Networking as a mechanism to build collaborative programs of research: lessons learned from IDRC experiences.

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        [The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the International Development Research Centre.]

Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years, IDRC has supported more than 300 network projects, spending over $250 million (CAD). The Centre has used networks in all its fields of research - health, information sciences, agriculture, environment, education, social policy, economics, among others. It has supported many different types of network arrangements, from national to global networks; it has supported networks on its own and in conjunction with other donors. The Centre will continue to make use of the network mechanism in many of its programs, and in fact sees an increasing role for donors at the network level.

Reviews have been undertaken of individual networks over this time, and a number of these are available from the Centre. At present, the Centre is undertaking a global review of networks, to develop a more comprehensive picture of the successes and failures, to attempt to identify where they are successful and where they are less helpful. The analysis of the data for this review is not yet complete. This presentation is based on a partial review of the data, with a special emphasis on Africa. It will focus on patterns and trends emerging which might have special reference to this group in considering the use of networks as a mechanism for research in the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change.

This review is based primarily on internal IDRC documents which have explored various aspects of networks over the past several years. Many of the papers and evaluations of specific networks

have been commissioned in the context of an overview of networks at IDRC by the Evaluation Unit; other network evaluations have been carried out in Centre projects, independently of this review. Other literature has been consulted at various stages in this evaluation. The commissioned papers have been based on two key factors: critical issues which have emerged in the Centre; and gaps in current knowledge to address what the Centre could do in the future to enhance further its support to networks. Extensive use has been made of interview notes prepared by Centre staff participating in the review (Anne Bernard, Andrea Goldsmith, Terry Smutylo and the author,) of coordinators of about fifty IDRC networks on a global basis.

I will present a series of key points which emerge from the analysis to date, which could be important starting points for the discussion. The key trends which emerge are in some respects contradictory. What they all point out is that networks are not a panacea, and they must be clearly focussed and limit themselves to the objectives which they have set for themselves.

As a starting point, it is worth noting that in many instances, the recipients interviewed perceived, or at least presented, more of the hazards to networking than did donor representatives who were interviewed. On the whole they were more cautious about the potential, and more concerned about the importance of the local control of the agenda. This issue may help to clarify the problems which have been identified in many of the networks which were part of this review, and it suggests a very clear need to ensure a full participation by all parties in discussing potential networks. It also confirms the need expressed by evaluators, academicians, donor representatives as well as recipients, to build on local expression of issues rather than create anew. Local ownership of the problem is critical to the success of the network. It is therefore incumbent on donors to define their roles in funding in terms understood and owned by the groups being assisted: the network will not create the ownership, but rather is a vehicle through which to meet an expressed and understood need.

Trends:

Below I will summarize a set of important trends related to networks in Africa. The key trends are grouped around four themes. These themes were used as the basis for interviews and for a file review of IDRC networks: the definition of networks, their functions, impacts and futures.

I. Definition:

This section will look at how networks are perceived and what their key elements identify them. The definition of networks is informed by 6 key problématiques identified by Tandon:

1. *involvement vs. responsibility:*

    how to move to the concept of joint responsibility in decision-making

2. *coordination vs. control:*

    how to legitimize the notion of coordination as more than a bureaucratic

    mechanism for control, to become a tool for information exchange

3. *the personal vs the institutional:*

    how to link people with strong institutional support: networks must move beyond

    the individual involvement to institutional commitment

4. *information vs. action:*

    how to use the networks to integrate information for action

5. *focus vs inclusion:*

    identification of a network purpose and building its membership as either open or

    selective according to the objectives of the network

6. *process and structure:*

too much structure can lead to institutionalization and a limitation of the ability of the network to meet its objectives.

Information exchange networks have frequently been problematic in Africa for resource reasons: human, financial and technical resources.

Networks must have clear objectives and these must be well understood by their members. It has often been the case that the objective or purpose has been understood by the designers of a network (often a representative of one of the organizations involved and a representative of a donor), but they have not brought in the members at an early stage. Consequently when one (or all) of the original designers leaves the network, it falls into a period of crisis. Where a network is created to respond to a donor funding trend, it has tended to fail.

Networks have strong potential to serve as capacity building agents.

Networks are expensive to establish and expensive to maintain. They require extensive commitment of time and they frequently require technical resources which are beyond the organizations which are involved. Therefore they remain donor-driven as well as donor funded, and suffer from frequent breakdowns in capacity, either human -- when the limited personnel are unavailable, or technical when equipment failures, or financial -- when resources are either not received or must be diverted in the short term for other pressing needs.

> **Networks work very well in the context of multi-disciplinary teams focussed on a development problématique.**

Where the objective of capacity building is clearly specified, networks have achieved many successes in this area, through funding training courses, serving as a fund for small research grants, providing support to institutional capacity building, and serving as a mechanism to link expertise. **However**, it is not given that networks will support capacity building. In many cases where this was not a specific objective, but was implicit, the capacity building did not occur, because there were no clear mechanisms or mandate for it.

Many cases where networks have been the most effective in this review have been precisely those cases where there was not a known way in which to work together, where the groups attempting to address a common problem did not have methodology, perspective or politics in common. They needed to find a new way to operate as a group and in this situation the network fulfils a very specific need.

II. Function:

How networks operate is critical to their perception in the research community.

A long term commitment is essential.

A successful network requires a considerable commitment of time and energy as well as a clarity of purpose. In an African context, networks are not sustainable if we think of them as locally funded and sustained. They will continue to require donor commitment of financial resources; however they also require a local commitment of human resources. It is increasingly important to ensure that networks emerge from recipient-identified needs and issues rather than from donor designs.

Networks need senior level buy-in and support from the organizations involved.

Networks are expensive in both time and money. They require considerable energy from those who participate and they require technology and opportunities to interact face-to-face, both of which take considerable resources.

Because they cost a lot, networks also require a long term commitment of time and resources. Results do not come quickly or easily. Without a long term commitment, networks result in a dissipation of energy and resources.

Networks provide an opportunity for geo-political sharing: for example the parliamentary network in Southern Africa (Smyth) provides an opportunity, in a non-political environment, to create a sharing of information amongst politicians of all parties. The purpose is to create for all a greater access to information than would be possible on a political party basis or even a national basis. Because of the senior level of support in the countries involved for this kind of sharing, the network has the potential (which it appears to be realizing) of serving as a clearing house for information as well as issues and ideas on the strengthening of parliamentary democracy. Senior level support for networks needs to be ongoing.

Networks are most effective where they operate within an eco-region.

III. Impact:

It is difficult to extract the impact of networking from the other activities which are covered in the same fields of research; however some attempt is made to do that.

A network operating within an eco-region has some clear commonalities amongst its partners, both as to issues and resources. In his review of a network in Southeast Asia which was attempting to focus on indigenous knowledge, Michaud notes that the spread of the network across several eco-systems within the region reduced the level of commonality to almost zero. In health networks ostensibly dealing with one disease, one discovers that the manifestations, etiology and sometimes the cures, are very different in India than in Central America, and

different again in Africa. There is no basis for a network because there is little to learn except in a most general sense of information exchange. In Africa, there is a constant tension in networks between West Africa and Eastern & Southern Africa. In some cases, the linkages work; in other cases there is a continuing expression of need to deal with issues and people in West Africa on a different basis and on different terms than in Eastern and Southern Africa, because the ecologies, economies and environments are different.

> **Networks serve a catalytic function for a group of individuals or organizations with a common interest.**

Interregional networks can still be effective and valuable, sometimes as capacity building networks, as a means to build a new field or domain of research, or to deal with a time-bound and specific problem which has common implications across regions (eg., trade).

The catalytic idea exchange and idea-building function is frequently raised as a central issue in network impact. This is a capacity building function, but more than that it is a capacity utilization function. In many countries, there are so few researchers in any one field that they

need the interaction with colleagues with similar problems in order to generate the creative

energy to come up with effective and relevant solutions.

Networks risk stunting innovation.

Networking is frequently used for advocacy purposes, for example in Bhopal (Tandon). The

network brings together the converted around a specific issue and they build on their common

interest to create a specific outcome. Or, in the case of the Parliamentary network, there is a

common set of information to which all want access; they are prepared to ensure that the access

is open across national and political boundaries because it is the only way most of them are going

to have any access at all to the information. There is a

Networks can be very effective tools for advocacy, or for precisely the opposite - that is, creating channels for communication which are not bound by political limitations or special interests. Where they are less effective is in the middle ground.

common need for the information which transcends the boundaries between groups or

individuals. Where networks find the most struggle for survival and success seems to be in the

middle ground, where they are efforts to share information in a common field of interest - but

without any clear or defined purpose.

Because a significant commitment of time and energy is going into the network, there is a

tendency to continue building the structure. As a result, the network may both absorb a great

deal of energy into the creation of an institution, and create a set of rules which may be "bureaucratic" and may limit the capacities of the researchers to move in new directions. Furthey they may divert resources from national priorities.

IV. Futures:

The ideal network is locally conceived and donor financed; leadership is crucial and stability in that leadership is essential. Networks serve a different purpose from institutions and should not replace institutions. However, they require a minimum critical mass of resources within a country for that country to participate effectively. Networks are technology dependent in many cases; this increases their fragility in the poorest countries, which have limited technology as well as limited human resources to manage that technology. In discussing electronic networking in Africa, Weber notes that some of the characteristics of successful networks are:

enthusiastic personnel, availability of appropriate technology

Networks are fragile.

clear definition of goals
standard protocols for international linkages
ability to absorb cultural diversity

At the same time, he identifies the key problems in electronic neworking in Africa have been
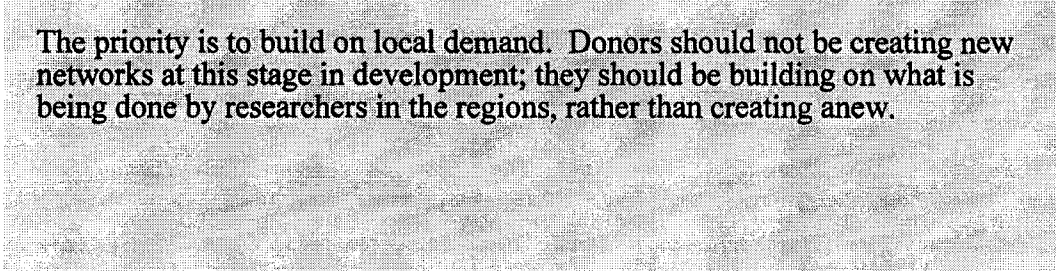very limited skilled personnel
a weak technological insfratrructure

a lack of autonomy in the node institutions
a lack of replacement supplies to maintain the technology.

Donors should be encouraged to build on existing networks and issues; the use of networks to introduce new issues or to identify new areas of work, is not seen as a priority at this stage. What is a priority is to solidify what exists, build the local potential for the development of effective networks, and focus on the priority needs.

> The priority is to build on local demand. Donors should not be creating new networks at this stage in development; they should be building on what is being done by researchers in the regions, rather than creating anew.

Conclusions:

Where they are clearly focussed, networks are still seen by researchers, donors and recipient institutions as effective and profitable mechanisms for the carrying out of research for development. What is essential is that they be selective, focussed, purposive and agile. Projects are sometimes defined as networks as a convenience. They have no artuiculation as networks and they are not perceived by their components as anything but a more convenient funding mechanism. In these cases, networks serve a function only as a means to deliver a series of projects - a project secretariat or executing agency function. To call them networks is to broaden the definition of what is a network to the point it is meaningless.

However, in other cases where the network mechanism is clearly seen as a means to either achieve a research objective or build research capacity, it is a strong and effective means through which to do that -- but in order to be successful, the network role and function must be clearly

addressed and articulated by the participants.

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clear that the Centre will continue to support networks (ref: Bezanson memo to all staff 17 July 1995)