

Networking for Agricultural Development

fact sheet

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What is a network?

- A network in the broadest sense is a community of people who have a common interest, purpose and need for knowledge. They might not necessarily be in the same place but might be connected virtually.
- Networks differ in their goals and modes of operation. They can take various forms, from electronic portals, interest groups or professional societies, through to groups of people who regularly meet for professional exchange.
- People 'network' actively to keep connected, influence each other's views, foster their common interests and exchange information. Professional networks enhance interpersonal cooperation from local to global levels.
- Networks form because people need each other in order to reach common goals by addressing similar issues and getting the information they need. Commitment is the key to their effective functioning. Network members must show their interest, credibility, professionalism and ethics to develop trust and win other members' cooperation.
- Speeded up by social media, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, social networks have become increasingly prominent in recent years. These web-based services allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile and connect to other users with a common interest.

Why are networks important?

- The shared understanding that emerges through social interactions produces knowledge.
- Especially when dealing with complex issues, such as agricultural development, networking is an important prerequisite for fast exchange and peer learning. People pay attention to what their trusted sources have to say.
- As a result of these interactions, specialized knowledge becomes visible to network members through connections between experts, policymakers and local people. Issues of local concern may become globally relevant and issues of global concern may be addressed locally.
- Networks can facilitate policy advocacy and foster preconditions for successful policy

implementation. Motivation, information and power influence can determine whether the interaction between government and other actors leads to cooperation, opposition, or joint learning.

- Networks enable development communities to share implementation-related knowledge to help others develop and scale up development solutions.
- Regional networks can play a role in improving the quality and usefulness of information being transferred. As intermediaries of knowledge, they can foster greater use of research findings in policymaking, strengthen the relationship between research and policy, and hence move towards a stronger culture of evidence-based policy and policy-relevant research.

How do networks function?

- To assess whether a network is functional and vibrant is a challenge. The functionality, depth and vibrancy of a network may be identified through a number of parameters.
- The parameters include primarily the numbers of ties each member of the network has and the specific connectivity amongst these ties – the higher the value, the closer the 'knit' of the network. Such links are often displayed in a social network diagram (see Figure 1), where nodes are the points and ties are the lines. The resulting graph is often complex, but can be used to analyse the social capital and influence of individual actors.
- The frequency of communication across a network and the quality of the communication are much more subjective parameters and difficult to assess.
- Looking at the types of partners within a network, such as government and non-governmental organizations, national or international agricultural research systems, and the countries where these organizations are located or headquartered may provide an indication about the interdisciplinarity and openness of a network. It illustrates whether a network is mainly linked to organizations of the same kind or to complementary partners, and to what extent a network operates within the same country, or connects to foreign or international partners.

SATNET example

- An example of a budding network is the Network for Knowledge Transfer on Sustainable Agricultural Technologies and Improved Market Linkages in South and South-East Asia (SATNET Asia). The network began with 30 partners from agricultural development- and trade-related institutions in target countries, and each brings important contacts to SATNET, thus broadening their experience and potential for sharing and learning.
- One of SATNET's key goals is to enhance networking amongst South and South-East Asian institutions to share knowledge on sustainable agricultural technologies and improved market linkages in the region.
- To assess the current interaction amongst SATNET partners, during SATNET's baseline survey key partners provided information about their professional contacts and collaborators. Data were analysed using quantitative methods and Netdraw© for the network analysis.
- One of the key findings was that while these organizations have strong local connections within their own countries and to international and regional organizations, the connections to partners in other Asian countries is weak (Figure 1).

- Further research needs to address what is the optimal degree of complexity/connectivity beyond which the network becomes unproductive. Following SATNET's development over the next three years will provide important insights in this respect.

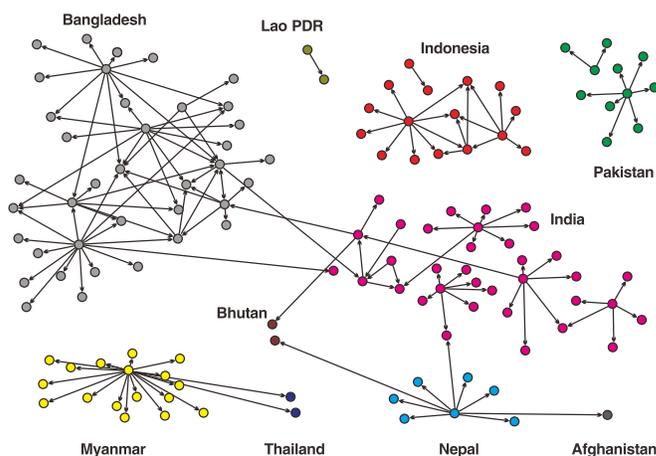
Conclusions

- Thriving networks that link people across disciplinary and national borders foster productivity.
- Networking requires a supportive political environment as well as network members who interact actively and with an open mind.
- There is a lot of scope to strengthen networks amongst national organizations across countries to complement the existing linkages and exchange with international and regional organizations.
- Networks such as SATNET provide a nucleus platform for regional exchange and learning.

Selected references

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Figure 1. Current links within SATNET partner countries (excluding regional and international bodies)



Further research needs

- The SATNET baseline survey looked only at simple quantitative parameters and did not attempt to collect exhaustive data on existing networks in the region.
- To fully assess the existing networks and their value to the respondents requires more detailed surveys of the specific interaction with each of their multiple partners, its frequency and subjective quality parameters. So far, data have been collected primarily for 3 out of 10 SATNET target countries.

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CAPSA-ESCAP

Jl. Merdeka 145
Bogor 16111
INDONESIA

P: +62 251 8343277
8356813

F: +62 251 8336290

library@uncapsa.org

www.uncapsa.org



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