An Introduction to Networks: Originally Developed as a Background Paper for the Working Session at Bring Food Home 2017

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Definition of an Intentional Network

Definition: "An **Intentional Network** is a network of people and organizations that are working on the same issue or vision, together with structures that have been created to mobilize the energy of these organizations."

A network can be formally or informally organized:

Formal Intentional Network: "A set of organizations comes together and creates a new organization or a set of agreements about membership, governance, and goals. Formal intentional networks have clear boundaries and purpose." Their minimum specifications include that:

- They **have a focus** (they address an issue, solve a problem, organize a neighbourhood / region, or develop a system / vision)
- **Participation is voluntary**
- Participants of the network are **peers**
- The network **fosters engagement** among individuals who are a part of the network
- The network **mobilizes action** (e.g. a set of collaborative projects)

Informal Network: Many intentional networks are informally organized. This means that they do not have a membership, they don't meet as a whole network, and they don't have a set agreed-upon purpose. They may organize through means such as a once a month shared meal so that people can get together informally and share information about opportunities and progress on projects. An informal structure may be an excellent model for networks that put an emphasis on breakthroughs, innovation, and going viral. Those who belong to the network may simply share information and self-organize into action clusters to work on different projects. These networks work when many people take the initiative to organize different projects to experiment and discover what works.

Types of Networks

Movements: Movements happen when networks of people raise issues to the public and often political attention. Movements are often informally structured and tend to be made up of a variety of different networks that are working towards common aims. (e.g. the women's movement)

Advocacy Networks: An advocacy network is a collaboration of individuals and groups that are advocating for specific goals and are taking action around a specific issue. These tend to be informally structured. They can be identified as SPIN networks – Segmentary (many diverse & changing groups);

Polycentric (multiple, often temporary, sometimes competing leaders / centres of influence); Networked (multiple linkages including speaking tours, joint activities, common reading matter). (e.g. women's right to vote)

Coalitions / campaigns: These are very tightly defined advocacy networks with clear membership that form to advocate for a specific policy initiative. These tend to be formally structured and members needs to agree on a clearly defined set of objectives. Coalitions are often short-term and often organize campaigns as a means to achieve what they are asking for.

System Development Networks: Rather than raising issues and changing policy related to identified problems (as is typically done by advocacy network), these networks focus on developing a new system. (e.g. farmers working to develop new distribution systems; community gardens). These networks typically focus on experimentation, innovation, and engagement.

Multiscalar Networks: When System Development Networks include horizontal networks (i.e. when regional / local networks encourage small self-organizing groups to implement opportunity-driven projects) and vertical networks (linked regionally / nationally to learn from each other and to work on policy and new infrastructure).

** A Network can be very effective if it sees itself as both a System Development Network and an Advocacy Network.

Network Focus

A network typically chooses a focal point to rally its work. This focal point is usually one of the following:

- An issue (e.g. food policy)
- A problem (e.g. hunger)
- A geography (e.g. a neighbourhood network)
- A system (e.g. a sustainable food economy)
- A vision (e.g. healthy eating)

** Even though one of these becomes the key rallying point, it is often useful to understand the network through each of these lenses.

Network Function

It is valuable when a network identifies its key functions and what types of activities it will take on to achieve its purposes. A network can seek to achieve many different functions including one or more of:

- Sharing information
- Coordinating action, events or services
- Organizing joint training and skill-building
- Setting up joint purposes
- Organizing joint research
- Organizing joint learning
- Forming a joint publicity or educational campaign
- Setting up a joint referral system
- Developing a joint brand, standards or criteria
- Developing new collaborative programs or services
- Moving a policy or advocacy agenda forward
- Advocating for a specific group or issue
- Generating new system elements: programs, services, activities, institutions, etc…
- Engaging stakeholders or mobilizing a base
- Generating innovation and breakthroughs for the field

These can be loosely structured as:

- Networks that have **Light Functions** (such as sharing information or holding a joint training event). These activities are typically low-risk. What is needed is clear coordination by an individual or small group. These can be a great place for a network to start to build trust and relationships.
- Networks that require explicit agreement (about a brand, message, or campaign) can be referred to as **One Front Functions** as they need to move forward in a united way. Clarity about membership, commitment and principles are essential.
- Networks that are more about **Engagement and Experimentation.** In this case subsets of the network are trying out new approaches or developing new parts of a system. A network can connect people and make sure that different activities fit together and add up to something.

Network Structure and Governance

"Networks are different than organizations: there is no boss who can fire members if they don't do their job, there are no weekly staff meetings to ensure that the communication and learning are taking place, and there are no teams or departments to organize the work and distribute funds. This means that networks need to create an explicit support network that ensures accountability, makes sure communication is happening, and supports leadership and action."

There are 3 basic types of network structure:

Organization-Like Network Structure: These networks function very much like an organization. People join the network and make financial and time commitments. They engage in goal-setting and planning processes (often by a governing board). Work is accomplished through committees or task forces. A challenge of these types of networks is that they sometimes have difficulty engaging members and so they benefit from building relationships among members, increasing opportunities for input, and spending time distributing work.

Organization-like networks need to agree on:

- Purpose
- Guiding principles
- Goals
- Membership
- Operations
- Planning or prioritization
- Governance
- Action
- Money / resources

Self-Organized Networks: These networks are very loosely structured and operate in a decentralized way. Decision-making is located in the many self-organized projects that emerge. This is often the case for System Development Networks. Some of these networks offer an online platform for discussion as their main contribution. Others are more structured but still have no membership: those who want to initiate projects are part of the network. These can include monthly meet-ups or joint projects among members. These networks are most effective when many people in the network work to foster relationships and make sure that support systems are set up.

Self-organized networks depend on some people to guide the network and provide aspects such as:

- A catalyzing function
- Training and support for those who want to build and connect the network
- Coaching for self-organized projects

- System mapping and identification of opportunities
- Venues for reflection
- Social web training

Hybrid Network: This model is adopted for the majority of networks. Network facilitators organize the work of the network so that people within the network can take initiative. These networks may or may not have a membership or a governing board.

Hybrid network needs to select thoughtfully from the above elements. Minimum specifications include:

- Purpose
- Guiding principles
- System mapping and prioritization
- Working groups
- Innovation fund for supporting decentralized action

Leadership

A number of different leadership roles support a network.

Network Connectors: These people identify aspects of the network that are undeveloped and work to link and connect people (e.g. introduce people to each other who can collaborate – such as an academic with a population that they are trying to research and support). The network connector also looks for clusters of people who are not connected (e.g. teachers and not-for-profits).

Network Facilitator: This role involves helping a group of people with a common interest set up a more formal structure. The network facilitator is involved in:

a) Catalyzing the network, which can happen by providing information about networks; helping people see the benefits of a network approach; and bringing people together to help the group map and understand the network.
b) Supporting the network in developing an appropriate structure and terms of reference.
c) Coordinating the network, which can include bringing network members together to accomplish tasks, providing social media outreach, organizing action by developing and regularly revising a plan, and helping members organize projects.
d) Helping network members build and strengthen relationships of trust and understanding. A network should be able to clearly frame its values. Every meeting and call can include relationship-building activities.

Most networks hire a network facilitator to coordinate the network. The facilitator needs to have skills in meeting facilitation, agenda development, listening, negotiation and persuasion, conflict resolution, planning and prioritization, reporting, and social web skills for communication.

Project Coordinator: This role is valuable once enough people have become connected and have started self-organizing. This person can:

a) Be a project catalyst (i.e. help the group organize itself)
b) Coordinate projects in a way that is transparent so that others in the group can see what's happening
c) Be a project coach – i.e. help interested people become strong project coordinators

Network Guardian: This role takes a broad perspective to pay attention to the network and help determine what the network needs (e.g. what is going well, what are the challenges, are resources flowing well and fairly). Network guardians also notice and take action to help networks develop systems (communication and engagement, support for network weavers, fair access to resources, and reflection and integration).

Forming a Network

There are 2 activities that are critical to forming a network. The first is to determine the structure of the network. BUT it's just as important to spend time helping people build relationships that will help them make decisions together. Successful networks start by helping people get to know each other and help them gain a deeper understanding of the issue they're working on. Often this starts when certain people act as network weavers by starting to connect people in the network, two and three at a time. Other times a network catalyst may bring everyone together to facilitate discussion on the issue. These 2 activities are sometimes pursued by two separate working groups.

"When a network decides to completely determine its structure before doing anything else, it is often condemning itself to failure, since the structuring process can drag on for years and momentum for working on the issue may be lost." Rather than spend much time on structure, some networks choose instead to make as few decisions together as a whole network as possible. However, all networks can benefit from developing *Ground Rules for Interaction.*

Get Started with these Key Strategies to Develop and Strengthen Networks

1) **Map the network**. This involves visually mapping relationships within the network in a way that enables members to take responsibility for improving it. Mapping can be done by hand (sticky notes on a big sheet of paper) or electronically using a software tool such as https://bubbl.us/ or https://kumu.io/. This will let the group see who is connected to the core of the network, how strong those connections are, and who are at the periphery that could be better connected. The group can then ask questions such as whether all stakeholders are at the table, if there are any isolated groups, and who else needs to be brought into the network.
2) **Develop TORs for the Network** to guide the governance structure (see the network structure section above).
3) **Close triangles**. This involves connecting two individuals so that these people can collaborate on their own. This can be a first step in getting more people to initiate and implement action. It is particularly important to use this method to bring new people in, to connect clusters, and to connect people with little access to power to those who can open doors.
4) **Implement action projects.** Right from the start, while the network structure is still developing, it can be useful to experiment with network action whether by developing an action plan or taking on activities of interest. Networks that seek to take action can be very effective when they focus "on opportunities and leverage points that have the greatest chance of making a difference. Spending time on drawing and understanding the system you are trying to change and then identifying areas where focused action would make the most difference right now can lead to substantial change in a short period of time." Taking action can involve setting up 'twosies' – two people who can work together to take something on – or sub-groups that can draw others in and report back to the larger network. A critical part of a network is to make sure that there are systems in place for this type of self-organizing. "Self-organizing is, without a doubt, the aspect of networks that is most likely to bring transformation." "When self-organizing is encouraged and supported, many more people will initiate collaborative projects."
5) **Train members in network building / weaving.** Right from the start, those who are developing the network can gather and share information about networks and how to strengthen them. A key part of building a network can be to keep extending this training to others.