

Networking in the Indian Voluntary Sector: Concept and Practice

Anil K. Singh, Former Executive Secretary
Voluntary Action Network India

Decide to network

Use every letter you write, every conversation you have

Every meeting you attend to express your fundamental beliefs and dreams

Affirm to others the vision of the world you want

Network through thought, Network through action

Network through love, Network through the spirit

You are the center of a network; you are the center of the world

You are a free immensely powerful source of life and goodness

Affirm it

Spread it

Radiate it

Think day and night about it

And you will see a miracle happen;

The greatness of your own life,

In a world of big powers, media and monopolies

But of four and a half billion individuals

Networking is the new freedom, the new democracy, a new form of happiness.

-Robert Muller

The concept of 'network' came from electronic engineering and started acquiring prominence in the development field during the early 70's because of an intense realization among development activists about the limitations of individual efforts in dealing with complex development issues of contemporary society. Experiences of associations across voluntary organizations were not very encouraging, even though several associational ventures have been in existence even before the independence of India. The Association of Sarva Seva Farm, Bharat Sevak Samaj, the Indian Cooperative Union, Indian Adult Education Association, All India Women's Conference, YMCA and YWCA are examples of national and international federations of local-level voluntary organizations in the country. However, most of these associations either catered to the need of one issue or one section of society.

Pre-Independence associations played a significant role in the Freedom Movement but many such associations had not been able to make the desired impact. The most prominent reason of their failure was that they could not keep their separate identity as associations. Since they involved themselves in implementing schemes, they created a situation where it was difficult to call them an association. In fact, the role of an association or federation is quite different from that of an organization.

Why associations or federations are needed?

Networks, although a late 20th century phenomenon, has become part and parcel of development scenario all over the world today. The word 'network' is defined as formal and informal institutional frameworks, with loose or structured parameters and with detailed tasks and responsibilities of its members. Networks help to link individuals, groups and organizations of various walks of life and provide greater strength to people working for a common cause. Networks perform a wide range of functions: from sharing and disseminating information to acting as a pressure group to influence policies. Members of a network lend valuable support to each other and help its members in perspective building or developing innovative approaches to developmental activities. Networking denotes an action (a verb), a process that involves a number of actors and brings a dynamic relationship between and among the various actors of civil society.

Voluntary organizations want to associate with each other for three main reasons.

First, because most organizations, working at the grassroots level (often in small, limited and remote areas) over a period of time, remain focused on their socio-political context. As social change agents, they find themselves more and more isolated and alone in the larger socio-political context.

After some years of work at the micro level, in a limited set of villages and slums, many voluntary agencies begin to realize that they can not move beyond their local and immediate context unless they find ways to influence at the macro level. As this realization grows, attempts at association or federation start. Associations through a process of federating are seen as a way of developing collective strength among voluntary organizations to enable

them to influence macro issues, policies and frameworks.

Voluntary organizations come together because of the need of protection. In situations, where the state or other vested interests in the society have posed a threat or made an attack on voluntary organizations, there has been simultaneous response to come together, to associate, to federate, in order to protect the space, the role, the legitimacy and credibility of the voluntary organizations. In situations of tightening of regulatory procedures, harassment or intimidation by government agencies and law-and-order machinery or dominant control by donors, many attempts of coming together and federating have been made in the country.

Why network?

The traditional form of organizing mechanisms neither provide space for individuals to interact freely with other organized entities nor do they allow free flow of ideas. On the other hand, networks not only provide opportunity, but also encourage their members to interact, exchange information, dialogue, and act together with those who may be placed in different organizational settings—voluntary organizations, government or academic institutions, trade unions, political parties, women’s organizations, mass movements, campaigns etc. Networks also create the possibility of individuals and organizations working on a similar issue, with somewhat different perspectives, to meet, share information, knowledge base, expertise, skills, resources, capacities and work together on specific issues.

The network is very significant in catering to the needs of voluntary organizations and in creating an environment that is favourable to meet their objectives. It ensures people’s involvement, provides a mechanism to influence policy-makers and also provides a forum to take-up major issues concerning voluntary organizations.

What networking does?

The purpose is to communicate across parties with whom we like to establish linkages with that are necessary to overcome isolation. Networking provides free flow of experiences and ideas across individuals and groups. Communication in a network can be initiated by anyone and received by anyone. This is the most crucial purpose of a network.

Secondly, solidarity across parties and support during crisis are very important for the existence of any network. Solidarity could be either material or emotional. In solidarity, there is an element of mutual accountability.

The third purpose is to influence others—the public at large, the political parties, media, corporate sector, etc. The shared analysis and common vision among various actors of civil society are the basis to influence public policy (public policy in contemporary context may be made by a local, regional or national government or a bilateral, multilateral agency or other actors like MNCs at the national and global levels).

The fourth purpose is that of mobilizing energy and resources particularly among individuals. New ideas, designs and perspectives get elaborated through new ways of relating with each other. Networks emerging from difficult social issues like child labour, environment protection, violence against women and human rights are able to mobilize individuals, groups, energy and resources among themselves.

Lastly, networks promote linkage building. Bringing together like-minded individuals, groups and institutions around a shared development agenda can be facilitated through a network. The purpose is not to coordinate the activities of those individuals or groups but to facilitate through systematic communication, sharing of information, experience and ideas.

Networks can be used for variety of purposes. It may be for achieving short-term as well as long-term goals. Different networks have been used for achieving different goals and different networks may be relevant for different situations. The relevance of a network can be briefly assessed on the following aspects.

A network may act as:

- ? A vehicle for identifying, articulating and discussing issues of major concerns, which are difficult to deal with in an existing institutional framework.
- ? An alternative arena for elaborating and sharpening newer ideas, visions, and perspectives. This is largely because new ideas entail a critique of and departure from the established modes. The existing institutional framework tends to curtail such possibilities.
- ? To provide support to grass-root organizations at the time of their hardship or retaliation from vested

interests, especially to organizations working for awareness building, organizing people for their rights and for social change. These types of organization inevitably invite retaliation from vested interests. Networks are also necessary to deal with such retaliations as a political strategy.

- ? A relevant strategy for resisting the increasingly diminishing democratic space and functioning at various levels in a given local, national, regional and international situation.
- ? To utilize and identify, encourage and revitalize individuals and small groups to support the cause of social transformation, and
- ? To exchange information, experience and vision across the cultures, systems, countries and continents.

Besides these, a network could be the most efficient and flexible mechanism for sharing information, experience and ideas across people, from various ideologies, groups and organizations spread geographically and working on diverse issues.

A network of voluntary organizations and people's organizations can play a major role in the collection and dissemination of information, highlighting people's analysis and viewpoint to build public opinion, to lobby with (or advocacy directed towards) policy makers and elected representatives of the people thereby building solidarity among voluntary/people's organizations and preparing a strategy for putting pressure on the Government. A network's role is very crucial because most of the time outside factors play an important role in deciding a country's developmental mode and directions especially in the developing countries.

TYPES OF NETWORKS THAT EXIST IN INDIA

Broadly speaking, there are five types of networks of voluntary organizations existing in India:

- Issue-based networks
- Area-specific networks
- Ideological networks
- Funder-led or funder-driven networks, and
- Broad-based networks.

Issue-based networks

During the 1970s and 80s several issue-based networks emerged to cater to issue-specific needs of voluntary organizations, such as health, environment, women, etc. These networks can further be divided into two categories: structured networks and loose networks. Structured networks are very effective in information collection and dissemination, lobbying/advocacy, articulating and developing alternative viewpoints etc, whereas loose networks mainly mobilize people for campaigns and movements. Constraints are that both types of network, in practice, are seen as critical of each other, in spite of realizing each other's strength. Most of the structured networks receive funds from governments and international agencies and have good infrastructure. In contrast to this, loose networks mobilize funds from the public and their member organizations.

Area/region specific networks

The emergence of this type of network is a very recent phenomenon, although regional/state-level federations/associations have existed in some pockets of the country. But after experiencing broad-based national networks like VANI, many regional and state-level networks were formed by voluntary organizations with almost similar objectives and structures. This process is still continuing in many parts of the country.

Ideological networks

In India's socio-political arena, certain ideologies play a prominent role such as Gandhian, Marxist, extreme leftists like Naxalities, religious groups like that of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. Different ideologies have tried and are still trying their level best to make voluntary organizations to follow them, or to bring them out on a common platform. There was a time when the Gandhian and Christian groups were dominating the voluntary sector but after the *Sampurna Kranti* movement led by Shri Jai Prakash Narayan and the failure of Naxalite movement, a large chunk from them was attracted to the voluntary sector. Later, many of them formed loose networks to coordinate and organize their activities. These types of network are not so effective in India because their primary objective is alien to voluntarism. Moreover, they promote a certain ideology, which again is against the very spirit of voluntary action.

Funder-led or funder-driven networks

In India, a large number of international funding agencies are actively working and providing financial assistance to voluntary organisations. Some of them have their offices in India with a number of branch offices. In the past, these agencies, especially those with offices in India, tried to bring their "partners" on a common platform to monitor their activities. Similarly, Indian funding agencies (government and non-government) also tried to set-up nodal agencies to plan, organise, implement and monitor activities supported by them. These nodal agencies also worked like networks. Experience shows that these types of network do not last long because voluntary agencies associate themselves with such networks only for getting financial support. They do not try out any working relationship with them. These types of networks mostly do not like their member organisations to get associated with other funding agencies. Some of them even dictate their terms to voluntary organisations. It often forces voluntary organisations to ultimately disassociate themselves from them.

Broad-based network

Broad-based networking emerges out of the realization that all issues or problems are interrelated with each other and one cannot expect a positive result just by addressing one problem in isolation.

VANI is perhaps the only network of this kind, though it does not claim so. Being the only such broad-based national network in India, it has members from all regions, states, and ideologies. In the recent past, some of the issue-based national networks also tried to address other important issues other than their own but their constraints such as objectives and structures did not allow them to work on such issues on a sustained basis. VANI was formed with an objective to address all such issues, problems, constraints in a holistic manner.

Based on VANI's experience, many broad-based state level or regional networks were also formed in different parts of the country.

CHALLENGES BEFORE NETWORKS

Based on the experiences of most of the existing networks, it has been discovered that many of them are facing certain dilemmas or challenges that must be addressed collectively for their continued effectiveness. The following are the commonly identified dilemmas or challenges facing networks in the contemporary setting.

Participation versus Responsibility

Members of a network are always interested to participate in it for getting news, opinion or experiences from others but they generally hesitate to take any responsibility on behalf of the network. Networks should be a collective process where member participation and responsibility must go hand in hand.

Coordination versus Control

There is a very fine balance between coordination and control and networks should not attempt to control its members or their activities. By definition, members of networks remain autonomous and a network should only ensure communication across its members or all those who are directly or indirectly associated with it.

Linkage between the Individual and the Institution

There are two issues related with this dilemma: first, the person as an individual member versus the institutional membership; and second, a person in an organizational membership (usually the chief functionary) versus involving the whole institution as member organization. Networks have enormous potential to enlist individuals as members based on their interest, commitment and resources on the issues being addressed by the network. But at the same time, resources for continuing an ongoing campaign also require institutional support; therefore both individuals and institutions are equally important. Oftentimes ideas, experiences and energies are brought together by individuals within the network but without the support, backing and commitment of institutions, it is not possible to sustain a campaign. Therefore it should be the responsibility of member organizations to involve their institution for the furtherance of the network objectives which seem to lack in most of the networks. Similarly the secretariat of the network should know the member organizations very well, including their staff, capacity, resources and mode of functioning. Only then will they be able to relate with the institution.

Information versus Action

Information is to be shared in order to promote further action. Networks share information with their members or partners with an expectation that members will act upon that information. However, this is not always the case. Members expect from networks that all information must be shared with them but hardly takes any initiative to act

upon the information shared with them. Similarly a network secretariat receives a lot of information from members without having any idea of what to do with such information. After a period of time, if members find that the secretariat is not using their information to further their objectives, they would stop sending information to the secretariat and vice-versa.

Focus versus Inclusion

Issue-based networks are generally much focused. The dilemma arises when they draw only those who are interested in that particular theme and work in a particular manner. Consequently, other organizations get excluded although they are very influential and are very good in advocacy efforts. Whereas broad-based networks have an inherent capacity especially in their character to draw a wide spectrum of members and people with varied interests and issues, the members want their network to address their issue on a priority basis. This results to the network addressing dozens of issues simultaneously and in turn losing their focus. This is the strategic choice that every network has to make and has to depend on its overall purpose.

Process versus Structure

Networking is a process as well as an activity to achieve certain goals; therefore, focus should always be on that process. It is a fact that institutionalization of networks is needed to sustain that process but the institution's structure should not hinder its primary function. The structure should be there to facilitate the networking process. Therefore keeping a balance between process and the structure is a challenge before most of the networks.

Working on an Issue in a Sustained Manner versus Inclusion of New Issues and Challenges

With changing socio-economic and political scenarios, new challenges are bound to happen. If networks want to remain relevant for their partners and members, it should take up new emerging issues and challenges and work on them. Similarly old issues which have become important for the sector and got integrated into the functioning of a large number of member organisations should be dropped from the network agenda. Otherwise it will be difficult to concentrate on the new issues and challenges. Dilemma arises in a network's secretariat as they have to develop capacities to address emerging issues on a regular basis or to look for other avenues to further their interest, capacity and skill. Management also faces the dilemma on how to retain their staff. Therefore it is found that the staff turn over rate (especially professional) is very high in network organizations.

The point at which an old issue is to be dropped and when and how to take up new issues is another major challenge before networks.

Static versus Rotating Leadership

In some networks, leaders remain because of their personality, acceptability, and linkages or there is no space for others. This has been an experience that, unless a person dies or vanishes from the scenario, the change of leadership does not take place. This results in members losing interest because they find that they will never get an opportunity to lead the network. In a rotating leadership system, new leaders bring fresh perspectives, innovation and dynamism in the networking process. In a healthy network, every member should feel that some day they would also get an opportunity to provide leadership. Frequent changes in leadership also create problems and sometimes continuity gets disrupted.

Solidarity versus Programmatic Action

In a crisis situation, it has been found that members don't find problems in providing solidarity to the affected person or institution. But if a network decides to do a programmatic action in support of a person, institution or an issue, members back out at that moment because of the fear of retaliation from their own organization. This is not a healthy development and affirmative course of action is needed to set the course right. The dilemma is that, in their crisis every member expects that all network members would stand solidly behind them, but in the crisis of others, they themselves back out from addressing the issue or extending solidarity.

THE ROLES OF A BROAD-BASED NETWORK

The roles of a broad-based network ideally include the following:

Information Collection, Analysis and Dissemination

Information sharing should be a two-way process. Networks should keep informing their members and others about various developments within and outside the networks, and members too have to send regular information to the network for wider dissemination. Timely dissemination of information among the members across the states is very important. Networks need to work as a data bank with broader information about the sector in that region. Access to the right kind of information has to be developed. Research, analytical and writing skills have to be acquired for proper need-based and relevant documentation. There should also be access to electronic information such as the Internet, email etc. Networks should make their members aware of new information and communication technologies for speedy and effective information collection and dissemination. There should be sharing of information at the state, inter-state and national levels.

Policy Analysis and Influencing

Acquiring the skill of policy analysis is a prerequisite to influence policy at the macro level. Networks need to have information about the different policies concerning the fields of their interest and involvement. The information has to be analyzed through the perspective of the poor, downtrodden and disadvantaged sections of society. The gap between policy formulation and implementation and the alternative suggestions have to be communicated across. Organizations keep on working at micro levels for years but do not succeed in achieving major successes because the policies at the macro level remain the same. Unless these policies are influenced, desired results cannot be achieved. The network, being the representative of the voluntary organizations, has to make sustained efforts to influence public policies. For this, networks need to have a better knowledge base about the existing laws and regulations affecting the sector.

Perspective Building

Perspective building on an issue the networks are willing to take up should be made among its members and others working on that issue. Options should be solicited and a consensus on the issue and its framing should be achieved through debate and discussion. Regular and frequent regional meetings with Voluntary Organisations (VOs) on other regional issues need to be organised for perspective building. Analysis of the trends, policies, programmes and public positions on the issues have to be studied. Publicity of the issues should be in the right perspective. Building programmes on participation in the political process, good governance, collective and collaborative actions have to be organised.

Alliance and Partnership building

Networks should work towards enhancing interactions between various actors of civil society such as corporate and cooperative sectors, media, donors, bureaucracy, intelligentsia, political parties etc, for broad alliance and partnership building. Here it is essential to differentiate between partnership and relationship. Partnership involves a definite give and take process with the partners coming together with a formed objective. Relationship, on the other hand, may or may not involve the element of mutual benefit. So in a partnership, either bilateral or multilateral, the concerned partners have to be convinced about their benefits as a result of the partnership. Therefore, networks while making alliances with any of the above-mentioned actors have to look for issues in their areas of interest.

Advocacy

Advocacy is a mode of social action to influence those who hold governmental, political and economic power. It is "a tool, based on organised efforts and actions that use the instruments of democracy to strengthen democratic processes. Such tools include election related work, lobbying, mass mobilization, forms of civil disobedience, negotiations and bargaining, and court actions" (David Cohen). Access to information is a prerequisite for advocacy initiative. Information about public policies—who makes them, how they are made, how to analyse and influence a public policy, how to lobby with policy makers to obtain desired changes—are the areas which lead to effective advocacy work. Also they ought to know about the laws, rules and regulations governing the voluntary sector. Networks need to build their capacity in these areas to have a better impact.

Interaction with the Media

To build a positive image of the voluntary sector in the public at large, it is essential to develop a better understanding of the different types of media and how they work. A collaborative relationship and regular interaction with the media have to be developed by networks to project the right image of the sector, for educating, sensitizing, mobilizing people at large, and for creating public opinion and influencing policy makers. The media is a very important element in the development process because of its wide coverage and vast reach. Networks should make optimum and appropriate use of local and national, print and electronic media as per the demands of the situation. Access to electronic media needs to be enhanced and information has to be

disseminated to the media in desired form.

Membership Management

Members are the strength of any network. Therefore it is a challenge for networks to get maximum involvement of its members in its activities. Often members' involvement remains at the participation level limited only to attending meetings and seminars, seeking other's experience but not sharing one's own. Members need to contribute both energy and resources to sustain a network. There has to be a sense of responsibility among its members towards fulfilling the objectives of the network of which they form a part. As all the members of the network have their own agenda, objectives, issues and area of operation, they are left with very less time and energy for the network.

Networks have to develop a strategy to make its members active and contribute their best, without controlling or interfering in their individual activities. Leadership in a network is often collective, and clashes occur due to the different ways of the persons involved. Networks need to work on strategies for conflict management, for nurturing leadership and cadre building.

Alternative Funding

Networking is a process and networks have to be procedural in nature. Many a times, due to lack of resources, networks take up a particular project for which funds are available for its sustenance and remain as implementers of that project; thereby becoming similar to any other organization. Due to lack of resources, it fails to maintain its procedural nature. Therefore there is a need to look for alternative funding sources, as very few existing funders give funds to networks and networking. And even if some funds are available, the possibilities of being a funder-driven project cannot be ruled out. So for a network to survive, to be free from financial uncertainties, it is essential for networks to look for alternative fund raising methodologies.

Conclusion

The issues discussed above are just suggestive and are based on the experience of several voluntary organisations. In conclusion, an important aspect of networking is its dynamism. In other words, a network that is not dynamic loses its sheen, vitality and visibility. It is also important to underscore that for a network to be strong and visible, the active role and support of its members hold the key. Success or failure of any network is intrinsically linked to the support of its members. After all, it is a two-way track where networks act as a platform for their members and seek in the process their support to make it vibrant, contemporary and relevant.