IDRC Networks:
An Ethnographic Perspective

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September 1996

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Governance Structures of Networks in Sub-Saharan Africa

This paper analyzes the governance structures of seven capacity-building networks in sub-Saharan Africa: The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC); the Industrial Policy Network (le Réseau); The African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS); the Educational Research Network for Eastern and Southern Africa (ERNESA); the Education Research Network for West and Central Africa (ERNWACA/ROCARE); the Municipal Development Program (MDP); and the Environmental Economics Network for Eastern and Southern Africa (EENESA).

Key conclusions reached in this review are:

1. The easiest way to initiate a new or revamped network may be for a technically competent official from the donor to take on the role of coordinator and to get things going in-house before bringing in other donors. He or she is likely to have the necessary combination of skills, and the confidence of the principal funding sources, at a time when new donors will be reluctant to take an active role.

2. Any long-term network to build research capacity in Africa probably requires a minimum critical mass, including a full-time coordinator, to make a real difference. The prevailing incentive structure is not sufficient to motivate either researchers or the coordinator to take a sustained interest in a "part-time network."

3. One should hire the strongest possible coordinator and be prepared to pay a competitive price. The position is very demanding, and the success of the network depends more than anything else on this individual. The ideal candidate has both scientific and administrative experience and is one who can compete on the international labour market. However, the salary level can be reduced somewhat by offering as much autonomy as possible in a supportive governance structure.

4. Housing network secretariats within IDRC's regional offices has not worked as well as locating them in separate institutions. Some changes may be required if the Centre wishes to pursue this mechanism. More authority may have to be delegated to the secretariat and the governing board or steering committee.

5. Coordinators must have a clear understanding of their reporting relationship. Divided loyalties must be avoided.

6. The creation of a separate scientific committee probably represents the final stage of delegation by donors. Before networks can set up well-functioning scientific committees, they need a strong secretariat, a well-defined program that enjoys broad consensus, and a well-respected group of African and non-African specialists on the scientific committee.

7. When one donor does not start things off on its own, an all-inclusive steering committee may be the best way to establish a consensus between the different sponsors and technical specialists on broad objectives and modalities.

8. Steering committees may offer a good compromise on the scientific front in the short run because they allow donors to participate in scientific decision-making until they gain sufficient confidence in the coordinator and technical advisors. However, donors must be careful not to impose their will on the steering committee, and the executing agency must not undermine its decisions in subsequent actions.

9. The need for administrative and financial support is substantial, often under-estimated, and probably most effectively addressed through a management committee. Steering committee meetings tend to be too large and infrequent to deal effectively with such problems. The tendency to leave these for the donor-executing agency to resolve has not worked very well. A management committee reporting to the full steering committee helps establish more of an arm's length relationship with the executing agency and better respects the quasi-independent character of the network.

10. It is more difficult to build a participatory, demand-driven network because there are two different reporting relationships for the coordinator. A balance must be struck between the aspirations of the membership and the exigencies of the donor agency. If the aspirations of the members take precedence, the agency is likely to minimize its financial commitment and confine the network to a part-time coordinator and few financial incentives. Greater donor commitment tends to create tensions and frustrations elsewhere.

11. Although well chosen policymakers are a useful addition to every network governance structure, it is the choice of coordinator that is likely to have the greatest impact on policy orientation. Coordinators from the region they serve appear to be more prone to emphasize policy relevance.

12. The importance of governance structures is underestimated.

13. Once a network has an effective system of governing committees in place, the lead donor agency must step back and learn to work through that system. This is a critical component of capacity-building.

14. AERC represents a successful model. Although its circumstances may have been special, other networks would do well to understand its approach and adopt relevant aspect.

15. Ultimately, personalities matter most. If mutual respect and the will to cooperate are there, various governance structures can probably work. If not, then a series of well-functioning committees may be the only way to overcome personality clashes.