NETWORK OF INNOVATORS IN GOVERNANCE
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Marseille, 5-6 June 2006

TOWARDS EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT
OF NETWORKS

Ragaa Makharita
Synthesis

This paper presents some thoughts on ways of ensuring effective performance and sustainability of professional networks. It benefits from experience and observations of the performance of some networks operating in the Arab region and draws lessons from successes and failures affecting both performance and sustainability. The role of the “champion” behind the establishment and operation of the network is highlighted; membership and funding issues are discussed in the light of lessons learnt. Application to the proposed Mediterranean Network of Innovators in Governance (MeNIG) is attempted; the aim discussing possible challenges is to provoke thoughts and reach feasible conclusions.

Introduction to Networking in the Arab Region:

“Networking” has recently become a new act of faith in development work in the Arab region. The growth of the civil society in the Arab region reflects the eagerness of many professionals to participate in public policy formulation to effect a political and societal change to achieve sustainable economic and social development through good governance, liberty and democracy. Many change and development-oriented professionals have opted for membership in civil society organizations; they realize that the role of political parties in effecting genuine and lasting change has weakened and faith in the value of participation in political parties as a means of contributing to change has waned. Civil Society organizations are now the new venue in which professionals and intellectuals find a forum to express their thoughts, participate in the development process and practice the principles of transparency, accountability and integrity. There is a growing sense of need to contribute to effecting the cherished change through reinventing government and the reinvigoration of the three interdependent elements that compose the process of governance: the State, the Private Sector and the Civil Society.

There is also a strong awareness that active civil society organizations acting individually are like isolated islands the impact of which may be negligible in the general political, social and economic order. The need to coalesce, to network, to establish alliances and link communities of practice to each other nationally, regionally and, eventually, internationally has become an imperative. This has prompted the establishment of a
growing number of networks with varying objectives, organizational structure and substantive content. Recent as they may be, these networks need now to work together and exchange experience to grow through joint learning and practice of effective management. There is still more learning to do, more experience to gain.

**Basic Requirements for Effective Network Performance:**

The following is a set of interdependent core elements that contribute to effective network performance and sustainability.

1. **Agreement on the vision, mission, objectives and functions of the Network:** The articulation of a mission, distinct objectives and key functions of the network is a first necessity. This should be the product of a participative process in which dedicated founders of the network (the champions) would share their vision and agree on their common goals and cherished achievements. The founders need also to define their target audience at two levels: a) potential members of the network and; b) the beneficiaries of the services that the network would provide. Their subsequent role is to share their views and aspirations with as large number of potential members of the network as possible and elicit their support and adherence to the same vision and goals and invite them to join the network.

2. **Legitimacy:** In some countries the establishment of a network may require registration in a designated government agency as a civil society organization to authorize it to act in the social order, to solicit funds and carry out activities. In general, real legitimacy is bestowed on organization through the value it creates, the services it provides to its members, the acceptability of its mission and goals and the recognition of its leaders as valuable contributors of ideas worth supporting and emulating.

3. **By-Laws, rules and regulations:** Legitimacy is also enshrined in the network’s by-laws that are adopted by all members, with defined rules governing policy and
decision making, membership, organizational structure, activities, funding and financial management and audit. It may take sometime before the by-laws become the standards that govern behavior and performance in the network. New networks need to continuously fine-tune their by-laws and their rules and regulations as they learn from experience and as new members express their views on the management of the network. The clearer these by-laws are, the more they are respected and implemented, so long as there is a common agreement among members and continued identification with the goals and objectives of the network.

4. **Value of the Network to its members:** Membership in a network is a function of the value that the network offers to members. Therefore, it is necessary to define that “value” at the outset with a supporting set of activities through which that “value” can be manifested. While the definition of value may be simple at the beginning of activities, it must be achievable to give credence to the network and entice new members to join in and actively participate in supporting and implementing its programs.

5. **Commitment:** This is an act of faith on the part of those who have not only considered the value of membership, but also have become convinced that their professional life would be enhanced through participation in the network activities and would help achieve their own goals. This commitment is expressed through continued support of the network, willingness to share experience, dynamic advocacy of the network mission and goals, financial contribution within means and effective implementation of assigned tasks.

6. **Selectivity:** Membership in the network should be carefully considered by the founders. Potential members should be people or organizations that share the same goals and are willing to contribute to the successful performance of the network activities and the fulfillment of its objectives. To be accepted potential members should demonstrate a high level of professionalism and commitment. They should have the ability to share responsibilities and provide intellectual inputs into the
network program, and where possible, human or financial support within available means. Selectivity also applies to the choice of activities and services to provided to network members.

7. **Program of activities:** The program of activities is a key magnet for increased membership in the network. The program should reflect the vision, mission and objectives of the network. This is what members will come together to support and do. While the seeds of the program of activities may be contributed by the founders, its elaboration should be the product of a participative process in which members, at least some to be considered as the Program Development Group (Committee), should deliberate. Program developers need to consider all elements of objectives, target beneficiaries, program structure and activity design. Implementing entities, individuals or organizations, need to be selected on the basis of their capacity including human and financial resources to ensure timely and effective implementation.

8. **Services provided:** Activities and services are also important magnates for increased membership and are elements of the value that a network creates. Members need to sense the value of the services provided; the more such services correspond to actual needs, the more they add value and increase commitment. Such services may take the form of collecting and disseminating information, guidance to obtaining services, monitoring of certain activities and reporting results, experts profile, assistance in resource mobilization, advice on problem solving, compilation of reference materials, standardization of professional terms, formulation of performance standards and other such services that network members may find of value.

9. **Financial Resources:** These are the sinews of the network; a steady flow of funds are vital for it survival and sustainability. Adequate funds to meet programmatic needs may be mobilized by different means and can be supported by the worth of the program and the benefits that may accrue to target audience.
Ensuring the flow of funds is not an easy matter and the program of activities should be defined both in terms of financial availability and possibilities of potential contributors. Ambitious programs that are not fulfilled may reflect negatively on the network performance. While the commitment of members is an important source of strength to the network, it should be translated into financial contributions within the means of each member. However, a network to survive, at least at its inception, needs to have an initial “patron”, a sponsor that provides sustainable funding support at least to cover the cost of management and basic operations for the first five years. Some networks may take a long time until they are capable to depend on their own resources. It is therefore, important to strike a balance between “wants”, “needs” and “financial possibilities and availability”.

10. Leadership and effective management: No matter how limited or large the financial resources may be, effective leadership and management may bestow trust in the network. Dedicated leadership with vision and a sense of mission has more potential to mobilize resources than otherwise. Donors, institutions or individuals need to know and to witness the value that their contributions create. They need to see evidence of progress, small as it may be, but progress nevertheless. Effectiveness of management is measured by its ability to increase participation in decision-making, program development and implementation and resource mobilization. Transparency, accountability and integrity in managing the network are necessary assets for network survival.

**Lessons of Experience in the Arab Region**

The network is a form of *partnership*. The new concept in the Arab region is “partnership”. There are strong indications that this concept will gain momentum as Arab societies move progressively towards democratization. Reform activities in the area of governance in the region have emanated from a more active and increasingly visible and vocal civil society, though still budding as this may be in some countries.
The Arab Declaration on Reform issued at the Alexandria Library in 2004, was the product of a partnership among Arab intellectuals who came together from different countries to claim their right in deciding the future of the region. What brought these together is their shared faith in the power of partnership and the need to build strong alliances to spur reform and compel governments to reconsider their complacency. They now meet annually to review progress, share experience and plan future activities. The Library of Alexandria continues to be the convener and sponsor of that loose coalition that is cemented by common goals: political, economic and governance reform for development. That “partnership” or networking of civil society organizations, academics and professionals from different fields has become strong over time; it helps enhance shared vision and focus on common issues in governance and development.

The Arab Network of NGOs (Shabaka) established in 1999 by a key sponsor who still provides the basic funding for its operation, has also espoused the concept of “partnership”. The “Shabaka” (Arabic for “Network”) has over 1,000 member organizations across the Arab region with headquarters in Cairo, Egypt. It draws its legitimacy and value from the causes it advocates, the services provided to members and from the variety of its member organizations, all accepted and legitimized in their respective community according to applicable laws and regulations.

The mission and goals of the Shabaka were defined at the outset by the key sponsor\(^1\) and discussed and endorsed in a regional conference that launched it in 1999. These were ten clear development objectives that included the contribution to strengthening social justice, respect of human rights and combating corruption in all its forms. It took three years of fine-tuning its by-laws until they became standards guiding policy and decision making, programming and management.

The key services provided include research on common issues affecting the performance of member organizations, assistance with program design and implementation, assistance in designing capacity building programs and resource mobilization, design and

---

\(^1\) His Royal Highness Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia.
implementation of performance evaluation activities and training programs for individual staff members from member organizations. The Shabaka publishes its research reports in book form, keeps an updated database on Arab NGOs operating in different fields and classified by area of specialty, disseminates information and responds to particular needs of individual member organizations. It holds an annual conference to discuss progress and focus on commonly selected theme that all organizations work on during the year.

In 2005, the Shabaka conducted a survey of “partnership for development” in the Arab region focusing on partnership between governments, the private sector, civil society organizations and funding institutions. They findings were presented in a regional conference in the fall of the same year. Among the key findings is the huge gap between the public statements of government policy makers and their practices on the ground: real partnership in many Arab countries remains an unfulfilled hope. Some Arab countries, it was found, are still too much centralized and do not allow the civil society or the private sector a role in the development order. The key reason for this opacity is the mutual lack of confidence of public agencies and civil society organizations. This has led to the weak participation of civil society organizations in policy making and in development planning. The findings also point out the weakness of the civil society in fulfilling its own role. Conclusions and recommendations of the survey may help change this situation in the near future.

An important lesson drawn from the experience of the Shabaka relates to the principle of “selectivity” of members of the Board and that, in turn, relates to the lack of flexibility in the by-laws. These require that membership to the Board is the result of a democratic process and “voting” by all member organizations present in the annual conference. Through manipulations and false promises, one of the Board member has abused his authority and disturbed the decision process to the point of jeopardizing the activities of the Shabaka and threatening its very existence. The present By-laws do not allow for terminating the membership in the Board before the end of the members term. In cases of emergency new elections have to be organized and membership in the Board may be terminated by a two-third majority vote, which is difficult to achieve in a relatively short
time, in addition to the cost of organizing a special conference for this purpose and the abusing member remains. Disenchanted member organizations have already declared their intention to withdraw their membership if the situation does not improve soon.

Two more lessons, one relates to the almost total dependence on funding from the original founder and the other deals with staffing. Most of Arab NGOs originally began as charitable organizations helping the poor and the disadvantaged, their funding base are contributions from rich individuals. Current laws do not facilitate that similar contributions may be obtained from the private sector. This has limited the funding abilities of the NGOs. Recent NGOs have development and reform agendas and these are usually managed by more sophisticated individuals but who are usually short on funding. This has forced the Shabaka to depend on the original founder who wishes to see that the Shabaka become self-sufficient after 7 years in operations. They also seek and sometimes obtain, financial support from Arab funds and international institutions, which is not a guaranteed source of sustainable income. Attempts are now being made to limit activities and implement a new strategy for resource mobilization.

On the staffing side, the recruiting and appointing processes did not follow objective criteria and has therefore, produced some weak individuals whose contribution to the overall organizational performance is minimal. The current labor laws practiced in Egypt and applied to all organizations operating on its soil, make it extremely difficult for an employer to get rid of non-performers and the Shabaka must bear the consequences. The heavy burden carried by the Executive Director has reduced her to ability to perform the strategic functions assigned to her post and the search for practical solutions to this and similar problems continues.

The Network for Gender and Development (@nged) is a relatively new network in the Arab region. Launched in 2002 by the Arab Center for Women Research and Training (CAWTAR), a regional organization with funds from the World Bank Development Grant Facility (DGF) and the support of other donors, the network consists of research centers, public agencies, NGOs, regional and internationals organizations, journalists and
media professionals and individual experts and parliamentarians from 19 Arab countries\(^2\). This variety of membership has made @nged a multifaceted policy-oriented network focusing on enhancing policy dialogue among intellectuals and governments, research, training, advocacy and information sharing.

CAWTAR considers @nged a pillar of its own outreach objectives and a vehicle for disseminating its research findings and its flagship product: Arab Women Development Report (AWDR), considered in the Arab region as a catalyst for policy dialogue and change. The focus is specified: gender and development, gender equality and rights of women. The research is action-oriented and policy-based to support the ultimate goal of improving the life of women in the Arab region. The bulk of the network’s activities focus therefore, on the production of the AWDR through research assigned to individual Arab research centers, individuals and groups of experts, academic institutions and NGOs. @nged provides a space for dialogue through seminars and conferences involving a multitude of partners and targeting public policy makers.

To attract attention to its work and at the same time increase participation and disseminate knowledge, @nged organizes annual competitions among journalists and media, youth groups and research centers for the production of best articles, radio programs and innovative solutions to women issues. The winners receive recognition awards and their products are published on @nged website. Among the reports that have stirred particular interest in the Arab region are: Arab Women in Economic Activities; Arab Women in Decision Making, Arab Adolescent Girl, Arab Women and the Media and Arab Women and Legislation.

@nged’s own research focuses on best practices in the field of women’s rights and involvement in public policy and economic development and the development of training materials particularly targeting the adolescent girl and the media. It cooperates with the

---

\(^2\) Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, Syria, Tunisia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
World Bank to follow-up on its activities in the Arab region targeting women and with UN and international organizations in the field of media development.

Relatively a young network, @nged does not have a Board of its own; decisions affecting its operations are made by CAWTAR’s Board of Trustees and the advice of CAWTAR’s Advisory Council. With relative freedom in programming and project implementation, @nged has succeeded in establishing associate networks such as: “Adolescent Network” (@DO), “Media Network” focusing on gender issues and “Arab Women Media Watch”. To increase value for its members, @nged ensures that its products and services relate to felt needs in the region, responds to specific needs when a majority of members so requires and assists requesting members through consultancy and technical advice. The outputs of seminars are documented and shared with all members, their Directory of Experts and Resource Persons is a useful reference to members and others. There are now 150 members of @nged, individual members pay a nominal amount of $15 a year and institutions pay only $20. @nged has recently been evaluated by the World Bank and found worth of continued support. It is estimated that by the year 2010, @nged will be self-supporting.

There are some lessons to be learnt from the @nged experience. Continued financial support is important but not necessarily the only reason for its success. Perhaps the key reason is the attraction of the subject matter: gender in development, and the deeply felt need for upholding the rights of women and ensuring their equity in the Arab region. There is a common agreement that Arab women continue to need active support for development; despite of the progress achieved so far in many Arab countries, some are still lagging. The second reason for @nged’s success is the high quality of its products and services to members. The third reason is participative program development to ensure its relevance to the region and the fourth is its effective management team, a small number and highly dedicated professionals with faith in what they do and operating under the guidance and support of a capable manager and leader in the field of women development.
Possible Challenges for the Mediterranean Network of Innovators in Governance

Members in the Network soon to be launched will certainly be drawn together by a common goal: “advancing the cause of good governance for development in the Mediterranean region”. “Governance” as a field of study and research is relatively young but its adherents are many; they are highly dedicated and willing to contribute to its growth through research, advocacy and training. As a multidisciplinary field, it draws together several specialists from the social sciences, economics, political science and computer science. The Network will certainly conduct research, disseminate knowledge, share experience and may lead to joint programs for advocacy, production of training materials and reforming the teaching curricula in different schools and institutes and will be able to provide a forum and a thinking space through organizing seminars, conferences and bring together several communities of practice to advance the field of governance.

The following challenges are discussed here as a contribution to the efforts for ensuring that the Network to be launched has taken into consideration a number of issues and has resolved them to reduce and eliminate possible pitfalls in its operations.

1. **Intellectual definition of “governance” and its operationalization in different parts of the Med region.** The area of operations of the Network varies in terms of language, acceptability of the term “governance” and the myriad of definitions that it has been given, especially in the Arab States. In fact, the term is not equally understood in the Arab States and in some it is totally rejected due to wrong translation that equates "governance” to “systems and philosophies” of “ruling”; that poses a threat to certain Arab régimes. This is important since it could affect the structuring of the Network into two units/sections with one specifically targeting the Arab States.

2. **Linguistic differences.** While all governance professionals in the Med region are fluent in English, the research findings and training materials will have to be translated to facilitate the sharing process, with corresponding added cost. It
could perhaps be agreed that English shall be the unifying language of the Network and the responsibility for translation into other languages be left to the Network members.

3. **Difference of governance issues to be addressed.** Issues faced by Balkan countries may differ markedly from those that need to be addressed in the Arab States. Innovations are of common interest to all, but priorities may differ. This will affect programming of activities and may create two parallel programs with possibilities for cross fertilization of ideas and sharing of results.

4. **Membership in the Network.** It is hoped that the Network will attract memberships from government institutions including parliamentarians, the judiciary, private sector and civil society. Reaching this variety of membership to promote innovation may vary from one country to the other, particularly in the Arab part of the Med. Region. While this does not constitute a cumbersome hurdle, it is important to be taken into consideration when deciding the profile of potential members of the Network.

5. **Differences in expectations between governments and professional members of the Network especially in countries that have started the reform process.** While professionals will be bent on thorough research, advocacy and shared learning at the regional level, governments on the other hand, may need quick results, projects with funding claiming that there is no more time for research, studies, seminars or conferences; they need quick answers to old issues that had been neglected and have now been discovered to be crucial. The buy-in of governments is important to facilitate the research process and pave the way for productive dialogue on innovations in public policy management and reform. This will certainly affect priority setting and activity programming.

6. **Value to members.** To provide value to members, the Network should not work on esoteric issues and academic theories on governance and innovations. Value
to various members will be demonstrated by the practical experience that members may share and the services that may enhance institutional performance in public agencies, such as advisory support, contribution to solving common problems, exchange of experience and joint learning. In fact, the Governance for Development Initiative in the Arab States supported by both UNDP and OECD, concentrated in its first phase on seminars and regional meetings to raise awareness and share experiences, considered a way of creating “value” to Arab States. The activities of the Initiative were recently criticized by certain governments as having spent 15 months without creating “operational value” to governments. “Value” may have different meaning to different parties and need therefore, to be well defined at the outset to ensure common agreement.

7. **Membership.** The Network would gain by having a mix of membership coming from different disciplines and representing government agencies, private sector, civil society organizations, media and academia. Attracting government officials may be the real challenge, especially in the Arab part of the Med region, they may be reticent to join, at least at the beginning, for fear of possible political reprisal. Public officials may join at a later stage when the Network has proven its value to them. To ensure their buy-in, it is advisable to include them in the Network’s activities and services even though they may not be Network members. It may be possible to start the Network operations with members from academia and interested experts in the field of governance and innovation. Representatives of others groups could be invited to participate in the Network activities to attract them to become active members.

8. **Funding.** While funding issues are common to all networks, for a budding network it is vital. The Network would need financial support for its early operations (for about three years) and for management cost to cover a small core staff of, perhaps, two persons working full time for the first six months and then part-time for the rest of the first year until the possibilities of future growth are
assessed. It is also possible to claim membership dues the amount of which should be decided during the Network launching meeting.

9. **Content.** It may be difficult at the outset to plan activities that respond to a myriad of needs. While maintaining the ambitions of the Network, the challenge is to design a feasible program with limited scope and addressing a specific target audience (academics and experts) and carry it out effectively. To develop the buy-in and demonstrate its value to members of the Network and other beneficiaries, the content should be well defined and reflect the mission and objectives of the Network. The content can be diversified as the membership grows and as demand for varied services increases with time.

10. **Sustainability.** The challenge of sustainability is intrinsically linked to funding and content. The Network will be sustainable so long the minimum funding requirements continue to flow uninterruptedly and the content of the Network provides value to the members and others users. The quality of outputs, no matter what the scope of activities and coverage may be, is a contributing element to sustainability. Continued awareness building, in professional and non propagandistic language, as well as the ease of access to information are two important elements that ensure sustainability.

11. **Linkages with other networks.** To achieve faster growth and demonstrate its value, the challenge is to link with other relevant networks, not necessarily specializing in governance and innovations but with those focusing on related issues such as gender, social justice, combating corruption, media, civil society, rule of law, think tanks dealing with public policy management and information technology applied to governance. The challenge is to concentrate the Network initial key efforts on developing the Network’s website to enable the users’ to access a rich variety of sources of information to increase the value of the Network and thus increase membership and widen the scope of participation.
12. **Management and effective Leadership.** This challenge may be met with the careful selection of the individual or individuals that will lead the Network, not only during its inception phase, which is critical, but at all times. A small select team of dedicated persons will constitute perhaps the most important element in building the Network and assuring its future growth. The persons to be selected should be themselves innovators to set the example for others and establish the reputation of the Network as a forum for serious, professional and forward looking work.

There are and there will be always challenges that will typify the stages of development of the Network. With solid adherence to the mission and objectives of the Network and the contributions of all members and supporters such challenges and risks will be adequately mitigated.

*Ragaa Makharita*