# The power of participation - capturing the impact of international networks.

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## Abstract

This paper reports on work in progress from a DfID-funded action research project on evaluation and networks in the international development and human rights field.  It explores the following questions about networks:

- ✪ What is a network? How can we conceptualise networks to help us work out how to monitor and evaluate what we do within and through them?
- ✪ How does a network differ from other organisational structures?
- ✪ Why do  traditional approaches to outcome evaluation fail to capture the impact of networks?
- ✪ What are the key aspects we wish to monitor and evaluate? How might we do that?
- ✪ How can we build evaluation into our work?

This paper reports on progress to date. This includes the development of evaluation approaches that take the issues of power, participation and process into account. The work is the result of the **experience** of those who coordinate networks, and our attempts to put evaluation into **practice**. It will offer suggestions for new tools for the evaluator's toolbox, and our experience to date in piloting those tools.

## Acknowledgements

## Introduction

It is currently the vogue to refer to the evaluators' toolkit.  This makes the assumption that there are a variety of methods (tools), albeit limited, which can be applied to the many different situations that require evaluating.  As evaluators we are often more at home with some tools than others (our preferred methodologies).  We apply our knowledge of how these tools should be used in any given situation (our evaluation design). Sometimes we become involved in an evaluation where our tools don't quite fit.  These situations present methodological challenges. Our assumptions are questioned. These are usually the points at which we grow.

This paper documents one such challenge. This action research project on capturing the impact of international networks was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) to explore new and more meaningful ways to evaluate international networks. It is generally held that international networks (often linking the north and the south) are a good thing. But on what evidence? Previous attempts to evaluate such networks concluded that there was a need to develop new methodologies which fit more appropriately than traditional project monitoring and evaluation. Many networks conduct lobbying and advocacy work, and the methodology for understanding the changes brought about by such work is very under-developed.[1] In this research we have concentrated on networks that do more than share information.

### What is a network?

'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 non-prejudiced growth or unguided learning is a network. All other topologies limit what can happen… 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.'*

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[1] J. Chapman & A Wameyo *Monitoring and evaluating advocacy: a scoping study*. London: ActionAid, January 2001; Karl, Marilee: *Measuring the Immeasurable*. New Delhi 1999

(Kevin Kelly quoted in footnote, Castells[2], emphasis added).

Most authors agree, at least implicitly, that 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; Networks for Development 2000). These are markers about relationship, about power and about action.  In this action research group we found we <u>had</u> to explore our understanding of what networks are, how they actually function, in order to begin to understand how we might monitor and evaluate what we do.

**How can we conceptualise networks to help us work out how to monitor and evaluate what we do within and through them?**

*A network gets its life and vitality from the input of members*. Networks tend to grow out of conversations, at conferences, where people connect through common agendas and think that they can offer one another and the wider world something better together than separately.

*Trust is the interconnective tissue that holds the network in place.* These are relationships voluntarily entered into, over and above our 'institutional' responsibilities. Trust is essential to maintain the energy necessary for joint action. This is especially true when, as in our case, the action is in contentious and conflictive issues, around human rights, power, small arms, development, war. The relationships are in large measure what sustains the network. When these relationships come under strain, if work is not done explicitly to support them, then conflicts over control and representation may become draining and undermining.

*Joint action, where it is central, gives the network strength.* It is often in undertaking activities together that the linking relationships which make the net are built.

Many have conceived of networks as a series of points linked in some way. Through a central hub, in two way flows of informational exchange, in multi-way flows. Yet for those of us who work as network coordinators, a network is based on the relational. The common purpose is what makes it a network, not simply networking. And then we are *doing, we are undertaking and engaging in an effort to realise that goal.* It is the joint activity that

gives us edge and power. *It is the relational, engaged in the creational, that makes the structure.*

*Threads, knots and nets.* This concept seeks to give the network a living feel, and one dependent on the commitment and input of its participants. It hopes to capture the sense of a dynamic, responsive, emerging form, the messy power of complexity, diversity, autonomy in the whole.
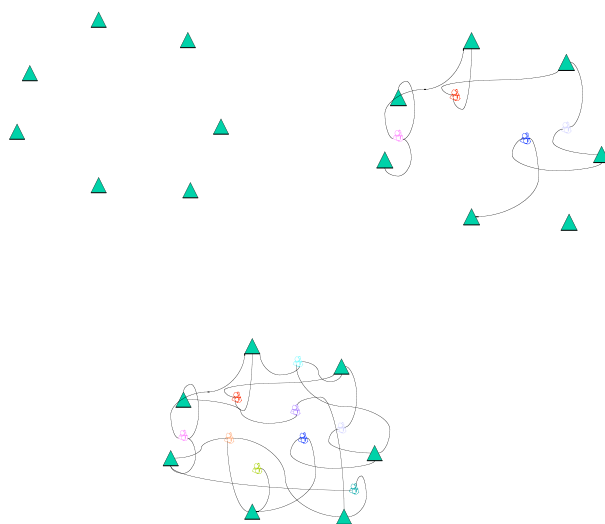


- ♦  the threads give the network its life. The threads link the participants through communication, friendship, shared ideas, conflict, information.
- ♦  the knots are where the threads the participants spin meet and join together. They are the joint activities aimed at realising the common purpose. These knots of activity make the most of members contributions, commitment and skills. They provide benefit and energy and inspiration.
- ♦  the threads are given tensile strength by the knots that tie them together,  and those common activities lead to greater trust, community, relationship.
- ♦  the net is the structure constructed through the relationships and the joint activities. This structure allows for autonomy in community. It 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 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'.

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[2] Castells, Manuel (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society* Blackwell p61

Watching out for broken threads, knotting together appropriate activities, putting out new threads to new participants. Working the net. Net workers.

## Why traditional approaches to outcome evaluation fail to capture the impact of networks

Structure, participation, relationship and action interrelate in a network. We need methods and approaches that recognise that the vital input from members, the joint action, the relationship-building, the consensus-building and the facilitation are integrated, and inter-related. Simply reading documents and interviewing key people will not do. We need to understand how a dynamic and evolving form influences its environment and is itself influenced by many contexts. We must move away from simple cause and effect, and attribution. We must build in participative reflective processes if we are to capture the diversity and breadth of our work.

## Contribution and input

One important contribution that we have to make to the debate is our understanding of how participation sustains our networks. These ideas started from a moment of inspiration, which like many such ideas, is very simple. Our discussions about participation come from the perspective of network coordinators. We know that the network works poorly if there is low-level participation. We generated lots of questions: about the added value of a network, net benefit to members, meeting needs of members.

Most of us are accustomed to the needs assessment approach. This enables us to secure funding, because we can demonstrate we are meeting needs. But it seemed to be fundamentally at odds with the nature of the network project. For instance, who is the network if not its members? If the members start to see the coordination point or secretariat as the network, then the secretariat starts to have to do all the work, and meet the needs of members. It is at this point that the tensions start to appear. The secretariat and the network get conflated. One becomes the other. The secretariat does more work, and the participants in the network expect more and maybe do less. The energy starts to change, and responsibility is relocated. As the secretariat or coordination is often the place where the funds are located, that is where the accountability resides to funders. It is also where

power, real or imagined, starts to get concentrated.

So we upended the idea of 'meeting needs' and decided instead to work from the starting point of 'contribution' and 'input'. After all, the input from participants is the base line resource, which it is then possible to circulate, share, exchange, and join-up with.

## Contributions Assessment

We developed the idea of a *Contributions Assessment.*

♦ a contributions assessment is the flip-side of a needs assessment. The aim is to hook into where the energy lies for the members, and involve people through their passion and drive to make a difference
♦ it maps what members believe they can contribute to a network project.: human resources, activities, skills, and energy. Value is placed on the interest and willingness to contribute, on what you can give not the size or extent of what you can contribute. In this way it pays attention to power differences, and obstacles to commitment
♦ it 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
♦ it enables members to be realistic about what they can commit to
♦ it provides a different kind of baseline assessment against which to evaluate.

We are currently working on how we can insert this idea into our daily practice of planning, working, reflecting and evaluating. We want to see what kind of impact such thinking may have on people's interest and willingness to participate. This is not simply a tool. It is more profound than that. It comes from a belief that we all gain not simply by having our needs met, but by offering to others what most inspires and interests us, by participating.

We have two early experiences of using the approach. For Codep, a platform for exchange and learning about conflict, development and peace, the network is farflung and mainly sustained through a newsletter, round-tables and an annual conference. The Committee wanted to undertake a needs assessment to see how better to respond to members. We piloted a workshop to see if we could better understand what members could offer and could commit to. The current series of round tables makes use of those inputs.

And one way Codep will be able to assess its achievements will be to see if those who offered to 'put in' got the chance they needed.

Creative Exchange, the forum for cultural rights and development, wanted to see what its members wanted. It designed a questionnaire that put emphasis on what members could contribute. The response rate was much higher than expected, and the information about what resources were 'out there' was vastly increased.

## Participatory Case Studies

Many networks grow out of a joint desire to change something. To get women's rights onto the agenda, to mobilise against the destructive power of light weapons proliferation, to relieve the debt burden of the developing world by pushing the powerful into action which will benefit the poor. The strength of a network approach to such lobbying tasks is the potential breadth of approaches and access made possible by a varied membership, the capacity for simultaneous and geographically-widespread action. Any evaluative process has to capture this richness, diversity and commonality, and be humble in the face of its limitations. Donors want to know about 'impact', often linked to a log-frame approach tied into funding for a secretariat. Yet the work depends on the members, and the members are often independent organisations with their own organisational priorities, which shift and evolve.

The approach we are working with seeks to draw out how a piece of lobbying work develops. The idea is to identify key moments of change, key actors, key strategies and key relationships using a time-line. In a network, this has to be contextualised across various countries if not continents, and often in relationships with other networks.

An example: The ABColombia Group is a small network of six large British and Irish development agencies and two observer groups. The paid coordinator participates in a broader Europe-wide network which covers Germany, Sweden, France, Belgium, Spain, Greece, amongst others. Many of these countries have similar national networks. The coordinator works closely with three networks of Colombian organisations, and two US networks. The work is a collaborative, and always changing enterprise, taking account of changes in context, policy and key personnel. The greatest strengths are the quality of analysis, the variety of relationships and the flexibility of action. The greatest challenge is maintaining trust.

Recent work has included lobbying against US and European Union support for 'Plan Colombia'. This involved high level meetings across the US and Europe, published analyses, public protest in Colombia and the US, mass lobbying of elected representatives, confidential briefings, questions to ministers in elected chambers, negative press coverage, speaking at conferences, and much more besides. We all of us who have been directly or peripherally involved have a story to tell about the influence our contribution had on decision-makers. We all know implicitly the theories of strategic change we work with and that underpin our choice of action. What we rarely do is articulate them and put them all together. The list of key points of change, actors, strategies and relationships will vary according to context, timing and knowledge that is not necessarily shared. It is this story-building that we are proposing as a way of understanding the complexity of lobbying networks and their work.

## Reflections and conclusions

It is too early to determine the adequacy and usefulness of the contributions assessments and the participatory case studies in improving the methodology to evaluate international networks. But one of the main outcomes of this work is that it is stimulating interest and discussion within the domain of international and domestic networks in the issues of power, relationships and participation.

In one current three-year project within the UK we are using the idea of the contributions assessment as part of an evaluation process for umbrella membership organisations, such as Bassac. This work has been funded by the Active Communities Unit of the UK Home Office. Lessons learned from the action research project have fundamentally altered the focus of the evaluation to explicitly include ways to measure participation, information exchange and the centrality of relationships.

## Glossary
ABColombia:  British and Irish Agencies working in Colombia
Bassac:  British Association of Social Settlements & Action Centres
CODEP:  Conflict, Development and Peace Network
FEWER:  Forum on Early Warning and Early Response
IANSA:  International Action Network on Small Arms
IFRTD:  International Forum on Rural Transport and Development