TO NETWORK OR NOT TO NETWORK: NGO EXPERIENCES WITH TECHNICAL NETWORKS

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Introduction

We live in an environment that some might call 'over-networked'. A growing number of development NGO networks, alliances and informal as well as formal groups have been established over the past years in the North as well as the South. This trend fits with the rise of new management theory based on the principles of collaboration, openness and strategic alliances. Furthermore, the complex nature of development issues means these are often better addressed in a cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary way.

The underlying claim of most networks is that they bring added value to the ongoing work of their member organisations and foster professional capacity development. Most NGOs that decide to become members of a network do so because they expect to improve the quality of their interventions and the effectiveness of their actions (Engel 1993). Others network to achieve what Huxham (1996) has described as 'collaborative advantage'. In reality, however, networks can also be characterised by 'collaborative inertia' indicating that they are not necessarily always a panacea for enhancing organisational capacity.

There has been surprisingly little research into why NGOs choose to participate in or opt out of networks. It appears that increasing resources from NGOs and donors are allocated to networks (defined as structure) and networking (defined as activity). So why is it that we know so little about what makes networks attractive and relevant to NGOs? What are the factors that motivate NGOs to join networks and participate in network based activities? And what practical use does such participation have? This article discusses the factors that make networks useful and attractive to NGO members and also questions how far NGOs are sufficiently strategic about their decision to participate in networks.

Background to this Study

This article is based on a study of two Danish networks: Aidsnet and the Children and Youth Network. Together Aidsnet and the Children and Youth Network consist of a total of 35 member organisations. Like many international networks, members of these two Danish networks comprise both small organisations mainly relying on volunteers, relatively big faith-based organisations and large international NGOs such as the International Red Cross or Save the Children. A number of these organisations have a religious affiliation whilst others focus mostly on women's or children's rights.

The common appeal for members is an interest in HIV/AIDS and/or children and youth in low-income countries. Both networks were founded on the initiative of the member NGOs themselves and are run by steering committees elected among the member organisations with the objective of improving the quality of Danish NGO interventions in low-income countries.

Both networks, however, are in a rather unique situation compared to other networks in the North, as well as in the South, in the sense that they are almost entirely funded by Danida, the Danish Development Cooperation. All activities and one full time technical network coordinator for each network are funded. Therefore the networks are under no economic pressure within their first project cycle.

Defining Networks and Networking

One useful definition of a network is provided by Church et al (2002: 12) who states that *'A network can be called a network when the relationships between those in the network are voluntarily entered into, the autonomy of participants remains intact and there are mutual or joint activities'*. This definition builds on the fact that 'true' networks are voluntary rather than imposed, they facilitate some form of collaborative action, the organisational autonomy of the member organisations remains intact and they have a common objective. Church et al (2002) also make a useful distinction between networks and networking, namely, that networks are a structure or architecture whereas networking connotes the active participation in activities together with other network members. Therefore 'joining a network' is not necessarily the same as 'networking', though these terms are often wrongly conflated.

Methodology

This study set out to explore what stimulates/prevents NGOs participating in a network. It also explored the factors that encourage or hinder organisations from participating in networking activities once they have become members of networks. The initial literature review revealed limited research on NGO networking. Much of the existing material provided useful inputs on network typology (Starkey nd., Church et al 2002), objectives (Fowler 1997) and activities (Engel 1993), however most of the existing network theory is based on the private sector and studies on networks within the voluntary sector appear to be somewhat limited.

In terms of methods adopted, we opted for an exploratory study and conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants from 11 out of the 35 member organisations. The sampling was based on dividing the organisations into three categories inspired by Church et al (2002):
(i) passive members; (ii) the medium active; (iii) the very active member organisations.

Findings

A major finding of this study was that NGOs appear to have exceptionally high and positive expectations of networking outcomes and it is striking that members overwhelmingly expect to benefit from their membership. What they expect to get out of networks in concrete terms however is often rather vague.

Interestingly, the motives for becoming a network member varied greatly: from pleasing the major donor to being seen in the NGO community as a trustworthy partner. The majority of explanations related to the network objective of capacity development and getting access to information and developing personal contacts.

Another striking finding was that prior to joining, only two organisations considered resource use against the potential benefits to be gained from networking. This finding fits with the broader literature, for example as mentioned by Merrill-Sands and Sheridan (1996: 5) *'…time demands, both in the total quantity of time invested and in elapsed time – are often not anticipated nor adequately budgeted for.'* One explanation could be that the majority of the NGO participants in this study are relatively small with limited past (formalised) networking experience and thus have limited previous knowledge of the true costs of networking. Another explanation for this may be that there is little tradition within the Danish NGO community of assessing non-financial costs from the onset.

The factors that make networking attractive to NGOs can be summarised in the three-tiered model in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Critical determinants of NGO networking
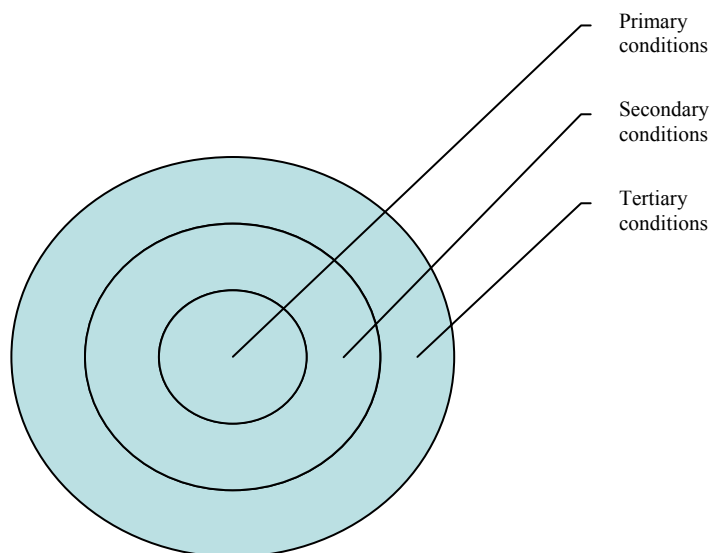
Primary conditions: contents, timing and format
These three networking areas affect any organisational decision as to whether to engage in any network activity. An activity can be relevant thematically but if the timing and format are inappropriate NGOs opt out. In other words, activity content must be perceived to be relevant; timing of the activity must be perceived to be of immediate and direct usability to the organisation and the actual form or mode of the activity (e.g. weekend versus working hours or one-day workshop versus series of meetings) must also meet with the needs of the organisations.

A personal interest in child rights issues, or in new scientific breakthroughs in the field of treatment of AIDS might not, for example, be sufficient to motivate an individual to spend time on such an activity if his/her organisation is not concurrently engaged in a related project. In addition, a suitable format for the networking activity is needed. A relevant format encompasses both more basic logistical issues such as activity duration and place of activity. Finally, the content must be delivered in a manner that improves the practical application of knowledge gained such as by mixing theory and practice in training, and by adopting appropriate adult education principles.

Secondary condition:organisational Capacity
The internal capacity of the organisation to participate is also important. Some organisations are specifically concerned with their capacity to absorb and maximise the usefulness of networking outcomes. They rightly think about the opportunity versus cost of engaging in networking activities – namely how they could otherwise spend the time and resources required to participate in a network. Disadvantages of participating highlighted by these organisations include lack of procedures for knowledge sharing, the fact that networks have become personalised with limited organisational ownership, and that networking often requires extensive follow-up. In general, the challenge seemed to be lack of time, culture and practical ways of passing on information, tools and know-how to other individuals within their organisations.

Furthermore, most key informants tended to be technical staff. This is not surprising, since the networks emphasise technical capacity development. However, in terms of the overall objective of organisational capacity development, networking at the managerial level may prove more effective, not least since managerial staff have the organisational 'bird's-eye view' that emphasises institutionalisation of networking outcomes and enhancing effectiveness.

In the majority of cases an individual is responsible for determining the resources used on networking activities. A drawback of this is that difficulties were experienced by at least three organisations in terms of absorbing the information and limited systematic assessment made at the organisational level of the benefits of networking. This finding ties in with an observation made by Fowler of over-reliance on individuals (1997: 113) *'…networks become more effective as membership extends beyond an individual into their organisation.'*

Questions arising include: (i) How does the capacity to absorb and utilise networking outcomes occur?; (ii) Does the absence of regular and organised analysis of the benefits accruing from networking, and concerns of relational capacity, affect

participation? One argument that could partially explain these findings is that membership in formalised networks is a relatively recent phenomenon among Danish development NGOs. Thus, one could expect to see an organisational culture evolving over time that develops and strengthens capacities for assessing benefits for using scarce networking resources, and that values absorptive systems and procedures for maximum utilisation of networking outcomes.

Tertiary condition: organisational culture
The wider circle in Figure 1 indicates that a culture of participation in networks plays a significant part in determining the outcomes of networking activities. Organisations that had prior experience with networks tended to view their resource use, and the expected benefits, more realistically. Similarly management also played a greater role in encouraging staff members to share and engage in activities in the network. By contrast, smaller organisations had a much more limited understanding of potential networking benefits and costs. Their organisational culture and tradition dictated that problems and challenges were to be addressed drawing on their own resources rather than scanning their environments to draw in external resources. One challenge that these results pose is: how does one reach out to, and draw into networking activities those organisations that have no culture of looking beyond their existing structure for wider input?

As indicated by the model, voluntary networking will take place only if requirements of the inner circle are met. However, the right conditions must also exist in the middle circle. The outer circle indicates at the more general level that any organisation contemplating belonging to a network must have objectives and a culture that converges with the networking concept.

Conclusion

The question remains as to whether NGOs are sufficiently strategic about their networking activities. More than half of those NGOs interviewed explicitly mentioned that their motivation for networking is related to their need for accessing information and building capacity in areas of growing importance to them. This is an example of a more strategic approach to networks. At the same time, a number of (primarily smaller) NGOs are driven into networks by the interest of volunteers and/or paid staff. This does not indicate that the benefits to the individual and to the NGO are necesarily irrelevant, merely that smaller NGOs may only locate the resources if this coincides with a personal interest.

Whether NGOs benefit from their network participation depends in part on the network itself, i.e. how well the network manages to offer timely, relevant and tailor-made activities that resonate with specific member organisations. NGO networks are perhaps most useful in terms of their potential to create impetus, develop joint activities around specific issues and enhance relationships.

Lessons learnt

A network should …

1. Be realistic about the resource commitment needed from network member organisations.
2. Assist members in identifying capacity gaps internal to their organisations. It should also assist members with the development of these capacities as these are a prerequisite for absorbing information and using it well within their organisations.
3. Make sure that networking is member-driven. Encourage initiatives from members in order to 'get them on board', to encourage them to use networking in a strategic manner.

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