M&E OF NETWORK DEVELOPMENT

Network results can be divided into different categories, such as network vibrancy, network connectivity and network effects. Monitoring and evaluation tools and methods need to be chosen to assess each of these areas separately, depending on the need. Network surveys and social network analysis are two of the most common methods used to monitor and evaluate networks.

Within social development, a large amount of work is carried out by groups of individuals and organisations working in collaboration. These collaborations may be informal, or they may be set up as formal entities. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is often required to assess the changes resulting from collaborative work, and to learn about how different individuals and organisations jointly contributed to change.

One type of collaboration is called a social network. A social network can be defined simply as a *"number of actors connected by some kind of relationship"* (Davies 2009, p3). Relationships between actors in a network may be formal or informal. They might be based on friendship or business. They might involve communications flows, business transactions, social media interactions, or any other kind of relationship. Networks can take many forms, including alliances, coalitions, partnerships, communities of practice, learning communities, thematic groups, associations, and unions.

CSOs may want to monitor or evaluate a social network in two circumstances. The first is when a CSO has helped develop or support the network, and wants to see how well it is progressing and/or what it has achieved. The other is when a social network wants to monitor and evaluate its own progress.

The type of M&E required depends on many factors, such as the size, nature and stage of development of the network. Probably the most important factor is the purpose of the network – in other words what it is designed to do or achieve. Purposes can range from learning and mutual support around a theme at one end of the spectrum to specific action to achieve identified policy change at the other.

One classification lists six network purposes or functions. Social networks may cover one or more of these functions, and there is often significant overlap (Mendizabal 2006).

- **Filtering:** identifying which information is most useful, and/or organising it in an accessible manner.
- **Amplifying:** advocating a specific message or position, or taking little known or understood ideas and make them more widely understood.
- **Convening:** organising groups and individuals around a common theme or goal.
- **Community building:** promoting and sustaining norms and values within a network.
- **Investing:** providing resources to support the activities of members related to network goals.
- **Facilitating:** increasing network members' efficiency and promoting learning across members.

If network members are clear about the purpose(s) of a network, it is often much easier to decide how to monitor and evaluate the network. It is also important to acknowledge that many people see networks not only as a means to an end, but also as an end in themselves. This implies that networks are inherently valuable, whether or not they achieve their planned objectives, and that unplanned and unintended positive change often results from networks which would not otherwise have occurred.

In order to decide how and when to monitor and evaluate a network it is often useful to divide results into different categories or dimensions. Different M&E methods can then be used to monitor and evaluate different aspects of a network. Categorisation can be done in different ways. The categorisation used in this paper is as follows (based on iScale and Keystone 2010):

1. **Network vibrancy:** the health of the network;
2. **Network connectivity:** relationships between different members; and
3. **Network effects:** what the network does and achieves.

Network vibrancy

The health of a social network covers multiple aspects of network development. Some of these are as follows.

- the resources needed to sustain a network;
- trust and shared value within the network;
- the structure and governance of the network;
- the size of the network;
- the extent of engagement within the network;
- the capacity development of network members;
- the network's resilience and sustainability;
- the diversity of the network; and
- whether and how individual members benefit.

Some of this is quite easy to measure. For example, it is usually easy to count how many people are members of a network, where members come from, or how much funding a network receives from internal or external sources. Some aspects of a network's health, however, are less tangible, and need to be monitored through different methods.

Some CSOs develop network assessment tools, similar to the kind of Organisational Assessment (OA) tools used to assess the capacity of individual organisations. These can quite easily be adapted to capture the health of a network instead of an organisation. A network assessment tool involves:

- dividing a network's functions into a series of domains, such as financial processes, communications with members, etc.;
- developing a rating scheme to rate performance against these areas; and
- developing a method to agree on the ratings.

Some information can be acquired through a centralised Secretariat (if one exists). Usually, though, assessing the health of a network requires reaching out to different members through a survey. The survey can be used to get the views of members on all kinds of issues, including their contribution to a network, what they get out of membership, how active they are, and how well or badly the network fulfils their needs.

Surveys often contain a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions usually involve some kind of rating system, and can easily be aggregated to produce statistics. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, can be used to look at members' experiences in much more depth. An example of one network survey is provided in the case study opposite.

Obviously, the type of network has a big influence on how M&E is carried out. If a network has a Secretariat or similar kind of central Hub then it is easier to administer and analyse a survey. If a network has a much looser structure it is much more difficult to assess the health of a network in this way.

Case study: Keystone and iScale network survey

In 2009, Keystone and iScale developed a survey that was used by a group of 9 transnational social change networks to conduct a comparative survey of all their constituents. The same survey instrument was simultaneously administered to their members all over the world. Data was collected through an anonymous questionnaire administered by email. Respondents included: members, partners, grantees, donors and members of advisory boards. The survey was designed so that different networks could better understand the health of their networks, and to provide a vehicle through which Secretariats could better understand the opinions of their members.

The survey covered a series of questions, designed to find out:

- basic information such as the type of member, and how long they had been in the network;
- the perceived role of the network (i.e. whether it was to support its constituents, to perform certain activities, or be an active agent undertaking activities on behalf of constituents);
- how well the network secretariat met members' needs;
- the quality of communications and response between the Secretariat and members;
- how and how often members participated within the network, and the type of relationships they had with other members;
- members' input into decision-making; and
- the impact of the network on members' own work (e.g. their strategies, capacities, visibility and reach).

The survey was partly designed to help the Secretariats involved understand how their networks compared to other, similar networks, and to look at areas where they could learn and improve. One example of a closed question from the survey is shown in the diagram below.

Source: Keystone and iScale (2009)

How effective is the Network Secretariat in the following areas?

	1	2	3	4	5	
	Not effective at all				Extremely effective	Dont know N/A
Facilitating networking/ brokering partnerships between constituents	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○
Coordinating advocacy actions	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○
Creating new knowledge	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○
Facilitating knowledge sharing between constituents	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○
Providing technical assistance/ capacity building to constituents	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○
Providing financial support to constituents	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○
Supporting its constituents in furthering their goals	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○
Promoting the work of the constituents	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○
Enhancing the constituents' capacity to mobilise resources	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	○

Network connectivity

Network connectivity refers to the relationships between different parts of a network. This includes how people are connected to each other, the quality of the connections, who is connected to who, the reach of the network, and how information flows between different members.

Network connectivity is quite well covered in social development literature, mostly through articles on Social Network Analysis (SNA). SNA covers a range of different tools and methods, designed to help map and analyse social networks. Its main purpose is to identify and analyse the relationships within and between different components of a social network. SNA is covered in a separate paper in the M&E Universe, and the remainder of this section provides a brief overview only.

SNA can be used for M&E in a number of ways. It can be used during situational analyses or project / programme design for diagnostic purposes. In other words it can be used to help try and understand a network better. Based on this better understanding, a plan may be put in place to support the network. This plan can then be monitored and evaluated using standard M&E methods. Alternatively, a Social Network Analysis exercise can be repeated after a period of time to see what has changed. These changes can then be further examined to see what contributed to them, and how they have affected the performance of the network.

SNA can be applied to networks at any level from very small, local networks through to large, international ones. Within social development, CSOs have commonly used SNA in areas of work such as policy influencing and mobilisation, where large amounts of work are carried out through partnerships and coalitions. SNA has also been used extensively to map and analyse knowledge networks and communities of practice.

Data for SNA is often generated through questionnaires or surveys, administered to different network members. Nowadays, it is standard practice for SNA to be conducted through specialist software. Once information has been collected and stored, computer software can be used to generate a visual map (or different maps) of the network. Data can also be presented in other ways, including matrices, graphs, tables and plots.

Perhaps the biggest strength of SNA is that it is one of the few M&E methodologies currently available that looks beyond the individual characteristics of individuals and organisations, and focuses instead on the relationships between them.

Network effects

Whilst the previous two dimensions of a network – vibrancy and connectivity – are mainly concerned with internal matters, the third dimension is more concerned with what the network actually does, and the changes it influences. These changes may be internal or external. So, for a network, change could cover a network's impact on its members, the members' own impact on their environments, and the collective networks' impact on the wider environment (Younis 2017).

Sometimes, M&E carried out to assess the effects of a network is not that different from standard M&E. For example, if a network Secretariat conducts funded activities on behalf of a network then it would usually be expected to identify objectives and indicators, develop baselines, collect regular information on progress, analyse data and write regular reports in the same way that an organisation would.

As with any kind of M&E, activities and outputs are easier to monitor and evaluate than change. Network Secretariats usually find it straightforward to capture the quantity and quality of activities undertaken and outputs delivered. Sometimes, this information needs to be accessed from individual members and then aggregated across the network. However, this is not normally difficult to manage.

As far as change is concerned, a network often has the same challenges as an organisation in identifying, capturing, analysing and communicating outcomes and impact. Probably the hardest thing is to agree on desired changes. There may be many different views within a network, and it may be hard to get consensus on what kind of change is desired. However, once desired changes have been agreed it is usually no more difficult for a network to monitor progress or evaluate change than it is for an individual organisation.

If a network is more decentralised, or much of the activity is conducted by individual members working on their own, it can be a bit more complicated. For example, in some learning networks the chain of impact includes a number of different steps, such as whether a network has enabled members to learn as individuals, whether members have applied this in their own work, and whether this has then made a positive difference (see James 2010). This can make M&E more demanding, as CSOs or networks might need to assess both the impact of the network as a whole, and the impact of multiple, individual members.

In these circumstances, a number of complex M&E methodologies can be used to assess a network's contribution to change. These might require some adaptation, as follows.

- Contribution analysis, process tracing and contribution tracing are all methodologies designed to work backwards from a change and identify the role an organisation played in contributing to that change. In some circumstances these methodologies might be used to assess the contribution of a network to a change, such as a policy change, and then go even further back and identify how different parts of a network helped bring about the change. This kind of exercise could be done in a workshop environment.
- Outcome harvesting could be used during a workshop to collect together a set of changes resulting from a network's work, and to identify the contribution of different members to those changes. Outcome

harvesting uses a set of guiding questions which could be designed to capture external change (change outside the network), internal change (change within the network) or a combination.

- The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique could be used in a similar way. MSC relies on developing a set of purposefully sampled stories or cases that can be used to capture change that was not necessarily planned at the start of a process. MSC relies on the definition of key domains of change. Within a network these could be defined to capture specific internal or external changes.
- Network surveys can be designed to assess how individual members are contributing to wider network goals. This can be very useful in situations where a Secretariat conducts monitoring and evaluation for discrete, externally funded projects, but misses a lot of impact that is generated through the network itself because it doesn't always know it is happening.
- Case studies or stories of change are often used to solicit the views of network members on a variety of subjects. Case studies could look at how members contribute to a network, or the value they get from being in the network. Case studies could also be used to illustrate how individual members have contributed to external change, either by working formally through the network, or by using skills, knowledge or resources acquired through the network.
- Case studies could focus on the same members periodically to form a tracer study. This would allow a CSO or network to assess how a network is influencing different members over time, and also whether the network is evolving in response to different internal and external needs.

As well as using these kinds of methodologies, CSOs or networks could use other M&E methods and approaches designed to address complexity. These include different forms of evaluation (e.g. developmental, participatory or real-time evaluation), complexity-oriented planning tools (e.g. outcome mapping or scenario planning), or different kinds of sense-making activities, such as workshops, periodic learning reviews or strategy testing. Most of these are covered in separate papers within the M&E Universe.

If M&E is largely the responsibility of a network, rather than a supporting CSO, it is important to remember that it is much easier to use the methodologies and approaches described in this paper where there is a central Secretariat or Hub with the resources and mandate to carry out M&E. More decentralised networks will not necessarily have the same ability to carry out formal M&E. It is likely, therefore, that M&E will be a much more informal affair.

Further reading and resources

Some of the tools and methodologies described in this paper can be found by clicking on the links below.

- Organisational assessment tools
- Contribution analysis
- Process tracing
- Outcome harvesting
- Most significant change
- Case studies and stories of change
- Tracer studies
- M&E of capacity strengthening

The questionnaire used for the Keystone/iScale network survey covered in the case study can be found at http://keystoneaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/files/Annex-2009SurveyQuestionnaire.pdf. This provides a lot of ideas for how to develop a more tailored survey to suit a network's needs.

The paper "Next Generation Network Evaluation" referenced below provides a useful overview of some issues around the monitoring and evaluation of networks. It contains a large number of questions and indicators that can be used to assess networks. It is available from https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/10625/50770/IDL-50770.pdf.

The paper by Younis (2017) referenced above is also a useful reference paper. It can be accessed from https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Evaluating-Coalitions-and-Networks.pdf.

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