

Good Practice: Nurturing Networks

What are networks and why should they be nurtured? Networks are made up of people who are connected by a common thematic interest or goal. Some networks remain loose and without specific goals, serving as platforms for members to exchange their ideas and experiences. In the SDC context networks have been set up to go further than this, as people are expected to identify themselves with a network and develop a sense of common purpose. When people in a network deepen their knowledge by interacting on an ongoing basis, develop shared values and a feeling of belonging or common identity, such a network can also be described as a community. Communities can combine the instrumental aspect of a network with social and value based ones. Experience has shown that it takes time for a sense of community to develop and usually it takes skilled facilitation, planning, organising and participation by members - in other words nurturing - for it to grow. Although a network may need more attention when it is created or when significant changes happen, "nurturing" should remain on the agenda throughout the lifecycle of a network.

What is special about networks in the SDC context? SDC networks were created in 2008 when SDC adopted a new organisational structure. The responsibility for sectoral (thematic) policy and quality of operations was transferred to the operational/geographic lines. SDC staff working in operations, policy dialogue and strategic partnerships on focus themes were connected through thematic learning networks. The institutional mandate of the new SDC networks is: to exchange knowledge and experience in various thematic areas as well as to upgrade thematic competence of their members. Although the overall purpose of the networks was communicated, **network-specific roles were more open-ended**. Therefore, the network Focal Points had an opportunity to **design roles, responsibilities and network development strategies** themselves. This guide distils good practices identified through such **self-driven learning**.

What is the purpose of your network?

An institutionalised network prospers most when it prioritises the most important subjects to be tackled in its thematic area, has clearly defined goals and structures, clear responsibilities and a role to play within the organisation. As SDC networks set their goals themselves, their influence on the operational level depends largely on the level of **activity, self-promotion and decision-makers' appreciation of networks as pools of thematic expertise**. Initial discussions on the purpose and direction of a network should take place when it is created. However, in order to grow and meet the needs of its members, the *raison d'être* and objectives of the network should be revisited periodically.

What kind of network are you?

SDC networks are all called networks, but they are at different stages and develop at different paces, depending on their respective dynamics. Some were created soon after the reorganisation and others have only recently become active. Factors such as membership, duration, etc. shape **networks** and determine whether they become more closely knit, i.e. develop in the direction of a **community**. The typology on the right can help you situate your network and guide your strategy, e.g. if you want to emphasise community building in your network, you can prioritise activities that allow the members to get to know each other and build common values and trust.

Typology: Where do you fit and where do you want to go?

Characteristics	Networks	Communities
Membership	Initially staff are mandated to be members by their respective managers	Defined by members; the primary driver for membership is own motivation; membership carries a stronger personal connection
Duration	Variable: one time or over time	Interacting over time
Size	Variable: can start small and grow or disappear quickly	Usually stable
Knowledge Role	Knowledge generation and extraction (scanning, filtering), places for learning and finding projects	Knowledge generation, training, shared work, task-focused
Process	Searches, queries, discussions, experiments	Planned, collaborative, structured knowledge sharing processes

Something in Between

How can a network be sustained or nurtured? The illustration below shows some elements of network nurturing. Although a network may need more nurturing when it is created or when significant changes happen, e.g. change in membership or when a controversy pits certain parts of a network against others, the nurturing requirement remains important throughout the network lifecycle and should stay on the radar of the Focal Point at all times. The assumption is that the **Focal Point should keep all issues in mind and address them together with network members**. Selected elements are described in more detail in bullets to the right of the illustration (*the main actors involved – in addition to the Focal Point - are specified in the brackets*).



- Issues and projects that bring an **added value** to members, i.e. are useful for their daily work, should be tackled. This also includes the value in terms of its contribution to members' professional development and the strengthening of the institution and its work (*All members*)
- An important **external factor** is at which point partners should be involved and under what conditions: it may make sense to wait for a network to 'solidify' internally before opening it up to partners (*Steering Group*)
- The network Focal Point and other network leaders, e.g. Steering Group members or co-Focal Point, should receive appropriate **training**, because dealing with global networks requires specific competencies in a quickly changing environment (*Management*)
- **Facilitation** includes facilitating online dialogues, f2f events and network development. This is vital in the early stages, but continues to be important, especially within an evolving institutional context. This is one mechanism to harness the energy of network members in the effort to establish an institutional niche that legitimises the network's influence on policy and practice (*Facilitator*)
- **Thematic and operational resources** refer to how the Focal Point runs the daily business based on available resources, i.e. does s/he do most activities him/herself or is s/he an orchestrator of a backstopping team? (*Management*)

Bernadinne Gadiaga from Burkina Faso is surprised that she is becoming an enthusiastic supporter of networks. Surprised because she was quite sceptical about the value of networks/communities as she often heard of networks being created and becoming obsolete again quickly. What seems to be different this time is that:

- **she feels that she can really get something out of the network and contribute to it**
As a National Programme Officer working for SDC, the thematic network she joined has given her the opportunity to build relationships with colleagues from other Cooperation Offices. Bernadinne has not only found a social 'home' with her SDC colleagues, but she also has new opportunities to learn from their experience. Being able to cross pollinate ideas and establish good practices together seems very useful to her and she is quite proud that she is seen as a reliable member who contributes quality content.
- **she is comfortable with the facilitation and feels that the network is developing, fulfilling its purpose and the possibility to exchange and learn from each other is being valued.**
Concrete tasks are being tackled together, e.g. she is part of a "learning project" which was created at the last face to face meeting of the network and together with other members from all continents she is advancing the project which will be discussed further at the next f2f.
- **she knows how to use the IT tools of the network and feels that there is a good balance between online interaction and moments where members can meet face to face.**
Although she trusts the Focal Point and network steering group to continue striking this balance well, she read up on the subject recently on the networking and learning website and is pleased to have acquired some theoretical background on this.

Surely there will come a moment where the network will be less active, but she is confident that when that time comes, the facilitator will be prepared to respond appropriately.

Key Resources

[Communities of Practice: The Institutionalisation of Informality](#) (SDC Learning and Networking Blog)

[FAO IMARK Module on Knowledge Sharing for Development \(Unit 3\)](#)

[DFID Facilitating Networks - a Good Practice Guide](#)