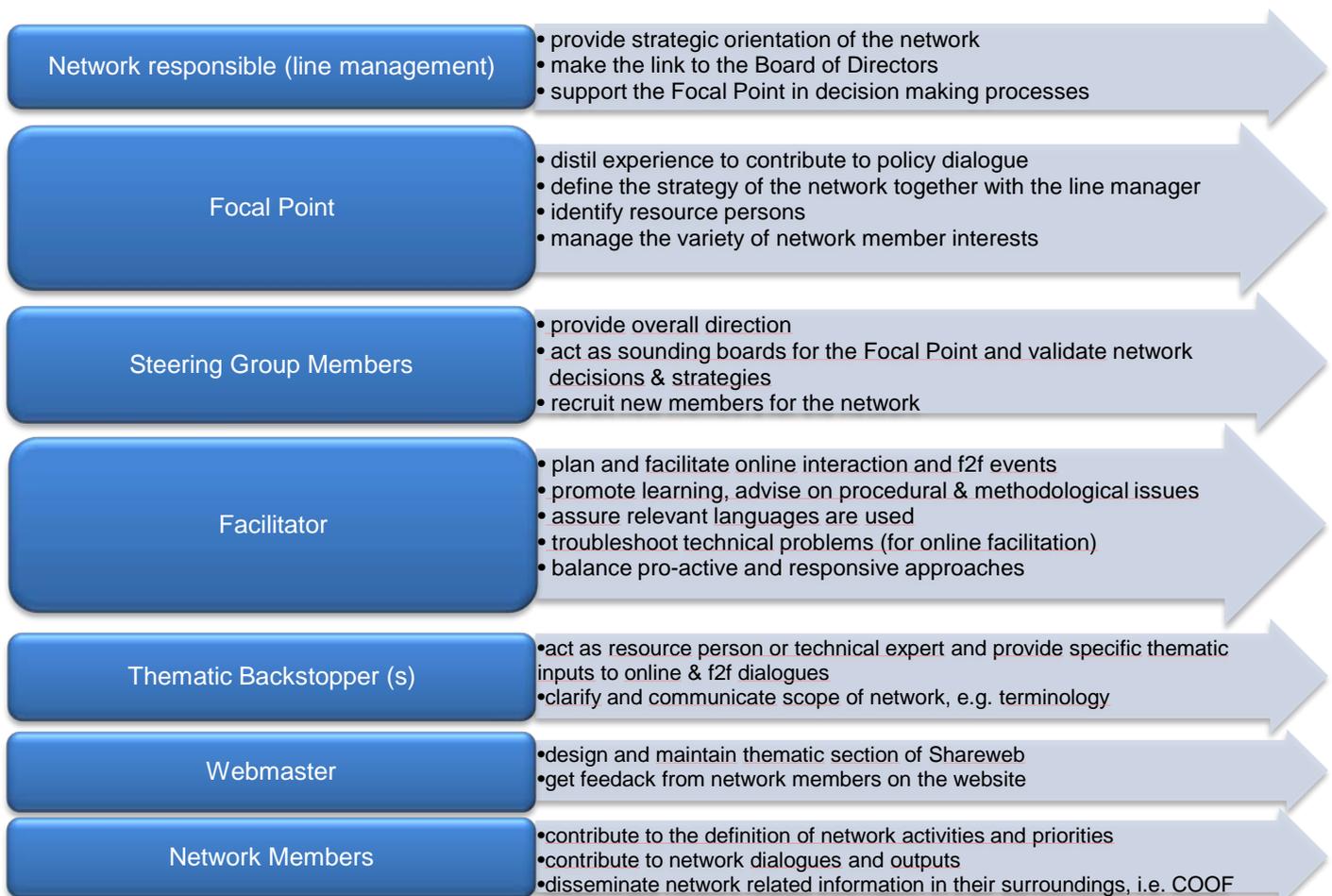# Good Practice: Roles and Responsibilities within Networks

How should we think about different roles within networks? In the guide on nurturing networks, we pointed out that networks are made up of people who are connected by a common thematic interest or goal. Although the roles that network members play may depend on who its members are, experience has shown that having clarity on roles and responsibilities within a network contributes positively to its development. Most SDC networks include a Focal Point, Steering Group members, a facilitator, thematic backstopper(s) and webmaster(s). Besides the Focal Point who is designated by the SDC management, the other roles can either be fulfilled by SDC staff and/or partners. This guide will examine the above mentioned roles more closely as well as assess cooperation modalities among them.

Why are roles important to consider? The clearer the roles and responsibilities are, the more **dynamic** and **decentralised** a network can become. A shared set of responsibilities among different people can contribute strongly to broadening the sense of **ownership**. The designation of roles and responsibilities is also closely linked to where the network stands in its **life cycle**, i.e. whether it is at the initiation stage, fully mature or being renewed (see the linking face to face events and online dialogues guide for more details on a network life cycle). While it may be advisable for the Focal Point to more tightly control a network in its initiation stage, roles can be distributed more broadly within the network once it has matured. Allocating specific roles to network members in the field can make the network **less head office driven**, e.g. by working with co-Focal Points in the Cooperation Offices. A (usually) less visible role in the context of SDC networks is that of the Head of Division who in most cases is the supervisor of the Focal Point of a thematic network.

What are the main roles and responsibilities within SDC networks? The institutional mandate of the SDC thematic networks is to **exchange knowledge and experience** in various thematic areas and upgrade the thematic **competence** of its members. As coordinator of a thematic network, the **Focal Point** has a leading role. Due to the open-endedness of additional network specific roles, the network Focal Points have the opportunity to design such roles themselves, based on the network development strategy and with the support of the ultimate responsible for a network (line management). Over the past years, the **roles** below have become general practice within SDC.

Role	Responsibilities
Network responsible (line management)	• provide strategic orientation of the network • make the link to the Board of Directors • support the Focal Point in decision making processes
Focal Point	• distil experience to contribute to policy dialogue • define the strategy of the network together with the line manager • identify resource persons • manage the variety of network member interests
Steering Group Members	• provide overall direction • act as sounding boards for the Focal Point and validate network decisions & strategies • recruit new members for the network
Facilitator	• plan and facilitate online interaction and f2f events • promote learning, advise on procedural & methodological issues • assure relevant languages are used • troubleshoot technical problems (for online facilitation) • balance pro-active and responsive approaches
Thematic Backstopper (s)	• act as resource person or technical expert and provide specific thematic inputs to online & f2f dialogues • clarify and communicate scope of network, e.g. terminology
Webmaster	• design and maintain thematic section of Shareweb • get feedback from network members on the website
Network Members	• contribute to the definition of network activities and priorities • contribute to network dialogues and outputs • disseminate network related information in their surroundings, i.e. COOF

What are the specific responsibilities of an SDC Focal Point? S/he is responsible for starting up and managing the thematic network s/he was assigned to. The circles in the illustration below further describe key responsibilities:

Some clarifications regarding the circles in the illustration to the right:

A Focal Point should prepare a network **workplan** in a participatory manner and in close coordination with his/her line manager. Then s/he should ensure it is implemented as planned.

Another key responsibility is to clarify other key **roles** within the network more clearly and define **collaboration modalities**, e.g. between the Focal Point and the facilitator or among the thematic backstoppers, the facilitator and the Focal Point.

A Focal Point should also provide **thematic advice** and ensure a coherent approach to network specific topics. In addition, promoting **learning** and offering **training** opportunities to network members are key responsibilities. Also, Focal Points can take on tasks related to **public relations**, for example through the maintenance of the Shareweb (website) of the network.

Finally, Focal Points should ensure the sharing of knowledge and learning within the network, for example through **identifying and disseminating good practices and lessons learnt**.
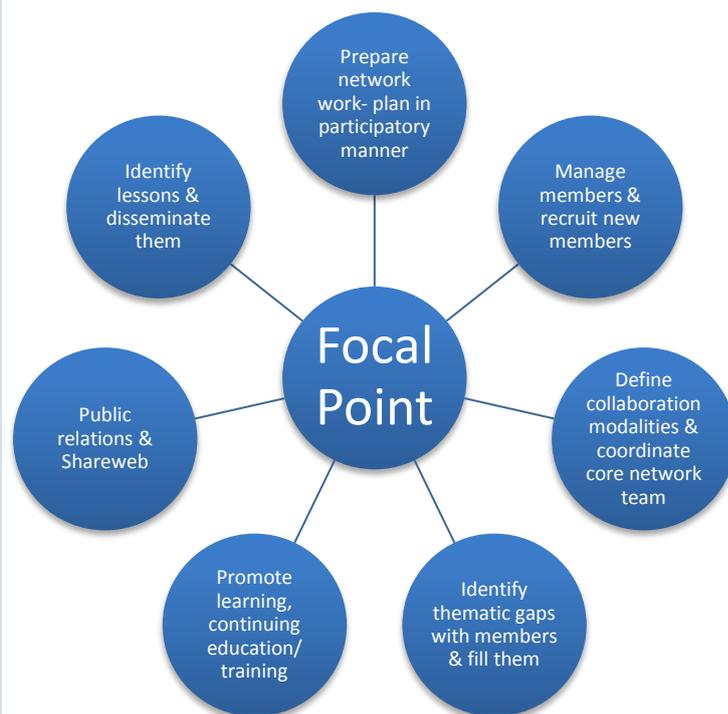
How can good collaboration be ensured? It is the role of the Focal Point to define the size of his/her team as well as coordinate the team that is often made up of the Steering Group, facilitator, thematic backstopper(s) and webmaster. While some Focal Points are strong multitaskers, taking on many of the above mentioned roles themselves and strongly relying on internal support for network related activities, others act more as orchestrators of their teams. Of course collaboration is easier with fewer people who are also in house, but collaboration does seem to also work well for the larger core teams of the network who receive external support. In the latter case, the Focal Point ensures good teamwork through defining tasks and activities as well as regular communication (online and f2f meetings). In some networks, the thematic backstopper(s) - who are usually SDC partners from non governmental organisations, research institutions or private consultants - also are webmasters.

Nguyen Thao is slowly becoming comfortable with her thematic backstopping role within an SDC network. She was invited to take this on by the network Focal Point about six months ago .Although she was flattered, she also had a lot of worries about how she could work effectively with the Focal Point, Steering Group and webmaster, all of whom are based in Switzerland while Thao works in the Cooperation Office in Hanoi.

At the beginning there was some confusion about who was responsible for producing which outputs and for responding to network members' questions. Thao raised this issue with the Focal Point, who recognised that things needed to be more clear. The Focal Point and Steering Group responded by:

➢ Making sure Thao was not only **invited to participate remotely in coordination meetings**, but also that meetings were held when she would be in her office and not have to leave very late in the evening
➢ Providing **prompt feedback** to Thao when she produced thematic items for the network newsletter, so there would not be undue delays just because she was not able to meet with Focal Point or steering group members face-to-face
➢ Lobbying Thao's supervisor in the COOF to ensure she was able to attend the network face-to-face meeting in Addis Abeba, thereby meeting a lot of network members directly and having a chance to demonstrate her expertise
➢ Supporting **regular voice meetings** (and starting with a video Skype meeting) between Thao and the network webmaster so they could together work out the optimal organisation of the Shareweb site and develop a smooth way of generating and adding new content

Now Thao can see that just because a group of people is widely distributed, it does not mean they cannot work well together, although she knows having a chance to meet face-to-face has been an important benefit.

Key Resources

DFID Facilitating Networks - a good practice guide

Launching Networks – Start-up Guide (SDC Learning and Networking Website)