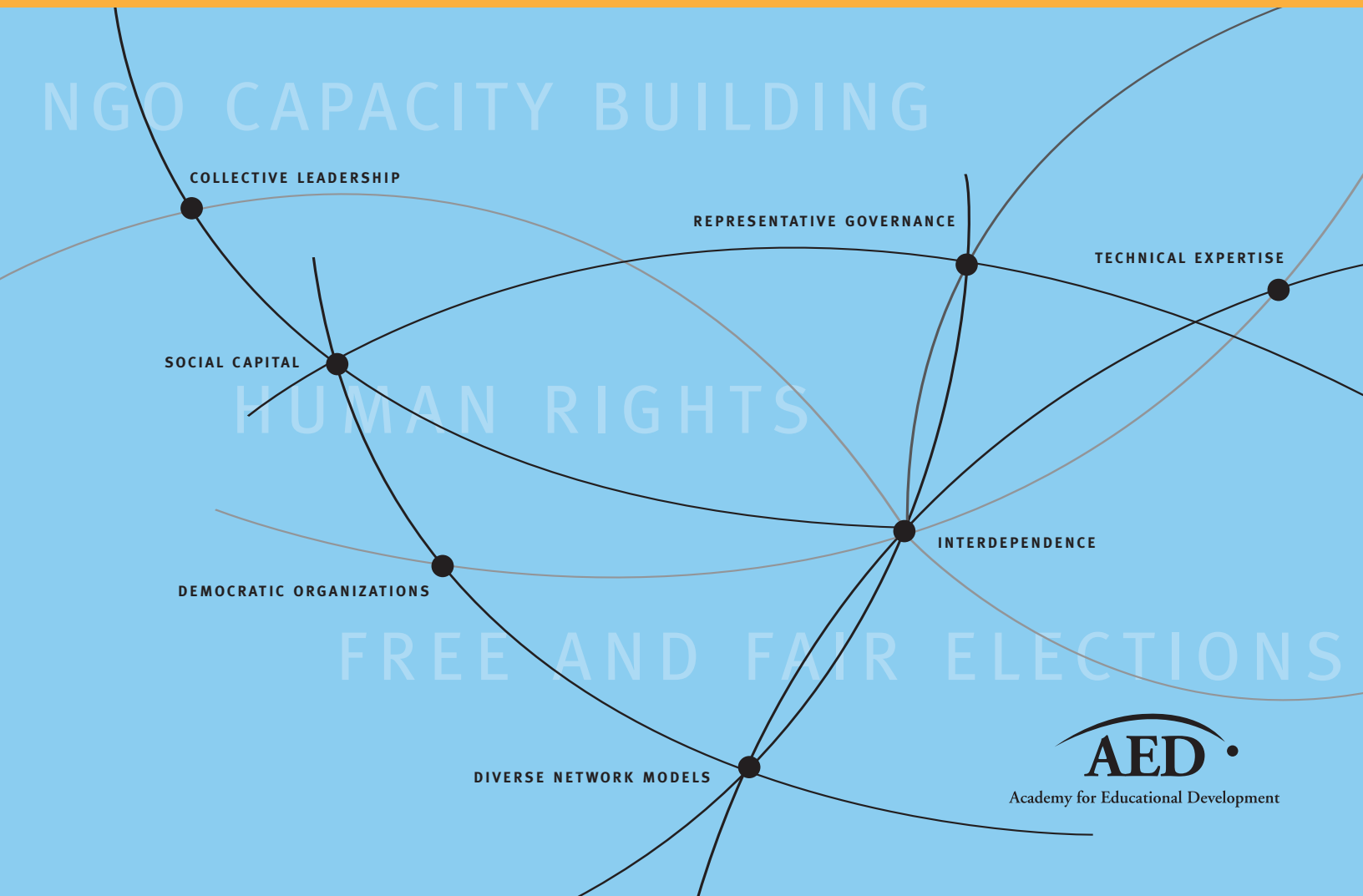






Supporting Civil Society Networks

IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS



AED
Academy for Educational Development



Academy for Educational Development
Connecting People > Creating Change

Founded in 1961, the Academy for Educational Development is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to solving critical social problems and building the capacity of individuals, communities, and institutions to become self-sufficient. AED works in all the major areas of human development, with a focus on improving education, health, and economic opportunities for the least advantaged people in the United States and developing countries throughout the world.

Cover Photos
Left: Bangladesh Human Rights Project
Center: Kastav Association, Croatia
Right: Red de Organizaciones de Ometepe, Nicaragua

Supporting Civil Society Networks

IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Edition 1

Darcy Ashman
with Chanya Charles, Ana Maria Cuenca,
Carmen Luca, Barney Singer, and Marty Schmith

Translated into Spanish by: Gorky A. Cruz

AED Center for Civil Society and Governance

December 2005

AED
Academy for Educational Development

Table of Contents

I. Introduction 5

II. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) 7
- a. What is a civil society network?
- b. What is the difference between networking, network organizations and networks?
- c. Why support civil society networks?
- d. What are some common challenges of supporting and working in civil society networks?
- e. Aren't there enough resources on networks already available?

III. Supporting Civil Society Networks: Essential Knowledge for Practice 11
- a. Civil society networks: Democratic forms of organization
- b. Common characteristics of effective civil society networks
- c. Diverse civil society networks: A typology of five network models
- d. Key issues in network design and capacity strengthening

IV. Key Priorities in Program Planning 19
- a. Clarify the purpose(s) and role(s) of civil society networks in programs and projects
- b. Align the shared purpose(s) of network members with appropriate network structure(s)
- c. Gear expectations for network success

V. Conclusion 22

I. Introduction

Civil society groups and organizations form networks to pursue aspirations for sustainable development and democratic governance that they cannot achieve alone. Networks can enhance the power and influence of citizen voice in advocating for policies and improving governance. Networks also can link service-providers to exchange information and resources or to develop coordinated delivery systems. Civil society networks have become partners of choice for many international development agencies seeking to maximize the reach, scale and impacts of their programs.

In practice, however, providing effective support to civil society networks can prove quite challenging, producing frustration and disappointment rather than satisfying and significant results. "*Networking means not working*," as one Nepali NGO leader sighed recently. There is a widespread need for better understanding of the unique features of civil society networks and how to work in and with them successfully.

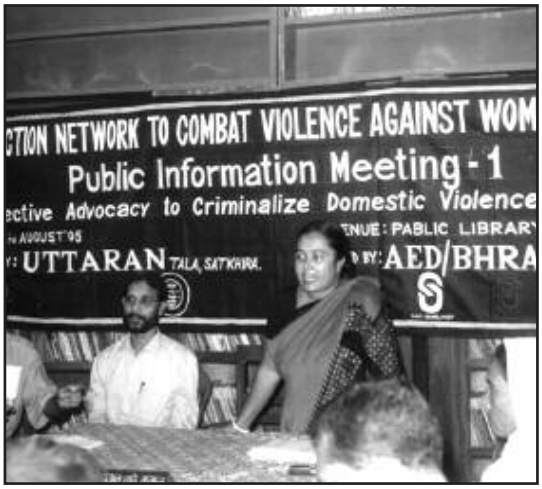


Photo: Uttaran, Bangladesh

Purpose and Organization of the Guide

AED's Center for Civil Society and Governance (CCSG) has created this guide to assist staff and program partners in civil society and donor communities to collaborate with civil society networks more effectively.[1] Whether our common goals are to strengthen civil society and democratic societies, mitigate conflict and build conditions for peace or contribute to sustainable social development, effective networks of civil society groups and organizations are often central to achieving successful results.

This is the first edition of a practical guide for use in all phases of program development, implementation and evaluation where civil society networks are involved. The guide should be useful when writing proposals, planning project start-up arrangements and designing monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

1. CCSG gratefully acknowledges financial support from several USAID funded projects, including the South Asia Regional Initiative for Equity (SARI-Equity), the Bangladesh Human Rights Advocacy Project (BHRAP), and the Capable Partners Program (CAP), as well as from the AED Social Change Group.

This edition of the guide provides a conceptual framework for understanding civil society networks and how to address key issues that arise when involving networks in international development programs. Section II addresses several 'frequently asked questions' about civil society networks. Section III discusses essential knowledge for practice, distilled from the authors' international experience, action research with civil society networks and other scholarship on networks. Section IV provides several suggestions for how to apply this essential information in planning and implementing international development programs. For those interested in further reading on civil society networks, the conclusion provides references to several web-based resources. It also includes contact information for the authors at CCSG so that readers can send us comments and suggestions for the next edition. We also are currently developing and testing several more practical tools with staff and partners globally for designing training workshops and providing technical assistance to strengthen capacities of civil society networks.

II. Frequently Asked Questions

Networks may be one of the oldest forms of social organization, pre-dating governments, churches, businesses and nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations. Almost everyone has had some experience in social networks, whether among extended family and friends, like-minded circles of activists or formal associations of professionals. Networks of civil society groups and organizations, however, are characterized by some distinctive organizational principles and properties.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

- What is a civil society network?
- What is the difference between networking, network organizations and networks?
- Why support civil society networks?
- What are some common challenges of supporting and working in civil society networks?
- Aren't there enough resources on networks already available?

What is a civil society network?

Civil society networks may be defined as civil society groups, organizations and sometimes, individuals that come together voluntarily to pursue shared purposes of social development or democratic governance. These purposes may include exchanging resources, addressing common social goals or expressing their identities as community or social group.

In civil society networks, member groups and organizations retain their basic autonomy, with their own identity, mission, and governance.

Networks can be composed of informal social relationships or formal bodies that are legally registered and institutionalized. Civil society networks may be known by many different names, including coalition, alliance, apex body, association, movement, federation, etc. Networks often choose their names based on their own identity, context and language. For the purposes of this guide, all of these examples are considered kinds of civil society networks.

Organizational arrangements often mistaken for networks include:

- Groups of less than 3 organizations, which are better described as partnerships; and
- Organizations with a single governance body/structure, even when they include many offices/units or were formerly independent organizations. Examples include a merger of two or more organizations, a network that has become a single agency or a franchise.

International NGOs must be aware that not every civil society network operating in a given

country is considered a local network. Networks must be an integral part of local or national civil society to be considered local networks. Some indicators include being governed by a significant majority of local organizations, having meaningful ties to local stakeholders and being seen locally as legitimate networks. Where international NGOs and their field offices are members of local networks, they remain in the background and guide their decisions based on the interests of the local context.

What is the difference, if any, between networking, networks and network organizations?

These commonly used terms can be confusing. Networking (a verb) can be understood as the act of inter-relating among people or organizations, such as to exchange information and other resources. Networks and network organizations (nouns), in contrast, usually refer to the arrangement of inter-linked people or organizations. A network organization is one kind of network that has become relatively formal, institutionalized and legally registered. See section III c. below, *Diverse Civil Society Networks* for further discussion of different types of networks.

Why support civil society networks?

A shared premise of many civil society programs and projects is that effective civil society organizations are essential backbones of thriving communities and countries. They make vital contributions to citizens' democratic rights and well-being by giving voice to citizen interests and providing services where they are needed. Civil society organizations are recognized globally for their success in shaping public policy, keeping government accountable, transforming conflict and promoting peace, defending human rights and ensuring that citizens have access to basic services.

Networks of civil society organizations, when successful, enable citizens to *amplify their voices* and achieve greater influence and impacts in policy, democratic governance and social change. In striving for results like building more peaceful and just societies or preventing vulnerable citizens from abuses of human rights, civil society networks can provide:

- Forums for people to share experiences, express identities, discuss and debate needed changes and craft strategies for action;
- Protection for those who are otherwise vulnerable to exploitation, abuse or retribution for speaking out;
- Jointly-governed bodies for coordinating campaigns and other kinds of joint action;
- Legitimacy with policy makers and other institutional leaders in democratic contexts, due to the numbers and social identities of those seeking change.

Effective networks can enable service-providing civil society groups and organizations to *increase their social development impacts* by extending their reach to poor and marginalized groups, expanding the scale of their programs or improving the quality of services. Such networks can provide:

- Linkages to facilitate communication and learning among groups and organizations with similar programs;
- Platforms to coordinate programs, activities and resources of multiple groups and organizations to achieve shared policy or program goals;
- Legitimacy with government and donors as accountable and cost-effective vehicles for implementing social development policies and programs that reach the poorest, most isolated or marginalized communities;
- Jointly-governed bodies for managing coordinated program implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Finally, civil society networks also provide benefits to democratizing societies over the longer term in their capacities as *democratic forms of organization*. Since networks are based on interdependent relationships among autonomous groups, they usual-



Photo: Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia untuk Keadilan dan Demokrasi

ly involve members in some form of joint communication, decision-making and governance.

- As forums, linkages and convening spaces, networks can be *opportunities for building social capital* among like-minded individuals and groups or among diverse groups that share common goals and aspirations. While any given forum or campaign alliance may be temporary, satisfying personal and institutional relationships characterized by mutual trust and shared norms for working together tend to endure and become resources for future action.
- As jointly-governed committees or institutional bodies, networks can be *schools for nurturing democratic citizenship*. To produce effective results, leaders must develop skills in democratic practices like building consensus, facilitating dialogue, and following democratic procedures for decision-making. Network members must develop skills in communication, coordination and legitimate decentralized decision-making.

What are some of the common challenges of supporting and working in civil society networks?

Although many civil society networks have achieved successful and even spectacular results in advocacy and other kinds of social change, many others have fallen short or even failed miserably. As a Vietnamese manager of a health program said, *"The **idea** of networking is good. We can do more when we work together. We can make a big difference because we have more power. But it's a big challenge — **how** to work together?"*

Challenges frequently experienced by civil society networks, donors and international NGOs include:

- Implementation results that don't live up to expectations of reach, scale or impact;
- Frustrating experiences with attempts at cooperation that lead to reluctance to join or support networks; and
- Networks that function primarily as funding arrangements and fail to sustain their program effectiveness after donor support ends.

Some of these challenges are due to the basic features of networks as relatively complex forms of organization. Because they involve autonomous organizations, each with its own mission, governance body and set of stakeholders to which it must respond, it can be difficult for members to align themselves in common arrangements for long. Networks often involve coordinating many levels of organization and interaction, from technical sharing to governance and issue-based action.

Networks are not only complex forms of organization; they are also paradoxical. Some of their features turn out to be both strengths and weaknesses; they must be coped with since they are impossible to avoid. Three such features include their *diversity*, their *financial resources* and their *degree of formal institutionalization.*

Diversity. Diverse missions, values, ideology, sector, nationality, etc. can strengthen a network by increasing the breadth of available ideas, stakeholders, reach, etc. Yet such diversity can lead to pervasive conflict and weak decision-making if

the value of the particular kinds of diversity represented in the network is not apparent to members and there is little mutual knowledge or trust.

Financial resources. Civil society networks, like individual organizations, find it difficult to achieve their aspirations without sufficient financial resources. Yet external funding is a weak kind of 'glue' for networks. If it is the primary motivation for creating or joining a network, members drop out when funding inevitably declines or ends. Money is a zero-sum resource; it breeds competition unless very strong alternative social norms and bonds exist. Networks that are clear about their visions and goals, mobilize available resources from members and engage donors to provide needed funding through collaborative relationships are more likely to succeed.

Degree of institutionalization. Some networks begin as informal cooperation among groups of organizations and then evolve into more formal institutions. Others begin as formal network institutions. Institutionalization can bring valuable assets to a network, such as enhanced legitimacy, a legal identity, more effective coordination and the capacity to receive grants directly. Yet there are several drawbacks. It is not uncommon for the process of institutionalization to change the quality of the network experience for members. Some active members may lament the change and even drop out because they valued a more informal and spontaneous network. New formal positions can create incentives for internal competition and weaken collaborative relationships.

Finally, administrative aspects of formal institutions, such as meetings, record-keeping, and financial management, can balloon to the extent that the network comes to feel like a bureaucracy and stifles the very initiative it needs to make it effective.

Aren't there enough resources on networks already available?

There are many interesting and useful resources on civil society networks available globally. Some of these have been created for specific sectors by sector-based resource institutes or networks based on their own experience, such as the International HIV/AIDS Council and Small Enterprise Education and Promotion (SEEP) in microfinance. Others are comparative analysis and syntheses of global case studies and surveys, like that by the International Forum on Capacity-Building (IFCB). Still others attempt to adapt principles of organizational development to network development. These resources and others can be accessed through the websites listed in the conclusion.

Other network guides and assessment tools have made excellent attempts to provide technical resources to assist networks to achieve their full potential. However, recent experiences with a range of networks in a variety of country settings suggest several important limitations in the extent to which current tools fit the diverse realities of networks and their developmental needs. Some of these limitations include:

- Many successful networks seek to remain informal or hosted by a single group or organization, yet the tools assume they are —or should become—separate formal legally registered institutions;
- Many networks evolve through a cycle of 'ups and downs,' yet many tools embody the notion that networks evolve through a linear sequence of phases;
- Some networks form to address a critical social issue and then disband, yet tools seem to expect all networks to become permanent institutions; and
- Although we encounter diverse types of networks, most tools are constructed on the basis of a single model, ignoring the capacity needs and potential of other network models.

III. Supporting Civil Society Networks: Essential Knowledge for Practice

An effective network, by definition, is successful in achieving its goals and impacts, satisfying its members and raising the resources needed to continue its work. The effectiveness of any given network can be assessed by the extent to which it accomplishes these three criteria.

Supporting Civil Society Networks: Critical Knowledge for Practice

- Civil society networks: Democratic forms of organization
- Common characteristics of effective civil society networks
- Diverse civil society networks: A typology of five network models
- Key issues in network design and capacity strengthening

Civil Society Networks: Democratic Forms of Organization

Networks are democratic forms of organization[2] in that they are self-governing groups of autonomous organizations. Networks are composed of interdependent relationships among member organizations. Interdependent relationships among organizations fall between independent relationships, like in market-based exchanges, and dependent relationships, like in hierarchies. The level of interdependence in any given network is a primary way to distinguish among different models of networks, as discussed below. Interdependent relationships mean that networks, like partnerships, work best when they are collaborative. Networks may involve different levels of seniority, responsibilities and decision-making, but since the fundamental nature of a network is the voluntary interaction of autonomous organizations, collaborative attitudes and practices are keys to successful results.

Common Characteristics of Effective Civil Society Networks

Effective civil society networks often share similar characteristics. They can be grouped in three broad areas: (1) history and external environment; (2) social aims and technical expertise; and (3) leadership, governance and management. No one of these areas can be ignored when designing, assessing or building successful networks.

(1) History and external environment

Successful networks are not created overnight, nor do they operate in isolation from their environments. New networks should consider the level of social capital existing among members and the extent to which the environment can be considered 'enabling' for the network's aims and prospective activities.

2. 'Democratic' is broadly defined to include all kinds of self-governance by autonomous individuals, organizations, sub-regions or countries. It does not denote any one system of democratic political governance, e.g. parliamentary, two-party, direct, etc.



Photo: SAATHI Nepal

"Networks are democratic forms of organization in that they are self-governing groups of autonomous organizations."

Pre-existing social capital. Relationships of mutual understanding, trust and norms of cooperation among network leaders and members are often found in successful networks. These relationships are among individuals and sometimes generalized to organizations. Networks founded on pre-existing social capital (among themselves and with key stakeholders) are more likely to organize themselves and produce satisfying results quickly.

Enabling environment (social, legal, political). Societies with long traditions of social networking and civil society seem to provide inherent knowledge and skills that participants bring to networks. Participants in other societies, characterized by more hierarchical and independent social relations, need more time to develop such competencies (e.g., Thailand or The Philippines versus Vietnam or Egypt). The existing political and legal environment is also extremely important. In some cases, governments prohibit meetings or otherwise restrict the rights of citizens to organize themselves. Laws also may restrict the fund-raising methods available to civil society networks.

(2) Social aims and technical expertise

Civil society organizations and networks take up many deserving causes. However, success appears to be most likely when issues gain high levels of attention and support from many constituencies. It is very useful to assess the extent to which networks' aims are valued by the societies in which they operate. It is also useful to ensure that networks not only have access to necessary technical expertise, but share common views of what constitutes expertise and high quality approaches to their joint actions.

Socially-valued aims and impacts. Successful networks are able to mobilize broad social action when they address issues that are very important to the societies in which they exist. Networks that address issues important only to a few local groups or primarily international stakeholders often fail to garner needed participation and support. They may become shells, continuing to exist, but unable to achieve much or win local recognition and respect.

Sound technical expertise to address social goals and achieve impacts. Even the most collaborative network will fail if it does not have a sound technical program strategy and the expertise to achieve its desired social impacts. Technical expertise may include a wide range of knowledge, skills and other resources, from legal or media expertise to social mobilization and legitimacy. Failure to reconcile different ideas about strategy and quality are often a source of tension

and conflict among alliances and networks which can lead to the emergence of factions.

(3) Leadership, governance and management

As democratic forms of organization, networks work best when leadership, governance and management are relatively collaborative, relying on *collective leadership, representative governance* and *coordinating management* rather than the relatively directive and hierarchical approaches common in single organizations. *Collaborative systems* for governance and management functions like record-keeping, communication and fund-raising/financial management are also important to network success, especially in larger, more institutionalized networks that must account to many members and donors.

Of course, in practice, collaboration is often an elusive quality. Leadership may be a matter of striving for a dynamic on-going balance between direction and consultation. Networks need direction and, in some cases, hierarchical levels of organization to divide responsibilities and coordinate activities. But in general, the theme of collaborative or shared direction should be kept in the forefront.

Collective leadership. Leaders hold the vision of collective as well as their individual organizational interests. Leadership requires skills of building consensus, resolving conflict, facilitating joint action, etc. 'Egos' are transcended for the good of the whole.

Representative governance (e.g. policy-making, ultimate authority and responsibility for the network). Governance must include all members, if not directly than in a representative model. Informal networks are usually governed and managed by an informal group of committed leaders. Where networks are more formalized and have a governance body, representative norms are often built into the legal code and social traditions. These can be adapted and strengthened for particular networks.

Coordinating management (e.g., operational decision-making and task accomplishment). Network activities usually get accomplished by the voluntary contributions of members, so those responsible for managing network actions must relate more as peers than as employers-employees. In informal networks, one agency may offer to perform the coordinating functions. The costs of the coordinating function should be recognized and, if possible, compensated. Finally, good network management involves collaborative relationships and systems.

Similar to good partnership relationships, mutual understanding, trust and shared norms of working together are vital. Since network members are autonomous, their participation is essentially voluntary. Members will be more likely to participate when they feel that their purposes for joining a network are being met and when they are satisfied with the experience of being part of a network. Active participation is crucial because it is the primary means through which networks achieve their shared purposes.

Minimal but functional systems for record-keeping and communication among members must be established. Shared information promotes the sense of collaboration and transparency essential to building mutual trust and confidence. When external stakeholders have contributed funds or other resources, systems for external reporting are also important.

Fund-raising and financial management. These are such important issues for networks that they deserve special consideration. Failing to understand the ways in which financial resources can affect network success is one of the key reasons why so many networks do not live up to their potential. There are three key ways in which successful networks deal with financial resources:

(1) *The most valuable resources are contributed by members.* Networks should always prioritize

their most valuable resources as the in-kind and financial contributions by members. This helps to keep them meaningful and accountable to members and members' primary constituencies.

(2) *The networks have developed collaborative relationships with donors.* Difficulties in relationships with financial donors are often cited as major challenges to effectiveness in civil society networks. A global study of successful civil society alliances by the IFCB in 2001 found that they were not part of international development projects. They did not receive major funding from donor agencies. Instead, they had received quick and specific funds for things such as convening meetings, publishing campaign materials, etc. International donors had also played important roles in raising public opinion and mobilizing support for the alliance causes in their home countries. Shared agendas and flexibility in reporting seem to be hallmarks of collaborative relationships between donors and successful alliances.

Donors and civil society networks do share common goals, so mutually satisfying ways of collaborating can be developed. Although there will be compliance obligations for donor funding, it is most helpful when they can be embedded within a larger collaborative relationships. Establishing such a relationship is the responsibility of all parties, including the donor, the network and its members.

(3) *Financial resources for the network as a whole are managed transparently.* When information about the receipt and allocation of financial resources is not shared openly within a network, suspicion and resentment can easily grow and damage relations. Once the funding arrangements and expectations have been negotiated jointly among the network and with any donors, ongoing financial management should be communicated frequently. If there are costs associated with financial management, they should be compensated and explicitly factored into the budget.

Diverse Civil Society Networks: A Typology of Five Network Models[3]

The previous section emphasized the common features of all networks as relatively democratic forms of organization. It noted that networks are composed of interdependent relationships among autonomous members. Interdependent relationships tend to work best when they are collaborative, with members working towards shared goals. The section highlighted a number of characteristics of successful networks, categorized in three broad areas including history and external environment, social aims and technical expertise, and collaborative leadership, governance and management.

Beyond these common principles and characteristics, there are several important ways in which civil society networks differ from one another. This section offers a new approach to distinguishing among types of civil society networks, especially those involved in international development programs and projects.

Currently civil society networks are expected to adopt similar structures, build similar capacities and strive for similar indicators of success and sustainability—even when these structures, capacities and indicators do not fit well with their specific realities. New networks often are encouraged to create relatively formal and complex structures to coordinate themselves (e.g., Secretariats, Executive Committees, etc.) when relatively simple informal structures would be much easier to manage. This can lead to problems like excessive hierarchy or using resources inefficiently.

One very useful way to distinguish among types of networks is according to their *shared purpose* and the *associated level of interdependence* needed to pursue it. Most civil society networks adopt one or more of five main types of shared purpose. Each of these types of shared purpose is associated with a level of interdependence from low to high. Table 1 below illustrates five different models of network that can be observed with this typology.

3. With the support of a research grant from USAID's Office for Private Voluntary Cooperation-American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (PVC-ASHA), CCSG is conducting research to explore and examine this typology with field offices and networks in four regions. The final research report will be completed by late 2006 and integrated into the next edition of this guide.



Photo: International Women's Day, Bangladesh

"Successful networks enable civil society groups and organizations to amplify their voices and achieve greater influence and impacts in policy, democratic governance and social change."

The first column of Table 1 identifies five types of shared purposes for networks often found among NGOs in international development. They include:

1. **To exchange information and learn from one another**, e.g., to learn more about crises and what each organization is doing, to share program approaches and identify best practices or to hear about innovative approaches to addressing common problems.
2. **To coordinate policies, programs or other activities**, e.g., to address issues such as duplication or gaps or to maximize use of resources for common purposes.
3. **To obtain common funding for members**, e.g., to augment the resources of each individual member or to allocate program funds in a given sector or theme to a range of individual organizations.
4. **To create new social value**, e.g., to carry out an advocacy campaign for policy or social change or to develop joint programs for service delivery.
5. **To strengthen members' common identities and interests over the long-term**, e.g., to build sector standards or enact legislation to create an enabling environment.

The second column shows the level of interdependence associated with each of the five kinds of shared purpose, ranked from low to high from top to bottom. The third and fourth columns show the changes in organizational autonomy that correspond to each level of interdependence.

When a network's level of interdependence is on the low end of the continuum (as shown in the top rows of Table 1), its members retain maximum autonomy and will require few changes to decision-making and governance. Conversely, when networks involve a relatively high degree of interdependence (as shown in the bottom rows), significant changes in formal decision-making and governance procedures are required.

Finally, the fifth column shows the types of network structures that are most appropriate for each type of shared purpose and level of interdependence. Networks adopt organizational structures to manage their interdependencies. Appropriate network structures enable networks to coordinate joint decision-making and governance as simply as possible. Network structures can range from being embedded in informal relationships to taking the form of complex bureaucracies with both elected and hired roles. Not every network structure is formal or complex. In fact, there are distinct advantages to light and lean network structures that can facilitate rapid coordination and joint action.

Table 1: Five Network Models

Shared Purpose	Level of Interdependence	Change in decision-making	Change in ownership of governance	Types of network structure
(1) Exchange information, learn from one another	Low	Little joint decision-making	None	Informal relationships; Single agency convenes mtg(s); Responsibility of member ass'n. to convene members
(2) Coordinate policies, programs, or activities	Medium-low	Limited joint decision-making by executives or delegates	Requires formal or informal agreement	Group or committee of authorized representatives
(3) Obtain common funding	Medium	Some joint decision-making, focused on finance	Requires formal agreement & often legal organization	Project management unit, hosted by one member or jointly created
(4) Create new joint social value, e.g. advocacy campaigns, service delivery	Medium-high	Some joint decision-making, focused on program action & finance	Requires formal or informal agreement; may involve new coordinating organization	Coalition, alliance, service delivery network. Coordinating organization may be hosted by one member or jointly created.
(5) Strengthen members' long- term common identities & interests, e.g. policy, legislation, reputation, etc.	High	Permanent joint decision-making by representation of executive or senior delegate	Requires formal legal organization, bylaws, etc. as provided by legal code and social norms/practices	Member association, apex body, federation, etc. Usually involves a general membership, elected board, and a hired staff who work in a coordinating unit or secretariat.

Key Issues in Network Design and Capacity Building

This typology of five network models makes it very clear that there is no single design or set of capacities to which every civil society network should aspire. Other things being equal[4], networks are more likely to be efficient and effective when they align their shared purposes with a network structure that is best suited to their level of interdependence.

There is nothing intrinsically better or more effective about a formal institutionalized network as compared to an informal one. Networks are an expensive organizational arrangement unless they are needed to achieve shared aims. The critical issue in network development, therefore, is to create the type of coordinating process and structure to fit the particular network, its collaborative aims, and its context.

Each of these five models has different purposes and structures. They will exhibit different behaviors and produce different kinds of results. A network to exchange information and foster learning will look and act differently than a network to advocate for policy change.

Even similar network models can exhibit very different behaviors and characteristics. Although policy-change coalitions and service-providing networks are both types of the fourth model, 'creating new social value,' in practice they look and act quite differently, as the following box highlights.

4. Such as technical or financial resources, an enabling environment, etc.



Photo: Signature Campaign, Bante Sheka, Bangladesh

Coalitions and alliances seeking policy and social change tend to be more dynamic, more flexible and have looser boundaries for membership. They may desire a greater degree of decentralized decision-making to enable local actors to organize locally meaningful actions within the context of a national campaign or movement. Ideological differences can be very hard to bridge, especially for longer periods of time.

Associations, federations and service-providing networks tend to develop more stable and bureaucratic systems. These systems enable them to provide more predictable services and handle administrative responsibilities such as staffing, financial management, reporting, etc.

Three related issues are critical to keep in mind when designing new networks and planning to build network capacities. They are:

- Any given network may involve several kinds of shared purposes and a combination of collaborative structures;
- Not all collaborative network structures involve formal legal organizations; and
- Over time, networks may or may not evolve to forms with higher levels of interdependence.

Any given network may involve several kinds of shared purposes and a combination of collaborative structures. For example, member associations often combine several kinds of shared purpose. One of their roles is to convene members to exchange information and learn from one another, as shown in the top row of Table 1. Although the association may have a relatively complex structure, it does not need to involve the entire structure (e.g., board, staff and members) in organizing the meetings. Instead, associations often create what could be considered a 'sub-structure,' such as creating a unit or hiring staff members whose responsibility is to convene and support the meetings.

Not all collaborative network structures involve formal legal organizations. The potential advantages of many networks are often found in the flexibility and speed they allow members to act jointly. Some alternatives to creating new formal institutions include:

- Making agreements to meet regularly and share information through social relationships, according to shared norms of collaboration, rather than through legal contracts;
- Appointing individuals whose job it is to coordinate member organizations. Supervise and reward for building mutual understanding, trust and confidence; and
- One agency volunteering to host coordinating staff or financial management responsibilities. Such effort and responsibilities should be transparent to all members and compensated if possible.

Over time, networks may or may not evolve to forms with higher levels of interdependence. A more interdependent network, with its associated formal network structure, is not necessarily stronger or more developed than one that is less interdependent. Some research suggests that networks can evolve to take on new kinds of shared purposes which involve greater levels of joint decision-making and governance as members develop mutual trust and achieve successful impacts together. Yet not all networks

need to become more interdependent if their shared purposes do not change.

Successful network initiatives are often found to have been led by individuals and organizations with a history of cooperating together (social capital). Formal institutional identities often are adopted after years of operating informally. Yet there does not seem to be evidence that effective networks follow a linear developmental path towards more interdependence or formal institutions. Consider:

- To achieve effectiveness, networks that started up as more interdependent formal institutions have needed to create more informal mechanisms to foster networking when the institutions are overly time-consuming or bureaucratic.
- Some networks start up collaborative actions to address a social crisis and disband when the crisis has been resolved.

Civil society organizations can benefit from participating in a variety of networks at different times and for different purposes. Networks can (and do) come into being, achieve their shared purposes, and then become less active or even disband until a new situation which warrants a network arises.

IV. Key Priorities in Program Planning

This section is designed to assist development practitioners to apply the information presented above in new and existing programs. There are at least three major priorities that should be considered:

- Clarify the purpose(s) and role(s) of civil society networks in programs and projects;
- Align the shared purpose(s) of network members with appropriate network structure(s); and
- Gear expectations for network success.

Clarify the purpose(s) and role(s) of civil society networks in programs and projects

Each of the agencies and individuals involved in designing and starting up programs and projects with civil society networks brings its own set of goals and expectations for the purpose and role of the network(s) in the program or project. Programs and projects seem to work best when ideas about purposes and roles are communicated clearly and openly with all those involved. It is not uncommon for different stakeholders—international NGO, donor, and network members—to have not only different, but divergent expectations of the basic purposes and roles of the network in the program. This can lead to many operational challenges and undermine success, so it is essential to make time to discuss and clarify purposes and roles.

In preparing for such discussions, review the major types of shared purposes for networks discussed above. Also consider whether the following common reasons why donors and international NGOs involve civil society networks in programs and projects are relevant:

- Social impact, e.g., carrying out advocacy campaigns to influence policies and change social norms or practices;
- Program management, e.g., coordinating funding to minimize costs of reaching numbers of civil society organizations and communities for similar program goals and impacts or to influence a sector;
- Building institutional capacity, e.g., strengthening networks' abilities to serve their members and build civil society as a social institution or sector; and
- Developing technical quality, e.g., linking practitioners to share lessons learned and identify best practices.

For international agencies, it is important to select networks that not only share their program goals, but also can demonstrate a track record and evidence of commitment to the



Photo: Bangladesh Human Rights Project

"Align the shared purpose(s) of network members with appropriate structure(s)"

issues. When scanning the environment to identify potential networks, remember that some may be dormant. Since networks often emerge to address a need and then become relatively inactive once the need has been addressed, it is easy to miss potential networks of social capital that could be reactivated for new programs.

Once in dialogue with potential program partner networks, an environment for good communication needs to be established, so that each participant in the discussions can voice its own ideas about purpose(s) and role(s) and listen to those of others. Once sufficient agreement has been reached, the next priority is to ensure that network members have the opportunity to clarify the shared purposes of the network and to establish an appropriate network structure.

Align the shared purpose(s) of network members with appropriate network structure(s)

Table 1, Five Network Models, and the related discussion of it should be very useful in thinking through and designing the network structure for new networks or those in need of renewal and capacity strengthening. This can help to avoid the problems caused by too many or competing purposes for a network or by adopting a formal and complex network coordinating body before the network is ready for it. Of course, the table is not a blueprint for network design; at this stage it is intended to spur thinking and inform discussions. Final decisions about specific network purpose statements and structures will reflect many considerations, such as agency policies and local regulations.

Gear expectations for network success

Since we are in a relatively early stage of involving networks in international development programs, it is difficult to know what can be expected realistically in terms of outcomes and impacts in a given timeframe. Three considerations are suggested:

- Previous experience and level of success;
- Network-building and social change outcomes; and
- Sustainability.

Previous experience and level of success. The level of success of any given network is often largely influenced by the previous experience of its members in working together. Therefore, assess the history and external environment of the network, as suggested above:

- If the members have little previous experience together, build in time to develop relations and learn to work together, e.g. build the network as short-term/intermediate outcomes.

- If they are relatively well-known to each other and have a successful track record, the chances are better that they are capable of a rapid start-up and achieving large-scale results.

Network-building and social change outcomes. It is easy to confuse and conflate two very different kinds of outcomes: those for building the capacity of networks to be effective in their shared purposes and roles and those for actually achieving changes in the societies of which networks are a part. Again, it is useful to clarify the extent to which one or both kinds of outcomes are desired and to sequence program and project activities appropriately. If significant capacity building is needed in order to achieve social change outcomes, it should be provided early in the program and the network should be assisted to integrate and apply the new capacity effectively.

Sustainability. Finally, goals and expectations for the sustainability of a network should be reviewed and clarified. A sustainable formal network institution may or may not be desirable. As discussed above, it usually takes some time before a network has developed the experience, social capital and recognition that warrants a formal institution. Such institutions require a good deal of resources to maintain. Once a network achieves success in changing an unjust policy or practice, there may be no more need for it to exist.



Photo: Bangladesh Human Rights Project

However, effective networks are a great resource for any civil society, for all the reasons noted above in the introductory sections. Although it may not be wise to sustain—if even to create—formal institutional networks, it would often be strategic to focus on sustaining the relationships, contacts and mutual knowledge that are developed by working together. Sustaining the social capital and related resources inherent in shared experience is overlooked all too often as a significant positive outcome of programs and projects involving civil society networks.

V. Conclusion

We hope this first edition of the guide has provided some useful information, insights and suggestions for supporting civil society networks in international development programs. We expect the next edition to include an updated typology, based on our research findings, as well as a new section with more tools for practical use, such as sample training designs for workshops, questionnaires for assessing network capacity and suggested indicators and scales for monitoring and evaluating network development and performance.

In the meantime, those who wish to consult additional references on networks may wish to visit our website, NGOConnect.net, which includes sections with resource on networks as well as many other topics of interest concerning NGOs. An excellent guide for setting up and strengthening networks also can be found on the website of the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations, www.icaso.org.

Finally, we expect this guide to be a living document that changes with new experience, research and feedback.

Please send any comments or suggestions to us at the following email addresses:

dashman@aed.org
ccharles@aed.org
acuenca@aed.org



Photo: Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia untuk Keadilan dan Demokrasi



Academy for Educational Development
Connecting People > Creating Change

1875 Connecticut Avenue,Washington D.C. 20009 • 202-884-8000

In July 2011, FHI 360 acquired the programs, expertise and assets of AED.



FHI 360 is a nonprofit human development organization dedicated to improving lives in lasting ways by advancing integrated, locally driven solutions. Our staff includes experts in health, education, nutrition, environment, economic development, civil society, gender, youth, research and technology – creating a unique mix of capabilities to address today's interrelated development challenges. FHI 360 serves more than 60 countries, all 50 U.S. states and all U.S. territories.

Visit us at www.fhi360.org.