

Breakout Session C—NGO Networks: The Impact of Networks on NGO Capacity

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This interactive workshop presented the latest thinking and practice on how networks improve NGO organizational development, advocacy, and performance, and discussed ways to promote future learning and collaboration. The speakers provided an overview of a recent study on NGO networks and summaries of three different NGO networks.

The presenters and participants then met in four breakout groups to discuss their work in more detail. At the end of the session, the facilitator invited participation in an ongoing dialog and collaboration regarding NGO networks. Those interested were asked to provide their contact information and to suggest topics for further discussion and research. More than 40 people submitted their names, contact information, and priority themes for further discussion. A synopsis of these topics is included following the speaker summaries.

NGO Networks: Building Capacity in a Changing World

(Claudia Liebler)

- Networks are firmly entrenched in all aspects of society. Many donors, including USAID, have long acknowledged the utility of networks.
- USAID/PVC recently commissioned a study on the contribution of networks to building NGO capacity. The study addressed six key questions: What is the impetus for network formation? What are the perceived benefits of networking? What role can networks play in fragile environments? How can donors best support networks? What factors characterize networks that build capacity? What is the perceived impact of networks on NGO capacity? (The last question was the major focus of the study.)
- All networks share a core set of underlying principles, but they are established for many reasons and take many forms, such as communities of practice, knowledge networks, sectoral networks, social change/advocacy networks, and service delivery networks.
- The researchers proposed a framework for describing NGO capacity that includes two categories: “standard” and “generative” capacities. Standard capacities are those that are traditionally assessed in organizational development, including external capacity, internal capacity, and technical capacity.
- The category of “generative” capacities emerged during the course of the study. Generative capacities include important skills that today’s NGOs need to master, such as learning how to lead in new ways (including leadership with colleagues and peers), learning how to work across boundaries, learning how to learn, and accessing the potential of technology.

- This preliminary study suggests that networks make a relatively minor contribution to building internal capacity, but they can have a significant impact on building external and technical capacity. The study also suggests that the potential for effective networks to build the generative capacity of their members is very high.
- Networks appear to be an effective way to address many of the familiar challenges to building NGO capacity because they provide a multi-directional flow of expertise, are demand driven, value and support local knowledge, allow for knowledge creation, and build the generative capacity of their members. The emergence of networks could potentially make traditional forms of capacity building obsolete.

Africa KidSAFE Network, Zambia

(Karen Romano)

- The Africa KidSAFE Network was created in 2000 by Project Concern International (PCI), a health PVO, and a local CBO, Fountain of Hope, to provide shelter, advocacy, food, education, and other services for street children in Lusaka, Zambia. The goal of the network is to create a “safety net” for these children by linking CBOs and FBOs, mobilizing new resources, improving provider skills and capacity, and advocating on behalf of children.
- KidSAFE member organizations include a wide range of CBOs and FBOs working with children in Zambia. Linkages between these groups are essential, because no single organization can provide the full range of services needed.
- KidSAFE has strong relationships with collaborating partners, including government ministries, international organizations and donors, and the local private sector. These linkages are critical to the network’s success.
- The network approach has strengthened teamwork and referral systems among member organizations, which together have standardized child intake forms, created a centralized database to track children in the system, and conducted collaborative research to identify needs and coordinate service delivery. KidSAFE has also mobilized new resources to reach more children.
- KidSAFE has been instrumental in strengthening the technical capacity of its member organizations, especially in the area of training for child and youth care workers. A professional association of childcare workers formed by KidSAFE trainees will play an important role in upgrading and ensuring the application of desperately needed professional qualifications and standards.
- KidSAFE has been successful in helping to build a safety net of services for street children in Lusaka. This success prompted USAID to provide funding to replicate the model in several major urban centers in Zambia (2005-2007). PCI will continue its efforts to strengthen KidSAFE alliances to ensure the network sustainability.

The Mexican Conservation Learning Network

(Jeff Kwaterski)

- The Mexican Conservation Learning Network (MCLN) was formed to improve biodiversity conservation by strengthening the performance of conservation organizations and practitioners. The Mexican Conservation Foundation and The Nature Conservancy were struggling to achieve their capacity building objectives through traditional training and technical assistance. Pact partnered with them to create a new approach that focused on networked approaches to learning.
- The organizers used the terms “learning initiative” and “communities of practice” to avoid the impression that they were creating new networks. The initiative helped to create trust and connections among existing networks by highlighting and supporting the thematic communities embedded in each.
- Core elements of the network are:
 - Thematic communities of practice to support learning and capacity building across existing networks.
 - Knowledge mapping to determine who is doing what.
 - Organizational capacity assessments to determine what is needed.
 - Flexible training and technical assistance to be responsive to emergent needs.
 - Information and knowledge networking to share expertise.
 - Web-based community collaboration tools to facilitate peer-to-peer communication.
- “Communities of Practice” are defined by Etienne Wenger as “... groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”
- Creating communities of practice is enhanced by identifying existing groups and then identifying key thematic issues, based on shared concerns, priorities, and interests.
- MCLN includes four communities of practice: Forest Fire Management, Natural Protected Areas, Water Conservation, and Mexican Conservation Networks. The Forest Fire Management community of practice was established shortly after a series of forest fires. USAID had a particular interest in this issue and provided funding for a half-time coordinator, demonstrating that building a solid base to support learning can attract donors who are interested in funding a particular thematic issue.
- Numerous lessons have been learned through this initiative:
 - Communities of practice should be designed for evolution.
 - There are many communities embedded within networks.
 - Don’t over plan; communities of practice are emergent in nature – organizers should focus on creating the enabling conditions.
 - Start by building communities of practice around priority topics.
 - Allow different levels of participation.
 - Leadership matters; staff members of member organizations will only be able to participate if their executive directors are on board.

- Consider the degree of formality that is needed.
- Technology should be used to empower and should not be a crutch.
- Relationships within communities of practice should be peer-to-peer.

New Sudan Indigenous NGO Network (NESI-Network)

(Suzanne Jambo)

- Indigenous NGOs in South Sudan face many challenges. South Sudan is a large geographic area with many different ethnic groups. The physical and institutional infrastructure has been destroyed by 40 years of war, and fear and insecurity are daily facts of life. The illiteracy rate in the region is 90 percent.
- Most of the indigenous NGOs were created by displaced South Sudanese who grew up abroad and wanted to contribute to their community. The Sudanese diaspora provides most of the human and financial resources for these organizations.
- Networks are essential in conflict-affected areas because they provide a means for indigenous organizations to reclaim power and legitimacy. Non-state entities have difficulty getting funds from donors and must develop creative approaches for capacity building.
- NESI-Network was created in March 2000 to create a strong, unified voice for indigenous NGOs in South Sudan. The network enables indigenous NGOs to share information and communicate across a large geographic area. It serves as an important link between indigenous organizations and the world, including the donor community.
- Advocacy for lasting peace is a cross-cutting issue that links member organizations and is a key element of the network's seven-year strategic plan. NESI-Network believes that peace must be incorporated into every aspect of life and is putting pressure on the international community and the warring parties to take peace seriously.
- NESI-Network also advocates for quality services from international agencies. The network believes that providing assistance without consulting local groups to determine what people need and want is a violation of human rights.
- NESI-Network enables indigenous organizations to work more effectively with international donors by identifying training needs, harmonizing reporting, and explaining the realities and needs of organizations in South Sudan so that donors can understand the context in which assistance is provided and the difficulties potentially faced in delivering services.

Topics of Interest Expressed by Conference Participants

Participants identified multiple topics as priority areas for further discussion. These included sharing lessons on key success factors for communities of practice and gaining access to studies and related information on networks, including how to form them and how to promote the dissemination of innovations. Rural development with local NGOs was another area of interest, as was human capacity development and capacity building

strategies in general—along with a means to measure and assess them. Participants also expressed interest in strategies for sustaining a pilot program and for finding a good balance between civil society, government, and donors—to create a productive network. Means to evaluate network effectiveness and methods to improve relations with local people were other identified topics. Several participants wanted to know more about the key success factors that generate impact and create successful, sustainable networks. Participants also noted several sector-specific topics of interest.