EVIDENCE BRIEFER

SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE NETWORKS AND MENTORSHIPS: EVIDENCE FROM AN EVALUATION SERIES

Evidence Briefer: Supporting Effective and Sustainable Networks and Mentorships: Evidence from an Evaluation Series

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many democracy, human rights, and governance projects aim to create sustainable results. Oftentimes achieving these results means developing connections and relationships between stakeholders that will outlast the project. However, project timelines and funding constraints limit our ability to assess if and how programs contribute to results beyond the lifecycle of the project.

To address this gap, the Evidence and Learning Practice within the International Republican Institute (IRI) designed a series of evaluations to investigate the implementation and results of projects with two common program approaches that create different types of relationships: **networks**, which create relationships where peers reciprocally share information, and **mentorships**, which create relationships where more experienced participants share information, skills, or networks with others.

This evaluation series used comparative case studies to identify the conditions in place when these program approaches succeeded (or failed) to better understand long-term results and develop guidance for future programs.

The evaluations highlighted three key recommendations:

1. Define the Intervention Clearly

Implementers should understand and clearly communicate the type of network or mentorship the program will build and/or support. Networks and mentorships encompass a wide range of goals, structures, and approaches, which should be articulated at the outset. When clearly defined, the program can set appropriate expectations (for funders and participants) and optimize results.

2. Establish and Communicate Clear Roles and Responsibilities

Network and mentorship programs rely on relationships, so it is crucial that all participants and contributors understand what they are expected to provide and what they will gain. Implementers and their partners should ensure these expectations are clearly defined, not left to participants' assumptions, in order to select the correct stakeholders to participate and sustain engagement throughout the program.

3. Develop or Capitalize on Social Trust

Networks and mentorships that achieve results are successful in building trust between participants. Interventions should capitalize on trust where it exists or be prepared to invest substantial time and resources in trust-building activities.

NETWORKS

KEY INSIGHTS

Be clear and specific about what we mean by "network."

At IRI, we define a network as "a group of individuals or organizations that pursue a shared objective and interact with each other on an ongoing basis." Networks exist on a continuum from support networks to coordination networks based on the degree to which the goal of the network is coordinated action. Networks can fluctuate from one type to another or have features of both. By being clear about what type of network we aim to support, we can better determine which program approach will best enable the network to achieve its goals.

	Support		Coordination	
	Support networks function via peer-to-peer sharing		Coordination networks function via coordinated or complementary action	
Audience	Their goal is to influence actors within the network		Their goal is to influence actors outside the network	Audience
Goals	They tend to support the personal goals of individual network members		They tend to support collective goals of the group as a whole	Goals
Structure	They tend to be more loosely organized		They tend to be more structured	Structure
Commitment	Participation tends to require less commitment from members		Participation tends to require more commitment from members	Commitment
Examples	Steering committees, training networks and support groups	Hybrid: Professional associations (conduct both member development and lobbying)	Advocacy coalitions, service delivery networks, and legal caucuses	Examples

Everyone needs to know - and agree to - their role.

It is critical to clearly define the roles and expectations of network members. This helps network members organize and assign their activities. Roles help people understand what is expected of them and what they can expect to get out of participating in the network. In both kinds of networks, members should understand and agree to their roles to prevent mismatched expectations, which can contribute to disengagement.

A network's purpose should help define its structure.

Network structure is defined in part by the systems in place to communicate, make decisions, and act. Structures can vary widely, but both coordination and support networks require consensus-building processes to establish rules of engagement and a shared purpose. Coordination networks often have technically complex goals that require a more well-defined structure with clear roles and responsibilities to ensure effective and efficient action. A less rigid structure is conducive to learning, discussion, and building individual capacity.

In closed political spaces, a well-defined network structure could pose a security risk. A loose structure, including irregular communication and no formal written rules or network documents, allows participants to communicate, learn from each other, and provide moral support while mitigating associated risks.

Trust and risk tolerance are closely linked.

The degree of social trust among network members often determines the types of activities network members are willing to conduct and, therefore, the types of results we might expect. This is especially true in closed spaces. Risk tolerance is dependent on the level of trust members have with one another. Our evaluations found that networks with higher levels of trust were more risk tolerant: they were more willing to hold public events, conduct activities despite government repression, and organize and associate more formally. Those with a lower degree of trust were less tolerant of risk and thus more reluctant to associate and collaborate.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the evaluations, funders, implementers, and network facilitators should consider the following recommendations to improve program design and implementation:

Use pre-existing levels of trust among network participants to inform programmatic expectations and activities.

Because trust is a key factor influencing risk tolerance and network members' willingness to work together, implementers should develop goals and activities based on preexisting levels of trust. Newer, less established networks, where members have little or no prior experience working together, will need a longer introductory period to build trust. This dynamic affects the timeline in which a network can realistically achieve its collective goals and should be considered when setting programmatic expectations.

When fostering new networks, projects should include enough time and interaction between members to establish trust before they are expected to act together. To build trust, programs should enlist an engaged facilitator, build in some "easy wins," establish a common purpose or goal, and facilitate repeated interaction.

For short-term advocacy actions, implementers should work with existing networks, whenever possible, because members have already established trust. Such networks can organize relatively quickly to coordinate actions and work together without the prerequisite trust-building activities.

Include activities and strategies dedicated to network function.

Network function has two main components: structure and engagement. Programs often focus on increasing engagement of members but neglect building the system by which they will make decisions, communicate with, and engage other members. When designing a program, staff should determine how defined the network structure should be, whether the network wants to achieve a precise or broad goal and if programming will focus on individual capacity or collective action. Program teams should weigh the pros and cons of each of these choices and use this information to design program activities.

Consider the types of stakeholders to include in the network, as it will affect how the network functions, its goals, and its results.

The types of members who are selected to join a network can impact how the network functions and what it achieves. Three common choices include 1) selecting elite, high-profile leaders versus lower-profile citizens or organization members; 2) deciding whether to include elected officials, government officials or neither; and 3) recruiting individuals with specific skills or assets (potentially with different goals) and helping them collectively develop a goal versus recruiting people who already have the same goal and connecting them to amplify their efforts. The considerations for these choices are outlined below.

Membership Status:

Options	Pros	Cons
Elite, high-profile leaders	• More credibility • Access to networks, resources • More name recognition/ familiarity	• Limited availability • Possibly firmer positions • More logistical and publicity considerations
Non-elite, low- profile individuals	• More willing/able to assume tasks or formal roles within the network • Can engage more members	• Requires resources to gain elite buy-in • Could be less experienced and need additional support

Elected Officials:

Options	Pros	Cons
Inside the Network	• Direct access to government and elected officials and perspectives • Build relationships between government and network members	• Increased difficult strategizing with government representatives present • Officials' competing priorities limit time, willingness, and ability to engage
Outside the Network	• Can openly strategize advocacy • Avoid appearance of co-option • Members have fewer "official" considerations limiting engagement	• Limits interaction with government actors, especially informal engagement • Less aware of government perspective or constraints

Level of Pre-Existing Consensus on Goal:

| Options	Pros	Cons
Low to none	• More inclusive • Ensures all necessary actors are included	• Time spent agreeing on goal reduces time for acting • Increased challenges to get diverse actors to agree on a specific goal
Medium to High	• Less time needed for agreeing on goal • Can focus time on strategizing and acting	• May still need to build trust • May not have all the skills/perspectives needed

MENTORSHIPS

KEY INSIGHTS

### Define mentorships based on their purpose, function, and achievements.

IRI defines a mentorship as "a person or organization who provides intentional, ongoing support to other people or organizations with less or different experiences to build their capacity, motivation, and/or professional opportunities." We use conceptual maps to visualize aspects of a mentorship's **function** and **achievement**. Implementers should select the characteristics of the mentorship to prioritize based on the context and the mentor and mentees' goals. In closed spaces, for example, a mentorship with continuous interaction (high sustainability) could be just as important as any achievement made by a mentee (high results).

Function

Engagement (y-axis) / *Structure* (x-axis)
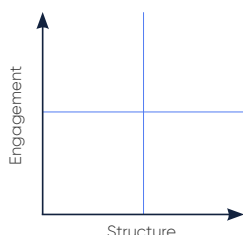
How the mentorship functions.

Engagement: The degree to which the mentor and mentee work together to achieve the mentee's goal.

Structure: The degree to which the mentor and mentee have defined the mentee's learning goals and developed a structured approach to achieving them.

Achievement

Results (y-axis) / *Sustainability* (x-axis)
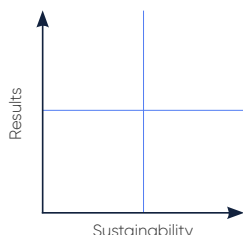
What the mentorship achieves.

Results: The degree to which the mentee achieves their goals, applies skills, and increases self-sufficiency as a result of support from their mentor.

Sustainability: The degree to which the mentor and mentee continue their professional relationship outside of the program.

Mentor-mentee compatibility is contingent on mutual trust.

Mentor-mentee compatibility can impact whether the mentorship achieves its goals and is sustainable beyond the program. It is contingent on mutual trust, which can be difficult to predict and measure. Frequent and open communication between mentors and mentees helps build a sense of trust and mutual investment in the mentee's goals.

Establish clear roles and responsibilities.

At the beginning of the mentorship, mentors and mentees should agree on their roles and responsibilities to establish clear expectations moving forward. Our evaluations found that most partnerships lacked clear roles and responsibilities, which led to misaligned expectations. While some mentees may appreciate a mentor's hands-off approach, others may be disappointed. Each partnership is unique, so it is crucial that mentors and mentees establish agreed-upon roles and responsibilities that best fit their needs and preferences.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the evaluations, funders, implementers, and mentors should consider the following recommendations to improve program design and implementation:

Implement learning agreements.

Program teams should implement learning agreements to encourage them to discuss expectations and create goal-based partnerships. The learning agreements should be structured, but not overly detailed to allow relationships to remain flexible. Mentors and mentees should be encouraged to review this agreement and make necessary changes throughout their mentorship program.

Consider a tiered mentorship approach.

In this mentorship model, an international organization like IRI serves as a mentor to an experienced in-country organization, who in turn mentors a less experienced group. A tiered mentorship model can allow implementers to provide clearer guidance and support to mentors throughout the program lifecycle. The tiered mentorship approach has resulted in improved understanding of the mentor role, better coordination with key stakeholders, and increased capacity.

Provide multiple options for project development and funding.

Rather than focusing on one type of support that may not benefit all mentees, programs should aim to provide mentees with multiple options for project development and financial support. Implementers should support mentees in choosing the organizational development route that will be most conducive to the mentees' success. It is also important for implementers to have access to mentors who can model these diverse paths. In two case studies, mentees were only exposed to one type of project development and funding route. As a result, some mentees with projects or organizations that did not clearly fit into the provided route were not supported as effectively as others.

Implement long introductory periods.

When possible, provide a long introductory period before pairing mentors and mentees to allow them to develop rapport and decide the capacities that are most important for them to develop. During this introductory period, program staff should observe interactions and gather feedback from participants to try to predict which participants have the most potential to become compatible mentor-mentee partners.

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