

Thematic Learning Programme on Networks

Draft Outline for discussion with PSO management team

Justification

North-south network are becoming a well-known phenomenon the development aid, and more and more networks are started. The networks vary greatly in origin and are taking shape in various ways depending on their objectives. Apart from increased synergy, these networks are expected to enhance collaboration between northern and southern organisations, and often are assumed to level the playing field. However, the experiences with the operation and sustainability of networks are ambivalent. Collaboration meets with recurrent dilemmas that hamper the development of the network.

The participants from the collective learning trajectory "capacity development and networks" that PSO organised in 2009 represented northern NGO's, which played a role in facilitation of the networks. They discussed topics like leadership, communication and ownership. One conclusion is that achieving a good north-south cooperation in networks is complicated. However a blind spot in the discussion was the perspective of the southern members of the networks. Are the same dilemmas also experienced by our southern partners, or do they see it differently?

PSO wants to stimulate learning from practical experience with facilitating networks. The questions raised in the learning trajectory were further discussed with a number of member organisations that participated in the trajectory in a meeting on 9 October. Their input has been included in this outline.

Leading question

How do southern organisations experience their participation in North-South networks and what attitude and approach makes that collaboration in networks meets the reality and expectations of southern partners?

Activities

Several complementing activities will contribute to finding answers to the leading question:

1. Exploration of southern and northern views on networks
2. Action research
3. Experimental activities (innovation) by member organisation

The first activity we would like to investigate the southern view without guiding southern partners to any expected outcome, whereas in the action research northern and southern organisations jointly decide what aspects they want to look at. The third activity is providing an opportunity for practical experimentation. We feel that this is an important distinction and the lines of investigation should be implemented separately, although the results will be exchanged and can strengthen each other.

Activity 1. Exploration of views

A comparison between views among a wide group of southern practitioners and views of northern network members will provide a better understanding of differences in perception of the concepts concerning networks. The exploration will be based on field research and complemented with desk research of the role networks play in a southern context. The results of the Moshi Dialogue that looked at views of southern and northern organisations on partnerships are very relevant for the views on networks and will be taken into account.

We consciously defined an open research question as the investigation should in the first place give room to southern practitioners to share their thoughts and identify dilemma's from their point of view. We are not looking yet for specific answers or lessons for improving collaboration in networks. After this first phase, depending on the outcome, a follow-up will be decided upon that takes these views into account for improving facilitation of networks.

Activity 2. Action research

A second line of investigation is through action research. This research will support networks of any PSO member organisation and their partners who want to investigate their respective views together in order to redefine their collaboration in a network. The research should provide insight in how to improve the functioning of the network.

Interested networks will work out a research methodology with help from an expert. Members within these networks will plan together how they will carry out the research and what guidance they will need during implementation. The lessons of this action should be shared within the PSO association and the development sector.

Topic

It is often difficult for an initiator of a network to understand what motivates members of a network to participate. Of course the question is asked, but the answers might be distorted by other factors, especially when networks are based on already existing partnership relations that have created a certain dependence. Power differences, financial relations, cultural background and various strategic considerations might all be at play.

Initiators of the network try to best-guess what the network needs to function when they facilitate the network. During the starting up interested parties will negotiate the conditions during an initial period during which stakeholders build the network relations. Does the resulting "contract" (which should not be seen as a definitely fixed agreement) indeed meet the needs and expectations of the network members?

By means of a self-evaluating process of networks that have gone through this process, network members will investigate how the network answers their initial motivation and what role the setting up phase has played in this.

Another angle of measuring the success of the setting up (contracting) phase of the network is by looking how healthy members consider their network to be. The motivation of the network members to invest in the network will depend on it.

Specific questions:

- What strategic needs does the network correspond to in the context of its member organisations?
- What factors motivate or discourage participation?
- How have these issues been addressed in the setting up of the network?

- How well-functioning do member organisations consider their network to be?
- What would southern member organisations want to change to make the network functional in meeting their objectives?
- What would northern organisations want to change to make the network functional in meeting their objectives?
- Difference in northern and southern view?

Considerations

- The research should be based on shared ownership by providing a participative approach for self-evaluation of the network..
- It requires an active attitude of partner organisations and PSO member organisations.
- To create the space for learning PSO can contribute to covering addition time and costs of the organisations involved in the action research.
- The methodology needs to be robust and allow comparison of results for drawing generic lessons.
- The methodology needs to be sufficiently flexible to allow for context specific factors.
- Experts in network analysis will be contracted for the design of the methodology in close collaboration with the networks involved.
- The southern network members are professional and leading stakeholders in the research. Their input should in no way be limited to providers of information. It is their analysis that counts!
- PSO member organisations and their partner organisations make their own arrangements for implementation of the research.
- A team (peer to peer, experts??) will provide advise for the implementation phase.
- The number of networks interested in participating is expected to be 6 to maximum 10.
- Geographical variation is not relevant for selecting networks for the research. A thematic diversity is welcomed.

Output

- Case studies documented with recommendations for the individual networks.
- Analysis of research results with generic lessons.

Insights will be used at different levels:

- For coaching of the LWT of participating member organisations.
- As input for an event with participants of the collective learning trajectories about Networks
- For sharing within the association.
- For publication for a wider audience.

Activity 3. Experimental activities of PSO members

For this activity any PSO member organisation can work out a proposal that falls within the leading question of the TLP. The member organisation will have to explain how the proposal came about and how partner organisations are involved in its design and implementation. Further the expected new

insights in facilitating networks will have to be explained and how the lessons will be shared. We specifically request to participate and share the activity in the PSO learning trajectories on Networks.

BUDGET

Activity	Description	Amount
Activity 1. Exploration of views	Research	30.000
Activity 2. Action research	Methodological design	15.000
	Self-evaluation of 6-10 networks (Workshops, coordination, case studies)	240.000
	Analysis and publication	25.000
Activity 3. Experimental activities of PSO members	2 Proposals	70.000
	TOTAL	380.000