Looking at collaboration in North-South networks

EXPERIENCES FROM AN ACTION RESEARCH

PSO *capacity building in developing countries*

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Experiences from an action research

Koen Faber and Eelke Wielinga
Co-authors: Akbar Gaffar, Gulalai Ismael, Francis Ng'ambi, Sharad Rai,
Victor Ricco, Virginia Sandjojo, Ridzki Sigit

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Acknowledgements

Writing this publication has been a collective effort. (Picture by Eelke Wielinga)

Participants

ASTEKI
ASOSIASI TELEVISI KERAKYATAN INDONESIA

PRACTICAL ACTION
Technology challenging poverty

IANRA
International Alliance on Natural Resources in Africa

PROLINNOVA
PROmoting Local INNOVAtion
in ecologically-oriented agriculture and natural resource management

UNOY
United Network of Young Peace builders

SOMO

OECD Watch

ETC FOUNDATION

niza in association with act!onaid

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

"What makes any social-living-system work is not how cleverly it is conceived and mapped but how wisely and mutually it is understood and valued."

Doug Reeler, CDRA

Networks pose different challenges than conventional organisations. One challenge is that networks require voluntary energy and commitment. Is this why we often see that participation in networks is not as active as was hoped for? Another difference is that relationships in networks are more horizontal, which means that working in networks requires different competences. How can networks be managed in such a way that they meet the expectations of their partners and motivate them to contribute? It was these questions we were interested in answering in the action research.

This publication is the product of a collective journey. It presents stories from practitioners who contribute to five networks that participated in the action research and who looked closely at what makes their networks tick. The publication discusses the lessons that these stories teach us. For analysis purposes we used the Free Actors in Networks (FAN) approach, which provided us with a different way of looking at network relations and at who plays a role in improving network connectivity. The lessons learnt and topics for further investigation are directly related to practical experience, because we believe that building on these experiences will contribute to a better understanding of networks. By discussing and sharing we hope to inspire others to also reflect on how they can make their own networks healthier.

This is not a groundbreaking academic study. Though several relevant topics are discussed that we see as essential to the functioning of networks. Some answers were found and, as with any innovative research, we ended up with more questions than we started out with. These questions result from having wrestled with the subject in practice. An important insight is that the key persons in the networks felt bolstered by the concept of the Free Actor.

The publication showcases the 5 different networks' stories written by the key persons involved, the co-authors of this publication. These stories reflect on each network's context at the time and what the key persons did in order to enhance the health of their network. It also shows the key persons' quests to transform their networks and the impact the action research had on the former. It traces the uptake of the FAN approach and looks at which of its elements took root during the action research.

The action research was initiated by PSO in April 2010 with four Dutch development organisations and a network secretariat based in the Netherlands. These organisations are involved in North-South networks and wanted to understand the perspectives of their network partners. For the purpose of the action research we looked for a way to actively engage the partners of each network in the South and opted to work with Southern key persons from each network. The representatives from the five networks undertook an intensive research process.

PSO supports around 60 Dutch member organisations in learning how to improve their organisational practice with regard to capacity development. One PSO's activities is the coordination of Thematic Learning Programmes (TLPs)

which are action research programmes designed to improve development programmes pragmatically, bottom-up and inductively. The starting points are the problems and questions that Dutch NGOs and Southern partners face in their relationships concerning a number of themes related to capacity development practices. TLPs aim to link theoretical frameworks, tools and concepts to practical applications in various contexts. The leading method for addressing these problems and questions is action research.

As mentioned above, this publication is the result of an action research on networks. Koen Faber at PSO was responsible for the editing process and coordination. Eelke Wielinga contributed his explanation on the FAN approach and together they compiled the concluding chapters.

The case stories from the networks constitute the core of this document. These were written by Akbar Gaffar and Ridzki Sigit from ASTEKI, Francis Ng'ambi from IANRA, Gulalai Ismael from UNOY Peacebuilders' Gender Working Group, Virginia Sandjojo and Victor Ricco from OECD Watch and Sharad Rai from PROLINNOVA.

Chapter 2 explains the context of the action research and how it was set up and Chapter 3 introduces the FAN approach: how it was developed and the vision on networks behind it.

Chapter 4 presents the case stories from the five networks. This is followed by Chapter 5 which provides current insights, emerging issues and shares the knowledge that the co-authors could deduce by using a different means of looking at networks in practice. The Free Actor concept proved very useful indeed. Keeping connected and the role of the network secretariat were also of great importance.

Finally Chapter 6 analyses the process of the action research. It also tells personal stories from the point of view of the coordinator and the network advisor.

The experiences and lessons learnt so far will be shared as interim findings rather than as conclusions. We hope that you will join us in our pursuit of ways to enhance North-South collaboration.

Definitions:

- **Networks** are emergent phenomena that occur when organisations or individuals begin to embrace a collaborative process, engage in joint decision making and begin to act as a coherent entity (Milward and Provan, 2003). This is one description, close to what is generally understood as a network. In this action research we were especially interested in networks that develop around initiatives.
- **Members** of a network are the organisations or individuals that hold formal membership and have formal decision-making power.
- **Partners** are the organisations or individuals that are connected to the central initiative or purpose of the network and take part in its activities. In this document the word 'partner' is usually preferred, as we discuss networks that utilise both formal and informal membership. We will only use the word 'member' when referring explicitly to partners with formal membership.
- **Key persons** are referred to as such in this document are because they took up the challenging task of representing their networks in the action research and were of central importance to the research. Their positions in their networks differ and they do not claim to be Key People in their networks. The key persons are co-researchers in the action research just like the co-authors of this publication.
- **PSO Member organisations** are the approximately 60 Dutch, non-governmental development organisations that have joined PSO to improve their capacity development practice.
- **Action Research** is research in action. The researchers are part of the action, trying to bring about change. Action research distinguishes itself from other types of research in which the researcher acts as an observer, not influencing the process being studied.
- **Ambitions** are what people would like to achieve or change. When people share ambitions, they hope their dreams will be fulfilled through concerted action. This is a crucial driver for change.
- **Vital space** is the space people experience in interaction with others. It provides room for learning and creativity. Vital space generates energy and increases the willingness to engage in concerted efforts.
- **Free actors** do what is needed to increase vital space in a network, with or without a mandate.
- **FAN approach:** The Free Actors in Networks approach is a research-based approach to identifying patterns in network interaction and effective interventions for improving the capacity of networks in order to achieve shared ambitions.

Chapter 2:

The challenge of meeting ambitions

"If there is one domain where tension between organisational principles and the practice of networks can be felt, it is the world of development work."

Eelke Wielinga

Healthy networks

Networks are an ever more common form of collaboration in development cooperation. These networks are potentially based on equality that originates from the desire to find partners with whom to collaborate towards a common development purpose. In this sense, networks can be seen as the ideal way of working in an equal partnership between Southern and Northern development organisations. However, if you study networks, you will soon observe that many do not work according to this principle. Despite the best of intentions, the traditional power relations between donor and recipient, between Northern expert and the South that needs to be capacitated, is still prevalent or even reinforced in networks. This publication came about on the basis of the desire to better understand why this happens and to recognise the underlying patterns.

How do you keep North-South networks healthy? This is the thematic learning programme of PSO on networks, that started with an action research offering development organisations and their partners the opportunity to investigate the relationships in their networks.

During previous learning trajectories organised by PSO it became apparent that Dutch NGOs are often the initiators and funders of networks. They frequently struggle to understand what motivates partners to participate in the network. Initiators of the network try to second-guess what the network needs, but often continue wondering if the network really meets the needs and expectations of all its partners. Quite often participation in the network is not as active as the coordinators had hoped for. Why is this? What can be done to improve ownership in the network?

Literature on networks describes many success factors, but does not provide many guidelines that might help people investigate the underlying issues or suggest how to improve a network that does not function well. Simply asking network partners to draw up an analysis and suggest improvements might result in a power game as differences in position, financial relations, cultural background and various strategic considerations all play a role here.

Similar struggles are mentioned recurrently at PSO learning events and current academic knowledge does not seem to help these networks sufficiently, so there is an apparent need for practical investigation. This is why PSO proposed starting an action research that would specifically look at the internal relations within networks and why network partners contribute (or not) to make the network function.

The FAN approach developed by Eelke Wielinga focuses specifically on these issues and that is why it was adopted for the action research (further description to be found in Chapter 2). The approach does not try to optimise the network in a kind of deterministic or mechanical way, but it focuses on the positive energy that connects those in the network. The reasoning being that partners connect to a network if it coincides with their individual ambitions

and the network's success depends on how effectively the partners and the network can maintain this connection. The action research was initiated using this stimulating view on networks and this publication intends to share the resulting experiences.

Action research methodology

The action research process centres on actions aimed at improving practice. In its simplest form the process of action research is an ongoing cycle of action-critical reflection-action-critical reflection. You put something into action, you then reflect on what worked and what didn't work, what you have learnt, what you might do differently next time. On the basis of these reflections, you implement new or different action. In other words, you test your reflections in action. And so on (CDRA[1]). This cycle should be repeated and ends with a major reflection phase.

Action research is both collaborative and critical. In this type of investigation the researchers are part of the action, instead of outside observers collecting and analysing data. All those involved are both subjects and researchers. Successful action research is based on shared curiosity and not on individual certainty. Action research works less well if people seek to prove their own ideas are right. Indeed, people are expected to put their practices, ideas and assumptions to the test by gathering evidence that could convince them that these may be wrong. (Bob Williams[2])

First reflection phase
PSO consulted the member organisations and looked for network expertise. An analysis of the issues surrounding networks that surfaced at prior learning meetings with PSO member organisations led to the first outline for the action research and a draft learning question.

A coordination team, with Koen Faber as PSO's coordinator and Eelke Wielinga as network advisor, was set up for the action research. It consulted with interested member organisations to reach a more detailed proposal, to refine the learning question and to make agreements on starting the implementation.

Selection of key persons
It was agreed with the participating Dutch organisations that they would find key persons in the networks participating in the action research, who could act as the research's owners. There were two reasons for this. First of all, the action research should actively engage the partners of each Southern network because the very purpose of the action research and the focus of the learning question was to elicit and understand Southern perspectives on North-South collaboration.

Secondly, people from the networks had to be actively involved because action research is not only about collecting

Reflection workshop with key persons. (Picture by Eelke Wielinga)

information, but also about practical actions that lead to change. Similarly, the FAN approach assumes that any network needs at least one 'Free Actor' who has the ability to work for the benefit of the network beyond the confines of a mandate or job description. The idea was that if the key persons were chosen well they could act as free actors within their networks.

The networks were instructed to find someone trusted and seriously involved in the network, who could make suggestions and find support for improvement. The key persons would take the lead in collecting and analysing the results.

Time Line workshops

Activities started with Time Line workshops (see Box 2 in Chapter 3) at the international networks that participated in the action research. Since the networks consisted of partners that were geographically far apart, the workshops were planned around meetings that were being held anyway, such as steering group meetings or general assemblies.

Joseph Ssuuna from Uganda facilitated workshops with ASTEKI and PROLINNOVA, Richard Smith from South Africa with UNOY Peacebuilders and Eelke Wielinga with OECD Watch. Eelke instructed Joseph and Richard on using the Time Line method, whilst facilitating the workshop with the IANRA network. Their facilitation helped the networks to make the various perceptions of important moments in the history of the network explicit. This moment of reflection and looking back was much appreciated and gave the networks some initial ideas as to possible improvements.

Time Line workshop with OECD Watch network. (Picture by Virginia Sandjojo)

During the workshops, the selected key persons from the networks, who also co-authored this publication, became actively involved. They were responsible for drawing up a Time Line report that briefly described the highs and lows of their network's history and provided the basis for further examining the dynamics of each network and the options for improvement.

Analysis workshop

In September 2010 under the guidance of Eelke Wielinga and Ger Roebeling (MDF[3]) the key persons analysed their networks' histories and this energised the action research. The aim was to familiarise the key persons with a common language for analysing and discussing network processes and to equip them to use the FAN tools. The analysis using FAN tools brought to light network patterns with both positive and less favourable effects. By somewhat distancing themselves from their networks the key persons could analyse sensitive issues with the help of their peers from other networks. This resulted in initial suggestions for actions aimed at improving the quality of the respective networks.

Action Phase

A period of nine months of implementation followed the success of which was largely dependent on the dedication of the key persons who were responsible for sharing insights into their networks. Their task was to look for ways, formal or informal, to initiate actions for improvement. It was a crucial period during which to take action and see if the analysis tools had been useful.

A work and resource page on the internet and a communication channel with the network advisor were established to provide support on the work's content. This also enabled the key persons to maintain contact with the peer group.

Second reflection phase

In June 2011, the key persons and the coordination team attended a second reflection and analysis workshop to share what they had done and what had happened in the network during the months since the first analysis workshop. The objective was to see if the experiences could provide improved understanding of network dynamics.

Sandra Hill from CDRA in South Africa was invited to supervise the co-researchers during the process of using writing to make sense of their experiences. The methodology of a 'writeshop' – a combination of writing and a workshop (see her article[4]) – helped to document the findings, while the companionship and input of peers who were also writing provided a good opportunity for action learning.

The discussions and writings resulting from the personal experiences recorded during the 'writeshop' provided the raw materials for this publication. It shows the efforts of the key persons to transform their networks and the impact the action research had on the key persons themselves. It shares the knowledge that the co-authors acquired from using a different way of looking at their networks in practice. The Free Actor concept, in particular, proved very useful and was used extensively.

To complete the publication, extensive consultation and reflection was needed in order to condense the most important lessons learnt and identify topics fit for further investigation. Do we now know more about what it takes to keep North-South networks healthy? Carrying out the research certainly taught us a lot and we hope you too will learn from reading this publication.

Chapter 3:

The FAN approach

In this chapter, network advisor Eelke Wielinga, will introduce the Free Actors in Networks approach. Eelke developed the FAN approach during his work with animal husbandry networks in the Netherlands (see Box 1 below).

'Networks as living Tissue' was the title of Eelke Wielinga's PhD study, in which he explored living organisms as a metaphor for understanding human networks. Although he had previously worked in Benin and the Philippines, his study was based on knowledge development in Dutch agriculture since the Second World War. After graduating he became involved in research into farmers' networks. He organised peer consultation between the facilitators of these networks and discovered that there was a need for models that captured their experiences. This is what ultimately led to the development of the FAN approach. This resulted in a number of tools that would help the facilitators with interventions in their networks. Eelke works as independent consultant.

Dynamics of networks

The dynamics in networks are fascinating. If you want to know how people shape their environments together, networks are more interesting than organisations. The relationships people develop to get things done are not restricted by the confines of the organisations they work for.

Two processes play out simultaneously when people collaborate to get things done. One being about how people find each other in relation to what they wish to achieve and the other concerns the structure within which they hope to achieve this. The FAN approach identifies these processes as the 'Red Column' and the 'Blue Column' of achieving change (see Figure 1).

The blue column shows the way we have all been taught to organise activities. There should be a shared mission. This is operationalised in SMART formulated targets. Then we choose appropriate tools. We assess the competences needed to carry out the tasks. We select and, if necessary, train people to acquire these competences. We determine the performance indicators to allow for M&E. And then we hope that the people are going to do what they are supposed to do to bring about change. The blue column assumes that the people involved share a mission from the outset and that the process of change can be controlled in a planned manner.
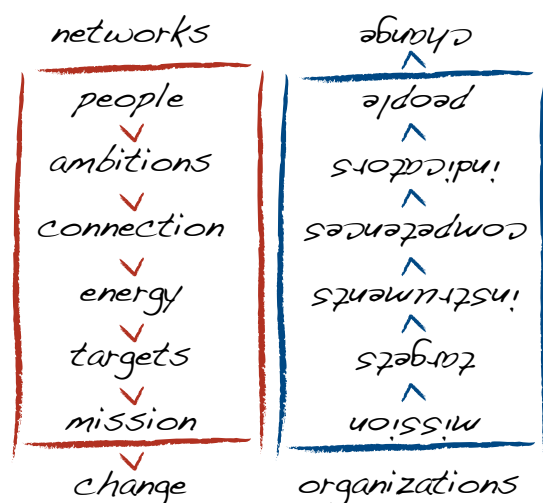
These assumptions cannot be taken for granted in network processes. A shared mission is not the start, but the result of a good process, in which individual ambitions have grown towards each other. Ambitions, opinions and mutual trust can change over time. Network partners cannot be controlled like factory workers.

People engage in networks for a purpose. Networks allow them to join forces, making use of different qualities through task division and specialisation, and they can provide access to knowledge, resources or decision makers. In contrast to conventional organisations and projects, hierarchy is not a precondition and mandates are usually not clearly defined. Therefore networks depend heavily on the voluntary contributions of their partners.

The FAN approach turns the blue column upside down and starts with people. The red column shows what it takes to motivate people to engage in a change process. When individuals with ambitions connect, they find out that others share their dreams and this increases the chance that the latter might come true. This generates energy. Informal networks emerge, seeking ways of joining forces. At a certain point in time, this leads to targets in order to focus the efforts. When trust increases, ambitions convert into a shared mission.

The two columns complement each other. By stating that the blue column is more prevalent in conventional organisations and the red column is the driving force for networks, we do not aim to disqualify one in favour of the other. Organisations also use the principles of the red column to motivate their staff. And since networks have to organise certain activities using stringent planning, the blue column has its value in such circumstances. The distinction does, however, emphasise the point that it is risky to approach networks in the same manner as organisations.

Since the red column is hard to plan for and makes it more difficult to hold people accountable for their efforts, its principles are generally overlooked in a culture in which organisations are supposed to deliver specified products in an effective and efficient way. In networks, hierarchy has limited options for forcing people into obedience. Most management tools were developed for hierarchies and follow the blue principles of planning and control. The FAN approach offers the red column tools, focussing on energy and connection. An initiative is the starting point.

Healthy networks require Free Actors

Networks can be seen as living organisms, with an identity, with task divisions and specialisations, and with a life cycle. Just like all living entities, networks reproduce themselves through patterns of interaction, as long as all the essential components are connected. Every network is a node in a larger network in which it has its function and every node in a network is a network in itself. From this perspective, networks are a way of conceptualising society. Organisations, projects, families and village communities are all networks, each with their own characteristic features.

Living networks can be more or less healthy. In a healthy network the interaction is rewarding. This makes people willing to make an effort and to align with others, which, in turn, makes the interaction more rewarding. As trust grows, the network develops higher levels of coherence, with more strength and an improved ability to respond to its environment. The reverse can happen as well. When interaction is not rewarding, the willingness to make efforts or to align decreases. This is a self-propelling process which leads to either chaos or stagnation and can eventually result in the network's decomposition.

Connection is crucial to healthy networks. Patterns, whether constructive or destructive, are always prevalent in living systems. Keeping a network healthy requires people who are able to recognise destructive patterns and who

have the position, the skills and the courage to do what it takes to restore connection. This is the role of what we call the free actor. No network can do without one. This explains the name of the FAN approach (Free Actors in Networks). Free actors position themselves between the managers, initiators and providers of a network (see the triangle of change in Box 4) and build bridges between these positions in a network. In this manner, they act as catalysts for change.

Anyone can adopt the role of the free actor, but it is crucial that someone does. Someone needs to act, because s/he thinks it is important for the network, regardless of whether s/he has the mandate to do so. This means there is no task description for a free actor: it is not a position. On the other hand, a free actor can only be effective if his/her position is accepted by the others in the network. The FAN approach offers tools to free actors to enable them to act effectively.

The FAN approach is based on two distinctive assumptions. One is that investment in mutual relationships for making networks healthy is the best way to get results that are relevant within their context. The other assumption is that there is no basic design for the ideal network. Networks differ and if you want the network to work you need someone to at least keep an eye on the relationships within it.

The thinking behind this is that although people engage in networks to achieve results, it is hard to predict where the networks will take them over time. Methods for planning and control are not enough, however a healthy network with strong relationships is capable of responding to a complex environment. The outcomes that emerge from the network processes might be better than anyone could have foreseen. This is why the FAN approach focuses on tools for improving connections, rather than on reaching goals.

We all have basic knowledge of what to do to keep connected in networks. As social beings, people developed the skill to keep networks healthy much earlier in their evolution than the rational capacities of logical planning. We experience these skills as intuition for what needs to be done in a given situation. However, over time we also learn patterns for defence that might not always be helpful and may limit our repertoire for action. 'To someone who only has a hammer, everything looks like a nail', so the proverb goes. The tools in the FAN approach do not replace our intuition with proven recipes of how to act. They provide a language for identifying what matters in network processes thereby facilitating reflection on personal experiences. By doing the latter, people sharpen their intuition and become more effective in new situations. The FAN approach aims to contribute to the capacity of people to respond effectively to what their network requires and to the responsive capacity of networks within their environment.

The FAN tools were designed to recognise patterns in the dynamics of networks and to provide options for effective action in specific situations. Four different FAN tools will be explained briefly in Box 4. The FAN tools can be applied to the information gathered about the network's functioning. The Time Line method can be used to collect this information by identifying important episodes in the network's history in a participatory way. The FAN tools then enable these episodes to be examined in more detail. This analysis provides insight into the underlying processes and the options for change. Adding this analysis develops the result of a Time Line is into a Learning History (Box 3).

Text Box 1: Development of the FAN approach

The FAN approach took shape during a large-scale experiment with Dutch animal husbandry networks. I was asked to contribute to this experiment because I had developed a vision on living networks in my PhD thesis[5]. I was very pleased when I was asked: "We have fifty farmers' networks here, could you please advise us on how to make them come alive?"

However, achieving the former proved quite hard. We discovered that the facilitators, some 35 subject matter researchers from Wageningen University and Research Centre, could not use all of what they had learnt in project management. Fortunately, most of them just followed their intuition. I introduced peer consultations with the facilitators to find out what they actually did. What was helpful and what was not?

They found it very difficult to recall what their own contribution had been to things that went well in the network. They worked intuitively and without reflection. These acts disappeared from their conscious memory, like dreams you cannot recall the following morning. The peer consultations were very helpful in retracing what they had actually done to make a difference. Often they appeared to have done the right things subconsciously. But they also applied their limited repertoire of interventions in situations where this was not helpful. 'To someone who only has a hammer, everything looks like a nail', so the proverb goes.

My colleagues and I worked out models to equip the facilitators with a language that enabled them to talk about what really mattered. After three and a half years and 120 networks, we had lots of documented experiences to illustrate the tools[6] (see Box 4). The experiment was successful and the approach to facilitating networks of innovative entrepreneurs became mainstream in the agricultural sector. I started providing courses on 'Working with networks' at Wageningen Business School[7] and at MDF[8] in Ede.

Text Box 2: The Time Line

The Time Line method is a tool for joint reflection on network processes. It helps participants to share perceptions and opinions in such processes. The tool is fairly simple and takes only a limited amount of time to use. It reveals a network's historical process as seen through the eyes of the people involved. The result is a story of which the participants say: "Yes, this is what happened and this story reflects the most important moments".

Example of a Time Line

milestones ■   card with statements ■   title of scene ■
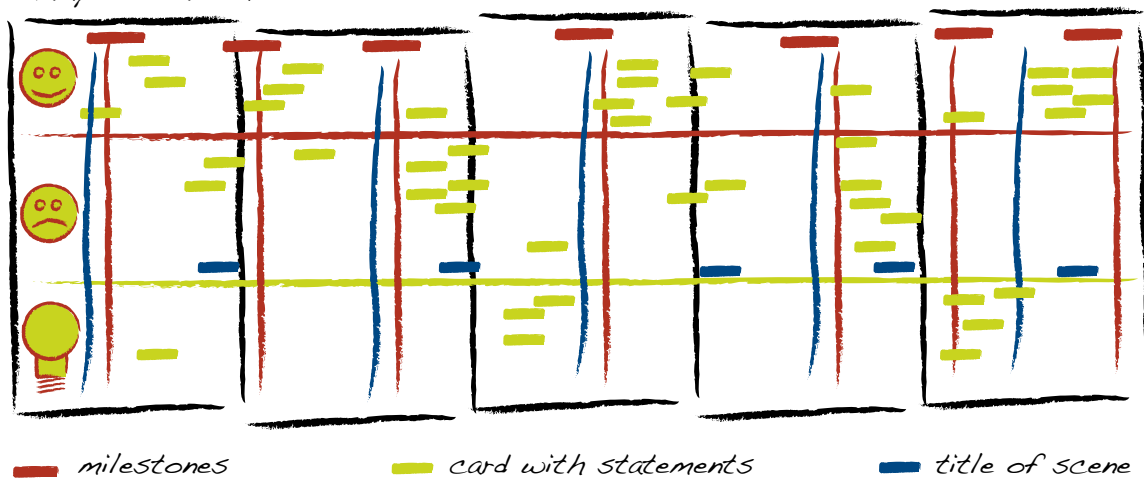
A Time Line session in the FAN approach is made with the people involved in the network. They take some time to reflect on their own process and discuss patterns that usually remain implicit. If there are veterans and newcomers, it helps everyone to arrive on the same page. Experience shows that after a Time Line session people are more inclined to take responsibility for their collective process.
A Time Line appreciates all contributions. Diverging points of view can feature next to each other and such differences are interesting. There is no need to reach consensus.

Participants are asked to recall all the moments they see as significant to the network process, from the start of their involvement up until the present. They write each moment on a separate Post-it. These moments can be positive (adding energy to their involvement) or negative (taking energy away). They can also refer to flash moments where new insights broke through or new opportunities opened up. Moments should be described in statements. All the stickers are stuck onto a large sheet with three rows. The vertical lines on the sheet represent milestones in time.
The result could look like the example below. It shows the energy curve of the process. It makes people reflect on their joint process.

Text Box 3: The Learning History

When an analysis is added to the Time Line, it becomes a Learning History[9]. The analyst tries to make sense of the story that appears in the Time Line. This leads to lessons learnt and plans of action.

Such analyses are always interpretations, based on theory, be it explicit or implicit. Someone else might come to a different understanding, using another theory. A Learning History report separates the narrative story and the analysis. Used in the manner described by its developers Kleiner and Roth (1997) in the Learning History the story should be told on the pages on the left and the analysis should be displayed on the opposite pages. Such analyses can also be put into text boxes.

It is easy to agree on what appears on the Time Line. If there are different perceptions of the same events, they all appear in the story. Agreeing on the analysis is much more difficult, especially if things in a network are not going as smoothly as desired. A good analysis leads to consequences for action. Sometimes, interventions are needed which are impossible to reach a consensus on. When this is the case, network partners cannot agree on the analysis that leads to such an intervention. This is why it might be better to have the analysis conducted by someone who is not part of the network such as an analyst or an active networker. Assistance from peers or a coach can help a lot.

The Time Line is first converted into a brief narrative story. Like a movie, the network process is subdivided into 4 to 6 scenes which are all given a title. Then each scene is analysed. Which changes can be observed? What caused these changes? Which external factors were important? And what did people in the network do to make a change happen? Here, the tools can be useful to give words to stages or patterns and to reflect on interventions for influencing the process. For example: 'According to the Triangle of Change, Actor X adopted the position of gatekeeper. Our proposal came too early for him. We learnt that we had to first mobilise more allies as change agents to make a change happen". The result is a short, easy to read story, which reflects what really mattered and what has been learnt.

Text Box 4: The FAN Tools

The tools in the FAN approach were designed to recognise what is at stake in a network and to provide options to act effectively. Each tool gives attention to a different aspect of networking:
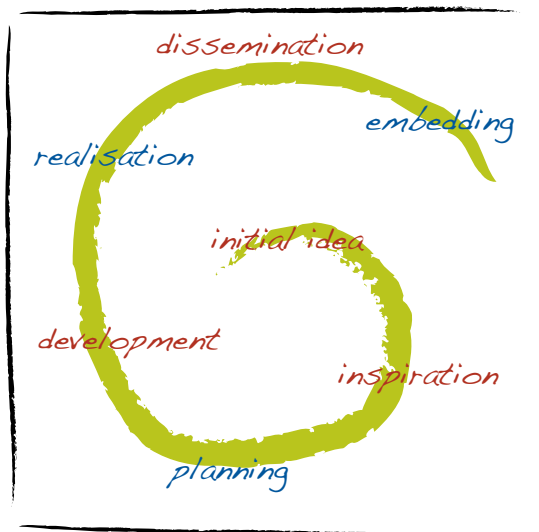
The Spiral of Initiatives focuses on content.
There are various stages in the development of an initiative. What is the initiative? How far has it developed? Which actors need to be involved at this stage? And what can be done to take the initiative one step further? It is not a linear process from A to B. It might also be necessary to take a step back too. This is why the process is presented as a spiral.
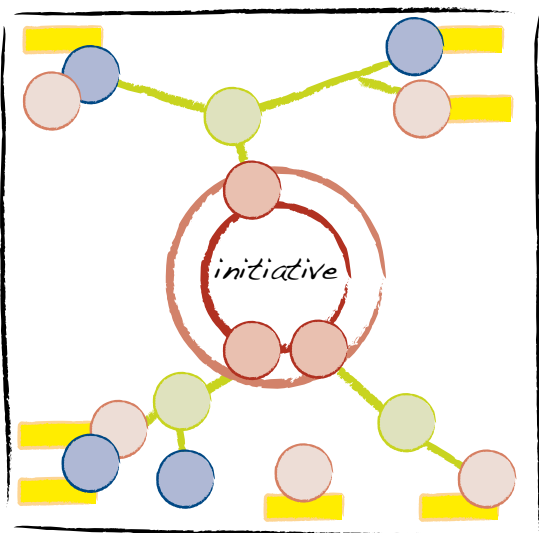
Actor Analysis focuses on involvement.
Factors that matter to achieving an initiative are represented by actors who adopt different positions of involvement. Users will benefit from the initiative. Suppliers are required to contribute. Partners feel ownership towards the initiative. Links connect partners to suppliers and users. Questions to be answered include: What is the initiative? What is needed? Who should be involved? Who can make connections? What connections should be improved?
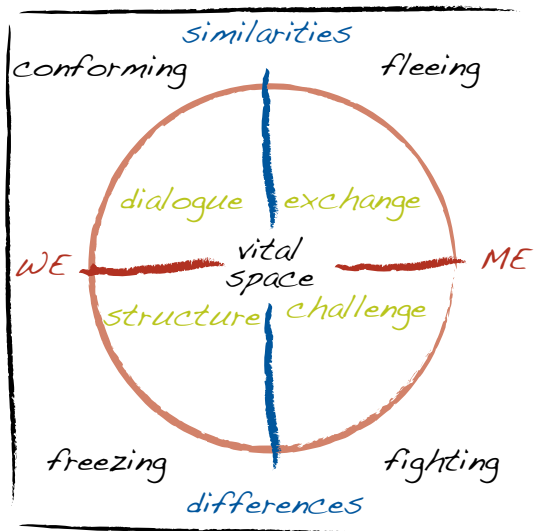
The Circle of Coherence focuses on interaction. Actors can build on an initiative together if there is 'vital space': trust that others will do their share and the freedom to learn and be creative. The model visualises constructive interaction patterns that feed vital space and destructive patterns that drain energy. Each pattern requires a different type of leadership interventions.
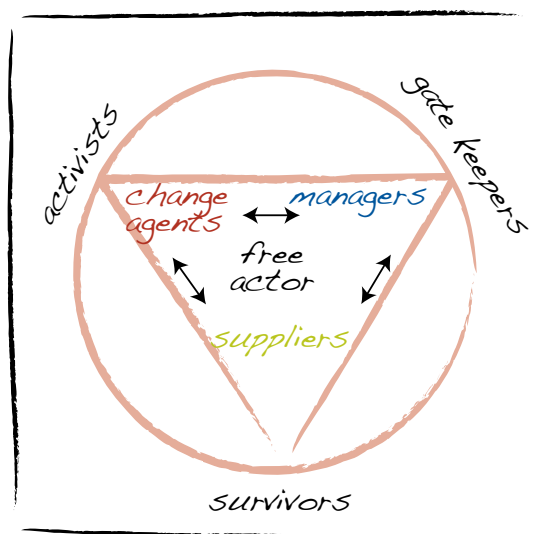
The Triangle of Change focuses on positions. Network processes require actors in complementary positions: change agents as drivers for change, managers adopting responsibility for structure and suppliers contributing knowledge, labour or whatever is needed. Actors might also adopt positions that do not contribute: they might be activists, gatekeepers or survivors. Free actors are in a position to build trust because as they are not part of the formal hierarchy, they are not the 'usual suspects'.

Successful networkers rely heavily on their intuition. This is in line with the theory of living networks, taking people as parts of living organisms that have their own built-in mechanisms for remaining healthy. The models in this approach should never be used as recipes to replace the role of intuition. However, people can sharpen their intuition by reflecting on their own experience and that of others. The tools provide a language to do so.

Chapter 4:

Network Experiences

Five networks participated in the action research. The co-authors tell the stories of these five networks as experienced during their own personal journeys during the action research. The particular dynamics of each network are described as well as some of the issues that the networks face.

Although the networks were all part of the action research and followed a similar process starting with a Time Line workshop at each network, the stories differ in style and content. During the concluding workshop, the 'writeshop', the co-authors were asked to write their stories in a lively and non-academic way. Of course they have drawn on the analysis they made of their network, but this is enriched by describing the networks from a personal perspective.

Similar kinds of issues can be found in many networks and while reading the stories you will recognise some familiar situations. The issues that stand out will be summarised in the next chapter. No general remedies will be suggested for making networks healthier, but the co-authors agree that it is vital to improve connections with partners and to mobilise active participation in the networks

Central to this chapter is the concept of free actors. During the action research, the key persons all recognised that free actors can play an important role in improving network dynamics, especially because, unlike conventional organisations, networks are based on voluntary contracts, as was argued in the previous chapter. Utilising the space between the (more or less) formal roles in the network has a considerable effect. We see an image emerge from the different experiences of what a free actor is and does. Obviously, a common element is that it takes a certain amount of courage to act as a free actor. There are also the questions of how and when a free actor can be effective and what their limitations are.

ASTEKI

ASTEKI (Asosiasi Televisi Kerakyatan Indonesia– Association of People's Indonesia Television) was set up to oppose the one-sided information being offered by the media industry. ASTEKI – the first and only network of community television stations in Indonesia – is characterised by two pillars - diversity of ownership and diversity of content.

Akbar Gaffar and Ridzki Sigit describe the challenges of connecting local media organisations in remote areas of Indonesia. They are two of the initiators of ASTEKI, a network of local television stations that challenges the system. The network makes it possible for very dedicated people, who often have few materials to work with, to help each other and take a stronger stand.

It is hard work to maintain contact in such a spread out network. Akbar and Ridzki recount their encounter with dedicated people in a traditional community, who against all the odds make local television so people do not forget their history. Such inspiring initiatives make people in the network realise that they do not walk alone.

They argue that the roles people assume are not fixed. Also the role of free actor can shift and can be adopted by different people at various points in time.

"Welcome to my village, how was your trip?" asks Yoyo, wearing the traditional black ikat clothes and batik headgear. He gives us a tour of his village, Ciptagelar, located on Halimun Mountain. Seven hours from Jakarta, the drive takes us along a winding road and through exotic landscapes. Yoyo invites us to have a look at his TV studio, which operates with very little production equipment. A laptop connected to a sort of transmitter, two digital cameras and an editing computer have been squeezed into a small room. "We are poor so we can only use what we have," says Yoyo, "and what we have is all we really need to run a media channel such as this one".

That night, we meet up with Abah, a man highly respected in Ciptagelar village. I explain the reason for our visit and tell him about ASTEKI and the community TV station network. Abah happily engages with us, telling the story of their efforts to develop media in the village. His dream to create a community TV programme dates back to his college years and he has used all his spare time since working to make this happen. Abah's vision is to connect the 20 traditional villages on Halimun Mountain through television.

Yoyo Yogasmana (SIGA TV) and Torianus Kalalu (Tifa TV), two members of Indonesian local television. (Picture by ASTEKI)

When I ask Abah about the existing national TV programmes, his reply gives us an insight into how the communities in Banten Kidul and Ciptagelar think. "Programmes from the outside only turn us into consumers. We do not wish our people to become greedy. What we need is to remember our roots, our history, our ancestors."

Using the limited technology they have, the TV programme created by Abah and Yoyo broadcasts 'wayang golek' almost every evening. Full of poetry, these puppet stories share teachings from the ancestors. Abah's opinion is that nowadays it is easier to share advice through television in the evenings, because during the afternoons, everyone is busy out in the rice fields. An innovative mix of tradition and modernity!

Over the past few years, my colleagues and I have worked as members of ASTEKI to develop local television programmes such as Abah and Yoyo's across Indonesia. Our deepest wish is for the media in Indonesia to become community-led. Our goal is to shift the paradigm from consuming news to producing news. Communities need to become aware that they have a voice, that they are not simply passive spectators and consumers, as the mainstream media would have them believe.

One way of reaching our goal is to develop news desk network centres in towns and cities across Indonesia. Starting

with our own informal networks, we visit colleagues and friends (most of them with an NGO background), and try to convince them to develop community news desks. By establishing news desk centres in several locations, we hope to inspire groups from neighbouring areas to catch the vision and lend a hand in developing their own community news desk thereby creating a ripple effect.

Some people liken our strategy to David fighting Goliath: Our community-led media has to battle the Goliath of market-led media, which is entirely controlled by an oligopoly, a small group of powerful players who use it to pursue their own interests. But then when we look at people such as Abah and Yoyo, who, despite living in an isolated village with limited resources at their disposal, pursue brilliant ideas which at first appear impossible to achieve. Such examples help us to continue our quest, confident that our goals can also be achieved. We know we do not walk alone.

Local person acts as cameraman for SIGA TV in Ciptagelar. (Picture by ASTEKI).

When we looked at the story of Abah and Yoyo, and at our own experience of setting up community news desks through the lens of the FAN approach, we found it difficult to separate positions according to the triangle of change (which includes suppliers, initiators and managers). In our experience, people move dynamically in and out of these positions, as well as that of the free actor or connector.

Abah, the village elder, is the initiator and visionary of community television in Ciptagelar. He isn't involved in the day-to-day activities, but by giving his blessing he creates space for Yoyo to act and this puts him in the position of a manager. But Yoyo is the manager of the activities. Because he as an outsider was invited by Abah to set up the TV channel he can also operate more freely between local interests. Our own role is to be the suppliers of equipment and training, but also to be connectors and to link individuals and groups to the network.

You can see that we have each taken up the free actor role from our various positions. At local level, Abah creates the space for Yoyo to act as a free actor. At the same time, we build the bridge to the network and are therefore free actors for ASTEKI.

Our journey as free actors or connectors for ASTEKI to create a community of 'information producers' still has a long way to go. However, the small steps we have taken have already created impressive results. Communities are becoming more confident; with our assistance groups of farmers are now able to stay in touch with their buyers through a media channel that they developed themselves; policy makers are finally able to hear from groups of jungle farmers; and community forums in various towns are now able to directly reach out to the government.

As ASTEKI members we will continue to build community media to fight the one-sided information provided by the industry, just as boldly as David fought Goliath.

UNOY PEACEBUILDERS – GENDER WORKING GROUP

The United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY Peacebuilders) is a global network of young people and youth organisations active in the field of peace building. The network aims to link up young people's initiatives for peace in a global network of young peacebuilders, to help empower their capacities and to help increase the effectiveness of their actions.

The International Secretariat of UNOY Peacebuilders wanted active participation from members in its gender programme. For that purpose, the secretariat set up a Gender Working Group which representatives from interested member organisations became members of. They were willing to contribute their expertise to the Gender Programme.

Gulalai Ismail describes how a global network faces difficulty creating ownership of the Gender Working Group among its members. She also lost interest herself, whereas her personal experiences with her local network in Pakistan inspire her.

With input from Rahel Weldeab, another member of the GWG, Gulalai analyses a number of reasons for the poor participation in the GWG. For one, the secretariat's dependency on e-mail as a means of communication does not foster any sense of affiliation. She discovered that this pattern is hard to break, but feels that the solution lies in approaching members less as users and more as partners.

Gulalai envisages a free actor as someone who actively works to get members to participate. In local networks this can be done effectively, but it is not so easy in international networks.

Over the years, the UNOY International Secretariat has launched wonderful gender initiatives such as gender policy for Peace-building organisations, a toolkit for gender mainstreaming in organisations, and various training courses for member organisations on gender-related topics. They have supported the members of the Gender Working Group [GWG] with relevant resources and opportunities.
However, despite initial enthusiasm, participation in the e-group is very poor. Only a few members of the GWG respond to the Secretariat's communications or requests for contributions. As a GWG member myself, I confess that

even I haven't participated very actively. Like others, I joined the group expecting to engage meaningfully in the gender programme, but over time I lost interest. It seemed things were going nowhere, reliance on e-mail as our mode of communication put a damper on relationships and confusion about the role of GWG within UNOY was de-motivating.

From my perspective as an analyst and as a member of the Gender Working Group, I believe the three primary reasons why members do not actively participate are a lack of ownership for the programme, the structure and mode of communication, and the burden of additional work:

– Not all members of the GWG have a clear understanding of the programme. Members often seem to feel little responsibility for the task at hand, as they see it as the 'Secretariat's work not theirs', something which the Secretariat will complete even if members don't reply. It often seems to members that the International Secretariat makes plans and decisions which the group simply has to follow.

– The means of communication between members and between the GWG and the Secretariat lacks human warmth and does not foster any sense of affiliation, as if it were merely a Yahoo group. This exacerbates the top-down pattern of communication in which the Secretariat puts out e-mails and members are supposed to reply. Some debates started in the group, but generally there is no horizontal communication among the members as the members don't have any association with each other nor with the GWG itself. E-mail does not provide the energy and motivation for members to participate actively.

– Members did not actively participate in the GWG because they were too busy with their own work in their organisations and did not prioritise GWG work. Their volunteer contribution to GWG could be seen as an extra workload.

After joining the action research, I again started taking an interest in the gender programme and gained clearer insight into UNOY and its gender programme. After the Analysis Workshop in September 2010, there were further efforts to revitalise the GWG: Update e-mails, e-mails requesting contributions, and 'wake-up call' e-mails were posted on the Yahoo group, but the strategy didn't work because we did not address the reasons mentioned above.

I personally feel that members should not be seen as users, but rather as partners. And this thinking should change both at the members' level and that of the Secretariat. My view is shared by the gender team at the International Secretariat, whose intention for the GWG was also one of active participation and horizontal exchange. So what is it we need for the GWG to function as we want it to? For members to be active partners in creating a vibrant platform for gender work in peace building? What will it take for members to interact with each other horizontally, share ideas and forge a sense of affiliation?

From my experiences in different local and international networks, I have learnt that working with volunteer members is a very tough job and always needs someone who can play the role of free actor to generate motivation and create opportunities for the active participation of other members.

I'd like to share a short story which illustrates the role of a free actor. In Pakistan there is a local network of young peacebuilders known as the Seeds of Peace Network. Last month when the Secretariat of this Network decided to extend the network to other parts of the country, an e-mail was floated to all members, inviting them to contribute and when, after a week, only a few replies had been received, the Secretariat decided to implement the extension programme on its own without much member involvement, as their lack of interest seemed obvious. Then one of

the network's members acted as a free actor and advocated with the Secretariat not to do it on their own but to provide the members with more space to participate. So the Secretariat had to delay the extension process in order to ensure the participation of network members. This member mobilised another member in the network, and now both of them are organising a face-to-face meeting to which all members will be invited, and a clear strategy for extension will be developed with the involvement of all the members.

It should be kept in mind, that this is a local network, where it is possible for the members to regularly meet in person to share their activities and challenges, to learn from each other and – in doing so – to build relationships. This is not so easy for an international network with members based in different countries. While the same solution may not be viable for an international group such as the GWG, free actors are clearly just as critical.

UNOY Peacebuilders' study session on gender. (Picture by Lillian Solheim)

OECD WATCH

OECD Watch is a network that aims to strengthen cooperation between civil society organisations world-wide, build capacity and promote a corporate accountability framework in the interest of sustainability and poverty eradication. The network's membership consists of a diverse range of civil society organisations working on human rights, labour rights, consumer rights, transparency, the environment and sustainable development.

Virginia Sandjojo and Victor Ricco explain how the OECD Watch network has made the best use of the opportunity to provide input into the 2011 update of the OECD Guidelines. The results have been encouraging. It did however demand a lot of energy from a core group of active members and as a consequence less attention was paid to the network's general work. It is often true that activity in networks is concentrated during certain periods or among a number of people, which poses a challenge to increase involvement again by other members.

Virginia and Victor explain how the task of monitoring the effective implementation of the OECD Guidelines will offer opportunities to reinvigorate the network. Regional focal points will be installed to work in a more decentralised manner enabling closer connections to local realities.

This is the story of a group of diverse organisations, with committed people doing their best to work together effectively. OECD Watch was founded in 2003. The main objective of the network is to improve and promote effective responsible business conduct of enterprises, mainly through testing the effectiveness of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (MNEs), from now on called the 'Guidelines'. These are a set of recommendations given by Governments to MNEs setting standards for expected responsible conduct.

OECD Watch's many advocacy efforts paid off when calls for an update of the Guidelines were picked up by OECD member states in 2009. OECD Watch dived into this process from the very beginning and, full of energy, started negotiations on how the update should be organised and later on what should be improved in the text of the Guidelines.

This initiative enabled the network to demonstrate its true value to the OECD and adhering governments. The update to the OECD Guidelines also proved to be a good opportunity for the network to reinvigorate discussions on the value of the standards and the complaint mechanism. At the same time, the review process exemplified how the network functions and identified which opportunities for the future should be tackled.

All those involved agreed that the process was short, rushed and intense. The update took up most of the network's time and resources over the past year. Although members of the internal working group put a great deal of time into the update process, the main burden was still on the OECD Watch secretariat to organise summaries of discussions, participate in consultations and take part in the Advisory Group to the Chair of the Working Party of the OECD Investment around the Guidelines. A day only has 24 hours and with energy fully committed to this process, the general coordination of the network suffered under the overload of work that came with the update and communication with members could have been better.

A minority of the organisations actively participated in the update of the OECD Guidelines. This was partly because of the confidential nature of the process and it has also proven to be difficult to organise active participation with over

80 organisations. Understandably some organisations are more engaged than others. Issue-based organisations have a specific focus and improving a very broad CSR instrument is something beyond their mandate. And perhaps some organisations lacked full understanding of the process or a comfortable enough association with the secretariat and the Coordination Committee to advocate on their own behalf. On the other hand, these types of organisations bring in specific knowledge necessary for filing OECD Guidelines cases. To capture these network dynamics and ensure that the network can benefit most from the resources of members, the secretariat would like to get to know members and their needs and strengths better.

The fact that the OECD Watch Network was mentioned in the updated text of the OECD Guidelines is a positive development. An explicit expression of appreciation for OECD Watch at the adoption ceremony for the updated text of the Guidelines also shows that its advocacy capacity was properly developed. This is something to be proud of. It is essential that ownership of this achievement is spread throughout the network. This is another incentive to connect more closely with members.

New opportunities have opened up for the network since the OECD Guidelines update was finished and the revised text approved. These are related to how to gear the work and use the new standards for members' effective implementation, as well as strengthening the network by doing so. It is a good occasion to reinvigorate and reach out to members, develop new material and initiate training and discussion seminars. In this context the opportunity also arises to revise the network dynamics by identifying members' needs and challenges.

One concrete challenge is to anticipate progressive steps to work in a more decentralised manner, enabling more room for contributions and closer connection with local realities. The OECD Watch network has members in all regions and each has its own frame of reference and its own particular issues. This makes the idea of looking per region at how regional members feel towards the network and how they can share their inputs and contribute to the network an interesting task. After acknowledging some good spontaneous experiences with members working more consistently around the stimulation action of one member in Argentina to invite regional members for discussion and alignment, OECD Watch decided to re-explore the possibility of thinking about regional focal points.

Assembly of the OECD Watch network. (Picture by OECD Watch)

Regional focal points were first proposed as a means of increasing member involvement a few years ago, but a lack of human resources prevented OECD Watch from implementing the idea.

The challenge now is to work towards the construction of an enabling, healthy environment in which to invite regional members to actively participate in the network, respecting members' needs, capacities, contexts and particular situations, as well as offering concrete assistance if these members so require. A form for facilitating regional participation and communication needs to be found. In preparation, personal contact with members will be consolidated to detect individual needs, potentialities and look for synergies. Having information about the OECD Guidelines and its complaint mechanism available in local languages is crucial to facilitate more active participation of members. Regional meetings have been successfully held in the past and OECD Watch will continue to organise regional meetings to build capacity among members, develop strategies for the region, make material available in local languages and to liaise with key stakeholders. By sharing knowledge, expertise and information, OECD Watch will contribute to promoting regional connections.

PROLINNOVA

PROLINNOVA is an NGO-initiated programme established to promote local innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and Natural Resource Management. PROLINNOVA is presently active in 20 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America where there are individual PROLINNOVA Country Programmes as well as joint international activities for mutual learning and policy dialogue.

Sharad Rai describes how PROLINNOVA, like many networks, depends on project funding. As it is also a large international network, the development of the national chapters that take part in this 'programmed' network depends on their own initiative and tends to become focused on implementing projects. He argues that it is hard for most members of such a network to find a common incentive besides funding.

Sharad talks about how his task to represent the network in the action research was more than he had bargained for. He took up the challenge by focussing on the Nepal Network of Prolinnova. With effort he ensured that all the network members including a few former key members participated in the analysis workshop that he organised to strengthen the Nepal Network. He saw many shortcomings emerge, which make him question his own role. Sharad realised that to change things he had to leave his comfort zone. "We have to shake ourselves up."

According to Sharad, free actors also have their constraints and are not completely free from power structures. They have to find out what room for action they have.

The day was like any other day at Practical Action in Kathmandu, Nepal – a member organisation of the Nepal Network (NN). I was having an informal chat with my manager over a morning cup of coffee when he asked me if I would be interested in carrying out action research on the PROLINNOVA network. A formal query had come in from the International Secretariat (ETC). Initially, I was not very keen as I wondered if this would distract me from my official priorities. I consented, however, believing it would not take too much of my time. The network concerned was the one I am also a member of, hence my interest in the content of the assignment. At the time, I did not realise that it would be more than I had bargained for...

The achievements of the Nepal Network are commendable. It has been able to demonstrate innovative ideas on many fronts such as capacity building measures, publications and the mobilisation of innovation funds. However it also suffers from many problems. The main problem in the NN that I could detect dates back to its formation five years ago. It was designed as part of a larger programme and hence lacks the key features and functions of a network. I cannot blame anybody for this as it is obvious that the initiative was considered a funded programme rather than a formal network.

When looking at the NN as part of the action research, I identified two further problems: the poor coordination and communication between network members, and a lack of clear plans and strategies around partnership issues. Both of these can be attributed to various factors such as a lack of shared aspiration, turnover of key network members, the attitude, competencies and qualities of members, a relatively new authority and lack of a conceptual framework in which the mutual incentives are clear to the partners.

Instead of being motivated by a shared vision created within the PROLINNOVA initiative, individual member organisations are connected through a funding incentive. We work towards achieving programme objectives, but fall short of going into the core ideals and strategies we could share. Without a clear-cut strategy and mechanisms for sustainable partnership it will be hard to get out of the programmed or funded mode and into a more self-reliant mode. Obviously the former is much easier as a programmed network can simply try to raise some funds and function as it has been doing currently in a structured, activity-oriented manner.

Members of the Nepal Network are having a discussion with farmer innovator Mr. Adhikari in Begnas.
(Picture by Ann Waters-Bayer)

I also became aware that as a member of the NN I am also part of all these results – good and bad. I feel that although I may not have contributed directly to all of this, I was also in a comfort zone doing nothing to shake us up just like the rest of the network members. Is this what happens when a network is 'programmed' rather than 'initiated'? I do not know.

The whole process of learning, testing and experiencing has been eventful since the day I attended the workshop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in the last week of August 2010 which representatives from different country–based networks participated in. I was provided with the opportunity to learn about new tools for collecting information. I feel now that the tools, such as the 'Time Line' and the collection of narratives, are useful not just as extractive tools to serve their own purpose, but are also an effective way of understanding and connecting with the members of networks from various countries. It was exciting to see how a simple tool can stimulate healthy interaction between people connected by similar ideals, but working in a different set of environments and structures.

Not long after that, I ran an analysis workshop for the Nepal Network. It was a challenge for me to design it. I was not sure where to start. That was one moment I guess when I had my doubts about my competency: I had never done similar work before. Finally I found it easy to develop the objective of the workshop and then to choose the appropriate tools. I think a little bit of everything – knowledge, attitude and skill – is required from us in such a situation. A more critical challenge was to ensure that all the network members, including a few key former members, participated in the meeting as all of these members were scattered, living in different locations (districts). Finally, I was able to get them together by taking an additional day right after the quarterly partners' meeting. I benefited from the presence of Chesha, the international support team (IST) member who happened to be present during the event and helped me with the process. It was also an exciting moment to observe participants actively involved in the whole process. I point this out in order to indicate that it helps and adds to your confidence when we have people at such events who are supportive of your endeavour and take part in the process with enthusiasm.

I think the actual turning point which made me act was when I internalised the current status of the Nepal Network. That is when I really took up the role of free actor. As I said earlier, I had had no idea what I was letting myself in for when I said yes to the action research.

There were moments during this time when I felt encouraged, for example by the reviews and the acknowledgement I received for my report on the NN. And I was partially encouraged with the results of my work. But there are still many hurdles for me to overcome if I decide to go all the way as a free actor. The major constraint holding me back is really about power and my chances of influencing the power structures within the network as well as in my organisation, to support me to do what I want to do for the NN. There is some comfort in knowing that a free actor role is not permanent, but if I take it up, knowing the issues of the NN as I do, should I act like a conventional doctor and start administering medication and radical treatments or should I, like some alternative healer take a more patient and holistic view? Or should I just act like a night watchman? Who exactly is a free actor?

Ultimately, the best I can do in order to acknowledge the trust and investments made by a few individuals in me is to try my best, share the learning and hope for the best!!

IANRA

IANRA is an emerging international alliance of 25 civil society organisations from 8 different African countries and one European country. These organisations wish to address the adverse consequences of natural resource use in Sub-Saharan Africa. Its mission reads: 'Enabling social, environmental and economic justice in the natural resources sector towards the empowerment of poor and excluded communities through research, lobbying, advocacy and campaigning.' This innovative alliance additionally seeks to link and thereby strengthen African and Northern (European initially) research, advocacy and campaigning.

Francis Ng'ambi explains how IANRA has evolved like a living organism over the last few years. It thrives on the energy of people and there is agreement on the main focus. Although a great deal of time has been invested in the design of the network at an international level, the national networks still remain weak. Francis emphasises that strengthening the national networks is vital.

He further describes how he worked to revive the Malawi civil society network on mining. By using his TOR as the guiding principle he could act as a free actor and he found out that he scratched where it itched most. Francis sees free actors as inside-outsiders who have the ability to influence changes for the good in networks. At times this role may collide with that of the staff employed.

To support the national networks Francis proposes identifying and training free actors for each country and supporting them. He realises that formally assigning them this role is – to an extent – contradictory.

Three years have elapsed since the International Alliance on Natural Resources in Africa (IANRA) Network was formed. Its beginnings are humble; a few individual civil society people from Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola, Kenya, DRC, Mozambique and NIZA from the Netherlands met in 2008 at a NIZA Consultation Meeting to discuss the future relationship between NIZA and the Southern Partners. At the meeting, while discussing various issues, a bubble to form a network to pursue work in the extractive sector in Africa emerges and surprisingly attracts enough interest to warrant pursuing further and to look at how NIZA could keep assisting in keeping the bubble aloft.

From then on, people like Rafiq Hajat from Malawi, Julia Szanton and Rosemarie Wuite from NIZA Netherlands and a few others have kept the idea floating until the next meeting is organised. The bubble has its first naming "IANRA" at the network's first meeting held in Johannesburg, South Africa later that same year. At the meeting nobody had a clear picture of what the idea entailed other than that the network will work, amongst other things, on the extractive sector. There is, however, unanimous agreement that the network's main focus is advocacy for community rights (environment, social, cultural and economic) around mining areas and other land related investments as well as campaigning for ethical extractive ventures in Africa as a way to protect natural resources in Africa. The advance of IANRA since 2008 indicates that the idea of having the network in Africa has a niche and, if properly developed, could make a big difference in the natural resource sector in Africa.

But as with any living organism, the survival of IANRA depends on how the various network members contribute to the whole; in other words how willing and ready the network's national members are to participate in activities and to share its global vision and mission. The network structure, although not very important, is necessary and needs to be designed in such a manner that it provides the right delivery vehicle for the network. Of extreme

importance are the roles that the different players have in the network to always keep the positive energy high so that the network has more active actors than gatekeepers who, in the final analysis, might just end up sapping the network's energy, thereby creating negative energy which is dangerous to its survival.

Further analysis of networking in IANRA shows that there are gaps in the style of networking which need to be closed in order to strengthen the network. A general overview of the network shows that a lot of time was invested in trying to design the nature and functioning of the network Secretariat while some of the national networks remain generally weak, fragmented and at times ridden with managerial conflicts and poor strategic vision; some of them are not even in tandem with the global IANRA vision. Even though IANRA has more work to do on how to structure its Secretariat, developing rules and procedures and also strengthening the North–South and the South–South partnerships in the network, and the development and strengthening of national networks should be paramount at this point in time.

March in South Africa of the IANRA network. (Picture by Rosemarie Wuite)

29 January 2011 was a turning point for me as a free actor when I found that I had scratched where it itched most in the Malawi IANRA national network: offering services to improve connections between members by working on some long standing, intra–ideological and operational conflicts; and also helping to restructure the network to improve service delivery.

It is not easy to come forth and offer a service when you are not even part of a network unless you are known to have the ability to carry out what you were asked to do, in this case by the Secretariat. Fortunately I was well known in the Malawian mining network. I also knew a lot of and had worked with several members of the network.

What I realised during this intervention as a free actor was that any ToR given to you only serves as guiding principles. It was quite possible to go beyond the ToR to get to the bottom of the issues affecting the network and to unearth problems or challenges network members had not yet even identified. The ToR did not take away my freedom. With the leeway to operate, I was able to bring up things that an employee or member of the network could not speak freely about. Yes, employed staff can play the roles of facilitator, manager, mediator and so forth, but they are often limited by a job description that regulates them. What's more, employees and governing bodies often get bogged down by structural and managerial issues. A free actor, on the other hand, has no such constraints and can see things from an outside perspective. Because I was not personally involved, I was better able to see if the network was alive and kicking or not.

Reflecting back, I asked myself questions such as why I was picked as a free actor to conduct action research which would help animate the Malawi Network? Because network members believed that I had a good understanding of existential issues affecting their network? Because I was a neutral person that did not belong to the network, yet understood and shared their vision, mission and objectives? Perhaps it was precisely because of my inside outsider position that I was able to play the free actor role effectively.

The concept of a free actor is still rather elusive. At times the role of a free actor may collide with those played by employed staff and lead to duplication in a network. Yet in my experience any person acting as an inside outsider with the ability to influence change within the network where the change may not have taken place without such an intervention, might be understood as a free actor. It is precisely there that the concept becomes rather problematic and confusing; for instance if an employed staff member transcends his or her role as an employee to act freely to change a given scenario, would such an employee be understood as a free actor or has he or she taken his/her own initiative to change the situation? Would any catalyst bringing forth change in a network be taken to be a free actor? And so, when does someone become a free actor in a network?

My experience as a free actor in the Malawi Network gave rise to a new bubble: a proposal was floated to the IANRA Secretariat and the Steering Committee to create a pool of well trained national free actors who would take a lead role in supporting national networks. Good though it sounds, the proposal is tricky in that it presupposes that free actors can be identified and trained when in fact free actors are supposed to pop up independently with ideas on how to enhance network health. In one way the proposal contradicts the theory of free actors; on the other hand, however, if national networks identify free actors who already play such roles in the network, just as PSO trained me and other free actors from six different networks from around the globe, the training would go a long way to enhancing the skills of the free actors in IANRA.

A VILLAGE

Koen Faber tells the story of Janet who is the person motivating and connecting people in a small village where his sister lives. Janet took up this role naturally and is very much appreciated. He becomes conscious that she is an excellent example of a free actor.

He argues that for free actors to emerge you need to create space not bound by the formal structure. It is to the network's advantage if informal leaders use this space to take initiative.

About 3 years ago my sister Liesbet moved to a new home in a village. She is in a wheelchair and hated the huge nursing home she lived in. Her new home is in many ways its opposite. Here people are taken care of in a warm way. And most of all there is always something going on in the village and her home is included in this buzz of activity.

The village where her new home is situated seems to make the best of every opportunity for getting together to celebrate. And whenever something needs to be organised Janet is involved. She has dyed her hair a shade of red and her pigtails make her look like a young girl even though she is not and is the mother of two teenage children. She is full of energy and of ideas. When she talks to you, she draws you in and in no time at all you know which events are coming up in the village, and more importantly, you want to be part of them. As she explains the ideas for a flea market, a concert or somebody's anniversary, before you know it you have been assigned a task. And no one refuses, whether it is to cut out 10 cardboard penguins to decorate the street in a Mary Poppins theme or to

lend your pick-up or anything else needed to contribute to the festivities. When she puts her mind to something, the whole village is mobilised and participates happily. She connects people, getting them involved without having a formal role.

Liesbet in her wheelchair, who cannot contribute much, also benefits as she thrives on the energy going on around her. The village is a very healthy environment for her to live in and to a large extent this is thanks to her. For that I am grateful to Janet and to the lively community.

There is clearly a difference between the formal leadership of a network and the informal. Both are important. Having an inspiring person like Janet in a network is invaluable and helps reduce the burden on the formal leadership. I believe that if only the formal tasks for managing and coordinating the network are recognised, these could easily become too heavy and burdensome. But who should identify others who can take up the space for initiative? If this depends on the people who are already overworked, you end up in a vicious circle. The network managers will not find 'Janets'. Someone like Janet cannot be appointed. But network managers would do well to create the right conditions for someone like Janet to take the initiative herself.

Janet's drive is contagious. She makes things move just because she claims the space for her initiative and she gets plenty of room to manoeuvre, not bound by structure or bureaucracy. Neither her role nor anybody else's is formalised. She connects and then people contribute voluntarily. The most important resource is time and little money is involved. People collaborate to do what needs doing and the reward for that collective effort is a pleasant place to live in.

You wish every network could have at least one Janet. We know that that informal leaders who connect and inspire contribute hugely to the effectiveness of a network. But someone like Janet functions in a particular environment. She is effective in a small community, where people live close together and communication can be direct. This can be a village, a neighbourhood in your home town, an office department or a local network. In large networks you would need to create smaller environments and allow for sufficient free space for people to take the initiative. If the right environment exists you can let go and hope that a Janet will arise.

Chapter 5:

Findings and emerging discussions

How to keep North-South networks healthy?

In the action research we tried to find out which attitudes and approaches could be helpful to make relationships between partners in the North and in the South more rewarding for all. All too often the standards of what is good are determined by the donors. Could we get closer to the needs and expectations of all the parties involved?

Some things went differently to what we expected. This is inherent in network processes and action research is no exception. There were disappointments and problems that remained unsolved. But we also found pearls that made the journey worthwhile. Three themes in particular seem important: the free actor as a concept, the intriguing role of a network secretariat and the problem of staying connected. In this chapter we will summarise what we learnt about these issues.

Proud to be a Free Actor

Free actor it is a new term used in the FAN approach. Yet, it seems to appeal to people. The term itself appears to link easily to things people see as important to a network.

Concluding workshop of the action research. (Picture by Eelke Wielinga)

In the concluding workshop of the action research the key persons of the networks described how it felt to be a free actor. The outcome was summarised on one of the cards during the brainstorming session: "Proud to be a Free Actor". Below a selection of the comments.

· I feel more stable now.
· It encouraged me to go beyond borders.
· It helped me to think beyond my mandate.
· It gave recognition to what I was already doing.
· It gave me energy, it was exciting.
· I started to recognise people in the network adopting the role of free actor. Now I want to support them, to provide space to them.
· It got me out of my comfort zone.
· It helped to get others out of their comfort zones too.

But also:

· It takes a lot of personal investment to be a free actor.

In summary we can say that the concept of the free actor has shown to be helpful to key persons in claiming the space they needed to serve the network. It was interesting to see how meaning was added to the concept. Originally, Eelke Wielinga observed that networks need someone with a free role who is committed to taking action to improve the network and called this role that of the free actor. The co-authors discovered this from their own experiences and this provided energy because it made people more confident to make an effort for what they believed the network needed.

To further detail our understanding all the co-authors provided a personal definition of a free actor and we discussed the concept at length. No one questioned the validity of the term itself. The following features were mentioned most often:

1. The most manifest element was the recognition that a free actor does not limit him/herself to a job description, mandate, Terms of Reference or the tasks signed for in the contract. S/he is not limited by boundaries or the fear of going against the norm.

2. A free actor is a facilitator of people and connections in the network. S/he builds bridges and stimulates people to participate. A free actor energises the network.

3. A free actor works hard and is committed to making a better network. S/he is passionate about bringing about positive change and it gives him/her purpose. S/he works for the satisfaction of seeing people work for the greater cause.

4. To fulfil this role, a free actor needs to be able to properly analyse the network and understand what the opportunities for change are.

5. It takes personal skills to act effectively as a free actor. Empathetic, communicative and supportive people are more likely to be respected and trusted in this role.

These characteristics should not be taken as strict criteria for being a free actor. This role can be adopted in many ways. Indeed it would be hard not to fit the description. What counts is that all the above elements have been observed in the co-authors' experiences. Together these five characteristics build a picture of what a free actor could mean to a network and help to recognise if anyone is acting as free actor. You might even find various people in the network in this role, some more analytical, others building bridges, but all contributing to strengthening the network. In part it will depend on the opportunities the network offers to act as a free actor. We argue that there usually is someone who has assumed this role or someone with potential who can be encouraged to adopt it.

In the experiences at PROLINNOVA and IANRA, the analytical quality of the free actor stands out, and the authors stress that the free actor should address issues in the network, point to challenges and help identify solutions. Francis Ng'ambi has observed that it helped him to adopt this role as an insider-outsider, who has the advantage over the network coordinator in that s/he has a fresh perspective on how the network can regain energy. Sharad Rai specifically stresses the need for someone in the network to come out of their comfort zone to address issues. This requires tact and facilitation skills, because the free actor is bound to influence power structures. It gave him confidence to see people respond to his intervention.

In the Seeds of Peace Network in Pakistan the free actor is seen as a facilitator, principally paying attention to consultation and establishing connections. Gulalai Ismael describes how two people adopted the role of consulting and motivating network partners, when the secretariat did not get much response. It had a positive effect on participation. Playing this role effectively certainly depends on personal skills. In the example of the Dutch village, a free actor is described as a woman who adopts the role to inspire and motivate people in her village naturally. In this way she claims the space to promote collective effort.

At OECD Watch the need was recognised to establish a stronger connection with network members. Virginia Sandjojo and Victor Ricco sought structural improvement by appointing regional focal points. At the same time, they recognised that a free actor plays an informal role, but feel that creating a formal position is a necessary step to provide space to act.

In every example, the free actors worked outside the boundaries of official tasks, if they even had any. Does this mean that it is possible for anybody in any position in the network to act beyond his/her mandate as a free actor and to take the initiative to improve connections in the network? We believe so, but in some structures this is more risky than in others and also someone's formal position can make it more or less difficult. Anyone can be a free actor at times, but the threshold for someone to act as a free actor can be higher or lower.

It is particularly interesting to compare the role of a free actor to other roles people can assume to bring about change, such as those of initiators, managers or facilitators. We will look at these three more closely below.

A free actor might be an initiator or a change agent in the network. As soon as s/he does something to consciously mobilise the energy to improve the capacity to bring about change, the role can be viewed as that of a free actor. However, not every initiator keeps an eye on the process. The pioneer syndrome is well known: someone who starts a movement, inspires others to join in, but often misses the flexibility to respond to what is needed as the network grows. During the writeshop the observation was made that a free actor needs to build bridges.

People in management positions who want to bring about change act as free actors too when they do not feel inhibited by their mandate to do what is needed. Here the concept of free actor is helpful in two ways. It reinforces managers' (probably existing) gut feeling that taking measures not defined by their job description might sometimes be necessary. The other notion is that leadership is not exclusive to those with a formal mandate to lead others. Anyone can take up the free actor role to initiate change and good leaders create an environment in which people are challenged to develop their capacities to do so. This is especially relevant to networks as hierarchy and task division is usually not as clearly defined as it is in organisations. There the free actor provides personal leadership. In the example of the village described by Koen Faber, the free actor adopts a role of informal leadership when she organises activities in which villagers enthusiastically participate.

A third distinction that might be fuzzy is between a free actor and a facilitator. A free actor needs facilitation skills to stimulate the process, but not every facilitator is a free actor. Again the difference lies in the formal job description versus the personal commitment. The facilitator's role can grow towards a (temporary) free actor if s/he feels committed to the intentions of the network and does things to benefit the network that were not laid down in the Terms of Reference.

In the ASTEKI's case, Akbar Gaffar and Ridzki Sigit concluded that the positions people adopt in the triangle of change (see Box 4 in Chapter 2) are not fixed and, depending on the circumstances, can be interpreted in various ways. The suppliers, initiators and managers, and also the actors move dynamically in and out of these positions. In a way this underlines the above that free actors can be found in any position in the network. What we have to look for are the characteristics that define the role of a free actor and we have so far defined a number of elements: a free actor is committed, has analytical and interpersonal skills, facilitates and is not limited by a mandate.

But does that mean that anything goes, as long as the intention is to the benefit of the goal? The answer is no. There is a precarious relationship between the freedom a free actor takes and the space s/he acquires to be effective. Tensions may occur, but if others, either network managers or network partners, no longer accept him/ her, the game is over. This was confirmed by the key persons, who indicated that they took the initiative, but were not completely free. It also depended on the context. Freedom that could be taken for action at a national level, like in IANRA, was not allowed in the same way at the international level of the network.

For coordinators or managers the challenge is to allow sufficient space for free actors in their networks. What they can do is to lower the threshold for people to adopt the role of free actor by making it less risky to do so. Sharad Rai was stimulated to tell his story at the global meeting of PROLINNOVA for example, which lowered the threshold and he took full opportunity to use the space he got. Managers can also raise the threshold if they don't trust it. After all, a free actor must acquire his/her position by building trust. This takes a lot of personal investment, but it also depends on the context. One can imagine that in a network with a lot of underlying tension it will be much harder to gain trust as a free actor and this will require more personal skills.

We have mentioned that the role of the free actor cannot be captured in an official task defined by Terms of Reference. Drawing up a job description for a free actor is contrary to the concept: it would bind him/her to a mandate. But this creates a dilemma: if you want to build a network with the help of free actors you somehow need to identify them. In the action research some guidelines were provided for the selection of key persons with the expectation that they would grow into a free actor role. Also some networks who took part in the research think of actively identifying free actors to help their networks. How it works out depends on the drive, personality and skill of each person, but making the function explicit helps to recognise that the role of a free actor is important and creates awareness in the network. Francis Ng'ambi observed that his TOR did not take away his 'freeness'. We therefore conclude that looking for people with the potential to become free actors is a pragmatic approach as long as attention is given to creating an enabling environment.

Lessons learnt
1. The concept of free actor has been useful to the networks and the co-authors observed that free actors can provide new energy to initiatives.
2. Characteristics for free actors that stand out are: a certain independence and strong commitment, facilitation skills, ability to analyse networks and good interpersonal skills.
3. The co-authors experienced that it requires some courage to act as free actor. The network can help by lowering the barrier for people to propose action for change.

4. A free actor needs to be accepted in his/her role to be effective in building bridges.

5. You could easily attribute too much to a free actor, nobody will then fit the ideal picture. This does not take away the value of the concept and all the co-authors found examples in practice.

6. A free actor has no pre-determined position in a network, but can work from various positions and with formal or informal responsibilities.

7. Although inherently there is no formal free actor position, the action research has helped us recognise anyone who is acting as free actor.

Topics for further investigation

1. The action research has proven to be an interesting way of introducing the concept of free actor in practice, but more experience is needed to gain a better view of the risks facing free actors. Risks can be both personal because someone is sticking his/her neck out or for the network if someone starts meddling without overseeing the consequences.

2. We assume that a free actor can be especially useful when things are stuck. We need further examples from more complicated networks to support this view.

3. We have discussed the characteristics of free actors at length, but also agree that free actors can have different personalities. Can we make the concept more robust by identifying basic essential qualities?

4. Context matters. In which environment does a free actor function well? Small communities with direct communication seem to be easiest for them to operate in, but what about large networks? Under which conditions would a free actor not be able to do anything?

5. The TOR dilemma. We have recognised the free actor to be a liberating concept and we state that free actors work outside their mandate. But we also see that somebody can grow into the role of a free actor. Could then, a free actor be appointed? Can network managers consciously benefit from free actors?

6. If you appoint free actors it carries a certain authority. Will this work in the free actor's favour or against him/her?

7. Can you find potential free actors? Free actors are not the usual suspects; where to look for the unusual suspects?

8. The concept of free actors serves to promote attention for relationships and connectivity, but still needs more testing in the development sector.

The role of the secretariat

Centralisation is inevitable in larger networks, but the networks in the action research struggle with the role of the secretariat. Since the secretariat represents the official body of the network, it links partner organisations, alliances and donors, which involves a lot of administrative tasks. For some partners the secretariat becomes the gatekeeper in the network.

The Time Lines of the networks that participated in the action research clearly show similarities: people with ambitions meet, decide to join forces, organise themselves, create a secretariat and then assume that the secretariat will do all the work from there on in. The secretariat feels the burden, especially in relation to the donors, but has a hard time in sharing it with the partners. The pitfall is that fundraising becomes the most important task. Where have the people with ambitions gone? The challenge that the networks clearly identified at the September 2010 workshop was to reconnect with the energy in the network.

Looking more closely at why partners tend to sit back we can discern two processes. On the one hand, the secretariat feels responsible for achieving targets or getting the work done. This was evident in the OECD Watch

network, where a small dedicated group assumed the task of revising the OECD Guidelines and other members kept their distance. On the other hand, partners are absorbed by their own duties and start to feel things they have to do for the secretariat as something additional, probably with lower priority. The feeling of ownership among the partners lessens, participation declines and it becomes more and more difficult to keep connected. The Gender Working Group (GWG) has clearly seen this happen. Little ownership was felt by the members and when they invested in revitalising contact with members this only had a limited effect. The GWG's next attempt will focus on approaching members as partners by involving them in decision making and planning, and by finding 'warmer' methods of communication.

Dealing with donor organisations is a specific task for the secretariat that consumes considerable management capacity and focuses on the implementation of the activities for which the funds were received and accountability is required to ensure the funds keep coming in. In this situation, the secretariat's work is essential to the network's survival. During the analysis workshop, the PROLINNOVA programme in Nepal was described as such a 'programmed' or project-oriented network in which the individual ambitions that constitute the network became secondary to the implementation of funded activities. In Nepal the facilitation of a free actor aimed at discussing these issues.

Formalising the governance structure of which the secretariat is a part, tends to consume time and energy, because careful attention needs to be paid to balance the influence and positions of those involved. The steering committee of IANRA became aware of investing a great deal of time and energy in the formal part of the international network, and decided to pay more attention to activities at country level.

The examples illustrate well that it makes sense to distinguish networking from the network. Networking is the activity of building and maintaining connections, whereas the network is the entity that people refer to, and which is embodied by the secretariat, which is seen as the manager of this entity or even as a synonym for the network. However, a network does not function without networking taking place. Ideally the secretariat is also responsible for this, but this can be easily overlooked.

The blue and the red columns in FAN theory illustrate the same distinctive processes. For survival the secretariats are pushed into the blue mode of traditional management-oriented tasks, whereas the energy that drives the network comes from the red mode of making connections between individual aspirations.

Looking at the issues of ownership and lack of participation in this light provides new understanding. If the activities of the network are concentrated in the secretariat or if management responsibilities are taking up its time, it can end up paying less attention to networking and connectivity in the network declines. Either the secretariat should prioritise facilitating interaction itself or it should create the conditions for others to stimulate networking. This is where free actors become important, because they take up this task.

Of course secretariats are not only managers and often dedicate a lot of their efforts towards maintaining interaction in the network. All networks in the action research facilitate exchange between the partners. The coordinators in ASTEKI, for instance, see themselves as connectors and providers, who make use of the strong feeling of solidarity in the network to establish links. As co-authors we all also observed tensions between management and networking tasks.

Since the secretariat usually controls many of the network's communication options, clever use of communication tools can make a difference. For example, the Gender Working Group suggested the use of Facebook groups. However, online communication also requires facilitation, as we have experienced in the action research itself and

thought should be given to how to share or delegate this important networking requirement, which sometimes feels like a bit of a burden.

Interaction between partners in a network typically goes through highs and lows in activity. A great deal of networking takes place around network meetings. The Time Line sessions during the action research generated a lot of energy, for instance, and were very much appreciated. Whenever a new opportunity is created to meet, the energy starts flowing again. This is what OECD Watch expects to achieve by creating new opportunities for interaction.

Decentralisation is an interesting way to increase the connector/networking function in the network. It is easier to interact in smaller entities and this separates activity from the formal process at a central level. Also, at a very practical level, this enables partners with similar motivations and ambitions to find each other. Several of the networks in the action research have a layered structure that consists of an international network and national or regional networks. Using focal points (OECD Watch) or by strengthening national networks (PROLINNOVA and IANRA) these networks reinforce local networking capacity. IANRA is noticing signs that the international network functions better if the national networks are more active.

The Time Line workshops brought to light bottlenecks in the interaction within the five networks. It helped both the secretariats and the network partners to reflect on the role they play in this. A shared feeling was that such moments of self-evaluation are important and that time should be reserved for joint reflection and learning.

Lessons learnt

1. When setting up the governance structure of a network emphasis should be put on formal tasks.
2. In spite of working hard for the network, secretariats risk alienating the partners of the network, because there is a difference between the logic of management responsibilities (blue column) and facilitation of networking (red column).
3. Increased awareness that specific effort is needed to increase the interaction with partners has resulted in practical solutions that are being tested by the networks in the action research.
4. Decentralisation of networking tasks seem to be a sensible way to relieve the burden on the secretariat and to make both the local and the overall network healthier.

Topics for further investigation

1. Which mechanisms are causing a fading feeling of ownership of the partners and a gradual concentration of responsibilities? And what can be done about this?
2. Since network processes are highly unpredictable, it is not helpful to judge the performance of the secretariat and the network using pre-set targets and criteria. What kind of monitoring and evaluation does provide meaningful feedback and help reflection and learning?
3. How can you maintain a healthy relationship between a secretariat and the partners? What are signals that something is wrong?

Keeping connected at a distance

As we have discussed in the previous paragraphs, the networks that participated in the action research all reported problems with maintaining connections. Especially in large (international) networks it is difficult to maintain lively participation by all partners. Several networks in the action research were looking for solutions by creating smaller communities within the networks by strengthening regional or national networks. In addition

people were appointed to help these smaller networks to function as focal points (OECD Watch) or free actors (IANRA). This approach created new opportunities for interaction, but did not automatically change the feeling of ownership. It will only work if it makes partners feel more involved, so the idea should not be introduced in a top-down way, but partners should be invited to shape it in the way that suits them best.

The experience in the action research suggests that when it is hard to keep connected, you should not conclude too quickly that this is due to a lack of partners with drive. Keeping connected takes a lot of effort from people in the core of the network and it requires an infrastructure to respond immediately when something happens that might be relevant to the network partners. There are many options available to improve communication through Web 2.0 tools, but this does not replace personal contact and attention.

Lessons learnt

1. Continuous sharing of experiences between partners motivates and feeds the networking process. The best effect is reached face to face, but as this is often impossible, the network should invest in other means, such as Facebook group chats.
2. Establishing a personal connection works because this gives enthusiasm in return.
3. Networks that rely on the digital environment have to pay special attention to the opportunities for creating ownership.
4. Activity in networks often peaks during certain periods. The challenge to secretariats is to keep connected with the partners during periods of low activity and to revive energy.
5. Decentralisation by appointing regional focal points or strengthening national networks is expected to help establish closer connections and to increase participation. A precondition is that the sub-networks are established with the partners' involvement.

Topics for further investigation

1. Is it possible to create energy and motivation when you can only rely on online communication? How can horizontal exchange be brought about in dispersed networks and how can you make it a shared responsibility?
2. Decentralisation was identified as a popular solution for improving interaction. Is this because we dealt with large international networks during the action research?
3. Are there limits to the size of a network or sub-networks to make meaningful interaction possible?
4. In reality a network with different layers, such as an international level and a national level combines different networks with different dynamics. How do different layers feed into each other?
5. When do focal points help to strengthen connections in large international networks and how can they be prevented from becoming just another layer in a bureaucratic system?

Chapter 6:

Analysing the action research

In Chapter 5 we X-rayed the case stories of the networks to draw conclusions about what it takes to keep networks healthy. We feel that we have drawn both useful lessons and significant topics for further investigation from the cases that will help other network practitioners to better understand network processes.

Undertaking the action research itself has also been an intensive learning experience. As in any good learning process, not everything worked out as planned. Interestingly the coordination team faced a number of similar issues concerning network facilitation, but we also encountered a number of particular topics that merit discussion in a separate chapter. In this chapter we will analyse use of the FAN approach and take a more detailed look at the action research process.

Chapter 2 explained how the action research was conceived and organised. In this chapter Koen Faber, the coordinator of the action research, and Eelke Wielinga, the network expert, examine how the action research worked out and relate the ups and downs of the process. Interwoven into the analysis they also provide a personal account of what went on.

Uptake of the FAN approach
Eelke Wielinga

Finally, harvest time for the action research arrives. Thrilling. The key persons from the networks came back for the Writeshop in June 2011, nine months after the September workshop. Back then they learnt about the concepts and the tools of the FAN approach. They went home with plans to make their networks function better. They were quite enthusiastic at the time, full of good intentions. Now, nine months later, it is time to deliver.

I hope to hear them say that the method changed their networks. Their lives. I dream that they will tell their stories in FAN language, hear them explain how they dealt with the 'managers', the 'gatekeepers' and the 'survivors' in their networks, what they did when the energy slipped away and which interventions they have chosen to reinvigorate connections. How this resulted in more 'vital space'.

But I have to be careful. This action research is not about the approach I am trying to further develop, but about their practice. They are not here to please me. It is about what they encounter in their networks. How they deal with the issues they are struggling with. My contribution is language, concepts, frames and theory that will hopefully help them reflect on their practice. This Writeshop is a snapshot to see if any traces are visible in what they tell and how they frame it. So, maybe it is not about delivery or harvesting, but rather about reflecting on what has been helpful so far and what to work on in the future.

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Network processes are discovery journeys and so is this action research. Only by doing and reflecting do you learn and develop your competences. It is hard to prove anything. But maybe solid proof is not what practitioners are waiting for. It is more interesting to learn from the stories of others and helpful when there is a framework that makes it easier to find the pearls and the puzzles in these case stories. I am nevertheless still eager to find traces of what the FAN approach did emerge in the case stories of our partners.

The start of the Writeshop is marvellous. Everyone is happy to see each other again. Two newcomers, heavily engaged in their networks, but not present during the September workshop, fit in as if they always had been part of the group. Four (out of nine) play guitar, there is music, singing and dancing. The Writeshop methodology mobilises the creative and intuitive parts of our minds, and demonstrates that the personal stories, including both successes and struggles, are more powerful than the formal, rational documents we all are used to writing.

On day three of the Writeshop I asked them straight out: "Take a crucial moment, preferably one you consider successful. What happened? And what did you do?" It would be best to have two peers to help to get out the story, because I knew how difficult it is to recall your own interventions over the course of events, especially if tension was high. But nothing substantial came to the surface. Let alone the use of FAN language. Confusion. And disappointment on my part. Writers say that there is always a moment that you have to kill your darlings. Get rid of what does not contribute to the main story, although you had written it so nicely. Does it mean we have to skip the toolbox, since it is not being used anyway?

More encouraging was the discussion about what the term free actor actually means. The word is not well known. That is not surprising, as I coined it myself ten years ago in my thesis. Yet, it seems to appeal to people. It appears to be easily linked to things people view as important. I was very interested in knowing whether our group members had done anything with it, and if so, what? Did they have the same idea in mind? Did they experience it as helpful?

One key person reported "being proud to be a free actor". It seemed that the term free actor gave recognition to what people felt they were doing already. They were free actors before they knew it or rather before they had a name for their role. These are people with courage. With insight into what the network needs. And with a position that was accepted by other actors in the network, which gave them the space to address the needs identified. These are the characteristics of the free actor.

The concept of the free actor also helped the key persons to choose the appropriate attitude. For example, as one key person said: "Before, I acted in the manner of the NGOs, always claiming our rights. Playing the power card. This is what will happen if you don't respond to our demands. This made me an activist in the eyes of other stakeholders. As a free actor I understood that I had to make connections. To build bridges first, giving other stakeholders recognition for their various interests. Since then, they accepted me as a valid actor in the network of stakeholders. I was even asked to act as a moderator in an assessment study involving government, international companies, civil society organisations and international institutions. I have just successfully completed this task."

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There were different opinions in the group as to who or what constitutes a free actor, which highlighted the fuzzy boundaries of the concept. Conversation was peppered with questions such as: Is anyone taking an initiative beyond his/her mandate a free actor? Can managers who want to bring about change also be free actors? What is the difference between a free actor and a facilitator? Going beyond borders: does that mean that anything goes, as long as the intention benefits the goal?

My answer to the last question is no. There is a precious relationship between the freedom a free actor takes and the space she or he requires to be effective. If others do no longer accept him or her, the game is over. We discussed attitudes and skills required to be a free actor. Passion, courage, empathy, being participatory, were just a few of the elements mentioned (see Chapter 5). It was fascinating for me to see how a concept can gain its own dynamics beyond what I intended it to be. The aspect of encouragement and liberation was something I had not anticipated.

Use of the tools

The Time Lines that were created at the participating networks' meetings prior to the September workshop have proved useful. They provided the key persons with a good impression of what was at stake in their networks as a basis for analysis and action planning. In the networks themselves the Time Line sessions also had their effect. Joint reflection on the process that has led to the present network is not common and this opportunity was appreciated by most of the network partners who participated. It helped people to arrive on the same page and it unearthed issues for the network's agenda.

For the methodology of the Time Line we found out that it is worthwhile to split the Time Line session in two. First, draw up the Time Line with the participants. Then prepare a narrative story with four to six scenes. This can be done by the facilitator and the key person. During a second (and shorter) session, this story should be shared with the other participants. This is not only useful for getting the necessary corrections: it also leads to discussion at a deeper level of understanding and more interesting stories will surface.

It turned out to be revealing to the key persons and the coordinators to put the red column focussing on energy and connection next to the blue column of targets and instruments. There are many existing management tools for the blue column of organising. The FAN approach provides tools for the red column. It gave recognition to the importance of energy and connection in the networks: issues that tend to be overruled by the urgency of reaching targets and securing funds. The effect was that all participants in the workshop made action plans for reconnecting their networks to the driving forces that created them.

The FAN tools were designed to recognise patterns and to help identify possible interventions for creating vital space. Once the issues and patterns have become more clear by analysing a network with the FAN tools, there is probably plenty of scope to use other existing tools. The convening group of network experts, who gave feedback on the FAN methodology, suggested for instance adding participatory methods or organisational management tools to the repertoire. It is important to distinguish between tools that serve red column activities and those for the blue column. Blue column tools help to structure processes aimed at reaching targets.

The FAN tools (spiral, network analysis, circle and triangle) proved useful to the key persons during the workshop in September 2010 for the analysis of the Time Lines of each network. Active use of the tools provided a different

perspective on the relationships in the networks and helped the key persons to identify actions for improvement. The Time Line, made for evaluating the workshop, revealed a large number of 'flash moments' when the tools increased understanding of the functioning of the networks. For instance a role playing game with the Triangle of Change that involved the coordinators in the supporting NGOs illustrated the positions that adopted in a network really well.

After having used the FAN tools for the learning histories, several co-authors (Francis Ng'ambi, Gulalai Ismael, Sharad Rai) mentioned during conversations that they used the FAN tools in workshops they facilitated themselves. Joseph Ssuuna, who got involved as a facilitator for the Time Line sessions, makes extensive use of them in his facilitating work. However, the co-authors did not write about these experiences and we have no recorded evidence that they systematically applied the FAN tools in their networks after the workshop in September.

Evaluation of the action research process with the key persons revealed that introducing the FAN approach and the tools as well as analysing the initial data during a single workshop was challenging. One week was not enough time. The FAN tools were originally developed based on coaching sessions with network coordinators. The reason for introducing them at an early stage was to provide a language that could help joint reflection during follow-up with the key persons. However, it seems the amount of information provided was daunting. For the future, we recommend first introducing the rationale between the blue and red columns and the concept of the free actor. The FAN tools should then be introduced more gradually as part of coaching the key persons.

It is interesting to see that issues such as ownership, motivation, the partners' ambitions for participation and the role of the secretariat are put on the table. It seems that adopting the attitude of a free actor has provided a means of bringing up these issues. As a result more space has been provided to explore these issues and the networks have arrived at practical strategies for improvement.

The networks are still at the beginning of testing the various approaches. It started with the personal experiences of the co-authors who received the space to experiment in the network. There was not much time, so the learning in practice continues. Hopefully we can continue to exchange experiences between the networks and with others.

Ups and downs of the Action Research

Preparation and first reflection phase

For the reflection on the current status of the networks we opted to work with Southern key persons from each network. The issues to be investigated, such as ownership and network partner expectations required the Southern partner perspective to be prominent. Some felt that not only the difference in perspective between North and South was a central issue, but also the different views between those in charge and the network's partners.

However, the conception of the action research came from the network managers in the North and so a difficulty had been built in right from the start. The participating Dutch organisations participated in the proposal for the action research and looked for suitable candidates in the networks. The key persons selected later on had to assume responsibility for carrying out the research.

The way to cope with this was by offering an independent area for exchange that would provide safe environments for sharing and reflection. For this reason it was decided to work with a core group of key persons who would act as co-researchers. The Dutch organisations were represented in a coordination group. In addition a convening group of five network experts was formed that would be asked for feedback.

Exchanging information between these groups became an additional task that was at times hard to attend to. The less elegant side effect of this division was that there was little contact between the core group of key persons and the Dutch organisations, which meant the latter could only participate marginally. Based on this experience we would not repeat this strict separation of groups with different functions in another action research and would prefer to go through the learning process as a single group to allow the improved exchange of different views. It means that other ways have to be found to create safe learning environments, for instance by setting up a system for peer advice or by offering coaching by a Southern facilitator.

The other consequence of conceiving the action research in the North was that the key persons were selected at a later stage. As discussed in the previous chapter, assigning the role contradicts the nature of a free actor, even though there was no detailed TOR and we left the instructions fairly open. With the experience of the action research that we have now, we could describe better which characteristics to look for when identifying a free actor. In spite of all this it worked out suitably well and the key persons grew into their role.

The Time Line workshops provided a solid basis for the action research and were a good way for the key persons to assume their role as co-researchers. The workshops themselves were much appreciated by the network partners especially the help provided by external facilitators. It was also an occasion which a good number of network partners could participate in, both in collecting the initial data as well as in the first reflection on the network.

Reflection furthered by the key persons in September when the first analysis workshop took place. By distancing themselves somewhat from their networks the key persons could analyse sensitive issues with the help of their peers from other networks. It proved useful to bring them into a different environment. While the workshop was energising, it was also challenging. It took time for the key persons to become familiar with the FAN approach's tools and concepts and to develop plans for using them in practice.

Action Phase

While the workshops in the networks as well as those with the core group of key persons created a lot of energy, the evaluation with the key persons towards the end of the action research showed that the implementation phase had been a far more difficult period.

The action research depended on the dedication of individuals who had been thrown in at the deep end with new knowledge and tools that they had not used before. The key persons had busy lives and felt they had been selected to do extra work for the research. As a result, staying in touch was difficult and depended on the organisers, and the key persons soon got soon caught up in their normal work. It then became evident that the selection process had not been ideal and that not all the key persons automatically assumed an active role in the network.

By organising online backstopping for the key persons we intended to coach and advise them on any issues that might emerge during the implementation phase. The tools can be helpful for reflection, but it seems as if the introduction of the intricate FAN tools during the workshop in September unintentionally overshadowed the rest of the workshop content and created the impression that the action research revolved around the tools.

To really act as free actor in a network you – above all – need to be conscious of your personal attitude and skills, and the FAN tools should only be used in support. This message could have been stronger when starting the action phase. We realise with hindsight that creating this awareness is more essential than providing theoretical knowledge and we should have paid special attention to coaching the key persons in their roles and less on the

technical feedback from the start. It would have been useful to introduce the FAN tools more gradually. We came to realise that it is important to create sufficient opportunities during the process for the key persons to discuss the implications of being both co-researchers and free actors.

Second reflection phase

Because we sensed that the insights from the action research would come from the personal stories of those involved, we looked for a way to let these stories emerge. We decided to change the approach of the final reflection workshop from a strictly academic analysis to a writing workshop. We asked Sandra Hill to facilitate the reflection process in a 'writeshop'. This is an intensive, participatory writing workshop. Writing is used as a powerful tool for inquiry and the purpose is to generate and share stories, to collectively make sense of them and to begin writing case studies for the respective networks.

When we met the key persons again for the writeshop it became apparent that each of them had been struggling in their own setting, which made the exchange very interesting. Nevertheless, much had happened at the participating networks between the workshops in September 2010 and June 2011, although the intensity varied from network to network.

Writeshop in June 2011. (Picture by Eelke Wielinga)

The writing process helped to bring out the key person's personal experiences. However, it was difficult to document detailed experiences of specific activities in the networks. This is most likely because facilitators do a lot of things intuitively, often without being conscious of the importance of what they do. Such experiences are soon forgotten if no reflection is undertaken within a reasonable timespan. Organising regular documentation of the experiences would have engendered more rigour in the action research.

The workshop turned out to be an important opportunity, not only to harvest, but also to exchange the various views on healthy networks. Although the use of the tools was not very evident in the period between the workshops, we were surprised how the Free Actor concept had really struck a chord. Some key persons had made brave efforts to act as free actors for their networks, while others, including some who joined the process later on, had developed their own understanding of the importance of a free actor. We could not predict this outcome of the action research, but true to its nature, it contributed to this transformation.

Isn't it ironic?
Koen Faber

My drive to work on the action research came from the conviction that we need ways to improve collaboration between organisations in development networks. Through inspiring discussions with Eelke I discovered a new way of looking at relationships in networks. The FAN approach really helped me to change my perspective and I was convinced it would also be useful for others. It offers a practical way for networks to achieve positive change. Just what we needed for an action research.

Discussing how to set-up the action research I felt that we were finding the right approach. The network partners would be actively involved with the Time Lines and then a peer group would continue to work together. In this way we tried to make the involvement of the Southern partners as large as possible. My task would be to facilitate the process. I do similar work, so I was looking forward to this.

Organising the Time Lines with the networks was problematic, but it worked out really well. I was especially happy with the work of the consultants from Uganda and South Africa who succeeded in connecting so well to the networks. We managed to get the Time Lines done just in time for the analysis workshop. I decided not to take part in this workshop, because I wanted it to be a space for the key persons from the South. I only attended on the last day of the workshop and I encountered a group that was bustling with activity.

When we said goodbye after the workshop in September 2010, I saw key persons who were very motivated to learn about networks and genuinely interested in making their own network more vibrant. I concluded that it would be easy to maintain a high spirit and stay connected. Eelke's role and mine would simply be to provide the means of communication and to provide support concerning the content of the work.

Only after the concluding workshop in June 2011, did I understand that the key persons had felt a little lost as to what to do. They took up the challenge, but we had demanded quite a lot from them. It was left to them to agree on support for the actions within the networks and with the member organisations.

Still it came as a surprise, although – with hindsight – perhaps it should not have done, that communication during the implementation of the action research was not as lively as I had hoped for. This frustrated me a lot and made me worry about how to increase contact. There were some technical limitations, but more importantly our support only partially met the key person's needs.

I now believe that the set-up of the action research made our relationship with the key persons too formal and top-down, more like that between a student and teacher discussing homework, even though we tried to stimulate an open exchange of ideas. In January when I discussed this with Eelke it was unnerving and rather ironic to realise that we had become the kind of distant secretariat that we criticised other networks for having.

Now I realise that what the action research needed to provide most was coaching the key persons in their new roles as free actors or facilitators. Keeping contact through the internet did not provide sufficient support to their personal struggles.

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So was it a failure? Not at all. I am happy with the results. Of course I would have liked the process to have yielded more detailed stories about the interventions the key persons made in their networks. We suggested keeping logbooks, but I am convinced that the experiences would have been richer if we had introduced stricter procedures for documentation. In spite of that, I see strong evidence that the concept of the free actor and the vision of the importance of creating vital space for interaction have been adopted and have given the networks options for improvement.

Learning from the Action Research experience

Ownership

Both the learning question from the action research and the FAN approach propagate the notion that ownership should be shared and active participation should be stimulated. We argue that this can be achieved by starting from the aspirations of those involved. By placing responsibility for the research with the key persons in the networks the idea was that they would be carrying the research and a dynamic research team would evolve. In this way we, as organisers, thought that we had avoided the pitfall of centralising the initiative and the burden. The fact was, however, that the main tasks were concentrated on only two people. Ironically we had fallen into the same trap of many networks that centralise responsibilities. In addition we also happened to be Northern experts and representatives of the funding organisation, thereby reinforcing the impression of prevalent North–South relations.

This demonstrates how easily you can unintentionally end up in this position. We did not want to be the directors of the action research, but in the roles of expert and donor you obviously need to design the process carefully and make a concerted effort to stay out of this. One obvious solution is to separate the responsibilities for the funding and results from that of facilitating the action research. Even if there is the intention to be a modest facilitator, the tension between positions can get in the way.

The other issue goes back to the preparation phase. A framework for the research was proposed and discussed, but not with the Southern partners as these only became involved at a later date. A better start would have been to design the action research together with partners from the South. Then the key persons would have had a more precise idea of what they were signing up for.

The strict separation of the key persons from the coordinators from the Dutch organisation with the intention of establishing a peer group did not increase ownership. Working as a single group would allow the improved exchange of various views and would possibly also increase mutual understanding and shared ownership of the research.

Communication

In the action research we ran into difficulty maintaining lively interaction just like the key persons do in their own networks. We experimented with an online workspace where people could share experiences, questions, suggestions, updates and documents. The idea was to reserve a safe area where key persons could share issues and worries. However, people's tolerance for writing down experiences and sharing them on an internet workspace appear to have been low or else the incentive was insufficient. Direct Skype calls were more satisfactory, but not regular enough to keep track of what the key persons went through. Only when we met again at the 'writeshop' were the exchange and discussion once again lively. The enthusiasm was back, even though there had been changes in the group's composition.

Having established ways of communication does not guarantee strong connections. The intensity and frequency of the communication matter, as well as who is communicating and with what intention. Questions to ask are: Do people know each other personally and has a relationship based on trust and equality been established? Does the communication serve both sides and do people give it priority? Effective communication takes time and dedication. This is one of the reasons why working in smaller communities within the network can provide energy, because people have closer ties and the task is partly delegated.

Transformation

Bob Williams states: Successful action research is based on shared curiosity not individual certainty. Action research works less well if people seek to prove the correctness of their own ideas. Indeed, people are expected to put their practices, ideas, and assumptions to the test by gathering evidence that could convince them that those practices, ideas and assumptions may be wrong. (Bob Williams).

The FAN approach was taken as the basis for reflection, but also to provide a different view on networks. As organisers, we had hoped to see how effective the FAN tools would be. Our assumption was that the tools would provide a language that would make it easier to reflect with the key persons and which would provide support during implementation, but during the follow-up the tools were hardly referred to. We did see a strong shared curiosity on how to improve relationships within networks and more specifically how free actors can contribute to this. This has yielded rich stories on the experiences of the key persons in which the Free Actor concept takes pride of place.

An action research aims for more than only yielding new information: it is also part of an effort to bring about change with those who take part. Did we achieve transformative change? Applying the FAN approach's vision has stimulated the key persons to undertake various activities in their networks and in many cases to act as free actors. The case stories show how this has not only changed their thinking, but also their actions and how they felt strengthened by the approach, even though it has been difficult at times. Proposals have also been made at network level and activities have started to increase interaction. These proposals involve the Dutch organisations. Moreover, the action research has had an impact on us as organisers. We discovered flaws in the setup of the action research, which we discussed in this chapter. So transformation can certainly be observed at all these levels.

The action research went through cycles of action and critical reflection at network and at a collective level. The cycles should not end with the action research. The networks are still in the middle of testing activities, mostly aimed at improving participation. Continuous reflection will be necessary to make these effective. We also hope that we can support the exchange of these experiences out of curiosity and the belief that others can benefit from this.

Research questions

We started with a rather broad research question 'How to keep North-South networks healthy?' We referred to healthy relationships within the network and in both analysis and action we focussed on those issues that were getting in the way of maintaining connections between partners in the networks and between the network secretariat and the network partners. We found that the idea of being a free actor was particularly inspiring to the key persons and it was used to propose change towards more active participation in the networks.

In our view, the question of maintaining healthy relationships is strongly tied to active participation and ownership. What can be done to improve ownership and participation in the network? A number of possible solutions came up in Chapter 5. A number of participating networks decentralised activities, recognised the need for the secretariat to pay more attention to its networking tasks and discussed the challenge of keeping connected at a distance.

Lessons learnt

1. The Time Line workshops proved to create good opportunities for reflection and a strong basis for the action research. On the basis of these experiences the participating networks indicated that they need to set aside time for joint learning.

2. Since networks are dynamic and complex, the action research was set up to achieve change using dedicated representatives in the networks. These people have developed their understanding of their networks and raised important issues. That in itself is valuable.

3. Asking the key persons to be active researchers was logical and necessary in order to engender the Southern perspective. However, the networks' Southern partners should also have been the key players in the design of the action research.

4. During the preparation phase, the Southern partners should also select the key persons. The underlying concept should be discussed during the design phase to provide the key persons with a more precise idea of the role they are to assume.

5. Introducing the FAN approach into action research should be done gradually. It is important to first explain the vision and concept, and let those involved internalise these and think out ways of applying these. The second step is to gradually introduce the FAN tools during follow-up and coaching, which will provide options for analysis and action if the co-researcher is ready for them.

6. Pay proper attention to coaching the free actors in order to allow them to reflect on their personal challenges, attitude and skills, as they need to build capacity to assume a different role in the network effectively.

7. Document experiences with more rigour during the entire process, so small actions that may seem obvious or insignificant at the time can be reflected on once the process has unfolded.

8. The pattern of partners disconnecting and relying on the coordinator or secretariat is hard to break, as we also discovered during this action research.

9. We have not found the right way of moderating at a distance to encourage a high level of sharing of sensitive experiences and help each other through difficult periods yet.

Topics for further investigation

1. The FAN tools help develop the intuition to recognise situations in the networks and options for action. By collecting more experiences it should be possible to increase the understanding of patterns and the corresponding solutions. These archetypes would help make the FAN approach more robust and accessible.

2. The free actor's role is to keep people connected, inspired and committed. The co-authors can see that it works, but how can the effect be observed and measured more objectively?

3. Have people in the networks also experienced negative effects from the approach?

4. Which other tools exist that could supplement the FAN tools?

5. It would be useful to develop a self-evaluation for networks. It would enable networks to regularly reflect on their own 'health' and would establish common ground for the discussion of strategies for improvement. The Time Line method would be a good starting point for this.

6. The power dilemma. Free actors work without TOR and restricting procedures, which means they somehow challenge the system. The FAN tools provides some suggestions as to how to deal with power. Does this provide sufficient scope?

7. We need to detail what the scope is for action more to improve connectivity and to invest in relationships. Is this an area of work suitable only for the secretariat and free actors?

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