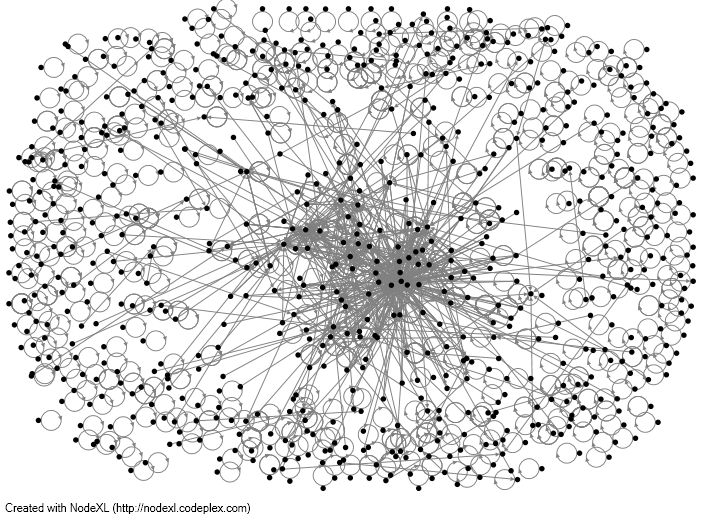
**Networks, platforms and partnerships: strengthening collaboration for sustainable development**

**Reflections and checkpoints for heads of institutions, program managers, evaluators and donors**



**Prepared for**

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# Abstract

A summary of 25 years of lessons learned and reflections on what is still needed to advance collaboration for sustainable development. The author considers the importance of extending the social networks of researchers and managers working in the sustainable development domain as well as the ongoing need for strategic partnerships among like-minded institutions, in particular to assess their collective impact on critical issues. The author’s research and that of her team members is encapsulated into five key questions that should be asked by managers of networks, platforms and partnerships of any size, whether funded or volunteer in nature, whether they bring together a group of individuals or are a large scale structured multistakeholder partnership of institutions. An extended checklist of issues, benchmarks and indicators is presented to guide managers, external evaluators and donors to ensure that all forms of collaboration achieve their potential to advance sustainable development.

# Introduction

This paper has been several years in the making. It presents insights from 25 years of work on networks, platforms, partnerships and collaboration undertaken by my colleagues and myself in the former Knowledge Communications and Global Connectivity Programs at the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). After stepping down from IISD in 2013, I thought there might be a use for an encapsulation of our research and evaluation work. But I put the paper on a mental back burner for the next four years, while I undertook a wide variety of monitoring and evaluation projects for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), and Manitoba Education, with additional advice to the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, the British Columbia Council for International Cooperation and others, exploring successes and challenges within networks, platforms, partnerships and education for sustainable development. This paper presents an opportunity to bring forward the lessons learned and reflections on what is still needed to advance collaboration for sustainable development.

Central to my thinking these days is Thomas Friedman’s perspective on the Power of One: “What one individual can do – the power of one—to make or break things is phenomenal…Ideas now flow through social networks all over the world faster and farther than ever. As a result, new ideas (including fake news) can suddenly take root, and long-held ideas – think opposition to gay marriage or transgender rights – can suddenly melt away.” (Friedman, 2016)

For me, this puts the onus of participation in networks, platforms and partnerships squarely on the shoulders of every single individual working for sustainable development. While much of what I have written over 25 years has focused on how institutions can partner more effectively, the missing piece I think has been the wide spread and systematic commitment of all researchers, program officers and activists to participate in these collaborative mechanisms, to share knowledge and influence across and beyond the immediate boundaries of their institutions into their extended networks of peers at other institutions and reaching out to social connections with families and friends.

As Willard stated in 2009 in her forward-looking piece on the rise of online social networking and its relevance for governance for sustainable development:

People working towards more sustainable development need to establish [an online] presence for themselves…Creating a profile, sharing information and cultivating meaningful interactions within a community does take time – time that will extend above and beyond an average work day. But the viral impact of updating extended networks of family and friends in the evening about what one believes in and works on during the day cannot be underrated. (Willard, 2009 p31).

In assessing collaboration across sectors and interests, Lenihan sets as a major benchmark the demonstration of personal responsibility – the willingness of individuals to assign themselves tasks related to their network/platform/partnership -- as indicated by whether they:

* “Spend time with others in their normal spheres of contact to inform them of the work underway and to gather their input; [and]
* Communicate the findings of the process to others in their [other] network[s].” (Lenihan 2012, p182).

**For all the efforts of institutions to mandate and support knowledge sharing and collaboration, each individual also needs to be driven by an internal imperative to reach out, share and learn. Personal responsibility is key.**

Much of this paper still focuses on institutional initiatives to set up mechanisms to engage individuals or to foster collaboration and partnerships among groups of organizations. I have nevertheless attempted in this paper to take a broader view where I can, considering all types of collaboration, whether individual or institutional, online or in-person.

## Background

This paper was supported through the IDRC-IISD Framework Agreement of 2012-2013. At the time, there was interest in scoping the functionality and value of knowledge sharing platforms and addressing the problem of “Portal Proliferation Syndrome” (Hammill, 2013 p1) particularly in the climate change domain: too many websites for brokering climate change information with very similar objectives and audiences. The original purpose of the paper was to explore what constitutes an “effective” knowledge platform on climate change to help IDRC sort through the range of emerging climate change platforms: what to use, what to support, and so forth. Shared interests in this challenge by IISD’s climate change team (with Anne Hammill) and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) (with Blane Harvey) led to a useful working definition of knowledge brokering platforms, based on Wenger’s work on communities of practice and knowledge brokering: “Knowledge brokering (KB) is broadly understood as a set of intermediary activities that link knowledge production and use”; “By platform we mean a technology package that integrates a number of tools available in the marketplace that one can acquire, install or rent, which is then tailored for the use of a targeted user group” (Wenger, White & Smith 2009, cited by Hammill et al, 2013 p1). Hammill et al’s reports and the development of the “Knowledge Navigator: your guide to climate change platforms” (<http://kn.ids.ac.uk/>) by IDS have contributed to addressing IDRC’s very specific interests.

These inputs have allowed me to focus my exploration on a related, but perhaps a broader question: Given the proliferation of knowledge platforms and portals in all domains – water resources, the green economy, and sustainable development goals for examples – and given that platforms, in the end, are part of the larger constellation of networks, partnerships, communities of practice and other forms of collaboration, are there some general observations and checkpoints that can be drafted for managers, evaluators and donors on strengthening and supporting collaborative efforts?

## Scope of this paper

This paper will provide:

* Part 1: Thoughts on extending networks of individuals
* Part 2: Reflections on the need for close, selective institutional partnerships and alliances
* Part 3: Five key questions: Guidance on strengthening networks, platforms and partnerships at a glance
* Part 4: A set of checkpoints on what to look for in all types of collaborative efforts, to guide managers, evaluators and donors

This paper will not provide:

* A scoping of or recommendations on specific networks, partnerships or platforms.

## Quick definitions

In many of my research papers and evaluations I have taken time to explore the definitional challenges, scoping out the (sometimes subtle) differences among networks, hubs, communities of practice, platforms, partnerships and other types of collaboration. For the purposes of this paper, I am taking a bare bones approach:

* Network: a group of individuals connecting with each other (encompasses social networks, professional networks, communities of practice, forums, etc.)

**SIDE BAR:** Overlap or confusion can arise when measures of formality are introduced: eg, two or more individuals may sign documents to structure a legal partnership with mutual risk and benefit sharing. Or a research network may be managed through a partnership -- formal agreements among a group of institutions.

* Partnership: a group of institutions agreeing to work together (whether single stakeholder -- eg, just research institutions -- or multistakeholder – government, business, NGOs) under the umbrella of which there may be networks of individuals undertaking various activities in support of the partnership.
* Platform: (other terms include gateway or hub) -- the mechanism supporting information exchange, networking and progress reporting among individuals and/or institutions.

**Throughout this paper, when I refer to all forms of connection and collaboration, whether networks, platforms, communities of practice, hubs, gateways, forums, partnerships or alliances, I will use the designator *“networks, platforms and partnerships”.***

There is one additional distinction between networks and partnerships that I will pursue in more detail in sections 1 and 2. As noted by Willard and Creech, 2011: “As the field of networks and partnerships practice evolves, it would appear that **networks have a stronger role in framing issues” --** [and I would add a stronger role in building capacities and supporting peer learning] -- “while **partnerships emerge as a key implementation strategy**…[M]any networks have shifted toward individual-based membership strategies and adopted community of practice models. Individuals come together to learn from each other, to frame issues, to and to meet others working on the issues. [Through this process], individuals may identify one or two potential partner organizations to work with on project implementation...” [emphasis added].

# Part 1: Thoughts on extending networks of individuals

As noted above, Willard and Creech (2011) speculated some years ago that networks were useful ways to organize and bring individuals together to frame issues and to learn from each other. The ubiquity of social media today has made it possible for individuals (researchers, government policy makers and managers, business people and others) to network freely with their peers across institutional boundaries. While partnerships continue to play a role (which I will discuss further in section 2), a greater emphasis is needed on how to strengthen and extend networks of individuals.

In 2007 I was invited by the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria to consider how a partnership of 14 think tanks, one in each of the G8 - G20 countries, might be established to provide research and guidance to the leaders of each of those countries in order to resolve global deadlocks. At the time I considered (and still do) that the expertise needed did not necessarily rest within any single institution at the national level – that experts were becoming much more mobile, having affiliations and associations with multiple institutions in different countries. Further, I suggested that the range of expertise needed to support G20 leaders extended beyond the policy researchers to include those with skills in communications and relationship building. What was needed was a different model: not one based on institutional alliances but rather one based on an open source approach – following a concept of policy code sharing (Maxwell, 2004). Groups of experts could be established in each of the countries, regardless of institutional affiliation; they would work together at the country level and across national boundaries to draft the policy “code” needed to move forward on climate change and other deadlocks, with the draft code then shared at large for broader networks of individuals to explore, test, and validate. In other words, using a network approach to frame the issues, to learn from each other and to reach out and engage others in the process. (Creech, 2007)

In some ways, this reflects how the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has operated over many years. There is evidence in other domains as well of the success of networking research and policy. Education comes to mind, with real progress on reorienting education policy and practice in many countries to support sustainable development. As my colleague Carolee Buckler and I reported in Shaping the Future We Want: the final report of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014, education is now recognized globally as an essential enabler of sustainability (Buckler and Creech 2014). This transformation of education took place over ten years, with one major contributing factor being how UNESCO mobilized tens of thousands of individuals to work on advancing changes:

During the DESD, we saw for the first time wide-scale application of multi-stakeholder processes for reorienting education systems … One of the most influential instruments for bringing stakeholder groups together to advance ESD has been the establishment of National Coordination Bodies. By sharing the process of ESD implementation across a spectrum of interests, these coordination mechanisms have served to inform and enhance government policy, have mobilized actions with private sector and civil society actors and have secured greater likelihood of achieving the goals of ESD. (Buckler and Creech, 2014, p172-173)

These National Coordination Bodies brought together individual teachers, government managers, school administrators, academic researchers and many others to review, advise and advance policy change around the purpose of education and reorienting education towards sustainable development.

In reporting on progress on its own regional strategy to advance ESD, the UNECE likewise observed the importance of large networks of individuals working towards a common goal:

Network models are also providing support for peer-to-peer learning among educators—both those involved in teacher preparation, and networks of teachers themselves. … Nearly all member States in the European Union, other Western European countries and North America group and two-thirds of member States in the Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia group report the existence of networks and platforms of educators involved in ESD (Creech and Buckler, 2016, p94)

More research is warranted into why these networking approaches worked so well. One can identify fairly easily some important contributing factors: sharing a common goal at local and national levels as well as the context of contributing to a larger effort framed nationally and internationally; the multiplicity of actors and skills brought together (not just the think tanks, academic researchers and policy people but also those on the front lines – the teachers and administrators, and those involved in communications and public awareness raising); as well as the time frame of 10 years – everyone knew this was a long haul effort and planned their commitment accordingly.

As my colleague, Mark Halle, once observed years ago, these networks should be more work than net. Ways to strengthen these working relationships are explored in more detail in sections 3 and 4.

However, it would also be worth looking at the social networks of educators themselves – their extended ties to students and parents, friends and family, and how this may have influenced the will and ability of governments to change and adopt new policy. As understood in social network analysis (SNA), the breadth of these “weak ties” may have also been highly influential:

As noted by Granovetter as early as 1973, weak social ties are responsible for the majority of the embeddedness and structure of social networks in society as well as the transmission of information through these networks. Specifically, more novel information flows to individuals through weak rather than strong ties. Because our close friends tend to move in the same circles that we do, the information they receive overlaps considerably with what we already know. Acquaintances, by contrast, know people that we do not, and thus receive more novel information (Granovetter, 2004, cited in Willard, 2009, p30)

The use of social networking sites (SNS) (Facebook, Linked-in, Wordpress blogs, etc) to talk about their vision and actions on education for sustainable development may have contributed to wide scale change:

Technologies such as SNS, which enable people to manage large networks of acquaintances, allow us to maintain the weak ties that bring novel information into our lives and to spark innovation. (Willard, 2009, p30)

Participants in the 2013 Large-scale Natural Resource Conservation & Restoration: Issues of Governance workshops hosted by the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (SESYNC workshops) suggested that there is a difference between creating networks and illuminating networks that already exist. There is a need for a greater understanding of the breadth and depth of existing individual connections and how to expand those, in order to build on and build out the social capital necessary for change -- capacity, resilience, responsiveness, and innovation. In any effort to broaden debate and catalyze change, sustainable development actors must meet threshold objectives of building more extensive relationships, building trust, and building knowledge to get to a common understanding of shared interests (SESYNC workshops).

If one agrees with Friedman, 2016, that social media have in fact made it possible for ideas to go viral and for great shifts in opinion and action to happen, how then do institutions promote a broader use of social networking to advance their causes? How does one balance an institutional concern with keeping teams focused on the daily tasks at hand with the value of staff talking about their work, their views, their challenges and hopes on social media? It comes back, in part at least, to promoting Lenihan’s advocacy for personal responsibility -- the willingness of individuals to talk about their work with others outside of the boundaries of specific projects (Lenihan, 2012). Several recommendations by Willard and Creech in the 2011 IISD partnerships review could help teams strengthen their personal networks:

[Every] staff and associate [should become] aware of the characteristics of their own personal networks. Some questions to consider include:

* + Do my contacts reflect the diversity of individuals working on my issue areas (e.g. geographic region, gender)?
  + Do my contacts include both established experts and new voices on the issues?
  + Do my contacts reflect the diversity of skills needed to move the issue forward (e.g. research/analysis, policy, communications, donors)?
  + Which relationships am I investing the most time/resources/trust in? Which am I receiving the most from? Is this balanced?
  + Do I need to reach out to any particular contacts to ensure the maintenance of our relationship? (Willard and Creech, 2011, p4)

Efforts to strengthen and extend these personal networks should be applied at the corporate offices all the way through an organization. As Hay (key informant) suggested, what would (or should) the extended social network of a think tank’s executive director look like?

At an institutional level, I would add the following:

* Do not fall into the trap that social media should be “corporatized”: ie, restricting the uses of Facebook, Twitter, and other services to promote a tightly controlled corporate message. While this may be necessary in a crowded media landscape to reinforce a recognition factor for an institution, this is not the same as actual engagement. As Willard notes, “social network sites are structured as personal (or “egocentric”) networks, with the individual at the centre of his or her own community (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, cited in Willard, 2009, p5). Individual staff need to be encouraged to build out their connections beyond the institutional boundaries.
* Provide support and encouragement to staff for their networking: As Hay (key informant) recognized, organizations don’t usually reward people for using their own networks for the good of the organization’s vision and goals – but perhaps they should!
* As Kala (key informant) suggests, encourage individual staff to consider who they should be talking with and why, and make the effort to connect – assessing and building their own personal network “map”.
* Undertake a few basic social network analyses of individual staff just to show their current reach, and how to extend that reach even further. Think about who is connected to whom and how frequent is the interaction (Kala, key informant). Free online tools are now available, such as Social Network Visualizer (<http://socnetv.org/>) and Gephi (<https://gephi.org/>) and would be worth testing.

Finally, I would encourage institutions to map the membership of networks, platforms and partnerships supported by the institution: how these demonstrate aspects of both work and net will provide insight into the effectiveness of the collaboration in serving its intended purpose. Look closely at the emergence of strong ties as well as weak ties. Madeline Church suggested a number of years ago that networks had both knots and threads. Knots – the strong ties in social network theory – are needed for collaborative work; while the threads – the weak ties – are important for knowledge sharing, awareness raising and influence. (Church, M. et al, 2002). What will be needed to create and strengthen the strong ties, and extend the weak ties?

# Part 2: Reflections on the need for institutional partnerships and alliances

As individual staff become more networked, a picture of the networked organization begins to emerge – not, as my team and I envisaged in the 1990s as formal networks and strategic alliances of institutions formed through Memoranda of Understanding and other governance agreements, but rather as a complex web of relationships of individual staff members sharing knowledge and working across institutional boundaries.

But if these webs of individual networks serve primarily to frame issues, share knowledge and learn from each other, what then is the role for institutional partnerships? It has been suggested by Willard and Creech that partnerships have become more focused on implementation, with institutions looking for those one or two other institutions that can assist with project delivery (2011, p2-3). While the individual staff will do the work, their institutions must still approve, support and even be contracted for their services. These are usually shorter, time-bound relationships, administered through written agreements and contracts, with defined roles and responsibilities for each of the organizations in the partnership.

While we noted that this practical approach to partnership was emerging, we also observed that the general concept of partners and partnerships was nevertheless being handled fairly loosely:

Over the years, IISD has included all institutional collaborators - such as donors, project collaborators, allies, and internship host organizations - as its partners. While this provided the institute with an all-encompassing view of its relationships, it was not particularly useful for helping IISD to improve the management of those relationships… Calling every institution we work with a partner masks important differences in how we work with organizations around the world. (Willard and Creech, 2011, p2.)

While many of the “partners” identified by staff were those institutions contracted to collaborate on various projects, there were other institutions listed as partners where no active joint projects existed but where the relationships were considered important to maintain – IISD’s “critical friends” -- organizations similar in history, structure and mandate.

This raises the question: Is there still room on the landscape for institutional relationships that go beyond specific project delivery? This question has been asked time and again over several decades, with heads of institutions exploring variations on establishing a strategic alliance of independent sustainable development think tanks (a Star Alliance, as Ashok Khosla (key informant) once suggested). These institutions hold much in common – they have emerged from an era framed by the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, the Brundtland Commission in 1987 and the Earth Summit in 1992. They have similarities in structure and funding models, common interests around where they engage and what issues they engage on, and the level of influence they seek to have on national governments, intergovernmental organizations and the private sector. Is there anything to be gained by proactively strengthening those relationships, from the CEOs through to senior staff and project officers and associates?

The role of think tanks has been evolving since Howard Clark observed that academic institutions were becoming largely physical plants for research – providing infrastructure, financial management and oversight for networks of researchers collaborating across institutional boundaries (Clark, 1998). There are similarities today in how independent research institutions provide a physical location for researchers, a financial back office, and communications vehicles. So at the very least, as part of strengthening relationships among likeminded think tanks, institutions could look to exchange lessons on “physical plant” management challenges that they all have in common – human resources, communications, accounting, project management. Given that the networked way of working can be considerably different from the hierarchical way of working, requiring stronger skills for knowledge sharing and collaboration (Networks Leadership Symposium 2011), these “critical friends” could be learning much from each other about how to strengthen communications and working relationships across their staff.

But these institutions should also look beyond the immediate “physical plant” issues and consider more strategically what strong, resilient, networked think tanks look like in the 21st century, where visions and missions are nearly identical, joint projects with one or more partners are the norm, and where personal networks of staff intersect. If each institution were to map the participants in its platforms, map its social media and map its contributions to outcomes, how much overlap would there be across the think tank landscape – and does that contribute positively to moving agendas forward? As Ashok Khosla (key informant) has said, we need to cut across the institutional membranes.

Traditionally, institutions have tended to review and evaluate their operations and results in the context of niche and competition: how is “my” institution positioned; what is “my” institution’s unique value proposition and impact? Donors and board members want to know that their investments of financial resources and time are getting recognition and results for the institution they are supporting (even though, as is often the case, the donors are supporting more than one institution, and board membership occasionally overlaps). And so the emphasis on institutional evaluation tends to be on the institution’s boundaries rather than on its relationships and how those relationships have made a core contribution to the institution’s effectiveness. A focus on niche can miss the innovation that comes from all of the extended relationships and influence, including where an institution may have added value to the work of others. Every institution should be presenting to its Board and donors a regular overview of its general reach and influence that creates enabling conditions for itself and for all those with whom it works, noting where it has helped other institutions, and which institutions have helped it to move its own agenda forward.

The interest over the last half dozen years in applying theories of change to institutional planning and monitoring is encouraging and might assist institutions to focus more directly on their relationships as central to their efforts to foster or catalyze change. At its most basic, a “theory of change” approach encourages an institution to clarify pathways for change and progress markers along those pathways (Centre for Theory of Change; Vogel, 2012). “Theory of change” helps institutions to map the connections between a long-term goal and a specific project, initiative or intervention. The trend in theory of change is to recognize complexity, and ways to address complexity through better engagement – in particular, personal engagement as the most common way to influence policy makers (Ofir, key informant). Less common, I think, is the consideration of what other institutions might be doing that will contribute to the changes sought.

A different lens to institutional monitoring and evaluation may be warranted for the 21st century: a viewing of think tanks as nodes in larger systems of influence and impact. We know that working on the sustainable development challenges of the day must be a collective effort, and therefore we should be jointly monitoring our collective impact. Is there a way for a small group of like-minded institutes to show how their efforts (undertaken independently) are nevertheless contributing to collective results? We should be considering the aggregate impact of a group of institutions on any given issue: Is progress being made, not only because of the small part one institution has played, but because of the aggregation of efforts of our friends and allies?

Such an approach is not without challenges. MacPherson (key informant) cautions that a collective assessment process would be nearly impossible if the evaluation capacities are not comparable one institution to another. Each institution’s approach to evaluation needs to be in order: what are the protocols, what are the feedback loops? An initial peer review of each other’s evaluation processes and capacity would be an interesting start to a process for collectively assessing outcomes and impact (Varughese, key informant). As a first experiment, a collective assessment might scope how the group of institutions are sharing knowledge and learning from each other.

Particularly challenging in efforts to assess collective impact will be determining the level of influence of any one of the institutions involved. Carden (key informant) recommends looking to the work of Patricia Patrizi for proof of influence in evaluation, and her exploration of roles, strategies, capacities, and knowledge use. Patrizi draws from her experience working with grant-making foundations and the challenges they face in determining collective impact across their portfolios of grantees and projects supported (cf inter alia, Patrizi and McMullen, 1998).

And there is the ongoing challenge in evaluation of placing greater emphasis on changes and impacts, often downplaying the role of process, when process is such an important part of creating the conditions for change and contributing to enhanced capacities and learning (Networks Leadership Symposium 2011). Perhaps this is in part due to the fact that in evaluation, we are good at understanding systems and parts, but we don’t understand social relationships or the changes in relationships that can support (or be a barrier) to progress (Carden, key informant). Clearly more work is needed on how to assess relationships in any given change process. Lenihan’s benchmarks of trust, openness, mutual respect and inclusiveness may be helpful to consider (Lenihan, 2012).

So where to start? How does one go about bringing together a group of institutions to undertake a collective assessment of their relationships and their impact on a given issue?

* Some practical boundaries are necessary:
  + Which institutions will be involved in the assessment? In any collective institutional effort, some thought should be given to lessons from chain theory, which suggests that chains are strongest with only two links, and no more than six (SESYNC workshops).
  + What issue or process are the institutions all working on that would benefit from an assessment of the collective efforts of those institutions to address it? Perhaps selecting one of the Sustainable Development Goals might provide a good frame for such an exercise.
* An external driver (such as a donor that provides support to two or more institutions in the group and wants to see progress across its portfolio of grants and grantees) would provide a mandate for the process.
* A methodology to assess collective impact among the group of institutions is needed. One possibility is to use “backward chaining” methodologies – trying to trace back from an outcome what were the influential factors (including roles of institutions) that led to it. Such an approach helps to “situate” all the people and institutions that were part of the action (Carden, key informant).
* Ownership of the process by the most senior levels of the institutions involved will be necessary to ensure both participation in the assessment process and use of the findings.

While getting reach and influence through individual staff networks is critical in the 21st century, I still believe in the need for a tight, well-honed group of institutional relationships (Creech, 2006). An approach to a collective assessment of the group’s efforts to promote change on any given issue could help boards, donors, and stakeholders to understand whether change happening and if so where and who is contributing to that. Such an endeavour would put the issue into the context of what others are doing, and provide greater insights into what the barriers, challenges and leverage points might be. And it should contribute to mutual learning about what is working and what more might be needed.

# Part 3: Five key questions: Strengthening networks, platforms and partnerships at a glance

Much of the 25 years of my own work and that of my team members can be summed up in five questions you should consider in order to strengthen your individual and institutional collaborations.

1. What is the focus of the network/platform/partnership?

What is the focus or purpose or intention of your collaboration – whether it is a network or partnership or community of practice (COP) that you have initiated or one that you participate in? What will be the outcome – what will change on the issues or across the region you are involved with? How will you sustain that focus over time – both for you personally, and for other members?

1. What kind of collaboration do you have?

Is it based on individuals or institutions? Does it bring together experts; the heads of organizations; volunteers; the general public; friends? What kinds of networking structures are available that will serve to support and sustain the focus of the individual or institutional collaboration? For example, would the collaboration benefit from a structure of tight working groups with specific tasks such as drafting reports or undertaking lobbying efforts; or does the network/platform/partnership operate best as a looser web of connections, primarily for information sharing, communication and awareness raising?

1. How do you engage with your members?

How deeply are you personally engaged in your network, platform or partnership? Are you regularly coordinating/corresponding with other members? Are your colleagues in your own organization contributing? How do your members engage with you and with each other? What do your members want and what are they prepared to contribute in order to benefit from participating?

1. How do your members learn?

Managers of networks, platforms and partnerships often suggest that the collaboration will build capacity among members and that members will learn and use the knowledge shared. But managers are less clear about how those members actually learn – what are the mechanisms for learning (whether formal, experiential, informal) and how do you assess whether knowledge has been gained, lessons learned and applied?

1. How do you monitor progress?

How might you measure progress towards your desired outcomes? What are the two or three criteria you would choose to monitor and determine progress — an increase in membership? An increase in the numbers of online exchanges? The development of products such as research reports or public advocacy statements? In coming full circle to the question of focus, can you tell whether anything has changed?

**SIDE BAR:** The checklist in Part 4 goes into much greater detail about the evaluation of networks, platforms and partnerships. For most managers, though – especially managers of volunteer networks or those collaborations that are broadly knowledge sharing or social in nature -- there are neither the funds nor the time to undertake formal evaluations. Nevertheless it is important to be able to determine whether your efforts are achieving the outcomes you are working towards. So I would strongly encourage managers to select two or three criteria for success, within a set time frame, in order to monitor your own progress, and to trigger changes in your approach if you are not meeting those criteria. It is helpful to do this even for your own social networks if you are using these to influence and change the world around you.

# Part 4: Checkpoints for Supporting Collaboration

The following guidelines draw upon my experience and that of my team members in facilitating and supporting networks, platforms and partnerships at IISD and providing monitoring and evaluation services on formal and informal networks, partnerships, strategic alliances, knowledge platforms and communities of practice to a wide range of international, national and local organizations. Research and views by others on collaboration practice are also noted. Every effort has been made to shape this into a practical working tool; many of the checkpoints are glimpses into the obvious but nevertheless are backed up with sources and experience as much as possible.

## For managers: Checkpoints on planning, managing, governance and monitoring

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Checkpoint** | **Explanation** | | **Justification/source** |
| **Planning and management** | | | |
| Be clear and specific on your intentions: what purpose will the network / platform / partnership serve? | | *Preface: All networks, platforms and partnerships appear to share a number of fairly generic goals: to make knowledge available; to foster sharing of knowledge; to stimulate new ideas/innovation through knowledge exchange; to promote collaboration on research, policy and practice. These, however, may be insufficient as goals and objectives to ensure long-term success. Managers should explore in more depth:*   * *A: What will have changed/be different as an outcome of your efforts to establish the network/platform/partnership?* * *B: Who are the three or four people you most need to reach/influence through your work?* * *C: what are the practical benefits to you as manager and to your institution; and* * *D: what are you really hoping the participants will gain from their involvement; what will the network/platform/partnership as a whole achieve?* |  |
| A: What will have changed/be different as an outcome of your efforts to establish the network / platform / partnership? | | Many collaborative efforts, at the design stage, tend to overpromise what they will achieve. Give serious consideration to whether your objectives are in fact realistic and measurable.  There are a number of methodologies available that will help you to think about how your platform will lead to change. |  |
| Theory of Change: There has been considerable interest in recent years in the use of theory of change by national agencies such as DFID, national and international development organizations such as HIVOS and the Asia Foundation, and UN agencies such as UNEP and UNICEF. Program managers are learning that theory of change can help managers to clarify pathways for change and progress markers along those pathways. “Theory of change” will help you to map the connections between your long-term goal and your specific platform/community initiative. | See: Centre for Theory of Change; Vogel, 2012 |
| IISD’s Impact Strategy: Other planning tools include IISD’s “Impact Strategy”, which may help you to articulate what will be different as well as to consider the specific individuals you need to reach out to who can influence that change. As noted by Willard, Creech 2008 (p1), in order to influence change,“Networks must develop comprehensive influencing strategies which encompass three interwoven strategies dealing with: relationship management, knowledge management, and opportunities management.” | See Appendix 2; IISD impact strategy; also Willard, Creech, 2008. |
| Outcome mapping: Outcome mapping and harvesting can help you focus on changes in behaviours of groups of target users/members as an outcome of your work.  For example, in proposing desirable outcomes for networks seeking to influence public policy, Willard, Creech 2008 suggest that it is reasonable:  • To expect to see policy makers accessing information and research from a network,  • To like to see a level of interaction and relationships forming with and between members of the policy community which provides the social context for learning and change, and  • To love to see policy makers advocating for policy change based on the evidence available. | See The Outcome mapping learning community, <https://www.outcomemapping.ca/>. |
| “Results-based Management” (RBM) frameworks can also help you to identify progress markers towards the changes you are seeking. |  |
| B. The need for a sharp focus on individuals in positions to make a difference | | Who are the three or four people you most need to reach? | Hay, key informant  Appendix 2: IISD influencing strategy |
| C: what’s in it for you and your organization? What is your vested interest in hosting/fostering the platform? | | If the network/platform/partnership serves your own organization and your own colleagues – if they sign up to read content, and even to share information with members, because it supports their own research and programming -- then you and your organization are more likely to sustain it. As per Hodgson, 2012: frame the collaboration within your organization’s wider knowledge management and program goals.  In circumstances where an organization has received a grant or tendered to host a network on behalf of a donor(s)/other major interests, be sure that your own institutional interests are aligned with those of the donors as well as members, and explore well in advance what the long term prospects of continuity will be. Will the network/platform/partnership be sufficiently critical to your own organization that you will be prepared to carry the network, seek new resources and maintain facilitation/hosting when initial grants have ended? | See: Hodgson, 2012, p12.  See: Creech et al., 2008, pp6, 25  See Appendix 1: Case study on platforms: The Entrepreneur’s Toolkit |
| D. What do individual participants expect to gain from their involvement; what do you expect the network / platform / partnership as a whole to achieve? | | In the early days of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Partnerships, many participants expected that the partnerships would lead both to new relationships and to new financial resources. These outcomes were not always realized. Collaboration managers should consider carefully what the target participants might be expecting from participation; and be clear on what you actually want that community to achieve as a whole:   * Is the purpose of the network/platform/partnership to build relationships, address differences of perspective, etc.? Are you therefore bringing together practitioners who have never crossed paths before (such as private sector staff and NGO activists)? Are your targeted members interested in such an activity and are they willing to invest the time to build trust and cooperation with those whose perspectives may be quite different? Are you, and they, clear on what they might gain from this interaction? This will require much more attention to recruitment of participants and facilitation of member interaction. Promoting the network/platform/partnership through your own networks may simply bring in people you already know and who already know, or know of, each other. * Are you deliberately tapping into an existing community where members may already know each other? If many of the community members already know each other, is the purpose of the network/platform/partnership then to strengthen those ties and lead to more work together? The target users may already have their own ways of sharing information, through LinkedIn, Facebook etc. How will your collaborative mechanism improve on users’ current channels of communication? | Based on: General observations from consulting services for several WSSD partnerships  See Creech et al, 2013  See Appendix 1: Case study on platforms: The Entrepreneur’s Toolkit |
| Leadership and ownership are key to the creation, development and maintenance of any network / platform / partnership. | | Much has been written about the “self-organizing” nature of networks. However, where the networks and communities are being fostered for a specific purpose, there needs to be a long-time commitment (active involvement) among a core group of individuals and institutions to ensure continuity of effort. Sharing responsibilities among the participants/ members (delegating specific tasks, for example, for moderation or content sourcing) can serve to reduce member attrition. | See Appendix 1: Case study of the Entrepreneurs Toolkit, exploring the impact of the loss of institutional leadership/ownership  See: The KM4Dev community of practice in knowledge management ([www.km4dev.org](http://www.km4dev.org)), structured with an internal core group and the sharing of facilitation among the broader membership. A case note on the success of KM4Dev can be found at <https://knowledgeecologists.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/communities-of-practice-in-international-developmentfinal1.pdf>. |
| Building community: The importance of a coordinator(s) of the network / platform / partnership and champions across the target user base. | | Throughout our research and evaluation work, Terri Willard and I have referred time and again to the critical importance of this role: the Coordinator (Moderator; Facilitator) – someone (or a small group) who is responsible for the day-to-day management of the network/platform/partnership and for regular contact with and engagement of members. Without one person or a small group committed to this role, a network/platform/partnership will not thrive. Look in particular to your young professionals to coordinate these kinds of entities.  In addition, there is evidence of the utility of champions within a network/platform/partnership – individual members who agree to invest time in supporting the collaboration beyond their own immediate use. These individuals help to maintain and grow levels of participation by committing to regular interaction through the network/platform/partnership and by promoting it across their own organizations and through their own personal networks.  Coordinators and champions are essential to building real community: constantly providing input and support, shaping insights, and keeping interest going. | Creech and Willard, 2001; Cole et al, 2001; Willard and Creech, 2006.  For an overview of one platform’s use of focal points as champions, see the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development, <https://www.donorplatform.org/our-structure.html>. Accessed 7 September 2017.  Creech and Moussa, 2012  Moussa, Key informant. |
| Structure | | Thought should be given to the structure of the network/platform/partnership: Small working groups can be more active/productive and can interface with the larger community. Even Facebook recognizes the value of structuring one’s social network, with the option to designate “close friends” within one’s broader network of connections.  You may decide that your network will operate best as a looser web of connections, primarily for information sharing, awareness raising and communication. | See for example the KM4Dev community, with an inner circle of 100 and an extended membership of 4,0000+ ([www.km4dev.org](http://www.km4dev.org)). |
| Ongoing coordination with other organizations, platforms and other network websites in your space | | As SDPlanNet has observed, there should be an ongoing effort to map key actors that could benefit from engaging through a network and its platform; and to coordinate with other platforms where interests may overlap. Hammill et al are correct to encourage efforts to dampen “portal proliferation syndrome”, and focus on strengthening and linking existing portals in any given domain. | Bizikova et al, 2014. p.18.  Hammill et al, 2013. p.1. |
| Content:  A network / platform / partnership should have content that is useful to its members, curated, dependable and updated regularly. | | Platform users look for knowledge in order “to perform a task, to answer a need, and to effect a change in [their] daily activities.” (Barlatier)  To help users to access that knowledge, curate (organize) the content in useful ways – as per Hodgson, by “keeping it up to date, organized, searchable, and “sticky” so that participants return to the site often”. [Note: Be careful of over-indexing content – if everything connects to everything, it becomes unusable by the target audience.]  Hammill et al point to the success of the former Climate Change Policy & Practice (CCP&P) platform, which produced and posted information and analysis by in-house content experts. CCP&P is now integrated into IISD’s Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Hub, and has content that users want, as measured by high levels of use and user feedback. | Barlatier et al, 2009. p.262  Hodgson, 2012. p.19.  Hammill et al, 2013. p.13. |
| Content that comes from members may be of particularly high value. | | Hammill observes that “Targeting and tailoring may breed more sharing”: while users come to a platform for content, those “who feel a platform is targeted to their expectations and lived experiences may be more likely to rely on its resources and share their knowledge [emphasis added]. So get to know your users.”  Barlatier confirms that “high levels of knowledge exchanges and interactions within the COP strengthen the participation process and reveals knowledge with high potential value” [emphases added].  Consider how you expect users to contribute: a) by making it easy for them to post documents and links to relevant research b) by members seeking advice from other members that leads to more knowledge circulating through the platform community and c) by sharing their own lessons learned.  As SDPlanNet has learned, if you want to build collaboration among your members, get them involved in sharing their knowledge. | Hammill, 2013. p.2.  Barlatier et al, nd. pp.46-47  Bizikova et al, 2014. |
| At the same time, be cautious of crowd sourcing documents from members | | Identify, validate and curate the 20-30 seminal pieces on the issue most important to the members. Build on that base with documents provided by members, but with a screen -- where does the document come from; what is its context, etc. | Hay, key informant |
| Integrate a learning dimension at the heart of the network / platform / partnership. | | The learning dimension is critical to achieve objectives of building relationships, trust and knowledge.  The learning components can include, inter alia, a) introductory material to inform and guide users new to the domain of the platform; b) structured in-depth opportunities such as regular courses and webinars, and c) online conferences designed to engage members and exchange views, to learn from experts and each other. | Hodgson, 2012.  Paas, Key informant. |
| Build capacity for knowledge sharing: Consider whether members have the capacity/skill to document and share their knowledge. Invest effort in helping members to share their knowledge. | | In the large scale network projects initiated by the International Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development (IFAD) (FidAfrique) and joined by IDRC (ENRAP, Karianet), the catalyst agencies (IFAD and IDRC) learned that long before knowledge could begin to be shared and benefits realized, there was a need for capacity development in how to do knowledge sharing: how to document lessons; how to participate in online forums; how to make use of social media, etc. Building a platform or portal for knowledge brokering will fail if the target members have not developed skills and understanding of the processes for knowledge sharing. | Based on network evaluations and related studies carried out for IFAD/IDRC for FidAfrique, ENRAP and Karianet.  Kala, Key informant |
| Technical issues | | The technical options for platforms can change rapidly [note for example, the current proliferation of mobile apps that can support social networking].  In addition to, or instead of, custom building a new platform/portal, consideration should always also be given to use of mainstream services like LinkedIn, Facebook and Weibo. Integration with these services (for example, one can now export LinkedIn profiles to other platforms) can save on reinventing functionality and simplify participation for users who want to maintain a single profile in one place.  Keep in mind Hammill’s observation that “The promise of new technologies should not detract from the critical infomediary and knowledge-management roles of platforms”. | Hammill, 2013. p.2. |
| Understand the full costs of network / platform /partnerships development, maintenance and growth and resource accordingly. | | As per Hodgson, 2012: Costs include the following tasks inter alia:   * Design and create the tools and systems; * Recruit and approve members (at the outset, but sometimes on an ongoing basis); * Manage the technical aspects of the site (e.g. layout, code, plug-ins, security, functionality, search-engine optimization, accessibility); * Train users on how to use and make the most of the [network/platform/partnership]; * Curate the content … and * Facilitate the learning processes: asking open questions to prompt discussions, moderate generative and convergent processes, validating new ideas. | Hodgson, 2012. p.19.  See also Willard and Creech, 2006, p. 35, on understanding the full costs and assessing the real value of networks / platforms / partnerships. |
| **Governance** | | | |
| Governance of networks, platform user groups and partnerships should consider the following: | *Preface: While governance is often discussed as part of networks and partnerships practice, it is less often considered in the review of platforms. Platforms are usually designed to be the vehicle through which a targeted community of users exchanges information and collaborate on shared interests. How that community and its platform govern themselves – what the basic rules are for participation -- can be critical to the long-term success of the platform. Governance includes guidance on who has a voice in the various activities, the structure and processes for making decisions, and reporting and accountability to members.* | | For an in-depth exploration of governance and management issues, see  Creech and Willard, 2001  Creech et al, 2008 |
| Membership | Who are the members; what are the criteria for membership; how are members admitted and removed? In the social media age, the challenge of how to deal with “trolls” appearing in any platform cannot be overlooked. | | Creech et al, 2008, p24. |
| Oversight, decision-making  and management process | “Some type of steering body should be established that represents the interests of the broader group, to provide strategic focus, guidance to the [platform manager] and to the [membership] as a whole” (Creech et al, 2008, p24), with clarity on how that steering committee is formed as well as on the role and scope of authority of the hosting organization. More simply, how are decisions made, by whom, and what happens in case of disagreement? | | Creech et al, 2008, p24 |
| Openness and transparency | Networks / platforms/ partnerships should be governed by the same basic principles and codes of conduct as those that their government, NGO and private sector members are expected to adhere to. Managers should be open and transparent about what organization or individual is hosting the network/platform/partnership; who the donors are and what major institutions are involved. If the collaboration is being run by a group of independent experts, then what are the profiles of those experts and their institutional affiliations? While posting logos of member organizations is usually practiced, more information should be provided: who is providing financial resources; what are each of the member/partner organizations contributing? How active are they? | | See for example: Transparency International’s work on codes of conduct for NGOs: <http://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/answer/developing_a_code_of_conduct_for_ngos> Accessed 28 September 2017 and  The World Association of NGOs compliance manual <http://www.wango.org/codeofethics/compliancemanual.pdf>, Accessed 28 September 2017  Creech et al, 2008, p25. |
| Reporting and accountability | There is an accountability paradox in networks/platforms/partnerships: when everyone is involved, who then is accountable for addressing barriers to progress? “Networking” blurs the chain of command: who is to be held responsible for the performance of the group? Consider more carefully the roles and responsibilities of individual members as part of determining accountability.  “Networks and partnerships should develop the practice of preparing an annual report on activities for their members and for the broader public” (Creech et al, 2008 p26), including financial statements on revenues and expenditures. Donors receive reports on their grants to networks, but are those reports shared with network members? | | SESYNC workshops  Creech et al, 2008. p26. |
| **Monitoring and assessment** | | | |
|  | | *Preface: How do you know whether your network/platform/partnership is meeting your objectives? Regular monitoring and assessment of its performance is essential.* |  |
| Review your plan regularly | | As noted under planning and management, many networks/platforms/partnerships tend to overpromise what they will achieve. Revisit regularly your “Theory of Change” or Impact Strategy or Outcome map or RBM Framework. | Based on network evaluations and related studies |
| Use Google analytics and related tools provided by your website services provider | | These tools will help you to track daily, weekly, monthly and annual use of the website for the network/platform/partnership, including search terms used, most used sections of the site, repeat users, and so forth. Get to know how these analytics work, and what they can (and can’t) tell you about how people are using your platform. | Based on network evaluations and related studies |
| Gather data from your members | | Short annual or semi-annual surveys of your membership can provide useful insights. Questions can include:   * What did you find/download/learn from the network/platform/partnership’s website? * What did you do with that information? (did you cite it; did you share it?) * Have you met someone you know through the network/platform/partnership? * Have you met someone new through the network/platform/partnership? * Have you invited someone from your organization to join the community? * Have you invited someone from outside your organization to join the community? * Have you contacted anyone from the network/platform/partnership directly for follow-up information? * What is the single most significant outcome of your participation in / use of the network/platform/partnership? | Based on network evaluations and related studies  Networks Leadership Symposium, 2011 |

## For external evaluators: What to look for when reviewing collaborative entities

As noted above, collaboration managers are learning that theory of change (and other planning tools) can help them to clarify pathways for change and progress markers along those pathways (Centre for Theory of Change; Vogel, 2012). External evaluators can then review the planning frameworks and consider whether such changes are being realized. In addition, many external evaluators continue to work with the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) guidelines for evaluation: in brief, assessing programs for relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact. To date, I have not identified new research into how Theory of Change and/or the DAC guidelines should be used in the context of in-person and online networks, platforms, and partnerships. Consideration should be given to characteristics of these types of collaborative entities that are critical to success but might be overlooked when mapping change pathways or using the lens of the DAC guidelines.

The following checkpoints may provide some guidance to external evaluators on specific characteristics of platforms and other collaborative arrangements.

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| **Checkpoint** | **Explanation** | **Justification/source** |
| **Major evaluation considerations** | *Preface: The following considerations emerged from IISD’s 2012 review of international networking and collaboration practices and contributions to the Rockefeller Foundation supported project “Emerging Practices in International Development Evaluation”.* | Creech et al, 2012  Creech, H. 2013. |
| Purpose / focus: Whether and how “external value” (value to those beyond the immediate group) is being created. | When assessing any kind of collaboration the evaluator should consider what is the purpose of those coming together and the desired outcomes from interaction. Are the collaborators achieving a common purpose/external value/a greater good beyond their own personal benefit?  Personal benefit is, however, a highly significant secondary benefit to collaboration: the evaluator needs to explore as well, the benefit back to the individuals participating in the network/platform/partnership. In any collaboration, each of the members should acquire knowledge, learning and skills that will benefit their own individual organizations and personal networks. | Creech et al, 2012  Creech, 2013  See Creech and Willard, 2001: the whole may be greater than the sum of the parts, but each of the parts should also become stronger.  Willard and Creech, 2008. |
| Understanding of structure and the evolution of that structure over time  Includes deployment of the appropriate operating model | Whether a collaborative entity is mostly self-organized (such as, for example, a professional group on LinkedIn) or not, some structure will emerge: Who has assumed some leadership? Where is the energy to drive discussions? Who maintains functionality in the background, such as directories of shared documents, lists of members and so forth? As networks/platforms/partnerships grow, one may find smaller, focused, more purposeful groups embedded in the broader, extensive network; These groups may address the network/platform/partnership purpose more intensely, or may shift energy away towards new objectives.  Evaluators should be aware that there could be a mismatch between the challenge the network/platform/partnership seeks to address, and the operating model chosen for the collaboration – including whether any kind of collaborative approach is in fact appropriate for the challenge. | Creech et al, 2012 |
| Emergence of social capital (defined in Creech et al, 2012 as the fabric of trust, shared values and understanding that allows diverse participants to work together toward collective outcomes and common goals). | The successful outcome of networking and collaborative platforms may be predicated on the nature and extent of social capital. Social capital provides capacity for action, resilience and responsiveness across the network, and contributes to a climate in which innovation can occur (SESYNC workshops).  The development of that social capital may rest in the existence of other personal, social networks and ties beyond the group. An evaluator should give some thought to mapping and understanding individual personal networks to understand where knowledge is brought into the network. Look for the key structural pieces -- the “connectors”: individuals within one network whose personal connections increase the flow of information and knowledge into, and out of, the network. Who are these people in a given network/platform/partnership, what is their role (both explicit and implicit) and are they performing their role to the benefit of the network/platform/partnership as a whole? | Creech at al, 2012  Bixler et al, 2016.  Huppé and Creech, 2012  SESYNC workshops 2013 |
| Have the members been engaged? Consider the following benchmarks: | *I have found Lenihan’s work on public engagement in policy particularly insightful and provide here his five benchmarks for monitoring engagement* |  |
| Trust | “Trust is demonstrated by a high level of willingness among the parties to continue working together to build the partnership.” | Lenihan, 2012. p180 |
| Openness | “Openness is demonstrated by a willingness to share views, information and knowledge relevant to the dialogue.” | Lenihan, 2012. p 181 |
| Mutual respect | “Mutual respect is demonstrated by a willingness to seriously entertain alternative views.” | Lenihan, 2012. p 181 |
| Inclusiveness | “Inclusiveness is demonstrated through public agreement that the right people are represented in the dialogue.” | Lenihan, 2012. p 182 |
| Personal responsibility | “Personal responsibility is demonstrated by a willingness of the people involved in the collaboration to assign themselves tasks based on the findings of the dialogue process.” | Lenihan, 2012. p 182 |
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| **Presence of critical success factors** |  |  |
| Capacity within the collaboration to manage the purpose or focus of the collaboration as a collective undertaking: the mechanics of interaction | Given that the first assessment point is on purpose/external value, an evaluation should explore how the collaborators are maintaining their focus in order to deliver that value. The evaluator should look not only for the existence of a strategic plan or work plan, but that it has been discussed with members, and whether members have a shared understanding of the goals, objectives and stream of activities. Consideration should be given to the processes for decision-making and coordination. | Creech, 2013 |
| Understanding of short- and long-term needs and outcomes | Networks, platforms, and partnerships may start with a long term view, and may consider what the long term benefits for the members and beyond will be; but short term benefits also need to be identified that will keep members engaged. The evaluator should explore whether and how the collaborators are identifying and celebrating incremental accomplishments and providing the members with some sense of progress. | Creech, 2013 |
| Presence of knowledge sharing and communications skills | Membership in collaborative entities is often by researchers and managers with substantive expertise. The collaborative entity may be designed to mobilize and communicate that substantive knowledge among the members and beyond to other audiences, but members may not have the skills for knowledge sharing and communications. How does the network/platform/partnership strengthen the capacity of members to share what they know with others? | Creech, 2013 |
| Monitoring performance and adaptive capacity | How does the network/platform/partnership monitor its progress; has it considered risks to its sustainability (such as membership changes; loss of key coordinators and champions; reductions in funding); what mechanisms are in place to manage the risk; how has the network/platform/partnership adapted to changes? | Willard and Creech, 2006  Creech, 2013 |
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| **Suggestions on how to apply the DAC guidelines** | *Preface: While there is ongoing debate and adaptation of the DAC guidelines, external evaluators nevertheless continue to use them regularly. The following notes may help evaluators to follow the DAC guidelines when reviewing collaborative entities like networks, platforms and partnerships.* | See <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm> for the DAC guidelines  Checkpoints are based on work done for the Asian Development Bank on knowledge partnerships (see Asian Development Bank 2011), and for the Rockefeller Foundation supported project, Emerging Practices in International Development Evaluation (see Creech, 2013).  The Sustainability checkpoint is based on Willard and Creech, 2006. |
| Relevance  *DAC guideline: The extent to which the aid activity is suited to the priorities and policies of the target group, recipient, and donor.* | The evaluator should review not only whether the intervention to be undertaken is relevant to the field, but also whether the work of the network/platform/partnership is relevant to each of the participating members and their organizations. | |
| Effectiveness  *DAC guideline: A measure of the extent to which the aid activity attains its objectives.* | The following are simple, practical indicators that relationships among members are performing as planned:   * Members start to talk with each other * Members contribute what they have agreed to share (either financial resources, or in-kind support, or knowledge) * Members accomplish something together that has value; combined with the counterfactual, that without the collaboration, there would be no such outcome * Members believe that they have gained something (contacts, knowledge, skills) from the collaboration. | |
| Efficiency  *DAC guideline: Efficiency measures the outputs—qualitative and quantitative—in relation to the*  *inputs.* | In network/platform/partnership collaborations, “transaction costs should be defined as the time and resources required for building the relationship, in the context of the long term value and impact of that relationship” (Universalia, IISD, n.d. cited in Creech, 2013). The costs should not be taken out of context and compared to the cost of undertaking a project by a single institution (with the corresponding reduction or elimination of costs for meetings, travel, communications and so forth).  It is however, very much an efficiency issue if the work could have been done as effectively by a single institution without the challenge of managing a collaborative group, and the evaluator should not avoid investigating this consideration. | |
| Sustainability  *DAC guideline: Sustainability is concerned with measuring whether the benefits of an activity are likely to continue after donor funding has been withdrawn.* | In the context of collaborative entities, sustainability is considered to be BOTH the likelihood that the achievements of the collaboration will be sustained AND the sustainability of the network/platform/partnership itself.  When reviewing sustainability, consider four points (Willard and Creech, 2006):   * + Relevance: whether the purpose of the collaboration is still relevant   + Relationships: whether the members are still active   + Resources: whether resources are available   + Time: whether the collaborators have given themselves sufficient time to achieve their purpose or if continuation is necessary. | |
| Impact  *DAC Guideline: The positive and negative changes produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended* | The contribution that the network/platform/partnership as a whole makes to the resolution of sustainable development challenges, and to the global body of knowledge and understanding about sustainability; as well as the improvement of each member's knowledge and institutional capacity to have impact. | |
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| **Desk review: Specific considerations for the online platform supporting member interaction** | *Preface: In conducting a desk review of the platform as the central tool supporting a group of collaborators/network members, what are the main points of functionality to consider?* | Based on input to a framework prepared by Paas (key informant) and IISD’s climate change researchers as part of a scan of climate change platforms (unpublished). |
| Context | * Institutional landscape: Who is behind the platform (host organization; independent group of individuals; donor): is this clear? * Niche or primary focus * Is it open to the general public; open to all those who sign up (and agree to a set of membership guidelines); or closed/private – invitation only? | |
| Process of development | * Is the majority of content supplied by the host organization/main proponent? * Is the platform primarily dependent on users posting content? * Is the content curated by person/persons (providing abstracts; organizing the content)? * Are there automated functions that contribute to curation (eg, ranking of documents as helpful; or most Accessed) and how are they used? * How often is the content updated? | |
| Content | * Is there an overview/introduction to the primary focus area to provide context/background to users new to the field? * Is there original research and communications content (ie, produced by the platform owner and/or members)? * Is there data (climate data, local observations, maps, etc.) available on the site or good navigation to data sets on other sites? * Is there access to government documents (as a distinct category from published research: for example, laws, regulations, policies, frameworks, programs – those activities that governments are proposing to do or are doing)? * Is there access to other people’s research (scientific, policy, field research -- bibliographic/grey literature collected/indexed by the site – content that wasn’t produced by the platform owner or members)? * Is there access to people – directories of experts, members, etc.? * Are there tools available on the site (either interactive online or downloadable apps– mapping; analysis; participatory scenarios, etc.)? * Are there learning systems on the site – (eg, introductory information, webinars, online courses)? * Is there a facility for knowledge exchange – (eg ability to post, comment, participate in forums etc.)? * Are there current awareness services provided: newsletter; blog; calendar of events, etc.? | |
| Support for and fostering of collaboration / connection / relationships | * Member profiles (imported from LinkedIn or original to site) * Upload files/share files * Rating of documents * Discussion/online conferencing/Join discussion groups * Ability to share drafting/editing of documents collaboratively | |
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| **Major challenges faced by networks, platforms and partnerships** | *Preface: Several common challenges have been observed across a wide range of networks/platforms/partnerships: How are these challenges addressed by the collaboration being evaluated?* | Based on consulting practice and key informant interviews |
| Unilateral planning processes for a collaborative entity | Who was involved in the initial design/planning of the network/platform/partnership – was the planning led by a single individual/institution; were potential members included in the early design stages; What was considered in planning the network/platform/partnership? |  |
| Lack of diversity of members, their interests and perspectives | As noted by a key informant, too often networks/platforms/partnerships “bring together people who are the same”. How are diverse perspectives to be included? | Ofir, key informant |
| Network/platform/partnership proliferation: Supply vs demand | Was the landscape of similar networks, platforms and partnerships adequately mapped; was there an analysis of the potential demand/use by the target audience? |  |
| Network/platform/partnership proliferation: intersection (or duplication) with other similar entities. | In a crowded space, how does one network/platform/partnership serve to influence/add value to other similar network/platform/partnership, and contribute to combined impact? |  |

## For donors: How to approach proposals for networks, platforms, and partnerships

Little has been written, to my knowledge, about the capacity of donors to review proposals for networks, platforms and partnerships. What do donors need to know? How do they manage the risk that much will be promised by the proponent but considerably less may be delivered for the investment provided by the donor? The following checkpoints reframe a number of the evaluation questions to apply ex ante to proposals for creating networks, platforms, partnerships and other types of collaboration.

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| **Six checkpoints donors should consider** |  |
| Purpose | When reviewing proposals for collaborative entities, donors should consider what is the purpose of those individuals and organizations coming together and the desired outcomes from their interaction. What’s the greater good; what will be different or changed as an outcome of their collaboration? How will individual members benefit; how will their organizations benefit; will a common purpose beyond the benefit to individual collaborators be achieved? |
| Context | Where does the proposal for a network/platform/partnership fit in the landscape of other similar online communities and collaborative groups? A good mapping of the landscape will be needed; see the Desk review outlined above for a template for conducting a desk review of other similar entities.  Where are the gaps in the landscape? What niche would a new network/platform/partnership fill or will a new network/platform/partnership do something better than existing ones? Is there an opportunity to link networks/platforms/partnerships more effectively? How would a new network/platform/partnership add value to other existing networks/platforms/partnerships? |
| Mechanics | Is the emphasis of the proposal on the creation of the online platform itself – the mechanics of operation and knowledge management – or does the proposal look beyond the tool? As one key informant suggests, “Donors should be expecting something that goes beyond the platform: research, new initiatives, networking/knowledge capitalization functions”. (Wilson-Grau, key informant).  Hammill elaborates: “Platforms don’t replace people—look at your offline functions... Face-to-face meetings were opportunities to advertise a platform (attract users), build user trust in what you have to offer (attract and keep users) and the facilitate co-production of knowledge (get users to generate content). Indeed, the more you want to move from hosting to tailoring, sharing and creating information and knowledge, the more important the offline functions.” (Hammill, 2013.) |
| Scope of users/beneficiaries | I would suggest that the actual number of members/users will usually be much smaller than promised. For example, as Hammill et al (2013) learned in the climate change field, knowledge brokering platforms are used by a small subset of CCD actors. Donors need to work with networking proponents to demonstrate how much further the benefits of networking/knowledge sharing can reach, beyond the number of immediate users (those who sign up or log in or download something from a network platform): One member may benefit from participating in a platform, but subsequently share that knowledge to many others through his/her own personal networks. How can networking proponents help to quantify the extended reach of networks/platforms/communities of practice? |
| Will the donor join the network/platform/partnership? Will the donor’s partners or beneficiaries use it? | Based on a number of evaluations of networks and partnerships conducted by IISD, it would appear that often networks/platforms/partnerships miss the opportunity to show how the collaboration will benefit the donor directly. Will the donor, the responsible program officer, others within the funding agency, and other partners of the donor participate in and benefit from the network/platform? How will the donor encourage individuals and organizations in its own networks to use the proposed new network/platform/partnership? |
| Time span / phases | How long should a donor (or group of donors) support a network/platform/partnership initiative?  “There is a risk that proposed time scales may be too short. Knowledge generation and sharing must be placed on a much longer time scale (beyond two to three years), as it can take that length of time to clarify purpose and focus, to identify partners, encourage the building of shared understanding, develop capacities, create an environment in which trust can be built, and see some initial progress”. (Asian Development Bank, 2011, cited in Creech, 2013.)  Nevertheless, proponents must align their requests for support with the funding cycles of donors. Donors need to look at how proponents are preparing for the phases of the network/collaboration and what their plans are to sustain activities into a second or even third cycle of work where resources may need to be sought from other funders. |

# Final comments

In many respects, this document has served as an index to 25 years of research and practice on networks, platforms and partnerships by Creech, Willard, and Buckler, and others who have contributed to that including Paas on learning systems and Huppé on social capital, together with related explorations by Hammill on climate change platforms, Bizikovia on SDPlanNet operations and others in the IISD family.

While the original driver for this paper was to explore what constitutes an “effective” knowledge platform on climate change, Ofir (key informant) has suggested that a focus on “platforms” has been a bit of a red herring over the past few years. While these mechanisms may provide access to information, having access also requires knowing how to make use of that information. Ofir views that the main limitation to using information to advance sustainable development lies in the weakness of relationships. With the increasing loss of face-to-face interaction, there is a growing lack of social involvement and the strengthening of relationships necessary for change.

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission identified that limitations to sustainable development lay in the state of technology and social organization [the way society is organized that limits what might be political feasible (Alfsen, key informant)], although there was hope that both could be managed and improved: that technology would be improved to avoid carbon emissions and environmental degradation and that social organization could be strengthened and become more accountable to serve the needs of current and future generations. (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). I suspect that the authors never envisaged ***that technology itself would impact on social organization in ways that might further limit progress to sustainability*** – whether with the massive loss of jobs through automation that would contribute to social disruption or through platforms and algorithms permitting the viral dissemination of fake news and hatred in ways that would undermine democratic governance processes and human rights and security. As my colleague Laszlo Pinter suggests, it is the unanticipated conjunction of high tech and low ethics.

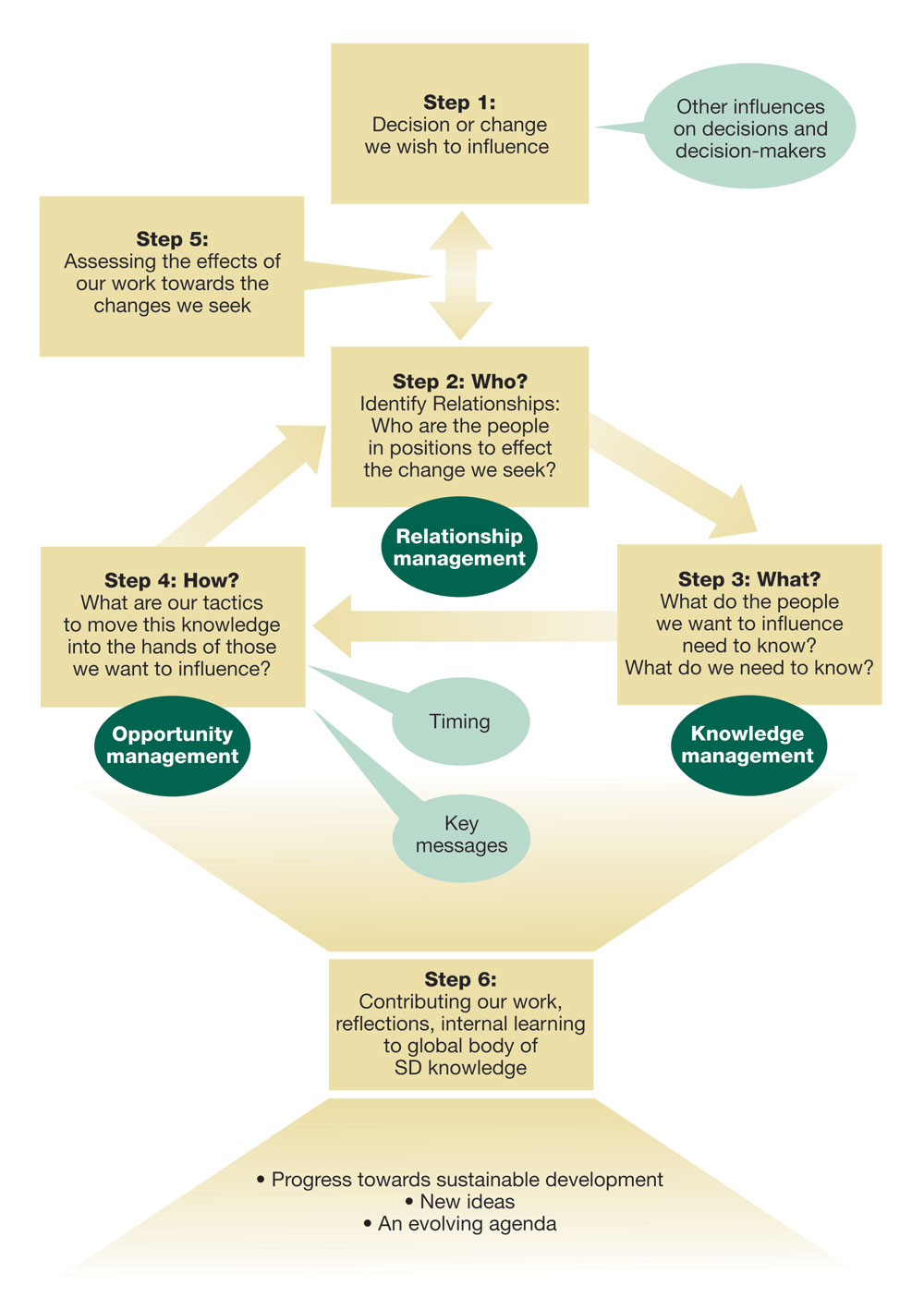
A major challenge for the 21st century is to consider how technology will be used in support of social organization and sustainability. Some part of the solution may lie in strengthening the interaction of individual sustainable development actors, enhancing and extending their social networks as well as their professional connections, together with building the capacity of institutions to collaborate more effectively and track their collective impact on critical sustainable development challenges. Hopefully this paper will contribute to efforts to strengthen these relationships necessary for a better future.

# Appendix 1: Case study on platforms: The Entrepreneur’s Toolkit

Prepared for the World Health Organization, 2016, for inclusion in “Key enabling factors in effective and sustainable research networks: findings from a qualitative research study”. <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/205283/1/9789241510202_eng.pdf>, Accessed September 26, 2017. The case study has been adapted for this report.

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| **The Entrepreneur’s Toolkit: Lessons in creating an online platform to support a community of interest.** |
| **Website:** www.entrepreneurstoolkit.org  **Secretariat location:** Live in 2015 but inactive; hosted by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)  **Mission:** To bring together socially and environmentally responsible small scale enterprises in developing countries to share their knowledge and experience through an online platform. |
| **Background:** From 2008 to 2013, the Entrepreneur's Toolkit was a joint initiative of three partners: the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation and the SEED Initiative (itself a partnership of the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature).  The platform contributors and users – all running small businesses in developing countries -- share a number of characteristics with practitioners in other fields:   * Contributors are skilled, knowledgeable practitioners in their fields * Focused on immediate, local level challenges in their communities * Service oriented to their clients, customers and community groups * Have little to no time to undertake research and learning to strengthen their skills * Nevertheless, have a high demand for knowledge that is relevant to their immediate needs.   Lessons from the experience of developing and managing the platform to serve a broad informal network of entrepreneurs may therefore be transferrable to those interested in supporting networks in other sectors  The platform was created in 2008-2009 by the three founding partners with financial and technical resources provided by all three. IISD managed and further developed the platform until 2013, using its interns working on entrepreneurship in developing countries as well as internal, in-kind resources.  **Objectives:**   * To provide an online venue for social and environmental entrepreneurs to find targeted, relevant information that would be of use in building and sustaining their businesses. * To encourage those using the platform to share their own experience as a way to expand and enrich the content, and in so doing develop a broader community of entrepreneurs all working to improve the social and environmental health of their local communities through small-scale enterprise. |
| **Process:** The platform was established using the same wiki software as Wikipedia. The three partners provided the base content and thematic structure; the entrepreneurs using the Toolkit provided on-the-ground cases, showcasing their own experience and sharing country-specific information. The platform was tested and promoted at a series of annual workshops at the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development meetings in New York, from 2009 to 2012. Additional content was shared by entrepreneurs participating in online and in-person training workshops held by the SEED Initiative with leading small scale enterprises in Africa, Asia and Latin America.  In 2013, all three partners faced changes in staffing and organizational structure. Without the ongoing management of the platform by a leadership team, the Toolkit is no longer attracting knowledge sharing contributions from entrepreneurs. It is still live, and continuing to be accessed, but largely as a static resource.  **Outcomes:**  During its lifespan as an active community platform, the Toolkit grew to 313 short articles contributed by authors from more than 10 countries including Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Guyana, India, Kenya, Mexico, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, USA and Vietnam. Pages have been published in English, French, Portuguese, Spanish or Vietnamese. Users from 186 countries accessed the Toolkit, with the top developing country users coming from Vietnam, Brazil, Kenya, India, Columbia, South Africa and Mexico.  **Major lessons learned:**   * **Leadership is key to the creation, development and maintenance of any platform**. The three partners each brought knowledge, resources and a vested interest in the success of the platform. The platform was seen to be important to advancing institutional objectives at each partner organization.Loss of that leadership and connection to institutional objectives has led to the current static situation for the platform. * **Drawing on existing networks is important when fostering a new, emerging community**. The three partners were all working with developing country entrepreneurs and used those informal networks to build the content and increase usage of the platform. * **Long term, sustained engagement of a knowledge facilitator/moderator is essential for the management of a virtual community.** Relying on volunteer contributions from users as the solution for long-term sustainability of the platform proved to be unrealistic. It was originally envisioned that if the Toolkit proved to be a welcome resource, volunteers would provide content and, similar to Wikipedia, also contribute to the editing and maintenance of the resource. In reality, however, the amount of users creating accounts and providing inappropriate content was overwhelming, and it became necessary to introduce a moderator/editor to manage contributions. * **The network participants themselves may need to have their capacity/skills to share their knowledge developed.** There was an assumption that the entrepreneurs would know intuitively how to share their knowledge: with the right forum and tools, they would know what to do. This is not always the case; in growing a platform community, face to face training, webinars and other tools may be needed to help the target group learn what of their knowledge is relevant, important and helpful to share, and good ways to communicate it. * **There is a need for a greater understanding of the “value proposition” in knowledge sharing across online communities.** Again, there was an assumption with the Toolkit platform that entrepreneurs would want to seek out knowledge to help strengthen their enterprises; and that they would contribute their own knowledge in exchange. Any future development of the Toolkit will need to consider more carefully:   + What value will a participant gain personally and directly from his/her participation, that will benefit his/her work?   + What is s/he willing to take the time to share in order to get that value in exchange? |

# Appendix 2: IISD Impact Strategy



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