Good Practice: Managing Membership

What is the scope of membership management? In networks it is just as important as in a club or association that members know each other and feel at home. Some ways of doing this are by welcoming new members, making a members' list easily accessible and periodically providing network members with data i.e. on mappings to illustrate who the members are, where they come from, etc. This guide also examines more strategic issues, such as broadening membership internally and keeping members engaged.

Related guides: (1) roles and responsibilities within a network, and (2) e-facilitation.

Who are the current members? A **stakeholder mapping** can be useful as it illustrates who are current members and what their characteristics are (e.g. through different pie graphs). It can then also be used for further analysis, for example to determine whether external participation or membership in the network is desired. A stakeholder mapping should cover three main aspects. First, map the membership in terms of **regional and institutional representation.** Members can be mapped by continent or country depending on the size of the network and also classified institutionally, i.e. whether they are at the Head Office of SDC or at a Cooperation Office. If partners are included in the SDC network, they should of course be included in the mapping. A second useful characteristic of a network is the **function of the members** within their institution, i.e. are most members Programme Officers, Heads of Cooperation Offices, Project Managers, etc.? A third important element to consider is how many **men and women** there are.

Who should be invited to become a member? Networks may start small in terms of membership and grow progressively. The members of SDC's thematic networks are **SDC staff of various divisions and sections, Headquarters and COOFs**, nominated or designated by the SDC Directorate. Now that the networks have been created, an important question for SDC networks is whether external partners should be invited to join the network and how they should be treated as members. The key question that has to be clarified before involving external partners, is the **purpose of the network**. Other important questions around involving partners are on 1) the **purpose** of involving them, 2) **who** the external partners are and which **criteria** determine which partners can join, 3) when they **should be invited** to join (timing), 3) what **their influence** may be on network development, and 4) what is expected of partners and what are their **expectations.**

Who does the managing of members? While the more strategic decisions mentioned above are made by the Management, Steering Group and Focal Point together, when it comes to implementation, the Focal Point plays a key coordinating role (see illustration below). S/he usually is responsible for updating the members' list, but may delegate this to someone else. In any case it is advisable to have only one members' list and clear mechanisms for approving new members and updating the list. It is also good to have a mechanism to link membership approval with a welcoming procedure (e.g. standardised welcome message, to help members get to know each other) and reach an understanding on who takes care of other relationship development work such as briefing new members.

The illustration on the right shows **five key elements** that should be constantly kept in mind regarding **membership management of networks.**

The illustration can be read **clockwise** from the top. Membership **mapping** can provide useful information to guide the process of broadening the membership of the network. Typically this is done in the early stages of membership management by recruiting more **SDC internal members**. It is often advisable to work on consolidating the network somewhat at this stage, followed by inviting SDC **external partners** to become engaged.

Keeping members engaged and **getting feedback** from members on the network are key aspects of membership management that should always be considered. However, often concentrated efforts on these issues only become feasible after other membership issues have been clarified.

Strategically steering the membership of a network: The work of an SDC network Focal Point or Steering Group does not end once members have been recruited and mapped. On the contrary, that is when much of the work actually begins. Maybe the Steering Group decides that action should be taken to **enlarge** the existing membership base or adjust the **mix** of members. Some networks might feel that they need to recruit more SDC-internal members, e.g. to ensure that the network is geographically representative. Through targeted **lobbying**, network Focal Points together with Steering Group members may be able to gain more members for their thematic network, especially from the field where the thematic network may be less well known. Illustrating the added value of being part of a specific network, e.g. receiving updates and relevant information in newsletters or participating in thematic exchanges through a scheduled offer of online and f2f events, of course also helps gain more members.

Keeping members engaged is an aspect that should be at the back of the minds of network Focal Points and Steering Group members at all times. This can be done by **selecting the network priorities** in a participatory way, thereby ensuring that network related tasks and activities are relevant for and contribute to the already existing daily work of its members (rather than being an additional burden). Many networks make this prioritisation and action plan building part of their periodic face to face exchanges. Network members then know what their specific tasks for the year are and can work in **smaller sub groups**, keeping the network Focal Point informed. The network Focal Point can, however, still make sure that the momentum built at a **f2f** event is kept, by periodically checking up on network members regarding the set priorities. Other ways of ensuring that the network activities are relevant and being followed up on are for example through conducting **online surveys** (as most members are spread across the world) or coordinating **feedback rounds on outputs**. Besides good planning, coordination and sharing of information, a warm and welcoming managing of members contributes to keeping members happy and engaged. This should be done from the start, e.g. through making sure new members are introduced, and continued by sharing updated lists of network members and their roles.

Helping network members manage their time. The members of SDC networks have to juggle heavy workloads and busy working schedules with actively contributing to the network. Focal Points and Steering Group members can make this **balancing** act easier, by **scheduling** activities such as e-discussions together with network members but also by giving **indications of the resources** required by specific activities. For example, if a sub group of a network is to produce a specific output, network members can volunteer to be part of a working group based on the provided **time specifications**. Creating **smaller email discussion lists** for specific sub tasks of the network carried out by only a selection of network members can help restrict the number of messages received by network members who are not directly involved. To ensure that the entire network is informed on the activities or discussions of such sub groups, periodic **feedback emails** from sub groups to the entire group can be organised.

It's a sunny summer day in Bern and Peter Schweizer is feeling inspired - not only thanks to the warm weather outside, but because he has just finished a rather interesting Steering Group meeting of his thematic network. As a member of the Steering Group he reflects on the development of his network and supports the network Focal Point in ensuring that the network goes where it should. The focus of today's meeting was on two things and Peter feels that his time was well invested in the meeting and is assured that the network is moving in the right direction.

First, the Steering Group assessed the **current membership** of the network. This was a rather quick exercise thanks to the updated list of members which is linked to pie graphs. This illustration of the distribution of membership clearly showed that more SDC internal members need to be recruited in West Africa, especially since the thematic focus of the network is also a priority in the area. After discussing the reasons for this under-representation of the region and possible ways of getting more staff involved, the Steering Group decided who would follow up on this issue. They all agreed on the ideal number of additional network members from that region and by which time they should join the network at the latest (before the next f2f meeting in six months). Although it would not be easy to ensure a more balanced membership, at least they had a clear goal.

The second point on the agenda was to reflect on the **feedback** provided by network members on the development of the network. This was done based on the compilation of the results of an online survey that was completed by most network members. The feedback confirmed that, overall, the network members felt that they were on track with the activities they committed to doing at the previous f2f and the level of information exchange within the network was appropriate. They expressed their appreciation for the quarterly newsletter but stressed that they would like to see more up to date articles on the website of the network. A number of members also recommended that an online training course be offered on certain subjects in order to deepen the common understanding of network members.

Peter feels that both the membership mapping exercise and the recommendations from network members confirmed his perception of current challenges and successes of the network. Especially the punctual feedback exercise reflected the growing ownership within the network for its activities and he is pleased to keep contributing to addressing the issues as a network member but also as a member of the Steering Group.