CHAPTER 24

Network Development For Biodiversity Conservation

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INTRODUCTION

Networks have been in use for some time now. Every individual and all organisations have external relations they co-operate with which are of great importance to their effectiveness, efficiency and survival. Our societies have been existing with social relationships that contribute to our well-being from time immemorial. For example, during the difficult time of death, information is disseminated very fast and relatives, friends and in-laws gather to soothe and sympathise with the bereaved. This is a form of networking.

WHAT ARE NETWORKS?

Networks are made out of existing systems and institutions or individuals that have a common interest in a particular area, in this case biodiversity conservation. The networking may be simple in nature involving manual or non-electronic exchange of data. For example reports, results of inventories, or any other information. It could also be semi-electronic involving exchange of data through physical exchange of diskettes. At its highest level, it could involve exchange through electronic mail connectivity.

In summary, a network has the following characteristics:

(i) Consists of three or more organisations;

(ii) *Has clear objectives or addresses a specified mutually-agreed upon need*: This factor is highlighted as a key to network viability. In order to generate interaction among different institutions in different geographical settings, there needs to be a common network. Network activities cannot be random. They should be guided by systems and strategies which offer viable prospects of achieving set objectives. Networks benefit from clear objectives and clearly-defined systems and strategies.

(iii) *Capacity and willingness to learn and share experiences and ideas*: Members must have the capacity and/or willingness to contribute

resources, time or information if the network is to operate effectively. This is a logical necessity of any collaborative action. Members should use their individual comparative advantage in certain areas to complement those of others. For example, institutions with the basic communication infrastructure (telephones, fax, E-mail, computers) necessary to bring network partners together may be able to complement the efforts of smaller organisations who may have field personnel with access to a wide range of experiences. A "give and take" (symbiotic) relationships has to exist. Underlying the capacity to contribute to the network is the presupposition that everyone is actually actively engaged in some work in their various areas.

(iv) Mutual trust and respect among the partners;

(v) *Partners in the network are equal and maintain their independence*: A balance between the nodes (members) of the network is important in order to realise the full potential both of the network and of the individual participants. Dominant actors run the risk of marginalising the efforts of individual sources of information and experience.

STRUCTURE OF NETWORKS

It is not necessary to have a central repository in a network. This is because there is a lot of data and sometimes it is best handled by experts in a particular field of biodiversity conservation. The best approach is for members of the network to easily access information that they require and add value to it either through analysis or integration with their own data.

Even though a hub may not be necessary in a network, someone or a particular institution must take responsibility to ensure that the network functions. The most important role of this sacrificial lamb is to ensure that data exchange standards are set and complied with. Data exchange protocols, data release policies, methodology for data collection and analysis etc. have to be agreed on.

FUNDING

Very few networks are financially self-supporting. Many rely on donor funding which is well known to be prone to swings of fashion. Obviously, running a network costs money and somebody has to keep the purse. Everybody in the network should contribute to this purse and/or get involved in fundraising.

In order to get everyone actively involved, the secretariat of such a network could be rotated among the main actors. Most importantly, is the willingness to participate and to be honest enough to recognise the source of information when it is used by another member of the network.

ADVANTAGES OF NETWORKING

- Promoting the exchange of ideas and information amongst individuals and groups who would otherwise not regularly communicate to each other. By promoting interaction and exchange amongst members, networking provides an active forum for debate and this could be a potential tool for lobbying and advocacy at policy levels.

- *Focus*: A network helps to focus the efforts of an often dispersed and hard-pressed community of development workers. The can also provide a common direction for collaborative efforts since they enable groups to join together on a limited agenda while maintaining their autonomy.

- *Resource use*: They have the potential to prevent duplication of efforts, especially in such activities as research and publication.

- *Synergy*: Networks offer the opportunity to use synergy of a group to find solutions to common problems. The pooling together and sharing of experiences acts as a catalyst in encouraging new ideas and forms.

Constraints

The two major constraints to networking are heterogeneity of context and heterogeneity of membership.

CONCLUSION

For a network to be successful, it must provide valuable services to the members. A network that has no real or valuable data will just be a white elephant. Internal evaluations of various networks have identified some major areas that require strengthening to bridge the gap between information production and its use. These are:

- tendency for networks to develop independently of one another with very little integration or exchange of information, especially in the field of environment;

- lack of clear understanding of the perceived needs of the end users for environment information and inappropriate formats;

- lack of mechanisms for incorporating environment data and information into the national development planning processes.

Strategies designed to overcome these weaknesses should place more emphasis on integrating networking into the decision-making process. In other words, investment returns from networking should be measured in terms of provision of relevant information for use in the decision-making process, and consequently better management and judicious use of natural resources. Information compilation and transfer processes and mechanisms – how they can be enhanced to maximise the impact of environment information on the decision-making process.

Things that need to be taken into consideration with networks are:

- the type and extent of environmental data generated by national institutions, agencies and programmes (format, scale, completeness of data, etc.);

- importance of current data collection and compilation practices in meeting national and sub-national development goals;

- identify successes and shortcomings;

- determine the current levels of effective application of data by end users; and the extent to which environmental data is integrated into the overall national planning process;

- determine the output forms which would allow end users to best be able to understand and use the data;

- produce the necessary programme framework for the country to develop appropriate interventions for supporting resource management decisions, including detailed national assessments; infrastructure development; training; technical backstopping; etc.

Requirements

- "One-stop" centre to act as referral for locating data or information;

- Standardisation of data and/or information;

- "Quick-look" images to assist users to decide on whether or not the data is of use to them;

- Publicity to increase the number of requests because a network is of no use unless it is used. Publicity may be through media, brochures, newsletters, etc.;

- Assessment of performance of the network – you need to prove that the data or information provided has been used and a difference in resource management registered.

Issues

Some members of the EIN would like to sell their data. Policies within the organisations require that they sell their data. The trend is to sustainability and hence some members of the network are forced to sell their data and costs may be prohibitive, e.g. Biomass, Surveys and Mapping. Institutions like MUIENR and NEMA may be able to provide data free of charge because they are primarily research institutions or because their activities are already financed.

Two forms of data exist: analog and digital. Analog data can be distributed without due reference to the original source while with digital data one has to have express permission from the source. Exceptions to this are when this has been processed further.

The issue of data quality exists everywhere. The current position is that you should quote the source of data and let the source defend the quality. Adequate acknowledgements have to be given for each dataset.

Development of skills – specific arrangement to train members of the network should be made so that they can contribute and get more out of the networks themselves. These skills may include writing newsletter articles, organising workshops and exchange visits. Of course, some of these skills may develop as a by-product of the membership. Concrete network activities help to consolidate networks and raise the confidence level of individual members.

Need for a structure – It is important to consider what form your network will take. Will it be a loose collaboration amongst members? Will you have a co-ordinating centre or hub? Networks seeking to achieve particular objectives by sharing out work among members so that each contributes to the whole usually require structured management processes. In other cases, particularly with local grassroots-

based networks, the emphasis is likely to be on loosely-structured network management which allows for sufficient flexibility.

Protocols of exchange – (modern technology). Biomass are on the Worldwide Web and therefore you can access their data easily.