

ICTs, capacities and networks

Achieving individual and collective goals

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This article considers the collective capabilities of networks in relation to their use of ICTs, information and knowledge management. ICTs can enable networks and their members to achieve their aims more effectively, and are often part of the ?offer? that a network makes to its members.

Development cooperation is increasingly reliant on networks and networking as ways to mobilise the capacities of organisations. There is also a growing appreciation of the contributions that information, knowledge, and information and communications technologies (ICTs) can make to organisation and development goals.



Most networks can hardly operate without the capabilities offered by the Internet and other tools of the information and communication revolution. Indeed, some only exist because of ICTs!

There are two primary uses of ICTs in structured networks. The first is where development stakeholders, in health or agriculture for example, use ICTs to make their networks and networking more effective. Their focus is on doing development better, through the use of ICTs. The second is where individuals and organisations with a focus on information or knowledge in development use ICTs to enhance their collective efforts. Their focus is on doing ICT-enabled or knowledge-based development better.

Using ICTs, these networks provide shared ?spaces? where their members can access competencies they need, develop their own capabilities, widen their circles of influence, and collectively create new capacities that did not exist before.

ICTs are also used to enable many less formal individual and social networking activities, as well as informal ?communities? and collaborations, some of which share the characteristics of networks.

Internal energies

It is useful to distinguish between networks according to their 'energy' sources. Some emerge from and are energised by the interests of members to join forces - their internal motivations - fuel - their activities. The KM4Dev community, for example, grew out of the desire of individuals to share knowledge and to contribute their competencies to the network. Similarly, AfriAfya was set up by health workers who wanted to foster collective learning, knowledge sharing and networking using ICTs.

Others are created or enabled by third parties who perceive a need for the various members to work together, or consider networks to be an effective way to achieve a desired result. In such cases, the challenge is to generate sufficient internal



ICTs are themselves part of the capacity conundrum. They contribute to processes by which members meet and communicate, and pool, share, learn about and re-use their competencies. ICTs are often a major part of the collective capabilities developed by the network or offered to its members. ICTs can also be a challenge. Depending on the tools chosen, certain levels of information and digital literacy and connectivity are necessary for members to participate in the network. The technologies can get in the way of 'real' communication and, perhaps, discourage members who lack certain technological capacities or whose knowledge-sharing and learning styles are more traditional.

As networks move online, a network facilitator needs to be able to make ICTs work for the diverse needs of the wider network, adjusting information and communication systems to meet both the evolving competencies of network members and the collective ambitions of the network.

Discussing ICT-related capacities, and hence the need - or not - for capacity development, can be complex, since a network's capabilities are not just the sum of its members' competencies. Rather, they emerge when those competencies are strategically managed and combined to achieve overall network goals. Identifying and mobilising individual member competencies requires significant strategic capacities at the network level, and these often become most apparent when a network begins to struggle. Some of the necessary capacities at the network level are listed in the following table:

Network capacities	Competencies
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Influencing	<p>handling complex situations;</p> <p>advocacy;</p> <p>negotiation;</p> <p>building alliances;</p> <p>inspiring trust;</p> <p>identifying value for all members.</p>
Facilitation	<p>ensuring participation;</p> <p>identifying and circumventing obstacles.</p>
Visioning	<p>seeing the bigger picture;</p> <p>clarity;</p> <p>conceptual thinking;</p> <p>future focused.</p>

Communication	<p>effective external and internal communication;</p> <p>listening – a finger on the pulse;</p> <p>knowledge sharing and management.</p>
Technologies	<p>using technologies to harvest, document, lobby and leverage experiences;</p> <p>using multiple media to disseminate network products;</p> <p>blending multiple media to network and involve members.</p>

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Links

ICT-enabled development network

[AfriAfya](#) was launched in 2000 by leading NGOs and the Kenyan government to improve coherence in the health sector. It provides learning spaces where organisations can work together and share information, knowledge and experiences.

ICT-oriented networks

[The Global Knowledge Partnership \(GKP\)](#) facilitates the development of collective agendas and actions, and provides spaces where members can collaborate and share information.

[Knowledge Management for Development \(KM4Dev\)](#) is a community of development practitioners who share ideas and experiences in knowledge management.

[Telecentre.org](#) is working to strengthen national and regional networks, and is investing in services to build the capacities of telecentre operators worldwide.

Further reading

H. Creech and A. Ramji (2004)

[Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for assessment](#). IISD Working Paper.

J. Ferguson and S. Cummings (2005)

[Supporting communities in development: Tools and approaches](#), Knowledge Management for Development Journal, vol.1(1).

R. McDermott (2000)

[Knowing in Community: 10 critical success factors in building communities of practice](#), Communispace.

C. Porter (2003)

[Networking for Health: a revolution ? Using new ICTs to support health professionals in developing countries](#). Dissertation, University of London.