

Networking for Impact
A Simple Guide to
Engaging in and Setting up Networks

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Vision

Local communities in the Asia-Pacific region are actively involved in the equitable and ecologically sustainable management of forest landscapes.

Mission

To enhance capacities at all levels to assist people of the Asia-Pacific region to develop community forestry and manage forest resources for optimum social, economic and environmental benefits.

RECOFTC is an international organization that works closely with partners to design and facilitate learning processes and systems to support community forestry. It seeks to promote constructive multi-stakeholder dialogues and interactions to ensure equitable and sustainable management of forest resources.

Title: Networking for Impact - A simple guide to engaging in and starting up networks

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SUMMARY

Networking plays an increasingly important role for many stakeholders and organizations working in natural resource management. A network can take different functions and forms. In a professional context, it can be developed to serve various purposes, such as to cultivate relationships, to share information, and to build capacities and consensus.

This brief guide to networking shares general lessons on how to make networks function effectively. The introduction explains what constitutes a network and its distinction from partnerships and organizations. Lessons on governance, organizational structure, and relationships among network members highlight characteristics of effective networks. The brief then discusses methods for appropriate communication and shows examples of networking tools. The sections that follow provide considerations for setting up and maintaining new networks, as well as the potential for creating synergies and cooperating with already existing networks. The brief concludes with recommendations of regular monitoring and measuring of outcomes and impacts.

Networking for Impact

A Simple Guide to Engaging in and Setting Up Networks

Networking plays an important role for many stakeholders and organizations in natural resource management. We engage in networks for various reasons: to share information, build consensus or capacity within a specific area, or simply to build relationships with other organizations and people. But what is networking all about and how can we contribute in making our networks function effectively?

In a step to more strategically engage in networks, RECOFTC conducted a small literature review in 2006 to find out more about networks and the critical issues that make them tick. In this brief guide to networking we share some of the general lessons and issues we found and hope they can raise some more interest and discussion on how to engage more effectively in networks.

HOW TO DISTINGUISH A NETWORK...

In general terms, a network is a group of people sharing common interests or expertise.¹ A network can be anything from a group of people sharing the same hobby (e.g., collecting stamps or music) to a formalized group formed within a professional context.

A network is a group of people sharing a common interest or expertise.

Networks can differ in range, time and scale, varying from formal to informal, a short or long life span, from local to global – and everything in between!

In a paper on international community forestry networks by CIFOR, a network was more specifically defined as a mechanism for the “**two-way sharing of information, experiences, knowledge and/or resources between previously distinct entities (persons, communities or groups) having a common objective**”.²

Networks may function in many ways, but generally they aim to either bridge gaps between different sectors and interest groups or to build consensus or capacity within a particular group. The functions of a network may differ accordingly, and can focus on activities such as information sharing, capacity building, coordination of activities, advocacy, and problem solving.³

¹ Wood, S., 2005. *Regional Networking Action Plan*, Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Program.

² Colchester, M., Apte, T., Laforge, M., Mandondo, A. and Pathak, N., 2003. *Bridging the Gap: Communities, Forests and International Networks*, Occasional paper no. 41, CIFOR.

³ Bradley, A., 2005. *Natural Resources Management Networking in Cambodia: Status, Lessons Learned, and Future Possibilities*. Community Forestry International.

As mentioned above, networks can range from being informal unnamed interpersonal contacts to formalized structured mechanisms for coordinated action. Networks can also operate at different scales (e.g. local, sub-national, national, regional or international) or periods of time, some networks operating for years while others develop to address a specific issue or issues, and may have a shorter life span, with a clear beginning and end.

Some informal relationships may well lead to closer collaboration and the expectation of a long-term partnership (see section on partnerships below), or develop into a formal network together with other organizations. Other relationships may stay at the informal level, being limited to periodic exchange of information, knowledge and advice, and sharing of experiences.

A related concept to networks is *community of practice*, a focused and interactive group of people who have a common interest in a subject or problem, and collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations based on their collective learning.⁴

...FROM AN ORGANIZATION...

International networks are distinguished from international organizations in that all the activities of members of organizations are generally part of an organization's plan of activities, whereas network members only act within an agreed mandate towards certain agreed goals, but are otherwise autonomous.⁵

...OR A PARTNERSHIP.

Partnership is a related but distinct concept to a network. There are various definitions of partnerships, but in this context (non-profit organizations), a partnership is seen as a dynamic relationship between two or more diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the division of labor based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner. Ideally, a partnership involves a careful balance of collaboration and autonomy, mutual respect, equal participation in decision making, mutual accountability, and transparency.⁶ RECOFTC engages mainly in two types of partnerships:

- **Institutional partnership:** a formal relationship between organizations that can involve transfers of funding, advice, joint activities and joint program development. Such a relationship tends to be longer term (e.g. 5 years) than the program and project partnerships mentioned below.
- **Program or Project partnerships:** involving joint contribution of resources to a specific set of activities, for a specified period of time. Such partnerships may also involve establishing linkages and working relationships with other organizations, and joint program or project development. The responsibilities and contributions of each party are generally specified in an agreement, signed by the authorized representatives of the involved parties.⁷

⁴ Wenger, E. 2000. *Communities of Practice as a Social Learning System*, *Organization Articles*, 7(2): 225-248.

⁵ Colchester, M. et al., 2003.

⁶ Brinkerhoff, J.M., 2002. Assessing and improving partnership relationships and outcomes: a proposed framework. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 25(2002): 215-231.

⁷ Adapted from *Our Strategy - Partnership in Action*, <http://www.recoftc.org/site/index.php?id=12>, 23 October 2007.

Partnerships of the kind mentioned above may emerge from or support thematic networks, but are in general more limited in their membership, more formalized in structure, and more focused on the achievement of mutual goals and the implementation of joint programs, projects, and activities.

SO, HOW DO WE MAKE NETWORKS MORE EFFECTIVE...

Research into what makes networks function effectively has highlighted the important role played by key factors, such as:

- the social and governance structure of a network (the individuals and organizations in a network and how the network is organized),
- the relationships between members, and
- communication patterns and the flow of information and other resources through the network.

The key lesson from such research is also that *initiating* a network is only a small step towards developing an effective network; *maintaining* network relationships and information flows, and resourcing the network over time are equally, if not more, critical.

Maintaining relationships and information flows, and resourcing the network over time are critical in order to develop effective networks.

Box 1: Lessons on governing networks⁸

The following lessons emerged from a recent study of international networks working in community forestry. To be effective, networks need the following:

- Clear aims and agreed methods
- Clear and strategic targeting of contact persons, active members, audiences, policy makers
- Good mixture of representatives as well as opportunities for discussion within and between different sectors
- Clear and well-reasoned and appropriate governance structure
- Coherent communication strategy; with multi-directional flow of communication, budgets for translation, plus face to face interaction between key actors
- Participatory mechanisms to ensure feedback
- Core funding from a donor or donors that supports flexible (but evaluated) outputs
- Cross-scale interactions and linkages (international, national and local networks)
- To build trust between members

...AND BUILD A SOUND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE?

Developing a sound organizational structure is a key aspect of effective network management. In general, the more decentralized the network's structure, the more opportunities will be opened for participation in decision making, and the more inclusive and democratic the network will be. Another important factor in participation and decision making is that foreign advisors do not dominate discussions or agendas in order to support and encourage local ownership.⁹

⁸ Egger, Urs, 2004.

⁹ Bradley, A., 2005.

Members of a network may vary in their level of activity and engagement, from very active to passive. According to a paper on networking for knowledge sharing, an international network stands or falls with its core group – the small group of committed people that feel responsible for the fate of the network. This core group can then facilitate a wider circle of less active participants. The paper argues that these different levels of participation are acceptable since they all play different but important roles, and that roles and level of engagement by members may also change over time. Furthermore, there may be stronger and weaker members regarding power and influence over the network. Commonly, the secretariat and the core group have more power in a network than other members. The paper suggests that it may not be possible to avoid this entirely, but the influence and power of particular members may be moderated by rotating duties and responsibilities in the network.¹⁰

Other lessons on organizational structures include the following:¹¹

- Size matters: Larger networks usually need more formal structures for ensuring democratic mechanisms, while smaller ones more easily can work within informal structures.
- Transparency, inclusiveness, and (where possible) informal governance arrangements: Aim for inclusiveness with a flexible, informal process. Democratic mechanisms such as voting procedures improve accountability and decision making, but involve high transaction costs. Looser structures based on networking processes (instead of project-based structures) are more informal and personalized, but lack accountability and inclusiveness. A balance is required.¹² The need for formal networks, for example, becomes more important when official channels need to be respected and accounted for, thus procedures for clear lines of communication, roles and responsibilities, and decision making become even more important (e.g. government networks).
- Resourcing is only part of the equation: Long term resourcing of networks is important, but excessive inputs of money and staff should not detract from self-reliance and a genuine network spirit.
- Think about the constituents and membership: It is challenging to involve community level organizations in international networks, although for the credibility of Community Forestry networks, linkages to the community level have emerged as important.

Direct links to communities or other local beneficiaries can be difficult to achieve, but is an issue to keep in mind for networks representing them or advocating in their names.

¹⁰ Egger, Urs, 2004. *International Networks for Knowledge Sharing – Lessons Learnt?* SKAT Foundation.

¹¹ Colchester, M. et al., 2003.

¹² Colchester, M. et al., 2003.

GETTING THE COMMUNICATION RIGHT

Appropriate methods for communication are a central part in networking, both in terms of clarifying the purpose of the network and actually achieving this purpose. As described earlier, networking has been defined as a mechanism for the two-way sharing of information, experience and knowledge. Interestingly though, when RECOFTC looked at networks active in the region, we found that they often lacked this two way approach to communication, with many using newsletters and other one-way approaches to communication within their networks. Overall, one-way communication tools do involve dissemination of information, but they may not be best suited to encourage response, discussion, or shared decision making.

Two-way tools are appropriate for participation and decision making, while one-way tools should be used mainly for dissemination of information.

There are other approaches in use that facilitate two-way communication, and Box 2 below shows examples of commonly used one-way and two-way tools in networking. In general, many of the two-way tools are best suited to smaller networks, and need more time and energy to manage. Colchester *et al.* suggest an approximate limit at 50 people or organizations for two-way communication, and that informal networks cannot effectively include more than this number in collective decision making.¹³ Ideally, a combination of communication tools may be used. For example two-way tools for participation and decision making within the network can be complemented with one-way tools to disseminate information to a larger group of people outside the “core” network.

Box 2: Examples of networking tools¹⁴

One way tools	Two way tools
Newsletters	List serves, discussion groups and blogs
Publications	Assemblies or annual meetings
Resource centers	Meetings at different levels (e.g. local, national, and regional)
Web sites	Workshops
DVDs, CD-ROMs	Exchange visits
Press releases	Training courses
Radio and television	Field projects
Other mass media	Research

The specific needs of the network members and appropriate options to suit the membership should be determining factors when choosing what communication tools to use. An assessment of members' access to internet facilities may, for example, be necessary before choosing methods for communication, especially if your network aims to include local stakeholders. A paper from the SKAT Foundation suggests that the demand for paper-based documents will decline gradually. Although, it also argues that

¹³ Colchester, M. et al., 2003.

¹⁴ Adapted from Colchester, M. et al., 2003.

it is still a small minority has access to internet, and that demand for paper-based documents remains strong.¹⁵

Networks constantly emerge, change, and end. This is the very nature of networks as they should depend on current needs and interests. The same applies to networking methods and communication tools, as new approaches and technologies can become available and accessible.

SOME BASIC STEPS TO CONSIDER BEFORE SETTING UP A NEW NETWORK...¹⁶

- Decide which “gap” to fill with the network.
- Analyze if your organization is the best organization to convene a network to fill this gap or if it should have a different role.
- Clarify the specific objectives.
- Identify potential participants.
- Clarify what kind of engagement and which networking tools would be appropriate (What can be learnt from existing networks?).
- Determine the timeframe for network development.

...AND FOR MAINTAINING A NETWORK.¹⁷

- Regular (not necessarily frequent, but consistent) communication is needed within the network.
- Selecting appropriate communication methods is extremely important as networking relies on communication; the communication methods must suit the members. The members of a network should be able to provide information and feedback, and be a part of discussions; this also requires listening and taking action according to feedback.
- It is important to value the commonly held interest, to stick to the point, and to provide information that the network wants, not just what the sender wants to distribute.
- Refer back to the purpose when deciding on activities and membership.
- Provide mutual benefits: not only benefits for the convening organization but to all members.
- Promote the network.

For organizations taking a coordinating or “catalyzing” role in a network, some critical issues are summarized below in Box 3.

¹⁵ Egger, Urs, 2004.

¹⁶ Adapted from Wood, S., 2005.

¹⁷ Adapted from Wood, S., 2005.

Box 3. Operating Principles for strategic Network Catalysts¹⁸

1. Maintain a low public profile and emphasize the commitment and contribution of other organizations.
2. Recognize the differing motivation and resources of the groups engaged in the network.
3. Engage those with the most direct and compelling interest in the outcome to provide sustained leadership.
4. Continuously scan the environment for opportunities to engage new participants who bring new perspectives.
5. Facilitate linkages and fill gaps not serviced by other organizations.
6. Work through existing communications networks and media to reach large audiences efficiently.
7. Help other groups find funding, but don't become a funder.
8. Keep staff and budget small to assure flexibility, avoid competing institutional interests, and maintain dependence on effective action from others.

FINALLY, CREATE SYNERGIES..

The project Learning Lessons from International Community Forestry Networks found that networks tend to work in isolation from each other, and that there is a need for greater synergy and coordination between networks. A lesson from this is that we as a member in a network should emphasize collaboration with other networks. Also, when setting up new networks we need to realize that the network does not need to cover all issues on its own, but could find a good focus and get a broader perspective from collaboration with other networks.¹⁹

...AND MONITOR AND MEASURE THE IMPACT!

Don't forget to regularly review what has come out from your engagement with existing networks, to see if they have been relevant and useful as well as gathering lessons learned for improvements or change. Also within the networks, there needs to be regular reviews of whether or not the network is meeting the needs of its members and their shared objectives. Even though you may feel it is difficult to monitor and measure the impact of your network, it is important to set up some indicators that can help you assess in which direction the network is going and whether it will reach its objectives. In addition, measuring the impacts is often necessary for fundraising, as donors are interested in the outputs and impacts that result from their investments.²⁰

Monitoring and evaluating the outcomes and impacts is an essential part of the networking process.

¹⁸ Colchester, M. et al., 2003.

¹⁹ Colchester, M. et al., 2003.

²⁰ Egger, Urs, 2004.