



TajWSS Network special event, 21 July 2015. Photo credit: P. Thiriet / Save the Children.

# HOW WE SET UP A NETWORK OF PARTNERS TO ACHIEVE GREATER INFLUENCE

My experience in Tajikistan with the WASH network – by Bekhruz Yodgorov

**This paper examines how networking and networks can be used as a tool to develop partnerships. This analysis aims to answer several key questions, such as: ‘Why is networking important?’ ‘How will networking impact the development of projects and activities?’**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Behkruz is Oxfam's Networking/Partnership Project Officer in Tajikistan. He has been in this job since May 2015, specifically focusing on the TajWSS (Tajikistan Water Supply and Sanitation)<sup>1</sup> project. The main objective of the approach was to build and maintain a strong network of individuals and organizations to achieve positive change within the Tajikistan Water Sector. He is also the Partnership Leads focal point in Oxfam's Office in Tajikistan.

## PARTNERING FOR IMPACT SERIES

To do the work it does, Oxfam works closely with partners at all stages of the programme, in all kind of contexts: humanitarian, influencing, development, etc. But what does it mean for our staff? Each day brings new challenges and opportunities, so how do they do it? Following a reflective and productive writeshop<sup>2</sup>, this Partnering for Impact series was developed to share and explore learning from experienced practitioners about what it takes to “work well in partnership”.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

*"Networking is a matter of creating useful linkages, both within and among communities, organizations, and societies, in order to mobilize resources and achieve various goals – the "art of building alliances."<sup>3</sup>*

As part of my familiarization with Oxfam in Tajikistan, I reviewed a wide variety of project materials, reports and activities. While examining all these materials I noticed how often networks, networking and specifically the TajWSS network of stakeholders came up, and this was an important discovery for me.

When I attended my first TajWSS network meeting, I found a room full of people and dynamism. Everybody clearly knew each other – it was obvious in the way they talked to one other. The room was buzzing – newcomers were exchanging business cards, papers, brochures. So many questions sprang into my mind and I wanted to know more about these people and their interests. I was also curious to know who came up with the idea to gather together all these people and make them share ideas, knowledge and skills.

## 2 THE NETWORK

The water and sanitation sector in Tajikistan had an acute need for **an arena where stakeholders could meet and share experience, ideas, views, knowledge and particular experiences** related to the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) sector. To respond to this need, Oxfam, in consultation with the government and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), as well as other stakeholders, initiated the network.

The Network of Stakeholder Organizations on Sustainable Water Supply and Sanitation was launched in November 2009 with the support of the Government of Tajikistan (GoT). The government was represented at the launch by the First Deputy of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Tajikistan (RT). The network's financial support was provided by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and facilitation was taken forward by Oxfam as an implementer of the SDC-funded Tajikistan Water Supply and Sanitation (TajWSS) project.

We were convinced that working in a network would enable us to achieve a number of things:

- **Greater sustainability and effectiveness** in the water and sanitation sector through sharing best practices and implementing innovative pilot projects.
- **A contribution to policy formulation** through the development of recommendations and policy briefs that can be used by the GoT to determine policy and procedures.

- **The promotion of existing positive legislation** and the implementation of a programme of **research and piloting**.
- **The facilitation of information management and learning** in order to initiate a wider debate with the intention being to create solutions to key problems in the water and sanitation sector.
- The ability to attract and keep **donors' interest** in the sector.
- The ability to **involve the private sector**.

The structure of our network consists of a steering committee chaired by the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources that acts as focal point on water policy from the government side. The network forms task groups to address needs and requests coming from its members. These issues include: relevant legislation; institutions' role and responsibility in the sector; tariffs set-up; operational solutions to operations and maintenance technical and managerial issues; identification of best practices/models; developing monitoring and evaluation indicators; developing mechanisms to link village/jamoat/district development planning to national level; and to implement pilot projects.

The network has been growing since June 2010, and it is now represented by more than 70 stakeholder organizations from the government, parliament, the UN, donors, academia, INGOs, civil society, the private sector and the media.

## 3 WHAT WE ACHIEVED AND HOW

In 2010, the network contributed to the development of **national legislation on drinking water** and played a crucial role during the **stakeholder consultations** for setting national targets under the Water and Health Protocol<sup>4</sup> in 2013. The network also made contributions to **national policy, regulations and laws** (for example the development of a national methodology to calculate water tariffs) that concerned tariffs, the taxation system, ownership of water supply systems and construction permits.

There are many joint activities running under the network umbrella that have been **implemented or financed through cooperation by the members**. These include research, the piloting of innovative solutions, evaluations, training and advocacy. This is a positive indication that the network is flourishing and fulfilling the needs of its members – and consequently those of the people in need.

When we started the TajWSS project, we realized that we needed skills in networking, policy, media, research and law. **Building the capacity** of the programme team in these areas with great support from Oxfam head office and the Regional Management Centre was a major success, as having the right skills meant that staff were able to engage effectively at many different levels – from community to national government. Having in place tailor-made staff development plans contributed to staff mastering the skills of communication, analytical thinking and political sensitivity that were needed for the network to succeed.

Network members have often used the regular meetings as an opportunity to **showcase their work**, their projects and their ideas. The network was perceived as a **safe space** in which issues and challenges could be raised and solutions identified.

In 2015, **the World Bank approached the network and asked if it could be used as a platform to present their research on ‘Poverty Diagnostic and Social Impact Assessment of the Water Supply and Sanitation Sector in Tajikistan’<sup>5</sup>** and get coordinated feedback and recommendations that they could then use to further enhance their work.

## 3 KEY LEARNINGS

- **Having high-level support helps** – our network is supported by the Tajik government. It is not always easy to ensure engagement and involvement of members at national level, i.e. deputy ministers. Oxfam approached directly the institutions and people it thought essential to involve at a national level. We were very clear about why we felt their involvement in the network would be mutually beneficial and about what we wanted from them in terms of their engagement and involvement. It worked.
- **Networking requires resources.** Make sure you have the staff and skills to support its function. Working in a network is not easy – you will need to build many skills in many people.
- **Networks need clear and strong facilitation** – in our case Oxfam took on the responsibility for facilitation. While the network is now fairly functional, it is not always easy to be both the facilitator and convenor of the network and its meetings.
- Make the platform interesting for stakeholders/partners in order to participate in regular meetings of the network. Oxfam tries hard to **provide a relevant agenda** that is responsive to members’ interests and needs in the field. Oxfam tries to find at least one topic for the agenda that is of interest to all the network members.
- **Be clear about what you aim to achieve** by working in a network.
- **Be flexible and responsive** to members’ needs. And remember that not everybody needs to be involved in everything.

# NOTES

- 1 For more information, please see the Oxfam in Tajikistan programme website:  
<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what-we-do/countries-we-work-in/tajikistan> and  
<http://www.tajwss.tj/new/index.php/en/>
- 2 A 'writeshop' is an intensive, participatory process that brings together experts and process facilitators under one roof to produce simple, user-friendly materials in a short period of time.
- 3 Maiese, M. (2005). *Networking*. <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/networking>
- 4 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the World Health Organization. (1999). Protocol on Water and Health. <http://www.unece.org/?id=2975>
- 5 Tajikistan Water Supply and Sanitation Network (TajWSS). 'Special Event of the TajWSS Network – July 21st, 2015'. <http://www.tajwss.tj/new/index.php/en/news/300-tajwss-network-special-event-july-21st-2015> and  
[http://www.tajwss.tj/new/images/povertydiagnosticcn\\_eng.pdf](http://www.tajwss.tj/new/images/povertydiagnosticcn_eng.pdf)

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email programme learning team at [programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk)

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