IDRC Networks:
An Ethnographic Perspective

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Networks as Mechanisms of Communications and Influence

The concept of people-centred development is central to an understanding of networks. The various actors in civil society must communicate with each other, and the horizontal exchange of information and ideas can be facilitated through a network. The rationale of a network is to promote people-centred development by allowing civil society to share experience and take joint action. Networks allow individuals, groups, and organizations that want to communicate with each other to pursue some common development agenda without surrendering autonomy. Networks can also serve as a mechanism of influence through the sharing of information, ideas, and experiences. This influence extends not only to civil society, but to the institutions of the state and the market. Networks are distinct from other forms of organization such as formal membership associations and umbrella organizations. Formal representation is not necessary in a network.

Four main purposes for networks are identified:

1. **To communicate** among actors in civil society;
2. **To mobilize energy** and resources as new ideas, designs, and perspectives are shared among interested groups;
3. **To build linkages** among actors in civil society by bringing together like-minded individuals, groups, and institutions around a shared development agenda; and
4. **To influence** public policy through shared analysis and vision among various actors in civil society.

This paper analyzes how to make networks more effective as mechanisms of communication and influence, around six core problématiques:

1. **Participation versus responsibility** A balance between participation in, and responsibility for, the network must be promoted among its members. The more widely shared the responsibility for network direction, the more sustainable the network.

2. **Coordination versus control** The purpose of coordination is to ensure the promotion of communication, not to control the activities of those who are part of the network. Those who associate with the network remain autonomous.

3. **Links between the person and the institution** The key is to ensure that individuals are as active as institutions in networks. Institutional bases are critical for a network, but these institutions must respect the autonomy, informality, and space that the individuals in a network require to be able to effectively serve the mandates of the network.

4. **Information versus action** There is an important distinction between solidarity and action. Although solidarity can be responded to by many members of the network, action requires the commitment of institutions to undertake follow-up programs.

5. **Focus versus inclusion** Focus allows a network to influence public policy more coherently; inclusive networks disseminate ideas and experiences more widely.

6. **Process versus structure** A certain amount of structure is necessary for continuity and accomplishment of purpose, but this structure must not curtail the evolution of the processes.