

A Training Module on Networks: Focusing on Functions and Developing Strategies

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Note for course leaders

- This is a model programme that should be altered to reflect the specific development needs of the group.
- You may wish to print out the Network Functions Self Assessment [form](#) and the
- SWOT [template](#) for use during the sessions.
- Please feel free to introduce and discuss local examples of good practice in this field

Networks: More than the Latest Buzzword?

“Power does not reside in institutions, not even the state or large corporations. It is located in the networks that structure society.” (Manuel Castells, 2004)

“We are some way from being able to structure public and organisational power in ways which really harness network potential...” (McCarthy, Miller and Skidmore, 2004)

“Africa’s strength lies in social networks which are invisible to many outsiders.” (Commission for Africa, 2005)

What do networks actually do?

Knowledge and Learning Networks: 6 Key Functions

**Community
builders**



Facilitators



Filters



Investor/providers



Amplifiers



Convenors



Community building



- Community building functions promote and sustain the values and standards of a network of individuals or groups
- Some make the transition from community builders to amplifiers and conveners.
- Community building networks often develop strong links *within* the network but none / few weak links outside the network

Example of Community Building: CIVICUS

- CIVICUS is an international alliance established to promote the foundation, growth and protection of citizen action throughout the world. It has more than 650 members in 110 countries
 - **Membership:** diverse, including networks and organisational sectors; policy and research, grant-making, youth, women, and the environment.
 - **Functions:** Community builder (through unifying events, service provision and newsletter/publications), filter (Civil Society Watch Index), investor/provider (governance capacity for CSOs), convenor (to a degree).
 - **Structure:** A hub in the developing world and regional offices in the developed world.
 - **Special characteristics:** CIVICUS headquarters and operational hub is located in Johannesburg, South Africa. It also has offices in Washington, DC and in London.

Filtering

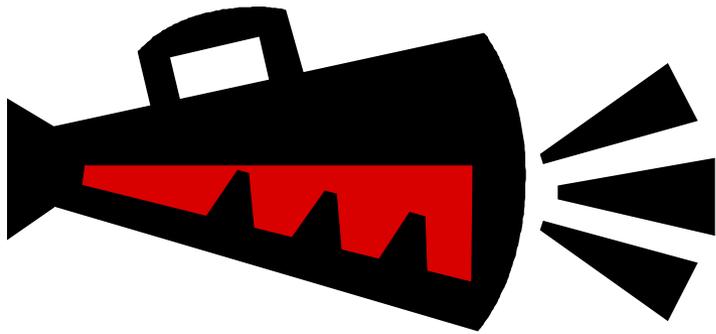


- The filtering function allows unmanageable amounts of information to be organised and used in a productive way
- Filtering networks can provide decision makers with a valuable service
- There is evidence that NGOs and think tanks can fulfil a filtering function
 - NGOs in the UK, for instance, often work to filter the evidence from several research sources

Example of Filtering: The Development Executive Group

- The Development Executive Group is a global membership organisation which provides members with useful information on the international development “industry”, facilitating intra-network communications and access to resources e.g. experts, contracts
 - **Membership:** firms, non-profit organizations, and individual professionals working in the international development marketplace.
 - **Functions:** Filter (from outside to the inside), community building (among development workers) and facilitator (facilitates access to other members and resources), provides (acts as a broker between donors/clients and members)
 - **Structure:** Strong management hub that filters information from the outside to make it relevant and useful to its members.
 - **Special characteristics:** emphasis on communications between partner members, multiple functions

Amplifying



- Amplifiers help take an private / complex idea or a message and transfer it to a public or simple –or understandable- one.
- Amplification can be used to disseminate a message or idea, and can also be part of a two way process of communication and feedback

Example of Amplifying: The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance

- The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance works through an education approach to tackle the issues of global trade and HIV/AIDS
- **Membership:** more than 85 churches and church-related organizations have joined the Alliance and bring a constituency to this common work of advocacy of more than 100 million people worldwide.
- **Functions:** Amplifying (the messages of HIV/AIDS, conflict and trade through churches), facilitating (coordination of actions among members)
- **Structure:** A small coordinating secretariat in Switzerland and a global committee. Other members are loosely attached.
- **Special characteristics:** A faith-based membership and use of institutional infrastructure of the Church provide the network with additional organisational strength. Its governance agreement does not then need to address too many non-executive issues

Facilitating



- Facilitating functions help members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively
 - Facilitator networks, like facilitators at a workshop help make things happen but do not need to be involved with the member's work.
- This function is often hard to differentiate from the others because, in theory, all networks are created to facilitate the achievement of any particular objective.

Example of Facilitating: MediCam, Cambodia

- MediCam is a network of NGOs active in Cambodia's health sector which seeks to link all health sector stakeholders
- **Membership:** NGOs
- **Functions:** Facilitator of policy influence, community builder (of health related NGOs in Cambodia), investor/provider (broker capacity building of MediCam members), amplifier/filter (via internal communications)
- **Structure:** A hub and many members but managed mostly via the internet and virtual communications. Full members are local institutions.
- **Special characteristics:** 3 types of membership: full membership for local NGOs, associate membership for international actors, observer membership for individuals interested in health issues in Cambodia. Observers have no voting rights. A minimum participation is demanded for members to keep membership.

Investing and Providing



- Investing networks offer a channel to provide members with the resources they need to carryout their main activities
- Broker investor/provider networks act mostly as facilitators connecting, for instance, donors and trainers with network members
- Networks can also be useful to invest or provide to third parties e.g. non-members

Example of Investing-Providing: African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), Zimbabwe

- The ACBF, based in Harare, is an independent, capacity-building institution
- **Membership:** 3 sponsoring agencies (AfDB, UNDP and the World Bank), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), 32 African countries and non-African countries and institutions.
- **Functions:** Investor/provider (capacity building and funding), facilitation (networking), amplifier (via publications and events), filter (of information in support of ACBF researchers)
- **Key structure:** A steering committee/secretariat that carries out the activities of the foundations.
- **Special characteristics:** It covers 2 regional organisations and 26 national focal points in 37 countries in Africa. It offers research grants as well as capacity building grants. It offers members networking activities as well as specialised workshops. It also finances workshops carried out by workshops.

Convening



- Convening networks bring together individuals and groups from different nationalities, disciplines, practices, or from different areas of the aid system
- Issues of authority structures, logistical capacities, credibility and media, communication and dissemination skills require special attention.
- Convening requires that the audience be more carefully defined and must develop context and audience specific tools
- Convening networks allow the development of systematic and sustainable linkages between researchers, policymakers and practitioners
- Convening networks need to carryout systematic and elaborate assessments of audiences, and also need to filter information to respond to a highly informed and specialised demand.
- Sequence of network development may culminate in a convening network in which all other functions come together.

Example of Convening: Coalition 2000, Bulgaria anti corruption network

- Coalition 2000 is an initiative of a number of Bulgarian non-governmental organizations aimed at combating corruption. It works at the agenda setting level drafting an Anti-Corruption Action Plan for Bulgaria, as well as implementing an awareness campaign and a monitoring system.
- **Membership:** International and governmental institutions, national NGOs and individuals
- **Functions:** Convenor (brings together various sectors and addresses their concerns), filter (information on corruption for easy access by all users), amplifier (of its work, findings of research and media), community building (help establish coalitions)
- **Structure:** A partnership network of partners from civil society, government and the private sector. Consists of a Policy Forum which sets work plans, made to determine the Coalition's work and is made up of representatives of all relevant institutions; a Steering Committee that provides direction and oversees the process; and a Secretariat that provides the management.
- **Special characteristics:** The network provides consensus and coalition building; collects information, disseminates (mostly to inform and shame) and influences policy through direct and indirect action.

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Functional focus: current and ideal

Name of Network: <i>Outcome Mapping Learning Community</i>		
Guidelines: Map the Current functional focus of the network by allocating 100 marks across the different functions. Then do the “ideal focus”. In pairs, discuss why you have made the allocation in question, and what might be required to move from Current to Ideal. Report back to the group.	Current Functional Focus	Ideal Functional Focus
Community Builders e (like CIVICUS)	50	10
Filtering Function (like DevelopmentEx)	15	15
Amplifying Function (like Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance)	15	0
Facilitation Function (like MediCam , Cambodia)	20	50
Investor / providers (like the ACBF)	0	15
Convening Function (like Coalition 2000, Bulgaria anti corruption network)	0	10

Task: Existing Balance, Ideal Balance

- Working in pairs
 - Map the current functional focus of the network by allocating 100 marks across the different functions
 - Then do the “ideal focus”
 - In pairs, discuss why you have made the allocation in question, and what might be required to move from Current to Ideal
 - Selected reports back to the group

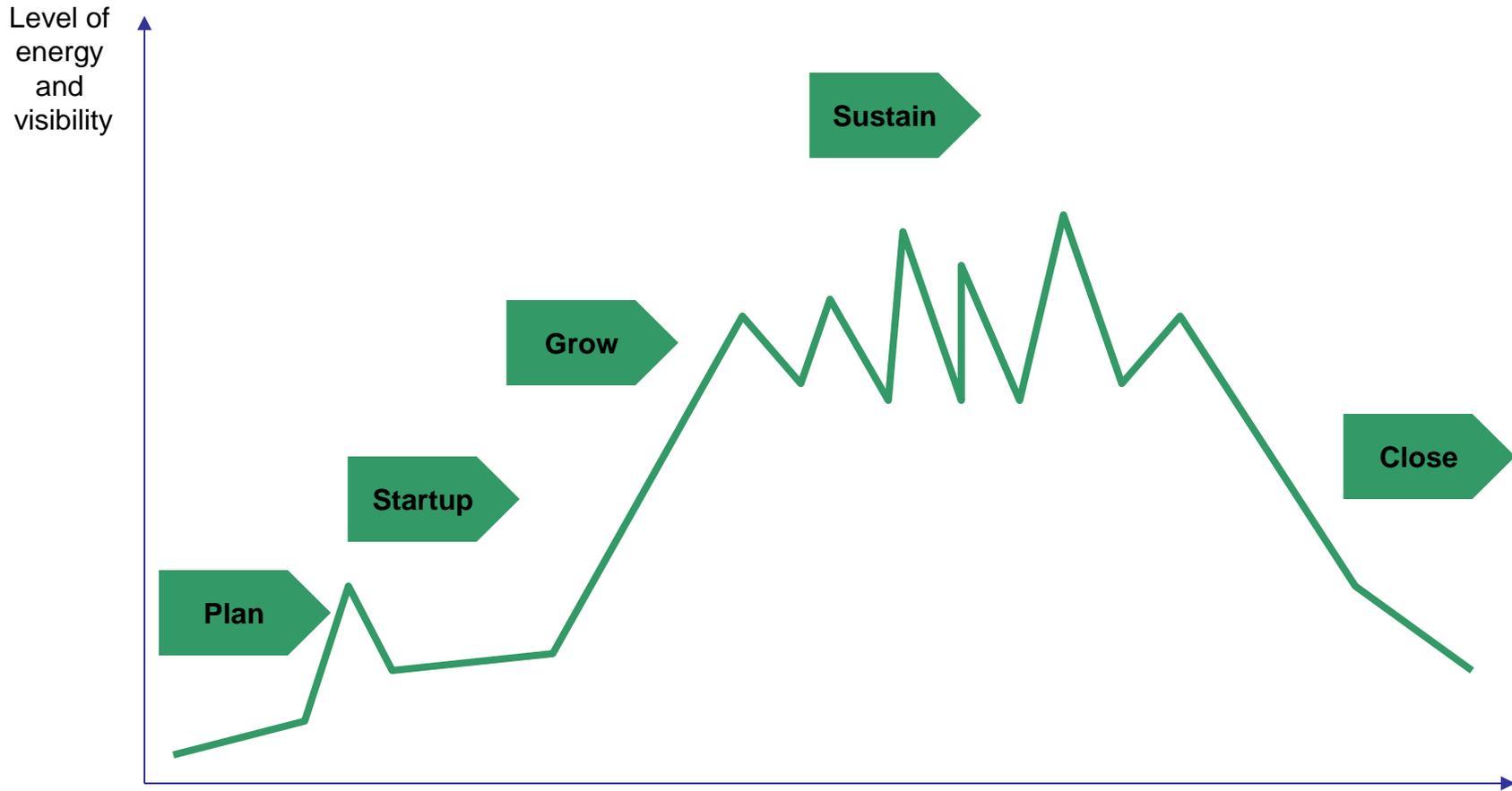
What do Networks Need to Do: Some Keys to Success

1. **Clear governance agreements** – to set objectives, identify functions, define membership structures, make decisions and resolve conflicts.
2. **Strength in numbers** – the larger the numbers involved the greater the weight given to networks.
3. **Representativeness** – is one key source of legitimacy (and thereby influence).
4. **Quality of information** – affects both the credibility and legitimacy of arguments.
5. **Packaging of information** – is crucial to effective communication.

What do Networks Need to Do: some keys to success

6. **Persistence** – change or influence often requires sustained pressure over a long period of time
7. **Membership of key individuals** – especially influential figures in the organisation / policy area
8. **Making use of informal links** – these can be critical to achieving many network objectives.
9. **Complementing official structures** – by their nature, networks add most value by complementing rather than duplicating official structures.
10. **Good use of ICTs and other networking opportunities** – ICTs are opening up great new potential for networking.

Life Cycle of a Typical Network



Plan and Start up

- Networks often emerge in an organic fashion and cannot always be managed into existence. They can, however, be fostered, by identifying areas where specific functions might be required or usefully performed
 - **What** is the purpose of the network?
 - **What** is the ideal functional focus of the network?
 - **Who** can contribute to achieving this purpose?
 - **What** are the common needs, problems and interests of potential members? What benefits?
 - **What** are the shared values and ideal ways of working?
 - **How** will it be structured and organised?
 - **How** will it obtain resources?
- Formal networks are often best launched with a meeting or workshop

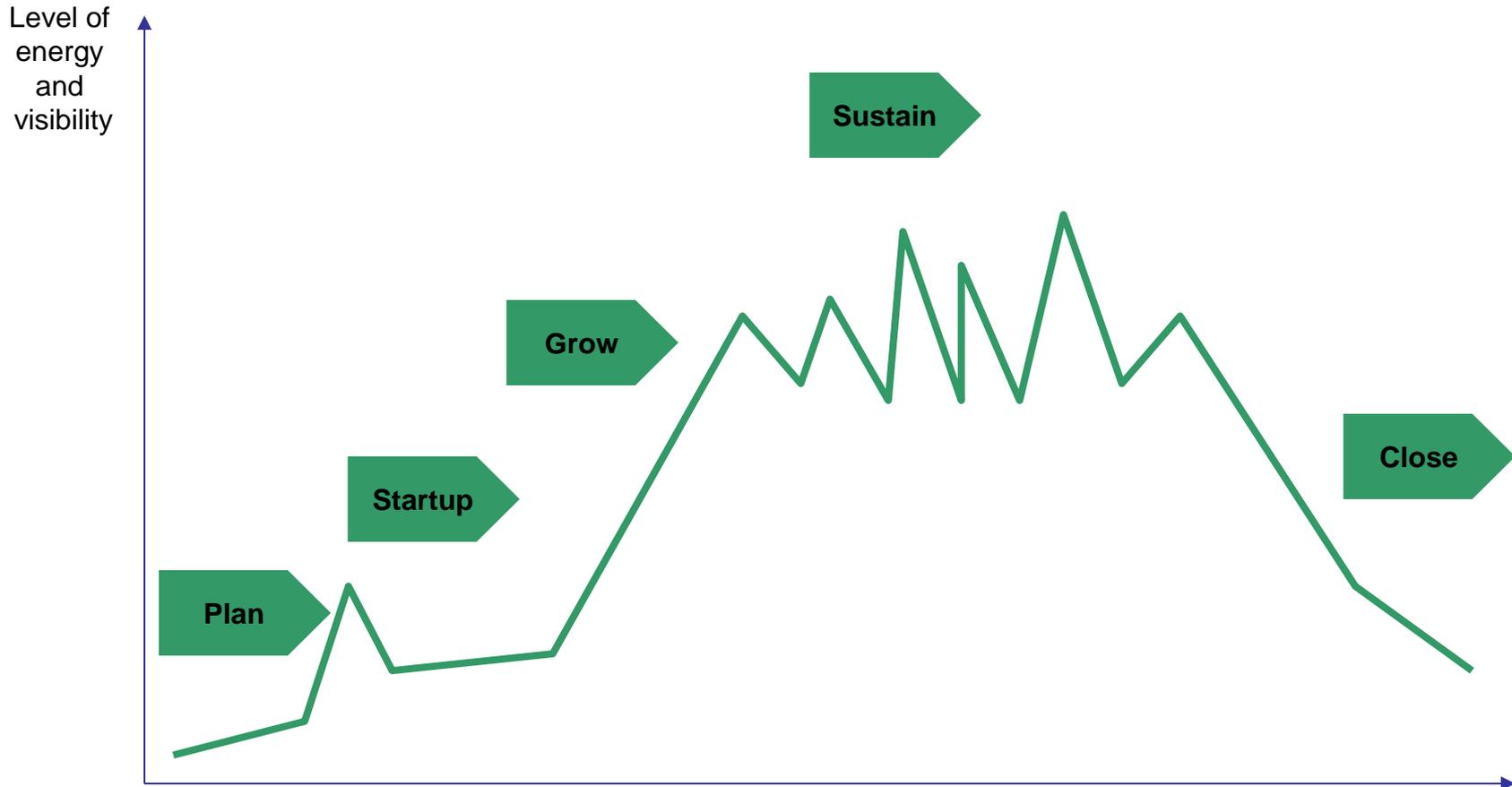
Growth and Sustaining

- After the initial excitement, the network needs to maintain interest and build commitment
 - face-to-face meetings
 - arranging social events
 - rewarding contributions
 - introducing new and challenging perspectives
 - getting external perspectives
- Community development requires
 - Rotation of roles and responsibilities
 - coordinator (spokesperson, organises, coordinates, facilitator (facilitates interactions within the community), knowledge manager (explicit knowledge resources management)
 - External and wider support for participation in the network
 - E.g. freeing up time and recognising the contributions of the community.
 - Member turnover needs to be addressed on an ongoing basis
 - ongoing recruitment “campaign”
 - Greater role in filtering, amplifying and facilitating
 - Ensure that social relationships are not stifled by too strong a managerial imperative

Closure

- Networks can come to an end naturally
 - members come to an end-point of the purpose
 - fragmentation into multiple smaller communities based around particular specialist subjects
- When a network ends
 - celebrate achievements
 - ensure that the relevant body of knowledge is captured and transferred

Where is your network now? Where do you want it to be?



Name of network :

Current stage:

Stage in ____ months:

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Examples of Strengths / Weaknesses

- Mission statement is [not] agreed
- Internal financial support is [not] available
- [No] commitment to knowledge sharing at senior levels
- [No] reputation for innovation
- Good [Bad] country-to-country relationships

Examples of Opportunities

- ICTs, technology
- Growing numbers of national staff
- Increasing relevance of topic (e.g. HIV-AIDS)

Examples of Threats

- No external funding for network
- Competing networks
- Partner information overload
- Highly fragmented approach to problem (e.g. humanitarian efforts)

- Individual / Group work
 - Fill out SWOTS for the network, based on where it is, and where it wants to be
 - Think about how to build on strengths, overcome weaknesses, capitalise on opportunities, and reduce the impact of threats
- Open Discussion
 - Were there common SWOT elements across the group?
 - Based on your SWOTs, did your development plan still seem realistic? What might need to change to achieve your goals?
- Think back to the current and ideal balance of functions
 - Does this still seem right? What might need to change to achieve the ideal functional balance?

Module Contributed by Ben Ramalingam



- Ben Ramalingam is a member of the RAPID Group at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and specialises in strategies for improving organisational learning and knowledge utilisation. Highlights from his recent work include:
- Programme management and analytical work for the Humanitarian Futures Programme, working closely with former UN Resident Representative Randolph Kent
- An evaluation of UNDP networks in the Eastern Europe and Central Asian regions
- development of an institutional learning and knowledge management strategy for Africa Humanitarian Action, a leading African-run NGO
- Setting up a global community of practice for users of the innovative Outcome Mapping methodology
- Provision of advice to the Swiss Government's development agency (SDC) on strengthening the institutional approach to sustainable livelihoods and empowerment issues
- Developing ODI's own knowledge management and learning strategy
- He can be contacted on b.ramalingam@odi.org.uk . More information about the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) Group at ODI can be found via www.odi.org.uk/rapid