Fostering Collaboration in Development Research:

A Report on Interviews with IDRC Program Staff & Network Coordinators

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1. Purpose and Methodology

1.1. Purpose of this Study

The mission of IDRC remains "Empowerment through Knowledge," i.e. to **promote interaction, and foster a spirit of cooperation and mutual learning within and among social groups**, nations and societies through the creation, and adaptation of the knowledge that the people of developing countries judge to be of greatest relevance to their own prosperity, security and equity. (http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-8513-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)

Collaboration among researchers, between researchers and their target audiences, among organizations – North and South, between donors and recipients, and among development agencies, is fundamental to IDRC's approach to fostering sustainable development. The expectation is that, by participating in equitable, dynamic, collaborative relationships, independent entities will be able to achieve much more than they could working alone. Linked with the goal of building indigenous research capacity, the intention is that the benefits arising from such relationships would extend beyond specific projects or time bound initiatives. Building capacity for the long term makes a collaborative arrangement both a means and an end itself.

The types of collaboration IDRC has supported are varied in both name and nature. Consortia, partnerships, strategic alliances, communities of practice, knowledge networks and research networks are all terms that have been used in reference to specific collaborative arrangements. We seldom, however, differentiate the nature and use of these supposedly different forms of collaboration. Further, such entities are dynamic; they evolve over time in response to internal and contextual influences. A web-based discussion group becomes a network that meets annually to share research results; a group of grant recipients become a task force to initiate the development of an international convention; research institutions with linked programs form a consortium aimed at influencing the agenda of upcoming trade talks. How can IDRC be more effective in supporting the diverse and changeable arrangements it loosely refers to as "networks"? A definition would be a good start.

The processes and functions of research networks were analyzed thoroughly by Bernard (1996), and more recently by Creech & Willard (2001), Church et al. (2003), Yeo (2004, 2005) and Creech & Ramji (2004). Drawing on this work, the concept of "network" as it applies to IDRC is defined as having the following characteristics[1]:

- networks are social arrangements made up of individuals and representatives of institutions based on establishing and building relationships, sharing tasks and working on mutual or joint activities, enabling new learning and mobilizing alternative action;

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[1] From: Earl, Sarah, **A Strategic Evaluation of IDRC-Support to Networks** or "What`s it take to make a network work, if a network could work well?" (Briefing Note) June 2004 See http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-65306-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.

- networks add value to work that would have otherwise been done individually;

- networks are forums for social exchange, which allow members and users to interact directly with one another so that this interaction influences the way they think or what they do within or outside the network;

- networks open opportunities through shared work to raise the profile of research results, foster cross fertilization, influence the policy community, build research and policy capacities, or build a case for a new research agenda, etc.;

- network members maintain their autonomy as participants.

This report is one of several studies, carried out as part of a strategic evaluation reviewing IDRC's experience supporting networks since 1995. The issues being examined by the strategic evaluation have been shaped by the interests of a group of IDRC staff who voluntarily formed the network working group (NWG), an informal learning community which meets approximately every two months to exchange ideas about supporting research networks. To complement the largely document-based components focusing on 'intent', 'sustainability' and 'coordination', interviews were conducted with experienced program staff and network coordinators to further explore these issues. This is a report on the results of those interviews. It updates previous work on the use of this form of collaboration by IDRC and, specifically, it intends to:

1. identify ways to improve IDRC's use of the network modality to support research for development;

2. identify issues related to the effectiveness of networks that need to be explored further through an email survey of network members and future evaluations; and

3. develop and test a framework for planning, monitoring and evaluating research networks.

1.2. Methodology

The interviews were carried out in late 2004 by a staff member in IDRC's Evaluation Unit. To identify interviewees, NWG members and their Program Initiative colleagues were asked to suggest networks from their respective programs where the coordinators were experienced, knowledgeable and articulate regarding IDRC-supported networks. The Evaluation Unit then selected from these suggestions based on regional and program area coverage and availability during study's timeframe. Thirty-five (35) people were interviewed in 32 interviews - 9 by telephone and 23 in person. Twenty (20) networks were covered in interviews with 20 Program Staff, 3 Project Leaders and 12 Network Coordinators. Average length of interviews was one and a half hours and all were recorded. Table 1 below lists the networks covered and people interviewed.

Table 1: Networks Covered; People Interviewed

Network	People Interviewed		
	Program Staff	Coordinator	Project Leader
CBDRM LeaRN	Brian Davy	Michael Reynaldo	Elmer Ferarre
CBDC	Wardie Leppan	Angelica Celis	
CIVIC	Angelica Ospina		
ENRAP	Renald Lafond	Shalini Kala	
FCNC	Ronnie Vernooy		
From War Termination to Sust. Peacebuilding	Pamela Scholey	Stephen Baranyi	
Grupo Chorlavi	Simon Carter		
IMFN	Brian Bonnel Richard Verbisky	Peter Besseau (ED)	
Isang Bagsak	Guy Bessette	Maria Celeste (SE Asia) Jones Kaumba (S Africa)	
LATN	Andres Rius	Diana Tussie	Miguel Lengyel
MAPPA	Madhav Karki		
MercoNet-Mercosur	Andres Rius		
MIMAP		Swapna Mukhopadhyay	
MISTICA	Luis Bartola Angelica Ospina		
PRRN	Roula El-Rifai	Rex Brynen	
Research ICT Africa!	Heloise Emdon		
ROCARE	Alioune Camarra		
RUAF	Luc Mugeot Kristina Taboulchanas	Henk de Zeeuw	Shingirayi Mushamba
SANFEC	Daniel Buckles		
SATRN	Basil Jones	Kennedy Mbekeani	
20	20	12	3

Interviews were structured on a series of open-ended questions sent to the interviewees in advance and asked by the interviewer. The guide used to record answers during the interviews is attached in Annex 1.

2. Findings: Confirming Existing Knowledge

Early in the interviews, it appeared that the interviewees were reiterating or confirming many of the Centre's earlier findings on networks. This section provides four examples of areas where interview data confirmed observations from previous studies. The four areas are: network evolution; member ownership and participation; role of evaluation; social relations.

2.1. Networks Evolve

Bernard, in her 1996 study observed that the key to the viability of any network was its ability to adapt, to "welcome and manage change constructively" (1996:27). To sustain

itself a network needs to alter its agreements on purpose and process in response to its changing external context and its internal development. Bernard also saw that, generally, the intended means and ends of networks are less than clear or are only partially articulated. She concluded this can be useful when there is:

> **"just enough clarity to allow people of quite different motivations to buy-in… goal ambiguity needs to be worked through… in networks where a specific obligation exists to act, to some degree in concert." (1996:41)**

Creech and Willard also refer to this:

> **"Objectives will shift and change over time. For this reason, Klijn recommends that objectives not be nailed down at the beginning of the network." (2001:69)**

In her review of network sustainability based on IDRC corporate documents, evaluation reports and Project Completion Reports, Wind found that 'sustainable' networks[2] emerge incrementally along a variety of dimensions. She summarizes the dynamic nature of research networks this way:

> **"Sustainable networks demonstrate flexibility in adapting to internal and external change. IDRC-supported networks have changed their title, their focus (e.g., adding policy advocacy to their mandate), their subject (e.g., by becoming multidisciplinary), their methodologies, the products they offer, their governance structures, and their ways of engaging stakeholders. Some networks have [had] several more-or-less continuous incarnations…" (2004:9)**

Of the 20 networks represented in this set of interviews, 15 started before the year 2000, and are therefore more than 5 years old. Of the 15, three were 10 or more years old. Only 2 of the 20 networks were reported as having made little or no change in direction, management or member participation since starting (Grupo Chorlavi, SANFEC). Interviewees gave copious examples of how their networks changed. Increased collaboration among members, and greater participation in running the network were most frequently mentioned. CBDRM LeaRN, ROCARE, LATN, CBDC, PRRN, FCNC, Research ICT Africa and RUAF are examples. Expanding the reach of their activities and expansion into spin off networks were next in frequency of mention (LeaRN, Isang Bagsak, IMFN). Shifts or refinements in research focus and involvement of local organizations or officials in network functions such as advisory committees were also cited. MERCOSUR began running regional programs funded by donor agencies; with SATRN the original coordination arrangements were dysfunctional in their organizational context and needed revising; and MAPPA drastically expanded the role of the Network Coordinator to include fundraising for additional projects. In the case of ENRAP, in the project's second phase, it was necessary to step back and build pre-networking capacity among the intended members to bring them to the stage where networking between members would be possible and helpful. Several interviewees mentioned the problem of there being less than adequate capacity for networking at the outset than expected. This was also the case with SATRN and Research ICT Africa!.

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[2] See section 3.3 below for an attempt to clarify the concept of sustainable networks.

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The inherent propensity to evolve was evident in the origins of the networks covered in the interviews. Many grew out of previously funded IDRC projects. ROCARE, LeaRN, Isang Bagsak, LATN, MERCOSUR, MAPPA, and MIMAP are examples. Several originated in IDRC explorations or issue-focused international meetings (CIVIC, From War…, RUAF, CBDC, SATRN). Several grew out of other networking relationships: FCRN, IMFN, PRRN, SANFEC. With ENRAP, Grupo Chorlavi, SATRN, MERCOSUR, Research ICT Africa!, LATN and Isang Bagsak the idea for a network was donor initiated – usually building on previous relationships or on a locally expressed need.

Comments by the interviewees strongly reinforce this view of research networks as dynamic, self-actualizing arrangements. Here is how some interviewees put it:

> *'The evolution of the network did not follow a straight line. There were many caveats, many redirections, many changes in the process… if we hadn't been flexible and willing to change, we would not be in the place we are now.'*

> *'A network is in nature, dynamic and in permanent change. You need to adjust, cut, increase over time… It can't be designed to be set in stone in the beginning.'*

> *'Objectives need to be clear and flexible to change as your exposure increases.'*

> *'The likelihood of achieving all the outcomes is to some degree uncertain because it's a network of people that change over time and cannot be predicted. They may not necessarily respond as the project document predicted perhaps some two years ago. So how can we absorb experience and recognize that some objectives were achieved and others weren't - and learn from this. This requires a lot of flexibility in our role as project administrators and understanding on the part of IDRC. We don't know where network members will take the project once they become involved and committed.'*

> *'It is a continual process of change, all partners have to adapt as new influences come into play'*

> *'The network has to be an 'alive group' so it can evolve as it responds to new challenges'*

2.2.   Ownership and Participation

Bernard stresses the importance of member ownership of the (often ambiguously defined) network goals. Members need to be able to collaboratively reformulate statements of purpose and the actions they will take to achieve them. Doing this in response to complex and changing environments and building on their learning and collective gains are powerful forces in keeping members engaged (1996: 39 – 40).

> **"…the willingness of members to help define direction, monitor and adjust operations and interpret the success of tasks constitutes *ownership,* another condition identified as critical to successful implementation…" (1996:43)**

Creech and Willard see this as central to network functioning too.

> **"The network as a whole needs to have a shared understanding and ownership of goals and objectives, over and above those stated in specific project proposals. It needs a shared plan of action to achieve those goals….Too often, a network is designed by a single institution at**

the project proposal stage in order to obtain the funding to get the network off the ground. The risk with this approach is that the goals and objectives in the funding agreement may not correspond to the expectations of those who eventually join the network." (2001:69)

Church et al. also found ownership and participation to be two sides of the same coin.

"Ownership, commitment, energy and creative action . This is a good definition of participation… in the network context." (2003:34)

The interviewees stressed the importance of ownership, self-determination, collective gains and facilitative leadership in relation to network cohesion and effectiveness. Here are some examples.

'It's a process of learning about collective ownership… The rhetoric of partnership and ownership is easy to use but we are all used to working in different ways and it takes time to experiment, try things and learn how to proceed.'

'In the first year, researchers felt they were being hired by the coordinator, but this time they felt it was more their symposium.'

'Once you begin doing it (involving so many diverse participants) it really begins to mean something else, to evolve into something which we are creating together in the process. As the network grows it tries new things, facing new challenges as a network.'

'What really crystallized it as a network at the local level was the realization by the partners that what they were accomplishing together could not possibly be accomplished alone or otherwise and it was at that point that things really started to get interesting.'

'They were participating in building something that they would participate in, held together by the feeling that they were doing something exciting for themselves.'

2.3.   The Role of Evaluation

Given the loosely coupled, multi-stakeholder nature of networks, stakeholders need acceptable mechanisms for assessment, adjustment and adaptation, to use to maintain consensus on purpose and modes of action. Jointly learning about and accommodating to their complex and dynamic contexts contributes to network sustainability. Bernard saw evaluation as playing an important role in the adaptive evolution of a network and as being almost an integral part of managing the full range of networking issues.

The more evaluation is made explicit as a function of membership, the more likely it is that iterative planning and adaptive execution will happen. (1996: 43)

Church et al., like Bernard, also see evaluation as an important adaptive tool.

"…regular and shared evaluation is almost certainly the only way we are going to be able to trace the changes we initiate through what is dynamic, organic and linked work. "Populations shift, goals shift, knowledge about program practices and their values change, and external forces are highly unstable. By internalizing and institutionalizing self-

evaluation processes and practices, a dynamic and responsive approach to evaluation can be developed to accommodate these shifts. (Fetterman 2001:3)" (2001: 38)

Weber cites numerous authors regarding the systematic value of evaluation of network functions. The need to maintain the integrative efforts of diverse elements and the challenges of managing tensions which are structurally inherent in networks, make monitoring, evaluation and reflection essential parts of networking processes.

> **"…monitoring and evaluation become important factors in the design or path of development within reflexive networks… From a design perspective, monitoring and evaluation facilitate the systematic regulation of networking risks and the increase of networking success."(2004:58)**

It was striking (and pleasing for an evaluator) to hear how frequently in the interviews the value of evaluation was raised. Spontaneously, interviewees referred to evaluation in 8 of the 20 networks in the study. These networks found formal evaluations, usually by people external to the network, useful for taking stock, reflecting on, and readjusting their goals and activities. Frequently, this happened when moving between funding phases. Evaluation findings provided the members, host organizations or funding agencies with a credible means to identify, negotiate and legitimize changes.

> *'The mid-term external review was a catalyst for more of a network with multi-stakeholder processes and better clarity on our vision and mission and points of entry'*

> *'Evaluations have been stimuli for change. There was resistance initially but in discussing at the workshop, we came around.'*

> *'We needed M&E training earlier in the program and to build a framework in from the start… the evaluation mission helped us learn – eventually.'*

> *'They wanted feedback to help them learn and improve; they got this out of the evaluators... The [donors] were delighted with the evaluation report <u>and</u> the workplan addressing the issues raised in the evaluation.'*

> *'The evaluation of phase 1 gave input to design phase 2.'*

2.4.   Networks as Social Arrangements

Bernard characterized networks first and foremost as social arrangements in which "…members commit to one another on a personal level for joint exchange, action and learning" (1996:14). Church et al. see trust as the "inter-connective tissue" in these social arrangements.

> **"…the inter-connective tissue of a network is the trust that exists and grows between the participants, and it doesn't just do it by itself. Work has to be done. Part of that trust-building work is done by the coordination function, in a constantly engaged process of knowing the members, facilitating their interaction, helping them to be in connection with one another." (2003:23)**

Creech and Willard support this perspective in the 2001 IISD report, <u>Strategic Intentions:</u>
<u>Managing knowledge networks for sustainable development</u>,

> **"Personal contact should not be overlooked as an important communications medium. While its one-to-one nature makes it a slow way of communicating, it allows for higher levels of tailoring of messages than other techniques. In addition, higher levels of context can be established through personal contact. This significantly increases the levels of trust and the probability for action on recommendations."(2001:49)**

Based on the interviews, this view of networks as primarily social arrangements persists in IDRC-funded networks. Even in those which are ICT-based, the importance of building trust, mutual confidence, through direct, face-to-face interaction and collaborative activities was repeatedly raised. Network coordination was perceived as an important influence on trust building. (We will come back to the role of coordination in a later section.)

> *'It's extremely difficult to put together these things, especially if partnership is important, without meeting face to face with each other and seeing who you can work with.'*

> *'Communities are not a one time decision, they are a process and processes take time. They are processes because they involve human interaction, human interaction needs trust; and trust needs time. Therefore it is important not to be overly ambitious with the objectives or with the things you expect from this network. You have to take into account the context the participants and the background interactions of the participants who have got together through the network.'*

> *'There was not much money for face to face meetings and therefore the network can't form. You can't demonstrate the benefits of sharing without direct sharing.'*

> *'We have face to face workshops at national and regional levels. Now they are able to personalize a lot of things and so when someone writes, they know who has written. Face to face is very essential to begin to know each other, to be quite comfortable with each other, and to respond in a friendly way in interactions in the future.'*

> *'After attending the first meeting, when it came to the second meeting, I really thought twice about going... I feared it would be sort of an examination, a time for reckoning, that you are letting the network down if you haven't done everything. But that eventually changed. I was more confident, in subsequent meetings to be able to explain why I have or have not done this or that.'*

In discussing what holds members together as a network, interviewees mentioned 'developing social and professional relationships with others who share interests, values or concerns' far more than any other reason. Less frequently cited were: opportunities for capacity building; enhanced voice, reputation or profile; and access to research funding. While this does not necessarily mean that the latter are less important, it does demonstrate, consistent with Bernard's 1996 findings, that those involved with networks see the social relationship aspect as a primary benefit and as the foundation for achieving other goals. This suggests that in setting up or assessing a network, networking processes deserve attention and that the social relationships established through these processes have value to the participants which are on a par with, and may even transcend, the network's explicitly recognized development and capacity-building objectives.

3. A Framework for Network Planning

In this section, I introduce a framework designed to assist IDRC staff and network partners in paying deliberate attention to key characteristics and processes when planning, monitoring or evaluating a network. First, I cite data that indicates a need for this kind of deliberate attention. Second, I define the framework elements. And third, I propose a working understanding of 'network sustainability' as at relates to network planning, monitoring and evaluation. In subsequent sections, interview data is matched to the framework components to test for resonance with IDRC-funded networks.

3.1.   A Need for Planning and Design

A large number of studies have, in recent years, yielded insights regarding the management of networks to mobilize resources for development research. Many of these insights are now widely shared by those working with, or belonging to, networks. This set of interviews corroborates the earlier work of Bernard, as well as the more recent work by others such as Creech and Willard, Weber and Church et al. The challenge for this report was to add value to current knowledge and practice. What could it add to enhance IDRC's effectiveness as a supporter of networks? An answer is suggested in the responses to the interview question asking explicitly for advice on how IDRC could improve its support to networks.

Responses drew on lessons from all the interviewees' experience with networks and covered a range of concerns. The dominant theme was the need to give more consideration to network dynamics in their planning and design. In decreasing frequency of mention, the concerns raised were: the planning and design of networks; learning within and between networks; IDRC management, policies and actions; and financial and human resources available to networks. The heavy emphasis on planning and design is understandable. At this initial stage the external funding agency is in a position to exert influence in two ways: to seek clarity and specificity regarding the network's intentions; and to tailor its expectations, policies and support accordingly. Once project funding is approved and network participants begin to exert ownership and influence over network direction and functioning, the donor partner (ideally) assumes a less directive and influential role.   Explicit in some interviews, implicit in others, was the general view that it is not adequate to: call an entity a network; budget for research grants, connectivity and workshops; and to recruit a coordinator. Those engaged with networks often discover that they need to compensate for poor initial planning as they strive to create the complex set of self-governing activities, good quality research and comfortable personal relationships to which IDRC-supported networks aspire.

The conclusion to draw from these interviews is that IDRC could positively influence network outcomes by paying more comprehensive attention to a wider range of key network processes or dynamics as part of its pre-funding development and approval work. It could then deliberately and strategically support the actions to be implemented to achieve network goals and objectives, as well as the processes whereby progress would be assessed and strategies revised. The Network Intentions Framework presented below

is a contribution towards moving in this direction. It is designed to be applicable for planning, monitoring and evaluating research networks and is offered here for critical consideration and possibly field-testing.

3.2.   Introduction to the Framework

This framework was created using ideas from Outcome Mapping and the Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric (SAFAR), described recently by Gadja (2004: 65-77), as used in the American Federal Departments of Education, Health and Human Services.   Gadja reports that, at the formative stages, groups planning to work together found a facilitated process using the SAFAR very helpful to define how they would collaborate, identify their roles and understand each other's expectations. Could a framework be developed for a similar use, in the context of IDRC-supported networks, to assist in designing a network and managing its performance? To explore this question, the following framework was developed to clarify network intentions with regard to five fundamental considerations which determine a network's shape, direction and results. These are not the only elements that determine a network's nature, but they represent key strategic considerations, which network planners and stakeholders can decide or influence in planning and managing their networks.[3]

The '5 Keys to Network Planning' column lists the five key elements, with questions defining each one. The 'Intentions' column lists some of the questions network members and/or practitioners might ask themselves to reach clarity on their network's intentions at the planning stage. In later stages, as the network's intentions evolve, these are also questions useful for documenting that evolution. Similarly, in the 'Outcomes' column these questions can be addressed in monitoring and evaluating outputs and results.

Table 2: Network Intentions Framework

5 Keys to Network Planning	Intentions	Outcomes
1. Goals & Objectives: • What development results or cause does the network work towards or contribute to? • What capacity-building results is it seeking? • What are its resource mobilization goals?	• What were/are they originally? • What is done to assure the initial and ongoing relevance of goals and objectives?	• Is there evidence of progress towards the goals and objectives? • Are they changed or changing?
2. Strategies & Activities: • What does the network do? • Who are the members and what roles and tasks do they undertake? • Who do members work with outside the network?	• What strategies and activities were designed to achieve goals and objectives? • How will they be reassessed?	• What strategies and activities been carried out? • What outputs have been produced and who have they reached? • Have any been reassessed? Changed?

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[3] For example, the network's "context" also comprises an important complex of influences that can shape formation, operations and outcomes. But context is not included in this framework because it is outside the sphere of influence of practitioners and managers. Practitioners respond to context in the way they treat these 5 key dynamics which are all within their sphere of influence.

3. Integrated Collaboration: • How closely do members work together in jointly-defined activities? • How interdependent are they in carrying out tasks to accomplish the network's goals and objectives? • How formalized is their interdependence?	• What was the intended ideal[4] level of integrated activity and collaboration among members? • What actions were identified or planned to foster the ideal level of integration? • Have any of these changed or are they evolving?	• To what extent have actions to support integration been implemented? • To what extent are members communicating, sharing information, cooperating, collaborating, partnering or merging their activities?
4. Leadership & Decision-making: • Is the leadership: centralized or shared among members; technical; scientific; organizational; directive or facilitative? • Are decision-making processes: defined explicitly or growing organically; shared, delegated or hierarchical; tied to specific roles, groups, or organizations? • Do members discuss, define and revise the arrangements for leadership and decision-making?	• Ideally, for this network, what does good leadership, coordination, and decision-making look like? • What mechanisms are planned for assessing and revising the leadership and decision-making functions? • What mechanisms are planned for assessing and revising any aspects of network operation (goals, objectives, strategies, communication, collaboration)?	• What kinds of leadership, coordination and decision-making functions are being used? • Are these functions reviewed, revised? • Are network directions, operations consciously revised? • What is member satisfaction with both the processes and outcomes of leadership and decision-making?
5. Communication & Interpersonal Relationships: • Through what channels do members communicate with each other? • Are there communication systems or formal information channels? • Are communications frequent, formal, informal, member initiated? • How much are member committed to and investing in communicating with other members?	• What levels and kinds of communication and interpersonal relationships are/were envisioned for the network? • Were mechanisms planned for assessing and responding to any tensions or concerns related to relationships among members?	• What level of mutual trust and comfort have members established with each other? • What member relationships have developed within and outside of network activities? • Have actions been taken to influence communications or interpersonal relationships?

The assumption here is that planning will increase the probability of supporting viable, effective networks. In other words, it enhances their sustainability and, as some would argue, enhances the sustainability of their achievements. But what do we mean by sustainability? Let us try to clarify what we are trying to achieve before considering further a tool with which to achieve it.

3.3. What is Sustainability?

Tricia Wind's <u>Document Review on Network Sustainability</u> makes a useful contribution to clarifying the concept of sustainability as it applies to IDRC-funded networks. She identifies four dimensions, each of which makes a network more or less sustainable, and

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[4] Ideal, for a network, in relation to its purpose, structure and decision-making processes (Gajda, p.69). Low levels of integrated activity are not necessarily a bad intention; in fact, well developed cooperation/ partnering can be effective and more appropriate than collaboration as it avoids the cost required for higher levels of integration (Gajda, p.74).

each of which presents its own challenges. Conditions in these dimensions are changeable: they may be stable, improving or deteriorating at any particular time. In synergy, the dimensions contribute to the overall sustainability of the network; but no dimension alone guarantees it. Unable to find a simple single definition of sustainability for networks, Wind's report states:

> **"Given the enormous differences among the networks included in this review, a single definition may be neither possible nor practical. The best common definition would be: "sustainability means that a network continues to function until it achieves its goals, or until its members are no longer willing or able to continue, or until it becomes irrelevant". A more helpful approach may be to look at various dimensions of sustainability that authors refer to when discussing sustainability for networks. These include time, financial, relational, and processes and structural dimensions." (Wind, 2004: 6)**

These dimensions show up in various ways as we explore the planning framework in subsequent sections. However, **the time dimension**, deserves comment here. None of the interviewees reported that their networks had been explicit about expected lifespan at the outset. Most assumed they would exist for "quite some time" and operated on that basis. Those who commented further usually cited discussions of the need for sustained donor funding beyond the current phase. To many, lifespan was directly connected to the quest for resources. It is understandable that network participants think first about resources when asked about network longevity. The practice of IDRC, and many other donor agencies, of funding projects phase by phase, gives a perceived instability to long-term network prospects. Wind's document review, estimated that 85% of IDRC-funded networks were projected to continue beyond their current phase, yet observed that: "…documents are consistently vague about exactly how long IDRC and network members expected the networks to last." (2004:10). She also poses a challenge for subsequent evaluation work:

> **"It would be interesting to pursue the question of why IDRC tends to avoid time-limited networks and seems to prefer leaving commitments fairly open-ended. Perhaps the interviews conducted for this evaluation of networks might reveal some perspectives on this matter." (2004:12)**

Interviewees offered three insights into the reasoning underlying this vagueness about intended lifespan. First, at the planning stage, neither the network structure nor its constituent relationships have been formed, so it is too early to discuss how long it will last. As one IDRC staff member put it: "How can one think about the lifespan of something that does not yet exist?" Second, being open-ended about lifespan is sometimes perceived as helping to maintain donor expectations of and openness to providing longer term funding.

> *'It was difficult to get them thinking about an end date. They wanted to keep it open for a purpose, to keep open the options for ongoing donor support.'*

Third, at the outset, those involved may not see themselves, nor be seen by others, as putting together a 'network.' There were several examples where they saw themselves as a collaborative effort setting out to create a resource that would exist for the foreseeable future, a curriculum, research program, an organization, a web-based service which

would carry on, embedded within existing institutions (e.g. RUAF – a web based information clearing house in a UN agency; Isang Bagsak – a curriculum for regional institutions; PRRN – a moderated discussion group for an international community of interest).

While the overall theme in the advice to future network planners from interviewees was to be specific about the network's intentions with regard to a variety of factors, lifespan may not be one to consider at that stage. Lifespan is more likely the result of the interaction of a variety of factors which determine the network's sustainability. The document review and the interview data tend to agree with the interviewee who said: **"there are benefits to leaving expectations about network lifespan open-ended".**

Supporting long-lived networks may be of less concern to IDRC than sustaining the network's contributions to development. Networking is a means whereby IDRC seeks to build research capacity and support the production and use of research results for development. But, since the relationships created by networking represent an enhanced capacity for development research, the relationships themselves are goals of network support. Such relationships may continue to function within or outside of the network and independently of IDRC funding. So networks (the relationships they consist of) are both means and ends.

The concept of network sustainability underlies IDRC's desire to support networks that are viable long enough to achieve their goals. Wind points out that the ability of a network to survive for a given period of **time** is one dimension of its sustainability, and goes on to identify three other dimensions: **financial, relational, and processes and structural**. While she found no single, simple definition of sustainability for networks that would cover the diversity in IDRC's experience, Wind has added conceptually to the discussion of sustainability. In addition to identifying the four dimensions of sustainability she has developed five categories of factors that help or hinder network sustainability:

1. Internal relations;
2. External relations and contextual factors;
3. Ongoing relevance;
4. Financial aspects; and
5. Institutionalization

The components of the Network Intentions Framework offer network practitioners, inside and outside IDRC, questions to help clarify how their networks will strive to attain their goals and to manage in the face of the factors listed above. Annex 2 illustrates graphically, the relationships among the dimensions and factors in Wind's analysis and the five keys in the Network Intentions Framework

4. The Elements of the Framework

In this section, the components of the framework's five keys to planning are tested for resonance with the interview data.[5]   Each key is defined and tested using the papers referenced for this report and the interview data.

4.1.   Goals and Objectives

Traditionally, one of the first considerations in designing externally-funded development initiatives, is the setting of goals and objectives. It is clear from the literature and interviews cited above, that network goals and objectives tend to be less than clear and specific at the outset. And they may tend to evolve over the life of the network. Therefore, the Network Intentions Framework, asks planners do two things. First, they should consider clarifying goals and objectives regarding three kinds of results (contributions to development, research capacity, and financial resources); and second, planners should specify their intentions regarding how the ongoing relevance of those goals and objectives will be monitored and adjusted if necessary.

Regarding the three categories of results, development and research capacity are included because they are explicitly part of IDRC's mission. The framework adds financial goals and objectives because of the voluntary nature of networks. Funding comes from external sources without organizational ties to the network. Therefore, maintaining its resource flow is of constant concern. Interviewees mentioned obtaining or sustaining financial resources twice as frequently as any other sustainability issue. International donors as well as national agencies were seen as somewhat unpredictable sources that had to be sought, cultivated, maintained and replaced. The difficulty of getting funding for essential fixed costs like coordination, publishing, information technology equipment, connectivity and operations was also part of the picture. Thus finding and maintaining financial support is a goal, implicit in survival, which requires explicit attention.

The review of project documents by Abra Adamo, analyzed the stated intentions of IDRC's support to networks, identifying four categories of intended results:

1) Improving the effectiveness and reach of Centre support;
2) Enhancing research quality;
3) Advancing the utilization of Centre-supported research results; and
4) Strengthening regional ownership of research and development agendas.[6]

Comparing these findings on 'intent' with the interview data, the network goals and objectives which emerged seem to articulate lower level, more task-oriented categories. According to the interviewees, the primary tasks of IDRC-funded networks identified by interviewees included:

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[5] It should be noted that the framework was developed after and in response to the interviews. Ideally, to validate the framework, the order would have been reversed and interview questions would have been based on the elements of the framework.

[6] Adamo, Abra. A Review of IDRC Documentation on the Intended Results of IDRC's Support of Networks (1995-2004). November 11, 2004

1) Influencing research focus or research methods;
2) Providing technical support to IDRC-funded researchers;
3) Giving IDRC-funded researchers and research increased profile and influence;
4) Promoting exchange, coordination and collaboration among researchers; and
5) Fostering relationships between researchers and research users.

These categories appear consistent with, yet slightly more specific than, the ones identified in Adamo's report. Further consideration will be given to the relationship between the two in the next section.

Interviewees saw progress towards commonly held goals as contributing to network sustainability. Below are some examples they identified.

> *'Impact is important in the long run. Work has to resonate and yield results such as changes in mainstream curriculum, farmers practices, etc.'*

> *'...the network has to have a formal voice in national and provincial agricultural policy'*

> *'Doing quality research helps it maintain reputation and confidence. Hence funding will come.'*

> *'...having innovative ways to get results taken up, with partners at the cutting edge of their field and [being] very innovative.'*

> *'Accreditation of the program by a university in the region would indicate we are valued.'*

> *'Unless the communities are involved, defining what materials they need, your activities can't be sustainable... involvement of the whole community in the whole process right from the start, in the actual concept, putting the ideas together. If you do not do this, you remain an outsider as a scientist and your ideas will be foreign to them and will not be accepted...'*

Table 3
Three Levels of Network Intentions

Corporate Level Intentions (from Adamo's document review)	Network Level Intentions (from interviews)	Network Strategies & Activities (from interviews)
Improving the effectiveness and reach of Centre support; **Enhancing research quality;** **Advancing the utilization of Centre-supported research results;** **Strengthening regional ownership of research and development agendas**	**Influence research focus or research methods;** **Provide technical support to IDRC-funded researchers;** **Give IDRC-funded researchers and research increased profile and influence;** **Promote exchange, coordination and collaboration among researchers;** **Foster relationships between researchers and research users.**	**Preparing policy briefs, research syntheses, position papers;** **Publishing and dissemination (via web, books, newsletters)** **Moderated electronic discussion groups;** **Workshops to share research results;** **Technical assistance** **Training** **Mentoring, D-group moderating** **Small grants competitions** **Study tours, exchange visits** **Case studies, success stories** **Community mobilization** **Policy advocacy, engagement** **National, regional or international meetings, conferences** **Joint funding proposals** **Teamwork on themes or issues** **Collaborative research** **Internships** **Curriculum development**

4.2. Strategies and Activities

Specifying inputs, strategies and activities - how results will be achieved - is standard practice in development project planning. Accordingly, the proposed framework asks for consideration of what the network will do, and with whom, to achieve its goals and objectives. In addition, given the inherent tendency of networks to evolve, it is also necessary to consider how the evolution in strategies and activities will be managed.

Interviewees identified a long list of strategies and activities employed to accomplish their goals. These are presented in the right hand column of Table 3 above. These three lists could be thought of as a results hierarchy. Moving from left to right, each elaborates in greater specificity about how before it will be accomplished. How will the corporate level results be achieved? Through the network achieving its intentions. How will the

latter be accomplished? Through carrying out the network's strategies and activities. The latter will be accomplished through a yet more detailed set of activities.

4.3. Integrated Collaboration

In planning and designing a network, consideration also needs to be given to the degree to which network members will work interdependently to achieve common goals. Is the intention that they will do their own research independently and only come together to share results? Will they share resources and integrate their efforts as a team? Overall planning needs to take into account that, initially, members may be reluctant to open up to each other. Strategies will be needed to build up the necessary levels of knowledge and trust. Members may quickly develop a desire to collaborate more closely together than originally planned. Building in provisions which enable the network to respond and to be flexible would be helpful. Such provisions might include: participatory decision-making; monitoring and evaluation; frequent face to face meetings; and facilitative leadership.

In her Document Review of Network Sustainability, Wind identifies "Internal Relations" as one of five categories of factors that contribute to the sustainability of networks. She singles out the following key aspects of internal relations as most influential:

- **Shared ownership and mutual trust;**
- **Dynamism of connections and interactions among members;**
- **Open versus selective approaches to membership;**
- **Individual versus institutional membership; and**
- **Allowing for varying levels of engagement with the network as opposed to insisting on a strict approach to equality of relations.**

In her paper, Gadja reviews some of the literature pertaining to the levels of collaboration groups develop as they progress through stages in their interpersonal relations. She defines the stages in progressive collaborative within what she calls "alliances" (I am calling them networks) as comprised of five stages:

1. **Networking:** identifying and reaching out to communicate with a population; identifying a base of support and exploring common interests;
2. **Cooperating:** raising resources, ensuring tasks are done, agreeing on mutual needs, exchanging ideas and experiences, results;
3. **Partnering:** sharing resources to identify common interests, supporting each other to reach common goals, retaining autonomy;
4. **Merging:** merging resources to create something new, specified timeframe commitment to outcomes;
5. **Unifying:** unifying in a formal structure, relinquishing autonomy to form a single structure.

She concludes that:

> **"…at the core of a four or five stages alliance development model, is the accepted principle that *groups will pass through predictable stages prior to effective performance."* (2004:70)**

Both Gadja and Susanne Weber cite Tuckman's "Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing" model of group dynamics as relevant to networking.

Weber, drawing largely on German social science literature, concludes that deepening of the social or team dimensions of networks based on trust is the "sine qua non for successful projects." (Weber,2004: 56) She refers to evolution in response to experience and context as "reflexive network regulation" (others might call it network learning or self-actualization) and concludes that this reduces "networking risks" and increases "networking success".

The interviews with network coordinators and program staff yielded information on two aspects of collaboration in the 20 networks represented: what was intended in terms of collective effort; and what level of integrated collaboration actually came about. In practice, IDRC-supported networks appear to stay mostly within the first two of Gadja's levels. In 15 networks, a grant-giving component (such as a small grants program) was the central feature with the networking aspect usually involved assembling researchers to exchange research results. In some cases group training was made available. In a few cases, like LATN, there was the stated intention to collaborate to produce policy-related syntheses of completed research for target audiences.

The program staff interviewed were well aware of progressive evolution in network collaboration.

> *'Once you begin doing it, involving so many diverse participants, it really begins to mean something else, to evolve into something which they are creating together in the process'*

> *'We need to build in signals - that this is owned, that there is commitment, that there are benefits – things to build on as we go. We need to look for these signals in the early stages and then depending on what they are, respond as we go to the next stage'*

> *'What really crystallized it as a network at the local level was the realization by the partners that what they were accomplishing together could not possibly be accomplished alone or otherwise and it was at that that point that things really started to get interesting…'*

The interviews suggest that an IDRC-appropriate version of Gadja's progressive stages of integrated collaboration within a research network would be more like the following.

1. **Sign On.** Members join the network and participate in organized events, E-discussions, workshops, training. (Passive participation)

2. **Respond to Opportunities.** Members initiate activities to participate in network activities: submit grant proposals; present research results; submit material for posting; comment on papers posted for discussion; engage in exchanges with other members outside of formal network events.

3. **Contribute to Network Functioning and Directions.** Members take on roles in network management or events, find/contribute resources, initiate discussion of

goals, directions, work separately towards common goals and issues; sharing experiences and exchanging advice, visits.

4. **Work in Partnership.** Members pool resources with other members to work jointly towards shared goals or outputs: joint funding proposals; produce collaborative research results; research syntheses for target audiences. Collective efforts shape and drive the network.

5. **Full Ownership** includes all of the above. Members are fully responsible for: governance; securing funding; decision-making; and accountability of the coordinator.

Overall, based on the interviews, the level of integration, that is the amount of jointly carried out work - either research or in operating the network – was low. With possibly only one exception, there were no cases where network members were actually organized to carry out the research jointly. The exception was Isang Bagsak, where members jointly did action research to develop an approach to information dissemination. However, in eight of the networks, the level of collaboration was increasing, or measures were planned to deepen member engagement either in network functioning or in collaborative research or dissemination. For example:

> *'In the next phase, we are now thinking about greater responsibility of the partners in governance.'*

> *'There has been a gradual deepening of comfort and willingness to discuss their research and cooperate together as a network.'*

> *'The ...network only began to work as a network in second phase, after 5 years. Phase one focused on becoming what it was supposed to be as a network member.'*

> *'There was a lot of mistrust at first, each member did his own research and reluctant to share with other... in phase 2 we had more trust, the regional coordination units helped'*

> *'Initially the main benefit to members was to receive research funding and the promise of sharing, now they want to drop centralized funding, each get their own resources and become a straight network, more autonomous, with more equity among partners.'*

> *'It crystallized as a discussion group that did not want to disband. D-group facilitation has been important in keeping the group together. Now we are moving consciously towards being a network.'*

> *'...very coordinator-driven at the outset... now becoming more participatory. This has been an organic, leader-driven evolution.'*

Three 'networks' in our sample were web-based discussion groups exchanging information, usually facilitated by a moderator. In one case the provision of a technological platform to enable the exchanges was the central IDRC contribution. One 'network', ENRAP was intended to be a network in which members could share development research experiences. In its second phase it was still providing technical

support to bring prospective members to the level of capacity and connectivity where they could prepare and share their research results with others or operate as a network.

4.4.   Leadership and Decision-making

Mutual trust among members, shared network ownership, common interests and purpose, adaptive flexibility, communications mechanisms, some level of coordinated planning and action, relations with the external context and financial uncertainty – all these are integral to the concept of networking. In IDRC's realm, it is usually the function of network coordination to foster and manage these conditions and dynamics.

There is universal acceptance of the need for a leader/facilitator/coordinator to initiate network formation and facilitate its continued adaptation. Bernard put it this way.

> **"Networks function at best advantage where they are not cast in stone, but encouraged to evolve. The capacity to welcome and manage change constructively is therefore an important indicator of network strength… Charismatic leadership, counter-balanced by a proactive and engaged membership, a minimal hierarchy and a limited and flexible bureaucracy are important factors in promoting adaptation. So too, there is a need for tolerance for ambiguity and variability in planning and execution, to suit different members ad changing contexts; letting members negotiate their own conditions across their institutional and individual divides." (1996:27)**

Church et al. also recognized this tension inherent in the leadership and coordination functions.

> **"How far does the coordinator lead and how much do they facilitate and help build capacity? The tension between the two is real and continuous…" (2003:32)**

How does someone with no hierarchical authority or organizational leverage ensure that commitments are kept, decisions are made and followed, participation is equitable, donors are happy and research is relevant? Obviously this is a very challenging role requiring considerable and diverse skills and experience. Interviewees were able to recall strengths and weaknesses in leadership and coordination from their experience and were able to describe coordination challenges their networks had encountered in the following areas.

Membership diversity: Although a frequently cited strength, diversity among members was challenging. First and foremost is the need to facilitate communications between different language groups in list serves, workshops and training sessions. Working across cultural differences was also demanding – reconciling differing organizational practices and expectations and balancing differing interests, strengths and research capacities of the various members.

The host organization's administrative practices, skill and experience levels present challenges, particularly when the terms of reference for its role have not been clearly set. This can be experienced in the network as unreasonable procedural demands or as lack of

interest or support. Allocating inadequate resources, either in staff time – particularly the coordinator's - or material support also presented challenges.

In the members' **home institutions**, the most significant challenge was the difficulty of motivating members to allocate time to the network. Often their home organizations did not place a priority on this work, did not allocate adequate staff time to it or did not recognize in performance appraisals.

With regard to the **capacity of the network** itself, facilitating and monitoring member participation were among the most challenging social aspects. Operationally, there were three areas where challenges were encountered: operating as a legal, international entity for financial transactions; establishing clear, reasonable reporting requirements; and making advisory and steering committees effective.

Relationships with donors presented challenges in three frequently mentioned areas: finding secure, stable sources of funding; coping with demands for network programming to fit within donor priorities or mandates; and having to comply with the differing, and often unreasonable, reporting requirements of their various donors.

In fostering **member communication and participation**, coordination challenges were found in establishing the right balance between being directive and giving members ownership and control. There is tension in enabling members to increase their level of participation as they get used to each other while at the same time trying to fulfill network commitments. Several interviewees raised the issue of establishing adequate channels of communication between areas with differing levels of connectivity or where email is not an established part of organizational functioning. And finally, finding ways to stimulate participation when members lack incentives, where they are highly preoccupied with their "main" jobs or in cases where they are not motivated to increase the quality of their research outputs.

The final area of challenge identified was in building active linkages with the network's **external context.** Obtaining community involvement in setting the research agenda, in keeping that agenda relevant and in deciding on priorities were ideals to strive for. So was finding appropriate ways to connect strategically with senior level policy makers, middle level officials, farmers and other research users. Influencing members' activities once they were back in their home contexts and transferring learning between members' contexts are two concerns that were also identified.

4.4.1 Skills Required in a Network Coordinator

To meet these challenges, what expertise and characteristics does a network coordinator need? For Church et al. part of the solution is in facilitative leadership which may reside centrally in a person or a team and may rotate to different players, but that emphasizes:

- o   Quality of input rather than control;
- o   Being knowledgeable about issues, context and opportunities;
- o   Enabling members to contribute and participate;

- o Defining a vision and articulating aims;
- o Balancing the creation of forward momentum and action, with consensus;
- o Understanding the dynamics of conflict and how to transform relations; and
- o Promoting regular monitoring and participatory evaluation.

Facilitative leadership is one of the characteristics included in an extensive "Checklist for Networks" which raises questions for reflection on many dimensions of network functioning (Church et al. 2003: 35-36).

The interviews identified a broad range of qualifications and assets that a coordinator needs to possess to fully serve a research network. Consistent with the facilitative approach advocated by Church et al., interviewees put 'people skills' highest on the list of desirable characteristics. These were followed by expertise in the network's areas of focus, project and organizational management skills and language capability and a flexible, learning approach.

Taking these, starting in reverse order, **learning fast and being open to new ideas** generated through member participation was seen as a valuable character trait for a coordinator, as was **multi-lingual skill** in the languages of the members. The management skills mentioned centered on **managing resources** (money, people and time) **and systems** (financial, administrative and information). Having the qualifications to provide **leadership in the substantive field** in which the network operates was seen as essential. Elaborating on this point, interviewees cited: being trained in the relevant disciplines; having relevant research experience; knowing the technical language; appreciating the complexities and issues; and having contacts in the field.

The strongest emphasis, however, was put on skills related to people and social processes. This demonstrates the importance interviewees placed on the social relationship dimensions of networking. This resonates with the significance placed on nurturing trust, participation, and ownership among members by Bernard, Wind, Creech and Willard and Church et al. The strong implication is that when planning and recruiting for the network coordinator, criteria need to focus on this key dimension. The 'people skills' identified included:

Diplomacy in interpersonal relations:
- With donors, governments, NGOs and private sector;
- With policy makers, negotiators and representatives;
- See what people need to make connections - in spite of gender discrimination;
- Know when to be transparent and when not to be;
- Navigate organizational hierarchies and systems; and
- Long standing professional/personal connections.

Group facilitation by:
- Bringing people together, motivating them, team and consensus building;
- Having multi-cultural skills to manage interaction between different kinds of people;

- Identifying goals, create a vision that unifies and draws partners into collaboration;
- Listening to and understanding where people are coming from, valuing diverse voices;
- Advising those lagging behind without imposing views or being dictatorial; and
- Facilitating the participation of members by understanding what they want to do and making it easier for them to do it;

Participatory management by:
- Persistence and patience in following up when people don't respond;
- Sharing roles and delegating up and down;
- Being results focused – all partners' results ;
- Learning about organizational change;
- Helping people fit in and grow;
- Being understanding and flexible in adapting to partners' needs;
- Learning and understanding partners perspectives, motivations and contexts;
- Being willing to make changes, take risks, adapting as you go;
- Appreciating and respecting diversity in organizations' stages of development;
- Being open to broad participation in planning;
- Finding value in other peoples' ideas;
- Demonstrating commitment to research and information exchange;
- Taking initiative with energy and passion;
- Leading in a democratic, informal team leader sense;
- Taking a learning approach, giving careful respect for peoples' statements;
- Including many disciplines and grasping emerging challenges;

A coordinator fully competent in all of these behaviors would likely command a salary several times greater than any IDRC-funded project could ever afford. The point is that networks are engaged in developing durable social relationships across disciplinary, linguistic, geographic, economic, and political boundaries. In the context of development research, this requires leadership that is skilled, adaptive and persistent. As the job usually falls to the network coordinator, recruitment criteria need to realistically reflect the package of competencies required by the network.

4.5. Communication and Interpersonal Relationships

As reported abundantly above, both the literature and the interviewees stress the importance of the social relationship dimensions of networks. For Bernard the commitment to social relationships, for exchange, action and learning, is the network's defining characteristic. According to the interviewees, social and professional relationships with committed, like-minded others was the main glue holding the network together. The diversity of interesting partners, warm personal relationships, and a feeling of group solidarity were cited as crucial strengths along with participation by members in design, planning and decision-making. Establishing the levels of trust, confidence and engagement to deliver on objectives was considered a challenge

Communication, the thread of which sustained social arrangements are woven, requires a significant investment in both resources and time at all stages. At the network planning stage, being clear on what member communications and relationships are envisaged and how they will be supported - and later checking on the support and the relationships which develop – will reduce the risk of failed collaboration.

As with other groups, collaborative relationships among researchers are founded on **trust and shared interests or common cause.** Interviewees singled out the **actions of the coordinator** as the primary catalyst and formative influence. Relationships develop when the coordinator who is known and respected: champions collaboration and participation among members; models respect for partner diversity and viewpoints; solicits and uses feedback; demonstrates learning; and promotes transparent, participatory decision-making. Collaboration among senior partners was seen as a model with significant influence on member willingness to engage.

In tandem with facilitative leadership, relationships among members depend on **opportunities for direct interaction**. Face to face contact is absolutely essential - events such as workshops to exchange or disseminate research results, training sessions or meetings to discuss viewpoints on key methods and issues were mentioned.

> *'Unless you bring people together to discuss and exchange, it will die, you need to sustain the physical side of the relationships as a formal network'*
>
> *'Face to face meetings are crucial, they helped create bonds and a more open and horizontal process.'*
>
> *'For social sustainability, relationships are built through the participatory nature of the network.'*

Conference calls, list serves, websites and other channels for direct personal contact were considered important also. A history of exchange or achievement, whether built on previous relationships or on new ones, contributes to the propensity to collaborate, as does the credibility of the institutions involved.

Monitoring or evaluating communications and interpersonal relationships in a network could track the actions taken to influence relationships, as well as the frequency and content of communications and whether they are formal, informal, direct or mediated, responsive or proactive. Outcomes to be tracked could include the level of mutual trust and comfort members report and the relationships or joint activities that have developed within and outside of network activities.

5. Summary and Conclusions

This report presents data from interviews with Program Staff, Project Leaders and Network coordinators that confirm the findings of previous studies on networks. It identifies some ways for IDRC and its partners to improve their approach to funding and managing research networks and it outlines a framework for use in planning, monitoring

and evaluating them. This concluding section highlights some of the advice the interviews offer IDRC and summarizes some of the challenging characteristics of sustainable research networks.

5.1. Advice to IDRC

The central message in this report is that networks tend to change both through planned, deliberate actions and through unplanned processes and influences. Taking this into account in planning and management will increase the network's ability to sustain itself, retain its members and accomplish its goals. A proposal for a Network Intentions Framework offers network planners, coordinators and members a way to do this. Loosely knit and fluid in organizational terms, networks lack the kinds of regulatory and protective structures that are present in other organizational forms. The tools of monitoring and evaluation provide some of the mechanisms through which networks can transform themselves to stay relevant, viable and effective. Specifically, IDRC could consider the following advice.

Plan for the unplanned:
A viable, effective, member-driven network will inevitably transform itself in unforeseen ways as it encounters and adapts to its internal and external needs, opportunities and conditions. Its initial budget and design needs to take this into account by providing for the collective processes, skills and information to identify, reflect on and respond to changing circumstances. The Network Intentions Framework, outlined on pages 12–13, can be used for this purpose: in planning, to clarify intentions; in operation, to monitor and reflect on inputs and progress; and, when the need arises, to identify and assess outcomes. It offers five areas in which intentions and outcomes can be clarified and influenced: 1) goals and objectives; 2) strategies and activities; 3) integrated collaboration; 4) leadership and decision-making; and 5) communications and interpersonal relationships.

Realistic Intentions:
Be specific and realistic about the network's starting point. The impression gained from the interviews is that project approval documents tend to state network objectives in fairly general, optimistic terms, whereas the starting points of networks tend to be farther from achieving the objectives than the project design assumes. Interviewees described cases where the prospective network members did not yet have the connectivity, capacity or interest to participate in the networking activities envisioned in the project documents. A realistic assessment of the networking readiness and receptivity of the intended participants could suggest criteria for providing network-oriented funding as well as goals and strategies realistically tailored to the actual situation.

Direct interaction among members:
As networks are fundamentally social arrangements, opportunities for direct interpersonal interaction are crucial to their functioning. Of the range of processes interviewees identified as significant in the development of networking relationships, the most important, it was stressed repeatedly, is meeting regularly, face to face. Being able to

interact directly and in person with other network members is a necessary complement to whatever other means of communication are made available. Budgets and processes need to accommodate this necessity.

Coordination skills:
Network coordinators need expertise and experience in at least three broad areas: project and program management; participatory decision-making and group facilitation; and the field of concern to the network. Recruitment criteria in all three of these areas should be developed based upon a realistic assessment of the network's stage of evolution and its other characteristics. These criteria should then be applied when selecting someone to fill this role and when defining its terms of reference.

5.2   Summary

The term network is applied ubiquitously to refer to a variety of situations and processes. In IDRC, its use suggests a self-regulating mode of cooperation that is efficient, flexible and democratic. It suggests voluntary participation by independent players who come together to cooperate professionally rather than compete; and who retain their legal, economic and institutional independence. While network suggests this constellation of characteristics, the term is too plastic to use as a basis for setting programming approaches or funding conditions. A more precise, variable focus lens is necessary.

The challenges of creating and managing research networks are inherent in their nature. They are replete with contradictions. They intend to be endogenously driven, serving endogenous needs, yet they are mostly exogenously initiated and supported. With the deepening of collaboration and collective commitment members lose flexibility and autonomy. They struggle to reconcile their own self-interest, with that of their home institutions and the collective intentions of the network.

Networks create a space for social interaction focusing on concerns seen from each member's own perspective. Achieving consensus on goals and establishing mutual interdependence in achieving them involves the development of trust. Hence the emphasis placed on social relationships in the literature and in the interviews. As relationships develop among network members, their participation in the network may change, the form of the network or its processes may evolve to reflect these changes. Further, the achievement of goals depends on external linkages, yet the contexts in which the network is embedded are changing too; and this creates other formative pressures. So networks evolve subject to both internal and external factors that are themselves evolving.

We can better understand these dynamic entities by seeing them as being sustainable along several dimensions, each of which is independently variable. The document review by Wind identifies four. So sustainability as a unitary concept does not apply to networks. Rather, sustainability should be seen as the product of the interactions of several dimensions.

But what IDRC really wants to see sustained, beyond the existence of the network if necessary, are: strengthened research capacity; research being applied to development; and relationships fostered or strengthened. This will require networks that are sustainable in the sense that they can last long enough and are capable enough to progress towards their goals in the time and with the resources they mobilize. Much of what determines this sustainability is beyond the control of the network, its planners, its members, and its supporters. The interview data suggest the way to cope with this dynamism and uncertainty is to take a more intentional approach to network planning and management. Such an approach would systematically take key factors into account to reduce the risks and improve the results associated with IDRC-funded networks.

Acronym List

CBCRM	Community Based Costal Resource Management
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IISD	International Institute for Sustainable Development
NWG	Network Working Group
SAFAR	Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric

Networks

AFWG	Arab Families Working Group – Phase III
LeaRN	Learning and Research Network
CBDC	Community Biodiversity Development Conservation Program
CIVIC	Caribbean ICT Virtual Community
ENRAP	Electronic Networking for Rural Asia Pacific
FCRNC	Farmer-Centered Research Network in China
'From War Termination to Sustainable Peacebuilding'	
'Gender and Citizenship in the Arab World'	
Grupo Chorlavi	
IMFNS	International Model Forest Network Secretariat
Isang Bagsak	Program in Participatory Development Communication
LATN	Latin American Trade Network
MAPPA	Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Program in Asia
MercoNet	Mercosur (Southern Cone Common Market) Economic Research Network
MIMAP	Regional Gender Planning Network – Phase III
MISTICA	Methodologies and Social Impact of Information and Communication Technologies – Phase II
MPCN	Medicinal Plants Conservation Network
PRRN	Palestinian Refugee Research Net & 'The Ottawa Process'
PEP	Poverty and Economic Policy Network
Research ICT Africa! Network	
ROCARE	Education Research Network for West and Central Africa
RUAF	Resource Center on Urban Agriculture and Forestry
SANFEC	South Asia Network for Food, Ecology and Culture
SATRN	Southern African Trade Research Network
WDMN	Water Demand Management Network

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Annex 1: Interview Guide

Nov. 2, DRAFT 8:

Interview Guide for IDRC Program Staff and Network Coordinators

Introductory Preamble
Thanks for being willing to participate in this interview which is part of a strategic evaluation aimed at improving the way IDRC supports and interacts with research networks. The interview will cover three themes: how networks get started, what holds them together and what they achieve. This study defines networks as *formal or informal social arrangements among individuals and institutions allowing them to interact directly to:*

- *build relationships, work jointly, enable learning or mobilize action;*

- *engage in exchanges which add value the way they think or what they do;*

- *raise the profile and use of research results; influence policy communities: build research and policy capacities: or advocate for a new research agenda.*

- *maintain their autonomy as participants.*

This interview will focus primarily on the _____Network.

1. Identification Information (*complete before and confirm during interview*)
    1.1   Network Name: _____
    1.2   Project Number: _____
    1.3   Program Area: _____
    Network Coordinator:
    1.4   Name: _____
    1.5   Title & Affiliation: _____
    _____
    1.6   Contact Information: _____
    _____
    1.7   Year Network Formed: _____
    1.7   Is the Network currently active? __ yes __ no. (If no, get story)

2. Data Collection Information
    2.1   Interviewee's Name: _____
_____
    2.2   Interviewee's Affiliation: _____
_____

2.3   Interviewee's Contact Info:
_____

2.4   Name of Interviewer: _____
2.5   Date of Interview: _____
2.6   Interview Mode: phone__;   in person__;   email__;   other__

3. Descriptive Information *(complete before & confirm during interview)*

3.1   Is membership or affiliation: ____ formal? ____ informal?

Geographical Location of:

3.2   Coordination/Secretariat: _____

3.3   Members: _____

Composition of Membership

3.4   Organizations ___   Individuals ____   Networks _____

3.5   Horizontal (single sector) ___   Vertical (multi-sector) ____

3.6   Network   Knowledge   area: _____

_____

3.7   Issue   Focus: _____

_____

_____

3.8   Main Strategies / Activities:

_____

_____

4. Origins and Evolution

4.1   Where did the impetus for this network come from? (story)

4.2   What expectations were there regarding the lifespan of this network? Were these ever explicit? Have expectations changed? How & with what results? How should lifespan be handled in a network?

4.3   Has your role changed since the network started? How? Why?

4.4   Did the goals or intentions of network members ever have to be reconciled or adjusted? How was this accomplished?

4.5   What other transitions has this network experienced (leadership, funding phase, focus, responsibilities)? How were these managed?   With what result?

5. Sustainability

5.1   What holds the members together as a network?

5.2   How were trust and collaborative relationships built?

5.3   How are member contributions assessed and recognized?

5.4   How did/does the network try to stay relevant to its constituency?

5.5   What for this network were the primary issues related to its "sustainability"?

6. Coordination

6.1.1   How is this network structured? How are roles and responsibilities assigned and monitored?

6.1.2   How are ideas, strategies, relationships concerning network goals and operations introduced, decided and changed?

6.3   What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses in the coordination of this network?

6.4   What relationships does the network have with other organizations?

6.5   Who looks after administrative matters? Is this a separate function from coordinating network activities?

6.6   Has governance of the network changed over time? How? In response to what? (story?)

6.7   What challenges were encountered in coordinating the network? What happened? *(Ask for specific stories)*

6.8   What are the 3 most important skills for the coordinator of this network to possess?

7. Outcomes

7.1   In your opinion what were the most important results which have been or could be produced through this network in terms of:

- *networking & collaboration*
- *capacity building*
- *development outcomes*

7.2   What factors or circumstance helped or hindered the network's achievements the most? (*Both helping and hindering).*

8. Overall

8.1 From your experience, what do you think IDRC could learn about improving support to networks?

8.2 What do network coordinators need to learn about assisting networks?

8.3 What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the network approach for achieving development goals? (Would another approach be better?)

8.4 Is there other information relevant to this network that you want to mention?

8.5 Is there someone else you think it would be useful to talk to about this network?

The Network

External & Contextual

Internal Relations

Ongoing Relevance

Institutionalization

| Time | Financial | Relational | Process/Structure |

Sustainability

Capacity

Research Results

Relationships

Financial

Five Keys to Planning:

Goals & Objectives

Strategies & Activities

Integrated Collaboration

Leadership & Decision-making

Communication & Relationships

Annex 2

Figure 1:

Factors that Influence Network Sustainability