Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment

Working Paper

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Introduction

Over the past several years of operating our own networks and providing advice to the networks of others, IISD has noticed that there is not yet a consistent discipline or framework for the monitoring, assessment and evaluation of knowledge networks.[1]

Knowledge networks usually engage in three types of activities:

- *Collaborative research and information exchange:* the systematic investigation of the target issue or problem, conducted jointly by two or more members of the network, or by an individual member with significant consultation with other members.
- *Engaging with stakeholders:* moving the research into policy and action, through improved communications and interaction with those who are in a position to put the research to use.
- *Network management:* setting up and running the operating structure necessary to build the relationships among the participants in order to strengthen the research, communications and engagement processes of individual members and of the network as a whole.

We have observed that network evaluations often begin with a process to solicit from members their original expectations and their observations about whether their particular network accomplished what it set out to do. The difficulty with that approach is that the network is not assessed against any external benchmarks—against what network management experience tells us could be optimal performance measures for networks. We believe that there is sufficient understanding now of how networks can and should be managed, that it is no longer enough to assess a network against the expectations (either high or low) of those involved in it.

Recommendations for network improvement should include optimizing the areas of energy and strength within the network, moderating expectations and strengthening critical areas that are underperforming. Although a network assessment is an important process to improve network performance, there is very little in the evaluation literature on methodologies that can be directly applied to networks. This paper is our attempt to develop guidelines that can be used by network managers as well as independent evaluators.

The scope of our interest is primarily research networks in the environment and international development field; and, more specifically, structured, or formal, networks of organizations rather than more informal communities of individuals.

In this working paper, we have set out to explore five major elements of network performance and related indicators of success. At the end, we outline a sample process for undertaking a network assessment.

What to look for in a network assessment

Every network arises in response to a unique set of circumstances: the challenges it proposes to address, the organizations and individuals available and interested in working together, and the resources available to support the work. All networks have different timelines, abilities, goals and objectives. Consequently,

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[1] *"A formal knowledge network is a group of expert institutions working together on a common concern, to strengthen each other's research and communications capacity, to share knowledge bases and develop solutions that meet the needs of target decision-makers at the national and international level."* Creech, H. and T. Willard, Strategic Intentions: Managing Knowledge Networks for Sustainable Development. Winnipeg: IISD, 2001. p19.

networks tend to be evaluated relative to the circumstances surrounding their initiation, and in particular, to the funding grants that supported them. Nevertheless, we have observed that there are five principal areas of investigation that all network assessments should cover.

1. **Effectiveness:** Are the network's goals and objectives clear and are they being achieved; is the network fully realizing the advantages of working together? Is the knowledge being produced relevant to the needs of decision-makers?
2. **Structure and governance:** How is the network organized and how is it taking decisions on its work? Are structural and governance issues impeding its effectiveness?
3. **Efficiency:** Are the transactional costs of collaboration a significant barrier to success? Is capacity being built across the network to strengthen members' ability to collaborate on research and communications?
4. **Resources and sustainability:** Does the network have the required resources to operate?
5. **Life-Cycle:** How is the network performing in comparison to other networks at similar stages in development: what is the continuum of growth of the network?

A.   Effectiveness

It has been our observation that most formal networks within the environment and development community do not have a strategic plan. Most institutions now recognize the value of such plans for managing and measuring their work; but this discipline has not yet migrated to groups of institutions working together. Collaborative work tends to be governed by a variety of documents: funding proposals, memoranda of understanding, contracts for research distributed to individual members, annual meeting agendas and so forth. What is missing across the board is the network plan. The single greatest barrier to assessment is the lack of a strategic plan against which to measure progress. Without this, it is much more difficult to determine what it is the network as a whole hopes to achieve (not just the recipients of a network grant), who or what it hopes to influence or change, and within what timeframe.

The Network Strategic Plan

We consider the following to be the major components of a strategic plan for networks.

1. The starting point for every network should be a clear understanding of what the anchor for the network is—an articulation of the decision or change in the world that it seeks to influence or effect.

2. The process of influencing and changing policies and practices is based on the building of relationships and leveraging those relationships for change. The next step in building a strategic plan should therefore be the identification of the relationships the network needs to build and foster:

- those who are in positions to make the decision or effect the changes;
- those who can influence the decision-makers directly;
- those in civil society who can bring pressure to bear on decision-makers;
- those who can support, reinforce and strengthen its recommendations, in particular the academic community and other research institutes;
- those in the media through whom the network can reach the public; and
- the donor community, who can finance and support its efforts.

In some networks, it is the members themselves who are in positions to make change and take action. The role of individual members as influencers and decision-makers should be highlighted as part of mapping the relationships that the network needs to establish.

3. Once the network has mapped out its relationships, it must analyze what these audiences need to know that will help them take or influence the decision. The network must articulate what knowledge is to be provided by the network, ranging from the identification, analysis and packaging of existing knowledge to the generation of new ideas, concepts and applications through research and field work.

4. The network must then determine how to move that knowledge into the hands of those it wants to influence. There are many mechanisms for this, including print and electronic publishing, holding workshops, presenting at conferences, undertaking training and capacity development projects: taking advantage of key windows of opportunity to move the network's knowledge into the hands of others and creating opportunity directly.

Network Strategic Plan

Decisions or changes desired by the network

Who?
Identify and define relationships:
Network members;
decision-makers

What?
Identify knowledge gaps:
What research exists;
what needs to be tested;
what new knowledge is needed

How?
Identify opportunities:
Prepare communications
and engagement strategies
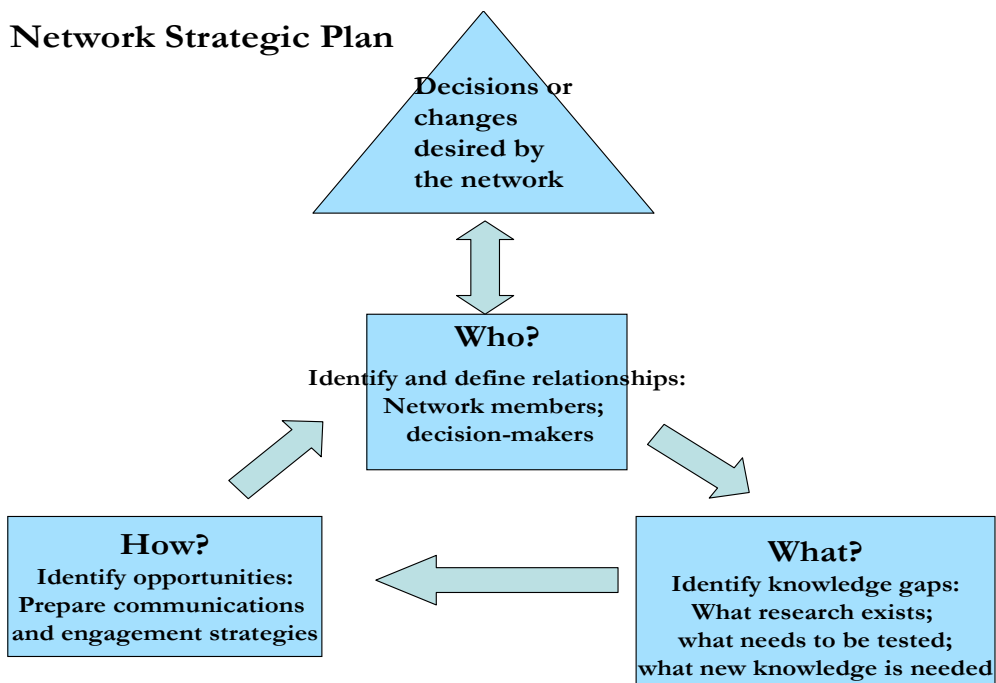
We know that in assessing the effectiveness of a network, it is difficult to demonstrate causality—that a network's efforts have led directly to the decision it was seeking. But we can look at incremental changes—changes in attitudes, actions and behaviours—that are a direct outcome of its work. In developing indicators for network effectiveness, we have been influenced by "Outcome Mapping," an evaluation methodology developed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in 2001.[2] The essence of Outcome Mapping is the focus on assessing outcomes as changes in behaviour, activities and relationships, and on systematically recording signs of those changes against desired progress markers.

With a network strategic plan in place, network members can begin to build in qualitative and quantitative indicators (or "progress markers") that will help them monitor changes as signals of the network's effectiveness. It is important that these indicators be developed in consultation with members, so that members themselves will learn to recognize and record these types of changes. The following are suggestions of indicators that we have found useful in reviewing the effectiveness of IISD's own networks.

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[2] For more information on Outcome Mapping, go to http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-26586-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

1.   *Indicators of changes in the knowledge base*

At present, most networks list research outputs (primarily papers published) as indicators of their contribution to the knowledge base in their field. When looking at changes in the knowledge base, one should be questioning to what extent the network is generating new knowledge and/or repackaging knowledge for new insights. The relevance issue is key: has the knowledge generated by the network been relevant to those outside of the network? Do they know more, do they understand better, can they make use of the network's contributions?

Changes can be identified through several sources:

- Interviews with key people the organization was trying to influence, to ascertain from them whether the knowledge contributed by the network was useful in any way. One needs to determine what their agendas were and whether there was a link between their challenges and the information provided by the network. Are they familiar with the network's knowledge products? Were the network's ideas too new; did it help with new problem definitions that shaped or changed agendas; or did it provide a synthesis of new ideas from others that were ripe for implementation? Where did the network's knowledge add value?
- Reviewing unsolicited user feedback (substantive comments on published reports) received by the network. Feedback may signal an increase in intellectual support for the network's research provided by experts external to the network.
- Journal indexes and citation indexes, as indicators of references to the network's information in academic and professional literature.
- Assuming that the network has established a Web site, Web server logs will provide an indication of whether there is growth in traffic to the site, and what documents are most frequently accessed.

In monitoring changes in the knowledge base, one should also look carefully at whether the network is achieving one of the advantages of working collaboratively: joint value creation. Knowledge networks create new knowledge and insights for use beyond the immediate membership, but knowledge can be created without working in a network. The network advantage is the collaboration of members on work, and the value gained from peer review and debate. Joint value creation is the creation of new insights and knowledge through the collaboration of members on research, on field projects and other activities. Indicators of joint value creation can include a range of interactions, such as:

- Increasing frequency of e-mail between/among members on research issues (analyzing the level of information sharing throughout the network).
- Substantive discussion on research issues at network meetings, and the documentation of those discussions.
- Peer review of papers by members of the network.
- Joint research on projects.
- Co-authorship.

A second important advantage to working in a network is the building of capacity among members to undertake new research in order to strengthen the network's contributions to knowledge.

Indicators of capacity development in research can include:

- Learning by doing: execution of specific research or field activities.
- Intellectual support for the research process provided by experts both within and external to the network.

- Background training provided in the issues under investigation (including e-learning modules, support for attendance at conferences, etc.).
- Customized information provided to members to support research.
- Inclusion of young researchers in the work of the network, both to assist with the work and to strengthen their own understanding of the issues.

2. *Indicators of changes in communications practices*

In order to get the attention of decision-makers and influencers, a number of channels and methods need to be deployed. We have observed, however, that communications practices in networks tend to be ad hoc—a report prepared and mailed out; a presentation given at a conference. In the absence of a network strategic plan, there is usually also an absence of communications strategies to move the network's knowledge into action. In assessing the effectiveness of a network, one should look carefully at methods of communication and at changes in those methods over time. An increase in the number of research papers from all members may indicate that work is being done. However, an increase in a variety of products stemming from the research, distributed in a variety of methods, timed according to when a decision-maker may be most receptive to the ideas, indicates strengthened communications practices that are more likely to be effective.

Furthermore, networking is based on the premise that decision-makers are more likely to respond to information coming from a collective rather than an individual voice. In assessing a network's effectiveness, it is important to observe whether in fact individual members are promoting the work of the network (collective ownership) rather than relying on the secretariat or coordinator to do the work.

Some useful indicators of effective communications practices include:

- Opportunity management: what were the major processes (negotiations, conferences, etc.) in which the network should have been active to promote their knowledge/information; what knowledge products were developed that related specifically to those processes? Have network members actively promoted the findings of the network in those processes?
- Opportunity creation: did the network organize workshops and consultations of its own in order to inform and engage decision-makers in the progress of its research?
- Use of communications professionals: we have observed that knowledge networks tend to be composed of researchers from the member organizations. A significant change to monitor is whether those researchers are bringing in the communications professionals from their organizations to assist with network communications.
- Product lines: did the network issue only research papers, or has it begun to create "spin off" products, such as short policy notes, briefing papers, summaries for specialized journals and newsletters? Are they publishing in academic or professional journals as well as self publishing and distributing their reports?
- How effectively is the network using electronic media (Web sites, e-mail lists, etc.)? Is the research available on a network Web site? Equally important, are individual member Web sites "pointing" to the network Web site and the research to be found there? Is there a public e-mail list promoting the work of the network, and do members contribute to it?
- Use of mainstream media: are members pooling their media contacts and assisting with the development and distribution of media releases; are they preparing editorials for mainstream papers?

In general, one should be looking for progressive levels of effort to engage the stakeholders each network member seeks to influence.

3.   *Indicators of changes in relationships*

The provision of information by itself does not leverage change; it is relationships that leverage change in policy and practice.[3] In assessing network effectiveness, one has to look at the types of relationships it has built, with whom and for what purpose.

Changes in levels and effectiveness of engagement can be identified in several ways:

- Interviews with the network members themselves, to determine whether the network has a clear picture of the agendas it was trying to influence, and whether their knowledge development and communications strategies were aligned with that picture. Did the network have a good understanding of who the key people were who should receive their information and who the "connectors" were, who in turn could influence key people? Where is the network positioned vis-à-vis other knowledge providers and other "influencers"?
- Interviews with key people whom the network was trying to influence to ascertain who they know within the network, how they found out about the network's work and how they became interested in what the network was doing.
- Monitoring participation in events hosted by the network: the number of participants, the sectors they represented and the level of their influence can signal growing interest in the network's activities, and growing engagement of more senior people.
- Individual members should also monitor their direct interaction with key decision-makers/influencers on matters related to their network research. An increased number of meetings or contacts with key people may indicate that individual members are gaining space in the political geography of their country or region; that they are gaining legitimacy and strengthening their reputation.
- Ultimately, requests from decision-makers for more information and more work (new contracts awarded; new proposals funded) indicate success in building effective relationships with them.

While single institutions can and do have influence with decision-makers, the network may, by virtue of the collective reputation of its membership, the value-added research and its communications work, be able to increase levels of engagement and sustain it over longer periods of time.

B.   Structure and Governance

When reviewing changes in actions and relationships, it may appear that a network is accomplishing little beyond basic information sharing among the members or the production of individual research reports. Less than optimal performance may result from the way the network has been set up and the way decisions are made within the network. Some specific questions around structure and governance should be explored in a network assessment.

1.   *How the network was formed: membership selection, exchange of expectations*

- Were there clear criteria in mind for membership selection (e.g., good research reputations; interest in the network research goals; and access to the policy process in their countries)? Is non-performance or exceptional performance with any given partner linked to the initial selection process?

- What were the members' reasons for joining?:
  o Access to funds – were members interested only for the sole reason to gain funding?

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[3] Creech and Willard, p36.

- o The desire to develop capacity to work on the issues – was there a genuine desire to form a partnership and work with members?
- o Contacts and building relationships with other organizations working on the same issues.
- o More access to information on the issues.
- o Is performance linked to clear articulation or lack of disclosure of expectations by members? Do the expectations correspond to the goals of the network?

2.   *Structure of the network: the nature of the working relationships*

- What was the model for the network?:

  - o "Hub and Spokes" model: one organization manages the daily operations of the network. The network functions as a collective of research partnerships between the coordinating organization and each of the individual members; there is little collaboration between members. These individual partnerships may be highly productive, produce new knowledge, and build capacity with the member as well as with the coordinating organization on the issue, and may achieve significant outcomes in influencing policy forums in specific countries. However, they may have been more easily funded on an individual basis rather than under a network umbrella. If the model of the network is hub and spokes, the assessment should look closely at whether the collective of individual partnerships really achieved the "network advantage" of joint value creation, increased capacity development and strengthened engagement and influence.
  - o Collaborative model: members interact consistently with each other as well as with the coordinators. The coordinating organizations themselves act as members of the network, undertaking their share of research, information sharing and input to the work of other members. In this model, pay particular attention to whether the knowledge generation, sharing and capacity building functions of the network flow beyond the immediate members into other fora and processes. When members get close and collaborative, they often forget to talk to others outside of the network.
  - o How is the network coordinated? It is now common knowledge that networks benefit from having one person designated as the coordinator. It is becoming more common to designate an individual as the coordinator. But it is not yet common practice to actually document a "terms of reference" for the coordinator, or to have the network members evaluate the performance of the coordinator. Problems with coordination may devolve from the lack of formal terms of reference and performance appraisal for the coordinator.

3.   *Formalizing the network: governance and decision-making protocols; the drafting and execution of work plans*

- **The funding agreements with donors**
  Is only one organization accountable to the donor, or are there provisions for members to also be accountable directly to the donor? Who is carrying the greatest financial and reputation risk for success or failure? Is strong/dominant performance by one member linked to their assumption of risk; is poor performance with any given member linked to lack of risk and accountability?

- **Memoranda of Understanding**
  What are the duties and responsibilities of members as laid out in MOUs or network governance agreements; are they clear enough so that members can be held accountable to their commitments? Are there mechanisms outlined for decision-making on network

projects and fund raising? If there are no formal MOUs or governance agreements, how do members make decisions on the work the network is to undertake?

- **Contracts with members (usually documenting exchange of funds for specific projects)**
  Are the contracts strictly bilateral, between the coordinating body and the individual member—in other words, while the contracts may require specific deliverables in return for funds, are they silent on the obligations of members to each other (what are they expected to contribute to the others; what are they promised that they will gain from the others)?

- **Are there work plans for members?**
  Are commitments made by one organization to a donor through a funding agreement translated into written work plans for members (in which members are accountable for specific levels of participation and deliverables)? Are commitments made by members at meetings transformed into an actionable work plan (i.e., not just the creation of a report of the meeting) against which performance can be monitored? In other words, do members understand and have they agreed to what is expected of them?

C.   Efficiency

We have often observed that the transactional costs of collaboration can become a significant barrier to success. How a network mitigates these costs is an indication of efficient management of the network. We suggest that in assessing network efficiency, one should look at the following management issues:

1. Internal communications and interaction among members.
2. Institutional support (commitment of member institutions to the network, beyond the individual participants in the network).
3. Systems and procedures (proposal development; contracting and accounting; logistics for workshops, etc.).

1.   Internal communications and interaction among members

In looking at internal communications in a network, one should review whether members have the appropriate tools to support collaboration, and how much they use them. Some signals of good internal communications include:

- Use of a mix of tools used to engage members in discussion and collaboration, recognizing that members may have different levels of comfort with the tools (Web, video conference, telephone, face-to-face meetings, etc.).
- Existence and use of an internal e-mail list: is it used only to distribute information from the coordinating group to members, or do members themselves use it proactively to circulate information or talk about their own work?
- Level of attendance and participation in network meetings.

2.   Institutional support

Success and sustainability for knowledge networks can be affected by the support provided by the institutions from which the membership is drawn. While individual researchers may represent their organizations in the network, it is important to investigate how much support they have from their institutions for their participation in the network. It is also important to explore whether the researchers

keep their institutions informed and involved in the network's activities. Some key questions to investigate are:

- Is participation in the network restricted to an individual researcher from a member institution or do many people from the member institution become involved in various aspects of the work?
- Does the individual researcher have the backing of his/her institution to participate in the network, or are there conflicts between institutional priorities and network priorities? How are such conflicts resolved?
- How does participation in the network, and the results of the work carried out within the network, become part of a member institution's corporate memory?

Answers to these questions reflect where the capacity in a network is being built (with the individual or with an institution) and where it will remain, as the foundation for future work.

3.   Systems and procedures

The efficiency of network operations is also reflected in the systems and procedures for contracting, for proposal development, financial disbursements, for reporting to members and, in turn, reporting to donors. This area of investigation usually focuses on the tasks of the coordinator, and the organization responsible for the accounts of the network. The questions are simple: are members satisfied with systems and procedures or not; and what is necessary to streamline them?

A recent lesson learned at IISD on network management is that reporting to multiple donors for network activities is made excessively onerous by the wide variations in reporting requirements from those donors. The solution was to negotiate a common reporting framework and time frame that satisfied the needs of all the donors.

D.   Resources and Sustainability

Working together to generate and share new knowledge, and putting that knowledge to work, can build the long-term relationships among members that are necessary to sustain networks. Nonetheless without adequate financial and human resources over a given period of time, any network or organization will face barriers to achieving its goals.

A network assessment needs to look at several resource issues:

1.   Human resources

- How stable is the network membership and coordination: has there been minimal turnover in the individual researchers representing their institutions in the network? Has there been minimal turnover in coordination of the network? Limited turnover can reflect both how wisely the members were chosen and how committed the members are to the work.

- Limited turnover, however, may not always be good for the network in the longer term. It is necessary to explore whether the network has the right mix of skills and abilities among its members to achieve its goals. Is it time to revise the membership of the network?

2.   *Financial resources*

- Does the network have the required financial and in-kind support to do its work? Insufficient financial resources (whether real or perceived) may deter member participation in any network. The challenge is to assess whether in fact there was adequate funding to achieve the goals, and how that funding was shared and accounted for throughout the network.

- It is also important to explore whether only one organization was expected to raise the funds. Did members assist with the fundraising, either providing input to proposals developed by the coordinating body, or by raising additional funds themselves to support network projects? The sharing of financial responsibilities is an important signal that the network is in fact operating as a network rather than as a collective of grant recipients.

- Examining the financial resources can also reveal indications of network effectiveness: If the original network funding has leveraged additional grants or contracts for specific projects with one or more members, or for the network as a whole, it signals that there is in fact a market for the network's research and communications work.

3.   *Timelines*

One of the more popular myths of networks is that once they are established, they must go on forever. It is often considered a sign of failure for a network to wind up its activities. In fact, we believe that knowledge networks should be time bound as well as purpose driven. Time is a critical and finite resource for networks, and must be managed accordingly. Key questions to ask in an assessment are:

- Has the network embedded sunset or renewal clauses in its agreements with its members? In other words, in setting up the network, have members agreed to work together for a specific period of time, at the conclusion of which they would assess their accomplishments and decide whether they have met their objectives and can terminate the network? At this decision point, they may choose to continue to continue or expand their work, but this "renewal" would also be time bound.
- Do members perform their duties in a timely way, or are there constant delays in tasks and deliverables that impede the effectiveness and efficiency of the network?

4.   *Sustainability*

If members do have a long-term vision for the network, one needs to consider whether the network is being organized and managed for long-term sustainability. Building and maintaining financial support from donors is only a portion of the issue. If the network is actively planning to work together for a significant period into the future, it needs to address a number of issues in organizational growth. In an assessment of sustainability, one must ask the following questions:

- Where is the leadership within the network? Is it sufficiently shared across the membership? Is there a plan for succession of leadership; can it shift from one member to another over time?
- What is the sense of ownership that members have of the network? What do they hope to gain from and contribute to long-term participation?
- Does the network have an adaptive management culture, based on internal monitoring of its work: does the secretariat or do the members consistently refine their objectives and their actions in keeping with their observations on what may or may not be working, either in the network's strategic plan, in its structure and governance, or in the efficiency of its operations?

- What are the mechanisms for anticipating and responding to change, in particular changes in the external environment in which the network is operating? Can the network respond to circumstances in which its research directions must shift, new knowledge must be generated and shared, and new relationships built?

E.   Life-Cycle Analysis

From time to time, we have been asked to compare one network against the performance of other networks. There are some caveats about undertaking comparative assessments. A network which has not performed up to expectations when assessed against its original intentions and against the criteria we have described above may still appear to be a success when compared with how other networks are doing. In effect this "lowers the bar" and has the potential to reduce the incentive for changing and improving network operations. And, as we stated in the beginning, every network emerges from a unique set of circumstances, relationships and resources, thus making it difficult to compare one network fairly against another. But it is fair to ask what is normal in network operations, in addition to what is optimal.

We are therefore exploring life-cycle analysis as a useful tool to aid in assessing and evaluating networks. The life-cycle of a network can be seen as its organizational growth from initiation to a mature stage of operations. In our observations of networks, we have noted four different stages in the life of a network: the start-up; growth (increasing, decreasing or constant); decline leading either to closure or renewal; and long-term sustainability. Life-cycle analysis is an interesting investigation into the evolutionary process of a network: how and when positive and negative, external and internal factors cause the network to experience either an expansion phase or contraction phase during each period of operation.

To the best of our knowledge, a life-cycle analysis of networks in the environment and development field is yet to be done. Such an analysis would describe levels of performance according to the phases of development that networks go through during their life span, illustrated as peaks and troughs through the history of a network, where each peak represents the increase in organizational productivity (expansion – increased network output), and each through the decline in organizational productivity (contraction – decreased network output). Although a more rigorous and in-depth study on network life-cycles is needed, the following will present a preliminary framework on cycles of network development, drawing from our observations of a few networks.

Years in operation	Quality of interaction and work
1-3	Formative period Members get to know each other; but work independently with little collaboration. There is some protection of turf; individual institutional priorities take precedence over network "friendships." A great deal of individual work is accomplished – new "knowledge" is created, although not always "jointly" with other members: members are productive if not interactive. Time and money may be invested at this stage in setting up the coordination systems and procedures to support collaboration. Through effective coordination, the work of individual members may be aggregated into "network" successes.
4-6	Status quo/growth

	Some of the benefits of investing in coordination should be apparent at this point: funding, contracts and work plans should be in place; members will probably have met several times; it should be possible to assess the effectiveness of the network with respect to its knowledge contributions, communications and relationships with those it seeks to influence.
	Members continue to be productive, but also begin to question why they are bothering to do their work within a network context. They question what the value added of the network is. This is a signal of maturing of relationships among the members, recognizing implicitly if not explicitly that they may be limiting their effectiveness by not adding value to each others' work.
	If this stagnation isn't monitored well, and responded to, then signs of non-performance begin to be seen: members miss deadlines, don't execute their tasks, and so forth. Often by the fifth or sixth year, the productivity is either quite high, indicating membership commitment even if collaboration is still an issue; or is quite dramatically falling off, indicating the likelihood of failure and wind-up in years 7-10. It is during this phase that a core group of members may emerge who have the desire to keep the network going into the future.
7-10	Decline and renewal At this point in their history, networks may go in one of three directions: • Further stagnation and outright failure; OR • Significant reduction of activities to simple information sharing around the network; OR • Real collaboration among a core group of members although not necessarily all members.
10+	Sustainability: long-term relationships built, interaction sustained among members including joint work, peer review, communications and real recognition and influence beyond the network.

We are speculating that "normal" network performance is relative to the length of time a network has been in operation. In assessing a network, interesting insights may be gained by looking at the spectrum of networks in general, specifically at the stages of network development, and how the network under review has performed within these stages, compared to other networks at similar stages in their development.

Final comments

Like all working papers, we know that this contribution to the field of evaluation will raise many additional questions. We would like to thank the following individuals for their insights as we developed this paper:

• Mark Halle and David Boyer, IISD, who gave us the opportunity to develop some of our concepts as we undertook a review of the Trade Knowledge Network, managed jointly by IISD and the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development
• Terry Smutylo, IDRC Evaluation Unit, who reviewed the paper

- Rinalia Abdul Rahim, Executive Director, Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP), who supported our internal review of the Strategic Plan of the GKP

The guidelines themselves will benefit from further testing and we are in the process now of working with other formal networks to see whether our approach is useful to them. We are also intrigued by a number of issues requiring further work.

- Can the guidelines we provide here also be applied to more informal networks of individuals – advocacy networks, networks of experts, communities of practice?
- We are observing that informal communities often develop around more formal networks:[4] how do we evaluate the functionality and benefits of these communities to the work of the network (and vice versa)?
- The section on Life-Cycle Analysis is particularly interesting, in recognizing that networks, like organizations in general, do go through stages of development. Further work is needed to test and validate our preliminary assumptions on what those stages might be.

New work will be posted on our Web site as it progresses: see
http://www.iisd.org/networks/research.asp.

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[4] For example, the community of practitioners in the knowledge for development field was brought together through the "GKD" [Global Knowledge Dialogue] e-mail list, as an extension to the group of organizations within the Global Knowledge Partnership.

Appendix 1: Process for network assessment

We suggest the following steps in undertaking a network assessment:

1. **Member consultation** – Preliminary information on the reason for the assessment (is it self directed or conducted by an external consultant; is it being done at the request of members; or coordinators; or donors?); discussion with members on what the goals and objectives of the assessment should be; request for relevant documentation.

2. **Documentation review** – The method in which the network creates proposals and reports to its donors. How minutes of network meetings and conference calls are conducted. How contracts with members, describing activities to be undertaken as part of receiving funding for participating in the network. This includes workshop reports, MOUs and governance agreements.

3. **Interview protocol with individual members** – A sample interview protocol is appended. Questions are framed to elicit from members signs of changes in research capacity; relationships with decision-makers, with other network members; and other changes resulting from their participation in the network.

4. **Interview protocol with people/organizations identified as those the network is seeking to influence** – A sample interview protocol is appended. Questions are framed to elicit indications of whether the network's knowledge was relevant to the needs of those people/organizations; how they engaged with the network.

5. **Network meeting plenary session discussion – locating energy for change** – An Appreciative Inquiry approach orients the assessment process towards positive experiences: what is working, what has provided excitement, enrichment, information to one's action – the premise being that when one focuses on the sources of energy within a group of individuals, the problems become less challenging, or less important.

   At a network meeting, in plenary, members are asked to share their thoughts and stories:

   a. Describe the best experience you had with the network: when did you feel most excited about the network; when did you feel you accomplished something valuable as a result of being part of the network?
   b. What did you value the most about the network?

6. **Draft review of assessment and recommendations** – This should be circulated to all members for comment, verification of findings.

7. **Assessment report**

8. **Work plan for response to recommendations** – The report should not be the end of the assessment. Part of the assessment process should include the development of the work plan for the next phase of the network.

Appendix 2: Sample interview protocol with network members

A. On the effectiveness of the network:

1. What did you hope to accomplish through the network?
    Prompts:
    - To increase understanding: Identification of a priority issue for your country/region; contribution to research on a priority issue?
    - To have influence: on national (or international) policy agenda?
    - To build relationships: create a broader coalition of interest/support for priority issue?
    - Other

2. What did you hope to gain by participating in the network?
    Prompts:
    - To gain access to other experts, to information?
    - To increase influence and reputation of your own organization nationally, internationally?
    - Other

3. What did you want to contribute to the network?
    Prompts:
    - Your knowledge/expertise?
    - Access to your own communications vehicles?
    - Other

4. Who did you most want to influence through participating in the network?
    Prompts:
    - Local decision-makers in different sectors?
    - Your own organization?
    - Other network members?
    - Others outside of the network?

5. What do you think has changed as an outcome of your participation in the network
    Prompts
    - In your own research?
    - In your interaction with local decision-makers?
    - In your relationships with other network members?
    - In levels of awareness/understanding nationally/internationally of the issues the network is addressing?
    - Other

B. On efficiency of the network:

1. What is working well in the network and should be continued? What did not work well and should be improved/ discontinued?
    Prompts
    - Interaction with members (internal communications)?

- Use of the network Wb ite (external communications)?

2. Did you have good support from your own institution for your work in the network? How did you integrate your network work into the rest of your institution's work?

3. Were the systems and procedures of the network satisfactory?
    Prompts
    - Contracts?
    - Financial support?
    - Correspondence, listserv, meetings?
    - Interaction with coordinators?

Appendix 3: Sample interview protocol for those the network seeks to influence

1. Is the person familiar with the network or with individual members of the network?
   - What is their perception of the network's role or contribution to the issues on which it is working?
   - What has the network accomplished or produced that the person thinks stands out? (prompt for workshops, conference presentations, research reports, e-mail lists, Web sites, etc.)

2. What were the major processes or agendas that the network was or should have been active in to promote their knowledge and advice?
   - What knowledge products has the network developed that related specifically to those processes/agendas?
   - What value has the network added to the debate?

3. Was the network's knowledge timely?
   - Was the network too far ahead of the agenda?
   - Was the information relevant to issues of immediate importance to its constituents?
   - Has the decision-maker more/better information/intelligence than he/she had before?

4. Does the network have a good understanding of who its "constituents" are?
   - Who are the key people who should receive their information?
   - Who are the "connectors," who in turn could influence key people?
   - Has the network built relationships with the right people?

5. What communications strategies did the network use:
   - How did the person being interviewed find out about the network; how has he/she received key research products; were they e-mailed to him/her; did they receive notification from a listserv or a secondary source; how do they use the network Web site, etc.

6. Were the research products in a format useful to the person?

7. Was the content credible, reliable?

8. Is this an issue on which the network is recognized as expert?

9. Where is the network positioned vis-à-vis other actors in this field?
   - Was there a non-network publication or organization that they found particularly useful; how does it compare to the network?
   - Has the network identified an appropriate niche for itself?

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