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EXPLORING A NETWORK'S VALUE

Case Study

LEARNING FROM ETHIOPIA

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The Sustainable WASH Systems (SWS) project funded by USAID is a learning initiative that applies systems approaches to promote the sustainability of water and sanitation services. In Ethiopia, Tetra Tech has fostered the development of Learning Alliances (LAs) focused on sanitation in two small towns, Woliso and Debre Birhan.

These multi-stakeholder groups work together to create conditions for sustainable improvements in sanitation services using an action research agenda. To encourage the long-term sustainability of these groups, in Year 3 of the project, Tetra Tech and LINC launched a structured process to strengthen the networks of the Learning Alliances.

Based on the experience, literature reviews, and consultations, we developed a framework for network strengthening in the context of the sanitation LAs. This included a list of components and definitions, as well as an assessment of what other project activities (if any) relate to this component.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief describes an activity to explore how members of a local sanitation network in Ethiopia value their network, and how this value can be amplified.

We also developed a menu of potential activities by component that could be applied by the field facilitation team in either group or individual settings. The framework was validated with the field facilitation team, and Tetra Tech identified first priority components for the first set of network strengthening activities.

During this process, it was noteworthy that some of the areas and activities from the framework were already areas of focus, while other areas and activities were novel and could offer an improvement in the functioning and sustainability of the groups. This dynamic is common; it is important to both recognize as well as build upon existing strengths.

One area identified as a priority was how members perceive and value the network. This brief describes the results of an activity to explore and amplify the value of the network for its members.

UNDERSTANDING HOW MEMBERS VALUE A NETWORK

A foundational activity for strengthening a network is to define the collective value proposition of the network – why participants are motivated and interested to be in the network. While the network’s value is related to its stated purpose, its composition, and its structure, none of these characteristics define how and why members value the network. Potential value propositions may include aspects such as connections, knowledge, competencies, collaboration, and/or resources.

In a simple example, members of an orchestra or football team may be considered a “network” based on their affiliation with the other group members. However, the value proposition of the network could be as diverse as continuous personal and skills development, fame and recognition, positive social interactions, or earning wages. It is critical to understand what members want to gain as a result of participating in the network, as well as what they expect to contribute to the network.

A basic activity to explore the network’s value proposition is to identify the current state and the desired future state (or vision) of the network.

Different members and sub-groups may have different incentives and expectations for participating in the network. At the same time, at an overarching level, for optimal sustainability and functioning of the network there should be some agreement about the overall value of the network among its members.

To continue with the previous example, if some members of an orchestra or football team value skills development, while others value earning wages, over time they may disagree on how their network should function and what actions it should take to achieve its goal. Essentially, the value can be considered the glue that holds the network together over time.

This value may change and evolve, particularly if there are changes in its operating context and membership. However, the extent to which the network remains functional and sustainable requires this adaptation to be driven collectively by the network itself.

EXPLORING CURRENT AND EXPECTED VALUE IN ETHIOPIA

In order to understand current perceptions of the network’s value, we conducted a small and informal survey among Learning Alliance members:

- What did you expect from the Learning Alliance when you first joined?
- How would you characterize your experience with the Learning Alliance
- What have you gained from the experience so far?
- What does it mean for you to participate in the Learning Alliance?
- What do you expect from the LA in the future?

METHODOLOGY

To collect information on the network's value, we conducted a small, informal survey. Due to the format of the group's meetings and their communications preferences, we gathered this input through a mix of written and oral feedback.

In other settings, input regarding the network's value could be generated through a variety of methods; a general starting point could be brief semi-structured interviews followed by group discussion and analysis. The goal is to gain a better understanding of members' general experience with the network, the value they are currently receiving, and the value they would like to receive. It can also be useful in this process to understand what value members are currently contributing to the network, and what they would like to contribute.

Members were asked to respond based on their personal perspective, rather than their institutional perspective. In this case, network members are participating as a representative of their organization. Nevertheless, we suggest that individuals should find value in a network beyond their representational duties in order to support continued participation and active engagement.

FINDINGS

Analysis of responses uncovered three themes related to the network value:

- Capacity building
- Collaboration
- Change of perspective

Each of these themes and their implications for network facilitation activities are described in the sections to follow.

"Understanding how members value the network uncovered an opportunity for network facilitators to foster more peer-to-peer support."

CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity building was one of the most frequently cited expectations of the value that the network can provide. This was largely related to technical issues such as establishing modern latrines and sewage disposal techniques. Members also discussed other types of skills, such as how they learned to solve problems by better prioritization and to develop action plans in a participatory way.

While peer exchange and site visits were mentioned as a valuable method of capacity development, members seemed to retain a preference for externally-led skill building. Generally, capacity building within the network was not highly requested or offered, and this is supported by the findings of a related effort to map the relationships among organizations in the network through a network analysis.

This finding presents an opportunity for fostering peer-to-peer support, as several network members are providers of training and other skills development through their institutional mandates. This is an internal resource to the network that is not being fully realized. This finding also suggests an opportunity to increase feedback among network providers of capacity development, as they may benefit from improving quality and being more demand-driven around the network's needs.

COLLABORATION

The network was also valued for opening avenues for more collaboration and partnership among members. This was one of the main goals of creating the network structure, and thus it was promising to see the members cite collaboration as a value of the network. For example, one member noted that the collaboration that was achieved through the network helped to address issues that were neglected by each stakeholder previously.

This finding was also supported by an organizational network analysis that was conducted around the same time period. This analysis demonstrated increased collaboration among organizations following the implementation of the LA network structure.

CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Change of perspective was not identified as an initial expectation of the network or something that members sought by joining the network. However, now that the LA had been in place for more than one year, changing their perspective was a frequently cited value of the network. Members reported thinking differently about sanitation works and what they consider as their responsibility for working in the sanitation sector.

For example, members used phrases such as “it broadened our perspective,” “broadened my vision for the town,” and “changed my views and thinking.” In particular, this factor was valued by those in leadership positions. Rather than feeling the pressure to complete all activities alone and to pass on instructions to others, leaders are able to rely on others and work toward shared goals. By increasing their collaboration with others, they find the potential to achieve more as a result.

REFLECTIONS

When this inquiry into the value of the network was conducted, LA members had already been working together for more than one year, through there was some turnover in individual members. This activity generated understanding of what drew them to the network initially (capacity building) and what additional value they were gaining from the network currently (collaboration and change in perspective). Comparing the results of the value proposition exploration to the quantitative results captured through a network analysis survey was also helpful to triangulate and interpret the findings.

Establishing the network’s value to its members and evolving this value over time is critical to its sustainability. It is recommended that network facilitators regularly take stock of how members view the current value of the network, as well as what are their future expectations of the network. In this example from Ethiopia, we identified opportunities for reinforcing the value of the network (increasing peer-to-peer learning) as well as potential threats to future network performance (reliance on outside experts).

We hope that others seeking to strengthen their network can learn from our general approach, with the understanding that any intervention must be driven by the local context. Network strengthening activities can take a variety of different formats, including those conducted individually and in groups. Additionally, activities to explore a network’s value can look beyond its members and assess issues such as why targeted members do not participate, how periphery members differ from central members, and how stakeholders or influential actors perceive a network.