Networking for learning
what can participants do?

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Contents

1.   Introduction

Why should anyone and especially donors invest in networking of civil society actors? What is its specific contribution to learning and innovation for sustainable development? The answer to this question seems quite obvious: to a large degree, learning and innovation in development and development policy emerges as a result of multi-actor networking, both spontaneous and organised. The evidence to support this claim is rather overwhelming (i.e. Korten, 1993; Engel 1997). However, as many authors indicate, not all networking contributes to learning and innovation, and not all donor interventions help: only particular types of networks that are supported and managed in a particular way do. Therefore, the question donors should ask themselves is not so much *why* to support networking, but *which* networks to support and *how*?

Box 1 - Why networking and why learning? Experiences and ideas from ICCO.

- By jointly investigating a certain practical subject with various organisations in different locations, the results potentially can have a greater impact. This can be seen in the experience of the Latin American Grupo Chorlaví: on the basis of the results of about ten systematisation projects on the subject of collective action (multi-stakeholder actions) for development financed by the competitive fund a short but very clear document has been elaborated as to be used for lobby activities. Its strength is that it is based on real practice in the field.

- The Secretariado Rural Peru – Bolivia, a network of about 40 rural NGO's, within which the participants are active in trying to learn from each other. Most members consider it very important not to seek homogeneity. As one of the members stated, "the heterogeneity of the participants enriches the discussions and shared knowledge.

- Within the framework of World Social Forum, ICCO and other organisations have, during the last four years, worked together with Human Rights organisations from all parts of the world bringing them together for information, exchange of working experiences and methods in this particular field. These events have led, among others, to the constitution of regional ESC-networks (among others in East Africa and the Balkans) that provide services and levels of information which each of the participating organisations would not be able to achieve or handle by themselves.

- One clear conclusion from our experiences up till now: to cope with the unavoidable tension between the necessity of integrated approach and specialisation of the implementing organisations, the only way to act is within networks. Although is not achieved automatically, they should also be learning networks as to be able to better their actions from day to day. ICCO intends to support this type of multi-actor development programmes more.

This paper draws upon experiences and materials collected within ICCO and literature readily available on networking for development. In this paper we will assess these materials and see whether the experiences and lessons learned are enough to build a strong case for investing in networking knowledge for development. But again, our attention will be less on the ideological debate of whether or not to support networks, but on which networks to support an how, to effectively enhance learning and innovation in development. In order to do this, we will first look at the networking process itself, its relevance to development and some key elements of its facilitation. Then, we ask ourselves: what is known about successful networks? That is, how to recognise networks that indeed produce results and outcomes that effectively contribute to innovating development processes, promoting multi-actor learning and advancing practical and/or policy proposals. Finally, we would like to know how to assess whether networks are effectively managed? What to look at?

A word of warning: this paper has no scientific pretensions and it is not exhaustive; it is a quick effort to organise what is known and to review what information is available, in order to assess the usefulness and

viability of a further exploration, that would have to produce practical results. Our main question is therefore: will in-depth analysis of the case study materials and several more comprehensive studies already available, produce useful results from a donor perspective? Would it provide donors with clearer guidelines on whether to support networking knowledge for sustainable development, how and under which circumstances? This exploratory study is just a first step.

The paper is set up as follows:

- Chapter 2 delineates what we are talking about:
  - o What is networking knowledge for development?
  - o Why is knowledge networking important?
  - o How does the process of knowledge networking operate?

- Chapter 3 sums up what characterises successful networking. Attention is given to four elements:

  - o What is said about participants taking part in networking?
  - o What is said about the role of management & governance of networking?
  - o What is said about the donors role in funding and supporting networking?
  - o What is said about monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of networking?

- Chapter 4 weaves different threads together in a discussion of possible opportunities for donors.

In the paper, cases are used to illustrate the principles mentioned in the text. Different elements of networking are thus highlighted by practical examples.

Box 2 – A few examples of networking in which ICCO is involved as a donor

- Asociación Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de Promoción (ALOP) [Latin American Association of Promotion Organisations] – ALOP is an association of 47 non-governmental development organisations from 20 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, working since 1979. Its objectives are the interchange of experiences, the working out of proposals at sectoral, regional and national level, and the promotion of projects (see also www.alop.or.cr .
- Grupo Chorlavi – a group of NGOs from all over Latin America and the Caribbean which aims at stimulating and facilitating the systematisation, exchange, comparative analysis and documentation of strategies, methods and tools that arise from the concrete practices of NGOs and Rural Organisations (ROs) in Latin America that have proven to be successful and innovative in the promotion of sustainable agriculture and rural development (see also www.grupochorlavi.org) .
- ILEIA – Since 1999 ILEIA is an independent organization with a mandate to contribute to poverty alleviation through the promotion of agro-ecological approaches. Documentation, analysis and publication of successful experiences in low external input and sustainable agriculture are the major activities. It started with a global magazine on Low External Input and Sustainable Agriculture (LEISA). Currently, its network produces a global and 4 regional editions, in four different languages, reaching over a 100.000 people: farmers and farm advisors in remote rural areas, as well as specialists, teachers and academics; almost all of the readership is in the South.
- Secretariado Rural Perú-Bolivia – network of NGOs working on sustainable rural development in the Andes region; it is organized around thematic learning groups tackling practical, methodological and policy issues related to promoting sustainable rural development, each led by one or more of its thirty+ member institutions (see also http://secrur.ls.net/) .
- More examples can be found in: Pinzás and Ranaboldo (2003) who have evaluated 26 networks in Latin and South America, which are sponsored by ICCO.

2.   What are we talking about?

2.1.   What do we mean by networking for development?

Several authors and network coordinators have provided definitions on what multi-actor networking entails, often depending on what their networks are about (see Nelson/Farrington, 1994:8). It seems impossible to come up with a definition that embraces all notions mentioned. What is clear is that networking is about organisations, institutions and individual actors joining forces around on a common concern (Creech/Willard, 2001:19). It is also about building relationships with other independent actors to (often) share knowledge, goods and experiences and to learn from each other with a common goal in mind (Padron (1991), Plucknett (1990), Engel, (1993)).

Box 3 - Definitions of networks/networking given by a variety of authors

- *Creech/Willard (2001)* – 'A formal knowledge network is a group expert institutions working together on a common concern, to strengthen each other's research and communications capacity, to share knowledge bases and develop solutions that meet the needs of target decision-makers at the national and international level.'
- *Plucknett (1990)* – 'a network can be defined as an association of independent individuals or institutions with a shared purpose or goal, whose members contribute resources and participate in two-way exchanges or communication.'
- *Engel (1993)* – 'Networking is the process resulting from our conscious efforts to build relationships with each other…. networks are more or less formal, more or less durable relational patterns that emerge as a result of such efforts. The core business is not the manufacture of products or the provision of services, but social learning, communication and the making of meaning'.
- *Nelson/Farrington (1994)* – 'Information exchange networking is a collaborative process of information exchange, around a central theme, carried out by actively interested parties.'

According to Engel (1993) almost all (civil society) *networking*[1] is characterised by four types of activities: the provision of services, learning together, advocacy and management.

- The *provision of services* refers mostly to providing information and training. It is about the networks communications infrastructure. Almost all networks for example do have a newsletter or a website which act as vehicles for the exchange of ideas and experiences. Often documentation and library services are provided as well.
- *Learning together* refers to the joint activities undertaken to raise members' level of understanding of the complexity of development problems. It includes mutual appraisals, exchange visits, workshops and other meetings. Common elements are joint diagnosis, exchange, comparison and synthesis.
- *Advocacy* refers to those activities performed or facilitated by the network to participate in (and influence) the public or government debate about development policy.
- Finally, almost all networks are characterised by a *'management unit'* whose role it is to facilitate the networking process. This includes maintaining or improving the communication infrastructure, overseeing the networks operating procedures, monitoring its resources, activities and outputs, and linking with other organisations and networks.

When looking at the added value produced by networking initiatives in the field of sustainable development, to some degree it contains elements in each of these four fields; priorities may differ

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[1]   Engel strongly argues to look at networking as a process; the networks are just the results of people and organizations dedicating time and energy to building relationships with each other; the network as such is part of the outcome, and not the only one.

depending on the context and the purpose for which a network was started. However, Pinzas & Ranaboldo (2003), after a comprehensive, comparative study of 28 Latin American networks, underline that by far the most added value originated from learning together and advocacy; these lie at the very heart of networking, other activities are mostly instrumental. An assessment of the networking process triggered by the LEISA Magazine (Engel et al.; 2002) supports this; yet it also shows that the priority given by network members to either learning or advocacy, may vary greatly, for example between continents and countries.

2.2.   The relevance of networking

The interest in the process of networking has been growing during recent years. Creech & Willard (2001) recognise four fundamental drivers behind this current interest:

- The emergence of information and communications technology (ICT) in 1980s and 1990s has made (global) networking much easier. Global information exchange and learning with people from different parts of the world has become accessible for large parts of the world.
- A *'sense of urgency'*: the growing complexity and inter-relatedness of major social, economic and environmental problems and the failure of some of the narrow approaches to solve issues like HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation and poverty alleviation makes multi-stakeholder and widespread learning unavoidable and highly needed.
- A *'sense of frustration'* among public and academic actors because of the marginalisation of many research endeavours and the lack of impact that research has had on public policy recently.
- Due to private sector experiments with *knowledge management* and the impact on the private sector, the public sector and civil society organisations have also become interested in it.

In relation to Small and Medium Enterprises networks (SME Networks for product innovation), Post, Hop & van Aken (1999) add another element related to the second driver mentioned by Creech & Willard: the pace of technological change and the increased technological complexity of new products forces small and medium size organisations to collaborate (see also Rosenfield's (2001) research on rural interfirm collaboration) .

From the perspective of civil society Engel (1993) mentions three fundamental drivers to networking, partly overlapping with the ones Creech & Willard propose:

- Firstly, civil society actors want to *upgrade* their performance through collective action, when they perceive a lack of access to relevant knowledge to be a critical factor hampering their work. Networks are strong because they fortify creativity and critical thinking through dialogue and exchange (see also: Nunez & Wilson-Grau (2003)).
- Secondly they want to *upstream* in terms of analysis and activities, to join forces and to search jointly for new ways of understanding and intervening in circumstances that are complex and defy simple analysis. Sharing strategies and deepening understanding by addressing global problems through knowledge of their local, national and regional contexts is possible (see also: Nunez & Wilson-Grau (2003)).
- Thirdly they want to *upshift* their impact, to take the focus of their activities to a higher policy level, enabling them to participate in the public and/or government debate about development and to effectively influence policy making.

In other words, ever more complex (global) development issues, the need for sharing experience and information outside one's own direct sphere of action, the emergence of ICTs and the subsequent overload of information, as well as the explicit intentions of civil society actors to improve their performance and increase their policy leverage – locally, nationally and internationally – put the need to support knowledge networking at the very core of modern development cooperation.

2.3.   The process of networking

The literature on NGO networking distinguishes different phases in the process of networking (Padron (1991), Nelson & Farrington (1994), Plucknett (1990), LEISA (1992), Creech & Willard (2001)). It often

starts with an initiator, a *prime-mover* (Padron, 1991) who stimulates, invites and calls on others to encourage them to form part of a network around a topic of common interest with the aim to upgrade, upstream and upshift the NGO activities relating to that topic. The initiator plays a catalytic role which requires time, thought and financial resources (LEISA, 1992). During this first *scoping phase* interests, capabilities and expectations to work together are explored by the different potential members of the network. This may involve visits to other organisations, face-to-face meetings or initial workshops to explore interests. After this scoping phase, the network comes into being in the *operational* and *consolidation phase* (LEISA, 1992). During this stage the network grows into full operation. Meetings and workshops are organised, rules of association are discussed and drawn up, exchanges and study tours are organised and a need begins to emerge for some regular means of communication between members, for example through a newsletter (Nelson & Farrington, 1994). During a third stage there is a *consolidation* of the structure of the network (Padron (1991), Nelson & Farrington (1994)). It is also during this stage that the objectives may be redefined and the structure redesigned to cope with new challenges. The network is now in full shape. If often spans various activities (service delivery, advocacy) and a small network secretariat keeps the network going. According to Creech & Willard (2001) the experience shows that it normally takes up to five years before a network establishes and produces concrete work. This is often at odds with donor funding which is often reduced at the moment when a network matures (after three/four years). Finally there is a stage of *dissolution* of the network or *evolution and adjustment* to new issues. Termination of a network is rarely the case. It is more common that networks move on to new activities.

Box 4 – Phases in Small & Medium Enterprises Product Development Networks in The Netherlands – Post/Hop/van Aken (1999).

It is interesting to compare NGO networking with networking which takes place between Small & Medium Enterprises (SME networking). Some similarities are striking, although due to a more competitive background most entrepreneurs and SME managers would only consider collaboration out of urgent economic need. The following possibilities make networking attractive, even for entrepreneurs: splitting up costs, risk sharing, involving additional technical know-how, access to additional markets / market contracts, improving flexibility as a result of adding up R&D capacity, speeding up innovation (time to market).

Phases in SME Networking

Post/Hop/van Aken describe the following phases in a SME network:

- *Initial process*: partner search. Often an a priori list of criteria is used to make a first selection of prospective candidates: e.g. good reputation, solid financial position, excellent quality etc.
- *Collective ambition and strategy development*: finding ways together on what needs to be achieved and how this can be done.
- *Cluster structure*: must be 'flexible'. The key is to not make any arrangement until there actually is a reason for it. A *central office* is often needed when the number of partners is growing. But it must remain small and play a coordinating role. The network must refrain from extensive formalisation: a balance between trust and formalisation must be found.
- *Performance evaluation*: (a) on financial and operational results, (b) on social contact and (c) on networking and learning potential: opportunities for knowledge and experience transfer.

Networking often goes through a process of institutionalisation as described above. Of primary importance in this process is to save the *essence* of networking: its *vitality* (Wielinga, 2001). Each network develops structure as a complex of agreements, procedures, institutions, culture and material circumstances. According to Wielinga networking is vital when energy is released through interaction enabled by the structure. The opposite takes place when a network loses its flexibility which can be recognised when procedures and controls are predominant over enthusiasm and satisfaction. Here the *'network manager'* plays an important role: s/he must take care for creating space for vitality, which can be done by

stimulating input and tuning, or by shattering illusions that block the process. In the next chapter we will focus on characteristics of vital and thus successful networking and what the role of participants, the network manager and the donors is.

3.   Characteristics of successful networks

'Networking is two percent technology and 98% management of relationships' – Creech/Willard (2001)

3.1.   Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature with respect to the characteristics of networks that are seen as successful; factors that are essential in keeping a network vital and striving. These may be grouped in four categories:

- Factors relating to the success of the joint efforts in pursuing established objectives;
- Factors relating to the capacity and disposition of network participants;
- Factors relating to the management and governance of networking activities;
- Factors related to funding and the role of donors. This relates also to the way networking can be evaluated.

Finally the relevance of a learning approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is emphasised.

3.2.   Success: maintain pertinence and ensure added value

Pinzás & Ranaboldo (2003) describe the conditions for successful networking in Latin America along four main axis[2], two of which are of particular relevance here: pertinence and added value.

They recognise that the pertinence of networking efforts – the adequacy and relevance of what the network does within a particular socio-political context – is interpreted very differently by different actors and networks. Their conclusion is not to aim for a single shared meaning; rather they underline the importance of a lively debate on the pertinence of what the network is doing and the way the membership perceives it. Clearly, pertinence is not a permanent state, it is to be continuously reassessed or even, re-negotiated among the membership. It is seen as closely related the needs and demands of the social sectors the network members work with as well as those of the membership itself; it also depends on the degree to which the donors interfere. However, Pinzás & Ranaboldo's conclusion is clear: the more networks understand and effectively develop themselves as spaces for innovation, experimentation and learning, and demonstrate their capability for advocacy, the more successful they are in continually renovating and revitalizing themselves within an ever changing development context and hence, ensure their pertinence. Subsequently, they specify a number of elements managers and facilitators need to take care of in order to achieve this.

With respect to added value, Pinzás & Ranaboldo emphasise the need for specialisation and focus. Many networks pretend to cover an excessive list of topics and/or thematic areas; they do not set nor stick to priorities well enough. Those networks who do focus, whether they concentrate on a limited number of well-specified themes or limit themselves to a well-defined sphere of social and political interaction, have generally achieved much more visible results, both internally and externally, results that were more sustainable and in addition, have been able to obtain a higher degree of commitment from their membership – although not necessarily a more massive one.

Besides, networks should focus on their core business which, in the view of Pinzás & Ranaboldo, has proven to be joint learning, drawing lessons and elaborating specific proposals, and advocacy. Their

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[2] Pertinence, sustainability, added value and structure, management and participation; their results with respect to pertinence and added value will be incorporated here; conclusions on sustainability, structure, management and participation are covered in other paragraphs.

evidence suggests that all the rest is instrumental to these two spheres of joint action in networks. In order to do so, networks need to pay systematic attention to designing and facilitating the learning processes amongst its membership, specifying and widely sharing lessons learned and building proposals upon these. They should also value and support local exchanges of ideas, experiences and knowledge, with the participation of grass roots organisations and other local development actors. The recuperation, or even rescue, of local knowledge for the sake of enriching the development planning and implementation process should be high on their agenda. Next, they should always have a keen eye for validating and disseminating their experiences and lessons learned in order to promote up-scaling their use. The development of strategic alliances with other actors and networks, not participating (yet), also regarding the monitoring the results of public policies, is one of the keys to success as well. Finally, Pinzás & Ranaboldo affirm that a minimum of institutional stability and an effective capacity to participate in the networking activities is a "condition sine qua non" for all successful networking efforts.

3.3.   Participants: daring to share

Three main characteristics seem to be common among participants of successful networks: their ability to share (in terms of attitude and disposition), their ability to contribute (in terms of skills, access and time/money available) and their commitment to networking.

- **Daring to share**: network participants need to be open, willing and able to learn from each other (Padron (1991), Ashman (2003), Engel (1993), LEISA (1992), Guijt et al. (2003), Rosenfield (2001)). Although this sounds rather obvious, in practice it means that participants must have confidence in their work and *'dare to share'* it with others (Padron (1991)). Thus there must be an atmosphere of openness among potential members which allows them to admit mistakes and to learn from them (Rosenfield (2001), LEISA (1992)). Networks cannot flourish without this trust. In practice, this means according to Ashman that networks and partnerships are more likely to become effective when they are founded by groups or networks of people and organisations that share a history of working together, that know each other and have relationships characterised by mutual trust.

- **Capacity to contribute**: participants must have the capacity to contribute: skills, access and time/money available (Nelson & Farrington (1994), LEISA (1992), Guijt et al. (2003), Plucknett (1990), Creech & Willard (2001)). When somebody is busy implementing a deadline-driven project or programme, with little in-built space for reflection and learning, he or she cannot be expected to engage actively in a learning network (Guijt et al. (2003)). Support of senior leadership in their institution, underlining the importance of networking, is necessary (Ashman (2003)). It also means that when electronic exchange of information and lessons learnt is an important activity of the networking, that all participants must have equal access to ICT facilities – or whatever facilities are used to do it – and do have the skills to handle these appropriately, to prevent the marginalisation of certain groups.

- **Commitment**: participants must be committed to the networking activities, they must consider the priorities of the network their own. They must be motivated by self-interest because networking is a potential added-value to their daily work. In his research on rural interfirm collaboration in the United States, Rosenfield (2001) found out that incentive grants are often of limited value. Companies coaxed into networks by a small grant are not those likely to persist after the grant expires. The same counts for NGO networks. According to Padron (1991), the golden rule for success is letting a network start from its own resources. Initial self-reliance guarantees continuity (see also: Engel, 1993). This doesn't mean that no funding resources for the networking activities are needed. But funding must not be the reason why NGOs decide to join a network. Another important condition is that the initiators are enough committed to overcome the organisational and establishment phase, which takes a lot of effort, while often working for not immediately seen results with little money.

Box 5 – A networking experience: PELUM – Participatory Ecological Land-Use Management
Parkie Mbozi (2002); *'Ground up': facilitating networking and sharing in sub-Saharan Africa*, in LEISA Magazine, Changing information flows, vol.18, no.2.

PELUM Network
A regional network of more than 130 civil society organisations with over 15 development partners working in nine countries in eastern and southern Africa. The members are involved in a wide range of activities in sustainable agriculture, food security, and natural resource management. The activities include training, information dissemination (including gender, HIV/AIDS), drought relief, seed multiplication and delivery, financial support, advocacy and lobbying. The mission of PELUM is to build the capacity of members to respond appropriately to changes and challenges towards the empowerment of communities.

Regional Magazine 'Ground up'
Five years after the network was formed, PELUM launched a regional magazine (in 2000). This magazine was seen as a potential vehicle for networking across eastern and southern Africa and with likeminded organisations beyond the region. Some specific objectives of the magazine are:

- to influence policy-makers and to lobby and advocate for sustainable communities;
- to provide a forum for critical analysis and evaluation of PELUM approaches and to share PELUM approaches;
- to provide a voice for the South, giving a southern perspective to development.

A striking feature is that the magazine was planned as a commercial publication from the outset, to look ahead to the time that donor support would fall away. The magazine also tried to include as much contributions from members as possible.

Impact
Although the number of subscriptions in 2002 was only just over 100 ones, the impact of the magazine is partly reflected in the comments of readers:

- 'Some member organisations use it (Ground up) in community workshops while others use the information from the magazine to develop course materials for their community education projects.'
- 'I was interested in the article of micro-irrigation technology for small-scale farmers. Please send more information about how I can get a quotation or terms of payment and the address of the agent in treadle pumps. I have been looking for this kind of pump to boost my farming business.'

Lessons learnt for PELUM
A lesson learnt is the difficulty in selling development information and products. In particular because purchasing power is limited among households and because development information is known to be free. Another difficulty is let members of the Association contribute. Up to 2002 the best result was a magazine consisting of 50% contributions from members, while the rest comes from academics, researchers, journalists and partner organisations.

3.4. Management & Governance: facilitation and participation
'The process of forming a network is an art, not a science.' – S.A. Rosenfield (2001)

Network governance is not network management (see Creech & Willard (2001)). Governance issues relate to the way the relationship among the membership is structured, decision-making is done and how this is eventually formalized; this is rarely done at the beginning of a network. Network management or facilitation addresses issues of network performance, the day-to-day activities, such as planning, designing

and implementing learning and sharing methodologies, developing strategic alliances, handling of staff and financial resources, monitoring work plans and so forth (often done by a network secretariat). Both are important elements in keeping a networking process going. Some main factors influencing successful networking relating to management and governance are: the importance of a shared problem or goal, the need for clarity of focus and planning, the need for flexible internal management and wide participation of network participants in decision making and network orientation.

- **Shared problem or goal**: having a common vision and shared goals among the members of a network is pointed at by many authors (e.g. Nelson & Farrington (1994), Plucknett (1990), Bernard (1996), Ashman (2003)). According to Creech & Willard (2001) every network should begin with a *scoping phase* of exploring interests and defining expectations to work together. This can be quite complex, especially in the case of virtual teams, crossing cultural and technical boundaries. Ashman (2003) speaks about the necessary strategic fit: the project goals must address needs and issues perceived to be significant by all the important participants of the network. The networking activities must represent a meaningful added-value to the organisational portfolio of each participant. To generate useful interaction among individuals working in different institutional and geographical settings, an issue of common interest must be identified (Nelson & Farrington (1994)).

- **Clarity of focus and planning**: managing a network is taking care for clarity of focus and planning (Kalaugher & Visser (2002), Nelson & Farrington (1994), Plucknett (1990), Creech & Willard (2001), Guijt et al. (2003). Also general issues, topics or problems around which learning will take place have to be planned. Often there is a potentially endless list of relevant topics about which to learn. To be effective, one has to focus on a limited number of topics and to prioritise these (Guijt et al. (2003)). Without a plan, members tend to put their own daily institutional priorities ahead of their network obligations. Moreover, a clear planning might also be important in attracting donors.

- **Flexible internal management and participation**: flexibility, transparency and effective participation is another crucial element (Bernard (1996), Kalaugher & Visser (2002), Plucknett (1990), Nelson & Farrington (1994), Padron (1991), Wielinga (2001)). A network according to Padron doesn't need a director, but instead an animator, a person or body with the power to convene, and to stimulate. The success of a networking process depends more than anything else on this individual. The role of such a 'network manager' is (a) manage the flow of information across the network, (b) keep participants engaged, (c) balance consultation with members with pushing forward the delivery on network work plans and (d) monitor the financial health of the network (Creech & Willard (2001)). Ownership is seen as the key to network sustainability: members work within a network, not for it. The impetus must come from the prospective members themselves who see the value in the network and are willing to take responsibility for it (Bernard (1996)). This means that participation in decision making and a non-directive management style are crucial. Such a management style also allows for flexibility in the course of networking, which is needed to be able to adapt to ever changing circumstances.

- **Network orientation**: The development of strategic alliances with others requires close linkages with others outside the network, as well as building the membership's capacities to contribute and sometimes, even compete with these others. An excessive attention to learning only from one's own experience and debates may at certain points lead to isolation and blind network members with respect to relevant experiences elsewhere. Network managers need to be aware of this and develop adequate information systems to make sure that learning processes and advocacy activities within the network are well endowed with alternative views and options (Engel et al. (2002)).

> **Box 6 - ILEIA - the Information Centre for Low External Input and Sustainable Agriculture**
> See also: http://www.ileia.org/
>
> *ILEIA Network*
> ILEIA is an independent organisation that functions as a network by documentation and publication of successful experiences in low external input and sustainable agriculture worldwide. The bottom line of the organisation is its LEISA Magazine which has over 20000 subscribers mainly in the South. Case studies and reviews revealed that the magazine is shared widely, sometimes up to ten readers, which means that actual readership is much higher.
>
> *Impact*
> A recent assessment (Engel et al. (2002)) of ILEIA revealed that the LEISA Magazine is highly appreciated:
> - 'Important reference material for study and training. We share it in workshops many times.'
> - 'The LEISA Magazine is used as a source of information by the technical staff of the project. In particular the issue on "the struggle against desertification" is consulted frequently, to learn from others' experiences but also because of the specific references it contains to web sites about desertification.'
> - Mr. (…) works for the Ministry of Agriculture in Ethiopia as a socio-economic expert who is most involved in monitoring and evaluation activities. One of the programs he carries out is focused on improved low-input farming for farmers who cannot afford high inputs. It gets a lot of inspiration from LEISA Magazine. Also the ILEIA book *'Farming for the Future'* is important in his work.

3.5. Financial resources and role of the donor

Finally, a very important issue is the support given by donors. Funding must not be the reason for NGOs to take part in networking, but without it experience has proved that sustainable networking is impossible.

- **Financial aspects:** most networks wouldn't have take place without some financial resources (Kalaugher & Visser (2002), LEISA (1992), Ashman (2003), Creech & Willard (2001), Pinzás & Ranaboldo (2003)). Almost all network literature stresses the need for at least seed money during the preparation and establishing phase (Engel, 1993), when for example an informal network wants to formalise. Others underline that long term commitments are needed from donor agencies as network operating costs should not be underestimated (see also the example of PELUM – box 5). Kalaugher & Visser (2002) mention that networks are often funded like projects, receiving support for 3-4 year periods, often difficult to renew. Taking into account the time needed to mature as a network (5-10 years) this means that funding stops at the moment a network is becoming productive. Lack of funding at this time, may lead to inactivity of the network and loss of initial investments in time, energy and money.
- **The donor in the network:** The above may also produce tension between the purpose and goals of a network and the donor's role as funding agency. In a ILEIA network meeting (LEISA (1992)) participants were concerned about the fact that donors might interfere in their work. But the more donors take the lead in defining goals, targets, partners and outcomes, the more they will tend to drive the network and lessen chances for ownership and sustainability (Ashman (2003)) and hence, undermine the essence of networking.

Box 7 – Grupo Chorlavi

Grupo Chorlavi is a network of Latin American NGOs and social and economic organisations of rural people (ROs). It started in 1999 with an 18-month pilot project trying to construct a network or rural organisations in Latin America. It aims at the systematisation, dissemination, exchange, comparative analysis and electronic documentation of strategies, methods and tools generated through the daily work of the participants. The network has six interacting components:

- *Fondo Mink'a de Chorlavi*: this is a competitive grant fund which seeks to stimulate and facilitate organisational learning through funding public and private initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable rural development. The final reports of the projects supported by the funds are discussed and fed back to decision makers.
- *Electronic Conferences*: every year two e-conferences are organised on topics of interest to NGOs and ROs.
- *InterCambios electronic newsletter*: each issue contains documents that introduce the reader to an issues of importance for NGOs and ROs.
- *Special Cooperation Agreements*: formal arrangements with groups of NGOs and/or ROs working on specific issues of interest. Through the arrangements Grupo Chorlavi can provide technical support and small amounts of funding to strengthen the activities.
- *Grupo Chorlavi Website*: which provides access to documents, articles, information on NGOs and ROs.
- *Chorlavi electronic list*: which can be used by participants to disseminate any sort of information related to the objectives of Grupo Chorlavi.

To strike a balance: Clearly, the challenge for donors in their support of networking and learning is to strike a balance between their role as funding agency and their own needs for collaboration, information and debate amongst their partners, and the need for ownership of the network, its agenda and learning processes on the part of the (local) network participants. That's why Engel (1993) argued for the donor agency to see its role as a sponsor rather than a donor of the network: combining sustained financial support and identification with the network's general objectives, with minimum influence on its decision-making about approach and operations. Evaluating specific donor experiences and to share "best practices" seems to be very urgently needed in this field; it might provide the much needed practical insights into the way donor agencies may effectively participate in promoting networking and learning.

3.6. Monitoring & Evaluation: a learning approach

It is of course of extremely importance for networks, when raising revenues from donors, to argue the 'network advantage' effectively (Creech & Willard (2001)). According to Engel (1993) there is no reason why we should not evaluate network performance as rigorously as any other organisation's performance. Donors rightly expect a network they fund to specify its expected outputs and impact, and to define indicators for measuring these. The challenge therefore is to develop a framework for M&E which takes into account the specific characteristics of networking. At this moment several authors and researchers are experimenting with models and concepts that have to address networking rightly (for example Ashman (2003), Nunez & Wilson (2003), Creech & Willard (2001) are all experimenting with frameworks they have developed themselves). Thus we are talking about work in progress! Another aspect is that almost all researchers (Creech & Willard (2001), Ashman (2003), LEISA (1992), Guijt et al. (2003), Engel (1993)) on networking agree that traditional approaches to monitoring and evaluation are not appropriate. The simple transplantation of models designed for conventional organisations doesn't work. These rarely provide opportunities for the network members to learn from each other about what is working well in their activities, about whether the networking is having the influence it wishes to have, and about what needs to be adjusted during the funding contribution period (Creech & Willard (2001)).

Traditional approaches to M&E:

- tend to look at specific project deliverables only, rather than taking into account the value of the relationships and other process outcomes that emerged;
- rarely involve more than the leading organisation in a joint discussion on the achievements of a network.
- might overlook significant network achievements due to a deficient analytical framework, based on organisational performance rather than network performance experience, and may therefore use a biased set of assessment indicators and assumptions.

Based on this, almost all propose *a learning approach* to assess networking. As said, it is work in progress. There are a lot differences relating to setting the indicators. Ashman (2003) comes up with a set of factors and questions which can be used as indicators (governance and management, strategic fit/program goals & outcomes, donor relations, mutual trust, joint learning), but doesn't make clear how these relate to the basic evaluation questions of effectiveness, efficiency and impact. Nunez & Wilson (2003) have some rudimentary reflections and point to the need of taking into account internal achievements of a network (raising e.g. the number of relations) as a goal on itself. Creech & Willard (2001) experiment with the most comprehensive framework by using elements of common project planning and evaluation approaches: SWOT analysis, results-based management, logical framework approaches, outcome mapping, appreciative inquiry and methods from the human resources field. Using components from these approaches they create three frameworks: for planning, monitoring (used quarterly, to track activities in so-called *progress journals*) and evaluation (both annually and at the end of the project). Some primary principles of these frameworks are that:

- they provide *qualitative* and *quantitative* indicators of success (e.g. the emphasis which is put on including *stories* recorded systematically over time in monitoring and evaluation activities (see also box ILEIA);
- that they are *participatory*, involving all network members, and not only the leading organisation;
- that evaluation components are embedded in a planning framework from the *beginning* (reserving time and resources for it) and
- that they anticipate some form of *regular monitoring* throughout the life of the project.

Valuable contributions are also made by Guijt et al. (2003:22), in particular when it comes to evaluating learning impacts through networking. They also don't give a final framework but suggest options in the form of a list of standard good M&E practices:

- Establish clear (learning) goals and objectives against which to monitor and evaluate.
- Check that proposed activities will lead to objectives being achieved.
- Establish performance questions and indicators for each objective.
- Address the five key evaluation questions of impact, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.
- Linking M&E into management practices and ensuring it provides necessary information to support management.
- Ensure sufficient time and resources for M&E in the design.
- Make appropriate use of qualitative and quantitative methods.
- Engage key actors in processes of critical reflection about the initiative.
- Invest in the necessary conditions and capacities for M&E systems to be implemented effectively.

Other valuable contributions exist in Latin America: Engel et al. 1998-2000; Pinzás & Ranaboldo 2003, which have not been systematised yet. Given the rich experience of networking in South America, and of evaluating it, a synthesis of methodologies used to evaluate learning-oriented networks for sustainable development would be a good investment to specify viable options for learning approaches to M&E in knowledge networking for development.

An example of an assessment of a network based on a learning approach is given in box 8.

4. Opportunities for donors

4.1. Why invest in networking knowledge for development?

Experience shows learning-oriented networks to be able to provide NGOs and/or grass roots organisations with an action-based platform for sharing insights, knowledge and experience, strengthening policy advocacy and improving service delivery, while resources can be pooled into joint programmes and projects. Existing networks show different sets of objectives, different styles of operation and different degrees of success, maturity and sustainability. Successful networking initiatives are generally characterized by: (eventual) clarity of focus, strategic planning of activities, flexible management and participation and a joint vision and commitment of its members. Reliable access to resources that can be dedicated specifically to planning and implementing well-defined network activities proved a key to success as well.

Importantly, networking knowledge for development is not just organising meetings and workshops. Current networking efforts show a variety of sophisticated strategies for sourcing (identifying and interpreting) and sharing knowledge and experiences, and to systematically learn from it. Information carriers may include (combinations of) web-based, electronic, printed, interpersonal and/or mass media. Experimentation and learning may be stimulated in different ways, sharing information, creating contests and or focused funding opportunities or supporting ad hoc and/or permanent task forces and working groups. Content may be shared in words, pictures, artistic or popular expressions; it may be conceptual or practical. Content may be activated through information sourcing (identification and interpretation), through interactive web sites, surveys or interviews, or by offering funding or organising writing contests. Mostly, it is done by using a combination of such strategies, besides bringing selected people together in workshops, meetings and/or conferences as well. As recent field research points out (Pinzás & Ranaboldo, 2003) networking knowledge for development produces its most significant results if by means of such

strategies, the network develops itself into a space for innovation, experimentation and learning, as a "live" foundation for generating pertinent and viable proposals and policy alternatives.

The sum total of learning-oriented networking initiatives in any particular field or region provides civil society with a critical "cortex" that enables it to go beyond the intuitive, beyond individual interests. It helps channelling the knowledge and experience gained through local initiatives, into higher levels of shared understanding and improved policy advocacy. In a way, it provides the meshwork of thinkers and doers that permits civil society to learn from experience, to develop its own knowledge base and to transform it into original policy proposals, without having to adhere to "one-size-fits-all" approaches and solutions. Therefore, we would like to postulate that *learning-oriented networks represent civil society's answer to the challenges of the emerging knowledge society*. Where government and private actors chose to rely heavily on institutions (think-tanks), civil society chose to enhance its learning through networking and sharing.

Donors should recognise this central role of networking initiatives in boosting the knowledge base, learning processes and the civil society actors' capacity to generate and advocate proposals, and relate their funding to the relative importance they attach to it. Capacity development, institution-building, advocacy and societal change, to name just a few, are unthinkable without a considerable investment in improving networking and learning among relevant development actors. Donors should invest in learning-oriented networking amongst their partners because they want to enable civil society both globally and locally to play a strong role in shaping the ideas and knowledge that determine our future. Besides, such investments are vital to sustain their own learning; sponsoring learning-oriented networking can not be lacking in donors' global knowledge for development strategies.

4.2.   How to invest in networking knowledge for development?

While relatively clear on the scope and relevance of investing in learning-oriented networks, the available literature and documented practice are as yet much less final on the lessons learned on their management and on how to ensure effective support to learning-oriented networking initiatives as a donor. The following are some of the lessons that may be proposed:

- *Networking is a tool for boosting development performance:* Fundamental drivers push civil society actors more and more towards collaboration and sharing knowledge and experience, in order to upgrade their performance through collective action, to cope with growing complexity of development problems and to be able to participate effectively in policy debate at the highest levels. Hence, investments in networking are contributions to *institutional development*, to developing intra- and inter-organisational capacities for dealing with different challenges and new horizons.

- *Networking takes time:* time to build relationships, trust and ownership, and to gradually build a shared vision and effective ways of planning, operating and facilitating networking activities. As a consequence, it is of no use to fund networks like short term projects, receiving support for three to four years. Networking needs *long term commitments*, not only from member institutions and individuals but also from donors. For the sake of sustainability networks are preferably funded by more than one donor, each providing a part of the total support needed.

- *Adaptive management and flexibility* are of primary importance to the governance of learning-oriented networks; these help create space for *diversity among members yet ownership too*. Donors must behave more like *sponsors*, supporting initiative without interfering in 'the flow of events' of a network. Consequently, supervision and administrative procedures are to be tailored to the needs of open-ended learning-oriented networks to ensure accountability and transparency.

- *Traditional approaches for M&E and supervision won't necessarily fit the bill of sponsoring a network.* Donors will have to accept *a learning approach to networking M&E*. At the very least, the concepts of "output" and "impact" are to be reassessed, as the results of a learning process cannot be

described in substantive terms (what is there to learn if we already know the outcome?), yet *can* be framed in terms of (joint) capacities, process outputs and value added. As made clear in paragraph 3.6. finding and testing frameworks for assessing learning and networking is work in progress. Evidence of learning and the effectiveness of networking (for example in the form of changed practices of participants) will have to be systematised in order to show the transformative capacity of networking .

4.3.   The roles donors can play: questions yet to be answered

Unfortunately, studies so far only reveal the difficulty for donors to strike a balance between different roles in learning-oriented networks. Many questions are as yet unanswered. May donors play multiple roles in networking processes? And if so, which ones?

- Is it possible for a donor to play several roles at the same time; to be both a funding agency and a participant, shaping the conditions for learning as well as trying to learn itself? How effective is this?
- How to prevent the donor participant from being seen only as a funder? How to avoid being (or being perceived as) conditioning the learning efforts?
- What measures have been effective to safeguard networking from becoming too much donor-driven? What can partners do?
- What can donors do themselves? What prerequisites exist? How can donors share in lessons learnt otherwise?

Given the current state-of-the-art of documented reflection, these questions deserve a more systematic review, on the basis of concrete experiences; to develop effective policies, strategies and approaches on how to effectively support learning-oriented networking initiatives, and the roles of donors in it. Very little research has so far addressed these questions, while donor experience is very rich. Therefore, literature and documented practice is to be complemented with key interviews with resource persons (donors as well as network facilitators) and with a more practical systematisation of case studies; the eventual aim being, to come up with a clear-cut strategy and cost-effective approach to ensure effective and sustained donor support/participation to/in successful networking knowledge for development initiatives.

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