Networking

With the recent developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) networking becomes more and more common, easier and diverse. E-mail, internet, weblog, websites, forums and discussion platforms have opened up the world and enable people to reach across borders and be in contact with each other. However, networking is more than being in contact, exchanging information and voluntary collaboration…

Why is networking important?

Because the wheel has already been invented. However, due to lack of or poor linkages between individuals and organisations working in similar areas (such as development, training, extension) people often don't know what is happening in their own field.

- What kind of problems are other NGOs facing?
- How do they solve them?
- What approaches are they using in their programmes?
- How do they influence the policy-making of other actors?

What is a network?

A Network is any group of individuals or organisations who, on a voluntary basis, exchange information or undertake joint
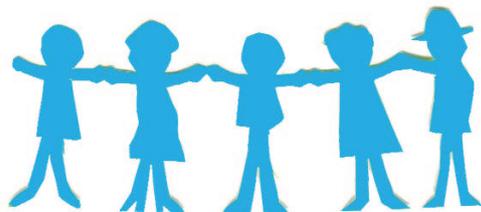
activities, who share a common interest on a specific issue or a general set of values, and who organize themselves in such a way that their individual autonomy remains intact.

> *Power does not reside in institutions, not even the state or large corporations. It is located in the networks that structure society*
>
> ~ Manuel Castells ~

People are not aware of all the 'wheels' available and try to re-invent them. By 'wheel' is meant any relevant input – project proposal, training, community approach etc. Networks can prevent this through an exchange of information and experiences with those outside their immediate environment.

7 more reasons why networking is important…

1 Networking facilitates the exchange of information, skills, knowledge, experiences, materials and media, which could increase the overall competence of members.

2 Networks can link people of different levels, organisations and background who would not otherwise have an opportunity to interact.

3 Networks can provide support, encouragement and motivation, especially for people living in remote areas.

4 Globalisation: Cross-border and North-South communication has been facilitated by ICT developments. Exchange of information is now possible world-wide. An example is the issue of human rights in various countries.

5 Governance: Non-governmental actors want to be included in policymaking. The role of civil society in influencing governance and policymaking is now widely discussed. Networks can influence both the process and the end product.

6 Organisational and knowledge management: Networks can be tools for efficient management of organisations and knowledge.

7 ICT: Recent developments in ICT have greatly enlarged the scope of networks. A world library of information is now available on the internet. ICT makes it possible for the majority of the population to let their voices be heard.

For good and effective networking there are a number of key issues to be considered.

Key issues for effective networking

1 Networks need to have a clear purpose and specific objectives, which will determine their direction, activities and membership. These objectives might evolve over time and will change as the network develops.

2 Concrete activities enabling members to participate and interact are essential

3 A core group of committed members is needed to manage, coordinate and facilitate the network

4 Centralization and domination by particular members should be avoided through delegation. All members should feel responsible for the proper functioning of the network, should participate and feel included.
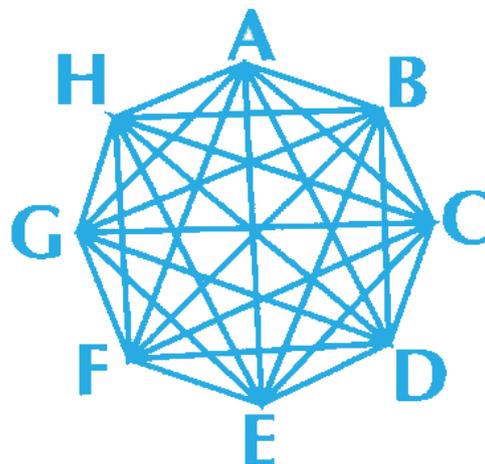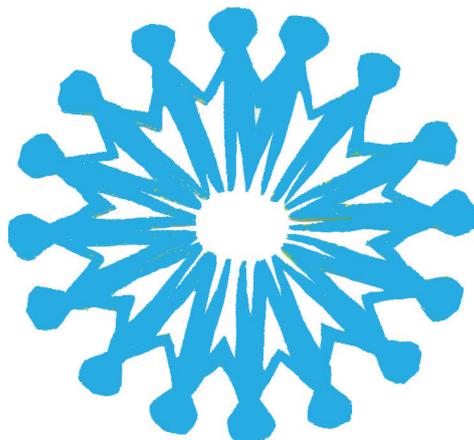
5 Sufficient funding and resources for effective networking and sustainability should be ensured.

> **"** *Citizen networks will become a more and more significant development mechanism to link, to provide communal direction, to learn together and to gradually dissipate the considerable constraints from several structural problems which work against the poor* **"**
>
> ~ Somsook Boonyabancha ~

6 Adequate strength of numbers and representativeness are important in order to reach the objectives. For example, a network representing the grassroots level should have a large number of members who really are living at the grassroots level.

7 The quality of information and its exchange as well as the language used, need to be in accordance with the capabilities of the members

8 Members need to be willing to share information and knowledge. In some places the sharing of knowledge and expertise is felt as a loss of power. Members need to recognize the benefit of sharing knowledge and expertise.

Practical tips/guiding questions

Starting-Up a Network

- Have you double-checked your reasons for starting a network?
- When should this network become active?
- What type of network will yours be?
- What kind of facilitation will your network need?
- What kinds of behaviours and activities are appropriate for a facilitator?
- What tools and channels of communication can you use for facilitating a network?

How to Involve External Participants in Networks

- Be clear what the network is for before involving external participants
- Who exactly are the external participants going to be?
- Who hosts the network?

Sustaining a Network

- What resources has the network got?
- What makes your network valuable to its members?
- Whether a faltering network needs reviving
- Handing over the role of facilitator
- What will happen when your network has done its job?

Further reading & information:

- *Communities of Practice:* www.**odi.org.uk**/rapid/Tools/Toolkits/KM/CoP.html
- *Community of Practice Facilitation:* www.**bellanet.org**/itrain/materials_en.cfm
- DFID (2004). *Facilitating networks – a good practice guide:* www.**livelihoods.org**/info/tools/Networks.pdf
- *Info and manuals on networking:* www.**itrainonline.org**/itrainonline/english/index.shtlm
- Networklearning. *How to build a good small NGO* p. 55-56: www.**networklearning.org**

Some types of networks

There is a diversity of network types and it is difficult to classify them. Here are some examples:

Global public policy networks

Overarching networks spanning all three sectors of government, business and civil society and addressing all stages of the policy process. These networks can have a variety of functions, such as disseminating knowledge, creating markets or raising new issues to the global agenda.

Knowledge networks

Professional bodies, academic research groups and scientific communities that are organised around a certain issue or subject matter. These networks can disseminate information, advertise important findings and indicate gaps in the existing knowledge base. An example is research into malaria.

Advocacy networks

These networks were formed with the main purpose of seeking to influence the policy process on certain issues or to function as pressure groups. An example is advocacy for children's rights.

Civil society networks

Examples are grassroots or community networks, networks of religious groups and trade union networks

Community of practice

'Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis' (as defined by Etienne Wenger in his book Cultivating Communities). An example could be a group working on HIV issues. Nowadays Communities of Practice (CoP) are becoming more and more effective.

- Perkin, A., Court, J. (2005) *Networks and policy processes in international development: a literature review. Making networks work in international development and influencing policy.* London, Overseas Development Institute: www.**odi.org.uk**/ RAPID/Publications/Documents/WP252.pdf