

# **PARTICIPATION, RELATIONSHIPS AND DYNAMIC CHANGE: New Thinking On Evaluating The Work Of International Networks**

## **SUMMARY**

### **On our understanding of networks**

The world is becoming a networked environment. This is having a profound impact on the way we organise at the local, national and international level. We need to find new ways to think and talk and make meaning about our linked work.

While many of us now work in formally constituted networks, this way of relating is not new. Informal networks have been the basis of family, community, and even politics for centuries. However, particularly in the field of international development, the formal network has become the modern organisational form.

Many positive characteristics are attributed to networks, not least their capacity to challenge and change embedded power relations. If we are to find our way to counter-acting the negative effects of economic liberalisation and globalisation, especially on the marginal and under-represented on the world stage, we need a greater understanding of how to build and sustain powerful networks based on the values of dignity in development for all.

Networks have the potential to connect diverse actors, in many countries and at many levels. People participate through commitment to a shared purpose, as autonomous decision-making agents, joined together through shared values. People undertake activities together, often simultaneously, often spread across geographical space. It is the linked nature of the work, and the quality of participation in the shared space of the network, that makes this kind of working unique.

In this research we have begun to develop a deeper understanding of this uniqueness. This brings together ideas about the way relationship, trust, collaborative action, structure, participation and reflection inter-relate in the network form. Each connects to the other through a feedback loop, and each affects the other. We have built on Chambers' (1997) four Ds - diversity, dynamism, democracy and decentralisation - as core attributes of networked working.

### **Trust and relationship**

Relationship is of fundamental importance. When autonomous individuals organise to do something together, and when that autonomy and diversity constitute our basic 'resources', the *relationship* between those diverse people

constitutes the connective tissue of the 'network being'. These relationships are strengthened as trust grows. Trust grows through working together and reflecting together on that work. Acting together is born out of shared values, values that also need to be revisited and articulated over time.

Part of that trust-building work is done by the co-ordination function, in a constantly engaged process of knowing the members, facilitating their interaction, helping them to be in connection with one another. Co-ordinator(s) facilitate *and* lead.

Decision-making in such networks faces the challenge of autonomous and voluntarily participating 'entities' who may be reluctant to be 'represented' but also reluctant to commit to taking authority. Trust provides the glue that allows control to be relinquished into the hands of those will act in the best interests of all.

### **Structure**

What kind of structure does this kind of work need? Network structures in this field tend to have a co-ordination centre or secretariat, and a management or representative committee as a minimum. Too tight a structure, with many rules and regulations for participation may strangle creative spirit, diversity and dynamism. Too much time spent on internal business and management is draining.

Too light a structure demands that very high levels of trust are present, which is generally only possible in smaller networks.

While structure needs to evolve with the network, and respond to the demands of the network, the ideal is the minimum structure and decision-making necessary to encourage democratisation, diversity, decentralisation and dynamism in our practice, not simply our rhetoric. Where decision-making happens in the structure needs to be transparent. Similarly, it needs to be clear which spaces are not intended to be decision-making arenas. Mixing up consultation, information-sharing and decision-making groups or committees tends to generate confusion and unnecessary demands for decisions.

### **Participation**

Participation is a key word for network working. Individuals and institutions join together voluntarily to work for a common

purpose without losing their autonomy or identity. A network depends for its vitality, dynamism and capacity for creative action on the quality and extent of that participation. Those whose strategic objectives most closely match the objectives of the network are likely to participate more regularly, and be more concerned with the development of the network. Those more tangentially interested will tend to participate at key moments of relevance for them.

Clarity of purpose helps to ensure that participants know what to expect and what they can offer. Participation levels ebb and flow. High levels of participation might be present in a big UN conference, whereas at other times, participation may be more passive. Snapshots of moments in time can be misleading.

Individuals may move through different levels of participation on a regular basis. Such shifts and flows can indicate dynamism, or lack of focus, or may simply reflect the priorities of the member organisations.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation in the network context needs to pay attention to how networks foster participation by their members, how a network adds value to the work of its participants, and how linking participants and their work together across time and space can mobilise greater forces for change. Evaluation needs to be able to analyse that change both internally, at the level of processes, and externally, at the level of influencing activities.

### **Processes**

Evaluation needs to be able to track the levels of dynamic engagement, understand the way contributions and benefits interrelate, and examine the mechanisms in place to foster trust-based relationships.

This project has developed some tools to help with these process-based activities:

#### *Contributions Assessment*

This helps a network to understand the level of commitment and contribution that its participants are offering, and to update this regularly. A Contributions Assessment is intended to see where the resources lie in the network. Evaluation can then be done on whether the network has facilitated circulation of resources, and given members the opportunity to participate. This should help to assess the dynamism and growth potential of the network. It moves away from the deficit-model, needs-led approach, placing emphasis

on the passion and drive to make a difference of network participants.

#### *Channels of Participation*

This helps the network to understand how and where the members are interacting with the network, and what their priorities are. By acknowledging and monitoring the channels through which members interact, a network can begin to explain the nature of participation.

#### *Monitoring Networking at the Edges*

Finding ways to monitor how much 'networking' is being stimulated by the secretariat function helps to assess the level of independent exchange that is going on.

#### *Check-list for Networks*

This gives an overview of how a network works, with suggested evaluation questions covering:

- Participation
- Relationship-building and trust
- Facilitative leadership
- Structure and Control
  
- Diversity and Dynamism
- Decentralisation and Democracy

### **Influencing Activities**

Attempts to disaggregate the 'impact' of the work of the individual members, and that of the network in a lobbying/advocacy environment misses the point. The important issue is to determine how far a network helps to foster co-ordinated, reciprocal action, action that can be replicated in a number of countries simultaneously; how it can be a repository for the combined analytical intelligence of its members, and stimulate better, more creative and debated responses in the very challenging work of human rights protection, peace-building and international development. This 'creative space' enables reciprocal learning to occur, and posturing or positioning to be questioned.

Evaluating lobbying and advocacy work in this context must try and understand the added-value that *linking* and *co-ordinating* bring to advocacy. These include:

- The improved quality and sophistication of joint analysis that underpins the advocacy;
- The extended reach to key actors in key contexts through which that improved analysis can be channelled;
- The capacity to act simultaneously, with shared ideas, in many places at once;

- The space for competing views to be discussed and consensus positions achieved;
- The opportunity for those with few other avenues to powerful decision-makers to gain access through the networked relationships.

### **Participatory Story-Building**

This is an interactive evaluative exercise undertaken by network members and documented. Key actors, strategies and moments of change are mapped as a way of plotting the story of change that all are working together on. The exercise is intended to reveal:

- How far our strategies and understanding of the context is shared,
- How far the information, ideas, documents and analyses circulating in the network have helped us in the critical moments
- How far our individual mandates have allowed us to work creatively
- How connected we are to other actors in the chain.

It also helps to show what added-benefit can be reasonably be assumed from the networked nature of the work. It therefore deepens our shared understanding for future work. In this way, the exercise in itself is intended to build trust and linkages.

### **Cost-benefit**

Networks fulfil fundamentally a process role, one of facilitating exchange, joint strategizing, sharing of analysis, and building of relationships. The maximum benefit at minimum cost comes when the members work separately but together, pursuing institutional objectives which are affected by the joint strategic thinking of the network, and can be put to the service of the network's shared understanding and analysis. The members do the work, using the capacity of the co-ordinator/ facilitator to foster creative thinking, share ideas, and support one another's lead activities when they can. This process constitutes the core cost of a network, and requires long-term minimal funding.

The cost starts to go up when the 'secretariat' or institutionalised function becomes synonymous with the network, and the secretariat begins to become more and more 'operational', doing more of the work itself. This is where traditional core costs start to take on greater prominence, more staff and equipment are needed.

Networks take time to consolidate, and get established. Network co-ordinators working over the long-term increase the whole network's capacity to understand its environment, the potential contributions of members, and the connections and relationships that need to be built along the way. Medium to long-term thinking is essential if institutional memory is to be retained and relationships nurtured.

## PREFACE

The world is becoming a networked environment. In recent years a number of authors have expressed their concerns about the way the kind of evaluation methodology currently practised in the international development sphere fails to acknowledge and reflect the unique nature of networked working.

*'In search of better evaluation and planning systems, we need to learn how to understand networks as opposed to projects or organizations, particularly radical networks, transforming themselves all the time and committed to achieving political goals. Instead of trying to squeeze networks into existing planning, monitoring and evaluation systems, we need to look for new ways of PME that respond to the different realities and needs of networks, with the aim of strengthening them and allowing them to grow according to their own standards and goals.'*  
Emphasis added (Dutting & de la Fuente 1999:133)

*'There is a need for more systematic information and deeper analysis in order to understand what "success" and "failure" might mean in relation to networks.'* Emphasis added (HIV & Development Programme & UNAIDS, 2000:8-9)

*'This scoping study did not find substantive information on how organisations are monitoring and evaluating the development of networks and movements for advocacy (as opposed to monitoring and evaluating specific activities carried out by networks.)*  
**Appropriate monitoring and evaluation methodologies for networks needs to take into account their political nature and the 'invisible' effects of much of their work, such as putting people in touch with each other, stimulating and facilitating action and the trust that enables concerted action.'**  
Emphasis added (Chapman & Wamayo 2001:38)

This project grew out of a desire to make monitoring and evaluation real and useful for networks. Networks have different realities to those of projects and programmes, which correspond to their often radical political nature, and their core of relationship, connecting and linking functions. We have taken networks' own standards and goals as

our starting point in an attempt to discover monitoring and evaluation methodologies more appropriate to that unique nature. Along the way we have had to deepen our analysis of what a network means, what it means to work in a networked way, what holds a network together, and what facilitates its functioning.

The paper outcome of the project is this report, which is intended to be practical and useful. The report is pitched at practitioners, those in the *doing* business of co-ordinating and participating in networks, and at those who fund such activity, the donors, who then ask for 'accounts'. By 'accounts' we mean not simply financial, but the stories of success and difficulties encountered in the *doing* of the work. However, the process outcomes of this project are harder to put on paper. The dialogue and networking that have been at the centre of the research have made it possible for us to advance and deepen our understanding.

In brief, this report seeks to do several things:

- To stimulate debate on what is meant by a network. Numerous benefits and advantages are ascribed to working through networks. Starkey (1997) and Karl both highlight the skill sharing, exchange of experience and information aspects of networks as ones that enable capacity-building, reduce duplication of work, while at the same time improving responsiveness. They emphasise networks' capacity to engender dialogue across diverse groups, address global problems through global action locally rooted; reduce isolation, and increase potential for political or social action. Funders are increasingly spending resources on sustaining the structural and the activity aspects of networks. Yet our research indicates that those who work and participate in networks often struggle to define what they really mean by a network.
- To provide greater insight into how networks are working, from the perspective of those who co-ordinate them. This brings together key aspects such as the level and quality of participation by network participants, the relationships necessary to allow joint working, and the way these interact with decision-making.
- To highlight the monitoring and evaluation challenges inherent in working in a networked way. As the quotes above indicate, the 'project and programme' monitoring and evaluation methodology many are familiar with is felt to be

- inappropriate to the specific context of a network.
- To reveal some of the ways in which networks have started to monitor and evaluate their work. While there is little available in written form (Karl's book *Measuring the Immeasurable* (1999) is a notable exception), network co-ordinators have much implicit understanding about the kinds of criteria they use to determine the success of their work. Many networks continuously evaluate the changes they have managed to bring about, and the changing contexts within which they work. Yet most of this monitoring and evaluating is done live, and in interactive ways which do not get written down.
  - To develop and work with some monitoring and evaluation tools that may 'fit' better with the kind of work a network does. These include ways of assessing levels and quality of participation and linking, and the kind of evaluative questions we could be asking ourselves about relationships and trust.

A network has as its primary functions that of linking, co-ordinating and facilitating joint work. Monitoring and evaluation in this context must be about those functions. This research has almost deliberately stayed away from looking into how to monitor and evaluate advocacy *per se*. Significant work is being undertaken by Action Aid (see Chapman and Wamayo 2001), Roche (1999), Davies (2001) and others in the field. While this research has something to add to our understanding about how change is brought about in complex, volatile environments with a myriad of complicating additional factors, we have concentrated our minds on how to understand the nature of what a network does. Evaluating advocacy work in this context must try and understand the added-value that *linking* and *co-ordinating* bring to advocacy.

This report highlights the following aspects:

- The improved quality and sophistication of *joint* analysis that underpins the advocacy;

- The extended reach to key actors in key contexts through which that improved analysis can be channelled;
- The capacity to act simultaneously, with shared ideas, in many places at once;
- The space for competing views to be discussed and consensus positions achieved;
- The opportunity for those with few other avenues to powerful decision-makers to gain access through the networked relationships.

It is these criteria that we need to evaluate against if we are to capture the unique extras that networked advocacy brings.

It is organised in four main sections:

- Section One focuses on the background, the ideas, and the methodology
- Section Two examines Networks and what we mean by them
- Section Three highlights the importance of trust, relationship-building, and structure
- Section Four looks at the centrality of participation and its relationship to evaluation. It outlines the new approaches we have been working with.

Finally Section Five draws together the conclusions and some ideas for further exploration.

The research has been in large measure the result of the commitment and insight displayed by the following network co-ordinators and members of the Action Research Group at the centre of it: Kathleen Armstrong (CODEP), Priyanthi Fernando (IFRTD), Helen Gould (Creative Exchange), Sally Joss (IANSA), Manisha Marwaha-Diedrich (FEWER), and Ana Laura de la Torre (Creative Exchange).

The research was led by Madeline Church, with expert input on evaluation and facilitation from Mark Bitel of *Partners in Evaluation*. Claudy Vouhé of Development Planning Unit (University College London) managed the project. The report was written by Madeline Church, with the feedback from all the above at various points in the process.

## SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND - IDEAS, METHODOLOGY

As professional network co-ordinators, working predominately in a networked way (with and within a range of international networks), the questions about what works and doesn't in our complex and changing environments are becoming ever more pressing. Many of us work nationally, and across the European Union. We work across boundaries and languages, and engage with myriad numbers of power-brokers, opinion-formers, officials, elected representatives, media, and others. We regularly analyse, discuss, and evaluate our work. What we rarely do is document the way in which we work, or spend time reflecting on what we might do better or differently.

In this context, the idea of working on the practice of evaluation within international, externally-funded networks arose. Concretely, we were asking ourselves how evaluation could be built into the practice of networks.

Our idea was to ask such networks about their evaluation experience, in particular what factors had either hindered them or enabled them to 'do' evaluation in their networks. We would then develop a more appropriate evaluation 'model', consult on it, and then trial it with a network. It was conceived under the rubric of participatory action research.

### 1.1 Why participatory? Why action research?

*'Action research is at its best a process that explicitly aims to educate those involved to develop their capacity for inquiry both individually and collectively.'* (Reason & Bradbury 2001b:10)

As a team, we are all committed to working for social justice and change in some form or other. Madeline Church's work as the co-ordinator of a small lobbying network on human rights, development and forced displacement in Colombia (ABColumbia Group), is predicated on this value-base. Mark Bitel's facilitation work with self-evaluation in community organisations is built on a belief that organisations have the capacity and knowledge to evaluate their work, but are frequently confused by complicated and 'elitist' evaluation jargon and methodology. Claudy Vouhé works in a variety of international settings seeking to transform gender relations in institutions by helping those in those institutions to analyse, map and plan for systemic change. We were therefore clear

from the beginning that our methodology needed to commit to that value base.

As Lincoln (2001) and many others have articulated (see Park, Fals-Borda, Kemmis, Reason, and others in Handbook of Action Research (2001)) action research grew out of a critique of social science and its inability to provide 'right' answers to persistent social problems. The 'detachment' or so-called 'objectivity' of social science research and researchers was critiqued as a 'failure to engage', specifically with those actually affected by policy change and intervention. It allowed a privileging of the perspective of academic elites over that of the ordinary participant. As such it maintained skewed power relations under the cloak of 'neutral science'.

*'The technical rationality built into traditional forms of inquiry acts pro- and retro-actively to disenfranchise certain kinds of stake-holders, while undermining democratic values and privileging elites.'* (Lincoln 2001:125)

*'Advocates of participatory action research have focused their critique of conventional research strategies on structural relationships of power and the ways through which they are maintained by monopolies of knowledge, arguing that participatory knowledge strategies can challenge deep-rooted power inequities.'* (Gaventa & Cornwall 2001:70)

In their *Handbook of Action Research*, Reason & Bradbury (2001) offer this working definition of action research:

*'Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.'* (Reason & Bradbury 2001b:1)

Participatory action research therefore joins together *research* (the gathering and interpretation of data) in pursuit of *action* (doing it differently or better), with an *understanding* of action (the data of practice), thus helping us to *reflect and make sense* (evaluate and theorise). This is built on an egalitarian belief that it is those involved in the action who must be involved in and determine the direction of the reflection, that those

seeking to generate new understanding of their particular context are the researcher-subjects. We are not looking for 'the truth' but hoping to gain greater knowledge as a result of bringing our plurality of experience together.

*'Truths' become products of a process in which people come together to share experiences through a dynamic process of action, reflection and collective investigation. At the same time they remain firmly rooted in participants' own conceptual worlds and in the interactions between them.'* (Gaventa & Cornwall 2001:74)

At its core, therefore, participatory action research not only 'does research differently' it has the power to challenge and change inequality. This 'challenge for change' is also at the core of what we are doing in much of our network work.

In forming networks across international frontiers and by linking together actors in different sectors and levels, in our work practice we are struggling to change such power differentials in pursuit of more equitable development. A network in this field responds to an innate issue of power. Small closed networks of decision-makers in the world are known to us all and deemed to be powerful, even if that power may be over-estimated. The network as it is currently conceptualised in the development sphere is often explicitly seen as a method of countering "embedded network" power; of enabling a greater diversity of voices to be heard, especially the historically marginalised, poor or powerless.

We have a profound belief that participation is at the core of what makes a network different to other organisational/process forms. An deep understanding of participation, how it is generated, moved, sustained, developed, increased, deepened, expanded, valued and lived is of critical and vital import in any work on networks. And any research on the topic needs to appreciate and commit to that, not just in its 'research question' but in its methodology.

This quotation on the characteristics of networks seems perfectly to illuminate why participatory action research is a natural approach in this context:

*'participatory and non-directive approaches, allowing for locally meaningful and relevant solutions to emerge in response to local characteristics and conditions. The networking process should ensure that responses are meaningfully reflected in people's daily lives.'* *Emphasis added (HIV & Development Programme & UNAIDS, 2000:7)*

As such the Action Research Group provided us with a space in which to dialogue and exchange, and in effect to create a networked community of practitioners asking similar questions. Our experience is as Park describes:

*'Dialogue occupies a central position as inquiry...by making it possible for participants to create a social space in which they can share experiences and information, create common meanings and forge concerted actions together.'* (Park 2001:81)

What we found through working in this way was a 'fit' between the ideals and values that had brought us to work in international networks in the first place, and a way to understand, ask questions and work together on suggesting ways forward. As network co-ordinators, the questions in this research were and continue to be threaded through almost every aspect of our work. Others in similar jobs have similar experiences.

## 1.2 Evaluation

We have approached this research through the lens of monitoring and evaluation. All the networks involved receive funding from external donors, and one of those is funding this research. Funders need to ensure that those receiving funds can demonstrate that it is money well spent, spent in pursuit of relevant and acceptable goals. Monitoring and evaluation is deemed to be able to respond to that demand.

More than that, however, we are dissatisfied with the methodology available to understand the value of working in networks. Standard planning, monitoring and evaluation methodologies have been found wanting by almost all the networks in Karl's (1999) collection.

While we did not work with a specific theory-based approach, there are two evaluation writers who have influenced our thinking.

- The utilization-focus of Patton (1999) appeals because of its pragmatic realism. The emphasis here is on use, and we were all concerned to develop useful materials. Particularly helpful is his work on revealing the underlying theory of change that we all have when we work. This theory is most clearly seen by the way we link goals, to objectives, to activities, what Patton calls a 'chain of objectives'. (Patton 1997:218) It is this we are using in the tool Weaver's Triangle for Networks.

- David Fetterman's (2001) Empowerment Evaluation approach matches, or 'fits' the network project at the level of values, and its emphasis on democratising the process through participation.

*'It employs the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. It employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies... It is designed to help people help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection.... This process is fundamentally democratic in the sense that it invites (if not demands) participation, examining issues of concern to the entire community in an open forum.'* (Fetterman 2001:3)

Without 'doing' empowerment evaluation, our work is certainly in tune with much of what Fetterman proposes.

### **1.3 The Action Research - an emergent design**

In many ways the only given about this kind of research is that the way to do it emerges during the process of doing it. The most important aspects are the emergent nature of the theory that we are working with, and the creative approach to methodology.

*'Since action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge, in many ways the process of inquiry is as important as specific outcomes. Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process.. In action research knowledge is a living, evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience; it is a verb rather than a noun. This means action research cannot be programmatic and cannot be defined in terms of hard and fast methods.'* (Reason & Bradbury 2001b:2)

One of our explicit questions in proposing this research was 'how do you do research with networks?' It is hoped that this piece of work will throw some light on the complexity of how to do participatory research in this context. To some extent we did as Wadsworth suggests, as one of the six key aspects to facilitating forms of collaborative inquiry:

*'identifying and bringing together all relevant participants or stakeholders through inclusive processes of 'organic' or 'naturalistic recruitment', and emergently knitting together*

*inquiry groups and inquiry networks.'* (Wadsworth 2001:426)

The most important development was the formation of an Action Research Group made up of network co-ordinators. Using the BOND register of NGO networks (funding restricted this particular research to working with those based in the UK) we contacted those listed. Using an initial questionnaire about their experience of evaluation, we invited co-ordinators to participate in an Action Research Group to look more deeply into the challenges of evaluation in a network. We gave ourselves the boundaries of 'international networks, externally-funded, who do more than just share information', as a way of concentrating our efforts and resources, and limiting our spread. We were also conscious that it was likely to be those with external funding who needed to respond to demands for documented evaluation of their work as a way of being accountable.

This group met 8 times over 15 months. We then 'made sense' of our recorded meetings, writing up synthesised notes and questions, and feeding them back to the Action Research Group.

We had a special session on evaluation, but mainly we sought to follow the questions that arose for us, always with evaluation as an underlying theme. We avoided complicated monitoring and evaluation texts and methodologies, preferring the pragmatic approach of working out what we needed to know and how to go about finding it out. The meetings benefited from a range of background reading and materials, including the sociological texts of Manuel Castells, writings from many disciplines on networks, organisational development literature, a body of work on trust in organisations, and evaluation methodology, practice and experience. Madeline Church was responsible for seeking out helpful theory and practice to enable us to understand, conceptualise and create new meanings. Mark Bitel brought in practical and extensive evaluation expertise.

*'Since action research shifts its focus as the inquiry develops, theoretical angles emerge during the process. The theoretical basis for the work cannot be determined in advance. Action research therefore cannot realistically aim to make an initial 'comprehensive' review of previous relevant knowledge; rather it must aim instead at being **flexible** and **creative** as it **improvises** the relevance of different types of theory at different stages in the work.'* Theory, in action research, comes from 'a



*process of improvisation as we draw on different aspects of our prior professional and general knowledge in the course of the inquiry.’ (Winter 2:1997, original emphasis)*

Simultaneously, the core team circulated 118 more detailed questionnaires, in English, French and Spanish, to networks world-wide about their evaluation experience. We traced networks through contacts in development agencies, through the world wide web, through personal contacts and networks. We began to use the DPU web-site to introduce the project and placed the questionnaires onto the web.

Throughout the project we maintained contact with many people world-wide who had responded to the questionnaire, or who had heard about the work through other sources. We met with and talked to network co-ordinators in other countries in Europe, Africa and Colombia.

It became clear that our idea of developing a ‘model’ was not appropriate. The networks involved in the Action Research Group are all at different stages of development. We decided that we would work with each of the participating networks on an aspect of monitoring and evaluation that they/we needed to work on:

- With IANSA we worked on monitoring and developing evaluation criteria,
- with FEWER on how to build an evaluation framework consonant with their conflict framework,
- with CODEP on how to understand their participation levels,
- with Creative Exchange on building in an annual Contributions Assessment
- with IFRTD on structure
- with ABColombia on how to capture the story of change in one piece of lobbying work.

Lastly, Madeline Church worked with the International Working Group on Sri Lanka using some of the tools generated through the research.

So, the data used for this report has come from various sources:

- Discussions in the Action Research Group
- Analysis of published and unpublished materials on networks, network evaluations, and evaluation methodology generally
- From the evaluation work undertaken by the research team with those in the Action Research Group

- From questionnaires circulated through networks and web-sites to network co-ordinators about their experiences of evaluation
- From an evaluation done with IWG on Sri Lanka
- From dialogue with those working in networks, in the UK, Sweden, Brussels, Uganda, Caucasus and Colombia.

#### **1.4 Challenges**

The challenges of working in this way with networks and network co-ordinators are multiple. In many ways the obstacles and challenges faced by networks in trying to do evaluation, listed and discussed in the responses to our questionnaires, are mirrored here.

##### **1.4.1 Time**

No-one appears to have enough of it. While the responses we got to our initial call to participate were tremendous, with an almost uniform urgency about when the results would be ready for others to use, very few people had the time to commit to participating regularly in a group dedicated to looking at the pressing issues around evaluation. Network co-ordinators always seem to have an overload of work, which it is already a challenge to prioritise. Those who committed to the Action Research Group needed to ‘show results’, that their time was well-spent. Most found it exceptionally difficult to do anything more than participate in the two-three hour meetings, which meant that the job of collation, summary, interpretation and proposal mainly came from the facilitation team. In essence keeping the group going was a similar job of network co-ordination and facilitation, a network of network co-ordinators working on evaluation. As such it benefited from the insights we generated along the way, and was indeed ‘emergent’. It was also very time-consuming (in time-terms the research was probably a year too short at least).

##### **1.4.2 Participation - who participates, the quality and level of participation**

Participation is the key word for the whole project. As far as who participated in the research project, we only managed to design a process in which network co-ordinators took a lead role. One of the most notable perspective deficiencies was that of network participants. To this extent we failed to bring in ‘all’ the stakeholders that Wadsworth talks about above.

Those who filled in and replied to the questionnaires were inevitably those who co-

ordinate or are in the secretariat of externally-funded networks. The evaluation dynamic and drive comes from these centres, largely because they have external funding. This is important because a repeating feature of all the conversations, interviews and discussions in the action research group is the difficulty all of us have in distinguishing between the Secretariat/ co-ordinator/hub of a network and the network itself. So while a Co-ordinator might answer our questionnaire in a certain way, it is by no means certain that the membership would concur, or even be bothered by the questions. So this research managed to bring into its circle network co-ordinators, but few who are the members of networks in this field.

Similarly we did not manage to get much input from donors. We asked those who filled in questionnaires to provide the names of their donors, in the hope that we would then be able to approach the donors with specific questions about their attitudes to evaluation of networks. In 39 questionnaire responses, 76 different donors were named. However, it soon became clear that without exact contact details and names of project managers it was going to be very difficult in the time available to find the relevant contacts in often very large donor organisations. It was also obvious from the questionnaires that those networks who had done evaluations had freedom to choose their consultants and terms of reference, and that these choices were not determined entirely by donors. Most used a standard methodology in the field (questionnaires, interviews, document review). We decided that the donor 'perspective', while important, was not critical to the project.

### **1.4.3 Facilitation**

It is abundantly clear from this process that working in a participatory way with networks requires a significant amount of facilitation, just as facilitation of any network. In particular, being both facilitator and participant brings greater understanding. In many ways this was a pilot project, which included the process of generating commitment from other network co-ordinators to participate in the research. Any further work would now have a good core group to help design a more elaborate process with wider reach.

### **1.4.4 The scale**

Inevitably, the scale of the research has outstripped our capacities within the confines of this project. Just as the subject matter we are working with – networks and their work – has an organic and almost boundless quality to it, so this project has generated far more questions and further avenues for exploration, revealed links and connections that are simply beyond what it has been possible to take on in the time available.

### **1.5 Benefits**

We were successful in developing and sustaining a small group of network co-ordinators and building a small community of inquiry with a high quality of thought and reflection on what working in a networked way means. It gave those of us who facilitate such working much needed space and time together to exchange experience, deepen our understanding and generate new ideas. This was perhaps its most important achievement, shared by all of us. The quality of this report, and the ideas it contains, are one significant result of that participatory process.

## SECTION TWO: NETWORKS - WHAT DO WE MEAN BY NETWORKS?

### 2.1 Introduction

Throughout our discussions in the Action Research Group we have been aware that we needed greater insight into and understanding of even what we mean by a network, before we could begin to develop appropriate ways to monitor and evaluate what we do through them. How do we conceptualise networks? What images help us? How do we link that meaning to the process we actually participate in when we're in it?

### 2.2 The Network Society

For Manuel Castells (2000), the advent of what he calls the 'network society' is harbinger of nothing short of a revolution. The development of information technology is enabling the social practice of networks and networking, in itself an old and well established tradition of human interaction (personal links, solidarity, reciprocal support), to mobilise resources on a global scale. This is having and will continue to have a seismic impact on the way we organise ourselves in societies, states and polities. Nation states are already giving way to supra-national coalitions and representation at the national level is in a crisis of meaninglessness. More decisions are taken globally yet people's interests are relocating either in the very local or the thematic. Nation states are 'either bypassed or rearranged in networks of shared sovereignty formed by national governments, supranational institutions (such as the European Union, NATO or NAFTA), regional governments, local governments, and NGOs, all interacting in a negotiated process of decision-making.' (Castells 2000:694) This is globalisation in action, 'the technological, organizational and institutional capacity of the core components of a given system (e.g. the economy) to work as a unit in real or chosen time on a planetary scale.' (Castells 2000:694).

This impact is profound, affecting our symbolic world, our organisational structures and our social processes. He sees the crisis of the nation state, a crisis of family and of patriarchy, as leading us to 'redefine sexuality, socialisation and personality formation', and reconstitute our social organisation. He believes new identities will be constructed through networks built around key themes and based in values. This will 'break up societies based on negotiated institutions, in favour of

value-founded communes.' (Castells 2000:694)

Reinicke *et al* (2000) echo this thinking, suggesting the need for new structures and processes of global governance in a context of economic and political liberalisation, driven by the engine of advanced information technology. They argue that both operational and participatory gaps are becoming more apparent in such a globally-governed world. Operational in that public institutions lack the resources, information and tools to respond to the new order, and participatory in that increasingly civil society and the private sector demand a voice in the processes of decision-making and policy-making, and are accumulating the resources to insist that they are included. The challenge is to overcome these gaps.

What this means for the way we understand the world is similarly new. Castells argues that the network society demands a new sociology, one that joins analysis of social structure and of social action in the same analytical framework. He sees an opportunity to develop a sociology in which structure and action are seen through the lens of the network, providing a metaphor that encapsulates the dynamic, iterative, changing, interactive reality of both structure and action. This will involve a move from analysis through the separate lenses of centres-peripheries, hierarchies of organisation, and the theories of social change, to one in which structure and action operate within the same plane.

What is Castell's network? A set of interconnected nodes, flexible adaptive structures that can perform any task that is programmed in. This can expand indefinitely, incorporate any new node by reconfiguring, as long as a new node does not obstruct but adds value, 'by their contribution in human resources, markets, raw materials, or other components of production and distribution.' (Castells 2000:695) Networks based on alternative values have the same basic morphology, differing by being led and driven by values.

*'Networks are dynamic, self-evolving structures, which, powered by information technology and communicating with the same digital language, can grow, and include all social expressions, compatible with each network's goals. Networks increase their value exponentially as they add nodes.'* (Castells 2000:697)

Castells is useful in that he more than anyone has thought large about what the influence of

this new way of working, and I would say old way of interacting, actually means. Placed in this context, the challenge of this research looks suddenly huge and overpowering indeed. If we are looking at such a significant change in the way we see the relationship between structure and action - one we would argue actually brings our organisational tendencies into line with the old norms of personal interaction, a bringing together of public and private, a re-joining of the political and personal, the world of work and the world of play and love and gossip, what Castells calls 'structuralism and subjectivism' (Castells 2000:697) - we need to develop tools for holistic thinking and analysis that we have all but forgotten in our drive to separate out and categorise. He, like many post-modern thinkers, talks of a new paradigm, the withering away of the dominant Enlightenment paradigm. 'A deep ecological consciousness is permeating the human mind and affecting the way we live, produce, consume and perceive ourselves.' (Castells 2000:694). He seems to believe that the network society is the social expression of that consciousness.

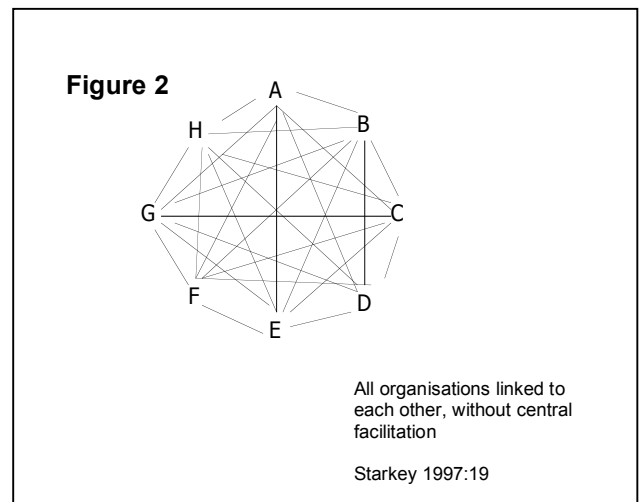
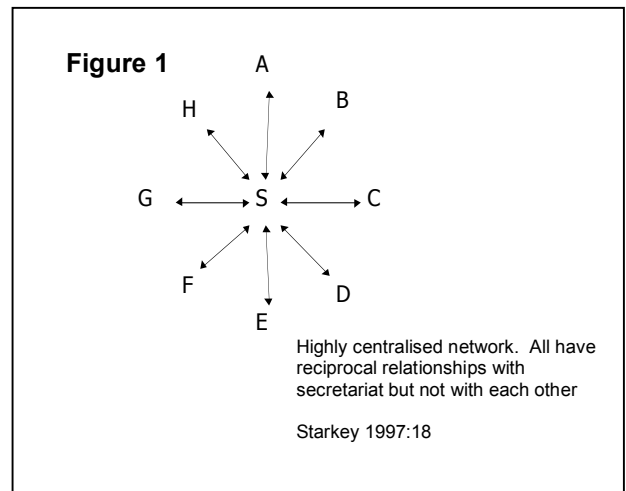
### 2.3 Network Typology

Many others have sought to, or decided not to put energy into definitions of types of networks. Most agree, at least implicitly, on a few simple markers. A network can be called a network when the relationship between those in the network is voluntarily entered into, the autonomy of participants remains intact, and there are mutual or joint activities. (see Starkey 1997; Karl 1999; HIV and Development Programme & UNAIDS 2000; and others). These are markers about relationship, about power and about action.

Few agree on how to typologise. As Starkey says, people have attempted to do so according to their membership, their geographical scope, their activities, their purpose and their structure. (Starkey 1997:15). Or as can be seen below, through a combination of criteria. What follows are some of those attempts.

Starkey's gives us a series of network models (and some that aren't in order to emphasise the differences). His diagrams show how participants and coordination function link together in varying degrees of centralization or decentralization. The most centralized model has the coordination function controlling the communication through the centre, and no horizontal contact between participants (Figure 1). The most decentralized involves contact within and between all participants, without central mediation. He

describes the decentralized model as theoretically a perfect network. He concedes it might not be realistic (Figure 2).



Karl's book brings together similar models, which she calls fishing net (threads linking nodes), the spider's web (threads linking nodes together with a central coordinating point) and the pyramid (similar to spider's web but with verticality built in). She also suggests that to capture the multidimensional nature of some networks they need to be imagined as organic clusters (Karl 1999:23).

Rhodes' policy network analysis, which really only looks at networks intending to influence policy, lays out a hierarchy of policy network types, from the most embedded and politically powerful at the top, to single-issue networks at the bottom. The former are considered to be stable and powerful structures whereas the latter are by nature unstable, fluid and with limited capacity for influence. (Bretherton & Sperling 1996:500-1). To some degree the distinctions are about the

extent of diversity of participants, and openness or exclusivity of membership. They are certainly about access to political power. Reinicke *et al* (2000), however, suggest that new Global Public Policy (GPP) networks are emerging, which are 'creative trisectoral arrangements' capable of loosening traditional power arrangements (Reinicke *et al* 2000:xi).

*'GPP networks embrace the very forces of globalization that have confounded and complicated traditional governance structures, challenging the operational capacity and democratic responsiveness of governments. They are distinctive in their ability to bring people and institutions from diverse backgrounds together, often when they have been working against one another for years. Making use of the strength of weak ties, networks can handle this diversity of actors precisely because of the productive tensions on which they rest.'* (Reinicke *et al* 2000:xxi)

They are, however, challenging when it comes to typology.

*'Having developed in the shadow of traditional multilateralism, GPP networks are protean things, difficult to define or typologise. This is so because they have grown up largely independently of each other to serve widely differing purposes.'* (Reinicke *et al* 2000:xi)

HIV and Development Programme & UNAIDS (2000) makes its main distinction along the lines of the purpose of the network. Is the network's core purpose one of capacity-building (enhancing skills, understanding, capacities, of network beneficiaries) or is its core purpose task-oriented, outward-looking and activity-based (aiming to change specific policy, get an issue on to the political agenda, raise awareness)? (HIV and Development Programme & UNAIDS, 2000:7) The categories are in essence about direction of energy.

Holti & Whittle (1998:44) distinguish between a 'broker network' and a 'thematic network' in which the roles of the hub or coordination point are different. In large measure this distinction boils down to the role the 'hub' plays. In playing the role of a 'broker' in a broker network, it has expertise and a formal representational role. In a thematic network, the hub operates as a facilitator and organiser of events, a trend spotter, generating learning and enthusiasm in the membership. This has some parallels with the 'advocacy' and 'capacity-building' split above.

Allen Nan (1999:17) offers us a vision of membership and structure and their relationship to participation and purpose. Smaller numbers of participants can do more difficult work together, larger numbers have more visibility. Greater structure (more committees, coordination hubs, etc) allows for greater size, communication and geographical spread. Less structure will need stronger personal relationships. Whether development is bottom-up or top-down will influence levels of participation, as will levels of central or decentralisation. The more top-down and centralised, the more you trade off participation for efficiency, speed and leadership.

Anne Bernard (HIV and Development Programme & UNAIDS, 2000:6-7) takes the approach of looking for characteristics that are common. She sees the relational as the core.

- a venue for social interaction through exchange and mutual learning
- member-ownership and interpersonal commitment to shared objectives and means of action
- capacity for responsive adaptation in the face of variable local contexts, including opening opportunities, creativity, and risk-taking
- cost-effective, since they involve a pooling of resources

Karl (1999) starts from the motivational, identifying the *whys* behind the choices people make to organise in this way, rather than concentrate on the structural form. In the main she sees networks forming out of conferences or meetings, or emergency responses to danger. Once people have worked together on something, they see the need or desire to continue to do so. She highlights four reasons, or *whys*: information sharing; advocacy; capacity-building and greater participation/less hierarchy. She spells out the added value of networks for those involved in them: dialogue across diverse groups, ideas-sharing, addressing global problems through global action; overcoming isolation, increasing potential for political or social action; respecting diversity, linking the international to the local; being inclusive; flexibility and responsiveness; capacity to do more together than alone.

Soderbaum (1999), in his study for Sida on African research networks, takes social network theory as his starting point, emphasising that 'networks are to be understood as vehicles by which social trust, communication and co-operation can be established and developed.' (Soderbaum 1999:2). His definition is drawn from the social

understanding of how networks and networking form a part of all human interaction, and places value on the links and relationships between the participant 'nodes'. 'A social network is perhaps best understood as an informal, voluntary based, dynamic and borderless open system which is flexible, fluid, adaptable and susceptible to innovations, new ideas and needs without that [sic] its internal balance is threatened.' (Soderbaum 1999:3)

## 2.4 Our struggle for definition

While it was not the intention of this research to put energy and time into 'typologising', rather to investigate *the challenges of our practice*, it became clear early on in the research that we were and continue to be in a struggle with our definitions of ourselves. We have consistently come up against the question 'What, or who, is the network?' As co-ordinators we regularly confront the confusion between 'the network' and 'the co-ordination hub, or secretariat'. They get conflated, intertwined and overlaid. Sometimes in our conversations the word network becomes synonymous with the secretariat function, and the participants, members, or partners (who collectively are the network) get forgotten. Kathleen Armstrong, Codep co-ordinator, says that she makes a conscious effort to remind the participants in her steering committee that the co-ordinator is **not** the network, the network is the whole of the participant parts. She reframes their sentences when they adduce the functioning and therefore the network to the co-ordinator. They say 'You are going to need to do x'. She reframes as 'We are going to need to do x, who can do it?' Such experiences infuse all our discussions.

**P:** the secretariat is not the network, it is the servant of the network, it services the network

**M:** *the thing is is that the servant often becomes the driver, because the power is invested into you, because you are there now, when you weren't there it had to be driven from lots of different areas, but now it is together enough to get a coordinator to do the day-to-day stuff that others don't have time to do, and so the responsibility gets dumped, or given to you and then you become the driver and the servant of that network.*

**M:** *It depends of the level of responsibility is given to this driver, it might be like the driver of a plane, or a train or a tram.*

(From Action Research Group 5 Notes, 2001)

In one complicated and rather tortured conversation with a colleague we spent a lot of time trying to determine whether her organisation was a network, or not, or a hybrid, or what it was, especially given that it is also a charity and a limited company. It appears that the decision to register it as a company was taken in part because the very informality or unstructuredness of the network format led to confusions about responsibility, representation, and rights. Some members believed that they could speak in the name of the network, for the network, hold workshops in the name of the network. In real ways they were the network, despite not necessarily being supported in that action by all members. Others thought the central coordination function had taken too much power and had itself become the network, not just an instrument of the network.

Looking at it another way, our confusion could be seen in terms of a struggle to separate structure from activity. This is an obvious confusion when we think that network (structure) and networking (activity) are often interchangeably used.

**C:** I find in the gender field for instance that people will talk about 'networking and building alliances' and it seems important to make a distinction, because I think the whole idea of building alliances, contains that idea of working on a common project or idea, it is focused on achieving something. Whereas networking has a broader kind of objective. (Action Research Group 5 notes)

It feels as if we are wrestling with exactly Castells' question: how do we bring together our understanding of social action and social structure in a coherent whole? How do we think holistically?

In the Action Research Group, participation has been our recurring theme, helping us to think holistically. In a sense what we have been developing through the work is a framework of participation. We have a profound belief in our group that participation is at the core of what makes a network different to other organisational/process forms. Who participates (issues around power, and resources), how they participate (issues about relationship, coordination, facilitation, governance) why they participate (issues around vision, values, needs, benefits, motivation, commitment), and for how long (issues around sustainability).

The markers identified above, about relationship, power and action, have helped us to talk about the work.

## 2.5 An emerging concept

*'The Atom is the past. The symbol of science for the next century is the dynamical Net. ...Whereas the Atom represents clean simplicity, the Net channels the **messy power of complexity**. The only organization capable of nonprejudiced growth or unguided learning is a network. All other topologies limit what can happen. A network swarm is all edges and therefore open ended any way you come at it. Indeed the network is the least structured organization that can be said to have any structure at all. ..In fact a plurality of truly divergent components can only remain coherent in a network. No other arrangement – chain, pyramid, tree, circle, hub – can contain true diversity working as a whole.'* (Kevin Kelly quoted in footnote, Castells, 1996:61. *Emphasis added*)

At the level of the overarching and conceptual, this quote inspired us because it reaches the real distinctive power of the network form, and the nature of its evolution. Suddenly, here is the true challenge of participating in a network. 'True diversity working as a whole', differences leading to coherence, the 'messy power of complexity.'

This somehow feels close to the following 'real world' description by a Ugandan AIDS Control Programme manager:

*'a network can bring institutions together, put the situation on the table and then help them work through how they can move. Each will then work out responses which suit itself, but are coherent overall. The network coordinates, facilitates and advocates, and different organisations can access its agenda in their own ways. In this way, the network can be as wide as the problem is, day by day.'* (HIV and Development Programme & UNAIDS, 2000:26)

Despite the variety of network models that Starkey offers, or Karl, they seemed to be missing part of the whole. We needed an image and a concept to help us to differentiate the dynamics of a network from those of other organisational structures. One that reflects the interplay of relationship, trust, communication, and activity.

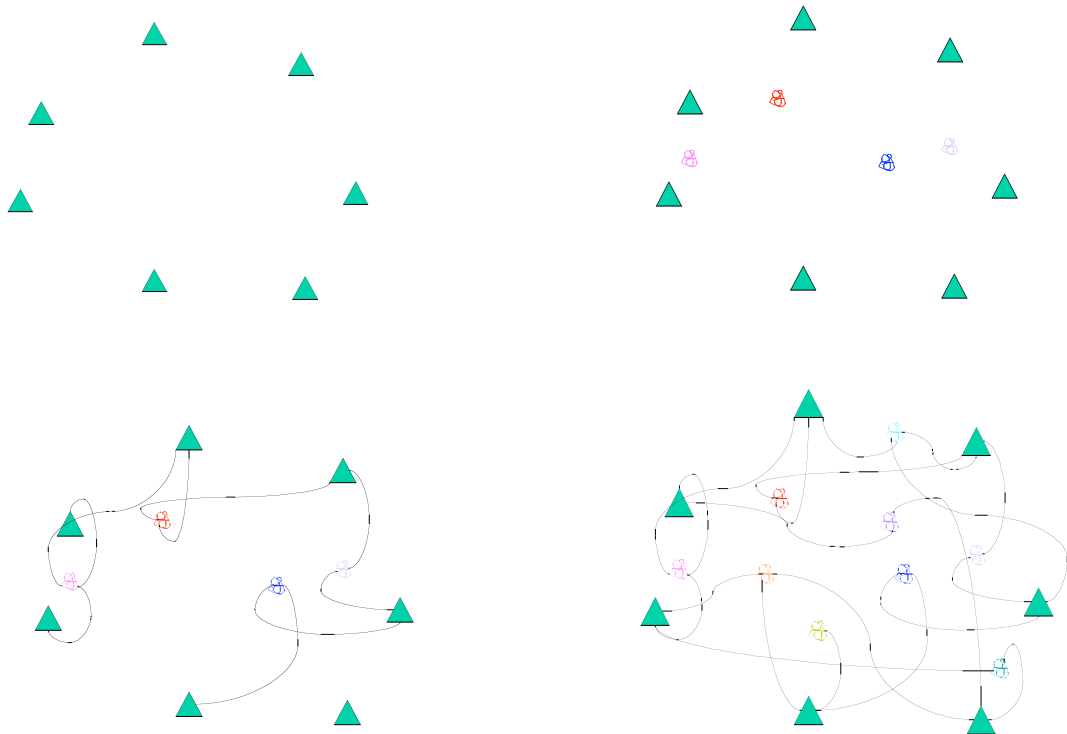
## 2.6 Threads, knots and nets - a network image

A network is based on the relational. This is the process that gives the network its strength. The common purpose is what makes it a network, not simply networking. We are in pursuit of something joined, something together. And then we are doing, we are engaging in an effort to realise that goal. It is the joint activity that gives us edge and power.

**Figure 3**

**Threads, Knots and Nets**

The triangles represent the members. The threads stand for the relationships, the communication and the trust. The knots represent what we do together, what join us. **It is the relational, engaged in the creational, that makes the structure.**



The threads tie us to each other through our joint activity and create the strength to hold us. (Figure 3) The coordinator, or secretariat is the artisan. Keeps the net in good order, knows which knots are best for what, notices the breaks, the fraying threads and seeks to renew them.

Threads, knots and nets - the body, the work and the structure of a network.

- ◆ The threads give the network its life. The threads link the participants through communication, friendship, shared ideas, relational processes, conflict, information. The participants spin these threads out from themselves. They voluntarily participate.
- ◆ The knots are where the threads the participants spin meet and join together. They are the joint activities aimed at realising the common purpose. These knots of activity make the most of members contributions, commitment and skills. They provide benefit and energy and inspiration.
- ◆ The net is the structure constructed through the relationships and the joint activities, a structure which allows for autonomy in community, a structure which participants create, contribute to and benefit from. The structure provides solidarity without losing identity, and is dynamic enough to incorporate new participants and expand without losing its common purpose. The structure is light, not strangling.
- ◆ The threads are given tensile strength by the knots that tie them together, and those common activities lead to greater trust, community, relationship.
- ◆ The coordination of such a structure can be imagined as a job of inspiration and of maintenance and repair. Of seeing the 'true diversity' and helping it to 'work as a whole'. Watching out for broken threads, knotting together appropriate activities, putting out new threads to new participants, extending the net. Working the net. Net workers.



This concept stays true to the idea of diversity, coherence, and the capacity for growth, without losing sight of the action. In the real world of practice and implementation, it is the activity (beyond the communication, information-sharing, relationships.) that gives the network its meaning. It also gives the network a living feel, one dependent on the commitment and input of its participants. It enables us to capture the sense of a dynamic, responsive, emerging form, using the messy power of complexity, and autonomy in the whole. And in some way it responds to Castell's urging for a way to analyse the merging of social action and social structure.

To return to practice, Robert Chambers in his work *Whose Reality Counts?* (1997), urges us to follow some basic principles if we are to really change the dynamics of the way we work. We have lifted and extended these four words from him as they seem to capture perfectly the creative spirit of a network working at its best. These are what a network should foster:

- Diversity – interaction between diverse opinions and ideas is creative and progressive
- Dynamism – freeing participants to be dynamic and propositional. Keeping structure light and facilitative, enabling, supportive
- Democracy – decision-making seen to be fair, inclusive and effective and only applied to the essential - to keep the net working. A shared vision developed by all.
- Decentralisation – the specifics of the local

- can be celebrated and enjoyed in the global

For us it is clear that in order to make this real, we need to consolidate and strengthen the following aspects of our practice

- We make sure the broad consensus, the highest common denominator, the most we can realistically strive for, is clear. The co-joining purpose
- We keep central rules to a minimum – the objective is to support not strangle
- We give trust-building and relational work priority, status and time. It is this that will strengthen the threads
- We make dynamism and diversity goals in themselves – it is this that brings creativity into our work
- We envision joint activities as more than just output activities – they are the knots that tie us together that keep the web tensioned so that we all receive some support
- We see input, participation, as a central objective – based on an understanding of 'contribution-brings-gain'

This, maybe, is what we should be hoping to illuminate, track and value through our **monitoring and evaluation processes**. This is profoundly different from other organisational forms and approaches. The way we work together in networks, and what we do together, influences the structure. The structure expands to encompass the reach we need.

## SECTION THREE TRUST – HOW RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING AND STRUCTURE INTERACT

### 3.1 Introduction

Across the literature, either in the development field or the organisational development literature, all agree that trust is of paramount importance when examining the network form.

This section looks at how the concept of the network that we have developed is sustained by relationship-building and trust. The intention is to find a way to talk about how trust, values, activities, structure and people interact, a way that is useful to us in our practice.

The network web is constructed through several relational processes. Participants contribute to a shared project with time, expertise, contacts, and information. They gain benefit from the pooling of others' expertise, access and resources. This happens in ways that respect their autonomy in decision-making and collaboration, and value their diverse views, mandates and institutional priorities.

These processes reflect what Ebers & Grandori call '*beacons in the sea of network analysis*.' (Ebers & Grandori, 1997:271) They conceptualise network formation in relational terms, seeing the network and its structure as something that grows out of the relationships that we form, rather than giving primary importance to the transactions between us. Their language is a language of flows and movement. They suggest three intersecting flows: the flow of resources and activity; the flow of mutual expectations; and the flow of information.

These 'beacons' are helpful in that they resonate with the work we have been doing in the Action Research Group. Their 'mutual expectations' between participating members can be matched to our understanding of contribution/benefit, or the in-out flow. The resources and activities flow are similar to the 'advocacy and influencing' joint initiatives, and the circulation and sharing of skills and ideas. Their third category is information flow, the on-going flow of analysis and material which keeps us all in the loop.

We converge in the importance we place on relationship, activity, reciprocity and information.

They also see the inter-organisational network as a being that undergoes constant evolution. It shifts and changes as the 'flows' fluctuate and respond to the contextual pressures, and the evaluations participants are constantly making.

*'Inter-organizational networking is subject to dynamic evolution because over time the forms, outcomes and actors' evaluations of inter-organizational networking change due to inherent development processes. The dynamics driving these development processes originate..in the specific outcomes of networking. These outcomes change over time the (pre)conditions for networking. Through processes of reevaluation, learning and adaptation, they may thus lead to adjustments, and sometimes the termination, of the originally implemented ties and forms of inter-organizational networking. The development dynamic thus has the structure of a feedback loop.'* (Ebers & Grandori, 1997:275)

The outcomes of the networking are being constantly evaluated and re-evaluated, and that evaluation changes the nature of the ties, the network, on which the networking is based. This in turn affects the outcomes. Thus the evaluation process affects the outcome, just as the evaluation of the outcome affects the process of the work.

What we have here is a relationship between activity, reflection on that activity, and the adjustment to the relationships and action as a result of that reflection.

### 3.2 The individual

What is more obvious in our concept is the primary importance of the individual, the participant. What impacts significantly on the activity-reflection-adjustment loop is the relationships that exist and evolve between those people doing the activity, the reflecting and the adjusting. The quality of those relationships enable or disable the processes of acting together, reflecting together and making changes together. In these relationships the individual person, rather than the institution who they may represent, is the primary agent.

For those of us working inside activity-focused networks, this cannot be overstated. Personal relations make or break the work. In an environment where there is no hierarchy, if you don't get on, the work may not even get done. In the light of the above, and as participants in networks, we need to pay serious attention to our own individual behaviours, to our attitudes to authority and power, and examine our norms of decision-making.

In the Action Research Group we have talked about the responsibility we have for examining and changing our attitudes. In

Chambers' words 'What sort of people we are and how we interact are fundamental to learning and action.' (Chambers 1997:76) Chambers questions why it is that university development courses do not tackle issues of personal responsibility and behaviour, when this has such an impact on the work that people do and the way they are perceived by those they work with. (Chambers, 1997:208-9) This is even more important in networked working. This quote from an evaluation report highlights just how individuals' attitudes to authority, leadership, and conflict can begin to paralyse effective networked relationships.

*'there is a marked reluctance to confront the issue [of personality] openly and on the personal basis that it needs. This tyranny of the personality is further complicated by its flip-side: the abdication of responsibility by the many – always expecting, encouraging the leader to take charge, then 'enjoying' the privilege of disowning unpleasant decisions, enjoying the role of uninvolved critical bystander – always knowing what should have been done better but never attempting to do it. These two negatives feed on each other and can serve to effectively block the process of democracy, while still capable of presenting a façade of participation to anyone who does not know this game well.'* (Network T')

Taylor, in his paper which questions hard the value of 'measuring empowerment' advocates 'relationship assessment'.

*'As important as the nature and quality of relationships with others, is the quality and nature of relationship with self. Although this might sound strange at first, we do relate to ourselves. We feel and act in certain ways towards ourselves. Our relationship with ourselves constitutes our basic orientation towards the world. We can feel essentially assertive or victimised; competent and in control, or perpetually undermined and exploited; confident and affirmed, or insecure – not only in specific relationships with others, but within ourselves. The ability to assess these internal relationships, and measure change over time, forms another important part of development practice.'* (Taylor 2000:6)

At another level, as it is the individual who is the primary agent in the relationships necessary to sustain the network, institutions and networks find that when individuals leave, those relationships must be built anew. It is exceptionally hard to 'institutionalise' network relationships if we acknowledge that in their essence they work through reserves of trust.

### 3.3 Structures

*'Putting in place formal integration mechanisms will not guarantee the development of the more informal integration mechanisms which underpin the emergence of at least companion and competence trust.'* (Newell & Swan (2000):1321)

It is clear from the reading that there is a fairly common structure which most externally-funded networks tend to operate with. A small co-ordinating secretariat or co-ordinating office, and a committee (advisory, management, executive, representative are some of the names used) which is drawn from the membership. This committee will tend to have some kind of representative spread (whether real or imagined), and may 'co-opt' others to participate who are deemed to have something to offer. The general participant group may meet once a year to set general strategic objectives and then delegate the more regular monitoring and management to the 'committee'. With larger networks that cover several countries or regions there is often a set of 'national' or 'regional' coordinations.

However, networks develop in ways that reflect the issues they are working with, the level of resources available and commitment to the core purpose. What seems to be the case is that as more people or organisations 'join', the structures tend to require review. The structure may display tensions around representation, agility and flexibility, confusion around where decisions are taken, by whom and why, and how far the co-ordination mechanism has autonomy and how far it takes its work from the 'committee'. Those networks seeking to influence policy-makers, with a political role, are more likely to find themselves concerned about representation and autonomy of secretariat.

The structure on paper tends to be more 'organised', and representative than it may be in reality. Given the voluntary nature of participation in the network form, those most interested in participating, those who see a more obvious 'fit' between their own work/organisation and that of the network, will tend to play a more active role than those more tangentially related. A national co-ordination or network connected to an international one may give the impression of a greater level of coherence and co-ordination than actually exists.

On the whole, these structures tend to be represented as variations on nodes connected together: in a web, a pyramid, a wheel, a cluster. Some of these were reproduced in

Section Two. One of the few exceptions is that of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, who conceptualise their network as a spiral, 'a non-membership fluid network which has a non-hierarchical structure with decentralised decision-making and wide consultation.' They still have co-ordination offices, a Core Group and a Co-ordination Group, which draft Plans of Action which the Co-ordination offices implement. However, the image they draw of their network is not based on their structure but on their values. For them the spiral represents linkage, facilitation, solidarity, two way flows, diversity, support, consultation and inspiration.

*'We draw inspiration from each other, share common objectives and in addition to activities carried out locally, work together on common projects.'* (Karl, 1999:41)

### 3.4 Structure and Trust

*'One thing is clear about network organisations, colocated teams, strategic alliances and long-term supplier relations: control is not exercised in the form of hierarchical authority.'* (Sheppard & Tuchinsky, 1996:142)

*'network organizations are self-regulating. Members, not a centralized source of power, are responsible for developing a vision, mission and goals for initiating and managing work activities. Members share their understanding of issues and devise ways to relate to each other in carrying out the work necessary to bring about a shared vision of the future. This vision provides the context that orients all network activity. Retaining this orientation is critical to developing and maintaining networks.'* (Chisholm, 1998:6)

In an organisation of peers, trust is the key.

*'It takes a long time to build trust, and it has to have a component of personal contact. But once built it operates like strong glue. It's a very big thing to lose, once you have it you don't want to break it.'* (Interview with IANSA Co-ordinator)

Trust makes it possible for participants to delegate and for the decision-making structure and committee to get on with it. Limited trust, dwindling trust, impacts heavily on structure and governance. For Chisholm, above, a network is a self-regulating form. For that to work, the vision must be shared and understood. Members build relationships with each other in order to advance toward that vision, through activities.

Diminishing trust tends to occur when the vision is contested, needs revisiting, or lacks clarity. Increased 'control' is often seen as a way of compensating for the lack of trust, and can result in greater and greater emphasis on rules and mechanisms for control. Individual personalities and their attitude to power, decision-making and control are critical factors in whether trust grows or withers. However, taking authority is also seen as hierarchical control and resisted. Those delegated to make decisions are often tentative, fearful even, while those delegating can be critical and controlling. In a network, trust, fostered through shared vision, values and activities, is the control.

**M:** I was surprised that it was easier to find common ground than could be imagined from outside. It is easier if they can talk about themes or projects rather than structure. Conflicts are worse when we start to talk about structure and governance, the question of membership, who and how, what the policy is for entering the network, formally defined obligations, how many projects or meetings, (Action Research Group 5 notes)

We begin to glimpse how structure and trust interact, and how the structural is often given greater weight or priority than the relational. This is true in the typologising, and is true in the energy given over to it in the practice. When the relational is under strain, network members may take refuge in discussions about structure and governance, and reach for structure instead of believing that structure will emerge from the relationships. An evaluation may be commissioned in order to suggest alternative structures.

### 3.5 Trusting trust and collaboration

What of trust? How does an understanding of trust help us to see what kind of structure we need?

Newell & Swan in their three year study of trust and inter-organisational networking between research institutions, make distinctions between three types of trust:

- Companion trust: this is the trust that exists in the context of goodwill and friendship
- Competence trust: this is where we trust in others' competence to carry out the task agreed
- Commitment trust: this is a trust made fast by contractual or inter-institutional agreements, ones that can be enforced. (Newell & Swan 2000:1295)

It may be that such categories are useful analytical tools to help us to understand what kind of trust we are hoping to build. In the environment we are working in, we are familiar with companion and competence trust. We understand that we will tend to make allowances for those who are good at their job, even if we don't like them or get on with them, and will tend to gloss over the incompetencies of friends. What Newell and Swan call commitment trust is less obviously present, although we would argue that it could be redefined as the agreement around core values, mission and overall aims.

What Sheppard & Tuchinsky (1996) call identification-based trust, trust generated out of shared values, maybe more helpful in this regard. It requires the greatest investment, but they argue, 'the rewards are commensurably greater. The benefits go beyond quantity, efficiency and flexibility'. The benefits they describe indicate that low levels of control are possible, because it is trust that permits us to let go.

*'When an identity-based relationship exists, it is possible for one's partner to act in his or her stead. Thus just as knowledge-based [capacity to understand and predict what other will do] and deterrence-based trust [existence of deterrents] allow a person, group or firm to become more **dependent** on another person, group or firm, identity-based trust makes it possible for a person, group or firm **to permit a partner to act independently – knowing its interests will get met.**' (Sheppard & Tuchinsky, 1996:145 *Emphasis added*).*

The importance of this cannot be over-estimated. We move from an understanding of relationships as control and dependency to the possibility of freedom and independence in the pursuit of common interests. We liberate ourselves through trust.

Yet trust does not build itself. It is something that needs to be part of the process work of a network. Powell (1996) argues that trust is a resource that must be used and reflected upon, monitored and revisited, in order to keep it going:

*'Trust and other forms of social capital are moral resources that operate in fundamentally different manner than physical capital. The supply of trust increases, rather than decreases, with use: indeed, trust can be depleted if not used.'* (Powell 1996:52)

What sustains trust is regular contact, dialogue, and monitoring (Powell 1996:63). It

is also sustained by the very act of collaborating together. The co-operative act is not simply a result of trust already built, it is also a method for generating trust. Trust can be a product of the very business of co-operating. Or as Network U puts it:

*'In a co-ordination space we may want to reach agreement about many or few points, about basic issues, or about philosophies and strategies. This desire can lead us to think we have created greater levels of agreement than in fact is the case. It is something you cannot achieve by discussion, it comes from the trust which joint work brings. Co-ordination spaces have their own dynamic that can develop toward greater or lesser integration over time. The quality of the trust which each entity has in the space depends on the levels of co-operation that you manage to achieve.'* (Network U)

If we believe this to be true, then trust can be generated out of the work networks do together.

### 3.6 What structure?

*'too loose a structure .. drains potential and continuity, and too heavy a structure .. stifles initiative and innovation.'* (HIV and Development Programme & UNAIDS, 2000:28)

*'Network structure must not only be satisfactory in substance, it must also develop through relationships and processes that satisfy network participants. Therefore, issues of network structure such as representation, finances, and governance must be addressed through iterative consideration in a participatory fashion as the network takes shape.'* (Allen Nan 1999:15)

So that's the challenge.

It seems much easier to analyse what trust exists and find the limits of it, than to think through ways in which trust can be expanded and consolidated, and how structure can be built around relationships, vision and action.

There are a number of writers on the subject who concur in the need for low levels of formal control, with high levels of co-ordination and facilitation.

*'The analogy to be explored for human society is not centralization and many complex rules but decentralization and a few simple tendencies or rules, are the conditions for complex and harmonized local behaviour.'* (Chambers 1997:195)

Fairclough (1994, referenced in Newell & Swan 2000:1320) advocates low levels of control to stimulate creativity, and high levels of co-ordination for integration. This feels like it mirrors Chambers' notions of decentralisation fostering dynamism.

*'..diversity, complexity, creativity and adaptability will be greatest at the local level with an appropriate minimum of regulation to enable individuals to know what the rules are and what is happening, so that they can collaborate creatively.'* (Chambers 1997:195)

Karl Wieck describe this in terms of maintaining 'tight control of core values and beliefs [which] allows for local adaptation in centralised systems' (quoted Stern 2001:10).

This respects what Freedman and Reynders (1999) call the 'premium' placed by networks on

*'the autonomy of those linked through the network.....networks provide a structure through which different groups – each with their own organizational styles, substantive priorities, and political strategies – can join together for common purposes that fill needs felt by each.'* (Freedman & Reynders 1999:22)

It also feels like it pays the right kind of attention to what co-ordination can accomplish and generate.

In a review of four HIV/AIDS networks, the manager of the Ugandan AIDS Control programme noted:

*'You don't need a very large structure; you need a full-time core group, some form of secretariat, which is able to organise core issues and then draw from existing expertise on an issue by issue basis. It should be able to have an eye on the ground, to do analyses, to bring people together and harmonise their expertise. It needs to be interdisciplinary. And it needs to let those who are its members feel a sense of belonging, a closeness with the problem. Otherwise, they will feel coerced when asked to do something for free. The key is to be spontaneous as new issues emerge, and members need to feel able to bring these in as they evolve.'* (HIV and Development Programme & UNAIDS, 2000:28)

However, low levels of control demand that trust is present. Allen Nan (1999) concludes from her review of the literature on co-ordination and networking amongst conflict resolution NGO's that they will be 'most effective when beginning with loose voluntary association which grows through

*relationship building, gradually building more structure and authority as it develops. No NGO wants to give away its authority until it trusts a networking body of people that it knows.'* (Allen Nan 1999:8)

### 3.7 Co-ordination and communication

*'The most important role I had was to keep and increase confidence among Forum members. I understood very quickly that it is very difficult to create common ground between different participants.'* (Interview with ex-Co-ordinator of Caucasus NGO Forum, Maxim Shevelev)

What has been repeatedly confirmed during the course of this research is the central importance of relationships with others. When asked, almost everyone prefers to network and work together through face-to-face meetings. Email is functional and practical, but face-to-face is what people want. Face-to-face makes greater trust possible.

**S:** what has to be recognised is that people need to talk to each other and not just by email, there has to be face-to-face meetings built in.

**P:** People think that they can build relationships like that through the email and you can't

**M:** It's a different quality of relationship. The potential for trust was there but wasn't realised until key members met face-to-face. There was a level of trust, or respect for each other, and we believed people meant well, but we didn't have political trust, until we met. Trust and confidentiality. (Interview with member of Network S)

Much of this work of trust-building is in the day-to-day business of those of us who are paid to co-ordinate networks. In the Action Research Group, the kinds of words that we use to describe our work and the work of the networks we co-ordinate tend to be process and values-oriented. We see ourselves as facilitators, and consensus-builders. We mediate, and balance the tension between enabling the participants to do their work and enabling them to work together, while at the same time giving a 'quality of input' that could be considered leadership

For the membership of the Action Research Group, it is clear that this 'process' activity is central to the work of the network.

*'The core business of a network is **process**, that of **networking**, working with other points in the web. This process is diffuse, difficult to capture, a process that happens in the spaces and connection points, a process that belongs*

*to the autonomous members and participants. These processes are formal and informal. Members fade in and out according to priorities, interests, conflicts. This is part of the norm of a network environment. The work of the co-ordinator or secretariat is built on process - relationship-building, facilitating, enthusing, enabling, circulating resources, adding value where needed....Looking at process activities and output activities together indicates that one cannot happen without the other, and that **if the process activities (the relationship/trust-building) are faltering the output activities will become harder and harder to implement.**' (Action Research Group 3 Notes 2001 )*

### 3.8 Making sense

What it seems that we can draw from the above is that the interconnective tissue of a network is the trust that exists and grows between the participants, and it doesn't just do it by itself. Work has to be done. Part of that trust-building work is done by the co-ordination function, in a constantly engaged process of knowing the members, facilitating their interaction, helping them to be in connection with one another. **This work needs to be recognised as an explicit outcome of a network operating effectively.**

Part of that work can, however, be done through the co-operative act. The act of co-operating is generative. That act must be reflected upon and 'evaluated' and that process of evaluation will not only change the process of acting, but will alter the outcome next time. In this way the network grows, evolves, redefines itself, sheds skin and produces/reproduces. This co-operative act is born out of shared values, values that also need to be revisited and articulated over time. Trust based on these values allows the participants to liberate themselves from control relationships, and provides the light holding structure in which each participant can operate autonomously and remain connected to the shared project. The co-ordinator(s) facilitate and lead.

What we may need to help us make this real is an understanding of the investment and expertise needed to work in this form. Time needs to be dedicated to establish trust, which is likely to mean time taken out of the individuals' other work in their own fields (Newell & Swan 2000:1321). At least in the current climate we work in where participation in networks often means time on top of allocated work in a person's paid job. This in

itself has implications for those funding, establishing and participating in networks. As we have often said in our Action Research Group meetings, those with most power and resources (time, money, influence) make the time to go to conferences and meet at each others' country houses, in order to build the relationships that allow powerful networks to flourish.

Harris et al (2000) suggest that those participating 'must be competent in network processes in order to find, join and participate fully in the activities of the network.' (Harris et al, 2000:231) Ebers & Grandori (1997) insist on the time needed for evaluation and analysis, 'otherwise important benefits of these forms of organizing – namely improved responsiveness and flexibility, more rapid and effective decision-making, and enhanced learning and innovation – cannot be achieved.' (Ebers & Grandori, 1997:282).

Newell & Swan caution us against the assumption that trust is built simply through good communication and interpersonal relationships, and they draw our attention to the underlying frameworks of understanding that a person holds, either lightly or tightly.. Their research indicates that in situations where people have differing epistemological perspectives, or underlying frameworks, increased communication may only serve to highlight the differences. (Newell & Swan 2000:1320) In our work this may be true about values. It is at the points where the values clash that the trust comes under real strain. And the more that clash is exposed, the less easy it is to work together, especially if those in the network are friends.

What is needed is a balance. While it is important to clarify and agree on underlying values, part of network working is to facilitate the joint working of diverse groups from differing sectors, levels and backgrounds. Networks of friends can become 'self-selecting oligarchies' (interview with member of IWG on Sri Lanka) with diminishing levels of creativity. It is one of the challenges of the form to find the balance between goodwill, trust in others' competence and a shared understanding of values.

Lastly, we may also need to develop a more sophisticated "relationship" vocabulary'(Taylor 2000:6), simply to enable us to talk about how we are in relationship. And any such vocabulary, to be of use to those of us working trans-nationally, will need to reflect a much deeper understanding of how relationships are built across cultures than we currently possess.

## SECTION FOUR: PARTICIPATION AND EVALUATION

### 4.1 Introduction

Participation has been the central theme of the discussions in the Action Research Group. Our work on participation has led us to develop ideas about how to design evaluation that can capture participation in a network in a meaningful way.

*'Through its non-directive leadership, facilitative management and effective use of members' respective expertise, the Network was able to create a sense of ownership among its members. They expressed full rights and responsibility to make decisions and to take action. In turn, ownership reinforced commitment, energy and creative action.'* (emphasis added, HIV & Development Programme & UNAIDS, 2000:33)

Ownership, commitment, energy and creative action. This is a good definition of participation, at least in the network context. Non-directive, facilitative leadership, and the effective use of members' respective expertise help participation to happen. Participation builds the relationships, and forms the structure of the net that holds those relationships together. Participation – of people in setting the agenda and making the decisions that affect their lives – is both politically empowering and liberating. It is essential if we are to realise our vision of inclusive, respectful and creative development, in which we all get to live to our full potential.

If we are to capture the essence of a network and be able to demonstrate its unique contribution, we need to be able to monitor and explain participation. Network co-ordinators need to be able to show who is participating, how, when and for how long. Evaluations need to be able to demonstrate that participating in the network enhances what participants are doing, and that what they bring to the network enhances their work and the work of the rest.

### 4.2 Participation – what do we mean by it?

*'Ownership and participation are two sides of the same coin' (Network T)*

Participation is the most visible issue in the evaluations of networks reviewed for this piece of work. It seems many networks are confronted by the challenges of how to

generate participation and sustain it, how to provide incentives, how to encourage greater diversity, how to enable those of a variety of languages and cultures to get involved, and how to manage a diverse range of capacities.

Much work has been done on participation and what it means. A quick look at just one literature review of the topic shows us the level of common understanding that exists about the value of participation.

Karl's (2000) literature review of monitoring and evaluation of participation in agriculture and rural development projects summarises a number of definitions of 'participation' used by projects and programmes across the world.

In the main they are definitions which emphasise the fundamentally political nature of what is meant by participation in the development context. Clayton et al say it most baldly:

*'Participation is an instrument to break poor people's exclusion and lack of access to and control over resources needed to sustain and improve their lives. It is intended to empower them to take more control over their lives.'* (Clayton et al cited in Karl 2000)

Participation as empowerment is well-understood and embraced in most of the networks we have come into contact with. Such liberating, empowering politics is a given, at least at the theoretical level.

In the Action Research Group, participation has moved around in our minds from being *action* (talking, listening, commenting on drafts, responding to questions, sharing information, acting simultaneously across geographical regions) to being a *value* (participation is democratising, it spreads equality, it opens the debate to those previously excluded) to being a *process* (it helps fair decision-making, it builds relationships). (Action Research Group 2 Notes, 2000)

These three aspects – action and process, underpinned by values – are what we consider to be the real essence of working in a network. This is what Priyanthi Fernando means when she says the IFRTD has a commitment to work in 'a networked and networking way'. The action and the process change each other, the process changes the action and the action feeds the process. The values are carried through both.

This most resembles a three level approach to defining participation by Oakley (summarised in Karl 2000): participation as contribution [action], in which people offer input; as organisation [process], in which



people organise themselves to participate and have influence over something; as empowerment, in which people gain power and authority from the act of participation [values].

Looking through and reviewing the evaluations of networks available to this research, four things stand out:

- The issue of participation by members comes up again and again.
- Few have good data about how participation in their network works
- Remarkably few evaluations have directly asked members why they do or don't actively participate in the network
- The recommendations that emerge out of concerns around participation levels are often linked to functional aspects of membership (types of membership, rates, incentives, or 'conditions')

Led by these thoughts, we started to develop some simple ideas to help us monitor and evaluate participation. What we wanted was to:

- understand the dynamism of a network through the levels of participation.
- make explicit what participants can bring to the network, the limits of that commitment, and therefore the 'available resources' that the whole has to share around.
- acknowledge the primacy of relationships
- build our capacity for facilitative, shared leadership
- trace the changes that happen when we lobby and advocate in linked ways. Together, the network uses the individual access that participants have to those with the power to change policy and influence development.
- recognise that in using that combined force, the network itself has power to effect change

#### 4.3 Lack of clarity about what a network really is

*"Perhaps one of the reasons why I haven't used [the network] is that I haven't seen how to use it..." (Participant in Network X)*

In a number of the evaluations reviewed for this research, there is a surprising amount of real confusion among participants about what the network they are involved with is for, or what the point of being in a network actually amounts to. It has never occurred to them to

contribute, they don't know how to contribute, and they don't know what's on offer in return. At the same time, increasing the level of contribution and engagement by members is seen by most network secretariats as a priority:

*'Since the major purpose is to facilitate the development of an information network.... **commitment** of the membership to contributions in this regard is of major importance. Since a third of the current membership already **contribute** ... the need to encourage similar commitments from other members should be viewed as a future priority.'* (emphasis added, Network Z)

The 'misperception' raised in this network is not uncommon

*'a further problem was the misperception of networks solely as resource centres, to provide information, material, papers, rather than as forums for two way exchange of information and experiences.'* (Network X)

This may stem from a general tendency to conceive of projects using the 'needs assessment' model. Projects are often established on a criteria of meeting needs. Meeting needs of beneficiaries, while common and necessary in many development projects, tends to obscure and confuse matters in a network. To be a network, and not simply a 'resource centre', learning and action happens as a result of what we all *put in*. This benefit/input relationship is what keeps the network alive and dynamic.

#### 4.4 Tools for measuring dynamism

Given that our conceptual understanding of a network is based on its activity, its capacity for responsiveness and renewal of ideas, it seems important to be able to determine the level of dynamism, and the quality of that engagement. We need to make serious efforts to understand the reasons why participation increases or decreases, stagnates or surges.

We have developed a number of simple methods to throw light on how participation is working, what kind of participation people would like and what kind of contribution they would like to offer. We have tended to steer clear of structural responses (such as membership definition) based on the belief that people engage with networks through a mix of shared strategic objectives, resources and relationships. It is this we are trying to illuminate.

In order to help clarify our purposes for being in a network, and to move away from the 'meeting needs' model, we have begun to use several tools. They each have elements which overlap with the others. They are intended as simple ways to gain greater understanding of levels of commitment, of what people have to offer, and of how they might interlink.

1. Contributions Assessment
2. Weaver's Triangle for Networks
3. Channels of Participation

#### 4.4.1 Contributions Assessment

The Contributions Assessment is the flip-side of a needs assessment, and is intended to reveal what people have to contribute, what they are willing to contribute, and in what time frame. It enables the network to see what resources it has access to, and how they might be shared, multiplied, or exchanged. This was developed and refined by the Action Research Group, and has been used in different ways by Codep, Creative Exchange and Fewer. Others who are just starting up networks, or who are doing evaluations (such as bassac and IWG on Sri Lanka) are also adapting and using the Contributions Assessment ideas.

The underlying premise of seeking out what people have to offer, rather than aiming to meet a need, has resonance with the *appreciative inquiry* school of action research (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett 2001). This is not simply a technique. It deliberately seeks to banish the problem-solving, deficit-model approach in favour of engaging with people's enthusiasm, energy and best-practice.

*'Appreciative inquiry distinguishes itself from critical modes of action research by its deliberately affirmative assumptions about people, organizations, and relationships.'* (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2001:191)

It is premised on the belief that 'it is much faster and more straight forward to go through the front door of enthusiasm.' (ibid:191)

In terms of evaluation, the appreciative inquiry approach represents a deep-rooted challenge to the standard evaluation practice of identifying problems for which recommendations are made.

*'The purpose of the discovery phase is to search for, highlight, and illuminate those factors that give life to the organization, the "best of what is" in any given situation. Regardless of how*

*few the moments of excellence, the task is to zero in on them and to discuss the factors and forces that made them possible. Valuing the "best of what is" opens the way to building a better future by dislodging the certainty of existing deficit constructions.'* (ibid:192)

We developed the guidance for Contributions Assessment (see Figure 4) in the light of discussions about moving away from the 'needs' deficit-model. This represents a significant shift in thinking. Using this approach it is hoped that members will recognise that they are the real 'resource centre' of the network.

#### 4.4.2 Weaver's Triangle for Networks

Weaver's triangle, adapted for networks (see Figure 5) is intended to help network participants clarify and understand what the aims and activities of the network are.

#### 4.4.3 Circles or Channels of participation

This is a way of capturing how people participate and how that participation changes and moves over time. Often the discussion or debate about participation centres around how to manage 'types of membership'. This may involve bringing in, modifying or dispensing with different categories of membership, each category bringing different benefits and requiring certain levels of commitment. Network X, for instance, talks about incentives:

*'The issue of incentives at all levels needs consideration. Incentives for user participation are poorly defined. Examination of different levels of user participation may be one way to address this problem (i.e., full member; associate member etc. each with attendant levels of benefit and required input).'* (Network X)

The danger here is that a 'structural' solution is sometimes sought, in which penalties are incurred for 'failing to participate'. The drive to secure greater participation can encourage a tendency to impose stricter 'conditions for membership' from the central secretariat. Network Y used an annual re-registration scheme in order to monitor levels of interest in the network and its newsletter. Members had to write a letter in order to be kept on the mailing list. This was seen as evidence of being an 'active networker'. However, the evaluation team concluded that:

## Figure 4

### CONTRIBUTIONS ASSESSMENT – A TOOL FOR MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN A NETWORK

*Guidance for gathering in the range of contributions that network members might make to a network*

A network depends for its life and vitality on the **input** of members. Networks tend to grow out of conferences, seminars, conversations, joint projects, where people connect through common agendas and purpose and think that they can offer one another and the wider world something **better together than separately**. A secretariat helps to **facilitate** the exchange and connection between those who participate, and to **draw on and circulate** the resources of members for the greater good, and towards the achievement of the overall shared aim.

One of the key issues for network projects and for those who coordinate networks is **participation**. How members participate, why some participate more than others, how to encourage greater participation, how to 'measure' participation.

A contributions assessment seeks to add another layer to needs assessment approaches. Most of us working in development and human rights are used to the needs assessment approach, of establishing a base line of project end-user needs before the project starts. You can then evaluate the work against that baseline, seeing if needs have actually been met by the project.

A Contributions Assessment aims to find out what people might **contribute**.

It can then serve as a baseline for assessing **if the network enabled its members to contribute over time**, and how that contribution gave **added value** to the network.

#### **Guidance for a Contributions Assessment**

##### **The underlying philosophy**

A **network** thrives on the drive, commitment and passion of its members. It is the combination of **diversity** (many autonomous institutions and individuals) **and a common purpose**, which gives a network power and energy. It is thus vital for a network to know what resources its members have and would be prepared to contribute and share. The aim of a contributions assessment is to hook into where the energy lies for the members, and involve people through their passion and drive to make a difference.

- A contributions assessment maps what members believe they can contribute to a network project. We are not talking simply about financial commitment in terms of a grant, but human resources, activities, skills, and energy. Value is placed on the interest and willingness to contribute, not the size or extent of what members can contribute
- A contributions assessment pays attention to power differences, and obstacles to commitment
- A contributions assessment enables the network as a whole to see what resources it can draw on and where it might need to seek extra members or resources
- A contributions assessment enables members to be realistic about what they can commit to – they are asked to think carefully about what such a contribution means for them in terms of time and energy and resources.
- A contributions assessment gives you baseline information against which you can evaluate. It enables you to ask –has the network provided its members with the opportunities they wanted to contribute? Has it enabled them to share in what is already in the pot? Has it enabled them to participate in making a difference?
- Evaluation can be done on how successful the network secretariat or coordinator has been in shifting the resources around the network, and how far the facilitation structures of the network have enabled that exchange to occur.

##### **How you might do a Contributions Assessment**

- Keep it focused on **contributions** – we all find it a lot easier to articulate what we might need rather than what we can add. The needs will get articulated in other ways.
- Decide who your contributors are – general membership, donors, steering committees, national network coordinators, secretariat, ...
- Be clear about what your network is aiming for – its helpful to have a simple statement or diagram that presents what the network is for, to enable people to see how and where they can contribute (see Weaver's Triangle for Networks as an example)
- Provide specific examples of contributions – participation in a committee, designing newsletter, organising a conference, doing policy analysis, etc. This will help members to define where their expertise might fit in.
- Ask members to think carefully about what they would like to contribute and how they might deliver it.
- Find out what the secretariat or coordinating function can do to enable people to contribute more effectively.

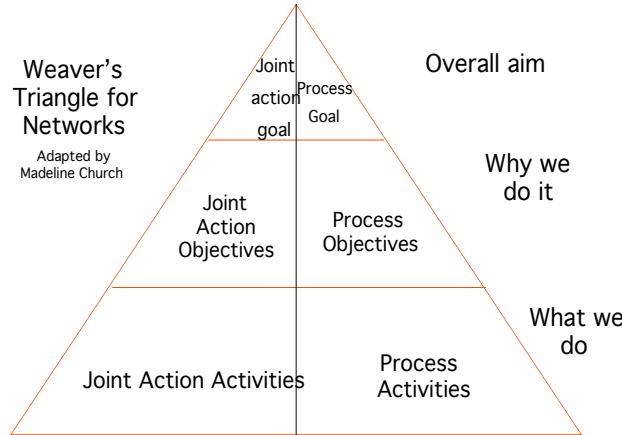
**Figure 5**

**WEAVER'S TRIANGLE FOR NETWORKS**

**A simple way to clarify aims, objectives and activities**

This tool is a simple exercise to distinguish **what** you do from **why** you are doing it. It helps you to see how you **link** what you do to why you are doing it, and what the **underlying theory** of your work is. Monitoring starts with the bottom section of the triangle. Evaluation in the middle.

This is a useful exercise to do with other people, as you can begin to see how your **perspectives and understandings of the work** you are doing either **converge or diverge**.



**OVERALL AIM**

This tells everyone why the network exists and the **change** you wish to bring about. It summarises the difference that you want to make. Overall aims are general aims.

**OBJECTIVES**

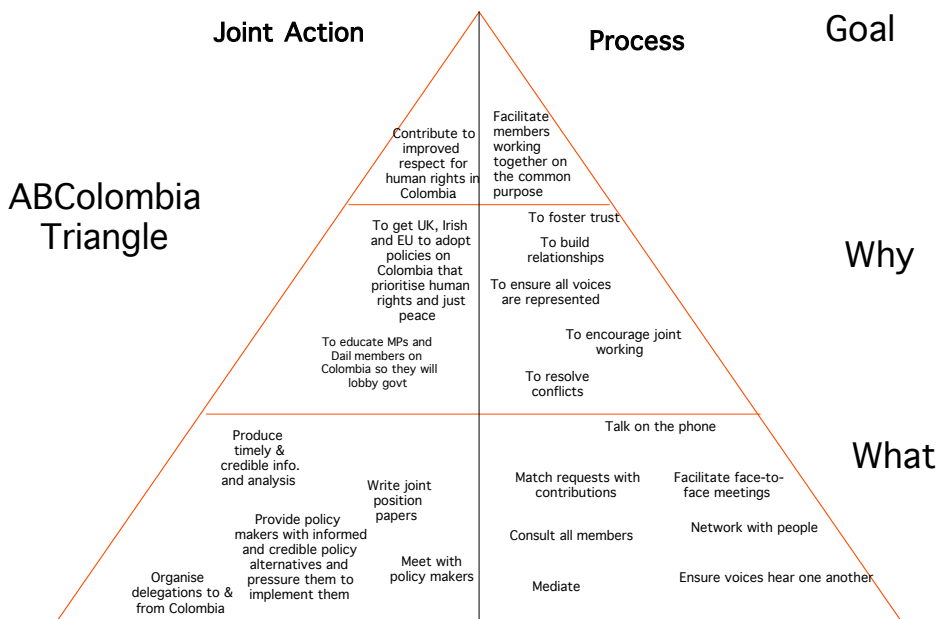
These are more specific statements about the differences the network hopes to bring about. There will usually be several, which will explain **why** you have chosen to do what you are doing.

**ACTIVITIES**

These describe the practical steps which you take to achieve the objectives. They say what the network will **do**. They are often called **outputs**.

Given that a central part of a network's work is that of facilitating the exchange and connection between members, the triangle is divided into two, to allow action aims and process aims to have equal weight.

**Example (not all aspects are shown)**



*'the annual registration ...does not really serve that purpose very effectively and it has become a culling tool. While some [network] staff are happy with that, stressing the need for members to show on-going commitment, it does lead to a major loss of members every year, many of whom are unhappy about being excluded from the [newsletter]. It contributes to a loss in continuity of membership.'* (Network Y)

People 'dropped off the tree' because of these regulations. They seemed to miss the realities of network working. People have to be sufficiently interested and engaged, and believe that working in this way will enhance their capacity to make a difference. Penalties and coercion have no place here.

The Circles of Participation idea comes in large measure from the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network (LACWHN) (See SIDA 2000:131-155). They have three categories of membership which they use in order to ascertain the degree of commitment and interest.

*R – those who receive the Women's Health Journal*

*P – those who participate in events and campaigns, and/or are contingent advisors for specific topics. They also receive Journal*  
*PP – Active and permanent participant in Network at national and international levels. Also receive Journal.*

However members shift from one category to another at any time, with inclusion in one or other category entirely contingent on their levels of participation, rather than on payment, or subscription. Such a framework enables them to assess both the growth over time of the network, and its dynamism.

*'In the course of time, the base of PP members has both broadened and increased.'* (Sida 2000:139) *'There is a continuous flow between the three categories of membership, and the Network is consequently very dynamic.'* (Sida 2000:141)

We have adapted this idea as Channels of Participation (see Figure 6).

#### **4.4.4 Participation and information flows**

Many networks produce a newsletter of one kind or another, which can also be used to assess the dynamism of the network.

Encouraging people to contribute and to 'own' the newsletter is a job of continuous monitoring and review. IANSA, faced with limited contributions to its newsletter and, in particular, gaps from certain parts of the world, decided to look again at the balance of regions, policy, practice and editorial appearing in the newsletter. It now seeks to

- Give space to contributions from a variety of sources
- Ensure a balance between northern and southern organisations
- Ensure a balance between policy issues, and programme activities of members
- Be self-sustaining, in that the secretariat does not have actively to seek out contributions.
- Keep central editorial to a minimum

In this way it is an expression of decentralisation, and democratic principles, and it values the dynamic *action* that members are taking in support of the aims of the network.

*'immediately there were more contributions and it was less centrally written, people said there was a great improvement.'* (Interview with IANSA Co-ordinator, 2001)

In similar vein, The Women's Global Network on Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) sees their newsletter as a key way of measuring the following aspects of participation:

- the success of their linking, – international, national and local, both out and across
- empowerment – in particular giving international meaning to local action and helping to strategize
- the office's capacity to give fair space allocation, to read and listen to feedback.

Other networks, such as Creative Exchange, are working to tailor their information flow to the expressed interests of the participants. This means that the way the flow occurs through the network is more nuanced, in the hope that this will prevent people being overloaded with information that they don't want. This presupposes the secretariat or co-ordinator understands what members can offer and what information they need, and that this is regularly updated. To that end, Creative Exchange is instituting an annual 'contributions assessment'.

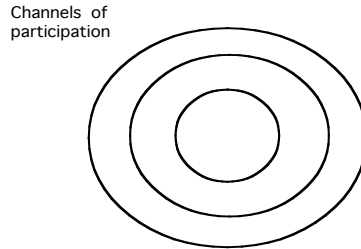
**Figure 6**

**CHANNELS OF PARTICIPATION**

This is a simple way of defining how many 'categories' of participation your network has, and being able to see how your members contribute.

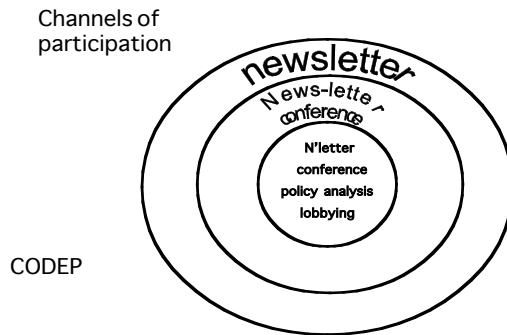
The idea is not to 'categorise' the members, but **understand how** people participate and at what levels. People may move between levels.

It may help to keep it simple. Three categories is probably enough for monitoring purposes.



The outer ring indicates a more remote relationship with the network, while the inner one indicates a more active and involved relationship.

For instance, in the UK Conflict, Development and Peace Network (CODEP)



- *Outer ring* – this category of participation involves receipt of the newsletter, with an occasional contribution to the content of the newsletter
- *Middle ring* – this category of participation involves receipt of the newsletter, with occasional contribution; and participation in the annual conference at some level.
- *Inner ring* – this category of participation involves receipt of newsletter, participation in the annual conference, and participation in strategic activities, such as governance committee, policy work and/or lobbying.

In a second example, a lobbying network used the following numbered participation levels for its evaluation:

1. Inner-Circle, very regular shared communication and debate/discussion, input. Part of decision-making process. Trusted. Has regular dialogue with own government.
2. Regular communication/input, active with own government, trusted but not party to confidential information
3. Regular sharing of communication both ways. Active on appeals
4. Share information
5. Recipient of Information

They used a simple table to help them determine how much members participate, and what they contribute. They have also added in other factors, such as the level of access members have to key players. That way they can see where the gaps are in the network's coverage or reach.

Name	Country	Participation Level	Contribution	Other Factors eg Access

#### 4.4.5 Monitoring activity at the edges

There is always the danger that the secretariat, in a bid to understand and manage the dynamics of participation, will miss what happens at the places in the network where it has little contact. This doesn't necessarily mean that nothing is happening. Various networks have developed simple ways to keep track of the kind of networking that is going on at the edges which has probably been stimulated or facilitated by the network.

IFRTD, for instance, has made "putting people in touch with one another" one of the

core objectives that need to be monitored.

Their newsletter deliberately keeps the items as short summaries so that members have to follow-up with the relevant contact to get further information. In this way the Secretariat stimulates linking that doesn't 'go through' the centre, and can be monitored as part of the network facilitation process. Participants can then be asked how being featured in the newsletter made a difference to them. Monitoring this activity adds another dimension to our understanding of how dynamic the network is. (see Figure 7)

**Figure 7**

#### **MONITORING NETWORKING AT THE EDGES**

One of the main aspects that networks wish to monitor is the level of networking that goes on that doesn't directly come through the secretariat or coordinator, but that nevertheless has been stimulated by the network structure and what it has to offer. Capturing a sense of the level of this 'activity' should give you some idea of how vibrant and alive the network is.

- A very simple way is to track what new contacts people make as a result of putting items in the newsletter. You can do this by sending a simple follow-up email after an issue, or by asking people to keep a note of contacts in return for getting space in the newsletter.

IFRTD only put short summaries about people's work in their newsletter, with a contact address, as a way of stimulating people to contact each other directly.

Creative Exchange: send out a short follow-up email asking how many contacts have been made as a result of the newsletter item

Codep keeps a record of how many new subscribers they get after every issue – this is an indicator that recipients are sending it on to others (networking)

ABColumbia sends out a free electronic weekly news summary. To subscribe you need to give details of who you are and why you want to receive it. This helps to map types of recipients (experts, journalists, students etc).

- A network coordinator can keep a simple log of how often they put people in touch with others, either on the phone, or by email. This need not be done all the time, but could be sampled over a three month period. Bear in mind the ups and downs of the activity level in the network (many networks are more active prior to and during relevant UN meetings for example).

Looked at together, the amount of activity should give some an indication of the vibrancy and aliveness of the network.

**Figure 8**

#### **MECHANISMS THAT HAVE HELPED ENSURE HIGH LEVELS OF MUTUAL TRUST**

##### **Meetings and Communication**

Annual face-to-face meetings

- Open and frank discussions
- Willingness and ability to co-operate constructively and work hard and creatively together
- Frequent exchanges together with the interchange of ideas
- Good safety standards on email
- Meetings held under 'Chatham House' [off-the-record] rules

##### **Membership and commitment**

- Personal experience of the country by members and an understanding of the issues and problems
- Long-term commitment to the issues and the welfare of the people
- Very high moral standards, integrity and skill
- Meeting of equals
- Everyone has something different to offer
- Relatively small circle, with similarity of views and interests
- Clarity and limits about who can be a member, given the circumstances and the nature of the work

##### **Consensus and autonomy**

- Institutional limitations are respected and honoured
- No attempt to force cooperation
- No attempt to over-represent the level of consensus; each action initiated by the Secretariat leaves open the option to sign off or not; only those who have signed off on an action are actually listed

#### 4.4.6 Relationships

As discussed in Section Three, relationships built on trust are the key ingredient necessary for a network to knit together. The sustainability and vitality of the network will depend to some degree on there being mechanisms in place to support these relationships.

In one evaluation undertaken as a result of this project, participants were asked to be explicit about levels of trust in the network and the sustaining mechanisms in place to foster trust. They are listed in the box. They are by no means exhaustive, and pertain to a small, contained, country-specific network where confidentiality is at a premium. They are included here (see Figure 8) to encourage examination of trust-building mechanisms and as a starting point for discussions about levels of trust in a network.

The other aspect of 'relationship' is the heightened importance of individuals in a network. While many participants will be representatives of institutions, the energy and drive given to the network will depend in large degree on the personality of the individual concerned.

Several networks highlighted the impact changes in leadership or governance had had on their network. In the experience of one country-specific lobbying network, a change in personnel in the co-ordination office had meant a change in the power dynamics. Those who'd had a privileged role in committees left and others joined. The direction of the network began to change. Active members became inactive and vice-versa.

On the other hand, dependency on a few key people was highlighted as a risk to sustainability. There is always a risk the network will lose strength if key people go or get burned out.

*'The ratio of active/inactive members does raise a question mark over the sustainability ..., since any change in the members of a core group of activists may threaten the continued existence of the network as a whole.'* (Network X)

Networking done for this research has confirmed that few, if any networks pay sufficient attention to how to resolve conflicts between individuals (networks are full of strong personalities). This may well be a fruitful area for further research work.

#### 4.4.7 Leadership and co-ordination

*'There is tension between the co-ordination person /office taking on a leadership role,*

*seeing the big picture, and giving people the space to be self-directing. How far does the co-ordinator lead and how much do they facilitate and help build capacity? The tension between the two is real and continuous, and in many ways is **the nature of the job.**'* (Action Research Group 4 Notes 2001)

Probably the most important and dynamic part of the success of the networked 'organisation' is the relationship between leadership and co-ordination. This may well be best expressed as 'facilitative leadership'. Such leadership may be shared out around the network. It needs to include consensus-building, knowledge of context and the membership, making the right connections, and spotting the gaps, the opportunities and the actions that could be taken to move the agenda forward.

Sarason & Lorentz' have isolated four characteristics which nicely capture the movement, creativity and expertise needed by those leading and co-ordinating networks (summarised in Allen Nan 1999:6):

1. *Knowing the territory* - a broad and sophisticated understanding of the range of members, other actors in the field, the resources available, the needs, and the history
2. *Scanning, fluidity, imaginativeness* - this is about watching for openings, seeing the connections and possibilities that exist, taking advantage of the moment
3. *Perceiving assets and building on strengths* - the goal here is to work with the assets and existing resources of the network, and build on those strengths
4. *Power, influence, and selflessness* - for Saranson & Lorentz, co-ordinators work from a base-line value of being a resource to all in the network, committed to helping them to do their work better. Co-ordinators have no formal power but work from a base of personal influence

In our meetings we discussed the myriad ways in which we as co-ordinators act to stimulate greater participation:

1. *Knowing the territory*: being aware of how people think in the industry or sector; keeping an eye on where people are and how you might help them to move forward;
2. *Recognising that people do not necessarily want to make connections outside their own regions or areas of expertise*; knowledge of the context, the concepts and the way they interrelate



3. Making connections: spotting the gaps, making the connections between regions for participants, building and maintaining relationships with other networks
4. Catching the opportunities: Identifying international events that could bring people together, or a context that would provide a moment for joint activities (such as the International Year of...., or an upcoming thematic conference).
5. Being inventive: providing something fresh and interesting
6. Being clear and transparent: clarity of aims or objectives helps people to see where they fit in; letting people know what they get out of it, so that they can see the benefit.
7. Assisting members in their own environments: helping members to ensure that they have institutional support for their participation, supporting them in internal lobbying in their own organisations
8. Keeping people engaged: making each participant at some time feel they have your attention and that you know who they are; knowing the usual players and finding ways to include those who are often excluded; encouraging, listening to needs and desires
9. Delivering on expectations: making sure activities proposed are feasible, and achievable
10. Mediating and building consensus: helping to bring all perspectives into the frame, so that all can see that their contribution is meaningful in the overall context

The *Checklist for Networks* (see Figure 9) is a guide to the overall process aspects of network building, and includes the kinds of evaluative questions networks could begin to ask of themselves on leadership and trust. As Reinicke *et al* point out,

*'The intangible outcome of networks – such as greater trust between participants and the creation of a forum for raising and discussing other new issues – are often as important as the tangible ones and they may endure even longer.'* (Reinicke *et al* 2000:xv)

#### 4.4.8 Participatory story-building - analysing change

Understanding participation through the work many networks do on lobbying and influencing is probably one of the biggest challenges. What do we want to be able to explain through evaluation in this context? How can we monitor what we do, when defining change in

this arena is complicated enough in a standard project environment? Networks necessarily work in many complex contexts and spaces at the same time. Identifying causality is an impossible task. As the quotes suggest, the best we can hope for are reasonable approximations about the effect of what we do.

*'Were our interventions timely or influential among circles of influence: I'm not sure we shall ever know this. Diplomats don't often share when they think they have heard a good idea or received a 'usable' intervention. The only test is if you see them doing something which looks like what we suggested.'* (Member of Network S)

*'One need know little about research to appreciate the elusiveness of definitive, pound-your-fist-on-the-table conclusions about causality. Our aim is more modest: reasonable estimations of the likelihood that particular activities have contributed in concrete ways to observed effects – emphasis on the word **reasonable** [emphasis in original]. Not definitive conclusions. Not absolute proof. Evaluation offers reasonable estimations of probabilities and likelihood, enough to provide useful guidance in an uncertain world (Blalock quoted in Patton 1997:217)*

At the same time, attempts to disaggregate the 'impact' of the work of the individual members, and that of the network in a lobbying/advocacy environment misses the point. The important issue is to determine how far a network helps to foster co-ordinated, reciprocal action, action that can be replicated in a number of countries simultaneously. How it can be a repository for the combined analytical intelligence of its members, and stimulate better, more creative and debated responses in the very challenging work of human rights protection, peace-building and development.

The initial premise of this research was to begin to find ways to build the practice of evaluation into the normal routine of network working. In seeking to illuminate the lobbying aspect of our work, this very routine, regular evaluation is almost certainly the only way we are going to be able to be able to trace the changes we initiate through what is dynamic, organic and linked work.

Jordan and Van Tuijl did a typology of linked campaigning work in 1998. While many lobbying networks would probably not see themselves as campaigning organisations, these criteria are none-the-less helpful for illuminating the processes at work in any networked lobbying and advocacy project.

- Extent to which objectives of those involved are linked
- Fluidity of information exchange
- Level of collaboration in review and setting strategies and levels of risk
- Accountability to most vulnerable actors

These criteria help to make explicit certain factors that indicate that lobbying work is 'networked and linked'.

- **Shared** objectives, **collaboration** in setting and reviewing the strategies being used to advance those objectives, and **joint** evaluation of that work. These indicate that the work is networked
- **Responsible relationships** between those in the network and those Jordan and Tuijl describe as most vulnerable. These might be peace activists, the rural poor, those monitoring arms flows in unstable countries. This indicates that the value base underpinning the work is happening in practice
- **Flows** of **relevant** and **useful information** and **analysis** between those who need it to do the work.

We would add these further criteria:

- Respect for autonomy of mandate and action. As mentioned in the above section on relationships and trust, the freedom to act autonomously but in concert with shared objectives is essential if the networked nature of the work is to survive. In many ways this comes down to the skill of the co-ordination and leadership. Part of this skill is to know the mandates and limitations of the participants well enough to be able to provide information and analysis, texts and ideas, to enable them to work together without compromising their autonomy.
- Mechanisms to facilitate trust-building

The participatory story building idea (see Figure 10) helps to illuminate our linked work and our capacity to influence change in more detail.

It is intended to reveal:

- How far our strategies and understanding of the context is shared,
- How far the information, ideas, documents and analyses circulating in the network have helped us in the critical moments
- How far our individual mandates have allowed us to work creatively

- How connected we are to other actors in the chain.

It therefore deepens our shared understanding for future work. In this way, the exercise in itself is intended to build trust and linkages.

#### 4.5 Progress

During the course of the research we have sought to use the Contributions Assessment, the Channels of Participation and the Participatory Story-Building ideas to help us to 'see' and 'explain' networked working differently. The move toward assessment of contributions has been embraced as a simple but novel way of understanding what the essence of a network is, and some, like Creative Exchange, are intending to build it in to their annual procedures. It is hoped that the data will provide a solid base for assessing how far the network is able to circulate and exchange those resources. The focus on contributions is also generating some resistance. Some network co-ordinators are concerned that members will feel coerced or pushed into making further contributions above and beyond their current work load. Others are concerned that if they cannot demonstrate they are meeting a need their importance or existence, or funding will be threatened.

The Channels of Participation idea, is also simple and has been used with the IWG on Sri Lanka to document the interaction of the members of the network, and the reach the network has. The IWG regularly does this kind of mapping exercise, although it has not used it up to now as an evaluation tool.

The Participatory Story-Building has been more complicated to trial, and has, in the context of the ABColombia Group, been used by the co-ordinator as a tool for analysis with key actors in the international networks working on Colombia. Discussions have been held about key moments of change, key actors and strategies, but largely mediated through the co-ordinator and documented by her. A joint evaluative meeting has yet to be held.

In all cases, the tools we have developed are intended to be simple enough to be generically useful, but able to reveal quite complex dynamics. They are designed to be used as part of a network's routine practice. They all need further refinement and that can only be done through working with them, trying them out, and changing them to fit the specific characteristics of the network.

## Figure 9

### CHECKLIST FOR NETWORKS

The idea of this set of criteria is to provide a broad checklist of characteristics that networks tend to share and some potential questions you might like to ask when thinking about doing monitoring and evaluation. Some will apply to the capacity-building functions of a network, others to a lobbying function. Many networks have combined goals. Similarly some will be more relevant to a tightly-focused limited task network, in which membership might be limited to those with relevant contacts and skills, and others to looser and more open-ended exchange networks.

This list is the result of extensive reading done for this project, and is intended as guidance only. To be useful in understanding the **process** aspects of working in a networked way. **How** you decide on what work to do, who does it and **how** you do the work together. And, of course, what questions you need to ask about its value.

#### 1. What is a network?

'Networks are energising and depend crucially on the motivation of members'  
(Networks for Development, 2000:35)

This definition is one that is broadly shared across the literature, although it is more detailed than some.

##### A network has:

- **A common purpose** derived from shared perceived need for **action**
- **Clear objectives** and **focus**
- **A non-hierarchical** structure

##### A network encourages

- **Voluntary participation** and **commitment**
- **The input** of resources by members for benefit of all

##### A network provides

- **Benefit** derived from participation and linking

#### 2. What does a network do?

- Facilitate shared space for exchange, learning, development – the capacity-building aspect
- Act for change in areas where none of members is working in systematic way – the advocacy, lobbying and campaigning aspect
- Include a range of stakeholders – the diversity/ broad-reach aspect

#### 3. What are the guiding principles and values?

- Collaborative action
- Respect for diversity
- Enabling marginalised voices to be heard
- Acknowledgement of power differences, and commitment to equality

#### 4. How do we do what we do, in accordance with our principles and values?

##### Building Participation

- Knowing the membership, what each can put in, and what each seeks to gain
- Valuing what people can put in
- Making it possible for them to do so
- Seeking commitment to a minimum contribution
- Ensuring membership is appropriate to the purpose and tasks
- Encouraging members to be realistic about what they can give
- Ensuring access to decision-making and opportunities to reflect on achievements
- Keeping internal structural and governance requirements to a necessary minimum.

##### Building Relationships and Trust

- Spending time on members getting to know each other, especially face-to-face
- Coordination point/secretariat has relationship-building as vital part of work
- Members/secretariat build relations with others outside network - strategic individuals and institutions

##### Facilitative Leadership (may be one person, or rotating, or a team)

- Emphasis on quality of input rather than control
- Knowledgeable about issues, context and opportunities,
- Enabling members to contribute and participate
- Defining a vision and articulating aims
- Balancing the creation of forward momentum and action, with generating consensus
- Understanding the dynamics of conflict and how to transform relations
- Promoting regular monitoring and participatory evaluation

Figure 9 Cont:..!

## Figure 9 Continued.

### Fostering diversity and dynamism

'too loose a structure ..drains potential and continuity, and too heavy a structure .. stifles initiative and innovation'.  
(Networks for Development, 2000:28)

- Have the minimum structure and rules necessary to do the work. Ensure governance is light, not strangling. Give members space to be dynamic.
- Encourage all those who can make a contribution to the overall goal to do so, even if it is small.

### Working toward decentralised and democratic governance

- At the centre, make only the decisions that are vital to continued functioning. Push decision-making outwards.
- Ensure that those with least resources and power have the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way.

### Building Capacity

- Encourage all to share the expertise they have to offer. Seek out additional expertise that is missing.

## 5. What are the evaluation questions that we can ask about these generic qualities? How do each contribute to the achievement of your aims and objectives?

### Participation

- What are the differing levels or layers of participation across the network?
- Are people participating as much as they are able to and would like?
- Is the membership still appropriate to the work of the network? Purpose and membership may have evolved over time
- Are opportunities provided for participation in decision-making and reflection?
- What are the obstacles to participation that the network can do something about?

### Trust

- What is the level of trust between members? Between members and secretariat?
- What is the level of trust between non-governing and governing members?
- How do members perceive levels of trust to have changed over time?
- How does this differ in relation to different issues?
- What mechanisms are in place to enable trust to flourish? How might these be strengthened?

### Leadership

- Where is leadership located?
- Is there a good balance between consensus-building and action?
- Is there sufficient knowledge and analytical skill for the task?
- What kind of mechanism is in place to facilitate the resolution of conflicts?

### Structure and control

- How is the structure felt and experienced? Too loose, too tight, facilitating, strangling?
- Is the structure appropriate for the work of the network?
- How much decision-making goes on?
- Where are most decisions taken? Locally, centrally, not taken?
- How easy is it for change in the structure to take place?

### Diversity and dynamism

- How easy is it for members to contribute their ideas and follow-through on them?
- If you map the scope of the network through the membership, how far does it reach? Is this as broad as intended? Is it too broad for the work you are trying to do?

### Democracy

- What are the power relationships within the network? How do the powerful and less powerful interrelate? Who sets the objectives, has access to the resources, participates in the governance?

### Factors to bear in mind when assessing sustainability

- Change in key actors, internally or externally; succession planning is vital for those in central roles
- Achievement of lobbying targets or significant change in context leading to natural decline in energy;
- Burn out and declining sense of added value of network over and above every-day work.
- Membership in networks tends to be fluid. A small core group can be a worry if it does not change and renew itself over time, but snapshots of moments in a network's life can be misleading. In a flexible, responsive environment members will fade in and out depending on the 'fit' with their own priorities. Such changes may indicate dynamism rather than lack of focus.
- Decision-making and participation will be affected by the priorities and decision-making processes of members' own organisations.
- Over-reaching, or generating unrealistic expectations may drive people away
- Asking same core people to do more may diminish reach, reduce diversity and encourage burn-out

**Figure 10**

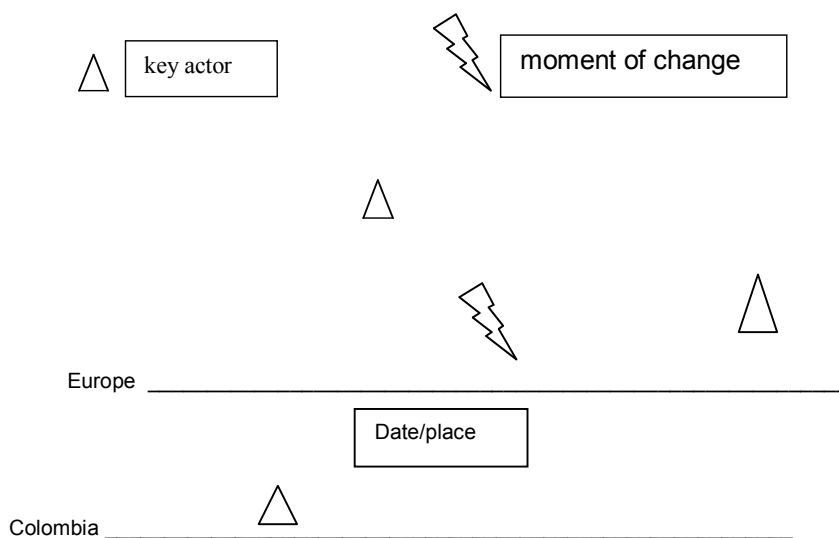
**PARTICIPATORY STORY-BUILDING**

This is a process to use with network members who together are doing lobbying and advocacy work. Each member will have different levels of access to decision and policy makers at one end of the chain, and to local partners and constituents at the other. Such strategic entry points are pooled to ensure the greatest coverage. Joint strategising, thinking and acting across space and time is what makes it 'networked' work.

However, each participant will have a different story to tell about the work they have done, the moments of change they have perceived and the obstacles they have faced. This exercise seeks to bring these stories together into one, without losing the richness, and then examine it. By looking critically, together, at who or where the main points of influence are, and what the key moments of change have been, the network as a whole learns about the scope of its work, the reach and access it has, and the strategies that have been influential. This can help in the next round of strategising. Telling the combined story is intended to reveal how we work, and help us to do it more effectively.

ABColumbia Group has started to use this approach to identify the 'story of change' about networked lobbying and advocacy on Plan Colombia. Those most centrally involved have been asked to identify the key moments of change, key actors, and key strategies used to move the work forward. This includes several networks in Colombia, national and Europe-wide networks, and grass-roots and policy networks in USA. A broad picture is gradually being revealed against a timeline, a picture of the *who, how, where, and when*. It has also revealed how far that work was coordinated, who the key players in the networks are, and what the interlocking networks did to facilitate the timely provision and use of key documents.

We have been plotting this against parallel time-lines, as a way of linking action in each region to action in another. Strategies can be identified in discussion.



The skill is in selecting the strategically important events in order to construct a story that is meaningful with regard to real change. Like any mapping exercise, you can easily fill the paper with narrative activities. What is important is being able to detect significant shifts and reveal their meaning.

The suggestion is that this exercise be undertaken with as many of the network participants who are doing the work, in the same room at the same time. In this way, you can capture the richness of networked working and better understand the relationship between one activity and another.

## SECTION 5

### CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IDEAS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

#### 5.1 Building evaluation into the routine of networks

The initial premise of this research was to begin to find ways to build the practice of evaluation into the normal routine of network working. Given the variety of participants and often far-flung nature of networks, evaluation needs to be conceived as an exercise built into the daily functioning. In seeking to illuminate the lobbying aspect of our work, routine, regular and shared evaluation is almost certainly the only way we are going to be able to be able to trace the changes we initiate through what is dynamic, organic and linked work.

*'Populations shift, goals shift, knowledge about program practices and their values change, and external forces are highly unstable. By internalizing and institutionalizing self-evaluation processes and practices, a dynamic and responsive approach to evaluation can be developed to accommodate these shifts.'* (Fetterman 2001:3)

Most networks evaluate constantly. This evaluation not only changes the process of acting, but also alters the outcome next time. As such they are dynamic and evolving entities. However, they rarely 'write down' such evaluation for external consumption, or make the 'evaluative' aspect of their work explicit. People want to know that their time is spent effectively. This means that time and energy must be set aside for joint reflection, analysis and evaluation, otherwise the important benefits cannot be achieved

To build evaluation into the practice of networks, in such a way that it can be used to 'account' for the resources invested by both participants and funders, we need to do several things:

- Make sure that evaluation of our work is on the agenda at network meetings, and doesn't get pushed aside in the dynamic drive to 'act'.
- Value and understand the unique nature of what a network does. Its linking, co-ordinating and facilitating function are process activities. This work needs to be recognised as an explicit outcome of a network operating effectively. Good

process indicators and evaluation are a priority.

- Use interactive, dialogic methods to understand the change we are effecting. This demands time and creativity. We need to be able to trace our joint working through joint evaluation practice. That way we accumulate learning and skill about how to be more effective in the future
- Engage the services of evaluation specialists not at the 'endpoint' or 'crisis' point, but as companions to the process of network development. Such 'organisational accompaniment' will help to document and reveal how networks work, where their strengths lie and what can help them evolve.
- Secretariats need the assistance of members in monitoring the work of a network. One way members or participants can 'contribute' to the work of the network is by offering to do small quantities of monitoring and evaluation work in collaboration with the secretariat. For instance, other networks use 'participant-observer' methods at international meetings, which can be generalised to ensure that all network members 'report back' on their linked work.

#### 5.2 Cost-Benefit

Networks fundamentally fulfil a process role. The maximum benefit at minimum cost comes when the members work separately but together, pursuing institutional objectives which are affected by the joint strategic thinking of the network, and can put to the service of the network's shared understanding and analysis. The members do the work, using the capacity of the co-ordinator/ facilitator to foster creative thinking, share ideas, support one another's lead activities when they can.

Thus the real financial resource requirements of a network are what's needed to enable the facilitation and relationship building function to happen. This includes the essential aspects of face-to-face network meetings, appropriate communication technology, and space for exchange, dialogue, resource-sharing and evaluation. Networks take time to consolidate, and get established. Long-term commitment by co-ordinators is essential if institutional memory is to be retained and relationships nurtured. Time needs to be dedicated to establish trust, in order to build the relationships that allow powerful networks to flourish. Good communication and interpersonal relationships are important but not enough. Networks and their secretariats or co-ordinators must

enhance their competence in network processes in order to find, join and participate fully in the activities of the network.

This process activity should be complemented by funds which allow for flexible emergency response, and for renewing and rethinking the direction the network is taking faced with complex and rapidly changing contexts.

Costs starts to rise when the 'secretariat' or institutionalised function becomes synonymous with the network, and the secretariat begins to become more and more 'operational', doing more of the work itself. This is where traditional core costs start to take on greater prominence, more staff and equipment are needed. There are networks which are minimally institutionalised, to allow for maximum commitment and participation by members at minimum cost. This works well, and it needs long-term basic core funding.

What creates internal tension, confusion and misunderstanding about 'who or what is the network' is the 'project thinking' that we are all so used to. Unfortunately, in a general climate of core funds being reduced, and process activities disguised amongst activities budgets, the network has a real dilemma.

### **5.3 Ideas for further exploration**

#### **5.3.1 Networked working**

This research has deepened our understanding of the complexity involved in networked working. Few who co-ordinate or participate in networks have time to dedicate to reflection, yet if we are to improve our practice, and thus make more of a difference through our work, further research of this kind is necessary. Those working as network co-ordinators have an enormous understanding and breadth of knowledge about how networks grow, develop, evolve and function that could be made more explicit and available to others

doing the same work. This can be done in a networked way, provided sufficient time and resources are allocated.

#### **5.3.2 Relationships and conflict**

Following on from Taylor (2000) and Chambers (1997), we need a more sophisticated "relationship" vocabulary', to understand and dialogue about how we are in relationship with others. In particular we need deeper understanding of how respectful relationships are built and maintained across cultures.

Networking done for this research has confirmed that most networks experience conflicts between participating individuals, yet few, if any have mechanisms in place to help them to resolve them. Networks, like other organisations in the field, are full of strong personalities. Perceptions and approaches to participation and decision-making may differ across cultures. This may well be a fruitful area for further research work.

#### **5.3.3 Power relations**

We have not had time to devote to examining in any depth how power relations work in a network, above and beyond discussions about the importance of trust and relationship-building. If one objective of networks is to provide a meeting point for large institutions, often financially powerful and smaller, poorer representative groups from the majority world, then issues about how power relations work are paramount.

#### **5.3.4 Evaluation**

The evaluation tools we have thought through and developed in this pilot project would benefit from being tried and refined in a wider context, with a broader group of networks. This project certainly opened up space for new ideas and thinking which show promise in the search for more appropriate methodologies.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> All quotations from evaluations of networks have been anonymised to preserve confidentiality