CSO Networks

Consolidating INTRAC Learning from Experience

Notes from meeting 19ᵗʰ Dec 2008

Why learn about networks?

CSO networks are increasingly important development actors. INTRAC has a lot of experience in working with CSO networks from our consultancy work as well as our programme and research experience. Work with networks has become more frequent in our consultancy work over the last few years and as we look at 2009 this trend looks set to continue. CSO networks are also core to INTRAC Central Asia strategy.

Despite this experience, most of the learning remains with INTRAC individuals. This learning needs to be shared so that we can consolidate what INTRAC knows about networks. This knowledge can then better inform our consultancy and programme practice.

Twelve INTRAC staff and associates met for just over half a day on Dec 19ᵗʰ 2008, with support from Sida. The group included: Brian, John C, Rod, Rick, Janice, Tom, Raj, Cornelius, John Hailey, Brenda, Sarah M, Idil). These are the notes from that day. They are not meant to be a coherent analysis of learning, but an aide memoire to remind participants of the ground that we covered and to be a first step in highlighting issues to deepen in the future.

INTRAC's Considerable Experience

Off the top of our heads we thought of more than 50 different experiences we had of working with CSO networks. These covered every continent and an extremely diverse range of 'networks' (see Appendix for brainstormed list - clearly much depends on what constitutes a network and we chose not to define it too tightly). Much of this was from INTRAC consultancies with advocacy networks (solidarity ones, child trafficking, faith-based, UN Protocols…); NGO platforms; learning networks (such as internal SNV learning); funding consortia; disaster relief consortia and national umbrella bodies. We have also brought programme research experience from CSO networks in Malawi and Central Asia, as well as formal research programmes on networks in Latin America (Teobaldo Pinzas) and social movements in Brazil (Lucy Earle).

INTRAC also has its first-hand experience of being members of BOND, IFCB, People in Aid, NVCO. We also have our own experience of Praxis as a learning network. INTRAC has also done lots of related work with federations of CSOs (such as Amnesty, PSI, Red Cross, ActionAid, YMCA), though these were excluded from our discussions.

Individuals brought their personal experiences of networks from previous employment, professional associations, Mums and Toddlers lobby groups, Tenants Cooperatives, and Children with special needs networks.

Critical Questions for any Network

Looking at these 50 or so experiences, participants highlighted the critical issues that CSO networks were facing (again see full list in appendix). INTRAC is usually asked to support in these areas. Despite the incredible diversity of types of networks and ways we had worked with networks, there was remarkable coherence about the major and critical issues to address. These issues are obviously inter-related, but seven different areas can be identified as key:

1. Purpose, interests and ownership
2. Governance and leadership
3. Relationship between secretariat and members
4. Diversity and power differentials between members
5. Sustainability and financing
6. Monitoring and evaluation
7. External linkages beyond network

From our experience then, these are the issues that INTRAC must always investigate when working with networks. In understanding how a network responds to these issues we must carefully examine its history - its conception is critical as is its phase of growth.

1. Purpose, interests and ownership

Clearly different types of networks perform different roles. We identified five main choices of roles for networks:
1. Advocacy (including protection)
2. Coordination (avoid duplication, work together – social movement, even joint implementation in disasters)
3. Learning (including capacity building)
4. Representational, identity, legitimacy role (e.g. NCVO)
5. Funding (grant management to members)

There is a critical need to develop clarity of role for any network. Many of us found that taking on a funding role necessarily compromised the other roles. Brian shared the experiences of NGO Umbrella bodies across Africa (such as VADA in Kenya) being used as a conduit of donor funds and quickly being destroyed. Bi-lateral donors are keen to simplify their admin burden by forcing partners into consortia (such as Global Networks for Health $50m for Plan, SCF, ADRA), but these have not been successful. When the EU Liaison Committee in Brussels took on this funding role, it too ended in failure. Yet some international NGOs are currently preoccupied with forming partners into consortia to access official funding - repeating the same mistakes of the past. Even the CWM experience showed that when a network takes on a funding role, they become perceived primarily as a donor by their members, changing relationships accordingly. The role of grant management fundamentally affects the identity of any network, particularly in resource poor settings.

Consequently in our work in with the CSO Platform in Syria, we recommended that the funding role be done by a separate body.

The ownership of the network is critical. To a degree this is influenced by its conception and its funding as the Nile Basin Initiative example showed. Teobaldo's experience of networks in Latin America found that they failed to do what members wanted. Instead they did the donor's work. We need to find out who created the network and why? John C gave a couple of examples of 'illegitimately conceived' network (such as the 92 group) that were started by donors, but have successfully developed a life of its own. To a lesser degree this is the same issue with INTRAC catalysing learning networks for HIV and seeking to develop member ownership.

Raj gave an interesting example of ownership of a network, whereby members were allowed to float, but if they did the network would disintegrate. Each individual had an incentive to remain part of the network.

The purposes of the network may be different or different stakeholders. For example the DFID Nigeria is supporting the Voice and Accountability project for its national governance agenda, whereas local organisations may join the network for much more practical and prosaic reasons, such as the building of a road. Stakeholders often have different interests, while donors may be interested in international agenda, local organisation concerns are likely to be more direct and more local benefits. To be an active network member requires investment of time and therefore the benefits must be clear.

Rod shared his experiences of the Nile Basin Initiative which was created from above by DFID and IUCN to bring in civil society voice. But CSOs joined more for the money than the desire for regional voice. The secretariat had extremely well-paid aid industry jobs. Instead of creating such gravy trains, donors may be better off 'sniffing around' and finding out what networking is already taking place and for what purposes.

2. Governance and leadership

Governance is also critical. INTRAC did some interesting research for Ford Foundation on the different governance structures of global networks which we need to learn from. We have also worked with the DEC on their governance because it was felt that the full-time secretariat staff had too much power. The board met just once a year. They felt they needed a proper board to take tough decisions, but when DEC tried to change the governance structure, MSF wanted to pull out.

There are a plethora of governance issues for networks:
- Model of governance: – ICW and other networks for example have two governance bodies – one formal registered board, another unelected executive board from members. This can be confusing.
- Importance of the AGM - Friends of the Earth have a highly democratic annual meeting taking one week to try and reach consensus on critical issues for the following year.
- Selection of board – electing members is good for democratic values, but risky for performance particularly in the early days.
- Representational or competency-based board members. Are board members there as individuals or as representatives of their organisations? If they are representing their organisation, there are often problems of continuity of people between meetings. More seriously board members may feel their main role is to ensure their organisation gets its allotted slice of the cake, rather than look out

for the interests of the network as a whole. It can be difficult for boards to shift from a representational role to a competencies role as John H's experience with the Dalits showed.

- Membership of board – should all board also be network members, or can non-member individuals can be brought in to fill gaps in skills and experiences.
- Governance/secretariat relationship - Sometimes stalemate at governance level paralyses secretariat work, at other times, such stalemate gives the secretariat power to continue to do what it wants to do…

The leadership required at secretariat level appeared different for networks than for 'normal' CSOs. Network leaders needed above all to be able to play an ambassadorial role, building relationships through great communication. Yet these are rarely the criteria used in recruitment. Many of the CSO network leaders in the Malawi research for example were chosen because they were the most vocal activists (not networkers). There is a strong connection between the leadership of the network and the relationship between the secretariat and the network members.

3. Relationship between secretariat and members

The relationship between the secretariat and the members is the nexus for any network. This is the interface that determines whether the network is functions effectively or becomes a no-work network.

As the network develops from its initial informality, there comes a time when some sort of dedicated capacity is required to coordinate member activities. This is called the secretariat. There are also different secretariat structures, which may change over time (as the Malawi research illustrated):

- Informal-voluntary
- Hosted by a member (often the one with most resources – international)
- Rotated between members (DAWN)
- Separate secretariat

But as this secretariat becomes stronger, there is the real danger that member role and commitment weakens. 'Networking' can diminish as the network formalises.

This is particularly problematic in the aid environment, where the 'project' system puts pressure on secretariats to deliver. Network secretariats (particularly in contexts where CSO members are generally weak) can find themselves increasingly taking on members roles as members are too busy with their own activities or not competent. Eventually, as in the Malawi research they have a strategic identity choice as to whether to remain a network or be more honest and call itself an advocacy NGO (also echoed by the Uganda Land Alliance).

Even in stronger contexts, we observe the shifting roles of the secretariat. BOND initially the committee members lead and the secretariat leader is a 'coordinator'. As it becomes institutionalised the leader becomes a CEO and the members do less.

Secretariat strength is influenced by a number of variables including its number of members (e.g. NVCO with 50,000); the strength of member commitment to a shared

objective (e.g. Dalits anger and commitment to shared vision if not strategy); the strength of the leadership…

As well as focusing on the Secretariat element in this relationship, we also must consider the members' contribution. Most CSO networks focus on quantity of members, not quality of their engagement. There could be some sort of kite-marking to allow entry into a network (such as the Opportunity family). This discussion raised lots of questions. What makes a good network member? Do we have good examples? Is there a list of responsibilities? How do you measure capacity to be a good member?

4. Diversity and power differentials between members

Our experience is that there are inherent power differentials within any network. Some members are stronger or weaker than others, as the PARINAC - UNHCR example illustrated. For many 'local' networks, international NGOs can also be members which brings important power dynamics into play. For example, in the early days of the CSO coalitions in Malawi, they were dominated behind the scenes by international NGOs. INGOs had the staff capacity and available funding for advocacy to be involved. Local CSO members did not have the resources to contribute much time to attend meetings, let alone take actions outside of meetings. Even within apparently more homogeneous networks such as IMRS, we observed influential power dynamics.

This power is not always necessarily at the centre. Power is not monolithic. For example in the CWM work, we saw how shifting church demographics is pushing the power of numbers away from Europe. Similarly with the Women's HIV network, the power of legitimacy and numbers is in sub-Saharan Africa.

5. Sustainability and Financing

Donors often push networks ridiculously fast into sustainability plans. What does sustainability mean in a context where 100% of members are 100% funded themselves? We need to ask, is financial sustainability really necessary? After all networks may be temporary initiatives, not something for life. It may be worth looking at life cycles of networks.

Membership fees undoubtedly gives a different dynamic to a network functioning. We were not aware of any research in this area. In some cases membership fees of umbrella may be part of NGO Law (such as in Malawi).But network fees typically contribute only a very small proportion of overall income. More important than financial sustainability, is the role of fees in prompting a sense of ownership. It can give members perceived power to demand services from the secretariat.

6. Monitoring and evaluation

How do you monitor and evaluate networks? Do you measure against the outcomes/purpose of the network or the process of member engagement with the issue? What are the indicators of successful networks? Is it just about evaluating their different roles in advocacy? Grant management? Learning?

There is a bit of evaluative work around. Development in Practice had an article about the debt relief networks (JH). There is a book JC has now ordered on the make Poverty

History campaign. Charlie has done work on evaluation of networks in Central Asia. The PSI consultancy will also give information in this area. Rick's Malawi research looked at: the impact of CSO networks from three different levels:

i.   **Representational indicators** (to what extent do the CSO networks represent an 'authentic' voice of civil society?)
ii. **Relationship indicators** (how have CSO networks related to key decision-making processes and how have these relationships been built?
iii. **Results indicators** (what has changed that can plausibly associated with the existence and activities of CSO networks? How has this contributed to poverty reduction, pro-poor expenditures, and economic growth strategies?)

There are major issues of methodology in such M&E of networks. In the ToR it needs to be very clear whether these are narrative perceptions or any hard measures (SM currently grappling with a client over these)

7. External linkages beyond network

For a network to be a global movement needs wider relationships.

For networks to be effective in their advocacy work, they need links into policy making processes (such as access to politicians). How does this access come about? Personal friendship? Media threat?
(Please add more here)

Ways Forward:

1. Consolidate INTRAC learning from experience to improve our services to CSO networks (Rick to put together proposal for this within CB topic)
   - Write up notes from today
   - Develop typology of networks and taxonomy of governance
   - Research and write up INTRAC's learning from experience (review reports, interviews with staff/associates)
   - Develop and circulate a bibliography
   - On-going Learning from Central Asia Programme with networks, and also future consultancies

2. Explore market for Praxis-research (Wait and see – needs a champion and opportunity). Possible issues to possibly explore:
   - M&E of networks (perhaps the M&E group Anne Garbutt)
   - Knowledge learning networks (post-Praxis links with Dutch?)
   - Internal governance and strategy
   - External governance and accountability agenda (covered by Brian Pratt Civil Society initiative)

Appendix 1 Staff and Associate Experience with Networks

BP
Evaluation CDRA (Ethiopia)
Engagement with IFCB, Impact Alliance, El Taller, ALNAP, People in Aid, BOND, NCVO
Networks in Latin America Teobaldo Pinzas
Social movements Lucy Brazil
MANGO, TANGO

CM
Child trafficking network
HIV/AIDS Alliance
FBO networks
Diakonia networks of partners

JH
International Dalit Solidarity Network
Provention risk reduction network
IMRS
CWM
Volunteer missionary movement

TT NHS internal networks e.g. cardiologists
Professional associations

BL set up two solidarity networks for advocacy with secretariats (Haiti, ABC Colombia)
Informal learning network for cash and shelter
International Committee of Women Living with HIV and AIDS

Raj
All India Association of Micro-enterprise development
Network of Black and Minority Housing Association
Learning network for UK museums
Asians Can't Play Football network

JG
Platform NGOs in Gambia, Syria
Governance Structures of global movements (Ford)
Aprodev – monitoring CSO coalitions in neighbouring EU countries
Self-help federations in Central Asia
BOND Networks in Africa/Caribbean/Pacific and COTONOU
Monitoring work of coalitions - Malawi
Tenants cooperatives in East London
Mums and Toddlers lobbying

SM
MACOS Funding channel
Uganda NGO Forum
District/provincial networks
Forest working groups

Poverty observatory groupings
Internal organisational learning – internal network

RJ
Strategic planning with MEJN, CISANET,
Inter-relationships between networks
Learning review of Global Networks for Health
Evaluation of JEFAP Consortium in Famine relief
Research on development of CSO Coalitions in Malawi

JC
Thai NGO Coordination Forum
NGO Lobby on UN Montreal Protocol
UNEP national committees
Networks of NGOs in Eastern, Central Europe and Central Asia lobbying on Rights and Environment
Proact Network
Children with special needs networks

Idil
Cyprus platforms

RM
Cooperative committees Cambodia
Volunteer sending network
Nile Basin Dialogue
National Social Watch India
Child rights network Uganda
British refugee Council
Gujarat network for funding
YMCA

Also Charlie's work with networks in Central Asia

Key Questions or Issues for Networks from INTRAC's Experience

Purpose and ownership
Purpose/aims
Difficulty in understanding aim of network
Common vision/mission
How do you build shared objectives?
What is different about strategic planning with networks?
What is the function and role and is there any shared agreement?
How to avoid the corrupting influence of money?
Does funding role undermine the learning/advocacy roles?
Who needs this network most?
Whose interests are being served?

Governance and leadership
Governance structures and processes
Issues of governance (mechanisms)
Ensuring representative legitimacy
Appropriate governance structures
Leadership - Attributed? Elected?

Relationship between secretariat and members
How balance secretariat role with member responsibility?
Role distribution vis a vis secretariat/members and power issues between these
What is the relationship between members and secretariat?
Legitimacy of network to express a view of all 'members'
Role and resourcing of full-time secretariat (purpose; costs; financing)
How to keep members interested/engaged?
Members actively engaged
How to avoid network taking members' place
How to serve members (identify and act on their needs)

Diversity and power differentials between members
Effective relationships between members
Power imbalances between members
Power struggle
How do we prevent one member from taking it over?
How to use each members' quality and resources to create synergy?
Power and influence
Centre/periphery (global or international vis a vis local/regional autonomy)

Financing
Sustainability: fees versus costs 'bloated vs agile'
Funding independence from donor

Monitoring and evaluation
Performance measurement
Measuring work quality, consistency, impact and effectiveness
Documenting value to donors and participants
Why do donors not see the importance and/or efficiency of what we do?

How to measure the success of networks?

External linkages beyond network
Interaction between networks
To whom should they link/relate to beyond the membership