

Recognizing Good Practices in Knowledge Network Management

The Just Governance Group learning community has been interested in networks as an associative model since its creation in 2006. Original members of JGG have coordinated, participated in, and/or advised international, national and local networks seeking to promote knowledge development and knowledge exchange related to human rights, justice, and democratic governance. This interest in networks has sparked significant research and debate among Group practitioners about the characteristics of networks, and sharing of ideas about best practices. In this second issue of Co-Praxis, we identify, from our experience and from literature review, good practices in the management of knowledge networks.

Just Governance Group and Knowledge Network Management

JGG has evaluated a number of networks promoting a range of development initiatives, including: leadership training of indigenous women in Peru, judicial education globally, rights-based community practice in the Middle East, and continuing education networks in Latin America. During these evaluations we have observed the challenges that networks face in implementing associative management practices and techniques while seeking to achieve verifiable development results. JGG seeks to understand good practices in network management that are coherent with the innovative and associative organizational characteristics that define networks.

Defining Knowledge Networks

A network is a process in which independent organizations or individuals with a shared purpose or goal associate to contribute resources and expertise for the achievement of common objectives. It is a non-hierarchical social system that embraces collaborative processes and engages in joint decision-making and knowledge exchange. Knowledge networks are:

- voluntary associations based on the perception of value added through collective action or exchange,
- dynamic, fluid and organic,
- noted for sharing responsibility for processes and outcomes,
- horizontal, non-hierarchical,
- able to mobilize and rationalize use of resources,
- temporary or long-term initiatives that depend on members' shared vision for knowledge development,
- effective users of information and communication technologies.

Identifying Good Practices in Knowledge Network Management

Networks are more likely to achieve development results if members are committed to innovative management practices within a defined governance structure. Good management practices will allow the network to continue its initiatives until it achieves its goals, or until its members are no longer willing or able to continue. Based on the JGG's experience and the literature reviewed, the following are examples of good practices in network management:

Key Documents Reviewed

Bloom, Adam. Betsy Kummer, Renee Mungas, and Matt Reeves. *Learning Networks: How Organizations Linked for Enhanced Knowledge Achieve Extraordinary Results*. USAID, 2007.

Cole, Victoria. *Hidden Assets: Young Professionals in Knowledge Networks*. IISD, 2001.

Creech, Heather. *Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment*. IISD, 2004.

Karl Egger, Urs. *Work the Net: A Management Guide for Formal Networks*. GTZ, 2006.

Lloyd-Laney, Megan. *Making Knowledge Networks Work for the Poor: Practical Answers to Poverty*, 2003.

Plastrik, Peter and Madeleine Taylor. *Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits*. Barr Foundation, 2004.

Schenk, Ingrid. *Structured Flexibility: The Governance, Coordination, and Outcomes of IDRC Supported Networks*. IDRC, 2005.

Taschereay, Suzanne and Joe Bolger. *Network and Capacity Building*. ECDPM, 2006.

Tuozzo, Maria Fernanda and Diana Tussie. *The Governance and Coordination of Networks: An Analysis of the Findings from an IDRC Strategic Evaluation (1995-2005)*. IDRC, 2006.

Zinke, Julia. *Networks as a Form of Capacity*. ECDPM, 2005.

Shared Strategic Vision

Once membership is in place, networks that meet virtually or in person to reach consensus on the strategic intent of the network are more likely to be sustainable. Additionally, each member should be able to identify what they hope to contribute to and gain from the network.

Operational Plan

An operational plan that sets out the network's operational objectives, initiatives, and member responsibilities will help the network achieve its shared strategic vision. Research and communication strategies should also be established as a guide. These documents should demonstrate specific activities that will contribute to the network's goals and can be used as benchmarks during internal or external evaluation processes.

Leadership and Decision-Making

Clear parameters for participatory and horizontal decision-making are important because they sustain the sense of ownership among members. Characteristics of effective network governance include: the decentralization of decisions, inclusive and democratic social organization, consensus-building, and participatory management. Networks that rotate coordinating functions may prevent the "institutionalization" of the network secretariat.

Funding

Networking may involve costs and require funding. Network members should explore options for financial resources, raising revenues to support the coordination and network management functions. Funds should be managed carefully, as donor funding and project management requirements may convert a network into a more established institutional structure. This could threaten the sense of fluidity and horizontal participation.

Technology and Resources

The continued evolution of information and telecommunication technologies permits the expansion and acceleration of the way networks function. Networks should access technical knowledge and innovation. For example, the development of internal communications infrastructures and virtual teamwork protocols help members interact creatively and productively within the objectives and timelines of network projects. In addition, web communication can be used for effective audience identification, engagement, and communication.

Communication

The development of a network communication strategy as a method for ensuring effective communication is of great importance. A network communication strategy explains how the network's communication is organized: internally among members and externally with stakeholders. All members should have equal access to network information and the tools to participate effectively. In addition, it is important to keep in mind cultural and gender aspects within a network as these considerably influence communication as well as the management of the network in general.

Management of Change

Networks need strong analytical and adaptive capabilities to keep them alive in the face of changing contextual realities. They need to recognize threats and opportunities in the external environment, as well as have the capacity to adapt, self-organize, create new structures and establish ways of relating and mobilizing energy for action.

Evaluation

The process of evaluation should be incorporated into the very first plans a network makes and it can have two dimensions: network results and development results. The first relates to the network's internal capacities developed to mobilize resources. The second refers to the external outcomes produced. A network should focus on the development of a planning-evaluation cycle as part of its managerial and administrative process.

JGG Reflections on Network Management Practices

- Network members as well as donors who support networks must pay special attention to the network process itself in order to avoid undue formalization or stagnation of network structures. Attention to network dynamics and the rotation of responsibilities helps ensure horizontal and participatory management and avoids the conversion of the network into another formal institution.
- We have noted the delicate balance between structure and fluidity in network management. For example, while clear decision-making guidelines, communication protocols, and roles and responsibilities need to be formalized, members' participation within this structure is often fluid and it may ebb and flow over time.
- In order to evaluate the effectiveness of a network's process and results it is important to integrate evaluation and reflection techniques into the network's activities on an ongoing basis. For example, periodic mapping of members' interests, needs, competencies, and levels of satisfaction can help identify knowledge exchange opportunities and members' demands and contributions. Also, regular engagement with the users of a network's knowledge products regarding the usefulness and application of those products can be easily integrated into the communication and dissemination techniques applied by the network.
- JGG has observed that knowledge networks offer significant intellectual value to their users/learners relative to the monetary costs incurred by optimizing opportunities for collaborative development and transfer of knowledge.

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