

## Not everything that connects is a network

By Simon Hearn and Enrique Mendizabal

**N**etworks have long been described as effective alternatives to uncontrolled markets and controlled hierarchy forms of organisation (Powell, 1990). In the public policy context, networks have been predominant factors in policy formulation (Peterson, 2003), innovation (Engel, 1997) and global governance (Reinicke and Deng, 2000). While not a new phenomenon in the development landscape, networks are becoming increasingly prevalent, as Ramalingam (2011) reports in his recent literature review. Donors, for example, are turning to networks to deliver aid interventions, NGOs are working through networks for collective advocacy and researchers collaborate across networks for greater policy influence.

But are networks always the most appropriate vehicle? Where they are appropriate, how can we make the best use of them? This Background Note argues for a more rigorous understanding of their nature, particularly their value (and costs), and presents a revised Network Functions Approach as a model for rationalised investment in networks.

It is clear that networks provide an effective mechanism for learning (Powell, 1990) and innovation (Engel, 1997) and enable collaboration beyond the usual institutional, cultural and functional boundaries; but they come with their own costs and risks. In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell criticised social networks and the international media hype about their ability to change the world. We may not agree with his arguments, but we welcome the challenge to the networks as a fix-all strategy. One of his arguments illustrates this: 'Because networks don't have a centralized leadership structure and clear lines of authority, they have real difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals. They

can't think strategically; they are chronically prone to conflict and error. How do you make difficult choices about tactics or strategy or philosophical direction when everyone has an equal say?' (Gladwell, 2010).

### What is a network?

The word 'network' is used in many different ways and contexts, from formal membership networks to informal social networks. It is used so much that it becomes difficult to understand what is meant (Ramalingam 2011) and, therefore, vital to clarify how we intend to use this term.

For the purpose of this paper we offer a broad definition of networks but narrow-in on a particular type of network of interest. We start with the definition used by Newman (2003), which is broad enough to encapsulate everything that is labelled network but allows us to focus on our area of interest. Newman defined networks as a collection of objects or actors that are connected to each other through some kind of relationship. We accept this definition, but want to be more specific about the types of networks we are discussing.

First, we are dealing here with actor networks, not networks between objects. Second, we are interested in networks as a distinct form of organisation that differs from hierarchical institutions, or finite projects. Third, we are more interested in networks that form around specific issues or a general set of values; rather than networks formed around a location or event. Fourth, we deal with networks with an explicit purpose around these issues that intend to interact towards that purpose. Finally, most networks we examine are facilitated or supported by an identifiable supporting entity often described as a

secretariat, coordinator, steering group or stewards.

Too often the term ‘network’ is used to identify the mechanisms that support a network or link its members – whether a secretariat, an email list, an online platform or an event. This may seem a minor grievance but is a symptom of a wider problem. There is rarely a clear enough distinction between the network and its supporting entity. The supporting entity could be, and often is, modelled on a hierarchical organisation or a finite project (albeit one with a very involved board or stakeholders). It can, therefore, be studied and treated as such – its aims and objectives can be projectised, with work plans and projected budgets. But these structures and services are not the network; the network is the people and the relationships between them.

When we talk about ‘setting up’, ‘creating’ or ‘developing’ networks, we are usually referring to the supporting entity – building a secretariat or initiating a coordinating project – not to the network itself. Since networks are built on the relationships and interactions of their members, we cannot and should not claim to be able to create them in the same way as we create projects or organisations. The language we use must change, so rather than ‘initiate’, ‘direct’ and ‘manage’; we prefer to say that we may ‘foster’, ‘nurture’ and ‘facilitate’ networks.

Our experience tells us that all we can hope for in fostering networks is to identify existing or potential relationships and enhance, add value to, expand, formalise or otherwise transform them. This is what it means to develop a network.

If time and effort is to be invested in fostering networks then we need a clear idea of what it is we are investing in and why – we need a way to describe networks and the benefits they are designed to deliver. Networks cannot be pigeon-holed into any particular definition that attempts to describe them in detail: networks are structured in different ways and operate through different processes emerging from their relationship-driven nature and the fact that they lack clear lines of authority. It is more useful to describe them through their properties and patterns of behaviour and to describe what they do: their functions. The argument for focusing on functions is presented in more detail in Mendizabal (2006a).

## A revised Network Functions Approach

The idea of function was used by Enrique Mendizabal in the development of the Network Functions Approach, or NFA. The NFA was inspired by Stephen Yeo’s typology of functions (Yeo, 2004) and first developed for research policy networks (Mendizabal, 2006a). It was then operationalised in collaboration

with Ben Ramalingam who applied it to the context of humanitarian networks as well as networks in the private sector (Ramalingam and Mendizabal, 2008). It has since been used in a variety of contexts including the strategic planning, review and evaluation of networks. The approach combines four elements of networks: purpose, role, functions and form.

The **purpose** is the objective of the network and justifies its existence, but is independent to the approach taken to achieve it. Identifying the purpose helps answer the question: ‘Why are we supporting or working as a network?’. The purpose could be long term (achieving the Millennium Development Goals), instrumental (delivering goods and services to a particular population or group), or fluid (improving a policy debate).

The **role** of the network is how it will promote value among its members in pursuit of the purpose. Two archetypal roles can be suggested – support and agency. In support networks, members act independently as agents of change but join the network to receive support that will make them more effective in their work. In agency networks, members coordinate their efforts with other members and act together as a single agent of change. These two extremes suggest very different ways of working within the network including the way in which members interact with each other and with the supporting entity. Figure 1 illustrates these roles in a simple hub-and-spoke network with a central secretariat.

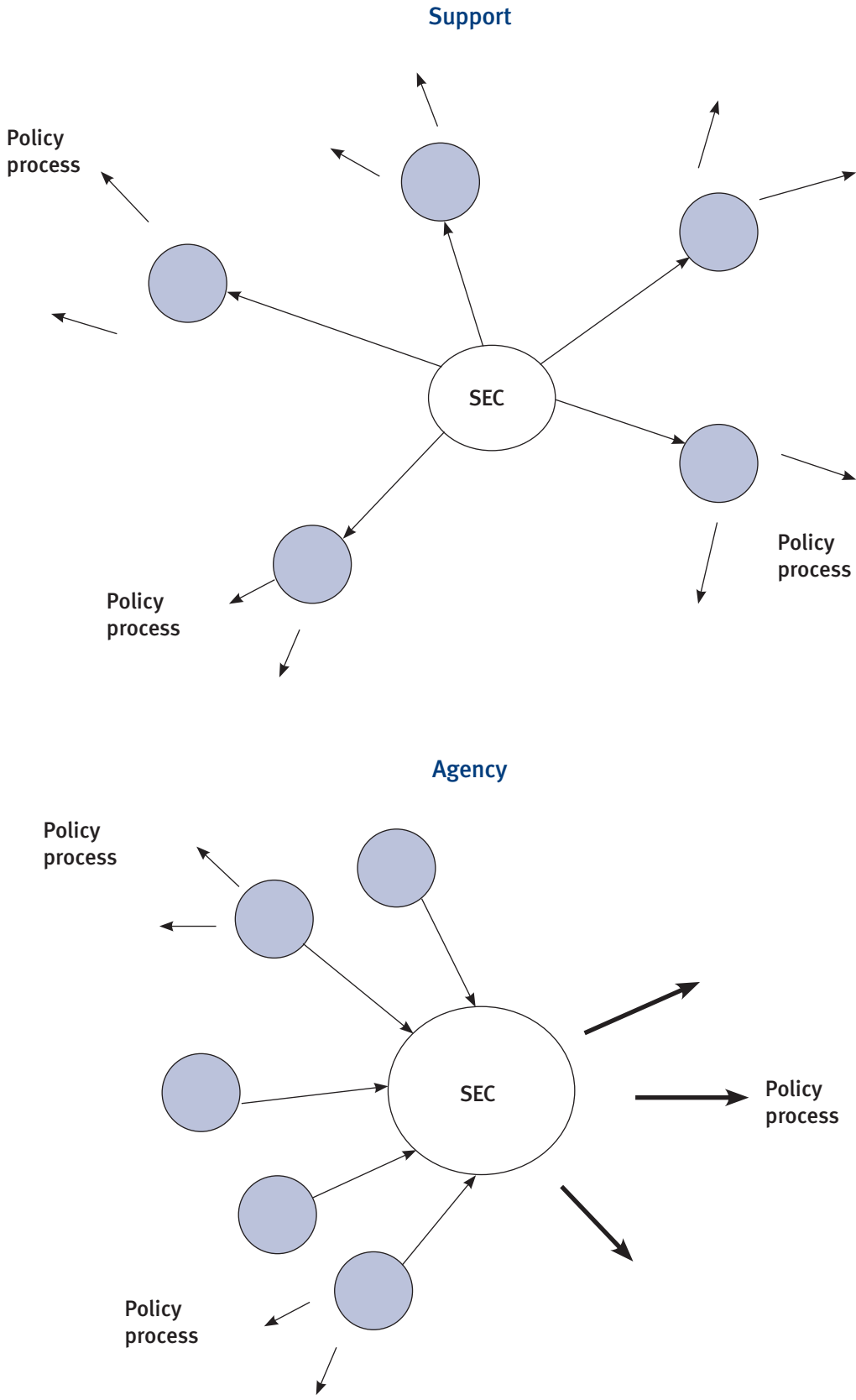
In practice, most networks strike a balance between the two – but few are aware of or are explicit about the trade-offs or their organisational implications.

The **functions** describe, more specifically, what the network actually does. Research by the RAPID programme at ODI has identified a number of non-exclusive functions across most networks: community building or coordination; filtering information and knowledge; amplifying common or shared values and messages; facilitating learning (research-based or otherwise) among the members; investing and providing resources, skills and assistance; and convening different stakeholders and constituencies.

The **form** describes the structural and organisational characteristics of networks including geographical and thematic scope, membership, governance, the external environment, strategic and adaptive capacity and the resources required such as capacity and skill, communications and funding (Mendizabal, 2006b). The main premise of the NFA is that **the form of a network should follow its functions** because its organisational arrangement is crucial to its capability to deliver them.

Based on our experience managing and working with various networks, and researching other func-

Figure 1: Support and agency networks



Source: Mendizabal (2006a).

tional definitions, this Background Note presents an alternative iteration of the NFA with key modifications that reflect our recent thinking.

1. We clarify the difference between the functions carried out by the network and those carried out by the supporting entity.
2. We review alternative functional models to produce a revised list of functions that will be applicable more broadly.
3. Rather than providing discrete functions, we provide broad categories to encapsulate a variety of functions.
4. We discuss additional considerations for the form of the network.

## Revised functions

A functional perspective is not a new way of looking at networks – a number of functional models are described in the literature. A quick look at a few of these reveals considerable agreement and overlap of network functions, particularly around five themes; knowledge management, amplification and advocacy, community building, convening heterogeneous groups and resource mobilisation.

- **Knowledge management** functions refer to the ability of networks to acquire (Podolny and Page, 1998), filter (Yeo, 2004), exchange (Martinez-Diaz and Wood, 2009) and disseminate (Reinicke and Deng, 2000) knowledge.
- **Amplification and advocacy** functions help networks place issues on the global agenda (Reinicke and Deng, 2000), amplify the voices of their members or constituents (Yeo, 2004), put pressure on stakeholders (Waddell, 2009) and enhance members' legitimacy and status (Podolny and Page, 1998).
- Third, **community building** enables networks to build shared visions among diverse stakeholders (Waddell, 2009), play a role in building cohesive, mutually supportive communities characterised by strong ties (Yeo, 2004), set and diffuse norms and standards (Martinez-Diaz and Wood, 2009) and encourage participation by increasing trust among members (Reinicke and Deng, 2000).
- Fourth, **convening** heterogeneous groups provides a bridge between groups who wouldn't normally meet (Yeo, 2004), fostering consensus among groups who would normally disagree (Martinez-Diaz and Wood, 2009), generating coherence through organisation (Waddell, 2009) and developing connections between supply and demand (Reinicke and Deng, 2000).
- Finally, networks **mobilise resources** to manage resource dependencies (Podolny and Page, 1998), provide an efficient channel for aggregated

funding (Waddell, 2009) and provide funding and services to enhance the work of members through, for example, capacity development (Yeo, 2004).

The table overleaf summarises the five function categories, outlining the possible roles of the supporting entity.

The supporting entity within a network is not alone in carrying out these functions; otherwise there would be no network as such – just an organisation, individual or project carrying out tasks. The role of the supporting entity is to support and facilitate the network to carry out these functions as a network. The facilitation function described by Yeo (2004) has been omitted from this revised list because facilitation is the means by which the supporting entity supports the other functions, not a function of the network itself. The learning function introduced by Ramalingam et al. (2008) has also been omitted because it is implicit in the other five functions and their support from the supporting entity.

These functions can be used to test whether a network strategy is appropriate. If the function is carried out more effectively through a network form of organisation than any other, then it is considered appropriate. For example, a grant-making programme could manage resource mobilisation, but if the grantees are based across different contexts, a network could make the allocation of resources much more efficient. Networks cease to be relevant when it becomes more efficient or effective for a single entity to carry out the function; here, a programme or a service organisation may be a better option.

## Network form

Rather than repeat the discussions on network form presented in earlier papers (Mendizabal, 2006b) we focus on five considerations for network planning: members, governance, organisational arrangements, stewardship and resources.

## Network membership

Networks are not created out of nothing; they build on priorities of their members (Gulati, 1995): shared vision, common objectives, similar interests, mutual history or collective identity. There are different depths of membership – it is not as simple as being either in or out: at the core of a network are the leaders – the committed members who provide strategic oversight. Then there are active members who contribute to the network and represent it beyond its boundaries. Third, there are those associated with the network but who are not active. Finally, there are those on the fringes who have little sustained connection to the network but who play crucial brokering roles.

**Table 1: The five network functions**

Function	Purpose	How does the network carry out this function?	How does the supporting entity support this function?
Knowledge management	Identify, filter and share important people, events, facts and stories; stimulate learning; mitigate information overload	Sharing information through websites; contributing to or editing a journal or newsletters; diffusion of ideas; storytelling; mentoring	Editing websites, publications and newsletters; moderating mailing lists; passing on relevant/useful information
Amplification and advocacy	Extending the reach and influence of constituent parts – members, ideas, initiatives	Hosting conferences, running campaigns, publishing targeted material, providing extension services, ripple effect	Disseminating publications, newsletters; managing campaigns; coordinating field work; representing the network
Community building	Building of social capital through bonding, building relationships of trust; consensus and coherence; collective learning and action among homogeneous actors	Hosting learning, networking or social events; creating opportunities to collaborate with others; providing space for open discussions	Organising events, facilitating internal introductions, coordinating projects or initiatives
Convening	Building social capital through bridging; stimulating discourse, collective learning and action among heterogeneous actors	Hosting formal multi-stakeholder meetings or discussion/decision-making events, enabling reputation by association, identifying and connecting new or emerging ideas	Organising events, maintaining contacts, facilitating external introductions, representing the network
Resource mobilisation	Increasing the capacity and effectiveness of members, stimulating knowledge creation and innovation	Offering training, grants, sponsorship, consultancy and advice; providing access to databases and libraries	Brokering training opportunities and consultancies/advice, managing grants and sponsorship programmes, administering database/library access

### Network relationships

The strength of relationship ties among members is crucial to a network and can determine core characteristics of those that function well: trust, accountability, micro-structure, diffusion of innovation, consensus and collaboration. Different relationship structures will be appropriate for different purposes; for example, broad but loose networks will be effective at spreading ideas to wide audiences but smaller networks based on strong ties are more fertile places for the development of ideas.

### Network benefits

Members' interests and motivations are not always aligned and their contributions to the network are more likely to reflect their own priorities. Given that other relationships may compete for their attention

and resources, network boundaries can be quite porous. So networks need to facilitate a shared vision to recognise and exploit different motivations, ensuring they add value to the overall network.

### Governance

The **governance** of networks cannot be the same as for hierarchical organisations: one rule is unlikely to fit all. Rules and norms in networks can be explicit or tacit but usually emerge and evolve over time. Therefore, 'setting up' networks could be more accurately described as transforming informal rules and relationships into formal ones. Mendizabal (2006a) suggested that the degree of formality of a network depends on the flexibility (or inflexibility) of its purposes (and roles and functions) and, more importantly, organisational arrangement. The formation of a

network can be charted in terms of the process of formalisation of existing relations between its members – as they became closer and stronger, these ties are being formalised through agreements and alliances.

### **Organisational arrangements**

The organisational arrangements within networks should be organic. For Taschereau and Bolger (2007), ‘networks emerge, grow and adapt to achieve their purpose, to respond to members’ needs and to opportunities and challenges in their environment’. In this sense, Paul Starkey (1997) described a spectrum of network typologies traversing from a highly centralised model to a highly decentralised ‘perfect network’ model. He indicated that most functioning networks exist somewhere between, but rarely at, the two extremes. These kinds of arrangements can also be nested within each other – e.g. a decentralised network may consist of centralised sub-structures (committees, working groups, secretariat, etc.). These sub-structures matter because, as Susan Allen Nan (2001) suggested, networks with more structural detail (more levels, committees, coordination hubs, etc.) can support a larger diversity, size and geographical spread while those with less structural detail must rely on stronger ties between members.

### **Stewardship**

Given this growing complexity, networks need stewardship to be of consistent value to their members and remain relevant to their purpose. Network management may be the wrong term but some form of leadership is essential and is usually a role taken up by a facilitator, secretariat or board, though leadership doesn’t necessarily have to be centralised. The key elements of this role involve connecting members, ideas and activities in a way that sustains the network’s functions and role and promotes its purpose. The facilitator must attempt to ensure that the priorities of individual members and homogenous communities add up to or contribute towards the network’s priorities.

### **Resources**

As a consequence, networks are highly resource intensive, involving high transaction costs and risks for members as a result of working collaboratively, and much administrative work for the secretariat and facilitators. Just think of the effort it takes to keep real friendships – we get excited at the possibilities that ‘networks’ conjure in our collective imagination, partly as a consequence of the rise of the ‘social network’ and the perception that we can ‘make friends’ so easily; but it’s deceptive. Maintaining relationships will always require effort; the tools can assist us but they don’t create something that is not there.

Similarly, the networks we are talking about here require much more than a click of the mouse: first and foremost they demand attention, in addition to quality time and a shared history. Members must be willing to support this and give it their attention. Without this, there is no business case for pursuing network models – a centralised model or a single agency approach may be more cost effective and relevant if members are not willing to contribute.

Bringing about changes within networks must take both form and function into account. Changes to the form can have dire effects on the network’s capability to deliver its functions and, ultimately, its purpose. Sometimes, networks will face or promote internal changes in response to changes in their environment or mandate, and to maintain their relevance: accepting new members, promoting new relationships and increasing resources for the network. These may lead to reassessment of the network’s roles and functions as well as structural adjustments or changes to maintain its relevance. The network will also face changes in its functional balance at some point; this is likely to demand a change in the form of the network, or at least reflection.

The structure of a network is made up of a complex set of components, configured to deliver its functions. Changing the functional balance, and therefore the focus, should not be taken lightly. In their study of networks in Ethiopia, Barry and Mendizabal (2009) found that as new functions were imposed on networks (namely to act as intermediaries, providing resources and services to third parties) their capacity to meet their original functions suffered.

Networks rely heavily on their loose linkages for the mandate to make significant changes. To be as responsive and strategic as possible, the network’s supporting entity needs the authority to make strategic decisions with little or no consultation with the members. This requires a cohesive membership (well defined and well connected), a clear and shared mission (which all members support) and the right resources and resource mobilisation capacity (to allocate and mobilise resources for long-, medium- and short-term initiatives) (Mendizabal and Yeo, 2010). This may demand dedication to the network that may be impossible for many members – leading to a play-off between member commitment and network responsiveness. Alternative, more centralised structures may be created to fulfil this role – but then one must consider whether a network is necessary in the first place.

### **Conclusions**

Networks are far too often conceived as an automatic vehicle for delivering development initiatives, with

not enough thought for the rationale behind such a choice. Many organisations and agencies decide that they really need a network to deliver an objective and their instinct is to engineer one; which often involves identifying members and funding their collaboration. There are problems with this approach. First, the entities that are labelled networks are not always networks: they are often projects or service delivery organisations that mandate a network-esque way of working. Second, networks are indigenous to any situation or environment; they exist before an initiative comes along and will exist after an initiative has closed down. They are a natural phenomenon that can be put to good use if treated in the right way, but they can't be created or destroyed, only transformed through sensitive facilitation. Third, networks are not panaceas and are not suitable in all situations. The suitability of a network strategy needs to be interrogated carefully before investments are made, particularly as a network could prove more expensive than an alternative strategy.

We have presented the Network Functions Approach, along with some recent modifications, to clarify the value of networks and articulate their comparative advantage over alternative forms of organisation. There should be a clearly defined purpose to the network at the outset. The role of the network should be defined, along the spectrum from support to agency – and it should be clear that

a network is the most effective or efficient or otherwise appropriate delivery mechanism for the role. By focusing on what the network will do in terms of the five categories of functions (knowledge management, amplification and advocacy, community building, convening heterogeneous groups and resource mobilisation) the case can be made for whether to invest in networks or not – based on whether these functions could be better carried out through another form of organisation.

If there is one thing we could ask of those who want to set up networks it would be to research the networks that already exist and to build on those by applying resources strategically. If the kind of networks they are looking for don't already exist, why is that? What are the inhibiting factors? If they remain determined to create a network then their resources are best invested in addressing these inhibiting factors. Once these are lifted, the network is more likely to emerge.

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