

Civil Society networks – types and success factors

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Ebba Augustin

Introduction

In the 23 years I am now involved in development work in Africa, Asia and the Middle East I have “networked”, initiated networks, facilitated the initiation of networks and worked as a member of networks. Some of these networks related to my work some were founded and driven for social or political causes. What has fascinated me most in networking, was the intellectual cross-fertilization that goes with networking, to learn from best practices from all over the world (without having to go through the hard task of experimenting myself), to meet people who share my values and hopes for the future and to gain access to a truly global culture of activism. What has considerably frustrated me at time were network-members who were unable to make compromises for the common goal or followed their own agendas, decision-makers of member organizations that lead their own organization top-down style while demanding democracy and transparency from the network, and networking for the sake of networking - without clear goals and vision that lead to concrete action. I have participated in networks only when I was to gain a clear benefit out of it for my work and when the resources I had to invest were at least partially covered by my employer. I have invested my time and my resources into network when I believed in their cause. Networking was most effective with a dedicated and efficient secretariat. When communication was cumbersome, when more time was spend on arguing then action I have left networks. For me networking was always about social change for a common good rather than for exclusive benefit of network members.

This paper is an attempt to summarize the common wisdom reflected in the available literature on networks and reflect on my own experience in networking, primarily in the Middle East. I will start with a definition of “networks”, cover the purpose of networks for Civil Society action, look at key elements of successful networks, different type of network structures, stages of network development and finally summarize lessons learnt for successful networking.

In the last 25 years the world has grown “smaller” and more interconnected at a rate unparalleled in human history. NGOs are important players in a new globally networked society. With a wealth of information literally available at the click of a mouse it is becoming clear to development practitioners and social activists that challenges they face on the level of local communities are often determined by political, economic and legal frameworks and events on the national, regional and even the global level. Hence, alliances of likeminded groups and individuals are formed to increase political and social influence of otherwise powerless social groups, to leverage available resources, to improve access to information and best practices, to build capacity and increase outreach. From the 1970s to the 90s transnational social movement organizations that advocate both local and global social agendas more than tripled to over 600. “Formerly local and national NGOs and community organizations now regularly operate transnational: swapping information, networking,

coordinating campaigns, framing claims, and locating shared targets. This is a change not only in the frequency of interactions across borders, but also in the networks' density, adaptability, complexity, and reach.”¹

In network meetings in the Middle East I routinely test how deep participants are involved in this culture of networking by asking who is a member of at least two or more civil society networks. With the exception of CS representatives from Syria (where Civil Society development is in a more nascent state) I yet have to meet an activist who did not raise a hand.²

The proliferation of “networks” and “coalitions” with different geographical outreach and with governmental, private sector and civil society partners is a sign of our times. Sidney Tarrow and Donatella Della Porta have called this trend “the most dramatic change we see in the world of contentious politics.”³ Such coalition building, resulting in inter-organizational networks of Civil Society organisations, can be a source of considerable power affecting social change. A much quoted example is success of the small Zapatista resistance movement against the Mexican government’s attempt to exploit the indigenous Chiapa populations. Local NGOs aided the Zapatistas cause by disseminating their message through an extended activist NGO community via the Internet, face-to face meetings meetings and messengers to policy makers and international investors. Ultimately the government of Mexico was forced to halt their campaign of privatization of indigenous communal land. The analysis of Internet links of the participating NGOs revealed the involvement of thirteen different NGO sectors from rights to trade organizations with some of them with deep and dense linkages in their respective sector.⁴

Inter-organizational networks of NGOs are an increasingly common phenomenon. International donors and the different UN-bodies increasingly initiative Civil-society networks on the national, regional and world-level to leverage impact, partner up with Civil Society resources and attempt “institutional sustainability” for development initiatives. At times massive donor funds go into the start-up of networking exercises that resemble illustrious talking-clubs and seldom lead to concrete action and ownership of the concerned members. At the same time a few celebrated success-stories exist. Most NGO networks have their success stories and failures and constantly struggle to cover their costs. Understanding what makes networks successful is a key to understanding the influence these structures can yield in the national, regional and global political-economic system. This paper attempts to provide a summary background into civil-society networking and the important lessons learnt for network success.

¹ Reitan, Ruth, Global Governance, July 2007, Ecycolpadiea Britannica, A Global Civil Society in a World Polity, or Angels and Nomads Against Empire? <http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/26374876/A-Global-Civil-Society-in-a-World-Polity-or-Angels-and-Nomads-Against-Empire>

² Ebba Augustin, Draft Report, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Towards an Arab Coalition for Freedom of Association & Integrity of CSOs, Brumana/Lebanon October 23th -26th, 2009

³ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, Dynamics of Contention (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 11. Quoted in: Reitan, Ruth, July 2007

⁴ Fulk, J. and Stephens, K. J. , 2007-05-23 "NGO Networks in the Global Sphere" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, TBA, San Francisco, CA Online <PDF>. 2009-05-24 from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p171163_index.html

Definition of “network” and “networking”

The activity of “networking” is probably as old as mankind. Human beings have always sought out individuals and social groups with similar concerns and interest as their own. The history of networking between independent organizations goes back more than 150 years. The World Alliance of Young Men’s Christian Associations was founded in 1855; 100 years later the Conference of NGOs interested in Migration (1950) was formed and the networking goes on.⁵

A network can be defined as a communicative structure of individuals, social groups or organizations that have a common interest, shared principles and ideas and values that engage in “voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal exchange of information and services”.⁶

Networks evolve under very different conditions and cover a large variety of sectors and geographical outreach. Networks differ by scope, objectives, members, structure, management, duration over time, initiation and foundation, purpose and degree of formalization and funding mechanisms. Networks can arise from a clear need for cooperation and involve a small number of members others are formed by outsiders (i.e. donors to international organizations such as the UN) and involve thousands of members/ participants. Networks can see themselves as temporary creations with a limited timeframe and clearly set goal. Other networks strive for organizational sustainability and establish durable structures and operating mechanisms. Networks can be formed for a single purpose (such as providing information or a platform of exchange) or multi-purpose for advocacy and lobby work. Networks can be homogenous (with high group cohesion and low level of conflict) or very heterogeneous (with members from opposite of the political or ideological spectrum). Networks can cover a small community or reach out to members in all corners of the planet. Networks can have focus on a specific issue or sector or can have multi-sectoral objectives.

However, despite the large variety of networks, some conclusions can be drawn: the longer-lived a network is the more diverse the fields of its activities, the larger its outreach and when outside funds are involved the higher the degree of formalization and structure. The major common denominator between all networks is that they are created for “networking”, the voluntary exchange of information and joint action between autonomous network members.

“Networking” implies a two way flow of communication and exchange of information, resources, expertise etc, between network members. When these exchange processes do not take place there is not networking and hence not network. Structures with only a one-way flow of communication, i.e. provision of information do not constitute networks.

Most networks distinguish between different types of membership. Membership in networks can be categorized based on type of participating organizations or intensity of involvement in the network. I.e. the WLUML distinguishes between networkers and active networkers. The two types of networking members are

⁵ Cyril Ritchie, NGO Cooperation and networking, , Centre International de Conférence de Genève (CCIG) July 2002

⁶ Torsten Benner, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28 (1), pp. 188-190, Book-review, Margaret E. Keck, Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998,

distinguished by the intensity of their network involvement ranging from buy- in into the network principles and values and receiving of information to active participation in collective initiatives and governance.⁷

Networks differ from organizations by being less hierarchical, structured and often less formalized. While an organization has a specific legal status and often a stable address, location and clearly identified central ownership, network secretariats can rotate between partner organizations and some networks have no formal or legal structure. Networking cuts across organizational boundaries, something organizations usually resist. A crucial difference is that networks are formed around shared values rather than purely instrumental goals. While all parts of the organization are essentially interdependent and accountable to one management, networks link formally independent entities with each other. Networks hence are essentially a linking mechanism between organizations.

When networks are formalized they follow the legal requirements in their country of registration. Hence a network might register as a “forum”, “union”, “network”, “society”, “alliance” or “coalition”.

Purpose of “networks” for Civil-society work

Civil society networks are formed for a specific purpose from which network members benefit. While there have to be clear benefits for individual network members, network activities are undertaken to achieve a common “network” owned purpose. Especially in networks that are formed around clear values and for “social change” network members are willing to invest resources for networking because they believe the output of network action is larger than the sums of the action of individual members combined. “Ownership” for a network are strongest when network members believe in such a common goal. Network purposes can be clustered under five categories:

1. increased **mobilization of and access to resources** (information, funds, HR, solidarity, support, technology, social or political linkages or access to channels for information dissemination such as the media, also intangible resources such as trust and legitimacy) for network members;
2. increased **scope for mobilization of key stakeholders and people for change** (outreach) - Networks as “platforms for action”;
3. increased **possibilities to create and/or exploit political opportunities** and **innovations** for change;
4. increased **scope for communicating core messages** to local, national, regional and global constituencies;
5. Increased **“clout” or “voice”** for network members;

Despite the large variety of NGO networks five clusters of activities are most commonly found:

- (a) Provision of services (information, resources, capacity building, linkages)
- (b) Joint learning (exchange of information and best practices)
- (c) Research
- (d) Lobby work and advocacy
- (e) Management⁸

⁷ WLUML, Plan of Action, Senegal 2006, page 14,

<http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/import/english/pubs/pdf/poa/senegal-2006-poa-en.pdf>

While there are typical advocacy networks or networks that primarily provide services to its members, most networks combine different activities.

Key elements of successful networks

Factors that are important operational pre-requisites for the success of social movements that can also be applied to networks: 1. mobilization, 2. framing and 3. seizing political opportunity:

In **mobilization** the network needs to establish a consensus for the required change and to mobilize sufficient social support for the required action. The Internet has grown into a key tool of for online organizing and “cyber activism”. Successful mobilization requires the ability to communicate the key issues to potential members and constituencies in a way that attract interest and solicits support for the networks goals (framing). Researchers into social movements point out the importance that networking has for successful social movements. “If a movement is to spread rapidly, the communications network must already exist. If only the rudiments of a network exist, movement formation requires a high input of “organizing” activity.”⁹

“**Framing**” refers to the ability of a network to organize and interpret people and their member’s experiences, hopes and intentions in such a way that they lead towards the desired collective action. Frames are social constructs of reality that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of the network. “Frame alignment is the process of conceptually linking individual interpretations with organizational interpretations, and, in so doing creating congruent interests, values and ideology.” “NGOs acquire, process, frame, and communicate information in support of their causes. Frames can also motivate people to take action when a new opportunity arises.”¹⁰ Framing includes formulating a clear, broad goal for the network and establishing the supporting arguments – a critical success factor early on in network formation.

The following case illustrates how “framing” an issue can have major repercussions on the work of local, national and international networks. “The frame of violence against women...helped women’s groups to attract new allies by situating them within the larger “master frames” or “meta-narratives” of violence and right...The issue of violence against women came most forcefully from women’s groups in the third world, but it found an echo among groups working with battered women in the north. Strategic networkers identified it as an issue that could build bridges internationally and initiated global campaigns.”¹¹

Seizure of political opportunity is an important feature of success, as it enabled the network to utilize an opportunity that is provided by a potential subtle change in prevailing framework conditions. This opportunity arises whenever an outside factor changes in favor of the goals that the network has set itself. On which level opportunity can be seized and which form it might take depends largely on the political system under which the network operates. Opportunities can be provided by elections, a change in political or social leadership, technological advantages, by media attention on an issue of relevance to the network or by changes that govern

8 Engel, P. (1993) Daring to share: networking among non-governmental organizations, in: Alders, Haverkort, van Veldhuizen, Linking with Farmers: Networking for Low-external-input and Sustainable Agriculture (Ileia Readings in Sustainable Agriculture), 1993, p. 131-150,

⁹ Jo Freeman, On the Origins of Social Movements, in: Waves of Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties, (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999, pp. 7-24. Based on a paper written in 1971 and first published in Social Movements of the Sixties and Seventies, (Longman 1983). Source:<http://www.jofreeman.com/socialmovements/origins.htm>

¹⁰ Fulk, J. and Stephens, K. J. , 2007

¹¹ Margaret E. Keck, Kathryn Sikkink, Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in: International Politics (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998, page 196

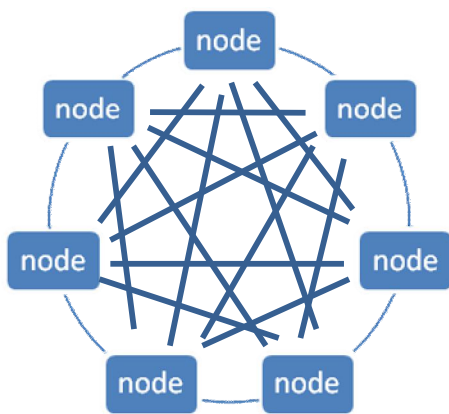
NGOs. Seizure of political opportunity is less a success factor for networks that do not have a clear change agenda but limit itself to exchange of information, capacity building or raising awareness on certain issues. However, all type of networks depends on framework conditions that either hinder or support their chance for success. To monitor these and to build strategies on opportunities hence is a key success factor for all type of networks.

Type of Civil Society networks

Networks provide an infrastructure for collective action. The structure of networks depends largely on their purpose. That said different network structures promote or hinder certain network activities, implying that the purpose of the network should influence its structure and not vice versa.

The purpose of the network determines if will be initiated with sustainability in mind or only for a limited time. The latter networks have a limited mandate and they dissolve when it has been achieved.

Social network analysis gives us with nodes and ties a useful tool at hand also for the understanding of network structures of civil society. Nodes are the individual organizations within the network, and ties are the relationships between them. The way this relationship is designed depends on the type of activities that the network pursues. Mapping these relationships allows conclusions about the character, the limits and possibilities of a network. Below five different network structures are introduced.¹²

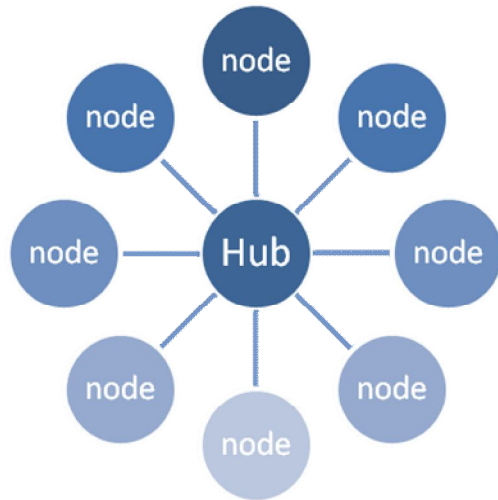


Graphic 1.

Informal flow between all members of the network

A network where every node freely interacts with any other is possible only in the very early stages of network formation with a limited number of members. No hub or focal point is present; interaction is informal and unstructured with only limited number of network members present. Secretariat and steering committee/management functions are undertaken by one member or rotate.

¹² Four of the network structures are adapted from: Optimizing efforts, a practical guide to NGO networking, Office to Combat Desertification and Drought (UNSO), UNDP, May 2000



Graphic 2.

“Central Hub” and spoke network

The hub and spoke structure is often found at an early stage of network development. Network interaction and activity is channeled through the (powerful” hub and often initiated by it. The hub acts as a “secretariat”, facilitator of network action, management and further development. It combines a secretariat function and that of a steering committee in one body. The hub can manage network funds and allocates funds to members according to a joint action plan. The spoke network is often used in donor initiated networks where the hub is sponsored and supervised by the donor.

A centralized network structure can be sustainable with continuous outside support and serves primarily as a service provider to its network. Ownership of network members is usually low and a strong vision and joint network goal absent. Such hub and spoke networks can also be formed for a specific purpose for a limited period of time by donors or international organizations. I.e. different UN-organizations had established NGO networks in preparation of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) that was held from 5-13 September 1994 in Cairo/Egypt. Similar civil society networks were established in other countries and hence dissolved after ICPD ended.¹³

An example of a donor initiated advocacy network is the **SALMA** network that was initiated in 2003 within the framework of a project “Life without Violence and Discrimination is Possible” by the Heinrich Boell Foundation-Arab Middle East Office. The network comprises 10 Civil Society Organizations from Jordan, Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon and aims at combating domestic and violence to which women in society and in state institutions are subjected to. National and regional campaigns work in tandem to advocate around the same issue; criminalizing domestic violence and violence against women. The network is in an early stage of establishing national networks around the issue of the issue of criminalizing domestic violence.¹⁴

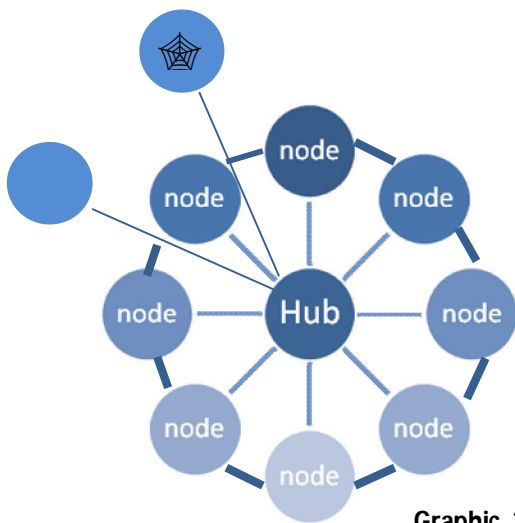
Another example of a hub- and spoke network, however with a less dominant but rather a focal point hub with coordination functions was the **FGM coalition in Egypt**. The FGM coalition, a small group of dedicated anti-FGM activists and organizations was formed in 1994 after a CNN film showing a circumcision created an uproar in Egypt. The goal of the network was to put FGM on the Egyptian development agenda. The coalition networked with key stakeholders such as the media and the medical professions and created working groups on their level. The focal point of the coalition had the task of coordination, outreach and mediation. No formal structure or board were established and the coalition was dissolved when the national Council for Childhood

¹³ "ICPD 94", No. 12, February 1994, Newsletter of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, Egypt, 5-13 September 1994, POPIN & UNFPA, http://www.un.org/popin/icpd/newslett/94_12/9ngonet.html

¹⁴ Website of the Heinrich-Boell Foundation <http://www.boell-ameo.org/web/117-214.html>

and Motherhood in 2000 received the mandate for anti-FGM work in Egypt and included it into its action plan for the country.¹⁵

National umbrella NGOs that reach out to civil society organizations on the local and community level also follow the model of a central hub and spoke networks. Umbrella NGOs have a “mother function”, they nurture and support the smaller local partners through capacity building, extension of grants, local resources mobilization and community organization. Relationships between the network hub (the umbrella NGO) and the local partners are formalized as required through MOUs. One such an umbrella NGO with network extensions into several governorates in Upper Egypt is the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS). CEOSS works in partnership with local Community Service Organizations (CSOs) and primarily provides capacity building to “strengthen local groups of economically poor and marginalized people so they can address issues affecting the quality of their lives.”¹⁶



Graphic 3.

Wheel network (interactions between hub and nodes)

A spoke and hub network at a more developed stage. The hub still fulfills a certain focal point function but network members also communicate directly in matters that do not require central approval or channeling. Trust and cooperation has build between network members and the hub only maintains the most crucial secretarial functions. Network activities are taken on under the leadership of individual member organizations. Over time networks tend to build up relationship to other similar networks in the region or globally and take in associated members that benefit the network.

An example of a wheel network with an open structure is the global “**Women Living Under Muslim Laws**” **international solidarity network** that “provides information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam.”¹⁷ WLUML attempts aims at “breaking the isolation in which women wage their struggles by creating and reinforcing linkages between women within Muslim countries and communities, and with global feminist and progressive groups”.

The Algerian sociologist and founder of the network Marieme Hélie-Lucas, notes: *"At the time I started this network [1984] we were under the threat of a new family law in Algeria which deprived us of rights that we enjoyed previously under colonial law (...) We could see many signs of our being pushed back to the homes which obviously none of us, the generation of liberation struggle, expected. So it was really interesting when I*

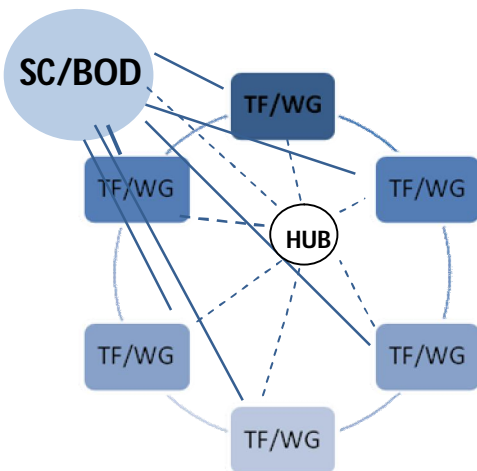
¹⁵ Notes for a round-table meeting with anti-FGM stakeholders, Conducted by GTZ-NWRO project, Cairo spring 2009

¹⁶ The Communication and Initiative Network, <http://www.comminit.com/en/node/132385> and: CEOSS Website: www.ceoss.org.eg

¹⁷ Website of WLUML <http://www.wluml.org/node/5408>

started travelling out of Algeria, mainly to Morocco and Tunisia in the beginning, to see that laws were different in other places when each time we were taught that you can't change anything because this is Islam. So my first contact with women from other Muslim countries showed me that this was a big lie and that just by interacting with each other, we could free ourselves for more ways of struggling for our rights."

The network was founded by nine women from Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Iran, Mauritius, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Pakistan as "Action Committee of Women Living Under Muslim Laws" and evolved two years later into the present network. WLUML does not have formal membership and networkers are a fluid group of individuals and organizations who maintain regular two-way contact with the network. Main network bodies are the "Program Implementation Council", that comprises 20-30 women and men and is responsible for developing and implementing the Plans of Action. The Board, which has legal responsibility for WLUML, is elected from the Council. The "International Coordination Office" (ICO) has primary responsibility for facilitating coordination between networkers. The financially independent "Regional Coordination Offices" in Pakistan (Asia) and Senegal (Africa and Middle East) are responsible for coordinating regional network activities in their respective regions. WLUML provides Solidarity & Alerts, networking and information services, capacity building to its members and produces publication and material for the media. The network relies on donations and outside funding for the implementation of its collective projects.



Graphic 4.

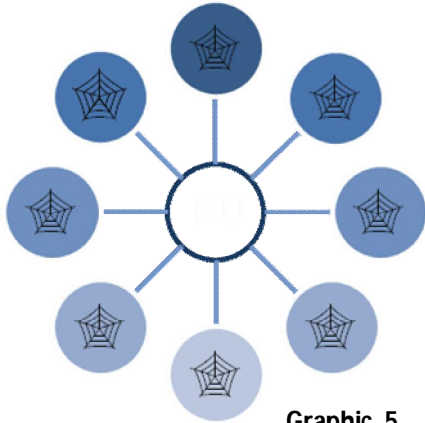
Advanced hub and spoke network

The hub and spoke network is more decentralized. The hub only fulfills secretarial and coordination functions that are not taken on by individual members and task forces. Strategic and management decisions are being made by the Steering Committee (SC) or BOD, network activities are planned and undertaken by flexible, task oriented task forces or working groups. Communication flows freely between the different members.

Example: **Arab Foundation Forum (AFF)** Members are grant-making foundations from the Arab region (currently 30), operates through regionally representative elected BOD (and appointed CEO) and task forces. The secretariat functions are taken on by an AFF coordinator.

The AFF membership fees cover core costs, network initiatives are supported by grants. AFF holds yearly member meetings to discuss strategies and elect BOD. ¹⁸

¹⁸ <http://www.arabfound.org>



Graphic 5.

Network of networks

This diagram shows a network at a later stage of its development where sub-networks have developed either around issues or in specific localities. Such a network design is found on regional or global levels where network nodes (sub-networks) are found on the national level or that of continents.

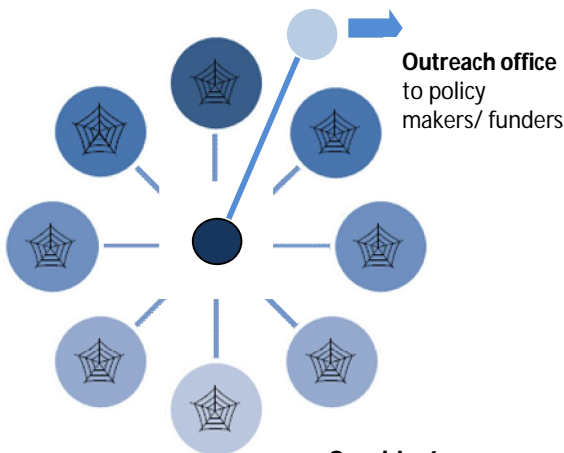
Networks like these have to have a sophisticated internet based hub and require large resources for member – meetings. They are often initiated by international donors and large northern CS organizations or the UN.

The advance of the internet has enabled trans-national networking also for advocacy NGOs on issues a number of Human rights issues. Despite its international and world-wide outreach domestic and international NGOs play central roles in these advocacy networks.

Networks of networks can also be found on a national level where national NGOs extend the reach of the network into their local CBO/NGO base on the community level.

Example: Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

The Association for Progressive Communications is a global network of networks whose mission is to empower and support organizations, social movements and individuals through the use of information and communication technologies. Composed of a consortium of 25 international member networks, APC offers vital links of communication to over 50,000 organizations and individuals in 133 countries.¹⁹



Graphic 6.

Integrating Network

Hubs and spoke network structures can be very centralized (see graphic 2) or more decentralized with a function on integrating more or less independent partner networks on the national level. Integrating networks with an international coordination secretariat and a international boards (with different degree of influence on the national network partners and the national board) are increasingly being adopted by international NGOs that operate worldwide to coordinate fundraising and strengthen advocacy efforts, and such as Save the Children, Habitat for Humanity, Opportunity International, World Vision and others.

¹⁹ <http://www.apc.org/>

See Hari Srinivas, Internet use- NGOs in action, The NGO Café website, <http://www.gdrc.org/ngo/internet-ngos.html>

29 national “Save the Children organizations” have formed the “Save the Children Alliance” to “join forces to protect and promote children’s rights...to maximize our efficiency and secure better outcomes for the world’s children.” According to the alliance website i.e. running costs on the country level have decreased in some cases through the “unified programs” by 25%. The SC Alliance has established a secretariat in London to coordinate major joint initiatives and offices in New York, Geneva and Brussels to influence United Nations and European Union policies for children.²⁰ A similar structure was adopted by “World Vision” as partnership of interdependent national offices, governed by their own boards or advisory councils. A common mission statement and shared core values bind the Partnership together. By signing a “Covenant of Partnership”, each national office agrees to abide by common policies and standards.”²¹

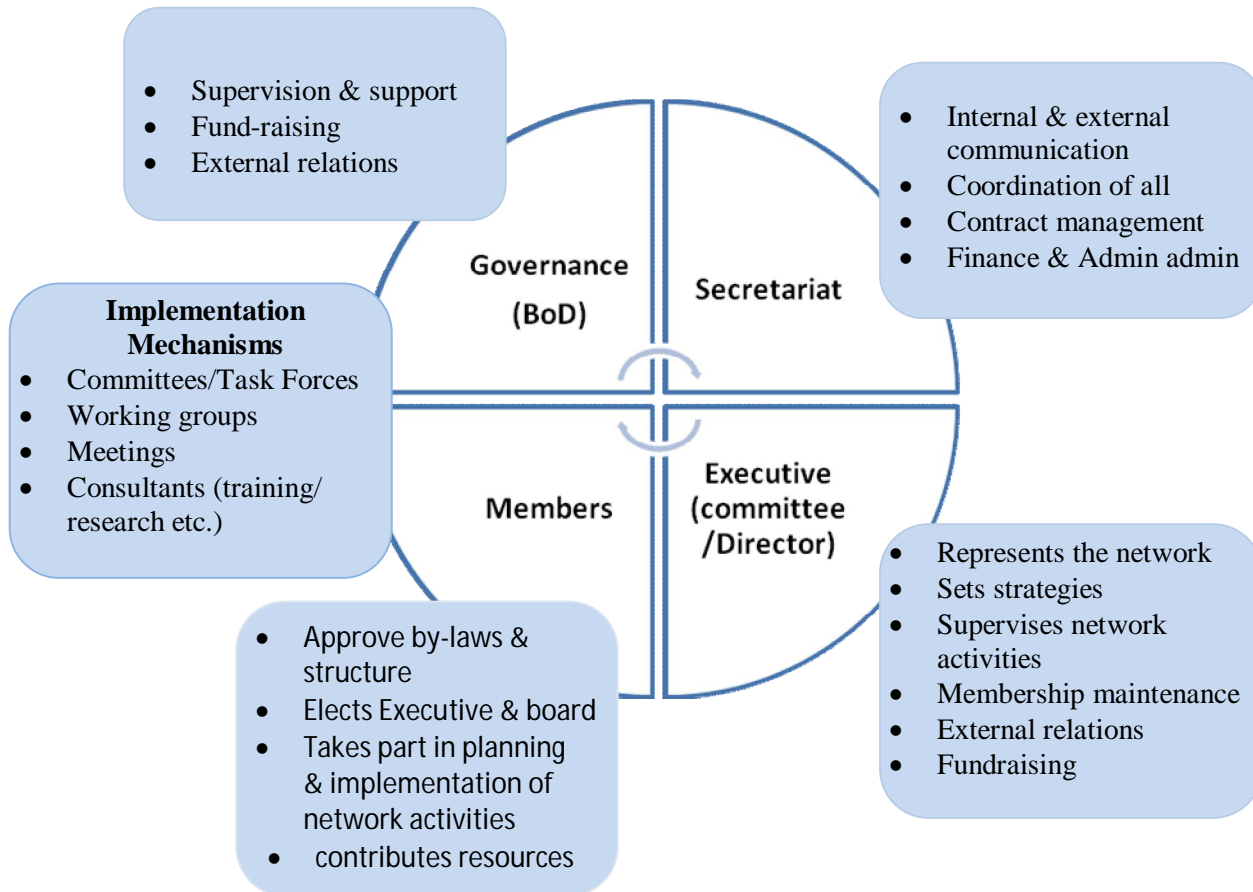
The network types presented above are simplified models; in reality a large variety of networks can be found with formalized or informal structures, with different types and models of secretariat and management functions. Key differentials between networks are their degree of formalization and structure, their outreach, their number of members and type of memberships and their degree of decentralization.

Components of network structure

Depending on the degree of formalization, the membership, outreach and purpose of a network several key role/functions are required for proper network functioning. This can be done informally (in informal and small networks) or requires formalization in the structure (in case of larger networks, extended outreach, purpose requirement or legalities). The challenge in the formation phase of each network is to identify the best structure for implementation, network member ownership and participation and balance these needs with the available resources. In donor funded projects the core costs of the network, the secretarial and the executive functions are often taken on by the donor. Membership funded networks invariably have to keep the structure very lean to keep the core costs minimal. Most networks cover costs for network activities through additional fundraising.

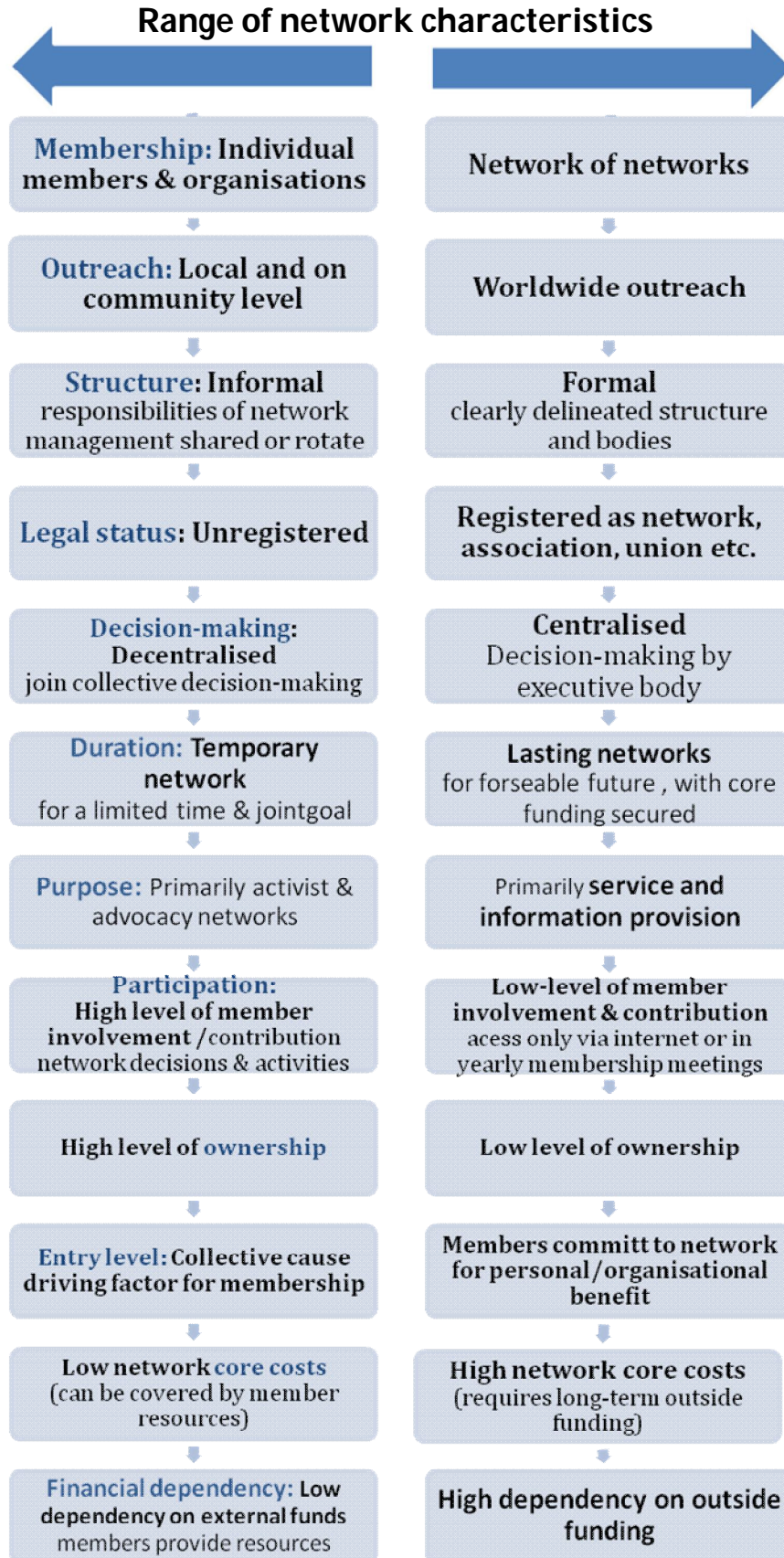
²⁰ Save the Children Alliance website: http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/about_us/structure/index.html

²¹ World Vision website:
<http://www.wvi.org/wvi/wviweb.nsf/maindocs/39F905AE21E265C1882573750075074B?opendocument>



Network characteristics

Networks constitute essentially a linking mechanism between independent organizations. As such they are highly varied entities. The diagram below illustrates the range of characteristics networks can exhibit and ultimately have to choose from in its formation stag. They range from informal, short-term, highly decentralized networks to formalized, highly structured entities that might become an integral part of a UN-body.



Stages of Network Development

Each existing network chooses its own path of development. While networks that evolve out of a specific need and out of the NGO community itself usually go through several stages of development and potentially change structure on that way, the structure of donor initiated national or global networks are often planned from the onset. Some local or national networks have evolved over time and extend in their outreach beyond the country they were originally founded in.

Network foundation evolves in several stages in which key questions need to be clarified, especially in grass-root initiated networks this is a very iterative process.

1. **Identification of a need and framing the issue** (for which some form of network could provide a solution) and setting the **network purpose – mission and vision- and benefit to members**

The starting point for a network is the recognition by a group of concerned people of certain weaknesses or challenges that a network could solve for its members and their common cause. This group of concerned people (NGO activists, donors, one key NGO etc.) become the network founders and they usually reflect and frame the issue in a small circle step 1-3 before inviting potential other network members to join in. This analysis will lead directly into the network purpose (vision and mission) and hence the benefit to its members. Unclear purpose and vague strategies can result in decision-making that is based on particular interest of members rather than of the network, in loss of interest, ownership by network members and trust.

The purpose of the network will also determine the type of organizations that might become members and the outreach of the network (locally, nationally, regionally or globally). It is of key importance that this step precedes the discussion of the structure and network management. Ownership by its members is derived from the network purpose and the benefits they reap individually and for the network cause, rather than from the abstract concept of a structure. Working on the network structure prior to the identification of its purpose is like putting the cart before the horse or building a house without prior knowledge of its inhabitants. This is a common mistake in donor initiated networks that are build on perceived needs rather than real ones and that build structures because they are deliverables in operational plans.

Needs identified might be that...

- activities in their sector of work and concern are scattered and hence less effective (*increase effectiveness and impact*)
- NGOs involved in the sector of work have little possibility for broader impact and increased clout on their own (*through forging of alliances and joint strategizing gain political and social weight*)
- Practitioners do not have access to the up-to date information or capacity needed for effective work (*up to date data for decision-making is available and capacity building is offered through the network*)
- NGOs in a specific sector compete for funds and are driven by donors rather than their own agendas (*larger funds are accessed jointly, distributed according to roles and capacity. Duplication is avoided, synergies are created*)
- Local best practices are not shared and hence mistakes in the field are replicated again and again (*best practices are documented, shared and adopted for scaling up through partner NGOs*)

- Strategies on community and local level are developed without recognition of the wider influencing factors and hence remain ineffective and local (*activities on the local and community level support national and global agendas and vice versa*)
- Little verifiable data is available on problematic issues (such as violence, FGM, effect of discriminatory laws etc.) that can be used for effective advocacy (*case studies, research provide missing data and information for effective advocacy*),²²
- Local actors have no linkages to regional or global initiatives and best practices (*global initiatives and best practice are known and adapted to suit local needs*)
- A service or information providing organization/donor requires larger outreach (advocacy messages and services are channeled through network members and their local Civil Society partners);
- NGOs desire to jointly improve internal governance and quality standards of delivery (*code of conducts, internal monitoring and improved internal governance*)
- Start up NGOs in the specific sector require guidance and assistance (*new NGOs gain experience and credibility through close affiliation and cooperation with well established network partners*)
- A joint analysis of the framework- conditions is required to identify opportunities for joint action (*network members distribute monitoring of key framework conditions and identify windows of opportunity*)

At this stage of network formation a list for potential network members is drawn by the founders and often a meeting is called for an inaugural meeting in which the network is established. During the inaugural meeting, beside a revision of the results of step 1, the type of networks structure needs to be agreed upon

1. **Identifying the type of network and governance structure** (network, alliance, forum etc.) At this stage of network formation the proposed purpose of the network that is reflected in its mission and vision is revised again in a larger forum. The type of network will need to be decided upon and hence the type of membership. Governance will be discussed and some form of secretariat, steering committee and board will be formed. It is mandatory to discuss the scope of funding available to the network through its members and potential outside funding or grants. It is crucial that at this stage the planned network structure is in line with available funding or commitment by the network members. This is especially important by grass-root initiatives. In donor initiated networks funds have to be allocated to support the planned structure (especially the secretariat and the communication infrastructure – i.e. an interactive website, office etc.) on the medium or long-term. At this stage the network founders also need to decide how much structure their purpose requires. The less structure a network has, the less control it has over the directions it takes and the actions in which it engages. The more structured the network is, the easier it becomes to channel members energies into the necessary tasks, but the greater is the danger, of losing their ownership. Networks need to find a balance between the efficiency and level of participation their purpose requires.

²² Activists beyond borders: advocacy networks in international politics, Margaret E. Keck, Kathryn Sikkink, Cornell University Press, page 194

2. Get the network operational

At this stage the basic network-infrastructure and a secretariat will be established, a website developed, email addresses newly registered, list of network members send out and potential first contacts with other similar networks established, the network formation is announced to interested parties and potential partners. Depending on the available resources and the input from each member NGO the first joint network activities will be planned. This has to be an inclusive exercise. It is best started with a mapping exercise of the current network members, their strength and weakness, their interests in and willingness to allocate resources. Joint strategies are elaborated and network activities designed. For the implementation of network activities working groups or task forces may be formed by the network members. Proposals might be developed to access additional recourse, contacts to potential cooperation partners or funders on the task force level need to be established.

3. Exclusion versus Inclusion

Networks of any kind have to deal with recruitment of new members. This raises the question of inclusiveness versus exclusiveness i.e. of NGOs that might have similar goals but different approaches (such as charity versus social justice). The more inclusive a network is, the less the commitment required to join and remain a member. A network that attempts to diversify its membership base as much as possible runs the risk of diluting its core values and becoming “everything to everybody” in order not to alienate the potential membership. While heterogeneity is tempting for networks that advocate social change ultimately it will leave the network unable to operate and without ownership. In general diverse membership allows exchange of wide ranging experiences and prevent an exclusive club-culture” that goes contrary to the spirit of networking. Too much of diversity becomes difficult to manage, provokes conflict and does not allow efficient “framing” of issues.²³

4. Managing growth

When a network is successfully operational its membership tends to grow. Other organizations will request to join. This usually puts the network in a temporary crisis. The current network members will have developed a certain network identity and especially in bottom-up networks until now communication within the network is collegial and increasingly will be based on trust. New members will have to be brought up to speed and will bring their own ideas into the network. That might raise questions in the networks mission, vision and governance structure. With additional members that request decision-making the founding organizations will be challenged to let go control as the network grows. The informal communication increasingly will have to make way to democratic and transparent decision-making for a larger group of members. At this point in time by-laws and code of conducts are drawn up to clarify internal network communication, rules and to mitigate conflict. Re-framing of the issues might be required at this stage to increase ownership and coherence. Network growth might also require adaptation or change of structure.

²³ Jo Freeman, Crisis and conflict in social movements organization, *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture*, No. 5, 1978, pp. 43-51. <http://www.jofreeman.com/socialmovements/crisis.htm>

5. Re-vision, strategizing and re-framing

In the cause of networking and project implementation all type of network will have to undergo regular assessment of its performance, mission and vision, structure, membership base, funding and outreach. This process is most successful if it is done in close involvement of its members, even if the outside view of a consultant can help. This is often done through working groups or committees that are formed by interested and qualified members. This is also an important entry point to re-frame the issues and strategize, as well as revision of the organization's mission.

6. Overcoming network crisis

Networks grow out of institutional infancy and move into a state of consolidation usually by going through a crisis. Network literature is almost unanimous that networks go through a stage of crisis that, if overcome makes the network stronger. A crisis can be brought on by fast growth in membership that overwhelms the current structure; phase out of donor funds; the withdrawal of influential network members; failure of strategic network actions; persecution of network members by government; unsuccessful conflict management; misuse of the network resources by leading network members and other factors that can or cannot be influenced by the network.

7. Increased outreach

Successful networks tend to increase the “networking ability” of its members and hence either reach out to networks with similar goals in other countries, regions or globally and foster the replication of similar networks in other locations. However truly global networks require large resources and have to overcome obstacles of heterogeneity of context, membership and communication infrastructure. It is not by coincidence that many worldwide networks are initiated and supported by international bodies or organizations.

8. Sustainability

Raising money for networks is notoriously difficult as network activities are largely “invisible”. Often donors are willing to provide seed money or start-up funds for networks, especially when they are initiated in the context of a development initiative. However, rarely donors are willing to extend funds to cover the core admin costs of networks beyond a reasonable start-up period. Networks that have established a costly structure that cannot be covered by membership fees, that have little ownership (and hence low level of member contribution) and have no feasible fund-raising strategy will cease to exist when donor funds dry up. Statistics on this process are hard to come by but in my experience the number is quite high.

Networks that are established for a specific purpose to be achieved in a limited time-frame have no issues with sustainability, as their mandate is limited and they dissolve when it has been achieved. (see above the example of ICPD preparatory networks).

International networks that were established under the auspice of the UN or in the context of international events are usually funded through UN or government bodies. An example is the “Youth For Habitat network” that established during the 1995 Copenhagen Social Development Summit. ²⁴

²⁴ Youth for Habitat website <http://www.habitatingenclik.org.tr/en/>

Long-term donor funding however comes with strings attached and ownership, including a say in long-term development, is often on the funder's side.

NGO networks that cannot rely on donors funds (for lack of credibility in the issue of social causes to lack of funding in the sector of work) have to either rely on their own funds, invest resources in fundraising, initiate income-generating activities or lobby for an endowment (which is very hard to access for networking activities!).

Network success factors²⁵

As we have seen above networks come in a large variety of types and are formed for different purposes. However, some basic factors can be deduced from the available literature and have proved decisive in my own experience that is basic building block for network success.

Ownership of the network by its members is a key pre-requisite for success. Network members are not active in network activities because they have to; they do them because they want to. This dependency on membership commitment and ownership implies that keeping morale and motivation high is a key operating principle of any network organization.

While ownership, at least of the founding members is a given, in donor networks ownership needs to be gained over time. Involving members into the first planning steps, from clarification of purpose (mission and vision), to definition of structure and decisions on network activities is crucial for donor driven networks. Ownership indicators are the willingness of network members to: contribute funds (membership fees), meeting facilities, human resources and expertise to network activities; allocate time for network meetings (without payment of sitting allowances) and send senior decision-makers to network meetings. A network is essentially established for networking and that implies member contribution. If this is absent, the network de facto ceases to exist. Ownership is increased through participatory processes, face-to-face meetings, constructive conflict management, and contribution of network members, joint planning and decentralized structures.

Trust is the glue that holds networks that advocate for social change and whose members share strong common values, together. Networks can develop a code of ethics or code of conduct and lay down conflict management procedures in its by-laws. Transparency in decision-making, quality and ethical standards for

²⁵ The list of success factors is derived from my personal experience and the following documents:

1. Kuttab, Arab Foundations Forum – A Story told, unpublished document, Amman, 11/2009
2. Optimizing efforts, a practical guide to NGO networking, UNDP/UNSO office May 2000
3. Building lateral learning networks, Lessons from the SEEP network, The Small Enterprise Education and Promotion Network 1825 Washington, DC 20009
4. Bill Traynor, Vertigo and the international inhabitant, leadership in a connected world, in The Nonprofit Quarterly, Boston, August 2009 in: <http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org>
5. To network or not to network: NGO experiences with technical networks, By Lise Rosendal Østergaard, coordinator, AIDSNET, and Joel Nielsen, senior consultant, Carl Bro, <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/12985228/TO-NETWORK-OR-NOT-TO-NETWORK-NGO-EXPERIENCES-WITH-TECHNICAL-NETWORKS>

joint action helps to build up trust. Trust also extends to individual members of network. Strong NGO representatives can use networks for personal aggrandizement, to gain visibility and influence on the national, regional and global scene, an intention that essentially undermines trust in the network. One tool to reduce the likelihood of such tendencies is to institutionalize rotation of membership and allocate resources for example for participation in high-status meetings transparently and according to agreed criteria.

Size matters! Networks that go beyond information sharing and virtual exchange need frequent personal face-to-face contacts to build up the glue of trust and personal relationships that hold successful networks together. Personal contact is particularly important in emerging networks but is also of relevance for large networks that span regions and continents. Most regional or world-wide networks hence have a yearly or bi-yearly general assembly or member meeting. Networks need to define a balance between the need to extend their membership and their ability (and resources) to arrange face-to-face meetings with its members.

Networks require a clear purpose and mission that is of such **relevance to its members** and their constituencies that they are willing to commit resources. Networking is only a minor part of the work of organizations, even for advocacy organizations; as long as the network activities do not provide a clear benefit to their work and mission, link to problems network members face on the ground, networking will cease. Networking needs to be seen as a means and not an end in itself!

Networks need to be **realistic and transparent about the resource commitment** needed from network member organizations. Resource commitments such as membership fees and time to attend management meetings can be communicated transparently to new members in form of by-laws. Commitments of resources for network activities need to be negotiated transparently in the planning process. Joint activities should only be agreed upon when the required resources are allocated freely the respective network partners.

Start small and grown organically when needed! This is especially important for networks that are built around social action issues and advocacy. This approach avoids the pitfalls of setting network objectives that are not achievable and allows the establishment of trust between network members from early on. Such an approach of course does not apply to networks that are established to for a wide outreach and to internet based networks.

A small start and organic growth also allows **waiting with formalizing the network** to the point where it becomes necessary. This might be a strategic approach in countries where civil society activities are under close scrutiny of governments and any formalizing requires long legal action.

Start with one joint network activity derived from the network goal/purpose and do it well, rather than attempt to do much – especially if resources are limited. This avoids frustration of network members when activities fail or are sub-standard. Success has many fathers, failure has none. Initial success creates needed ownership, especially for newly founded networks.

Keep a balance between activities and shared vision and values. Shared values are the glue that keeps network members together. It is important not to get lost in activities but regularly reflect on common values and the network goal. This reflection process has to be undertaken on the level of the steering committee or the executives as well as on the level of network members, i.e. during a yearly assembly.

Keep costs for network structures to a minimum, core expenses compact and covered by membership-fees! Fundraising for networking is a challenging business but it can be eased when core costs of the network are covered either from the networks own funds, on long-term basis by a donor or through an endowment. The key for the sustainability of any network is a lean, appropriate and affordable network structure.

Network governance needs to be designed in line with the networks goals. The balance between the need for structure and decentralization is a delicate one. Hence, network governance structures and bylaws need to be regularly reflected upon. The network steering committee needs to reflect the composition of its membership and the resources and expertise required to achieve the networks goal.

Networks managers need to have the buy-in of all network member organizations in major decisions. If they move faster than their membership can follow they will lose commitment, engagement and most important of all trust. That implies adjusting speed, language and approaches to the capacity of the weakest member of the network. This potential handicap can be solved by consistently building the capacity of weaker member organizations and setting minimum standards for membership. Networks operate in a constantly changing environment. Managers need to adapt to this and be flexible in their management approach.

In regional and international social action networks a flexible structure and framing of issues is essential. The WLUMI plan of action 2006 notes: “For many networkers, the flexibility offered by WLUMI’s network structure is especially important because it enables us to work on national priorities while simultaneously, by linking women across global boundaries, it enables us to generate international pressure for local rights struggles and contribute to international advocacy and analyses.”²⁶

An **effective secretariat** (hub/focal point) and **efficient communication structures** and means are a key to a well functioning network. The secretariat acts as facilitator, coordinator (of network activities), arranges meetings and ensures effective communication. In smaller local networks or in start-up phases it might be a network partner that takes on the role of the secretariat. It is important that the secretariat has the required resources and capacity to fulfill its role effectively. This is especially important in larger, regional and world-wide networks.

Issues of inclusion or exclusion of potential network members have to be discussed within the network in a participative and iterative process. This will largely determine the character and identity of the network. Inclusion prevents fragmentation of the respective Civil Society sector but should not lead to adopting such a broad frame that becomes meaningless in mobilization for action.

Decision-making requires embracing creativity; it requires time for in depth consultation and should not settle for the lowest common denominator. Conflict is especially unavoidable if the network is heterogeneous, but even in homogenous networks conflict is essential part of networking. By living through conflict and managing it constructively and fairly trust is build and networks grew stronger. It is this process of “framing” the core issues of the network and create ownership.

Clarify roles of the different network bodies and decision-making processes early on in network foundation and revisit the structure regularly. Especially in integrating networks that are build on complementarities of its members and increased impact through networking, it is important to negotiate where the role of the focal point or center begins and who can best contribute what to the network. “Equality” between networking partners does not mean “the same”. Decision-making processes and with whom decision-making authority lies need to be clarified very pragmatic and with the network purpose in mind.²⁷

²⁶ WLUMI plan of action, Senegal 2006,

<http://www.wlumi.org/sites/wlumi.org/files/import/english/pubs/pdf/poa/senegal-2006-poa-en.pdf>

²⁷ Jon Huggett, Katie Smith Milway, and Kirk Kramer, Increasing Effectiveness in Global NGO networks, The Bridgespan Group, June 2009, page 11

Establish accountability and transparency for network management. Whatever the structure of a network, accountability and transparency of its management is crucial. Peer reviewing is a useful tool adopted by many international networks and helps strengthen the network by building relationships, assess risks, align priorities of network members, share best practices and improve accountability.

Establish clear and **effective mechanisms for participation of network members.** These mechanisms are different according to the network type and membership. Participation includes transparent board governance and possibilities for network members to actively participate in governance and joint activities, i.e. through task forces.

The **free, transparent and unequivocal flow of communication** is important for network functioning. Each network has to find effective mechanisms and tools for communication that are appropriate in its context of operation. If these are not available, or the capacities of members to effectively use them is limited, the required infrastructure needs to be established and the capacity needs to be build. In countries where the internet is unreliable or the required infrastructure is missing, alternative means of efficient communication need to be established. The efficiency of the secretariat influences also the communication efficiency of the members.

Individuals in the network will change. Hence it is important for the establishment of inter-organizational and external network contacts to **de-personalize these lines of communication** and establish links between organizations that do not depend on one individual only.

Organizations need to be represented in the network by decision-makers so that important decisions can be made during the meeting. It is a warning sign for low commitment if decision-makers frequently are absent and junior staff is deputized for key meetings. Even when organizations are official members of the network, it is maintained essentially by individuals.

Network meetings need to be facilitated by members with strong facilitation skills, called when necessary, prepared well in advance and decisions need to be documented and shared. Effective meeting preparation, management and follow up are an essential asset for network success.

Members require assistance in **identifying capacity gaps** that are internal to their organizations and relate to the network goal. This analysis is the entry point for capacity building within the network. Capacity building can be supported by outside resources or becomes an internal support mechanism in which stronger members provide capacity building to weaker ones in their areas of expertise. This process can be pro bono and might require only marginal resources. Capacity building can be traditional through training courses but also through staff exchange, exposure, coaching in the field etc.

Create mechanisms for learning that favor collective analysis and include opportunities for all to teach and to learn. This is an important strategy to increase ownership, network cohesion and to become a learning network.

Conclusions

As we have seen the proliferation of networks worldwide is a rather recent phenomenon although its roots can be traced back into the 1800. The growth of networks has greatly been enhanced by the advance of the internet, as the WWW provides a low cost and (with some reservations depending on location) efficient tool for communication, the backbone of any kind of networking.

The analysis showed that networking is not a panacea for all challenges and ills civil society organizations are faced with. Networkers need to part with the notion of sustainability of networks; it is the goal and purpose of a network that counts and not its structure.

Donors that use CS networks to advance certain project goals need to be aware that sustainability of many donor initiated networks comes at the cost of keeping the network secretariat on life support for a considerable length of time. If this is to be avoided donors are better served to support already existing networks, let go with the notion of organizational sustainability or invest time and efforts into increasing ownership from the onset. The network purpose needs to shift from being owned by the donor to the ownership of the network members.

Networking is an excellent tool to frame local issues in a global context and solicit support and solidarity on a wide scale. This is of particular advantage to Women's Rights Organizations, clearly noted in a statement from the plan of action of "Women Living under Muslim Law", *"More than the sum of its parts, the added value of a network lies in generating an analysis of women's rights violations that can only emerge once international networking has uncovered our diversities and similarities and how these can be used against women. Our coming together adds important new dimensions to our local understanding of local power dynamics."*²⁸

For all "weaker" groups of society coming together is a major prerequisite for achieving social change – although it often comes at snail's pace. "Divide et impera" is practiced by powerful forces in society since ancient times. Women are still treated in many parts of the world as second class citizens and even minors. Hence, networking - reaching out to support and solidarity across social, legal, ideological and political divides is one of the most important strategies of Women's Right Work. The need is too urgent, the time and resources are too limited, the issues too interlinked as if one organization and one movement could do it alone.

Networking hence remains a crucial option for women's Rights organizations to solicit support and build effective strategic alliances for action and learning. We have seen that a clear vision and values, clear purpose and commitment are basic prerequisites for network success. Personal and organizational enrichment and benefit has to take a backseat to the achievement of the jointly set goal. While networking requires strong networking personalities, Madonnas type of activists and rigid ideologists are important drivers in their own rights, but often spell the end of joint action. Planning and fundraising has to go hand in hand, as most networks cannot survive with their own resources.

All social action networks constantly struggle with the challenges of evolving and maintaining a structure that enables effective implementation of activities while allowing sufficient flexibility to respond to, sometimes rapidly, changing circumstances. Hence flexibility and an open planning approach are of key importance for social networks.

²⁸ WLUML, Plan of Action, Senegal 2006, page 3,
<http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/import/english/pubs/pdf/poa/senegal-2006-poa-en.pdf>