

Theory of Change showing the influencing strategy of the food security network in Georgia within the South Caucasus Food Security and Nutrition programme. Shared by food security network member the Georgian Alliance for Agricultural Development (GAARD).

TOP TIPS TO BUILD AND SUPPORT EFFECTIVE NETWORKS FOR CHANGE

Learning from Oxfam’s influencing work in the South Caucasus Vietnam and the ECSN-BRICSAM programme

This short paper summarizes the experience of Oxfam staff and network representatives who met in Yerevan, Armenia in December 2016, and suggests practical ways to address some of the typical challenges facing networks, whether when starting out or expanding.

The aim is to maximize the potential for networks to act as catalysts for pro-poor change in their countries and regions, building a global movement for change.

INTRODUCTION

When working to bring about changes to policy and practice, is a network always the answer? If so, what are the best ways to support a network to achieve its objectives? And what role for Oxfam?

Working with and as a part of networks is inescapable in today's interconnected world – and increasingly of Oxfam's programming and influencing.

But what shape and size of network is most effective to build social capital? What is the payoff between benefits and investment? How can they influence governments and the private sector? How to ensure networks are inclusive and promote the rights of women and marginalized groups? How can INGOs and institutional donors support rather than replace these platforms to contribute to change beyond limited project cycles?

Evidence is essential to influence policy, to monitor and to call to account when there are implementation gaps between 'paper and practice'. As potential alternative models of governance, networks can contribute to a culture of popular and inclusive participation, civic engagement and dialogue.

This short paper summarizes the experience of Oxfam staff and network representatives who met in Yerevan, Armenia in December 2016, and suggests practical ways to address some of the typical challenges facing networks, whether when starting out or expanding. **The aim is to maximize the potential for networks to act as catalysts for pro-poor change in their countries and regions.**

WHO IS THIS DOCUMENT FOR?

Everyone creating, joining or supporting a network.

WHAT DOES IT CONTAIN?

Recommendations and illustrative practice.

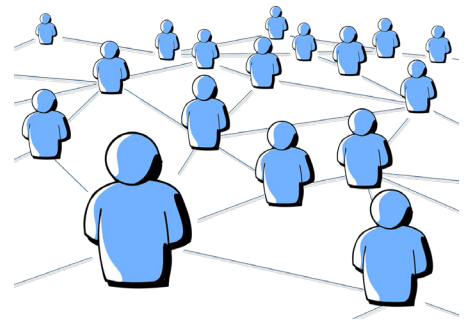
1 SHARED PURPOSE: THE FIRST REQUIREMENT OF A SUCCESSFUL NETWORK

Networks are often a means to an end, for example to increase collective bargaining power or influencing capacity. Being clear about a network's purpose is the key ingredient to successful collaboration. How members discuss and agree on this can happen in many different ways, but there always needs to be a process.

All members need to know the purpose of an alliance, but the levels of alignment can vary: some join because it is a useful space to network internally (to gain access to expertise and key contacts), whereas others will be the network champions.

Re-evaluate a network's purpose and identity regularly, particularly as a network expands, and where a shared history originally united founding members. Growth and diversity plus openness to new members add strength, but need to be managed.

The costs versus benefits of network membership need to be upfront and agreed.



In practice

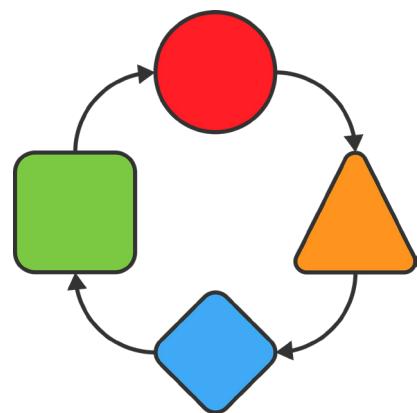
In Georgia, members of the Georgian Alliance for Agriculture and Rural Development (GAARD) defined and agreed their collective mandate, which is enshrined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and endorsed by government. In Armenia, the Agricultural Alliance's (AA) MoU signed by all members commits the alliance to serve the collective advocacy agenda of its members.

2 AGREE WHO DOES WHAT, AND WAYS OF WORKING

Agree the optimal division of labour. Working together does not mean everybody doing the same thing or playing the same role. Play to the strengths of individual members (social capital, connections or research capacity).

Consult and agree on shape and structure. Agreement needs to be reached on many issues relating to governance and structure of the network (informal or formal? With or without a secretariat? What criteria for membership selection? Are all members equal?).

Evaluate the pros and cons of including large INGOs or representatives of duty bearers. If the network includes a large INGO (such as Oxfam), or chooses to include actors who are also sometimes the 'object' of the network's advocacy and influencing work, such as government ministries, it is important to agree their role, responsibilities and entitlements.



Assess, develop and monitor the network's capacity to deliver. To fill identified gaps in capacity, network members can assess the relative merits (and feasibility) of boosting capacity by *either* proactively co-opting new members with the missing skill sets and/or connections *or* contracting external expertise.

Embrace the surrender of control. Interdependence means to a lesser or greater extent surrendering control, which has implications for reputational risk, letting go of an 'input-output log frame approach' and mindset and rethinking attribution.

In practice

In Armenia, given the vastness of the agricultural sector, the AA has thematic sub-groups for a more effective division of labour, optimal positioning and to promote participation. In Tajikistan, the Network of Stakeholder Organizations on Sustainable Water Supply and Sanitation (TajWSS) has a steering committee chaired by the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources which acts as focal point on water policy from the government side. The network has task groups to address the needs and requests of its members. *'Having in place tailor-made staff development plans contributed to staff mastering the skills for communication, analytical thinking and political sensitivity required for the network's success'*, explains Bekhruz Yodgorov, Oxfam's Networking and Partnership Project Officer in Tajikistan.

The experience of the Empowering Civil Society Networks BRICSAM (ECSN BRICSAM) programme of working with a network of networks is that:

- The secretariat role is important and needs to be agreed upfront.
- It is crucial to get internal accountability mechanisms right.
- It is vital for there to be an autonomous space to set the agenda.
- If the managing body for a funded project is also the de facto secretariat, this often leads to tensions. They are two entirely different roles: one is 'treasurer' and the other is 'chairperson' and they should not be merged if the network is to be autonomous and sustainable.

'If Oxfam is to take on more than just the management of the funding relationship, then this needs to be decided by the network itself and formalized clearly as a joint decision.' – Thomas Dunmore Rodriguez, OGB National Influencing Advisor

'It is not always easy to be both the facilitator and convenor of the network and its meetings'

– Bekhruz Yodgorov,
TAJWSS Network and
Partnership Officer

3 AGREE HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE AND VOICES ARE HEARD: GOVERNANCE

Agree how decisions are taken, priorities are set, and resources and communication are managed. Good governance is essential to build trust and gain legitimacy. It can be the difference between a network succeeding or failing and growing or imploding.



Do not underestimate the value of creating an alternative model of participatory and democratic decision making. This can be a major contribution in and of itself in addition to the work of the network.

In practice

In **Georgia's** GAARD, all decisions are taken by consensus with no voting, as laid down in their MoU. **Armenia's** AA charter sets out the decision making process and other practices such as rotating chairs for meetings, in order to build and sustain trust and shared responsibility.

4 WHEN IT MATTERS, SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE AND DEVELOP A COLLECTIVE SURGE CAPACITY

Identify the critical opportunities to present a united front and speak with one voice, and develop the capacity to rally and act. This means having the capacity to act at short notice, which means working hard to build and sustain trust. Sometimes, this means individual network members need to temporarily set aside their own agenda. This once again points to the need for absolute clarity about the network's role and purpose, and its alignment with members' objectives.



Find ways to keep in touch during quieter times. Just as important as the collective surge capacity to seize opportunities or respond to threats is a network's ability to 'to keep the 'engine running' during quieter times.

In practice

In Georgia's GAARD all declarations and petitions are signed by *all* members, which adds strength to advocacy. In Armenia's AA it is understood that *'if each member is dedicated to the Alliance mission (...) they will divert attention and resources to contribute to the collective chorus of the network's joint advocacy even in cases of short notice.'* – AA member

5 PARTNERING WISELY

Be clear about the relative costs and benefits of partnership 'by association'. We live in an increasingly 'connected' world, making it tricky to say who is on the inside, who is on the outside, connected by association – 'in' for some things and 'out' for others. There are networks within networks; sometimes they overlap with members of one network simultaneously belonging to others. And then there are important relationships, for example with the media or academic institutions. These connections can add value (opening doors, adding expertise) or can cause tensions (connections to power and money, and the risk of co-option).



Evaluate risks, costs and benefits when inviting new members to join and do the same if you are the one considering joining. Uniting to achieve a common goal might mean partnering with an informal social movement, but how do the potential gains stack up against the (as perceived by formal, larger NGOs) risks or challenges? Conversely, gaining access to resources and positions of influence might be an attractive incentive for a social movement considering entering a broader-based alliance or networked relationship, but at what risk to grassroots legitimacy?

Be prepared for the need to develop different communication and negotiating skills and styles. Joining a network can mean finding oneself on the same side of the negotiating table as actors classically seen as the 'opposition'. How the leadership of a network and the leadership of individual member organizations skilfully rally political will around a clearly agreed goal that is able to (albeit temporarily) supersede differences requires extraordinarily sophisticated skills, and once more, absolute clarity about the goal.

In practice

In **Tajikistan**, TajWSS draws its 70-plus stakeholder organizations from the government, parliament, the UN, donors, academia, INGOs, civil society, the private sector and the media. 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 in 2013.

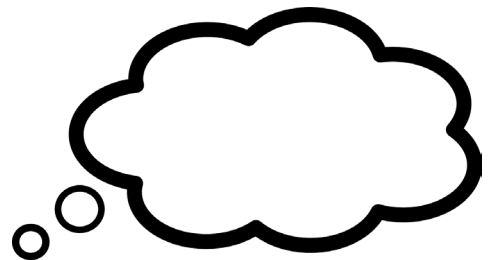
6 OCCUPY THE POLITICAL SPACE WISELY

Use stakeholder analysis and power mapping as a minimum, but consider supplementing with more nuanced tools such as Social Network Analysis or Netminer to understand where influence lies, and how relationships within and beyond a network increase or decrease influence and vulnerabilities. It is only by deepening an understanding of the formal and informal (visible and invisible) connective tissue of power that opportunities for influencing can be identified and threats can be mitigated.

Find government allies who are amenable to civil society engagement. Where dialogue with government agencies (or individual officials) is possible, propose and negotiate to achieve policy change.

Develop multiple relationships with different parts of government to safeguard against inevitable changes in personnel. Vary engagement activities (personal meetings with officials, petitions, media opportunities) to keep momentum fresh and dynamic.

Be proactive to find ways into the foothills of policy making. For example, providing technical assistance to government can help to gain entry to the corridors of power. Critically evaluate the political pros and cons of freer movement across the divide between government and civil society, inviting government into network spaces and/or supporting network representatives to



participate directly in government processes such as hearings and parliamentary sessions.

Develop a capacity to be both proactive and reactive. It is important to ‘read’ the signs to prepare for political storms and to take advantage when elements combine favourably.

In practice

Understanding Networks: The application of Social Network Analysis methodology in the South Caucasus context

7 AGREE WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE – MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Collectively agree indicators of success and milestones to measure the network’s performance. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches typically involve periodic self-assessment, a blend of quantitative and qualitative indicators and are increasingly supported by a range of software options, for example enabling the production of visual network maps that can kick-start planning conversations with members.



In practice

Qualitative Assessment Scorecard (QAS), used in Vietnamese advocacy coalitions and Social Network Analysis (SNA), used in Georgia and Armenia, are two approaches for the assessment of a network’s effectiveness that have been used by Oxfam with partners.

8 SUSTAINABILITY – SUSTAINING A NETWORK’S ABILITY TO INFLUENCE

Think in terms of ‘sustainability of the benefits of a network’, rather than focusing on the sustainability of a network per se. A network’s performance is measured in relation to its ability to achieve its objectives and remain true to its values, as reflected in its governance and inclusiveness. If a network is high-achieving but at the cost of its values, this erodes its potential for sustainability, and vice versa.

To endure, a network needs to think beyond the project cycle. Breaking down long-term system-changing goals into projects requires strategic planning skills, plus an ability to adapt to changes in the external context, as well as to navigate internal flux such as changes in leadership.



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This publication was created by the OGB Programme Learning Team in collaboration with Andrew Wells-Dang; Thomas Dunmore-Rodriguez; Jan Bouwman; Stephanie DeChassy; Bekhruz Yodgorov; and Benoit Trudel.

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