Network Effectiveness Framework

for policy advocacy engagement

Complete Guide

9 November 2016

Contents

1. Rationale

Networks, if effective, enable civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens to build their power, by amplifying their voices and providing greater legitimacy and influence for sustainable development and social change. In a progressively complex and interdependent world, civil society is increasingly forming networks, movements and other agile structures – either formal, informal or virtual to advocate for change.

A key priority of the Foundation is to support civil society networks to develop their capacity to constructively engage with decision-makers to influence relevant policy. The network effectiveness framework (NEF) offers a structure and methodology to assist civil society networks to systematically monitor and improve their effectiveness in key dimensions of their performance. NEF is anchored in the Foundation's Capacity Development Framework which asserts that capacity diagnostics are an intrinsic part of a change process and should recognise strengths and promote self- learning.

The NEF provides a self-assessment methodology to measure achievements, set targets and identify actions needed for progress. NEF recognises that networks are structured and operate in various ways, some will be stronger than others in certain aspects, but despite their variation, key elements of effectiveness can be used to structure analysis and monitor progress. Two key reference documents: the network's theory of change and a map of network structure and linkages will be used to assess effectiveness. Continuously revising them will be part of the NEF change process.

The intention of NEF is to help networks to:

- Monitor progress and performance;
- Identify strengths, capacity gaps and set targets;
- Improve planning for greater impact.

2. What do we mean by a network?

While networks can be defined broadly as a collection of actors that are connected to each other through some kind of relationship, the Commonwealth Foundation has narrowed-in on a particular type of network of interest:

1) Networks as *a distinct form of organisation*, different from hierarchical institutions. The networks tend to be made up of autonomous organisations, which may or may not be formalised, but can also include other actors such as the media, individuals, trade unions, academics, the private sector.
2) Networks that *form around issues or a set of values for social change and sustainable development*.

3) Networks with an ***explicit purpose for policy change advocacy***. This may be a purpose agreed collectively by the leaders of the network or mandated by government.
4) Networks with an ***explicit intention to actively engage its constituents*** in assessing issues and identifying advocacy strategies. Networks need to be representative of their constituents so that there is strong ownership of the messages put forward.

The Foundation is not interested in networks that form for the sole purpose of delivering a programme or discreet project. While some of the work of the network may be 'projectised', the network should be formed by actors and organisations local to its context, an existing organised group or borne out of an initiative or need identified locally.

Coalition, alliance, or movement?

The choice of name - coalition, alliance, movement, apex body, etc. and the different structures and ways of working emerges from the relationships, history and political context of their establishment. All of these organised groups fall into the Foundation's definition of a network.
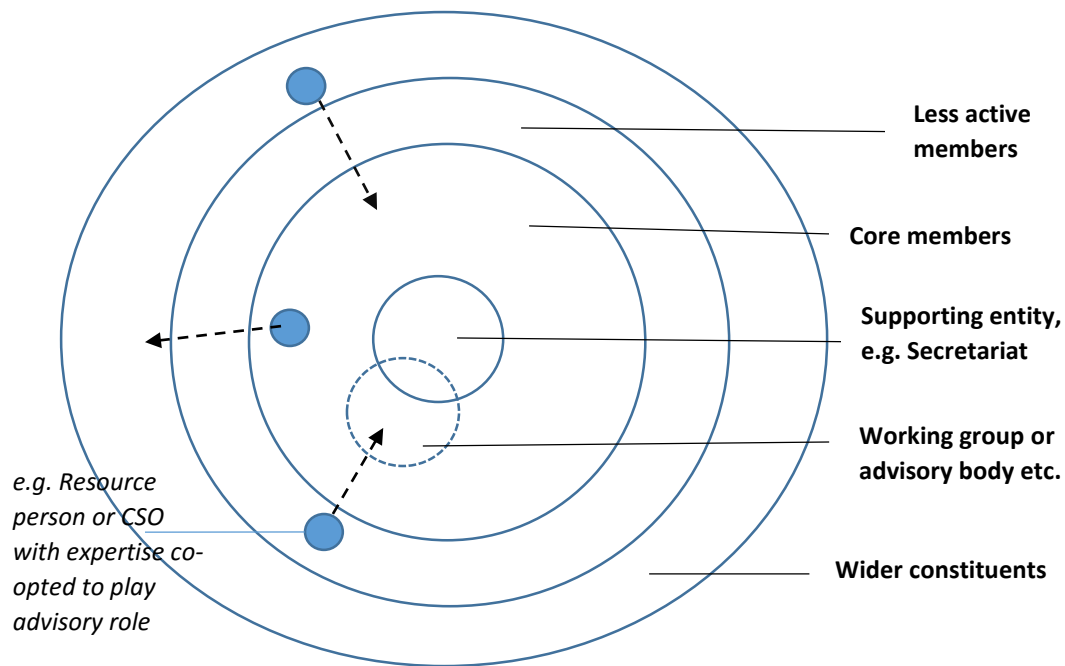
Network structure and membership

Most networks that work towards a social change and policy reform purpose are facilitated by an identifiable supporting entity such as a secretariat, an organiser, or steering group, etc.[1]. The different layers of membership can be illustrated as a Venn diagram (see Figure 1). At the core of the network is the supporting entity - e.g. Secretariat, organisers or some kind of a governing body that provides strategic leadership and administration. Outside the core are the committed members followed by less active members who may not have sustained connection to the network but who play crucial brokering or technical support roles from time to time. Finally, the constituents on the fringes, who receive communication and may participate in events and consultations.

This multi-layered, loose structure is useful for decentralised forms of decision-making that can support a diversity of members and geographical spread. Additional sub-structures such as a working group or technical advice committee, hosted within the Secretariat, may also be desirable. Frequently, 'the Secretariat' can become conflated with 'the network', which can lead to a confusion in purpose. A secretariat and the services that it provides are not the network. The network is the people, member organisations and the relationships between them.

(See overleaf)

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[1] Ashman, D. *et al*. 2005.; Hearn, S. and E. Mendizabal. 2011.

Figure 1: Diagram showing layers and fluidity of a network's constituency

Less active members

Core members

Supporting entity, e.g. Secretariat

Working group or advisory body etc.

Wider constituents

e.g. Resource person or CSO with expertise co-opted to play advisory role
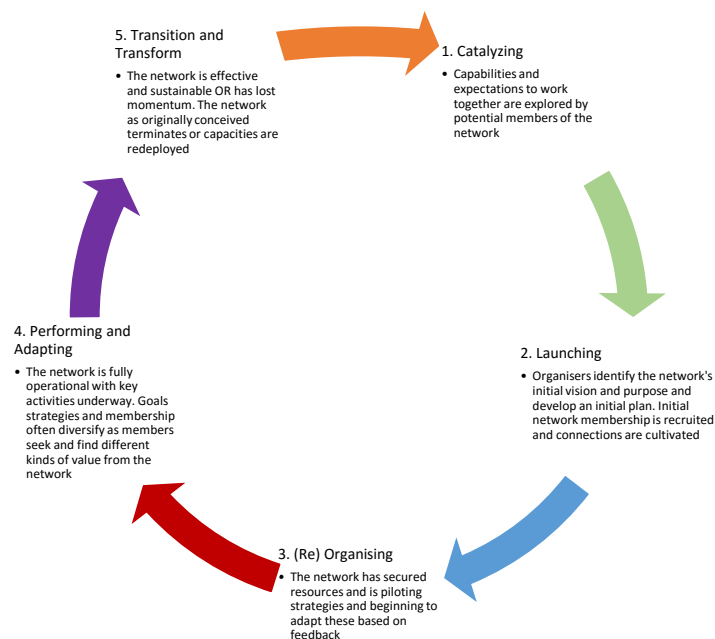
The lifecycle of networks

Networks typically go through a lifecycle at which different forms of structure and adaptation to achieve purpose emerge. Five stages are illustrated in the diagram below. The pace at which networks move through stages of development differ, likewise the capacity needs at each stage.

(see overleaf)

Figure 2: Diagram illustrating the different stages of a network's lifecycle
Adapted from Lucero, C. et al. 2010; Network Impacts and Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2014

5. Transition and Transform
- The network is effective and sustainable OR has lost momentum. The network as originally conceived terminates or capacities are redeployed

1. Catalyzing
- Capabilities and expectations to work together are explored by potential members of the network

4. Performing and Adapting
- The network is fully operational with key activities underway. Goals strategies and membership often diversify as members seek and find different kinds of value from the network

2. Launching
- Organisers identify the network's initial vision and purpose and develop an initial plan. Initial network membership is recruited and connections are cultivated

3. (Re) Organising
- The network has secured resources and is piloting strategies and beginning to adapt these based on feedback

3. Challenges and complexity of networks

Networks are complex forms of organising. Aspects of networks for policy engagement that make them complex, challenging and of interest in the NEF are:

- **Networks are generally made up of autonomous organisations and actors**, each with their own mission, governance body and set of stakeholders to which it must respond. The diversity in the membership of networks can strengthen the breadth of available ideas, reach etc., however, it can also lead to conflicts if the value of the diversity is not optimised and there is lack of clarity on the collective ambition. How can network leaders facilitate a shared vision and make the most of its diverse membership so that there is a common agenda for policy engagement?

- **Different structures will be appropriate for different purposes** and networks will need to assess and experiment with the structural needs that best serve the change it wants to see. As networks evolve, some may seek to remain informal or eventually disband, while others evolve into more formal bodies. How the structure facilitates its relationships - among members and with stakeholders will have implications for its effectiveness. A diversity of relationships can provide legitimacy, technical support, advise and improve influence and it is the structure that will help to provide the pathways for these relationships.

- **Networks can be financially and administratively taxing**, particularly for the supporting organisation or individuals. Core network members will contribute time and in kind resources. Experience shows that external funding can be a weak kind of 'glue' for networks[2]. If it is the primary motivation for creating or joining a network, members are more likely to drop out when funding declines. NEF provides some considerations for network financial management and fundraising.

- **Networks are unequally developed**. They don't evolve in a linear fashion. Some may be strong on connectivity but weak on advocacy. Some member organisations will be stronger and more experienced advocates than others. The NEF enables networks to map their relevant strengths and weaknesses in relation to their own context and purpose, and identify what they need to do to move forward.

4. Elements of network effectiveness

The NEF offers a holistic analysis to improve effectiveness. Four main elements of network effectiveness for policy engagement and change have been characterised and are described below. The analysis should look at all elements. Analysing one element without the others will limit the effectiveness of the network and its power to make change.

The process for working through the framework and to use and apply it is also important. Section 5 provides an outline of the process. Section 6 provides a simple matrix of the framework – the elements, characteristics, capacity needs to fulfil each element and suggested action to support strengthening.

The four elements are:

1. **Vibrancy**: A vibrant network has clarity on the change it wants to see, devolved leadership, actively addresses gender and power imbalances in its structures and learns from its experiences.

2. **Connectivity**: A connective network has structures that allow for a diversity of connections required to make decisions and achieve outcomes in its theory of change.

3. **Resources**: A well-resourced network values, utilises and cultivates funding from members as well as external funders and is transparent in its management of funds.

4. **Policy advocacy strategy and impact**: An effective policy advocacy strategy has a clear problem identification, is backed up by research evidence and is targeted where power lies. A network has made an impact when the media adopts its

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[2] Ashman, D. *et al*. 2005.

messages, decision-makers engage the network in determining the policy agenda and its recommendations has led to changes in policy.

The elements described further:

1. Vibrancy

*A **vibrant** network has clarity on the change it wants to see, devolved leadership, actively addresses gender and power imbalances in its structures and learns from its experiences.*

Networks are made up of autonomous organisations and actors, each with their own mission, governance body and set of stakeholders to which it must respond. Networks therefore need to facilitate a shared vision to recognise and exploit different motivations for participating, ensuring that they add value to the overall network. Clarity on the change members want to see as a collective will help to build ownership and vibrancy.

Leadership plays a critical role in facilitating the collective vision and maintaining participation and network vibrancy. Network leaders must play a difficult balance between direction, consultation and consensus building so that power and decision-making is balanced between leaders and members. Societal power imbalances such as between men and women, race, and ethnicity should also be addressed within the structure and the vision and intentions of the network's advocacy.

Policy advocacy often takes a long time to achieve change and many CSOs and networks face the fatigue of membership and to maintain momentum. Refreshing leaders, bringing in new people, skills, energy and ideas to achieve greatest collective impact can help to keep members and constituents energized.

2. Connectivity

*A **connective** network has structures that allow for a diversity of connections required to make decisions and achieve outcomes in its theory of change.*

Connections are the building blocks of a network. A network's structure and relationships will determine how its connections facilitate delivery on outcomes. Structures therefore need to allow for a diversity of connections that, for instance, support effective communication between members, make meaningful linkages with wider constituents, permit effective decision-making and provide sound technical expertise.

Sub-structures within a network, such as a technical advisory group or a communications working group can be 'nested' within the secretariat (as illustrated in Figure 1) to support decentralised leadership and decision-making. Networks that cover a large geographical spread and support a large diversity of members may also find sub-structures provide for organising at different levels (e.g. national vs. regional) to ensure that actions are meaningful within different contexts.

3. Resources

*A well-**resourced** network values, utilises and cultivates funding from members as well as external funders and is transparent in its management of funds.*

Networks are resource intensive, involving risks for members working collaboratively and much administrative work for the leaders. Without an appropriate level of resources - finances, and time and skills to take forward the ambitions of the network, it will remain incapacitated. There are three key ways in which successful networks deal with financial resources.

Firstly, because external funding can be a weak 'glue' for networks, it is important that networks also fundraise through the contributions of members. Recognition of member contributions helps to build ownership and accountability. Secondly, information about the receipt and allocation of financial resources should be shared openly within a network. Financial management should be communicated frequently. Thirdly, networks need to cultivate good relationships with funders. Where there are shared agendas, a collaborative relationship can help leverage additional sources of funds.

4. Policy advocacy strategy and impact

*An effective **policy advocacy strategy** has a clear problem identification, is backed up by research evidence and is targeted where power lies.*

*A network has made an **impact** when the media adopts its messages, decision-makers engage the network in determining the policy agenda and its recommendations has led to changes in policy.*

Ultimately, the network's interest is to affect policy change. While the vibrancy, connectivity and resources of the network are important, its impact is the reason for its existence: policy change for sustainable development and social change. A well thought out policy advocacy strategy is crucial to a network's policy advocacy impact and should be based on:

a. Clear problem identification of the issue;
b. Research evidence of the problem and the policy change required;
c. Clarity on outcomes sought from policy change process;
d. Identification and analysis of who has the power to influence outcomes;
e. Plan for use of communications in the strategy[3].

Once a strategy is in place, key areas to determine impact for a policy advocacy network are around how it has influenced the policy debate in the media, the kinds of policy influencing products produced and its level of engagement with institutions in governance.

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[3] For more information on policy advocacy strategy development, see: ODI Research and Policy Development. ROMA: A guide to policy engagement and policy influence. http://www.roma.odi.org/introduction.html

Strategizing for both the short term and longer term desired outcomes will help to show and provide tangible results while working towards more longer-term policy change.

5. Using the framework – the process

As noted in Section 1, the NEF is designed to help networks to:

- Monitor progress and performance;

- Identify strengths, capacity gaps and set targets;

- Improve planning for greater impact.

A facilitated workshop setting is most appropriate to use the NEF, involving all or as many core members as possible in the analysis. Using the questions in the NEF matrix (see Section 6), members can undertake a **self-assessment process**, ideally in working groups, to determine the status of progress against characteristics of each of the NEF elements. It is recommended to have an experienced, independent facilitator who can help prompt discussion and to probe answers to the NEF questions.

Using this participatory process, the workshop should also **outline targets and collaboratively agree on actions** and key responsibilities to achieve targets. The matrix at Section 6 provides some potential actions to support strengthening which may help discussion on choosing what would be the best course.

Results should be recorded, ideally on the NEF record sheet (see Annex 1). Targets identified will determine what capacity development support is required from members and other stakeholders. The results will also allow the network secretariat to track, validate and learn from the network's development as it progresses. Ideally, the targets should form part of the network's workplan.

In the **first application of NEF**, **establishing a baseline** will be essential. The workshop facilitator should support the network members to develop, as a first step:

a. A theory of change, if there isn't one already;
b. A power analysis to identify target audiences and current and potential linkages;
c. A map of the network to show structure and linkages.

The framework record sheet (See Annex 1) provides an opportunity for rating using a RAG (Red, Amber, Green) status as well as to provide a scoring and overall tally. The **rating and scoring is helpful to monitor and show progress** and can be used to provide accountability to stakeholders. Each of the four NEF elements is broken down into 2 to 4 characteristics and each characteristic is further broken down into 1 to 4 attributes or capacities (See Section 6). Each of the characteristics of each element is ranked. See Annex 1 for an example. The ranking system works simply:

Red Amber Green rating and scoring		
	5 points	Network has achieved all attributes of this characteristic
	4 points	Network has achieved almost all attributes of this characteristic
	3 points	Network has partially achieved the attributes
	2 points	Network has begun to make some progress on these attributes
	1 point	Network has not achieved any of the attributes of this characteristic

The ranking should not however, be the focus of the analysis. **Discussion, reflection and consensus** between core members on the strengthening needed is the most important result of the framework analysis. Ideally, the review of progress should be done annually. Frequency should be decided between members but not fewer than once per year.

6. The NEF matrix

	Characteristic	Attributes and capacities	Potential actions to support strengthening
Vibrancy	Shared vision	Network members have arrived at a consensus on a clearly articulated shared ambition and theory of change?	• Clearly articulate value the network aspires to deliver to members and constituents and its identity. Regularly review • Undertake exercise to develop a theory of change • Discuss and review any areas of overlap, convergence and confusion between the advocacy and messaging of the network vs that of individual members. Revisit the advocacy strategy if needed. • Develop a terms of reference or code of conduct for membership and for the Secretariat, share it broadly and live by it. • Welcome and orient new members, standardise induction process
		Network members agree that they are achieving more together than they would on their own; there is clarity on how the network adds value to the advocacy of members?	
		Members hold a set of shared norms or operating principles?	
		New participants can quickly become productive within the network?	
	Gender and societal power imbalances	Network vision and ambition recognises gender, intersectionality and other societal power imbalances and addresses this in its structures and in its advocacy?	• Brainstorm power imbalances in the context of the work of the network. How can the network structure, key messages and engagement address intersectionality?
	Distributed leadership	Leaders help members play an active and informed role in assessing issues and identifying advocacy strategies which reflect needs of members?	• Identify individuals with strong group process skills to take on more responsibility • Identify areas of growth that members can take responsibility to research or plan and present to the other members • Develop a system for diversifying and refreshing leadership • Target opportunities for network members to connect and collaborate directly
		Responsibility and control is spread throughout the network?	
		Leadership is refreshed and renewed as network evolves?	

Characteristic	Attributes and capacities	Potential actions to support strengthening
	Leadership allows for the necessary diversity of knowledge, skills and capacity to achieve outcomes?	
Learning and Development	Network regularly measures, evaluates and reflects on its impact to refine its goals and activities and is capable of managing change?	• Use of network effectiveness framework to assess milestones • Regular 'moments' for reflection and learning are a part of network workplan.

Connectivity	Structure	Network has a concept of its structure, how it suits its purpose, and how it might evolve?	• Map the network in order to visualise structure, diagnose strengths and weaknesses • Using theory of change assess what knowledge, skills and capacity is needed to achieve outcomes. Review in light of network map and how to accommodate and adapt the structure • Clarify boundaries of the constituent groups – who are members, who are wider constituents
		The structure allows for diversity of knowledge, skills and capacity to achieve purpose?	
		Structure allows for organising meaningful actions at the 'base' of its membership to ensure focus remains relevant and that constituents remain connected?	
		There are resource people that the network can draw on, from its constituents, to gain influence, new knowledge and fresh ideas?	
	Connections between core members	Structure allows effective and frequent communication between the Secretariat and members?	• Discuss and agree if members feel they are kept abreast of relevant information on and for the network and how this can be improved • Review network's use of social media tools and strategies are a good fit for types of interaction needed • Encourage small collaborative projects between two or three network members
		Members interact and collaborate with one another without going through the facilitating organisation. The network invites self-organised action?	
		If some highly connected members leave, the network remains strong?	
		The network is consulted by national and regional IIGs?	

	Linkages with wider constituents	The network has good links with the media and is consulted by media representatives?	• Review power analysis and develop communications strategy to raise profile of network
			• Undertake PATT assessment Column C – determine level and steps needed to advance to higher level
		Other CSOs/actors regularly ask to be a part of the network?	• Review map and identify where and how to integrate media into structure
Resources	Financial resources	Members contribute voluntary/in-kind resources to the network?	• Undertake financial /fundraising plan to meet needs of network development to fulfil theory of change
		The network has a financial sustainability plan or business plan looking at resources from diverse sources?	• Quantify contributions of members to network growth and development
			• Link to the network mapping and structural and needs review.
		Network has a budget which is managed transparently?	
	Skills/Capacity	Network can identify and prioritise filling skills and capacity gaps?	

Policy advocacy strategy and impact	Strategy	The network has reached a consensus on the policy reform arena or issue that it would like to engage. Consensus with its constituents	• Undertake policy research around policy issue. Clearly identify the problem you are trying to address and the policy gaps/needs that underpin it.
		The network has researched its policy issue, clearly identified the policy issue/problem, the policy asks, and desired outcomes	• Undertake power analysis to determine where the power lies to make change around policy issue/problem, who has influence and who can help.
		Network members have undertaken a power analysis to determine who it needs to target and who can help in our advocacy	• Develop engagement strategy to influence policy based on power analysis, including a communications strategy
		Network members have developed a unified and shared policy influencing strategy including communications strategy around some clear key messages	

	Influencing the policy debate	Policy influencing products, engagements relevant to the needs of policy-makers are being produced or delivered	• Relate/speak to pressing issues of national and regional policy makers in research and in developing key messages. • Monitor and track media uptake. Ensure media is involved in network structure – review network map
		The network has framed the policy debate around its key messages and changed the knowledge base around the policy issue	
		Media is using key messages advocated by the network in its discussion around the policy issue	
	Engagement with IIGs	IIGs recognise the network and have offered to review and / or consider policies in light of the network's policy asks	• Undertake PATT assessment Columns D and E, determine levels and identify steps needed to advance. • Review power analysis – has network identified and engaged the right people to engage? • Review communication strategy – what is working and not working – how can network improve its engagement?
		IIGs have established mechanisms for regular consultation with the network and/or wider civil society around policy issue	
		IIGs engage with civil society in determining the policy agenda in decision-making processes and policy development	

7. References

The following key references were used in the background research to develop the NEF. The literature on network assessment is by no means extensive; the field is still young in both theory and practice:

Ashman, D. et al. 2005. *Supporting Civil Society Networks in International Development Programs*. Academy for Educational Development Center for Civil Soceity and Governance. First edition.

Commonwealth Foundation. nd. *Commonwealth Insights: Constructive engagement*. Commonwealth Foundation

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Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation. 2014. *Framing paper: The state of network evaluation*. Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation.

ODI Research and Policy Development. ROMA: A guide to policy engagement and policy influence. ODI Research and Policy in Development.
http://www.roma.odi.org/introduction.html

Scearce, D. nd. *Network Effectiveness diagnostic and development tool*. Monitor Institute.

ANNEX 1: Example of NEF record sheet

NAME OF NETWORK

Characteristic				Baseline/Status	Potential actions to fulfil attributes of this characteristic	Measurable target and date for delivery	Who is responsible?	Score
RAG status & scoring	5	Network has achieved all attributes of this characteristic						
	4	Network has achieved almost all attributes of this characteristic						
	3	Network has partially achieved the attributes						
	2	Network has begun to make some progress on these attributes						
	1	Network has not achieved any of the attributes of this characteristic						
Vibrancy	Shared vision		Network has a clearly articulated shared ambition and theory of change?					4
			Network members agree that they are achieving more together than they would on their own; there is clarity on how the network adds value to the advocacy of members?					
			Members hold a set of shared norms or operating principles?					
			New participants can quickly become productive within the network?					
	Gender and Societal Power Imbalances		Network vision and ambition recognises gender, intersectionality and other societal power imbalances and addresses this in its structures and in its advocacy					3
	Distributed leadership		Leaders helps members play an active and informed role in assessing issues and identifying advocacy strategies which reflect needs of members?					4
			Responsibility and control is spread throughout the network?					
			Leadership is refreshed and renewed as network evolves?					
			Leadership allows for the necessary diversity of knowledge, skills and capacity to achieve outcomes?					
	Learning and development		Network can identify and prioritise filling skills and capacity gaps					3
	Structure		Network has a concept of its structure, how it suits its purpose, and how it might evolve?					4
			The structure allows for diversity of knowledge, skills and capacity to achieve purpose?					

Connectivity		Structure allows for organising meaningful actions at the 'base' of its membership to ensure focus remains relevant and that constituents remain connected?				
		There are resource people that the network can draw on, from its constituents, to gain influence, new knowledge and fresh ideas?				
	Connections between core members	Structure allows effective and frequent communication between the Secretariat and members?				3
		Members interact and collaborate with one another without going through the facilitating organisation. The network invites self-organised action?				
		If some highly connected members leave, the network remains strong?				
	Linkages with wider constituent	The network is consulted by national and regional IIGs?				3
		The network has good links with the media and is consulted by media representatives?				
		Other CSOs/actors regularly ask to be a part of the network?				
Resources	**Financial resources**	Network has relationships with a range of funding agencies and is pursuing new relationships				3
		Members contribute voluntary/in-kind resources to the network?				
		The network has a financial sustainability plan or business plan looking at resources from diverse sources?				
		Network has a budget which is managed transparently?				
	Skills/Capacity	Network can identify and prioritise filling skills and capacity gaps?				3
Strategy and Impact	**Strategy**	The network has reached a consensus on the policy reform arena or issue that it would like to engage. Consensus with its constituents?				2
		The network has researched its policy issue, clearly identified the policy issue/problem, the policy asks, and desired outcomes?				
		Network members have undertaken a power analysis to determine who it needs to target and who can help in our advocacy?				
		Network members have developed a unified and shared policy influencing strategy including communications strategy around some clear key messages?				
	Influencing the policy debate	Policy influencing products, engagements relevant to the needs of policy-makers are being produced or delivered?				2
		The network has framed the policy debate around its key messages and changed the knowledge base around the policy issue?				

	Media is using key messages advocated by the network in its discussion around the policy issue?					
Engagement with IIGs	IIGs recognise the network and have offered to review policies in light of the network's policy asks?					
	IIGs have established mechanisms for regular consultation with the network and/or wider civil society around policy issue?					2
	IIGs engage with civil society in determining the policy agenda in decision-making processes and policy development?					

	Total Score	36
Participants in analysis:		60