

Capacity of networks

The nature of civil society networks

Networks are a special form of organisation. In the words of Taschereau & Bolger¹, their growth can be seen as “a response to an increasingly complex world which has spawned new arrangements for collaboration among like-minded or like-interested parties, as well as actors that have not traditionally worked together”, with information and communication technology as a major enabler. Furthermore, “much of the enthusiasm around networks is rooted in a belief that the capacity of networks is greater than the sum of its parts. It is generally believed that networks can generate capacity and have an impact on social change processes which is greater than that which could be achieved by members acting alone.”

Membership of networks

Membership varies according to the type of network – formal or informal, paid or free.

Aims and activities of networks

Engel (2005) suggests that civil society actors are motivated to join networks to:

- *upgrade their performance* through collective action and access to relevant knowledge
- *upstream - join forces* and search jointly for new ways to understand and intervene in complex situations, sharing strategies, address global problems
- *upshift their impact*: to take the focus of their activities to a higher, eg national level, to effectively influence policy making

Coordination and decision-making in networks

The report by Taschereau & Bolger suggests several key differences in the way in which networks operate, compared to other types of organisation:

- Whereas the typical organisation is mandated to act by a governing body, *a network is constituted through the “voluntary coming together” of individuals*,
- While organisations are structured more or less hierarchically to meet their goals, *networks have a wide variety of flexible structuring patterns which evolve in response to member commitment*
- Where organisations possess codified roles, functions and practices, *networks are fluid and organic, and functions and practices emerge over time*
- While organisations enjoy structures decision-making and accountability to the board or other stakeholders, *there is negotiated order and reciprocal accountability in a network*.

Key factors affecting the success or failure of networks

Endogenous (internal) factors:

- Pre-existing social capital – strong relationships among like-minded individuals and organisations with some capabilities who are motivated to learn and act together because they believe they can better achieve their purpose through a network
- Opening of political space
- Other factors: leadership with vision, credibility and legitimacy

External factors:

- External interventions that help to open up political space
- Facilitation of exchange and the coming together of isolated individuals with competencies and organisations with capabilities
- Access to external resources (e.g. funding, means of communication)

¹ Taschereau and Bolger, Networks and Capacity, ECDM, 2004