Learning Brief

Networking
The facts behind regional research collaboration

This learning brief is based on a paper written by the coordinator of an African health research network. It presents the benefits of regional networks, but more importantly, it also exposes a number of the pitfalls - particularly for South-based regional networks and institutions. Problems are valuable lessons and, whilst we do not propose solutions to these problems in this leaning brief, we hope that some benefit will come from placing the difficulties on the table.

Regional research networks, alliances, partnerships and institutions have the potential to be powerful entities for lobbying regional development agencies, but also governments.

There are a number of measures of a successful regional research network. They include:

- The improvement of the quality of research

- The strengthening of individual and institutional skills, and

- The production and dissemination of new knowledge.

These achievements are readily reported by the networks, as they ensure continuation of funding, and membership. Shortcomings however, are not often noted. What the networks fail to see is that by being open about the challenges they have faced, they provide valuable lessons for other networks, and demonstrate a dedication to a transparent way of working, which sets the scene for the sharing of knowledge.

This learning brief concentrates on a number of the specific challenges facing regional networks in the South, including those related to:

- Communications

- Sustainability (including the ability to accept and undergo organisational change)

- Collaboration

The benefits of regional research networks are clear. Networks aim to foster communication, cooperation and collaboration among their members; they assist their members and partners to identify common problems and transnational (regional) issues, and encourage the development of mechanisms to address these problems, and they provide interaction with other regions or networks as well as funders.

Effective networks are more likely to persuade regional development agencies and governments to pool their resources, which would ultimately result in more funding to advance regional scientific knowledge for development. Networks have a dual capacity: as generators of regional research findings, and as vehicles for research capacity building in developing countries. They provide a public good (research results) and complement national research efforts in universities, public institutions, and may compensate for transient deficiencies in national research systems. Networks lead to joint strategies, research which leads to action, pooling and utilisation of resources including human resources, and enables more donors to deal with one agency which leads to economies of scale. They foster creation, exchange and dissemination of information and expertise for various users including policy makers, and create a critical mass of individuals who can think intellectually on sensitive issues independent of their institutions. They are flexible, influence development agenda and strengthen regional themes.

Challenges

Most networks report on the outputs, outcomes and impact of their programmes. Yet weaknesses, threats to organisational development and survival, shortcomings, and

other challenges faced in the implementation of planned programs are rarely reported or documented. This is because by being overly transparent networks fear that they might jeopardise their own survival by exposing their weaknesses to competitors and funders. Some of the concerns include the issues of ownership (does the network have a "niche"?; who are the stakeholders?), power relations (ownership and politics), conflict of interest and rivalries, transparency, accountability and affordability, competition for resources, exclusivity, and financial constraints.

Other tangible challenges facing networks include:

Communication

This is a vital component of an effective network. Collaboration between members of a network can only be achieved through direct interaction: to share tasks, and more importantly, to undertake a task together in a manner that adds value to what would otherwise have been done individually. Communication (and information technology) is clearly essential for these undertakings. Electronic mail is a vital tool which allows members to contact each other frequently and inexpensively. It allows the efficient exchange of information and allows the articulation of new ways of thinking, free from institutional limitations.

In some circles the idea of a "virtual network", given the technological advances in communication that are available today, are highly appealing. However, these technologies continue to bypass many of the poorer countries due to poor telecommunications infrastructure. In Africa, for example, very few people have access to, or use, the internet. Very few in fact have functional telephones. Yet even this is secondary to a poorly developed "information culture", where the use of email as an every day tool for communication, is rare.

Sustainability

Many networks rely on a single funder. This failure to diversify their sources of funding and other resources can be fatal for a network in today's funding environment. Many donors and development agencies are scaling down their support for networks/networking, and thus, it is essential that they find a way of becoming self-sustainable. Part of this sustainability will require a willingness to accept, and undergo, organisational change. It is essential to adapt and pursue innovative approaches as well as to keep up with development trends, as failure to do so may lead to the collapse of even the most remarkable achievements.

Some of the pertinent questions for a Network considering this issue are:

- What sort of organisation must a Network become if it is to be sustainable?

- What must it be able to deliver, and to whom, to gain new resources?

- What else can the organisation offer that will raise revenue?

- What services can be offered that someone is willing to pay for?

- At what stage can donor funding be phased out without endangering the programmes?

- What are the options for long-term financial sustainability?

- Which activity has the highest priority from the standpoint of members?

- Which activity will make the biggest impact in terms of visibility of the organisation and attracting other donors?

The answer to these questions will determine the future of Regional networks as they strive to take advantage of the opportunities that arise while maintaining their mandate.

A Network's ability to continue after donor funds have ended is determined by its credibility as an organisation, and its performance in achieving the stated mission in the eyes of its members, affiliated institutions, regional governments and donor agencies. One strategy might therefore be to focus on the highly visible priority activities initially and thereby maximise the chances of demonstrating credibility and unique expertise that will lead to further opportunities.

Collaboration

There are a number of possible forms of collaboration. The first is for the Network to establish "chapters" in its member countries, with membership from like-minded representatives of research institutions, government, NGOs or universities. In principle, the Chapter would be responsible for raising a large part of its own funding, through the development of research proposals etc. However, there are few successful examples of this option.

The second option is for the Network to forge North-South partnerships. This can prove to be a very successful and useful way for South-based Networks to develop both their management capacity and to capitalise on international or local market possibilities. However, there are pitfalls. Northern partners have been known to take advantage of the unequal relationships which often exist in such partnerships and utilise the Southern partner's name to secure funding, only to disappear once this occurs. Southern partners can experience marginalisation in terms of funding, publications and patents in such partnerships.

South-South collaboration is a further option. However, these partnerships can be affected by institutional rivalries and competition for funding.

Conclusion

There are enormous benefits to be gained from building collaborative networks and alliances, and by improving communications among the various networks. Networks can support and reinforce each other's efforts through exchange of resources and personnel, and by working together. The networks can collaborate in regional groupings to tackle common problems and to lobby for their interests with global partners. The networks therefore, need to form strategic partnerships and alliances based on commonality of interests such as vulnerability to certain health risks or diseases.

Since one of the main causes for rivalry is competition for funds and programs, development and funding agencies can play a major role in the formation of alliances. They could re-structure their strategies, program development, and infrastructure to strengthen networking, and facilitate and actively support networks in achieving their goals. They could identify problems, develop the capabilities to address them, and mobilise collective action tailored to regional and national diversity. This could include governance, facilitating the availability, accessibility and use of information and communications technologies and value of information management and knowledge-sharing.

One of the strategies for helping networks build alliances is for the donor agencies to facilitate meetings where systematic in-depth situation analysis of the functions of various like-minded networks is conducted, an analysis made of how they currently interact and where they are complimentary. They could facilitate meetings for developing and strengthening teamwork and planning. In these meetings the networks will set priorities, agendas, and goals for coordinated action. They will specify mechanisms for frequent interaction, discuss methodologies needed to allow networks to coordinate inputs, monitor resource flows and clarify organisational responsibilities towards mutually agreed goals. In this way regional networks will think in terms of a health research system, rather than a collection of projects.

Reference

Pertet AM (Unpublished) An essay on Regional Research Collaboration's hidden facts. SOMANet, Kenya.

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