium of contact is e-mail or other electronic means. Over half the networks report using this channel either daily or weekly (in a sense, many are already “virtual networks”).

More than 40 per cent of networks claim to suffer no communication barriers whatsoever, while about one-quarter complain of insufficient money or other resources. The networks reporting the most barriers are in Africa. A drawback commonly mentioned is the lack of internet infrastructure – no electricity, inadequate connectivity, high costs, lack of technical skills, and so forth.