

Chapter 12

Networking for Development: Cornerstone for Efficiency and Impact of ICT for Development Projects

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ABSTRACT

The chapter is about the importance of networking activities in building successful and sustainable international development cooperation (IDC) experiences. The reasoning starts from the consideration that, while society is going through a deep change process and is moving towards a network model (the so-called network society), international development cooperation still seems to adopt models and practices that were conceived for an industrial society. A brief review of the most common critics to IDC shows that increasing the level of networking and knowledge-sharing could contribute to effectively tackling the main inadequacies and challenges that IDC is facing. In turn, this would also help networking for development studies to find their place both in academic and in non-academic research and to be taken in greater account by policy makers. The concept of “networking for development”, introduced in the central part of the chapter, is analyzed from different angles: first by defining the actors that should be involved and the mechanisms that should be put in place, second by reasoning on the added value of networking and on the ways to demonstrate its potential impact on IDC, and finally by mapping the relevance of the issue in a some donors’ strategy.

INTRODUCTION: A GROWING NETWORKED SOCIETY

The concept of network, in all its facets, fully embodies the capacity to describe our present world as well as our perception of it. In both

developed and growing economies, we more and more use transport networks, rely on energy networks, communicate through ICT networks, collaborate in social networks, work in enterprises networks, and so on. Concepts such as “network society”, “information society” and “knowledge society”, are currently used by sociology, economics and other disciplines as a way to describe and

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understand our world and its dynamics built on connections, nodes, and communication fluxes; in a word, networks.

Among the vast literature that describes the raise of importance of networks in all spheres of our societies, we will refer to three fundamental authors, giving three different but convergent views on the raise of importance of networks in our societies: Manuel Castells, Yochai Benkler and Catherine Distler.

Manuel Castells, considered by many as the father of the concept of network society, claims that the new central role that information and knowledge have in all human activities with respect to the era priori to what he calls the “information revolution”, are defining the emergence of the “information society” and, in terms of economic systems, of the “networked information economy.” In four conferences given by Castells in Milan, Rome, New York and Boston, whose text are collected in the Italian “La città delle Reti” (Castells, 2004), the author presents his view on this “network societal paradigm”. He does so by focusing on three areas: education, enterprise, and urban planning. In these fields, the accent of policies and practices is moving from the actors (institutions and individuals) to the relations among the actors, and on the networking dynamics among them. Castells notes the importance of the inner multistakeholder nature of modern networks: not only networks are built among similar actors (networked enterprises, networked civil society, etc), but among actors of different nature (Castells, 2001), this adding complexity and presenting new challenges to social studies.

Yochai Benkler, one of the most relevant observers of economic networks in post-modern society, gives another important contribution to understand the “networks-driven” change that is taking place in society. In his “The wealth of networks”, Benkler claims that not only networks are substituting most of the basic structures of the industrial society, but also that the presence of these networks is changing the very inner nature

of human activities, impacting on concepts like property, time and space. He concludes that if we put the accent on a multiple number of relations taking place at the same time and no more on an actor or on a bilateral relation, the whole value system is affected and needs to be analyzed through different lenses (Benkler, 2006).

Catherine Distler, in her work with Albert Bressand focusing on social networks, claims that the focus of modern societies has moved, with strong differences depending on geographical and economical contexts, from the individual to a technology-mediated relationship between individuals and between the individual and the world. This is true “in relationships among people, like on the Internet; or relationships among companies, like on an electronic data interchange network; or relationships among nations, like when central banks use clearing and settlement networks. Most of what is called information technology today has already outgrown the name and is now relationship technology.” (Distler and Bressad, 1995).

What the three authors agree upon is that virtually every sphere of human activity, especially in developed countries but more and more in developing ones also, is today working through and relying on networks: economy - how could a multinational company live without international networking, or how could an SME survive without local networking?; finance - how would a working day at the London stock exchange look without the support of ICT networks?; entertainment and leisure - would it be the same without Youtube?; daily communication - how would your life be without email?; social movements - without the internet the strongest campaign against McDonald's would not have been fought; and to a lesser extent policy and citizens participation are based on technological, social and relational networks much more than ever.

When looking at this change process from a society based on individual actors who interact mainly bilaterally on a punctual basis to a model based on a multiplicity of actors who continuously

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