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# E-networks and NGO Challenges: Insights from Mexico

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**INTRAC**  
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## Introduction

This Praxis Note examines practical examples of using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to strengthening NGOs and reflects on the various pitfalls of the successful implementation of e-networks for the strengthening of NGOs in developing countries. The Note also acknowledges that a lack of infrastructure and skills creates obstacles to this process. Based on the results of the analysis, the Note concludes with lessons learnt and recommendations for the future.

Recent years have seen increasing demands on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to reach development goals. These greater demands include the provision of public welfare services and the changing context in which NGOs operate, challenging organisations to strengthen their capacities to fulfil their missions.

At the same time, policy discourse at international level is promoting the use of ICTs for development. Electronic-based learning networks are being introduced in different parts of the world as a way to address the organisational exchange and learning needs of a variety of organisations dedicated to achieving their specific missions for development.

## Contextual Challenges: the Current Aid Environment

In the current climate, there are four particular challenges now facing NGOs as they work to achieve their development objectives.

Firstly, NGOs need to mobilize an inclusive civil society at the local, national and international levels.

Secondly, NGOs need to hold institutions accountable for their actions and ensure that they respond to social and environmental needs.

Thirdly, NGOs need to ensure that international programmes are implemented effectively and work for the benefit of poor people and poor countries.

Fourthly, NGOs need to ensure that gains at the global level are translated into concrete benefits at the grass-roots level.

NGOs are facing demands to solve an increasingly complex set of issues. In addition, they are operating in more dynamic and complicated environments that require NGOs to have effective relationships with a broader range of institutions. Consequently, both practitioners and researchers have raised concerns regarding the capacities of NGOs and their ability to fulfil their missions. Specifically, practitioners have raised issues around the role of NGOs, their accountability, legitimacy and the

type of relationships that NGOs enjoy with businesses, other NGOs and governments.

This change to the environment has had a noticeable impact in terms of encouraging initiatives and mechanisms that allow NGOs working in the same field to improve their effectiveness. 'Engaging with others over the long term in a process of mutual learning and innovation becomes more important than claiming that NGOs have the answers' by themselves in an isolated way (Edwards et al., 2000: 12).

In consequence, in the field of international development, new initiatives have started to emerge. These involve building networks, working in a collaborative way, openness to innovation, and a willingness to learn from others through knowledge sharing. In other words, to respond to the increasing demands being put on them, NGOs are learning to share and learn from others collaboratively.

## Networks and their Benefits

Formal networks have emerged as an important avenue for helping NGOs meet the challenges they face. A general definition of a network is 'any group of individuals or organisations who, on a voluntary basis, exchange information or undertake joint activities' (Starkey, 1997: 14).

Generally, the main goal of networks is to learn from each other's practical experiences (good and bad) and, in this way, to contribute to development aims. However, a network may serve its members in different ways. For some, the network can serve to convene meetings and engage support for a region or issue that could not be done individually. For others, the network can

provide a learning forum that is cheaper than each individual NGO contracting trainers or consultants. In both cases, the purpose of belonging to the network is to enable organisations to learn more and in a cost-effective way.

## Sectoral Level

Since the explosive growth in the use of ICTs, there is a belief that NGOs can have greater impact on their development missions, particularly because shared learning, fundamental to how development practices are improved, is taking place in e-networks. E-networks are not dissimilar from a traditional network, except that they are facilitated by technological systems. This specific characteristic makes them much more cost-effective. For example, they enable interaction even when funds are not available for face-to-face meetings. In their role as alternatives to or complementary to face-to-face activities, e-networks reinforce contact between members, allowing continuous communication between members without the need to travel long distances.

Specifically, there are four main reasons as to why networks using ICTs are thought to enable NGOs to have a greater impact on their developmental missions:

- 1) **Connecting and unifying efforts.** ICTs have been able to connect NGOs throughout the world, including NGOs that were previously working in isolated conditions. An initial consequence of this is that NGOs now realize that there are situations in which they are duplicating efforts and they can thus take remedial action to begin to develop a common agenda and focus.

2) **Accessing real experiences.** The practical work of NGOs informs their learning, research and evaluation activities, and ICTs provide easy access to information from practitioners, which can drastically improve the quality of fieldwork. Lessons learnt are shared to influence others, inform the debate, raise awareness and advise on best practices, with the authority of having emerged from real experience rather than theory.

3) **Crossing borders.** Thirdly, ICT networks facilitate the flow of communication between grass-roots organisations and Eastern and Southern NGOs. Ideas and experiences can move between different programmes and across national frontiers in ways that are impossible for organisations that have a presence at one level alone.

4) **Decentralising and balancing learning.** Information systems can facilitate some of the complex processes by which individuals and organisations learn. For example, ICTs offer the infrastructure for a public space to make connections between practitioners or between field staff and headquarters, with the result that structures are decentralised and more flexible. Furthermore, ICTs facilitate the balance between formal and informal learning through access to well-documented best practices posted online, discussion forums or e-learning programmes.

In short, access to and use of information is becoming increasingly important, alongside achieving concrete actions in fulfilling the objectives on the ground. In particular, ICT applications provide new tools for improving access to information and sharing knowledge

relating to thematic applications and successes and failures in implementation. They contribute to linking dispersed communities that share common interests. For example, networks sponsored by the World Bank and Volunteers for Technical Assistance (TechNet) are using e-mail and Internet to organise discussions in a coherent fashion.

**OneWorld Online** is a global gateway<sup>1</sup> that provides NGOs with access to a multilingual and multimedia library and a broadcasting and news resource on various topics, such as human rights and sustainable development. In doing so, OneWorld repackages content from their partners, taking readers to the primary resources of more than 700 organisations from Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

**The phenomenon of Wiki.** The inventor of Wiki, Ward Cunningham, posed the question: ‘What’s the simplest thing that could possibly work?’<sup>2</sup> His answer was Wiki: a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit Web page content using any Web browser. Wiki supports hyperlinks and has simple text syntax for creating new pages and cross-links between internal pages in real time.

Wiki allows for content to be added and contributions to be edited. Much of the content is therefore subjective, and it changes as people come and go.

Nowadays, even the concept of ‘wiki’ is part of jargon and words such as ‘wikipedia’, ‘wikispam’, ‘wikiclones’ are

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<sup>1</sup> Gateways are websites providing content and news, including media such as radio or video. They are often created by an organisation or an individual as a service to others or as a way to fulfil an organisation’s mandate.

<sup>2</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward\\_Cunningham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward_Cunningham)> (Accessed 15 February, 2007)

now commonly used. Like many simple concepts, 'open editing' has some profound and subtle implications for web users. Allowing everyday users to create and edit any page in a website is exciting in that it encourages democratic use of the web and promotes content composition by non-technical users.

### **Organisational Level**

ICTs not only have an effect externally on how organisations communicate and relate, but also have an internal effect in terms of their structures and how they deal with information systems for strengthening their capacities. In view of this, the application of ICTs to networks at the organisational level can have several effects:

1. Facilitating the exchange of information, skills, knowledge, experiences, material and media, through meetings, workshops, publications and cooperative programmes that enable staff to collaborate in a more effective way.
2. Reducing duplication of work and effort, encouraging faster progress and wider overall impact.
3. Linking people of different levels, disciplines, departments and backgrounds who would not otherwise have the opportunity to interact.
4. Providing the critical mass needed for local, national or international action change.
5. Helping to address problems that affect those working at the community level.
6. Providing members with motivation, professional recognition, support and encouragement.
7. Enabling the collaboration of funding and technical cooperation

agencies and those in need of resources and support.

In this regard, there is a general appreciation that the application of ICTs in networks could positively contribute to organisational learning to strengthen the links and capacities among and within organisations which are fundamental for the development strategy of NGOs.

### **Barriers and Pitfalls**

#### **ICTs**

It could be argued, however, that these perceived benefits owe as much to an enthusiasm for new technologies as to hard facts. For instance, the decreasing costs either in technology or communications have not reached all developing countries and the impact has not been as great as expected.

While more than 1 billion people around the world have access to the Internet, regional access varies tremendously. For example, almost 70% of the population in North America have access to the Internet, whereas in Africa, with three times the North American population, only 3.5% have access (Internet World Stats).<sup>3</sup> Research has found that 'for the 10% of Londoners who are unemployed, a new US\$1,500 computer would represent about six months' total income. For the 45% of Indonesians who are unemployed, it represents several years' cash income in relative terms' (Holderness, 1995: 3).

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<sup>3</sup> Internet Usage and World Population Statistics were updated in Sept. 18, 2006 (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>)



A parallel can be drawn with development organisations. Because the infrastructure is not always in place in developing countries, adoption of, and access to ICTs is highly uneven. NGOs are often based amongst their constituencies, often in rural areas, where access to the Internet is very limited or non-existent. The result is an 'urban bias'. For example, Kampala, Uganda's capital, has 4% of the nation's population but 60% of the share of the national telephone lines.<sup>4</sup>

In developing countries, a lack of skills is another limiting factor to the widespread use of ICTs. The research conducted for this study (Holderness, 1995) concludes that differing levels of economic development and skills to operate the technologies posed problems to the effective adoption of ICTs.

### **Process and participation**

The functioning of these ICT-enabled networks (i.e., e-networks) and the effect of these constraints are not yet clearly understood as literature on this topic is very limited. What is clear is that network initiatives cannot ignore the context in which they operate. As some practitioners have warned, they 'could do more to exclude ... people from such knowledge than to open it up to them' (ECDPM, 2000).

E-networks in the development arena are generally inter-organisational. Members are individuals from different organisations that share common professional interests. These networks are highly complex as they connect organisations with different roles and objectives operating in different time zones, individuals from many

national/international cultures that often have to overcome language barriers, as well as individuals who do not have full access to electronic technology.

In short, evidence suggests that e-networks may not address issues of neither hierarchies, dependency or centralisation.

### **Case Study: Gulf of California Learning Network (GCLN)**

The Gulf of California Learning Network (GCLN) is in a region that includes more than 300 kilometres of coast in four states of Mexico: North and South Baja California, Sonora and Sinaloa. It comprises 29 organisations throughout this region. The majority of the organisations (58%) represented are NGOs, with academic and governmental institutions representing equal proportions (21% each). The mix of organisations highlights the complexity of the network itself, as it needs to integrate different objectives, organisational cultures and structures, perspectives and skill levels.

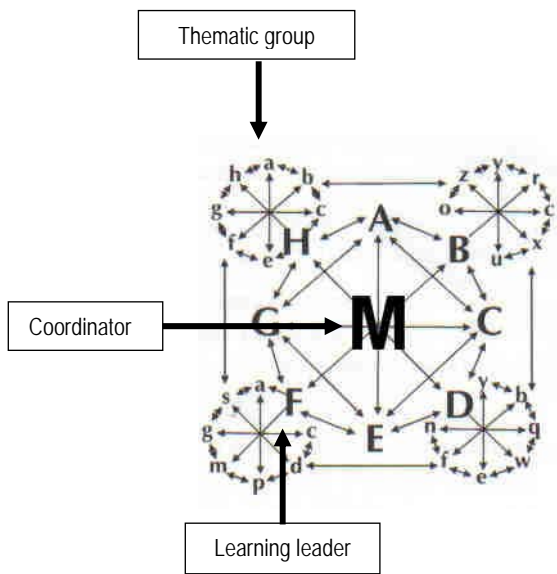
The aim of this network is to link and strengthen the capacities of its members in order to fulfil their missions of protecting environmental sustainability. They do this through an integrated programme of capacity building, which includes self-evaluations, access to training, distance learning and workshops, among other activities.

A coordinator facilitates and oversees the needs of the network and links the network members. Some members are grouped thematically within the network and take part in group debates that are facilitated by the group leader.

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<sup>4</sup> See the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), *World Telecommunication Development Report 2002*; Internet Software Consortium (<http://www.nua.ie>)

## GCLN Model



Adapted from Starkey, 1997 (not all possible lines shown)

An analysis of the GCLN found that the majority of its members believe that belonging to the network, which relies extensively on ICTs, enables them to link to other environmental organisations that work in the same region but that had not been in contact before. In addition, by exchanging and sharing their knowledge, they have been able to create new ways of collaboration, (e.g. submitting proposals together to raise funds) and improve the skills of their staff through exchange visits, distance learning and joint training. This continuous flow of communication and information relevant to their work would not be possible if they did not have the portal which enables these learning activities.

However, the report also revealed problems, which I will now discuss.

### ICTs

#### *Lack of infrastructure*

In the GCLN there was an assumption that all NGOs participating had an appropriate and homogenous level of

infrastructure in their organisations. However, it was discovered that 20% of the organisations do not have full access to computers at work and 30% have low speed connectivity, making it difficult to download and upload documents, discussions and images. In this regard, some organisations are marginalized or excluded.

#### *Cultural barriers to electronic communication*

Several of the network participants claimed that electronic communications are cold, that they lack intimacy and are not sufficient to facilitate effective knowledge sharing. In fact, it has been necessary to complement virtual exchanges with more regular face-to-face meetings to minimise this cultural barrier. In their opinion, face-to-face communication provides the necessary environment of trust and confidence to build a relationship to act together.

### Process and participation

#### *Different degrees of organisational maturity*

The more established organisations are interested in using the network as a tool for influencing broader policy issues external to the organisations themselves. The smaller and newer organisations, on the other hand, tend to be more inwardly focused and are interested in developing and improving their own management capacities. These differences, in turn, have an impact on what is contributed to the network and create difficulties for setting a pace in organisational learning.

#### *Power relationships*

Large organisations have self-confident staff that tend to dominate the smaller organisations, particularly those with less confident and more introverted

people. They also tend to provide the majority of the content that is shared within the network. As a result, they tend to set the agenda and thus the direction of the network. Domination by a certain group of organisations and/or individuals serves to marginalize others and create an elite group within the network.

### ***Centralisation of information***

Information that is centralised by the manager or coordinator of the network creates dependency within its members to be participative and proactive, rather than reactive to the coordinator leadership. Even more, if the contact person of an organisation member of the network is also centralising the flows of information to the organisation, that organisation may even die in the eyes of the network because no one else in the organisation feels they have the authority or knowledge to convene meetings or start activities to contribute to the network.

### ***Competition and fear***

Although participant organisations understood that to learn it is necessary to recognise mistakes, in practice many of them were neither open to recognising their mistakes nor willing to share them with others — particularly when publishing experiences on the web. One of the key reasons found was that several individuals indicated that such exposure could have negative consequences on funding and image.

### ***Unprocessed information***

If information is not analysed it cannot be processed and used by others, and consequently, it is difficult to form a critical mass and learn from experiences; that is, to have true knowledge. There is a lack of effective mechanisms to

systematize experience. When NGOs in the GCLN have been asked to share their knowledge, it has been almost impossible to get documented and processed knowledge rather than raw information. In the best cases, documents are in reports, but these are hard to interpret in everyday terms as lessons learnt. In some cases, lessons relevant to their work are in people's heads and kept in a 'donor-seeking jargon'.

### ***Monitoring and evaluation***

It is often the tendency to evaluate the effective usage of the ICTs by its members, which can divert attention from the main goal of the network. In the GCLN, there has been too much emphasis to monitor and evaluate certain areas, such as how the network and the use of ICTs adds value to the work of its organisations, but not that much to the individual and sectoral levels. Also, it has looked how ICTs are fostering the participation of its members which in principle is good but not enough, since it also needs to look at how linking participants and their work together across time and space can mobilise greater forces for change.

Monitoring and evaluation processes should cover different levels of performance. For example, they should provide results at the activity, objective and goal levels. They should be providing quantitative and qualitative results. Some examples of indicators from GCLN are:

- ✓ Percentage of active members identifying common problems regarding sustainable fisheries in the first semester
- ✓ Number of discussions online in the second semester
- ✓ Organisations have strategic frameworks for each of their



- programmes by the end of the first year
- ✓ Member organisations have learnt to strategise an advocacy campaign by the second year
  - ✓ Member organisations have developed collaboratively a campaign to abolish the use of ‘agalleras fishnets’ by the second year
  - ✓ Change of law abolishing the use of ‘agalleras fishnets’ by local governments in three countries by the third year

2. Members need to consider the success of the network as an explicit objective of their professional lives and work to turn competition into co-operation.
3. Trust is critical and is built from the mutual respect of the members in their learning processes, skills, and cultures. An explicit role of the coordinator should be to build trust. The facilitator should be constantly engaging with the network members, facilitating the interaction, helping members to be connected and enabling equal access to all regardless of their resources.

## Implications for practice

From the GCLN case, we can identify some practical lessons to help overcome potential barriers to the implementation of effective e-networks. Below is a list of key tips:

### Member organisations

1. Networks depend a great deal on the contact person within the member organisations. These individuals tend to be leaders who get involved voluntarily in the networks. Good leaders, however, are not necessarily those who are the most active participants in discussion groups, as this characteristic does not translate directly into action (e.g., mentoring a group, arranging periodical activities) and does not ensure that they have sufficient knowledge on the specific topic nor are willing to help others. A good leader has to be discovered, and it is neither a natural selection (where he/she offers to be part of the core group) nor a process that participants can do at the beginning. A network needs time to identify personalities and skills that can lead thematic groups effectively, particularly when the facilitation is by distance.

### Network Coordinator/Facilitators

1. Network members should arrange activities themselves, but the coordinator has to monitor closely whether members are being passive and encourage more active engagement. Activities such as the elaboration of e-bulletins, logistics, and moderation of chatrooms, can be delegated to carefully chosen leaders in relation to specific topics where they feel comfortable and ready to contribute with their expertise.
2. Identifying and understanding members’ preferences regarding how they want to access information electronically is extremely important. Choosing and relying on an unpopular mechanism (e.g., e-discussion fora) can result in stagnation since members do not participate because they feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar with these mechanisms.
3. In the case of the GCLN, the funding organisation had assumed that discussion fora would be one of the most used tools for information exchange. However, none of the members liked to use discussion fora and new tools had

- to be introduced and explored instead. In the end, members preferred to use chatrooms and e-bulletins.
4. Chat rooms have been highly successful for three reasons. First, they are a real-time conversation; second, chats are kept in small groups, so dialogue is easier; and third, chats provide for problem-solving on specific topics. For example, chatroom discussions have allowed for the learning of new techniques in management, resolved planning problems, and provided alternatives for external communication strategies. Two elements have been central to the success of these chatrooms: a moderator guiding and maintaining the conversation, and a stimulator whose role is to stimulate discussion through posing provocative questions.
  5. Managing a network by distance requires a significant amount of time, and there should be someone assigned to this task full-time. This co-ordinator could be aided by leaders of specific thematic/learning groups (often called 'learning leaders').
  6. Relations between the central group managing the network and the members should be formalised, particularly with the learning leaders to ensure commitment.
  7. There should be an area in your electronic platform (e.g. portal, website) for legal documents reinforcing the rights of the content provider. This is particularly important since the content of what is being published electronically usually does not comply with intellectual property rights.
  8. Each member organisation should develop a strategy based on their learning from the network.
  9. In dialogue, identify the benefits for each organisation or individual in order to develop successful integration in a clear way. Intensive effort is required to identify organisational needs and how these may be identified and met through the network.
  10. There is a tendency to provide content in English for international networks; however, English may not be the first language and special effort should be made to translate information to enable all to be able to access it.
  11. E-activities need to be complemented by face-to-face meetings to facilitate interaction and build trust. Trust allows control to be relinquished into the hands of those who interact.
  12. Monitoring should be in place to track the levels of dynamic engagement, understand the way contributions and benefits interrelate, and examine the mechanisms utilised to foster trust-based relationships and participation.
  13. Networks have to be evaluated and monitored. The focus should be on the long-term goal of strengthening the NGOs to help them achieve their objectives rather than on the creation and maintenance of the network itself.
  14. In order to be able to evaluate the performance of the network, key indicators need to be identified by its members. These indicators need to be monitored throughout the life of the network and should be agreed by all the members from the beginning or when a new member joins.
 

As part of the monitoring process, these indicators may need to be revised periodically and should be changed if appropriate. As the

network evolves, so do their objectives and indicators.

### **Skills and knowledge**

1. The effective use of information technologies undoubtedly goes hand-in-hand with ICT skills and knowledge. Therefore, investment needs to be made in ICT training to enable everybody to acquire a certain level of skills and in this way allow them to participate in ICT movements.
2. Organisations need to learn how to transform information into knowledge. One option is to systematise experiences where best practices and lessons learnt are highlighted. An external person is needed to conduct the first efforts at systematisation and sharing the know-how within the organisation. Over time, these skills can be transferred to network participants so that they can analyse and process information on their own.

### **Sustainability**

One possible way of making a network sustainable is to charge periodical fees to the members, in areas such as workshops and training. Since attracting further funding for ongoing networks can be difficult, one approach may be to attract funding for specific activities such as publications, online courses or specific events.

## **Conclusion**

NGOs in developing countries have begun to make systematic use of information systems — both ICT-based and non-ICT-based — in order to

improve the flow of ideas, experiences and information, as well as to improve learning experiences from the field to increase the impact of development programmes. An increasingly globally networked NGO community interacting across the world is finding considerable common ground and scope for the sharing of information based on ICTs.

To meet the challenges of making effective use of the new technologies available, what is needed is a better understanding of the dynamics of culture, power, context and a focus of efforts towards common issues and interests. Electronic networks enable people's participation in their own governance because knowledge is not transferred; rather it is shared and can cross any regional border. As Deane (1998) has argued, knowledge has to be interpreted, adopted, and evaluated by those it is designed to help, and this is the greatest relevance of e-networks.

There is little doubt that the information era is here. E-networks provide great opportunities for NGOs to engage in mutual learning and collaboration in a cost-effective way. In doing so, NGOs need to contribute to the content and dynamism of the e-networks to make meaningful use of the technologies. At the same time, it is critical that these networks are well managed. The adoption of these principles and not the introduction of the technologies per se, will enable NGOs to fully capitalise on the opportunity to influence and form part of greater processes for development.

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