

Working Paper 271

**Understanding Networks:
The Functions of Research Policy Networks**

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ODI's Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme aims to improve the use of research in development policy and practice through improved knowledge about: research/policy links; improved knowledge management and learning systems; improved communication; and improved awareness of the importance of research. Further information about the programme is available at www.odi.org.uk/rapid.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|---|
| (Anti) – MAI | (Anti) – Multilateral Agreement on Investment |
| ACBF | African Capacity Building Foundation |
| AERC | African Economic Research Consortium |
| AfDB | African Development Bank |
| AFREPREN | African Energy Policy Research Network |
| ALNAP | Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action |
| BRP | Bridging Research and Policy |
| CIES | Consortio de Investigación Económica y Social (Economic and Social Research Consortium) |
| CSO | Civil society organisation |
| CSPP | Civil Society Partnerships Programme |
| DEC | Disasters Emergency Committee |
| DevelopmentEx | Development Executive Group |
| DFID | Department for International Development |
| DSA | Development Studies Association |
| FANCA | Freshwater Action Network Central America |
| GDN | Global Development Network |
| GDN BRP | Global Development Network Bridging Research and Policy project |
| GPPN | Global Public Policy Network |
| HAI | HelpAge International |
| ICT | Information and communications technology |
| IDRC | International Development Research Centre |
| IFPRI | International Food Policy Research Institute |
| IFRTD-AL | International Forum of Rural Transport and Development for Latin America |
| IISD | International Institute for Sustainable Development |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| KNET | Knowledge network |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| ODI | Overseas Development Institute |
| PPA | Partnerships Programme Agreement |
| PRA | Participatory rapid appraisal |
| RAPID | Research and Policy in Development (ODI Programme) |
| RPN | Research Policy Network |
| SARN | South Asia Research Network |
| SISERA | Secretariat for Institutional Support for Economic Research in Africa |
| SURFS | Sub-Regional Resource Facilities |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |

Executive Summary

We are constantly talking about networks. Banks use their networks to offer global services to customers; airlines fly passengers all over the world via their networks of partners; news agencies use media networks to keep us informed every minute of the day; and terrorist networks threaten citizens around the world. The importance of networks extends to the development sector: they organise civil society to advocate for and implement change; they link the local with the global, the private with the public; and they provide spaces for the creation, sharing and dissemination of knowledge.

In a way, networks seem to make anything and everything happen. But we have yet to understand what they are and what they can and cannot do. In the development literature, a huge variety of policy and social network concepts and applications exists. This paper attempts to set out a framework to help clarify what research policy networks do.

Networks and policy influence

ODI, as part of its RAPID programme, has begun a long term study into the linkages between research and policy. One element of the study addresses the roles that networks can play to make these links more feasible. Perkin and Court's (2005) literature review of networks and policy processes in development discussed many of the key emerging themes surrounding the subject. The authors show that networks can be useful as communicators or bridges between research, practice and policy. Networks can help researchers influence policy processes in several ways. This usefulness hints at the functions that networks can play.

Why focus on functions?

The attention to functions is important for many reasons. Among them, as in any organisation, what a network does is related to how it is structured. Changing one without changing the other might lead to negative impacts on the network and its objectives. Also, introducing new functions to certain networks might be counterproductive in terms of the achievement of the network's original objectives and those who depend on them. These are very relevant issues for research policy networks in the development field – in particular as they re-form to have more of an influence on policy.

In addition, traditional definitions of networks do not necessarily respond to the vast diversity that exists. These make assumptions about what different types of networks should be like rather than embrace their difference. A functional description could incorporate a much broader number of research policy networks, which carry out very different functions and roles and are organised in many different ways to achieve the same objective evidence-based policy influence.

Functions

Building on the lessons of networks studies focusing on their usefulness and functions, this paper addresses the problem of describing networks by considering the possible functions that they can play to link up the various processes that allow the bridging of research and policy. To do so, it takes Portes and Yeo's (2001; Yeo, 2004; Yeo and Mendizabal, 2004) suggestion that networks can fulfil six, non-exclusive functions:

- **Filter:** 'Decide' what information is worth paying attention to and organise unmanageable amounts of information.
- **Amplify:** Help take little known or little understood ideas and make them more widely understood.
- **Invest/provide:** Offer a means to give members the resources they need to carry out their main activities.
- **Convene:** Bring together different people or groups of people.

- **Community building:** Promote and sustain the values and standards of the individuals or organisations within them.
- **Facilitate:** Help members carry out their activities more effectively.

Roles

Among research policy networks there are many fundamental differences. Some networks are, in fact, key agents of that change, whereas others merely provide their members with the support they need to pursue their own research policy strategies. So it is probably easier to think of the previously mentioned networks' functions within two supra-functions or roles: **agency** and **support**.

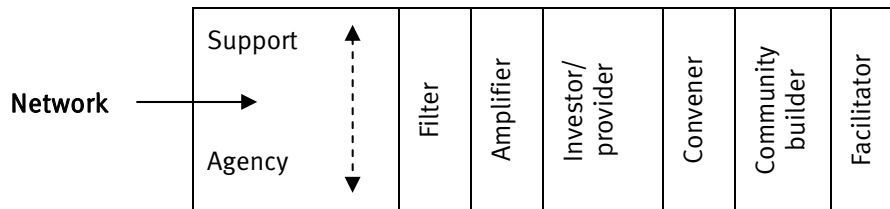
- The **agency** role denotes a network that is charged by its members to become the main agent of the change they aim to achieve.
- The **support** role, on the other hand, works in the opposite direction. In this case, the network itself (as an independent entity or the secretariat) is not the agent of change.

In practice, most research policy networks have some characteristics of both. Recognising these is important for considering the functions they need to undertake.

Discussion and conclusion

A description of a network using the functional approach would consider first its role: whether it is a support or agency network (or what proportion of each it follows). Within this, one would then consider the various functions the network carries out, as done for the Peruvian networks used as examples in this paper. With this information it would become easier to understand how these networks can influence policy using research-based evidence.

Describing networks



1 Introduction

We are constantly talking about networks. Banks use their networks to offer global services to customers; airlines fly passengers all over the world via their networks of partners; news agencies use media networks to keep us informed every minute of the day; and terrorist networks threaten citizens around the world. The importance of networks extends to the development sector: they organise civil society to advocate for and implement change; they link the local with the global, the private with the public; and networks provide spaces for the creation, sharing and dissemination of knowledge.

In a way, networks seem to make anything and everything happen. But we have yet to understand what they are and what they can and cannot do. In the development literature, a huge variety of policy and social network concepts and applications exists. This has resulted in a failure to reach a common understanding on whether policy networks constitute a method of analysis, a tool, a proper theory or a metaphor for something else (Borzel, 1997).

This paper attempts to set out a framework to help clarify what research policy networks do. It begins by considering the premise that a relationship exists between the functions and structure of policy research networks (Creech and Willard, 2001), and then focuses on the former. This ought to help us to understand and work better with them.¹ The paper also builds on the work by Perkin and Court (2005): a literature review and analysis of research policy networks.

The paper argues for the importance of focusing on policy research network's functions. It is structured as follows: Section 2 considers the usefulness of networks and the benefits of taking a more functional approach to understanding them. Section 3 addresses six functional categories in more detail, providing some illustrative examples for each. This leads to the recognition of a set of overarching roles or 'supra-functions' that describe the network *raison d'être*. Section 4 then considers these roles and functions from the perspective of seven examples of research policy networks in Peru. The paper ends with a series of conclusions and implications for further research, policy and practice.

¹ A thorough discussion on some of the key structural characteristics of networks is being dealt with in a forthcoming paper by the author: *Working with and Supporting Networks*.

2 From a Prescriptive Definition ...

ODI, as part of its RAPID programme, has begun a long term study into the linkages between research and policy. One element of the study addresses the roles that networks can play to make these links more feasible. Perkin and Court's (2005) literature review of networks and policy processes in development discussed many of the key emerging themes surrounding the subject.

In Perkin and Court, networks are broadly defined as 'formal or informal structures that link actors (individuals or organisations) who share a common interest on a specific issue or who share a general set of values' (2005: 3). In their paper, the definition is narrowed down to describe a very specific type of networks: those dealing with traditional research for policy producers – or policy networks. For instance, some of the most commonly identified research policy networks are:

- Global Public Policy Networks (GPPN)²
- Epistemic Communities (Stone and Maxwell, 2005; Haas, 1991)
- Knowledge Networks (KNET) (Stone and Maxwell, 2005)
- Communities of Practice (de Merode, 2000)
- Advocacy networks
- Private-private policy networks³

However, because the emphasis of the definitions of these research policy networks is on what they are rather than on what they do, it is sometimes difficult to see where to place, for instance, non-professional trade union networks, networks of religious groups, grassroots or community networks, which might not be interested in advocacy. And these policy networks definitions also bear little relevance within the Latin American policy network literature that awards informal family and friendship networks – in particularly the elite – a central role in the policy process (see Corzo, 2002; Adler, 2002; Grindle, 1977; Gamboa and Cordero, 1989; Devés, 1999; Bonaudo and Sonzogni, 1992).

This paper offers the opportunity to look at networks from an alternative viewpoint, one less prescriptive, by recognising that networks are valuable for their roles in poverty eradication. Rather than a definition, the aim is to arrive at a framework for describing networks. In doing so, the focus is on research policy networks, that is, those that use research-based evidence to attempt to influence policy and practice. The emphasis on function, however, should allow for the analysis of other types of networks, including informal ones.

2.1 Networks can be useful: why focus on functions?

Perkin and Court show that networks can be useful as communicators or bridges between research, practice and policy. For instance, they found that networks can help researchers influence policy processes in several ways. They can (2005: 28-9):

- Marshal evidence to enhance the credibility of the argument;
- Foster links between researchers, civil society organisations (CSOs) and policymakers;
- Amplify good quality, representative evidence;
- Collaborate with policymakers;
- Bypass formal barriers to consensus;
- Enhance the sustainability and reach of the policy;
- Act as dynamic 'platforms for action';
- Provide good quality, representative evidence;
- Link policymakers to policy end-users;

² For further information, see www.globalpublicpolicy.net/.

³ See Pattberg (2004) for examples.

- Foster communication;
- Provide support and encouragement; and
- Coordinate member evaluations.

These are some of the activities that networks can carry out to link research with policy. Tanner (in Brehm, 2001) identifies a series of functions that can be carried out under different types of partnership relationships between North-South organisations (in this case from Cambodia). Why not then work with a more functional classification of networks focusing on what they are designed to do, a classification that does not attempt to define a network but rather describes it? By doing so, we may extend the analysis beyond looking at certain types or groups of networks, as is often the case. This would recognise that it is impossible to arrive at a finite set of types of networks: networks can take multiple forms depending on the characteristics of their internal and external environments.

This way of thinking about networks is not new. Reinicke et al (2000), for instance, list six similar functions that international policy networks can fulfil:

- Shape the agenda;
- Facilitate the process of negotiation and setting international standards;
- Help develop and disseminate knowledge;
- Help create and deepen international markets;
- Provide mechanisms for implementing global agreements; and
- Build trust.

These functions are related to international policy networks but, interestingly, only one of them refers specifically to research (help develop and disseminate knowledge), which suggests that not all networks, including policy networks, necessarily fulfil a research function. He also hints that the creation and dissemination of knowledge can be considered as one single function of international networks and not separate, as is often the case.

The attention to functions is important. If there is a strong relation between the functions networks play and their form then, on the one hand, structural reforms of networks are bound by the necessity to fulfil their functions and, on the other, changes in their functions and objectives are bound by their structure. Changing one and not the other might lead to a negative impact on the network and its objectives. Also, introducing new functions to certain networks might be counterproductive to the achievement of the network's original objective or to both old and new and those who depend on them.

Reinicke is also considered in Paalberg's evaluation of the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI) experience with decentralisation via regional policy networks (2005). Paalberg assesses which are the best network structures for international policy research organisations that attempt to create or sponsor networks in developing countries. The structure (he offers a simple dichotomy: more decentralised vs. more centralised) must serve a very specific objective: achieve regional decentralisation of IFPRI. He concludes that the structure is tied to the local capacity level: 'the weaker the local capacity, the more centralised the network must be at the IFPRI hub' (Paalberg 2005: 10). And, interestingly, IFPRI's experience suggests that uneven local capacities lead to the development of 'heterarchical' structures in which some functions are more centralised than others. There is, therefore, a relation between how the network is organised, what it can do and how it does it.

Similarly, Bernard (1996), working on IDRC networks, identifies several types of networks that offer an insight into their functions:

- Interface networks – for linking small non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with international actors;
- Projective networks – that encourage networks to pursue new lines of research;
- Platform for action networks – that facilitate both implementation and advocacy;
- Non-traditional networks – that play on the capacity of networks to shift their form and function with great flexibility; and

- Access networks – that link different sectors.

Finally, Struyk (2000) and Creech and Willard (2001) provide yet another link between form and function that supports this paper's initial focus on the latter as the guiding criteria for networks study. Struyk, looking at think tank networks, classifies them according to four categories: objective or function; incentives for participation; basis for membership; and network coherence. These categories emphasise that both function and form are important and closely related; together, and not independently, they help us understand any given network.

Creech and Willard offer a broader and more extensive and detailed analysis of networks, addressing the relations between function and form focusing on one model of policy networks: formal knowledge networks. Some of the lessons of their long-term (over five years) work can be summarised in the following recommendations:

- Before setting up a network, leading members need to determine what will be the network's objectives, who should and should not be members, and what the costs are of joining the network;
- There are clear network advantages in joint value creation, strengthened capacity for research and communication, and linking with decision makers;
- Working networks require organisational management and a network manager;
- Communication and engagement strategies are essential from the start;
- Network evaluation methodologies and skills are required to foster structures and environments beneficial for and supportive of networks.

In determining the planning framework for network formation, management, communications and governance, Creech and Willard begin by asking: What are we going to do? On whom are we going to influence change? And, how are we going to effect those changes? In essence, they are asking what the network's functions are. This serves as the basis for the development of a network plan.

An important aspect of the focus on functions is that we can now include the study of traditional networks (horizontal, member driven, etc.) as cases of networked organisations. This means organisations such as NGOs or think tanks, which host and run networks to carry out their main objectives. Many large international NGOs, for instance, work through a series of networks to advocate before policymakers (supporters who write petitions and implement campaigns), to implement their projects (local CSO partners in developing countries), and to raise funds (patrons and individual donors). Similarly, ODI hosts and coordinates networks such as the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and uses a network of partners in developing countries to set up multidisciplinary and multinational research teams.

Capra's understating of networks as relationships between processes fits into this line of analysis (in McCarthy, Miller and Skidmore, 2004). Networks' functions can explain these relationships and the effects they have on the processes that make up the networks. For instance, in an ideal research policy network, research processes would be related to planning and communication processes. If we focus on the shape that several networks of this kind have, we will find that the same functions can be fulfilled by many different types of structures, depending on the internal and external characteristics of the network. In other words, we can use various means to link research with policy. The fact that we are playing a communication function, however, does not change, even if the message and the means do. We can then compare different communication functions.

The following section looks in more detail into the functions that networks can play.

3 ... To a Functional Description – What Networks Do

Building on the lessons of networks studies focusing on function, this paper now addresses the problem of describing networks by considering the possible functions that they can play to link up the various processes that allow the bridging of research and policy. To do so, it takes Portes and Yeo's (2001; Yeo, 2004; Yeo and Mendizabal, 2004) suggestion that networks can fulfil six, non-exclusive functions:

1. Filter
2. Amplify
3. Invest/provide
4. Convene
5. Build communities
6. Facilitate

It is important to emphasise that most networks can play more than one function. This is not under discussion in this paper since, in fact, most successful research policy networks would do. What is important, however, is to recognise that not all networks can play all functions at once and that some networks can only play certain ones: those for which they were designed. It will also be useful to understand the processes by which networks can carry out more than one function. Is there a sequencing pattern that networks have to follow? For example, do community building networks need to become filtering networks before they can act as amplifiers?

The following subsections further explore these functions and offer some practical examples of specific activities carried out under each.

3.1 Filter

The filtering function of a network allows unmanageable amounts of information (about people, experts, events and facts) to be organised and used in a productive way. Filters 'decide' what information is worth paying attention to. This function, unlike the others, is a passive one. Other networks or actors or other functions within the network collect and provide the information to the filter. Media content editors often carry out filtering functions by 'deciding' what is disseminated to the general public. Filtering networks can provide policymakers with a similar service. Ministers and members of parliament, for instance, have networks of advisors and informers that filter evidence and research on any one particular subject and provide them with, hopefully, the necessary information they need to make a policy decision.

Lessons from the Global Development Network's Bridging Research and Policy (GDN BRP) project also suggest that think tanks can fulfil a filtering function. Think tanks in Argentina, for instance, can filter the evidence from several researcher sources.⁴ Similarly, expert working groups appointed by policymakers to help on specific policy issues filter alternatives and ideas to arrive to policy recommendations.

Some of the activities, projects and programmes carried out by networks under their filtering function are:

- Job opportunities listings on the DevNetJobs website;
- DevelopmentEx databases of bidding opportunities from main donors;
- ALNAP, Eldis and id21, which classify and organise documents and resources on different subjects for easier access by their members or users;
- Advisory boards or study groups within a network who synthesise the opinions of experts;

⁴ Miguel Braun, workshop comment at GDN BRP Project Workshop, January 2005, Dakar.

- Conflicttransformation.org provides information on scholarships, courses and conferences to members;
- Periodic newsletter with key research findings from members' projects;
- The Combined Harare Residents' Association filters the concerns, complaints and recommendations of the citizens of Harare;
- The Freshwater Action Network Central America (FANCA) publishes news summaries relevant for its members.

Box 1: The Development Executive Group (DevelopmentEx)

The Development Executive Group is a global membership organisation serving firms, non-profit organisations, and individual professionals working in the €100 billion international development market. It provides them with useful information on the international development industry, facilitating intra-network communications and access to resources such as expert consultants and contracts.

Functions: Filter (from outside to the inside), community building (among development workers) and facilitator (facilitates access to other members and resources), provides (acts as a broker between donors/clients and members).

Key structure: Strong management hub that filters information from the outside to make it relevant and useful to its members.

Special characteristics: Stresses communications among partner members. The main objective is to help members to be profitable, so it is geared towards offering members access to funds and other operational resources.

Source: www.developmentex.com/index.asp

3.2 Amplify

Amplifying functions of networks, as well as filters, are more clearly related to the roles that the media play (in fact, the media plays both roles). Amplifiers help take an idea or a message from a private or complex state and transfer it to a public or simple – or understandable – one. Advocacy or campaigning organisations, or alliances such as Greenpeace, Oxfam or the Jubilee Campaign, are examples of amplifying networks. The media also plays an amplifying function by disseminating stories and ideas to a wider audience; this suggests that networks can play multiple functions. In a media network, some participants (the journalists), amplify the stories by communicating them from the periphery (the field) to the centre (newsroom). Other members of the network (the editors) then filter those stories deciding which ones are communicated to the wider audience.

Amplifying can serve several roles. It can be used to disseminate a message or idea; it can involve a communication processes (which involves two-way relations); and it can be used to manage others.

Dissemination functions amplify a message outwards. Academic journals are often organised as networks of global, regional or national editors to capture current research on specific subjects and amplify their messages by publishing research in the form of papers and articles. (These editors in turn are acting as filters of information.) Many networks advocating for policy change in the global arena are arranged as such to amplify the messages of individual partners.

Communicating functions, on the other hand, involve a two-way process. Community educators' networks can amplify health and nutritional messages through rural areas but also amplify the messages of the poor back to the planners of the health and nutritional policies. Communication also assumes that the receiver understands the message; we cannot be satisfied with him or her listening to it. And because it is a two-way process, relations among members of these networks would fluctuate between teacher-pupil and colleague.

The management function is more clearly observed when the message or the information is amplified within an organisation or a network to obtain a specific reaction from the staff or network members relevant to the running of the organisation. For instance, GDN informs the network members through

newsletters and emails of the details of the next conference and of their individual responsibilities with respect to its organisation.

Some of the activities, projects and programmes carried out by networks under their amplifying function are:

- The Fairtrade Foundation licenses the Fairtrade brand to raise awareness of fair trade;
- The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) network publishes member's working papers – providing an additional amplifying means for their outputs;
- The Development Studies Association (DSA) newsletter announces upcoming conferences and other network-related activities;
- The CIVICUS newsletter with communications and messages (job opportunities, call for papers, book launch announcements, etc.) from members;
- The World Bank's 'Voices of the Poor' project;
- A Participatory Rapid Appraisal process carried out within a community;
- The Make Poverty History white wristbands, among other activities, helped raise awareness about key issues affecting the developing world.

Box 2: The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance

The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance works through an education approach to tackle the issues of global trade and HIV/AIDS. At present, more than 85 churches and church-related organisations have joined the Alliance and bring a constituency to this common work of advocacy of more than 100 million people worldwide.

Functions: Amplifying (the messages of HIV/AIDS, conflict and trade through churches), facilitating (coordination of actions among members).

Key structure: A small coordinating secretariat in Switzerland and a global committee. Other members are loosely attached.

Special characteristics: A faith-based membership and use of institutional infrastructure of the church provide the network with additional organisational strength. Its governance agreement does not then need to address too many non-executive issues.

Source: www.e-alliance.ch

3.3 Invest/provide

Investing networks offer a channel to provide members with the resources they need to carry out their main activities. The ACBF in Africa, for instance, provides resources in the form of technical assistance, skills and funding to its research partners. Investor/provider networks can take many forms and may involve the distribution of goods and services from within the network (member led) or from outside the network (acting as brokers).

Broker investor/provider networks act mostly as facilitators connecting, for instance, donors and trainers with network members. ACBF, the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), the Economic and Social Research Consortium (CIES), the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) and the Secretariat for Institutional Support for Economic Research in Africa (SISERA) are examples of such networks. The ACBF provides resources in the form of technical assistance, skills and funding to its research partners. CIES in Peru distributes research grants among its members to promote local research. The DEC in the UK acted as a provider of funds to its members – as well as an amplifier of the plight of the tsunami victims and a facilitator for the support from the general public. In these cases, funds come from outside the network, with the central hub acting as a broker between supply and demand.

These definitions, however, focus on internal investments; i.e. on the network's members. Networks can also be useful to invest or provide to third parties – non-members. For instance, the DEC could be said to have acted as an investor/provider of funds, goods and services to the victims of the tsunami (clearly, non-members). Similarly, donors create coordinating networks to harmonise their

interventions in a country, region or sector. The network provides the platforms and mechanisms to invest.

Some of the activities, projects and programmes carried out by networks under their investor/provider functions are:

- CIES assigns research grants to members via annual contests;
- RedR offers training in disaster and humanitarian relief to members and non-members;
- The DEC distributed funds collected from donations to its member humanitarian agencies;
- MediCam, in Cambodia, provides its members with access to training opportunities organised by the network and others.

Box 3: Consorcio de Investigación Económica y Social (CIES), Perú

The objective of CIES (IDRC funded) is to strengthen the Peruvian academic community to produce and disseminate knowledge useful to policy analysts and policymakers in the public sector, civil society and academia. It does so by providing research grants to researchers as well as a platform to engage in debate and capacity building.

Functions: Investor/provider (channels funds from IDRC-CIDA and other donors), amplifier (but not advocate, only via traditional means), community building (of the research community in Peru).

Key structure: Members include 30 institutions among universities and research centres. The steering committee is made up of representatives of members, public sector, civil society and donors.

Special characteristics: CIES is seen as a source of funding and a space for publication of academic work. It is not a means to reach policymakers. E.g. members work independently to influence policies and do not necessarily go through CIES. They organise activities such as seminars and capacity-building activities; they also link the members to other networks. The network is not equally organised. Universities and centres from Lima have more representation than those from the country side.

Source: www.consorcio.org/index.asp

Box 4: African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), Zimbabwe

The ACBF, based in Harare, is an independent, capacity-building institution. Membership includes three sponsoring agencies (AfDB, UNDP and the World Bank), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which joined the Foundation in 2002, and 32 African countries and non-African countries and institutions.

Functions: Investor/provider (capacity building and funding), facilitation (networking), amplifier (via publications and events), filter (of information in support of ACBF researchers).

Key structure: A steering committee/secretariat that carries out the activities of the foundations.

Special characteristics: Covers two regional organisations and 26 national focal points in 37 countries in Africa. It offers research grants as well as capacity-building grants. It offers members networking activities as well as specialised workshops. It also finances workshops carried out by workshops.

Source: www.acbf-pact.org

3.4 Convene

Convening networks bring together different individuals and groups. In the case of research, a convening network would bring researchers together to plan and carry out research; it could, for instance, convene researchers from different nationalities or disciplines. A convening network can also bring together users of the products or services of networks or their members, for instance, policymakers looking for advice or ideas from researchers. The functions of a convening network, however, go beyond filtering and amplifying and require the ability to reach out to very specific audiences in several sectors and levels. Issues of authority structures, logistical capacities, credibility and media, communication and dissemination skills require special attention. An example of a convenor is a public private consultation group that brings together policymakers and interest groups, or the GDN where researchers from different constituencies, and participating in different processes or projects, come together with policymakers and donors.

The convening functions of a network, unlike the amplifying ones, require that the audiences be more narrowly defined: it is made up of either members of the network or very specific groups such as public and private decision makers. Hence, a convening network must develop context and audience-specific tools to communicate and disseminate its goods and services. Convening products differentiate between audiences. This is different from producing a newsletter that discusses several issues that might interest different groups; convening implies having separate newsletters. It is also seen as not offering a whole range of products for all members, but instead providing a differentiated product to each member. Similarly, the network filters the information and messages of the members as they come together. This supposes that a common agenda is set during a clear convening process, but does not mean that it is the only agenda shared by some or all of the members. Convening networks can use this function to gain credibility and legitimacy to participate in the policy process. Coalition 2000 in Bulgaria did this by incorporating all key actors in the development of anti-corruption strategies.

Another important aspect of this type of networks is that, in some cases, their main function is, in fact, bridging research and policy. Convening networks allow the development of systematic and sustainable linkages between researchers and policymakers (or between research and policy). Unlike amplifying networks, convening networks need to carry out systematic and elaborate strategies to inform policy processes and plan the research of their members accordingly. Similarly, they filter evidence to respond to a highly informed and specialised demand. This means that convening networks will most likely have a more elaborate structure than other networks and therefore prove more difficult to create and manage. Unfortunately, it is these networks that resource-strapped researchers need in order to increase their chances of affecting policy processes.

This brief review of convening networks suggests that they must also fulfil other functions such as filtering, amplifying and community building. We could say that convening networks depict a higher state of network functional development. This means it is possible to conceive a sequence in network development that may culminate in a convening network where all other functions come together.

Some of the activities, projects and programmes carried out by networks under their convening functions are:

- The GDN Annual Conference bring together actors from development agencies, public sector, civil society and the private sector;
- ODI meeting sessions often include participants from different areas of the development sector for whom different information materials are produced;
- The Coalition 2000 has developed programmes specifically designed to work with different actors: local authorities, civil society, journalists, educators, the private sector, etc.;
- The DSA has set up a number of study groups to provide its members with specific spaces for participation.

Box 5: Coalition 2000, Bulgaria anti corruption network

Coalition 2000 is an initiative of a number of Bulgarian NGOs aimed at combating corruption through a process of cooperation among governmental institutions, NGOs and individuals. It works at the agenda-setting level, drafting an Anti-Corruption Action Plan for Bulgaria, as well as implementing an awareness campaign and a monitoring system.

Functions: Convenor (brings together various sectors and addresses their concerns), filter (information on corruption for easy access by all users), amplifier (of its work, findings of research and media), community building (helps establish coalitions).

Key structure: A network of partners from civil society, government and the private sector. It is a partnership. It includes a policy forum to determine the Coalition's work and is made up of representatives of all relevant institutions (NGOs, institutions of the state, international organisations); a Steering Committee that provides direction and oversees the process; and a Secretariat that provides the management.

Special characteristics: The network provides consensus and coalition building, collects information, disseminates (mostly to inform and shame) and influences policy through direct and indirect action.

Source: www.anticorruption.bg/eng/coalition/about.htm

3.5 Build communities

Community building functions promote and sustain the values and standards of a network of individuals or groups. These networks can work towards the formation of informal neighbourhood groups, formal research communities and even ‘expatriate’ communities. The functions illustrate another important aspect of networks: some exist as a means of supporting a type of community; if they did not exist, the community would disappear (e.g. community networks such as neighbourhood associations that come together to promote their livelihoods: a ‘neighbourhood watch’ or a ‘street-vendors association’: Aliaga, n.d.). Members initially unite neither to communicate a message nor to invest in each other but to protect themselves from outside threats. In some cases, they begin to provide services to the members and act as amplifiers of their problems to a wider audience. This is often not their primary function and therefore they are not organisationally prepared for it. Some, however, do make the transition from community builder to amplifier and convener; their policy impact improves. These are particularly important as they constitute the few in which networks are intrinsically representative of the poor (see, for instance, the experiences of Aliaga, n.d.; Forni and Longo, 2004).

Community building networks are also related to trade networks such as the DevelopmentEx or the DSA which provide a space where a community of professionals and institutions in development can come together. Although it provides a series of services to its members (investor/provider function), its main objective is to sustain and promote its own activities, thus strengthening the community as a whole. As a consequence, it is less useful as a means to communicate with non-members. A research community network may be faced with a structure that supports and promotes member research efforts but is unable to provide adequate linkages to policymakers. The literature on social capital gives interesting examples of community-building networks that develop several strong links within the network but none or few weak links to others. Unfortunately, for those interested in bridging research and policy, community-building networks have the right environment for developing good quality research. They are effective in producing, sharing and advancing knowledge among researchers – but are not effective in promoting it or linking to more policy-oriented networks without reducing its research capacity.

Some of the activities, projects and programmes carried out by networks under their community building function are:

- The DSA annual meeting provides networking opportunities and offers members a showcase for their research products (e.g. publications) and research work (e.g. workshops);
- ALNAP meetings offer members a chance to meet each other and strengthen bonds and relations;
- CIVICUS newsletters offer members information about what other members are working on;
- The DevelopmentEx gives members a series of services and spaces for information exchange;
- A professional or trade union is a closely knit structure of individuals with the same professional practice and offers capacity-building opportunities to its members;
- A street vendors’ association organises meetings with other associations to share experiences;
- The International Forum of Rural Transport and Development for Latin America (IFRTD-AL) has organised a space for researchers and practitioners to share their knowledge and experiences.

Box 6: CIVICUS

CIVICUS is an international alliance to promote the foundation, growth and protection of citizen action throughout the world. CIVICUS currently has more than 650 members in 110 countries. Its membership is diverse, including networks and organisational sectors; policy and research, grant-making, youth, women, and the environment.

Functions: Community builder (through unifying events, service provision and newsletter/publications), filter (Civil Society Watch Index), investor/provider (governance capacity for CSOs), convener (to a degree).

Key structure: A hub in the developing world and regional offices in the developed world.

Special characteristics: CIVICUS headquarters and operational hub is located in Johannesburg, South Africa. It also has offices in Washington, DC and in London. Members include NGOs, CSOs, grant-making institutions, business entities committed to social issues and any individuals interested in civil society issues. It provides a platform for action research useful to its members.

Source: www.civicus.org/new/default.asp

3.6 Facilitate

Facilitating functions help members carry out their activities more efficiently and effectively. In the case of research networks, these might include organising conferences and meetings, publishing working papers and policy briefs, and providing mentoring to researchers or key individuals. Facilitator networks, like facilitators at a workshop, help make things happen but do not need to be involved with the member's work.

Facilitating functions are the hardest to differentiate from the others because, in theory, networks are created to facilitate the achievement of any particular objective. In this case, facilitation refers to the actions of networks that are different from those that are the main actions of the network's members.

Some of the activities, projects and programmes carried out by networks under their facilitating function are:

- MediCam hosts a series of resources (online databases, libraries) useful for NGOs working in the health sector in Cambodia. It also provides orientation services for new arrivals to Cambodia working for the network's members.
- DevelopmentEx provides bidding information from several donors making consultants' work easier. It also facilitates hiring procedures by filtering possible candidates using a means-tested search engine.
- UNDP's Sub-Regional Resource Facilities (SURFS) network reduces distances between practitioners and experts by providing members with quick answers from experts in other UNDP offices.

Box 7: MediCam, Cambodia

MediCam is a network of NGOs active in Cambodia's health sector. It seeks to link all health sector stakeholders by representing the voice of its NGO members, facilitating policy, advocacy, building capacity of MediCam's members and health partners, and sharing relevant quality information.

Functions: Facilitator (for its members), community builder (of health-related NGOs in Cambodia), investor/provider (broker capacity building of MediCam members), amplifier/filter (via internal communications).

Key structure: A hub and many members but managed mostly via the internet and virtual communications. Full members are only local institutions.

Special characteristics: Three types of membership: full membership for local NGOs, associate membership for international actors, observer membership for individuals interested in health issues in Cambodia. Observers have no voting rights. A minimum participation is demanded for members to keep membership. They lack sufficient links with regional and international networks doing similar work.

Source: www.medicam-cambodia.org

A preliminary observation, and particularly relevant to bridging research and policy networks, is that functions are also related to the stage of the policy process that networks (or CSOs in general) aim to influence. Facilitation functions are more related to the implementation of policies or actions; filtering and investing/providing functions to policy monitoring and formulation and research; amplifying functions to the communication and dissemination of policy alternatives or evaluation results; community building to the evaluation of policies; and convening to setting the agenda.

4 Supra-functions or Roles – What Networks Exist For

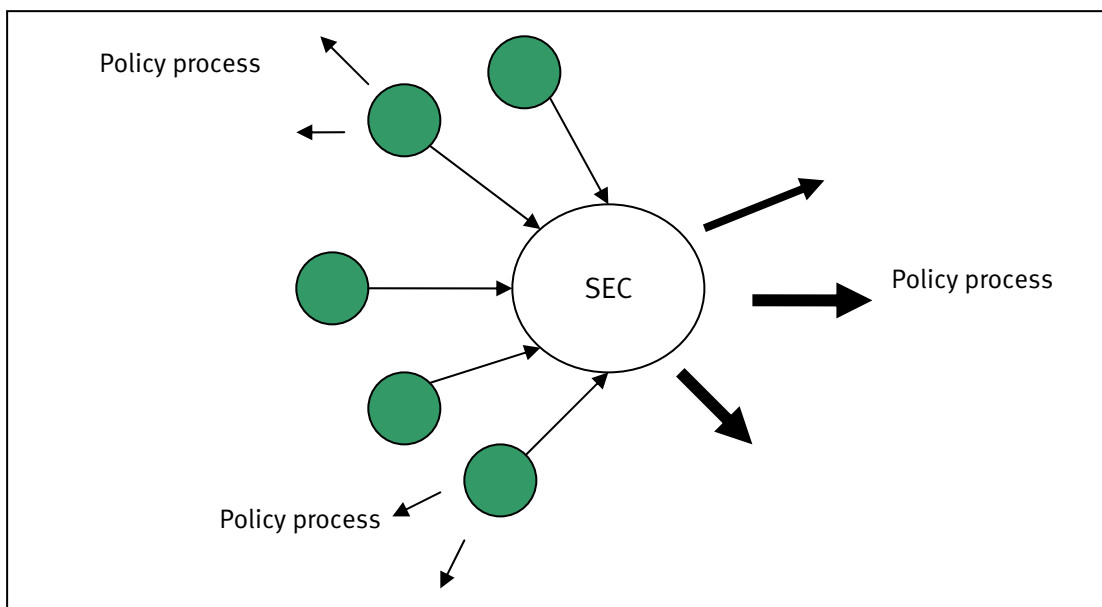
Recent work in Latin America, and in particular Peru, highlighted another key aspect regarding network functions. After discussion with various networks and their members, it became apparent that not all research policy networks are oriented towards an active and direct effort to change policy. Some are key agents of change, but others merely provide members with the support they need to pursue their own research policy strategies. It is probably easier to think of the above network functions within two supra-functions: agency and support. These roles would describe their *raison d'être*.

4.1 An agency supra-function

The agency role denotes a network that is charged by its members to become the main agent of the change they aim to achieve. Hence, research and communications are networked or centralised; in any case, coordinated. Members may pay a fee (joining and/or annual), provide it with funds to execute agreed projects (such as a campaign), or allocate a portion of their programme or project budget to its running. The Make Poverty History campaign is an example of a network with an agency role, where individual members charged the campaign (of which they are active participants) with the overall responsibility to lead on key specific issues (aid, trade, debt) without renouncing their own policy advocacy on others; this gave them a strong voice. In other cases, such as in CIES, the network has the capacity to raise funds, which allows it to run coordinated programmes or projects. A key aspect on agency networks is that the brand is a recognisable one; more so than in support networks (below).

So in these types of networks, members provide (directly or indirectly) resources to the network secretariat (or the network as an entity) which in turn is charged with influencing the policy process. In the figure below, the members empower the network secretariat to influence the policy process. But, independently, they can continue to influence their own policy processes.

Figure 1: Agency role

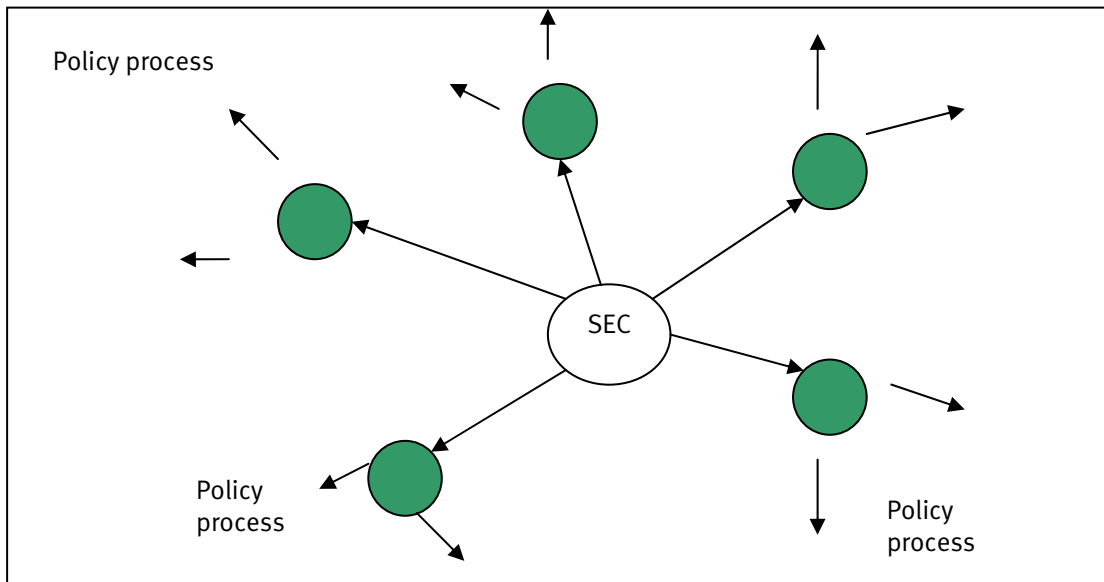


4.2 A support supra-function

The support role, on the other hand, works in the opposite direction. In this case, the network itself (as an independent entity or the secretariat) is not the agent of change. Rather, it supplies the network members with the resources (goods and services) it needs to carry out their own research and policy advocacy. The IFRTDAL, for instance, is a network of Latin American researchers and practitioners

linked by their interest in the field of rural transport. Not all of them, however, work on rural transport itself. Some are labour practitioners, others and road safety researchers, and others transport experts. The network provides them with research, tools and contacts on one of the many themes on which they work. They can use these resources to affect policy processes in which they are involved, in favour of rural transport.

Figure 2: Support role



Unlike an agency network, a purely support network lacks the capacity (or the mandate) to influence policy; that responsibility rests on individual members or coalitions within the network. The figure above shows how members withdraw resources from the network to influence their own policy processes.

Within each supra-function, it is possible to observe all the other functions mentioned before. IFRTDAL, for instance, filters information and amplifies among its members. It brings together very different groups of actors (policymakers, researchers, academics, practitioners) with different thematic expertise, it has helped create a community of practice in Latin America and, when it can, it provides the members with funds, mostly for research. However, although the secretariat carries out a good job at running the network but does not have the capacity, or the mandate, to act towards achieving a policy change. And, as with the six functions, it is possible for a network to play both roles. An agency network can also offer a support function. However, a support network cannot provide an agency function; at least, not as easily.

It is possible, therefore, to consider the possibility of networks that fulfil both roles with great success. In fact, one would expect most networks (including the ones described in this section as examples) to show both roles – simply because in any network members have multiple relationships between them exchanging resources and action.

4.3 Roles and functions: evidence from Peru

The study of seven networks in Peru provides a series of examples of how these roles and functions come together. The networks described in Table 1 below carry out a combination of the six functions considered above within structures designed to fulfil one or both of the roles of research policy networks. Key examples are CIES, which has an exceptionally strong and capable secretariat and is therefore independent to carry out an agency role; and Foro Salud, whose secretariat is rather small and therefore depends on its members agency drive.

Also interesting is the example of the Mesa (an association of CSOs dedicated to promoting the rights of the elderly) which tries to empower its members to influence change themselves.⁵

Table 1: Summary table of networks and their functions

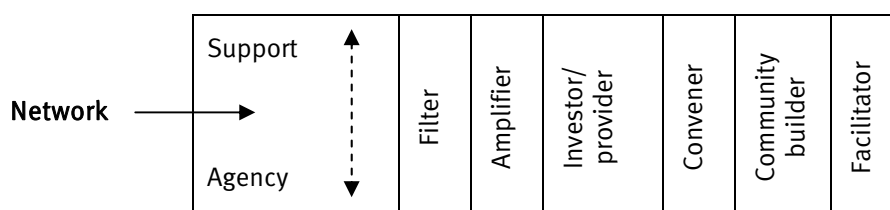
| Network | Supra-function | Functions (examples of activities) |
|----------------|--|---|
| CIES | Agency and support (both strong) | Provider/investor: resources (grants), research and communications capacity, advice and mentoring. Amplifier: research findings of members, promote the brand, various media and products. Filter: research produced by networks, key research produced by others. Community builder: promotes networked research projects and the development of thematic networks. |
| Foro Salud | More support than agency (both moderate) | Convener: brings together regional and thematic fora – each discussion different issues, and includes institutions and individuals from all sectors involved in health issues. Community builder: created a national space for engagement and supports the development and running of regional and thematic fora. The network has moved from filtering to amplifying to convening . |
| Foro Educativo | Support (with some agency) | Community builder: brings together all experts on the education sector, creates other networks, links people in different areas of the economic and political context. Facilitator: provides its members with strong links to each other and facilitates the debate process. Amplifier: the individual or collective opinions of its members, through various media and at different levels. |
| The Mesa | Support (with some agency) | Community builder: promoting networked work among CSOs involved in the protection of the elderly, supporting the creation of new networks. Amplifier: take the messages of each member to policymaking fora, other networks (e.g. Foro Salud) and international institutions (e.g. HAI, UN). Provider/investor: empowers its members building their capacity to become agents of change. |
| Participa Peru | Agency | Amplifier: communications strategy at the national and local level, though different media and with different products. Filter: filters information towards its decentralised partners. Convener: produces different communications products for each different type of audience (national/regional, public/civil society). Provider/investor: funds, resources, information, capacity building. |
| CONVEAGRO | Agency and support (both strong) | Filter: filters information from the policy context and research community to its members. Amplifier: amplifies the demands of the members and the policy recommendations of the network (based on research) to different policy actors, engages in different media. Community builder: unifies the agriculture and rural sector into one strong and representative body. |
| Peru 2021 | Support | Facilitate: guides corporations in the process of developing a corporate social responsibility strategy by directing them to experts and other corporations with positive experiences. Amplifies: the successes of its members and the model of corporate social responsibility developed by the network. |

⁵ For more information, see www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppa0103.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Based on this analysis, what should be the alternative to the prescriptive definition of networks presented above? A description of a network using this functional approach would first consider its role: whether it is a support or agency network (or what proportion of each it follows). Within this, it would then consider the various functions the network carries out, as performed for the Peruvian networks above. With this information it would be easier to understand how these networks can influence policy using research based evidence.

Figure 3: Describing networks



In this sense, Table 2 below shows the type of functions necessary to influence policy at the different stages of the policy process. The main lessons emerging from it is that different functions are needed at different stages of the policy processes and that, in all cases, more than one is necessary. If the network has a support role, its members will have to carry out most of the functions; if it has an agency role, its main functions will be charged to the secretariat or the acting entity of the network.

Table 2: Key ways in which networks can help CSOs to influence policy processes

| Stage of the policy process | Key ways to influence policy | How networks can help | Functions |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|
| Agenda-setting | Convince policymakers that the issue is indeed a problem | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marshall evidence to enhance the credibility of the argument Foster links between researchers, CSOs and policymakers | Amplifying Convening |
| Formulation | Communicate detailed evidence to policymakers and work towards building a well informed consensus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amplify good quality, representative evidence Collaborate with policymakers Bypass formal barriers to consensus | Amplifying Convening Facilitating |
| Implementation | Complement government capacity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance the sustainability and reach of the policy Act as dynamic 'platforms for action' | Investing and amplifying Amplifying, investing, convening, community building, facilitating |
| Evaluation | Collate high quality evidence and channel it into the continuing policy cycle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide good quality, representative evidence Link policymakers to policy end-users | Filtering, Facilitating Convening, amplifying and facilitating |
| All stages (underlying) | Capacity building for CSOs aiming to influence policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster communication Provide support and encouragement Coordinate member evaluations | All All Community building, facilitating |

Source: Perkin and Court (2005)

Additionally, support networks will be more likely to focus on inward-looking functions such as community building and investing/providing. Agency networks, on the other hand, will develop outward-looking functions such as amplifying or convening.

It emerges that networks provide an important alternative for individuals and organisations trying to influence development policies. But it would be expected that these need to consider the resources, capacities and skills that they can offer; the external context in which the network will be set out; and the interests of the members themselves. Parallel research on networks at ODI focuses on their structure to address how the resources, capacities and skills that networks have at their command can affect their functions and, in particular, their use of evidence to influence policy and practice in development.

The functional approach, however, is a first step towards improving our understanding of research policy networks. It provides an entry point for thinking about capacity development and network formation. Further research should also look at the networks that remain in the space between these formal research policy networks addressed by this paper and the informal personal networks that 'make things happen'. Similarly, further discussion remains on the agenda regarding why networks are a better fit to address policy-research linkages.

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Annex: Websites Consulted

ACBF: www.acbf-pact.org

AERC: www.aercafrica.org/home/index.asp

AGA Khan Development Network: www.akfc.ca

ALNAP: www.odi.org.uk/alnap

Centre for Economic Policy Research: www.cepr.org/default_static.htm

CIES: www.consortio.org/index.asp

CIVICUS: www.civicus.org/new/default.asp

Coalition 2000: www.anticorruption.bg/eng/coalition/about.htm

Development Executive Group: www.developmentex.com

Development Studies Association: www.devstud.org.uk

Fairtrade Foundation: www.fairtrade.org.uk

Global Development Network (GDN): www.gdnet.org

GDN Bridging Research and Policy Project: www.gdnet.org/rapnet

Global Public Policy: www.globalpublicpolicy.net

Greenpeace: www.greenpeace.org/international

Huairou Commission: www.huairou.org

IDRC's Evaluation Unit: www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26266-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

International Forum of Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD): www.ifrtd.org

Jubilee Debt Campaign: www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk

MediCam: www.medicam-cambodia.org

Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland (NIDOS): www.nidos.org.uk

Overseas Development Institute (ODI): www.odi.org.uk

Open Knowledge Network: www.openknowledge.net

Oxfam: www.oxfam.org.uk

Pan Asia Networking: http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-4509-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Research and Policy in Development (RAPID): www.odi.org.uk/rapid/

RAPID Networks Project: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppao103

Red Latinoamericana de Política Comercial: www.latn.org.ar

RedR: www.redr.org

Shack/Slum Dwellers International: www.sdinet.org

Solidar Global Network: www.solidar.org/default.asp

Southern African Grantmakers' Association: www.donors.org.za

The Combined Harare Residents' Associations: www.chra.co.zw/index.cfm?linkid=2&siteid=1

The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance: www.e-alliance.ch

The RING Alliance: www.ring-alliance.org/index.html

Third World Network (TWN): www.twinside.org.sg

UK Consortium on AIDS and International Development: www.aidsconsortium.org.uk