Uniting through networks - The art of fostering ICT for development networks

Joitske Hulsebosch, Bénédicte Marcilly and Loeki Schaeffers, IICD

The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) has five years of experience building the capacity of multi-stakeholder networks in the field of ICT for development (ICT4D) in nine countries. The networks engage in knowledge sharing, advocacy and awareness raising activities to a different extent in each country. In this paper, the authors draw lessons from their experiences with the networks and aim to contribute to the practice area of capacity building for networks.

"In my project I had a problem with connectivity which I raised in one of the network meetings. Someone suggested doing video-recording of best practices. If you have a server and digital videos, you have an interface for the media. It was a tremendous idea to put the videos on a local server. We tried it on a pilot basis and it worked perfectly. We are now trying to upscale this idea." - Network participant in Ghana.

Capacity building for networks

There is growing interest in networking among development agencies because of its perceived benefits (Smutylo 2005). Creech & Willard (2001) identify four drivers behind this:

- ICTs facilitating information exchange;
- The inter-relatedness of social, economic and environmental problems;
- Frustration with the separation of research and policy; and,
- The success of private knowledge management initiatives.

For IICD's purposes, networks are groups of individuals or organisations that retain individual autonomy while voluntarily exchanging information or goods or implementing joint activities (Church, et al 2002).

IICD's approach

In order to promote locally owned sustainable development, IICD supports a number of ICT for development (ICT4D) networks. The objectives of these networks are 1) to share information about ICT-enabled development; 2) to raise awareness about the potential of ICT and the benefits that ICT applications can bring; and, 3) to influence policy and development processes.

Nine national ICT4D networks

IICD has supported local organisations in nine countries (Jamaica, Ecuador, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia) to set up national ICT4D networks. The legal form of the networks (Box 2) varies from NGO to Company Ltd under guarantee. Most have elected governing bodies and constitutions. All have staff members and an office.

There are major differences in membership among the networks. Some focus on organisations and others on individuals. Networks tend to be stronger in capital cities and some have thematic subgroups. Some have secured non-IICD financing, ranging

TIC Bolivia presents itself to peer networks in other countries (2003).

from local contributions to international development funding. Public-private partnerships have also been a challenge, although there has been some non-financial support in the form of sharing expertise and skills.

Although the output of most networks (newsletters, workshops, etc.) is impressive, it is harder to measure their impact on member practices and policy. Reviews have been conducted in Bolivia (2004) and Ghana (2005). In Bolivia's case, the review highlighted the need for greater availability of information, more concerted public relations, greater involvement in policy and more contact with ICT4D players. Ghana's review showed that members benefited from new ideas and relationships. Members felt that the network's value was in channelling information and uniting disciplines rather than in influencing policy. (IICD 2005).

IICD's capacity building
IICD plays multiple roles supporting ICT4D networks:
- Offering feedback on network development;
- Offering advice directly or through third parties;
- Bringing North-South and South-South information together;
- Coaching coordinators and board members;
- Helping create annual plans, approving grant requests, drafting contracts, monitoring funds; and,
- Promoting South-South learning through exchange visits.

IICD also acts as a network board member when requested, although - to avoid any possible confusion about its roles - it prefers not to.

Network capacity building: learning by doing
Networks tend to start with knowledge sharing before moving into policy. The Ugandan and Bolivian networks, for example, only got involved in policy a few years after their inception. Finding the right focus is a challenge for networks (SKAT Foundation 2004), but shared missions between member organisations and networks can be crucial to growth.

Network sustainability
Financial, institutional and political sustainability are all important (Box 3). For institutional sustainability, the members' level of involvement must be checked regularly against their interests. IICD has developed a questionnaire to gauge members' needs, and this is currently being used in a number of countries.
Networking initially depends on a core group of members, but eventually more active members need to be attracted and the network needs to be opened up to new initiatives and more representative leadership.

Presentation of Togunet during a workshop, 2003.

Experience suggests that having respected practitioners involved in activities is good for political sustainability and the network's reputation. In terms of financial sustainability, IICD typically offers annual grants of €40.000. These grow as networks develop and then decline as they start to mobilise resources. Intentions for support should be clear from the outset, and capacity builders should help networks pursue outside funding once they have proven their value. They also need to fund conservatively initially, to encourage focused spending and motivate the networks to focus on financial sustainability and structure early on.

Supporting network development
It can take five years for a network to become productive, running contrary to donor funding, which drops as networks mature (ICCO/ECDPM 2004). Questions arise as to whether donors can play multiple roles and how to prevent networking from becoming too donor-driven.

IICD has faced confusion over its multiple roles, and it is caught between supporting

The coordinator of Infodesarrollo.ec, Ms Diana Andrade, presents the approach of this Ecuadorian network.

networks and showing its donors results. IICD's partnerships are relationships of equals, but may not be perceived as such. For instance, during a review in Ghana, IICD's suggestions were taken as instructions, because they came from the funder, so having a network secure other funding is healthier for the advisory relationship.

IICD recommends making roles explicit and separating them when possible. IICD has chosen to combine roles, as network funding is scarce, and it is uniquely positioned to act as a broker for ICT4D information.

Stimulating local knowledge sharing
Cultural differences have an impact on fostering development and approaches need to be localised. Networks may have more individualistic or collectivist approaches, but regardless of this, it is the networks alone that should decide on their focus.

One important factor for an effective network is trust; trust and confidence to engage in exchanging information, knowledge and experiences.

Huysman and De Wit (2002) advise caution in rewarding knowledge sharing financially, arguing that tacit rewards may be more effective in the long term. We recommend encouraging knowledge sharing within organisations so that it becomes routine.

Working with local capacities
Members need skills in networking, policy, documentation, communication, organisation, leadership and negotiation. These need to be identified locally and strengthened among members; when unavailable locally, they should be sought externally, without replicating external solutions.

IICD encourages exchanges between networks with similar issues. Peer-to-peer networking enhances network performance and assists partners who are less familiar with information networking.

Network supporters need to know how to listen. Sometimes communication is difficult in the absence of face-to-face interaction, but IICD has nonetheless chosen not to have local offices, to strengthen local ownership and demonstrate trust.

Networks built on existing initiatives appear to be more successful, although the stability of these initiatives and intellectual property issues need careful assessment before investing.

Regional networks

One important aspect of IICD's work is to harvest the experiences and exchange of information and knowledge between people and/or organisations interested in ICT4D at the international level. Consequently, IICD is engaged in platforms in ICT4D, in the production of online and off-line materials (iConnect, ItrainOnline), and workshops in regions; the so-called Cross Country Learning Events. The areas covered are diverse, ranging from themes like connectivity to sectors such as education and health. The activities of the national networks actually feed the information and knowledge exchange at the international level. As IICD focuses mainly on the national level, the networks at the international level are not fostered as is the case with the national networks, where the development of the network is the focal point of attention.

Conclusions

IICD's experience in supporting national networks through advice, grants and brokering international connections has led to the following changes to our practices:
1. Pursuing organisations that share objectives with the network;
2. Building trust and knowledge sharing before entering the policy realm;
3. Thinking about institutional and political as well as resource sustainability;
4. Bringing respected practitioners on board;
5. Building a strong core group and then helping it find new ideas and fresh leadership;
6. Being clear about support early on, focusing the network on sustainability;
7. Recognizing that acting as advisor, donor and broker is difficult, but not impossible;
8. Allowing time to build trust;
9. Not trying to build from scratch.

Acknowledgements

Mr Ibrahim Unusah, coordinator of the Ghanaian network, GINKS.