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Evaluating international social-change networks: a conceptual framework for a participatory approach

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International networks for social change are growing in number and influence. While they need to be able to assess the extent to which they achieve their purpose and determine ways in which to be more effective, conventional evaluation methods are not designed for such complex organisational forms, or for the diverse kinds of activity to which they are characteristically dedicated. Building on an earlier version of their paper, the authors present a set of principles and participatory approaches that are more appropriate to the task of evaluating such networks.

KEY WORDS: Civil Society; Methods

Introduction

During the 1990s, networks became an increasingly important means of social synergy and for some a central characteristic of the world today.[1] By 2000, it was calculated that there were 20,000 transnational civic networks active on the global stage (Edwards and Gaventa 2001). These formal or informal structures bring together diverse social actors to enable them actively to pursue common goals. In a globalising world with increasingly effective means of communication, a network offers unique political and organisational potential. Social-change networks can influence economic, political, and cultural structures and relations in ways that are impossible for individual actors. In these networks, the members are autonomous organisations—usually NGOs or community-based organisations (CBOs)—and sometimes individuals. Furthermore, when the network is international, its aims and activities reflect the heterogeneous contexts represented by its members.

An international social-change network typically performs a combination of two or more of the following functions.[2]

- Filtering, processing, and *managing knowledge* for the members.
- *Promoting dialogue, exchange, and learning* among members.
- *Shaping the agenda* by amplifying little-known or little-understood ideas for the public.
- *Convening* organisations or people.
- *Facilitating action* by members and addressing global problems through knowledge of their local, national, and regional contexts.

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- *Building community* by promoting and sustaining the values and standards of the group of individuals or organisations within it.
- *Mobilising and rationalising the use of resources* for members to carry out their activities.
- *Strengthening international consciousness*, commitment, and solidarity.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to what networks can do and accomplish:

> *So although networks have become much more important to the way we live, we do not live in a world dominated by networks. Networks are extraordinary ways of organising knowledge, co-operation and exchange. They are far more effective means of sharing learning than hierarchies and generally better at adapting to change. But they remain poor at mobilising resources, sustaining themselves through hard times, generating surpluses, organising commitments, or playing games of power. This is why, for example, the interesting feature of the anti-globalisation movement is its weakness not its strength, and why Al-Qaeda can inflict huge damage but cannot create.* (Mulgan 2004: 53)

Therefore, in evaluating an international social-change network, stakeholders and evaluators alike face unique challenges in assessing its functioning and achievements. First, the context in which such networks operate is a globalising world of dynamic, complex, open environments. However, demands on members and the network itself to change course, often dramatically and at short notice, are increasingly overridden by planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes and procedures. In these circumstances, conventional means for evaluating operational effectiveness and efficiency and progress towards goals are not simply difficult but often useless.

Second, an international social-change network is loosely organised and non-hierarchical, with authority and responsibility flowing from and around autonomous members. Accountability is highly diffuse in terms of what happens, what is achieved, and by whom. Within the network, all but a few accountabilities constantly shift. This is further complicated because networks share accountability for many actions with external allies.

Third, attribution of impact presents problems in all endeavours to bring about social change, but especially so in international social-change networks. Their political purpose is to influence the structure, relations, and exercise of power, from the national level (and sometimes the local) to the global level. Such achievements rarely are attributable solely to the activities of the network. Usually they will be the product of a broad effort undertaken with other social actors. Frequently, results will be collateral and unintentional. Therefore, establishing reliable links of cause and effect between a network's activities and the political results that it aims to achieve is of another order of attribution than that faced by the organisations that comprise its membership, or for evaluators accustomed to assessing other types of organisation.

The operational complexity of an international social-change network

All social-change organisations operate in complex, open, and dynamic systems. For an international network, a characteristically voluntary and diverse membership and geographical spread multiply the complexity, uncertainty, and unpredictability. Thus, the management of these types of networks is special.[3]

Participation is central to the uniqueness of networks. As one group of network thinkers say, 'We have a profound belief that participation is at the core of what makes a network different to other organisational/process forms' (Church *et al.* 2002:7). Working solely from these criteria of participation, Table 1 highlights the differences between networks and other organisational types.

Table 1: Participation in different types of organisation

	Networks	NGOs	Membership organisations*
Who?	Both organisations and individuals can participate in networks. But the participants in networks are characterised by their diversity, including geographical diversity, as well as cultural, lingual, and at times also ideological diversity.	Only individuals participate in NGOs, and they are culturally and ideologically relatively homogeneous.	Individuals who want to be members join voluntarily because of a common interest.
How?	The way actors participate in networks is very diverse, ranging from voting in elections to participating in campaigns. Participation in networks is sporadic; at times very intensive, at times non-existent. Independent and autonomous social actors have equal but limited authority and responsibilities in the network.	Participation in NGOs is regular, often daily, and more regulated, usually involving fixed, full-time employment relationships.	Membership has strictly defined responsibilities to the organisation, and, when large, is organised into chapters. Regular meetings and group activities. Participation of members is similar in intensity and frequency. Participation is an 'extracurricular' activity.
Why?	Participation in networks occurs for a variety of reasons, including combining forces to make a stronger statement, legitimacy, learning, potential access to funds, and the pooling of resources.	Participation in an NGO is usually based on personal reasons of self-interest. Reasons include sharing the philosophy and ideals of the NGO, making a living, and other personal benefits. Career-oriented employment.	Common interest in a limited or specific problem or purpose to which they want to contribute and benefit.
For how long?	A network may cease to exist once it reaches its goals, or the goals may be so broad and far-reaching that there is no reason for it ever to stop existing. Participation in a network will last as long as the members remain committed.	Employee–employer contracts	Until the individual loses interest in the problem or purpose.

*From co-operatives, professional associations, and unions to fisherfolk and peasant leagues.
Source: Ricardo Wilson-Grau and Fe Evelyn Garcia.

The motivations of the principal actors—the members—in joining a network are very varied. Some may be more interested in receiving information or the tools that it generates, while others join for the political spaces and relationships that a network offers. Many but perhaps not all may wish to be institutionally associated with the common, larger purpose or community. In situations of social or political conflict, the motivation may be the simple need for protection. Their conviction that they cannot achieve meaningful political objectives by working alone is what drives some network members. In sum, the strength and sustainability of a network

depends to a significant extent on its usefulness to its members, who may very well have different interests and needs in belonging to the network.

Another unique feature is that the principal actors in the network are autonomous organisations, and the individuals that participate on their behalf are not employees or managers, as is the case in other types of organisation. Thus, networks operate more through facilitation and co-operation around the activities of its organisational components than by directing programmes and executing projects. The management bodies of a network generally consist of a general assembly, a board of directors, and a secretariat. Nonetheless, the structure of a network is not hierarchical; commonly, the secretariat assumes responsibilities for communication, co-ordination, and organisation to catalyse and carry out activities. In other words, the scope of authority is restricted in a network. Procedures for command and control that are common to NGOs, grassroots groups, corporations, government bodies, professional associations, and other forms of organisation rarely work in a network. Consequently, a network requires different evaluation processes.

A conceptual framework for the functioning of a network

For the functioning of a network, there are four qualities, crossed by three operational dimensions, to take into account. The *qualities* (the first three of which are based on Church *et al.* 2002) are the following.

- **Democracy:** In addition to being a recognised value, democratic management is a necessity in a network. Success depends on equity in the relations and exercise of power within the network. The members are autonomous organisations. In a network, the members' participation in taking a decision is the best guarantee that the decision will be implemented.
- **Diversity:** A unique strength of a network resides in the variety of its membership because of their distinct social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. Part of the genius of this organisational form is that its members share common values and a collective purpose, but beyond that they have different conceptions and strategies to achieve change. The challenge is to enable each one of these heterogeneous actors to make a creative and constructive contribution.
- **Dynamism:** The network promotes and is nourished by the enthusiasm and energy characteristic of a voluntary membership. Its dynamism depends on how well the network is able to balance the diverse contributions of members with joint, sustained collaboration. For this, the leadership must stimulate and strengthen democratic internal processes, the active participation of all members, and effective work in alliances. A network must enhance interaction between its members. It facilitates rather than directs innovative proposals for action.
- **Performance:** The relationships between organisations and individuals engaged in purposeful action characterise a network. The better the network operates, the better the quality of the interaction.

These four quality criteria run through three sets of *operational dimensions* that contain the six principal components of a network's functioning.

Political purpose and strategies

This is the arena in which the network nurtures consensus among its membership on its reason for being, and the best avenues to follow in order to fulfil that purpose. The political purpose answers the questions: What social change does the network aim to achieve? What values motivate its members? For other types of organisation, the answers are in their 'mission statement' or 'institutional objectives'.

The strategies refer to the approaches that the network employs to achieve its political purpose: how does the network propose to generate results that will fulfil its purpose? Since an international network is composed of organisations that are themselves rooted in the reality of different countries, the strategies are necessarily of a general nature. Nonetheless, the relevance (or not) of the strategies that a network develops is one of the elements that determines whether its activities will have impact.

Organisation and management

A network operationalises its strategies through systematic, continual processes that produce results on different levels and of varying importance, all of course to fulfil its purpose. Sometimes referred to by terms such as 'lines of action' or 'tactics', they are similar to programmes and projects in other kinds of organisation. Responsibility for the activities is more dispersed than, for example, in an NGO. The organisational units—the members individually or collectively, as well as the secretariat—operate with higher degrees of autonomy than do departments and employees. There are four components to organisation and management in a network: structure, operational management, institutional capacity, and communication.

Within a network **structure**, instead of an executive office there is a body whose function is co-ordination and facilitation. This entity steers the network's strategies and actions, articulating them with the activities of individual members. The operation of this secretariat may include projects. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that the local activities, and the changes that they bring about, are principally the responsibility of the individual members.

In contrast to other types of organisation, in a network **operational management** focuses on enhancing collective, democratic, horizontal, and diverse activities of members who are rooted in specific local realities. Management is guided by the common purpose, which is the basis for trust and gives coherence to the multiple activities. Consequently, the secretariat, as the key component of operational management for the network, generally co-ordinates more than it administers programmes.

As in any organisation, the **institutional capacity** of a network depends to some extent on the people in positions of responsibility. In addition, the institutional capacity of a network relies on the capacity of its members. Decision makers should be qualified for their specific tasks, just as the material and financial resources should be appropriate for the activities of the network. Consequently, a network strives to empower and strengthen its members through training, exchange of information, and mutual support. It develops and takes advantage of the resources and energy of all its organisational components, thus multiplying and compounding the effect of individual efforts.

For every social organisation, **communication** is important; in a network, it is vital. A network is essentially a complex of human relations, and they determine its success. Due to its very character, a network promotes social mobilisation, generates technical, political, and financial support, and involves external actors. Therefore, it must create complementarity, synergy, and strategic alliances. Consequently, communication is as much an organisational and management function as it is one of information exchange. Furthermore, an international network is intercultural, requiring understanding across great distances and social and cultural differences. For all these reasons, the communication function is central to success or failure in a network.

Leadership and participation

For a network, everything related to leadership and participation is as important as are its political purpose, strategies, organisation, and management, because democracy, diversity,

and dynamism are intrinsic to its nature. A network aims to be more than an association of like-minded organisations. Common agreement on the strategies is as important as selecting the right strategies. Similarly, the network action should be more than the sum of the individual activities of its members. To achieve this 'added value', decision-making processes must be characterised by a democratic leadership and the active involvement of the members. Also, there must be many opportunities for all members to participate in the activities of the network and collaborate with each other. More concretely:

- Decision making requires as much agreement about *who* should participate in *which* decisions as it does broad participation in making specific decisions.
- The participation of those who make up a network is fundamental for its sustenance and endurance; it is a source of enrichment and strengthens the network. Effective participation depends on a mix of different factors—the opportunities, funding, time available, interest, commitment, and above all trust.
- Co-ordination is basic to a healthy network that generates synergy. This depends heavily on a leadership that enhances internal management and its presence and influence in the wider world.

Assessing a network's qualities – from evaluation indicators to organisational strengths and weaknesses

Every evaluator will have his or her own approach to assessment. We will share with you an instrument that we have found helpful. It is a matrix with evaluation criteria that seek to be exhaustive (see Table 2). That is, we suggest that these 56 indicators cover all aspects of a network that potentially should be considered in an evaluation. We have tried to express them in plain English. The precise meaning of the words, however, will no doubt vary from network to network and person to person. Furthermore, individual evaluators and each network should decide if they require additional indicators, and evaluators should take care to customise the wording.

We have placed the criteria in the quality/operational quadrants where they most appear to belong. Each of the criteria may also be relevant for another quality criterion or a different operational dimension. This explains why similar indicators are in different quadrants. Gender equity appears explicitly in three indicators and indirectly in several others. Arguably, however, the principle of gender equity should be present in virtually all the indicators.

Once you have agreement on the indicators and where they go in the matrix, the matrix may be used in different ways. For example, Rick Davies suggests that the indicators can be used as a menu of potentially relevant performance attributes to which network participants can respond:

- Which do they think are most-to-least important (as objectives)?
- Which are more 'means' and which are more 'ends'?
- Which do they think are most-to-least present in the existing network (or present versus absent)?
- Which of these attributes best defines the difference between this and other networks that they are or have been participating in?

These can be compared with the evaluators' own (or another key stakeholder's) theory of the network, expressed in answers to the same questions.[4]

There is one way, however, that the matrix should *not* be used: it should not be used mechanically. The indicators will not work as a checklist, for example. The relative importance of each

Table 2: Quality criteria and operational dimensions

		OPERATIONAL DIMENSIONS		
		Political purpose and strategies	**Organisation and management**	**Leadership and participation**
QUALITY CRITERIA	**Democracy**	1. All members share vision and mission. 2. Individual members have a sense of ownership of the network 3. Gender equity is a shared value of all members.	19. The members contribute and have equitable access to the resources (people, funds, goods and services) and reputation of the network. 20. The structure is neither hierarchical nor gender-biased.	39. The network members consider the decision-making process is just. inclusive and effective. 40. All the network members have the opportunity to collaborate in activities that make best use of their skills and contribution. 41. The network emphasises building relationships of trust internally and externally.
	Diversity	4. The diversity of members is appropriate for the network's purpose and strategies. 5. The strategies of the network reflect the range of political positions in the network.	21. The range of opinions and ideas of the members about what the network should do have a place in the activities of the network. 22. The human and financial base of the network is sufficiently broad to avoid the dependence of many members or individuals on a few. 23. Conflicts do not paralyse the network's capacity to act.	42. Significant numbers of the network members contribute to the implementation of the strategies. 43. Members interact creatively, constructively, and in a gender-sensitive manner. Members are enriched by differences.
	Dynamism	6. There is a balance between strategic reflection (are we doing the right thing?) and action (are we doing it right?). 7. Goals are pursued by seizing the opportunities and adjusting to obstacles without losing sight of the political purpose. 8. Achievements serve as a basis for reformulating the strategies.	24. The division of responsibility and authority between the Council, the secretariat, and national member organisations changes with the circumstances. 25 The structure is light, facilitative, and supportive. The rules are minimal. 26. The resources of the network expand and contract, quantitatively and qualitatively, according to the strategic needs. 27. Organisational culture is in tune with network principles – the network 'thinks' and 'acts' as a network, not as an institution.	44. The members take initiative and influence the development of the network. 45. The members effectively co-ordinate their activities. 46. The network co-ordinates effectively with other networks on common action issues. 47. All the members contribute to and benefit from organic and political outcomes. 48. The operational outputs of the network are more than the sum of the activities of the individual members.

(*Continued*)

Table 2: *Continued*

		OPERATIONAL DIMENSIONS		
		Political purpose and strategies	**Organisation and management**	**Leadership and participation**
QUALITY CRITERIA	**Effectiveness**	9. The network focuses on the essential—fulfilling its political purpose. 10. The network pursues clearly defined impact—structural, long-term political changes. 11. The strategies are based on an up-to-date analysis of the environment in which the network operates nationally and internationally. 12. The strategies and lines of action are coherent with the social changes that the network seeks. 13. The network has a clear organisational identity for members and for external actors. 14. The network achieves organic and political outcomes at the national and international levels. 15. The balance between organic and political outcomes corresponds to the purpose and strategies of the network. 16. The network is a key player in the work to achieve structural, long-term change. 17. The division of responsibility and authority between the Council, the secretariat, and national member organisations works. 18. Work is planned, monitored, and evaluated.	28. The network is autonomous—it decides on and defines its own paths. 29. Policies on how the network should and should not function are followed. 30. The council members' qualifications correspond to the requirements of the position that they hold. 31. The assets—material or immaterial—are appropriate for the requirements of the strategic lines of action. 32. The financial function—raising, spending, and accounting for money—is well structured. 33. The network pursues a financial strategy and adequately manages its financial resources. 34. The network has a communication strategy designed to promote social mobilisation, generate technical, political, and financial support, and involve external actors. 35. Internal and external communication is effective. 36. The network understands what qualities and skills are needed in the co-ordinating function, and the qualifications of the staff of the secretariat are suited to their responsibilities. 37. People working in the network are able to apply their skills and qualities fully. 38. The network learns from everyone's experience; learning is a basis for innovation and improved performance.	49. The different components of the network—Council, secretariat, and members—are accountable to one another and to external stakeholders. 50. Members participate as much as they desire in decision-making processes that are solid and generate trust. 51. There is sufficient opportunity to participate in the network's activities, and their contribution is recognised. 52. Through the network, the members become more competent and committed human-rights protagonists. 53. The leadership successfully dialogues and negotiates with other social actors in building alliances that contribute to the implementation of the lines of action. 54. Alliances lead to the formulation of new strategies. 55. Leadership combines co-ordination, facilitation, and new ideas, and encourages innovation and focus. 56. Leadership is not vested solely in the co-ordination function but emerges around the network where appropriate to activities or issues

Source: Ricardo Wilson-Grau and Martha Nuñez, Marcie Mersky, and Fe Evelyn Garcia, with suggestions from Madeline Church and P.A. Kiriwandeniya.

criterion will vary from one network to another. The combinations of weaknesses will have different significance for one network compared with another.

Table 3 is an example of how we have used the matrix. Once there is agreement over the content of the matrix, we convert the indicators into a questionnaire, as shown. We send it to all stakeholders, both internal (members, secretariat staff) and external (donors, allies). We tabulate their answers and analyse them qualitatively and quantitatively in the light of our review of the network's written files. We take into account how they cluster numerically—the highs and the lows—and the comments that we receive in the last column. We make decisions about what score we will consider represents a strength, and what constitutes a weakness worth worrying about. For instance, in one evaluation, when the average score was higher than 4.0, or was in the top 15 per cent, and the indicator also received a favourable comment, we considered it a strength. Those that scored below 1.0 or were in the bottom 15 per cent and that received a negative comment in the last column were considered a weakness.

Most importantly, how to use the matrix is a decision that must be made on a network-by-network basis. For instance, one team of evaluators that used this matrix highlighted the network's 'identity' as a fifth quality criterion, because the stakeholders considered the issue so important at that moment in the network's development (Bijlmakers and Laterveer 2004). In sum, there is no set formula; the matrix must be applied creatively.

Equally important, we do not rely solely on answers to the questionnaire. In face-to-face, telephone, or e-mail interviews with key stakeholders, we explore the indicators that scored as strengths and those that scored as weaknesses until we feel we understand the collective opinion. We find that the indicators will tend to cluster into areas of strengths and weaknesses. These serve to refine further our evaluation questions, or sometimes we may already begin to draw conclusions and formulate recommendations. Also, the results serve as points for discussion in an evaluation workshop. Or you can simply propose that stakeholders discuss how to build on the strengths that you have identified and overcome the weaknesses. This creates a basis for them to venture into making conclusions and recommendations on the network's functioning.

Table 3: A sample questionnaire

		To what extent does the statement in the second column characterise the network?						**If you consider this is a special strength, explain why. On the other hand, if it is a weakness that the network should devote time and energy to solving, also explain why.**
		Max <<<<<<<<>>>>> Min						
	Quality indicators	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**	
	Political purpose and strategies							
1	**All members share the vision and mission.**							

Assessing results in an international social-change network

A network's reason for being is to contribute to change. Therefore, it is of fundamental importance for a network to identify and comprehend both its internal and external achievements. There are four types of achievement for an international social-change network:

- **Operational outputs**: the products and services that are an immediate result of the activity of the network.
- **Organic outcomes:** the changes in the behaviour, relationships, or actions of the network's members that strengthen and develop their collective capacity to achieve the network's political purpose. The changes are a result—partially or fully, intentional or not—of the activities of the network.
- **Political outcomes:** these are changes in the behaviour, relationships, or actions of individuals, groups, or organisations outside the network that are involved in activities related to the network's political purpose. The changes are a result—partially or fully, intentional or not—of the activities of the network.
- **Impact:** long-term changes in the relations and exercise of power in society as expressed in the political purpose of the network.

Operational outputs are common to most types of organisation and therefore not exceptional. The 'outcomes', however, require more explanation, especially since we propose that the evaluation focus on them as the bridge between the activities, services, and products of a network and the impact that it seeks to achieve. Since social change is ultimately brought about by social actors working within and influenced by the network, we use the concept developed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), in which the core idea is that outcomes are changes in their behaviour, actions, and relationships (Earl *et al.* 2001).

Organic outcomes refer to the changes in the members and staff of the network. One of the principal results, of great validity and importance, is the network's existence and permanence over time. We know that this is an unconventional criterion for evaluating results. A for-profit business can rarely justify itself by the number of employees whom it hires; its margin of profit and return on investment is the principal measurement of success. Sometimes the major achievement of a government may be simply to have finished its term of office, but usually its results are evaluated in terms of the quantity and nature of its contribution to the common good. An NGO does not exist to exist; the NGO must benefit other people.

Networks, however, are both a means to an end and an end in themselves. Admittedly, this is an inherent contradiction but also a challenge: 'There is a tendency for networks to focus not on tangible impacts, but rather simply on the exercise of validating their own existence' (Riles 2001, cited in Perkin 2005:12). Nonetheless, if the network functions effectively and efficiently, it strengthens and develops the web of relationships that are at its core. That is, the existence of the network is an interactive, innovative *process* with added value for its members. The concept of organic outcomes resolves this dilemma of ends and means. The evaluation focuses on the changes in behaviour, relationships, or actions of the members of the network themselves, as they reinforce each other and advance together with joint strategies to achieve their common purpose.

Ultimately, the success of a network depends on its external achievements, the end results, or enduring, structural **impact** in society. Impact is, at the end of the day, a network's political reason for being. Since a network is an association with the aim of changing relations of power and made up of diverse national organisations with their own missions and objectives, the problems in evaluating impact are double-edged. First, how do you measure changes in the structure and relations of power in societies characterised by complex, dynamic, and

open systems? Specifically, these changes occur in heterogeneous contexts, are indefinite in time, and depend on the actions and decisions of many more actors than the members of the network. Second, when there *is* a change that represents impact, who can assume credit for the change? Who is accountable for what changes (and does not change), and to whom and how?

What we have found most useful is to focus on **political outcomes**, because social actors bring about the long-term changes in the relations and exercise of power in society. Thus, the evaluator seeks to identify the verifiable changes in what it is that individuals, groups, or organisations do that relate to the political purpose of the network. For example, here are three evaluation questions designed to identify political outcomes to which a network contributed:

- **Human-rights network:** In 1998–2004, what were the verifiable changes in the behaviour, relationships, or actions of Asian national governments, the UN Human Rights Commission, or its members that resolve cases of involuntary disappearances, prevent recurrence, and end impunity in Asia?
- **Development network:** Since 1999, what changes can you identify in the behaviour, relationships, or actions of transnational corporations or their executives, or of civil-society actors that influence them, that had potentially positive impact on sustainable community development in Africa?
- **Environmental network:** In the past five years, what changes can you identify in the behaviour, relationships, or actions of CSOs or leaders that enhance people's environmental security?

Organic and political outcomes must be specific and verifiable. The formulation of outcomes that have been achieved should be sufficiently concise and concrete so that someone outside the network will be able to appreciate and verify them.[5] Outcomes must describe (although not explain) what changed, who changed, when, how, and where as specifically as possible. Quantitative and qualitative aspects of the outcome should be specified.

When two or more people work together to identify and formulate outcomes, there will generally be two or more different perspectives and sets of interests involved. They are challenged to achieve consensus without resorting to agreeing on the lowest common denominator. Thus, writing clear outcomes requires enough time and mastery of the language to craft solid results in a language that all readers can readily understand. To complicate the challenge, the participants in a network do not always use the same language; and of course even when they do, the vocabulary that they use may have different meaning even among the staff and members.

We have found, therefore, that in international networks the identification and formulation of outcomes to which they have contributed is best done in two stages. First, we ask stakeholders to draft answers. Then, we comment on the drafts and follow up with a capacity-building working session during field visits to craft the final products.

Depending upon the time and money available, the evaluators can pursue four other questions:

- What evidence is there that the changes actually occurred and that the network contributed to them?
- What was the role of other social actors and contextual factors?
- To what extent was the network's intended outcome achieved, whether formally planned or not?
- Were there other intended political outcomes, or outcomes that should have been achieved, but were not? What were they and why were they not achieved?

Depending on the purpose of the evaluation, these additional points may or may not be optional. For example, regarding the second point, Rick Davies points out that a wider focus on the role of other actors, and the context, can help to generate knowledge that would help to make the outcomes more replicable elsewhere.[6]

The case for a participatory process

Lastly, we suggest that a network evaluation be as participatory as possible. When successful, a participatory mode of network evaluation promises significant advantages. It can do all of the following:

- Identify achievements more comprehensively.
- Enhance learning about success and failure, more than serving as a mechanism of operational or budgetary control.
- Collectively appraise progress towards the political purpose and the development of the network itself.
- Serve as a mechanism for accountability to internal and external stakeholders.
- Preserve the historical memory of the shared processes that gave birth to and sustain the network.
- Do justice to the core qualities of democracy and dynamism and strengthen democratic internal processes.

As Michael Quinn Patton says, 'participatory evaluation means involving people in the evaluation — not only to make the findings more relevant and more meaningful to them through their participation, but also to build their capacity for engaging in future evaluations and to deepen their capacity for evaluative thinking' (Waldick 2002). This is not simply recognition of the core values of an international social-change network: in our experience, participatory evaluation greatly enhances the validity and cost–benefit ratio of the exercise. The participatory approach is uniquely suited to evaluating international social-change networks where democracy and participation are prized.

The involvement of external evaluators facilitates the process and ensures checks, balances, and the objectivity of the evaluation. We find that the greater the involvement of the network's staff, members, allies and donors, and the more the evaluators serve as 'facilitators in a joint inquiry rather than experts wielding "objective" measuring sticks' (Engel *et al.* 2003), the greater will be the quality and validity of the evaluation. Perhaps most importantly, through participation the stakeholders, and especially the membership, develop the understanding and the commitment to implement the conclusions and results.

Participation begins with the network leadership working with the evaluators to design the process. Then, they mobilise the other stakeholders to assess the network's functioning and identify, formulate, and provide evidence of organic and political outcomes, usually through questionnaires and interviews with the evaluators. The analysis of the information and the drawing of conclusions should also involve stakeholders, for which workshops with the membership is another effective mechanism. They may not all agree with each other, but through the participatory process mutual understanding, learning, and communication between internal and external stakeholders are enhanced.

In conclusion, international social-change networks are growing in importance. As with other civil-society actors, they are under great pressure from within and without to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness in generating results. In our experience, understanding and evaluating them presents a fresh challenge to all the stakeholders involved. The voluntary and diverse membership and geographical spread of such networks multiply the complexity, uncertainty,

and unpredictability of what they do and achieve. We have found that effective and useful evaluations of networks engage stakeholders and thus enhance learning, as well as informing the internal and external decision-making processes.

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Notes

1. Manuel Castells (1998) considers that we live in a Network Society that is 'made up of networks of production, power and experience, which construct a culture of virtuality in the global flows that transcend time and space'.
2. Adapted from the functions classifications of Yeo (2004a, b), Portes and Yeo (2001), and Reinicke (2000).
3. For additional recent information about civil-society networks, see www.NGOConnect.net; www.impactalliance.org; www.iisd.org; www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/projects; www.euforic.org; and www.MandE.co.uk.
4. Comments on and reactions to *Towards a Conceptual Framework for Evaluating International Social Change Networks*, by Rick Davies, 27 April 2003.
5. We recognise that we are begging the question of how to assess achieved against expected results. We are doing this for two reasons, one practical and the other theoretical. In our experience, international social-change networks plan lines of action clearly aimed at influencing change in the behaviour, relationships, and actions of other social actors, including their own members, but they do not predefine those outcomes. If they predefine any Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound (SMART) results, these are the outputs that they will produce in the process of pursuing those political goals. Furthermore, in our evaluation experiences, we have discovered that networks contribute to organic and political outcomes, although these outcomes have not been predefined. This, of course, does not prove that predefining outcomes does not lead to even greater achievements. We are convinced

that it will, however, and this leads to our more theoretical reason. Again, in our experience, for international social-change networks the context is too complex, open, and dynamic to plan synergies between desired outcomes and the activities to achieve them. The number and levels of relationships between social actors is enormous, as is the influence of factors such as different national economies and political systems. These relationships are fluid and permeable, reconfiguring as new actors and factors enter or leave or play larger or smaller roles. Furthermore, all such relationships are constantly changing, often very fast indeed. Nailing down SMART outcomes beforehand can tie down the capacity of an international social-change network to respond and innovate, above all when the network commits itself to achieving those predefined results in order to demonstrate success to its donors.

6. See comments of 17 December 2005 on 'The "Attribution Problem"', at www.mandenews.blogspot.com/ (retrieved 13 October 2006).

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