

Uniting through networks: The art of fostering ICT for development (ICT4D) networks

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In my project I had a problem with connectivity which I raised in one of the network meetings. Someone suggested doing video-recording of best practices. If you have a server and digital videos, you have an interface for the media. It was a tremendous idea to put the videos on a local server. We tried it on a pilot basis and it worked perfectly. We are now trying to upscale this idea.

(Network participant in Ghana)

Introduction: capacity building for networks

Within the current focus of development agencies on capacity building, one of the subsets of activities is network development. The expectation is that by engaging in equitable, dynamic, collaborative relationships, independent entities will achieve much more than if they would work alone (Smutylo 2005). Networks create a number of benefits for their members such as access to information and know-how, understanding of needs and political agenda, strengthening of capabilities, pooling of resources, enlarging personal networks, partnerships, testing ground for new ideas, work division, benchmarking, etc. (GTZ 2006).

The interest in the process of networking has been growing during recent years. Creech & Willard (2001) mention four fundamental drivers behind this current interest:

- The emergence of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in 1980s and 1990s has made (global) networking much easier. Global information exchange and learning with people from different parts of the world has now become possible for large parts of the world.
- A ‘sense of urgency’: the growing complexity and inter-relation of major social, economic and environmental problems and the failure of some of the narrow approaches to solve issues such as HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation and poverty alleviation makes multi-stakeholder and widespread learning unavoidable and highly needed.
- A ‘sense of frustration’ among public and academic actors because of the marginalisation of many research endeavours and the lack of impact that research has had on public policy.
- An interest of the public sector and civil society organisations in knowledge management, due to private sector experiments and the impact of knowledge management in the private sector

For the purpose of this paper, we would like to adopt the following definition of a network:

‘A network is any group of individuals and or organisations who on a voluntary basis exchange information or goods or implement joint activities and which is organised in such a way that individual autonomy remains intact’ (Church et al 2002).

Networks have existed for a long time and are important social capital. What is new though is the conscious effort of development agencies to nurture these networks: the capacity building of networks. Capacity building of networks includes the whole range of activities, from funding and advisory services to supporting and extending networks in their roles and functions. In this paper, we will use the words capacity building and capacity development interchangeably.

ICCO/ECDPM (2004) state that almost all civil society networks are characterized by four types of activities:

- The provision of services to members (e.g. information and training);
- Learning together to raise members’ level of understanding (e.g. by organizing exchange visits, workshops and/or meetings);
- Advocacy to influence the public debate or policies;
- Management of the unit to facilitate the network process.

Many networks aim to engage in more than one type of activity; some even in all four. Though the latter is not impossible, it is critical to realise that different activities require different kinds of structures, processes and levels of formalisation: form follows function (Creech 2001); any structure will only permit a network to effectively pursue certain activities, while rendering it less effective in other fields. For instance, an information sharing network requires less degree of formalization than a network aspiring to become a legitimate partner in policy processes. Clearly, a broader range of activities demands more complex management structures. At the same time, one should not one-sidedly focus on structure and formal design, since network activities and relationships are more important than the formal structures. The practice of networking, i.e. the voluntary exchange of information between autonomous participants, is the main objective of any network (UNDP/UNSO 2000).

Networking is 2 percent about technology and 98 % about management of relationships.
(Creech and Willard 2001)

In a recent workshop about ‘Networks as a form of capacity’ (Zinke 2005) some critical questions were raised about capacity building for networks: what capacities do networks require in order to function effectively? How do external actors influence networks? There is a sense amongst development practitioners that intervention repertoires have drawn mostly from human resource and organisational development literature and may be inadequate for understanding of and making informed choices about intervention strategies for network development (Bolger and Taschereau 2005). The authors found a considerable amount of descriptive literature as well as guides or guidelines, but fewer reflective and analytical case studies.

This paper will attempt to contribute towards developing network capacity development by sharing and reflecting upon IICD’s five years of practical experiences. Even though



Picture 1 TIC Bolivia present itself to peer networks in other countries (2003)

generalizations about networking experiences can sometimes be cumbersome because ‘each network evolves under specific conditions’ (UNDP/UNSO, 2000), we would like to share some observations on the dynamics of nine ‘unique’ networks, and IICD’s evolving ideas on network capacity building. IICD’s networks are unique in the sense that they all focus on the domain of ICT4D, which is a rapidly evolving domain. As a result, there is a great need for knowledge sharing in order to stay up to date of recent developments. Part of the domain

knowledge is explicit knowledge, and actors within the ICT4D domain may be relatively more technology-savvy than actors in other development domains. These specificities should be kept in mind while comparing these networks to similar networks active in other fields.

IICD’s approach to capacity building for networks

Rationale

The International Institute for Communication and Development - IICD (www.iicd.org) - assists organisations to realise locally owned sustainable development by harnessing the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs). We work in nine countries in Africa, Latin-America and the Caribbean to improve development within the fields of education, health, governance, the environment and livelihood opportunities (especially agriculture) through the use of ICTs.

Box 1. Building blocks of national ICT4D networks

IICD and the network representatives have developed a set of knowledge sharing and communication tools, known as ‘building blocks’. These are combined and implemented by each network in various ways to suit local needs and situations. Some building blocks are:

- **Face-to-face meetings** - workshops, seminars, meetings and forums;
- **Content development** - documenting local lessons on the uses of ICTs in development for electronic and hard copy publications;
- **ICT4D website** - locally developed websites highlighting news, research, events, ICT stories and other information;
- **ICT4D newsletter** - a local newsletter – available in print, via e-mail and/or web – depending on local needs;
- **E-discussions** - electronic discussions to share experiences and ‘meet’ other likeminded people in a cost-effective way;
- **Media, awareness raising and lobbying** - reaching out from the networks to inform and influence policy makers by repackaging and presentation of lessons and content into easy-to-read formats that appeal to non-specialists;
- **Research** - one way to answer questions on the impact and usefulness of ICTs for development is to do practical research around local projects;
- **Cross-country activities** - international exchange workshops, ‘peer assist’ trajectories and skills development programmes.

When our number of projects began to expand, partners indicated that finding information on the status and impact of local ICT-enabled initiatives was difficult. Without opportunities to learn from other experiences, informed decision-making was problematic. The wheel was being invented over and over again and scarce resources – be it in terms of human, financial or knowledge – were being wasted. Partner organisations identified an urgent need to set up effective platforms where local ICT for development (ICT4D) plans, progress, results and experiences could be discussed and assessed. IICD was interested in facilitating horizontal communication between its partners in a country, to establish a learning channel that would empower projects on the ground to find their own answers to problems, without relying too much on IICD for responses to their question.

In Jamaica, many 'ICT4D' buses are driving - but no one knows how many, who's driving those buses, in which directions they are going and whether there are alternative routes - or shortcuts – to be taken.

Network participant in Jamaica

To this effect, IICD facilitated the development of national ICT4D networks. In 2001, IICD organised a workshop for participants from all of its partner countries. During the workshop, two overall objectives for the networks were formulated:

- To share country-specific information, knowledge, methodologies and lessons learned on ICT-enabled development;
- To raise awareness on ICT4D-related issues and influence policy and development processes, by communicating relevant content to local public, private and civil society policy makers and their advisors.

Furthermore a range of knowledge sharing instruments or tools known as 'building blocks' (see box 1) were identified, based on the underlying idea that each country would select, adapt, mould and combine these according to local needs and situations.

Nine national ICT4D networks

Since 2001, IICD has supported nine ICT4D networks (see Box 2). Some, such as those in Tanzania and Uganda, started as early as 2001, others, such as the network in Ecuador, more recently. Although IICD was wary of local groups formalising their networks too

Box 2. ICT4D networks in nine countries

Bolivia: www.ticbolivia.net

Burkina Faso: www.burkina-ntic.org

Ecuador: www.infodesarrollo.ec

Ghana: www.ginks.org

Jamaica: www.ict4djamaica.org

Mali: www.mali-ntic.com

Tanzania: www.swopnet.or.tz

Uganda: www.i-network.or.ug

Zambia: www.ebrain.org.zm

quickly, all networks are now officially registered organisations, a legal prerequisite in order to be able to receive funds. Legal entities vary from NGO to Company Ltd under guarantee. Most have developed a formal governance structure and constitution, which includes a steering or coordinating committee (board) comprising members. The involvement of these governing bodies in steering the network varies. In Jamaica, for instance, the board assumes a strategic function, whereas in Tanzania the steering committee decides on both direction and the detailed activities.

The governing bodies are generally elected, though the extent of involving members in such elections varies. In several countries, experiments are done with 'working groups', 'track leaders' and/or 'think-tanks' to involve members more actively in planning and execution of activities.

Box 3 The case of the Ecuadorian ICT4D network - Infodesarrollo.ec
by María Belén Albornoz, Chair of the network

Infodesarrollo.ec started in 2003 in an informal way by bringing together a few organisations working on ICTs as a tool for development. Key in the structure is the secretariat, hosted by one of the member organisations, who has a coordinating role to develop the annual activity plan, and to implement the plan engaging as many members as possible. This stage focuses on exchange of experiences, whereas the dissemination of information in the use of ICTs for development is the main role of the network.

The network started off with an ‘envisioning’ workshop for interested stakeholders, followed one year later by a member workshop to further develop mission, vision and objectives for the network. The governance structure was also put in place, with a board to work with the secretariat and a president to act as the spokesperson and representative of the network. Membership was formalized in an inter-organizational agreement and criteria for new members were elaborated. For the first time, participation in policy processes was considered as a role for the network and since then, the network has added research, training, sensitisation and organisation of forums to its range of activities. Through these changes, we experienced that more activities ask for more organisation.

This has led the network into a new phase: the development of a sustainability strategy, motivated by its increased participation in ICT4D at national levels, and as a result, increased added value and visibility. The network has been legally registered and processes and mechanisms are being put in place to consolidate the engagement of its members. The network has continuously evolved from its inception, increasingly responding to the need to work together towards a joint vision.

It is difficult to envisage where Infodesarrollo.ec will be in two or three years time: we are still discovering what capacities we have, and what the expectations of our members are, whilst searching for the most adequate network ‘model’. Through pilot activities we expect to develop a set of core activities and ultimately, a clear identity of the kind of network we aspire to be.

All nine networks have established a secretarial office, and have hired staff including a (full- or part-time) remunerated coordinator in charge of the network’s day-to-day activities. Some networks have employed an assistant, others a part-time content developer, administrator and/or technical specialist. In Ecuador and Jamaica, the secretariat’s office space is hosted by a member for free, in other cases the network has needed to rent office space, adding to fixed overhead costs.

The networks are characterized by large differences in terms of membership. In Ecuador and Bolivia we see organisational membership, Ecuador counts seventeen and Bolivia eighteen members, both with growing interests by other actors to come on board. In the



Picture 2: Togunet presentation during a workshop in 2003

other countries membership is predominantly based on individual participation. However, participant numbers do not necessarily reflect the varying degrees of activity. ToguNet in Mali has a membership of roughly 180 (consisting of 80% individual members and 20% organisations); in Ghana these figures are 230 (89% individuals, 11% organisations). Discussion groups consist of up to 400 subscribers. The networks all have their stronghold in the capital and struggle with reaching out to the various regions within the country. Tanzania is the only country where an independent charter has been established in one of the regions, whereas Bolivia has two regional knowledge-sharing groups linked to the national network. Some networks have developed thematic subgroups, such as in Mali, Ghana, and Jamaica, or thematic nodes such as in Uganda.

Several networks have secured co-financing besides IICD, ranging from local contributions in Ecuador and Jamaica (FLACSO, CETID, HEART/NTA, MCST, Cable & Wireless) to international development funding (IDRC, UNESCO, Civil Society Foundation, APC, etc). Ghana, Ecuador and Jamaica have so far been most effective in securing co-funding, with IICD supporting 35%, 60% and 40% respectively of the total network budget projected for 2006. Generally, it has been a challenge to forge public-private partnerships, though in-kind support for certain events and activities has been forthcoming from the private sector. An interesting initiative in Jamaica, the Jamaica Collaborative for Universal Technology Education (J-CUTE), has recently been able to draw in public, private and not-for-profit partners within a longer-term collaborative framework.

Even though the concrete outputs of most networks are impressive (in terms of newsletters, forums, workshops, etc.), it is difficult to measure their intangible effects in terms of changed practices of members, improved quality of services of member organisations and enabling policy environments. Network Progress Reviews (NPRs) have so far been conducted in Bolivia (2004) and in Ghana (2005).

The Bolivia NPR highlighted the need for a methodology to systematize ICT4D experiences. In terms of products and services, members prioritized the website and e-bulletin and expressed the wish to have a local 'ICT Stories' competition. Media and public relations were identified as vehicles for increasing the network's overall visibility. In terms of processes, members indicated a strong need to influence public ICT policies; stressed the importance of organising face-to-face meetings amongst members (through focal groups and regional meetings) as well as a need to partner with other ICT4D actors to strengthen political legitimacy. Exploring co-financing opportunities was also advised (IICD 2004).

The NPR in Ghana collected anecdotal evidence to measure the network's results. Analysis of individual stories showed that through network participation, members have picked up new ideas, tools and working methods; they have been exposed to new knowledge areas (e.g. open source), have built new constructive relationships, and have acquired materials to support them in their daily work. As ICT4D is a relatively new and rapidly developing field, all members saw the added value of network activities in channelling information and bringing actors from various disciplines together. The value of the network in influencing the policy environment was, and still is, much less recognised. (IICD 2005).

IICD's capacity building interventions

In supporting national ICT4D networks, IICD fulfils multiple roles through its team of knowledge sharing officers based in The Hague:

- *Process advisory*: improving the network function by offering advice and feedback to the networks on their development. This may take the form of advice on internal governance structure, membership outreach and engagement strategies;
- *Expert advisory*: IICD provides direct advice on ICT4D issues (e.g. on website development or sustainability planning) or, when necessary, draws in the expertise of third parties, such as consultants;

- *Brokering/'info-mediary'*: connecting North-South as well as South-South knowledge and information. Working with nine ICT4D networks, IICD can support cross-fertilisation of experiences by bringing in and feeding back experiences from other ICT4D networks and activities;
- *Mentoring/Coaching*: IICD often coaches either the network coordinators and/or the networks' board members in the development and implementation of their activities;
- *Grant-management*: supporting the write-up of feasible year plans, approval of grant requests, drafting of contracts, monitoring the disbursement, use of funds and overall progress of activities;
- *Facilitating 'peer assist' trajectories*: promoting South-South learning through supporting exchange visits between networks.

Upon explicit request of local partners, IICD has been acting as a network board member, but does not in principle want to partake in internal decision-making functions to strengthen local ownership and avoid confusion of roles.

Network capacity building: learning by doing

Networking with a purpose

IICD and the networks have jointly identified two overall objectives, related to knowledge sharing and to policy participation. In practice however, all networks have started with knowledge sharing activities. For example, in Uganda the network started in 2002, but only in 2005 did it start engaging in policy activities, when it was invited by the National Planning Authority to facilitate a policy process to integrate ICTs into Poverty Eradication Action Plans. Similarly, it took the Bolivia network a few years to become interested, and a legitimate partner, in the National ICT Strategy process. The initial network interests thus clearly focused on exchanging concrete ICT4D experiences. Having developed such a knowledge base, the two networks could then move to become more involved in horizontal coalition building among public, private and NGO partners in support of advocacy efforts. Other networks are still wrestling to shape their role in policy participation and to find a consistent direction for members' advocacy interests.



Picture 3: The network coordinator of Ghanaian GINKS

Finding the right focus will always be a challenge for networks (SKAT Foundation 2004). Having a clear purpose, i.e. knowledge sharing and policy participation around ICT4D issues, has proven to be a strong concept in our case. In some cases, member organisation's mission alignment with the network's mission has been quite crucial for network growth, as they have become the drivers of the network.

Based on these experiences, in future IICD will pay more attention to identifying organisations with aligned

objectives to the network's objectives for coordination roles, paying less attention to policy participation from the immediate start, and focusing on the most urgent felt need in the start-up phase. Sharing of experiences and joint learning seem the most pertinent activities before a network can participate in policy processes at a national level. Some networks may opt to specialize in one or the other role.

Box 4: The three levels of sustainability

1. Institutional sustainability

Institutional sustainability includes the ability to deal effectively with outreach and membership issues. Additionally, it involves exploring what type of 'network model' best supports the overall network objectives and member dynamics. Generally speaking, network structures seem to be evolving and there is no blueprint for the 'best structure' (also see Box 3, the Infodesarollo.ec case)

2. Political sustainability

Political sustainability entails the network's ability to build strategic alliances and leverage those relationships for change, as well its capacity to effectively represent a broader constituency. If well managed, the legitimacy of a network should be built in a way that ensures an increasing reputation in the field of ICT4D. For instance, the need to forge alliances with strategic partners in the National ICT Policy Process served in fact as the catalyst for the Bolivia network to open up - in order to gain political legitimacy and build its constituency base. Finding a common cause that 'pressures' the need for striking alliances can be instrumental in building both institutional and political legitimacy.

3. Financial sustainability

Financial sustainability deals with how the network mobilizes resources for its activities and overhead costs. We can make a distinction between local resource mobilization (member fees, fees for services, etc.) and grant seeking (from donor agencies and private companies).

(Schaeffers 2006)

Working towards sustainability of a network

Initially, IICD focused strongly on the financial sustainability of networks; however, additional experiences and reflections have led us to broaden this perspective to include institutional and political sustainability (see box 4). Though sustainability of a network may not always be feasible or desirable, and networks may become obsolete if the network's relevance as perceived by its members no longer exists. Nevertheless, IICD hopes the networks will flourish beyond their initial funding period.

With regard to institutional sustainability the key lesson is to regularly check the level of involvement of members against their needs, interests and motivations, in both formal and informal ways: does the network sufficiently reflect members' interests and therefore, do they feel genuinely committed to the network? An important factor for an effective knowledge sharing network is trust, which encourages members to engage in exchanges and conversations. In the early stages, 'networking' greatly depends on the initiative, craftsmanship and endurance of a core group of a few committed members, often including a coordinating member. We observed that trust then develops within this core group, which is in some cases referred to as the ICT4D 'family'.

The challenge many networks currently face is to attract more active members and open up the core group to new ideas and initiatives; to find a balance between internal exchanges and external perspectives. In some countries, such as Ghana, Burkina, Zambia and Bolivia,

it has proven difficult to move away from a core group of members to distributed leadership within a broader and more representative group. To address these and related issues, a monitoring and evaluation questionnaire focusing on the impact of networks, has been developed and is currently being applied in several countries (Ecuador, Bolivia, Uganda, Ghana and Mali). The outcomes are expected to be instrumental in better gauging and responding to the members' needs, in addition to informal feedback loops.

In terms of political sustainability, experience has demonstrated that having a few highly respected practitioners or ICT4D champions/pioneers can make a difference for the network's reputation. Hence it is essential for a network to identify a number of these people and to engage them in the network activities in one way or the other. This could be in the form of a think tank, as the network in Ghana is piloting, rather than the network's 'regular' activities.

Concerning the mobilisation of resources, IICD supports a substantial part of the networks' overhead costs and set of activities, and will then encourage efforts towards financial sustainability. Networks will typically start with annual grants of about 40.000 Euros. Funding will then increase, based on the phase and concrete development of the network, until it attains more autonomy in resource mobilisation. It has generally proven to be difficult to find additional sources of funding in the early phases of the networks, when networks are still 'finding their feet', developing their knowledge base and seeking to create added value. However, over time, with increased performance, visibility and legitimacy, diversification of funding generally becomes more feasible, as demonstrated by the networks in Jamaica, Ecuador and Uganda. Mali network activities would almost completely come to a halt, if IICD funding were to stop. The lesson is to be flexible, help the network explore co-funding options, but not until it is possible to show tangible value. Communicating support intentions clearly from the beginning is also important, as members then know what kind of support, and in what time frame, the network can rely on. The intensity of support has led some networks to believe that IICD will continue to sustain the networks indefinitely, but the future of our support still has to be worked out.

Our experience in Ecuador has shown that mobilising members' contributions from the start can be an effective means to reduce the network's dependency on external donor funds, as well as strengthening local ownership. In Bolivia, where historically IICD's partner organisations have formed the core of the network, it has proven to be much more difficult to secure alternative sources of funding. The Zambia network is one of few where members pay fees, though many others are currently actively exploring options to do so.

From an early stage, IICD tries to focus the network's attention on sustainability issues. Though the networks have to make their own choices, IICD tries to trigger thinking to help make some critical choices more consciously. This involves amongst others intended levels of overhead costs (e.g. employment of staff), possible cost-recovery strategies (membership fee structures, etc.) or the network structure. In future, IICD will be more cautious in supporting overhead costs for a new network without first exploring the possibility of member contributions. The art for the network capacity builder is to fund 'developmentally': with cautious investments in the beginning, encouraging networks to prioritize their needs, maintain a clear focus and spend funds in a balanced manner.

Financial resources should be available to enable networking throughout the cycle, but should never be the driving force to set up a network.

Supporting network development through multiple means

ICCO/ECDPM (2004) observe that it takes up to five years before a network establishes itself and produces concrete work, which is at odds with donor funding which often diminishes when a network matures. The same report addresses the role of donors and some of the unanswered questions, such as:

- Is it possible and/or desirable for a ‘donor’ to play several roles at the same time, to be sponsor and participant, to be donor and advisor?
- What instruments have been effective in safeguarding networks from becoming too donor-driven? What can donors do themselves?

IICD has faced some complex dilemmas because of the inherent contradictions in the multiple roles it fulfils. It has also experienced, to a certain degree, confusion about its roles in the various networks. Being an independent advisor implies helping the networks to better achieve *their* goals, without having an individual or organisational stake in the outcome. However, at the same time funder interests must be represented (worth the investment) and accounted for. As a result, IICD faces the tension between supporting the



Picture 4: Infodesarrollo.ec (2003)

autonomous network building process as well as the pressure to provide results to its own donors. Thus, IICD oscillates between steering to achieve results, and facilitating to ensure local ownership and demand-responsiveness. IICD engages in partner agreements: being a partner implies a horizontal relationship. In practice however, this relationship may end up being perceived as more hierarchical. For instance, during the progress review exercise in Ghana, it surfaced that, because coming from the ‘donor’, IICD’s suggestions for public forum topics were as ‘instructions’ rather than advice. Building a constructive, open and honest advisory relationship is far more complicated when the advisor holds decision-making power over the funds on which the network is dependent. The sooner the network is therefore capable of having a diverse funding base, the healthier for the advisory relationship.

Such dilemmas continue to challenge us in our work and no easy fixes are available. In terms of network development, the lesson that can be shared from this experience is that roles and interests should be explicitly expressed, if not altogether separated, in order to avoid unnecessary confusion and to make these dilemmas more transparent and open to discussion. Even so, at this point IICD chooses to continue to combine the various roles, as it is not easy to find other funding agencies for this type of networks. IICD values its close advisory relationship, because it feels it is well positioned to play the information brokering role, providing access to a wealth of experiences, southern views and perspectives on ICT4D.

Stimulating knowledge sharing and learning within the local context

Undeniably, observing network development in nine countries in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean provides IICD insights into cultural differences, their effects on fostering

development and the necessity to adapt networking approaches to the local context. Working within a context of impeding factors such as competition for funds, fundamentally different ways of thinking (between private sector and civil society) or engrained cultural practices provides inherent difficulties to knowledge sharing. Building trust and confidence by ‘nurturing’ networks and encouraging an open knowledge sharing platform is paramount to the success of networking. One of the lessons is that the building of trust to enable ‘real’ knowledge sharing does cost time, so one should be patient and invest in relationship and trust building.

Clearly, there are cultural differences between countries which affect networking. Some countries have a more ‘individualistic’ mentality, whereas others have a more ‘collectivist’ mentality. Individualism focuses on the degree to which a society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. A high individualism ranking indicates that individuality and individual rights are dominant within the society. (<http://www.geert-hofstede.com>). Different countries appreciate the contributions of individuals and organisations in networks differently. For example, Jamaica values the creativity and innovation that individuals bring to the networking process, whereas Bolivia emphasizes the need for organisational membership in order to gain political legitimacy, building its constituency and strengthening sustainability. A recommendation is that one should not ‘impose’ a preference for either modality, but let the network decide where to put the emphasis.

Consequently, networking ‘models’ vary, from networks functioning as ‘communities of practice’ to those that strive to provide services to members, or take part in policy processes. For instance, the network in Ghana felt it had been operating rather as a community of practice, driven by individuals passionate about ICT4D. The Jamaican network is considering an overall members’ charter that brings together individuals as part of loosely formed thematic communities (e.g. sector-specific groups), with organisational membership that provides the political legitimacy and constituency needed for participation in policy processes. It is believed that individuals will bring creativity and innovation to keep the network going, whereas organisations bring in critical resources for the financial and political sustainability of the network.



Picture 5: A planning session with members (Ghana, 2005)

An advice taken from Huysman and De Wit (2002) is that rewarding knowledge sharing financially should be done with prudence: when knowledge sharing becomes routine there is no question of extra effort taking place and a reward in itself can actually prove to be counterproductive. Instead of financial incentives, the authors argue that a ‘tacit reward system’ could be more effective on the long run. In fact, in some IICD-supported networks, such as in Mali, networking champions refused the monetary reward that was offered them by the network to facilitate thematic groups. Their argument to take on a leadership role without monetary compensation was that taking on the responsibility enabled them to get more visibility in their own fields and, for some of them, could even result in paid consultations from other development partners. A recommendation here is to stimulate knowledge sharing ‘attitudes’ at organizational levels, and negotiate time with

organisations so that individuals learn to perceive knowledge sharing as part of their daily work, rather than an extra task performed outside of regular working hours, as is often the case with individual members. Recently, IICD has actively started promoting this concept internally by incorporating 'knowledge sharing' in its own internal appraisal reviews; the idea is also being promoted in some of the networks.

Working with local capacities

In order to fulfil their two major networking objectives, members need to develop networking skills, policy participation skills, journalistic and systematisation (documenting) skills, effective communication skills, organizational skills, negotiation skills and, for the coordinating committees and networking champions, leadership skills. Many of these capacities are – to a greater or lesser degree – already available in the nine country networks that IICD works with. As such, the collaboration is less about transferring skills from a Netherlands based organization to local organizations, than about identifying already existing capacities and strengthening those. Moreover, it is about complementing and sharing of skills between networking members, as well as mutual learning by all stakeholders involved in the networking process.

IICD fosters the use of exchange visits and peer assist mechanisms between networks from countries with similar issues. For example, a peer assist workshop organised between Bolivia and Ecuador enabled both networks to strengthen their policy participation skills and to learn from their respective experiences. This peer-to-peer networking mechanism provides members with capacities and 'troubleshooting tips' to enhance their networks' performance, and allows partners to assist each other with information networking.

Capacity building is a learning process which benefits both the 'builders' and the participants. It is a mutually reinforcing exercise that involves sharing of skills and expertise needed for networking. It entails respect for values and attitudes inherent to respective countries, for people, organisations and networks all functioning in different ways. Capacity builders therefore have to find and assess the local skills and capacities available and then stimulate their uses for the benefit of the networks. Networks add on to already existing resources, structures and individual and organisational commitments. When skills are not available locally, arrangements can be made with external resource persons, while taking into account that one needs to be careful with 'replicating' external solutions.

Another lesson is that people working to develop and support networking should adopt the appropriate attitude. Taking time to 'listen before talking' is the golden rule (though not always easy) that IICD tries to apply constantly. Sometimes processes and outputs do not always move as we expect them to. However, when we take the time to explore the real reasons behind this, we will often find solid reasons for why things have moved differently. It is therefore not only about active listening, but also about asking the right questions. Sometimes this is difficult to gauge from a distance, since face-to-face interaction is not always possible.

It has been observed that networks that build on existing initiatives and experiences are generally more successful. We would however like to make one cautionary note, based on our networking experience in Ecuador, namely that one should first carefully assess the

stability of existing mechanisms and institutions, clarifying any intellectual property issues, before making investments to develop the network further.

Conclusions

IICD's experiences relate to national, multi-stakeholder networks, operating in the fast innovating area of ICT4D. It is important to keep this in mind in terms of the 'replicability' of some of the lessons for other network capacity developers who may work within a different context.

1. Pay attention to involve organisations in the core of the network whose objectives align with the network objectives;
2. Building a strong knowledge sharing network and trust relationships comes before active policy participation as a network;
3. Thinking about sustainability issues is not limited to resource mobilisation, but includes institutional and political sustainability factors;
4. Network sustainability is increased when respected individuals and practitioners are involved;
5. Build a strong core group, then help the core group to recruit new ideas and fresh leadership;
6. From an early stage onwards, be clear on your support as a network capacity builder, and focus the network's attention on sustainability issues. Help the network to think through some critical choices in terms of its identity;
7. Combining multiple roles as advisor, funder and broker is complex (but not impossible);
8. Fostering the required levels of trust for knowledge sharing takes time and is often underestimated;
9. Capacity building does not mean building from scratch, but working with existing realities, which requires the right 'listening' attitude (contradictory to the expert advisor attitude that may be expected from network capacity builders).

After five years of supporting nine networks with advice, grants and brokering connections across countries, we have gradually changed our practices to incorporate these insights, which is helping us achieve better results both within the organization, but also and more importantly, in the networks.

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Abstract

The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) has five years of experience building the capacity of multi-stakeholder networks in the field of ICT for Development (ICT4D) in nine countries. The networks engage in knowledge sharing, advocacy and awareness raising activities to a different extent in each country.

The authors draw lessons from practice and through reflection on their experiences with the networks. Yet, despite common goals, each network is unique and therefore develops its own dynamics. In this paper, the authors aim to contribute to the practice area of capacity building for networks by sharing IICD's approach, practical experiences and evolving insights on supporting and 'nurturing' the networks.

All in all, IICD chooses to combine different roles, of independent advisor, funder and facilitator in stimulating knowledge sharing and learning, while paying due attention to cultural differences in the different local contexts. Building trust and confidence by nurturing networks and encouraging an open knowledge sharing platform is paramount to the network's success. Listening before talking, taking the required time, asking the 'right questions' are simple but golden rules IICD tries to apply to ensure local ownership and to build on existing initiatives and experiences successfully.

About the authors



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