



# NETWORKING FOR GREATER IMPACT

A miniguide

## RESUME

We form networks and alliances to strengthen the impact of our work. Yet, half of all strategic alliances fail. Read what you can do to improve the management of your alliances and networks, and strengthen the impact of your joint work.

[Strategihuset](#)

## Networking and Alliances

### - A mini guide to effective alliance building

#### Why networks and alliances?

We form networks and alliances to access ideas and information, to generate and capitalize on the extra energy and power of numbers, and because decision makers often prefer to speak with several Ngo's at the same time, rather than with NGO's individually.


Unfortunately, work in networks and alliances are often not as easy as we might want it to be. It is cooperation between alliance members that makes the work worth the effort. It is the joint action, members' true participation, commitment and contributions that make cooperation in networks successful. But often this is where networks fail.

This 'miniguide' to alliance building is aimed at NGO staff working with or in alliance with other NGOs. Its purpose is to provide inspiration and specific ideas on how to improve the effectiveness of collaboration and the joy of working together.

#### What makes work in an alliance difficult?

There are several reasons why networks and alliance building is difficult. One of the most important is the way NGOs usually organize themselves:

In the typical NGO alliance or network all partners are equal. There is a joint leadership and equal ownership of the network. Tasks are defined by the members themselves. There are no pre-determined solutions to the problems members seek to solve together. And most solutions are to be invented along the way. As a result, there is a high risk that conflicts about 'what to do', 'how to do it' and 'by whom' arise. Particularly during the first phases of a cooperation.



Conflicts are not always bad, however. Conflicts can contribute to strengthen the joint identity and cooperation between partners if solved in ways that enable members to feel that their concerns and interests are taken into account. This requires that you invest time and resources into the network, and that the network has a coordinator who can facilitate cooperation between its members.

Below is a description of the characteristics of a good network, and what you can do to strengthen the advocacy networks and alliances that you are part of.

We don't distinguish between 'networks', 'alliances', platforms or any of the other terminologies used to describe a cluster of cooperating organizations. Although the terminologies do reflect differences in the scope and depth of cooperation, the dynamics that determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the cooperation remains the same. It is these dynamics and how to promote them, that is the focus of this guideline.

#### What makes a good network?

A good network or a good alliance is first and foremost able to exploit all the members' resources effectively to achieve a common goal. Networking is most effective when members work separately, but together towards the same goal, and within the same strategy and action plan. Networking is best when members are using the coordinator to stimulate creativity, share ideas and support each other, so that together they can develop new ideas.

Efficiency is reduced when the coordinator or the 'Alliance Secretariat' becomes synonymous with the network, and the coordinator gets more and more operational. This is when the cost of the network increases, and more staff and more money to operate the network is needed.

A network's ability to exploit members' resources effectively depends upon 3 separate characteristics:

- Its ability to stimulate the participation of members and utilize the knowledge and resources of each member.
- Its ability to unite its members and strengthen opportunities for joint influence

- Its ability to create added value to the work of Members



Question and indicators that can help you assess the effectiveness of your network on those 3 parameters are described in the table below.

Ability to stimulate the participation of members	Ability to unite members and strengthen opportunities for joint influence	Ability to create added value to the work of Members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How and with what resources do members participate?</li> <li>▪ How is trust and relations built and maintained between members?</li> <li>▪ How is the network managed?</li> <li>• What is the decision-making structure?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the network have a common vision and mission that unites its members? Does everybody understand it the same way?</li> <li>• How is communication and knowledge sharing among the members ensured?</li> <li>• How do members utilize and manage their differences constructively?</li> <li>• How are conflicts managed and resolved?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The quality of analysis and understanding of the common problems</li> <li>• The access to decision makers</li> <li>• The ability to act simultaneously and coordinated</li> <li>• The opportunity to discuss alternative solutions and reach consensus</li> </ul>

*Many organizations join networks, without knowing the network's objective or without considering what they want to achieve and how they can contribute to the joint work. Thus, before discussing how the efficiency of our networks can be improved, let us consider the relevant questions to ask before joining the network.*

### Questions to consider before joining a network

Which networks should we choose and who should we work with? We often choose to work with likeminded organizations – those that are similar to us. Such a cooperation is often straight forward and doesn't require a lot of investment into 'getting to know the others'. Yet, it prevents us from enlarging and diversifying our network – and thereby from getting other means to access decision makers and reach our goals.

Sometimes, we join networks because the organizations we use to cooperate with do, and because we won't miss important information.

Yet, we can enhance the benefits of cooperation if we start by considering what resources we can contribute to the network, what we want to achieve, and what we seek from our partners.

## 5 questions to consider before joining a network.

### 1. *What do we want to achieve?*

What do we want to achieve and how can an alliance or a network help us reach our goal?

Too often, we join networks out of fear of not accessing the right information or being excluded from 'something'. Yet, we forget to ask ourselves what we want to achieve through the network. The result is, that we risk wasting time on networks that are not relevant to our work. Yet, clarity about the goal and purpose of our participation enables us to be explicit and honest about our priorities and interests.

### 2. *How can we contribute to the network?*

How can we contribute? A network is primarily the sum of resources we all bring into it. Clarifying our own resources enables us to make realistic commitments to the network and avoid disappointing other members when commitments are not fulfilled. Before joining a network, we may therefore want to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What are our strengths in advocacy work? Is it in documentation, popular mobilization, political contacts and lobbying, email campaigns or something else?
- What activities, contacts and relationships can we contribute with in the network?
- How much time and what human resources can we contribute?

If we know the answer to these questions, it is easier to look for allies and partners who can contribute with elements to our campaign that supplements our own expertise.



### 3. *Which competencies are we looking for?*

What are the missing competencies and resources that may help us achieve our goal? Joining a network of organizations that resemble our own may be straight forward. However, sometimes greater effect is achieved by identifying partners that can complement our own resources and capacities and give us access to decision makers that are otherwise out of reach to us.

Identify partners that can help us influence the political, economic, and cultural actors that impacts our goal or prevent us from reaching it; and who possess capacities that we do not possess ourselves.

### 4. *What are our 'red lines'?*

Many organizations find that working in networks generates many questions about themselves: their self-understanding, their policies, and procedures. Before the 'usual way of doing things' is challenged by working with other organizations that tend to do something else, it might be a good idea to clarify where we are willing to compromise and where we are not - and why. If we know this, if we are aware of our 'red lines', it is much easier to participate constructively in the negotiations that are a part of any networking.

### 5. *What is our plan to leave?*

Does our network still fulfill our organizational needs? Being member of a network does not mean that membership should be forever. Some networks may be long-term. Other networks exist to fulfill a specific, time-bound purpose. Before we join a network, it may be a good idea to identify the criteria that may make us want to leave the network again

## How do we create a good network?

How do we create a good network? Building trust, identifying common interests, and clarifying rules and procedures for decision making are important ingredients indeed, but not the only ones. Below is a 'check-list' of issues we may want to consider to build or strengthen our network or alliance, once we have clarified what we want to achieve ourselves.



### Clarify vision and goal

It is surprising how often the vision and goal of an alliance or network remains unclear to its members. However, the clearer the aim, the easier it is to get the support of all members. A clear goal enables us to move in the same direction and rally behind the same objective.

### Formulate clear procedures for knowledge sharing and communication.

Clear communication is a precondition if all members are to feel part of and ownership to a network. On the other hand, too much and too frequent communication is tiresome and may destroy the motivation of members to absorb the information they get. Therefore, it is important to agree on what kind of information we need to share and how often.

Prepare meeting minutes that clearly indicates the decisions made, who is responsible for their execution and when. This facilitates execution of decisions in between meetings.

Use cloud computing – e.g. drop box - to create a common document database, so all members can always keep up with what is happening in the network and the content of the latest documents. It is free and only requires that you create a user account.

### Create trust and positive working relationships.

Networks are based on personal relationships between its members. And good relationship depends on trust.

In professional relationships trust is often based on confidence in the other person's skills or on a mandate or a written contract. Trust can also be based on a shared identity and experience – for instance related to the implementation of a successful advocacy campaign.

Trust is usually created when we feel that our needs and interests are recognized by the person(s) we cooperate with and that our expectations are met. Therefore, recognizing our joint interests and seeking to accommodate the concerns, needs and contributions of everybody is vital, when we aim to build or maintain a network.

Good communication by email may be enough to sustain trust, but personal encounters are often necessary if we want the relationship and trust to grow.

### Clarify the contribution of each member.

Don't ask what the network can do for you but what you can do for your network. Many organizations tend to ignore the fact that it is the contribution of each member, that makes a network succeed. There are many ways to contribute to a network or an alliance. Time, knowledge, documentation, contacts, and access to decision-makers are some of the most important means of contributing to a network.

There are many approaches to advocacy too. Some organizations specialize in documentation, while others are good at popular mobilization. Identify the special skills that each member has and discuss how they can be used in the joint work. Clarify in advance how much (time) each member can contribute. If the network is missing one or more advocacy skills, try to recruit members with these skills.

### **Leave space for differences and joint decision making**

Making one-sided demands is rarely the best way to create a dynamic network. Make room for differences, joint or rotating leadership and equal participation in planning and decision making processes.

A commonly used way of ensuring joint decision making is to assign the following responsibilities to the different units in a network:

- The joint forum (all) approves the strategy and the action plan of the network.
- The Steering committee supervises and advises the coordinator and the chair on a regular basis
- The Chair is the spokesperson for the network and overall responsible for the implementation of the action plan and strategy
- The coordinator facilitates the cooperation.

### **Employ or appoint a coordinator.**

A coordinator is not just an administrator. Coordinating a network can almost be likened to lead a group - just the coordinator has no mandate to lead. A good coordinator is particularly important in alliances, where members need to agree on joint goals, strategies and responsibilities for decision making and execution.

The coordinator should be able to keep himself updated about member organizations' development, needs, concerns and interests. He or she must facilitate the creation of trade-offs between members, stimulate collaboration and new common ideas, and must communicate decisions clearly and quickly.

The ideal coordinator often has management experience or experience in coordinating networks of the past. Experience in negotiating and analyzing others' needs and interests, is an asset too.

### **Literature for further reading:**

- Steven Covey: The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People
- Steve Steinhilber: Strategic Alliances, Harvard Business Press