

Good Practice: Linking Face to Face Events and Online Dialogues

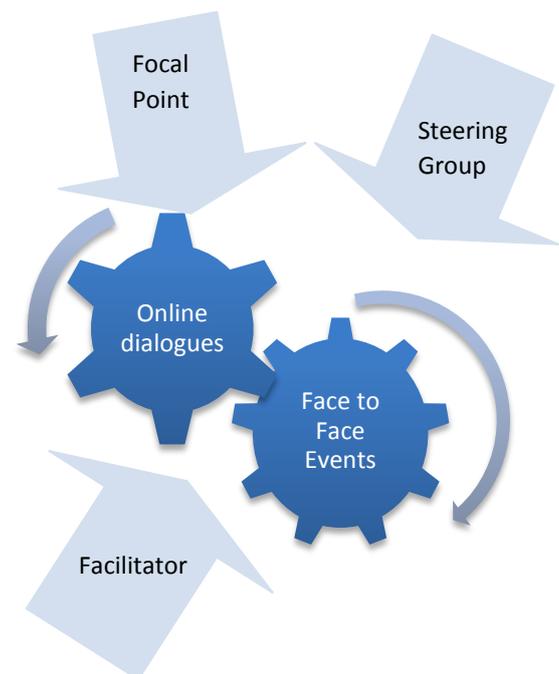
Bringing online and face-to-face interactions together. In the context of SDC networks, there is great potential in thinking about how face-to-face (f2f) and online interactions can complement and strengthen each other. If we are conscious about how we design and implement both aspects, we can create synergies that strengthen network activities, outputs and coherence, as well as generate higher levels of enthusiasm among members. These synergies will support enhanced learning and ultimately lead to stronger, more effective networks that make robust contributions to thematic policies, dialogues and activities of the organisation.

Related guides: (1) e-facilitation, (2) planning face-to-face events and (3) roles and responsibilities within a network.

Why should online dialogues be linked to f2f events? The fundamental point is that online interactions and f2f events are both episodes or moments in the ongoing life of a network. They each have their respective strengths and weaknesses in terms of supporting network development, producing outputs, sharing learning, etc. The more Focal Points and network facilitators think about both elements of network interaction together, the more they can customize their workplans to **use both for mutual reinforcement**. Although online and f2f settings require different facilitation approaches, activities in both contexts are based on similar principles. For example, both require a skilled **facilitator** who makes recommendations regarding methods, steps and processes to reach objectives set by the network owners.

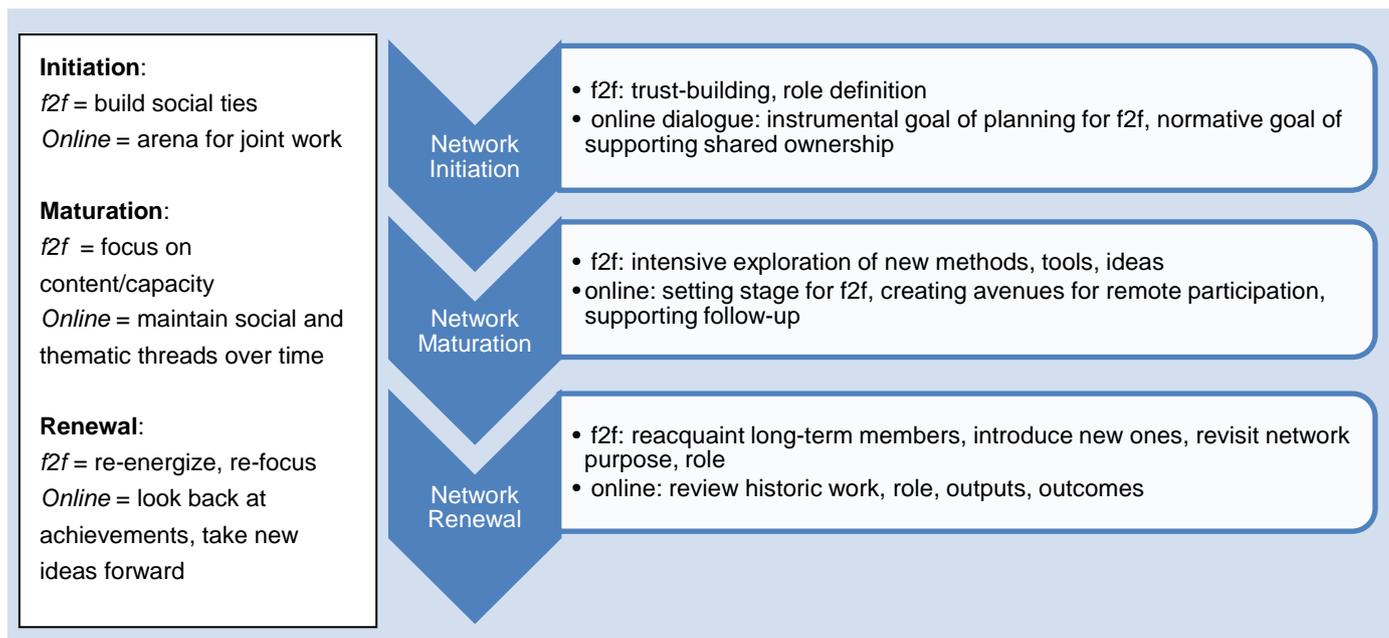
Who can ensure that the linkages are made?

Although some network members themselves will recognize the added value of linking the two, it is one or all of the **Focal Point**, **facilitator** and **Steering Group** of the network that need to keep the rhythm of f2f versus online interactions in mind when planning and overseeing various activities and projects associated with the network. This team of people may be made up entirely of SDC staff, or it may include external backstoppers who are familiar with approaches to support networks and communities. These actors in particular are best able to ensure that the threads flowing into and out of workshops, episodic online discussions and ongoing online and offline interaction are woven together (and thereby mutually reinforcing).



How should these linkages be approached? There is no pre-set formula. Decisions on **when** to hold a f2f or specific online dialogue or on what level of emphasis should be given to **network development** versus **content development** versus **policy dialogue** versus **output production**, depend on the specific context. Focal Points and others supporting networks need to look at internal **dynamics** and **needs** as well as the **external context** (e.g. major events, decisions, milestones which affect the network environment) in order to make sound decisions about timing and focus. One significant contextual factor is the **stage of development** of a given network. Networks or communities do not all develop at the same pace or in the same ways, but it is useful to consider three broad stages: the establishment or **initiation** of a network; its **consolidation** or maturation, and; the **renewal or reorientation** of a network (this would typically occur after a number of years and/or an institutional policy shift concerning the network (see the guide on nurturing networks for additional thoughts on the nature of networks and communities).

The graphic below provides possible **roles for a f2f workshop or meeting and online dialogues which occur before/after such meetings**, based on different stages of network development.



What is an appropriate rhythm for planning f2f and online events? It depends. It is important to consider the social nature of a network and to allow each network to create its own rhythm. Even with networks that mostly interact in an online way, it is important to have periodic f2f meetings. The frequency of f2f events of course also depends on the available resources of a network, the geographic spread of its members, etc. In the SDC context, holding one f2f event every 1.5 to 2 years is advisable. Another variation on this recommendation is to have a regional f2f event on an annual basis and a global one every two years. Regarding online dialogues, it makes sense to use them as preparation or as follow up to a f2f event. Moreover, online dialogues can be held every few months but again, an initial balancing of online and f2f dialogues is ideally done during the elaboration of the workplan of a network.

Fredrika Helmholz has been a member of an SDC network for two years now. In the early stages she was not sure if it was going to be beneficial for her work: it seemed to represent just another extra set of things to do in an already significant workload.

This started to change when Fredrika followed and participated in an issue-focused online dialogue among network members. She actually found the dialogue not only interesting, but quite useful in giving her ideas about how to more effectively integrate thematic elements in her work (although she was not fully conscious of the importance of the network in enabling the sharing of such ideas)

This episode was a positive one, but it required a more sustained or significant effect on Fredrika's work for her to fully appreciate the value of the network: she did not have to wait long.....the network Focal Point initiated an online dialogue for network members to discuss what should be taken up in their first global face-to-face event, which was going to be held six months later. Fredrika was not sure if she would attend the f2f, so it was really nice to be able to contribute online.

As it happened, Fredrika did go to the f2f and found that participants – including her – quickly got into a productive mode because they had already concluded preliminary discussions online. Fredrika had rarely seen a f2f meeting begin with such energy!

On top of that, participants agreed to take up a range of issues that could not be fully discussed at the f2f in follow-up online discussions in the coming months. Again, Fredrika came to see that somehow the network members were interacting, making decisions and collaborating in an ongoing way, whether it was f2f or in an online environment. From that point forward, Fredrika was convinced that the investment of time was well worth the excellent opportunities for learning and exchange she could have by being an active participant in the network, even though it was still not easy to balance the various demands on her time.

Key Resources

[DFID Facilitating Networks - a good practice guide](#)

[Knowledge Sharing for Development IMARK e-learning module \(Unit 7\)](#)