Networks:
More than the latest buzzword

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From the G8 to anti-globalisation protests to Al Qaeda, we hear that networks are the most effective organisational model. It is the latest buzzword. So, too, in the field of international development. Researchers on social capital, organisational management and globalisation all talk of networks. Practitioners are setting up numerous networks and showing that they can improve the use of information in policymaking.

Networks are structures that link individuals or organisations who share a common interest or set of values. They can be formal or informal. There is a considerable body of evidence suggesting that networks can help improve policy processes through better information use. They may, for example, help marshal evidence and increase the influence of good quality evidence in the policy process; they can foster links between researchers and policy-makers; bypass formal barriers to consensus; bring resources and expertise to policy-making; and broaden the pro-poor impact of a policy.

A good example is the Huairou Commission. Until the mid 1990s grassroots women's groups were kept out of discussions at global level. In less than ten years, the Huairou Commission has gone from an informal, loose coalition into a global network of more than 11,000 grassroots women's groups.

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But they don't always work. In Ecuador, twice in the past five years, well-organised networks of indigenous peoples and peasants have played critical roles in removing governments from power. In both cases, however, they failed to reverse the policies they opposed; the new governments maintained the status quo. Their organisation at the grassroots did not translate into the capacity to influence policy.

But networks can play a role in linking information to policy. Stephen Yeo, a leading thinker on networks, identifies the following six non-exclusive functions for networks. They can act as:

Policy researchers from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union networking at a workshop in Moldova, June 2004 (©ODI)

Filters which 'decide' what information is worth paying attention to and organise unmanageable amounts of information. For example, the Development Executive Group is an international forum which provides and exchanges information on project and employment opportunities.

Amplifiers to help take little-known or little-understood ideas and make them more widely understood. Advocacy or campaigning NGOs such as the Jubilee Campaign are amplifying networks. The FairTrade Foundation, for instance, works though a network of those licensed to use the brand to amplify the fair trade message.

Convenors which bring together people or groups of people. For example, Coalition 2000 in Bulgaria brings together CSOs, government institutions, the private sector and donors in various coordinated initiatives to fight corruption.

Facilitators to help members carry out their activities more effectively. For example, the MediCam network in Cambodia gives members access to services and facilities such as meeting rooms, a specialised library, communication means, training opportunities and access to policymakers and donors.

Community builder networks, promoting and sustaining the values and standards of the individuals or organisations

within them. The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) promotes best practice and minimum standards of learning accountability and performance among humanitarian agencies.

Investor/Provider networks, offering a means to give members the resources they need to carry out their main activities. The African Capacity Building Foundation, for instance, provides technical assistance, skills and funding to its policy research partners.

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Networks can play more than one role. Indeed, they usually carry out several functions simultaneously in order to maximize their chances of influencing policy. The specific mix will vary.

However, different functions require different structures for maximum effectiveness. Networks designed for – and effective at – one role may not be good at others. Introducing new functions might compromise the original objectives. Specific networks will need to consider carefully how many and which functions they can carry out successfully.

Influencing policy through networks is rarely straightforward but we know more and more about what works. There are 10 commonly cited 'keys to success':

- Clear governance agreements which set objectives, identify functions, define membership structures, make decisions and resolve conflicts.
- Strength in numbers: the larger the numbers involved the greater the political weight.
- Representativeness is a key source of legitimacy and thereby influence.

- Quality of evidence affects both credibility and legitimacy.
- Packaging of evidence is crucial to effective communication.
- Persistence over a period of time is often required for policy influence.
- Key individuals can facilitate policy influence.
- Informal links can be critical in achieving objectives.
- Complementing official structures rather than duplicating them makes networks more valuable.
- ICT: New information and communication technologies are increasingly vital for networking.

In developing countries, the challenges of networking are significantly greater that in the North. Economic, social and political environments are more difficult. Capacity is more limited. Resources are scarcer. The right kind of network is therefore crucial. Different keys open different types of policy door.

Networks deserve some of the recent hype. But they don't change the basic rules of economics, politics or human nature.

Even so, we are not making enough use of networks. Many actors are operating in isolation and responses are often fragmented. There is scope – and need – to use networks more to influence policymaking in international development.

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