

It's not just the data: participatory monitoring and the most significant change

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ABSTRACT

Overlaying the technical aspects of participative communications and network design is the question 'how they can secure social change?' Social change is a political act. How can transnational networks gain political influence for local groupings at the national and international level?

The Global Network for Disaster Reduction has undertaken a large scale 'participatory monitoring' project with the intended aim of using an activist 'social network' to create 'social demand': influencing policy and implementation within the UN's framework for disaster reduction.

While the project achieved its intended goals, the unintended impacts of the project are argued to be at least as significant; revealing ways that networks can create 'political space' at the local level which can influence policy and access to resources at the national and international level.

This paper is presented from a practitioner perspective, linking practice to theoretical work on transnational social movements and participative communications.

Keywords

Networks, Disaster Risk Reduction, Transnational Social Movements, Participative communication, Participatory Monitoring.

INTRODUCTION

Networks and social change

Social networks have proliferated across the world as communications technologies open up the possibility of transnational groupings collaborating to share knowledge and take co-ordinated action. They are seen as a means of exercising countervailing power by groups who are otherwise excluded from governance processes. Such groupings, often referred to as 'Transnational Social Movements' (Tarrow, 2005), believe that they can open up 'political space' (Gaventa, 2006) securing seats at the tables where policy is set and resources allocated – nationally and internationally.

However such networks are often frustrated in their goals. Despite their new-found ability to connect, collaborate, share, campaign and advocate they still find themselves shut out of the corridors of power.

“. . . For example, during the . . . committee meeting . . . the civil society delegates were not allowed to participate fully in the working groups . . . more than 60% of the civil society recommendations to the final declaration had been completely ignored . . . there were continued suggestions that the Civil Society should disengage from the process and refuse to continue being 'pawns' in a multi-stakeholder process that would not fully consider and integrate their perspectives . . .”

(Cogburn, 2004, from an account of civil society involvement in the UN WSIS information society summit)

Reviewing Statement: This paper represents work in progress, an issue for discussion, a case study, best practice or other matters of interest and has been reviewed for clarity, relevance and significance.

In the field of international development there is a wider and repeating theme of the failure of 'participation' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001); as participation in principle often leads to co-option in practice, preserving rather than shifting the balance of power. What options do networks have for leveraging their collaborative strength; to achieve participation in decision-making and access to resources?

Using a network to secure greater resilience to disasters

This paper is a practitioner report on one possible option based on participative monitoring: the 'Views from the Frontline' (VFL) global survey project undertaken by the emerging 'Global Network for Disaster Reduction' (GNDR) in 2009 (<http://www.globalnetwork-dr.org/VFLreports.htm>). GNDR is concerned with 'Disaster Risk Reduction' (DRR) - increasing the resilience of communities to natural disasters. At the time of launching VFL, GNDR had only been established for a year, a short lifespan in network terms.

The project aimed to secure 'space' within the United Nations ten year process for Disaster Reduction (the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA)) established by the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)). In doing so its goal was to demonstrate the divide between policy established at national level and implementation at the local level. It emphasised creation of 'social demand'; stating "Accountability works best where there is public or "social" demand on the government for the provision of appropriate goods and services" (<http://www.globalnetwork-dr.org/gndr/aboutgndr.html>). Allied to this has been an emphasis on social media and networking tools.

The paper examines the impact of the project both in terms of its original goals and in terms of the 'most significant changes' (Davies, 1996) which actually emerged from the project. It concludes by considering the effect of the project outcomes on the future strategy of this network.

About the author

The author is project manager for the 'Views from the Frontline' project, and was previously involved in other 'participative communications' projects. The author is also engaged in practice based doctoral research on social networks, social media and social learning. The perspective is therefore that of an embedded 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1991).

WHY 'VIEWS FROM THE FRONTLINE'?

GNDR encompasses both International NGOs (INGOs) and national and local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). They wanted to address the concern that the UN-ISDR process was insufficiently engaged with the people it was ultimately intended to benefit. While the HFA set broad goals for improvement in DRR it didn't appear to either consult people at the 'frontline' or to contain any means of establishing whether policy was translating into practice. The only measure put in place, the 'Global Assessment Review' (GAR) restricted consultation to officials at government level.

Views from the Frontline – a participative monitoring project

The network decided that it should provide its own 'complementary' assessment of progress towards the goals of the HFA, basing its design on that of the 'Civil Society Index' which assesses progress on indicators of development of Civil Society (<http://www.civicus.org/csi>). The overarching goal was to present robust data reflecting the perceptions of stakeholders at the local level; demonstrating the gap the network believed existed between policy and practice. This would in turn create 'social demand' - leverage for change at the international and national level.

The project faced several challenges. It had limited resources and consisted of member organisations who themselves were often very small. It was not clear whether the network could successfully gather sufficient data to be able to make a strong case for their hypothesis. In addition to these constraints, time was very short. The launch of the project timescale slipped by over six months, but the delivery date, determined by the biennial Global Platform meeting of UNISDR, was immovable. The global financial crisis led to funding shrinking further and only a third of the anticipated funding was in fact available to participants.

IMPLEMENTATION – WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

With this backdrop, experience would suggest that many of the network members - small in-country CSOs - would drop out. Such organisations, whatever their underlying goals, are inevitably funding driven. The first surprise was that of approximately 40 participating countries 33 continued with, and completed, the project. Why was this the case? What was the perceived value to local groups which led to them participating despite the limited funding? We return to this question later.

The project itself depended on questionnairing three different stakeholder groups (community members, civil society organisations and local government) on a face to face basis and submitting collated results to the secretariat. The realities of communications across the network were highlighted during this process. The network anticipated supporting sophisticated 'social networking' activities among its members. However although it created a web based 'members zone' (customised from 'Moodle') with forums, wikis, document stores etc. the reality was that a majority of network members restricted themselves to email. For many, internet access was intermittent, with outages of days or even weeks; even when they were connected the bandwidth was such that loading web pages was painful and frustrating. An experiment with an online survey interface (based on 'Zoomerang') therefore had very little uptake.

At a recent Global Workshop (January 2010) - at which many active network members were present - the nature of the network and its communications was discussed, based on two pictures of a network:-

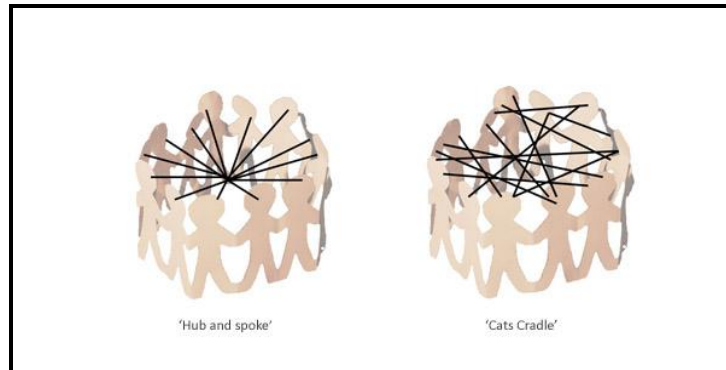


Diagram 1. Two images of network relationships

There was unanimous agreement that the functional relationships in the network were represented by the 'Hub and spoke' rather than the 'Cats cradle' diagram. A poll of members showed that communications had been almost entirely between network members and the secretariat. Was 'network' the right term for GNDR's activities?

The meeting also discussed appropriate ICTs to support GNDR's work. Results of a live poll are shown below:-

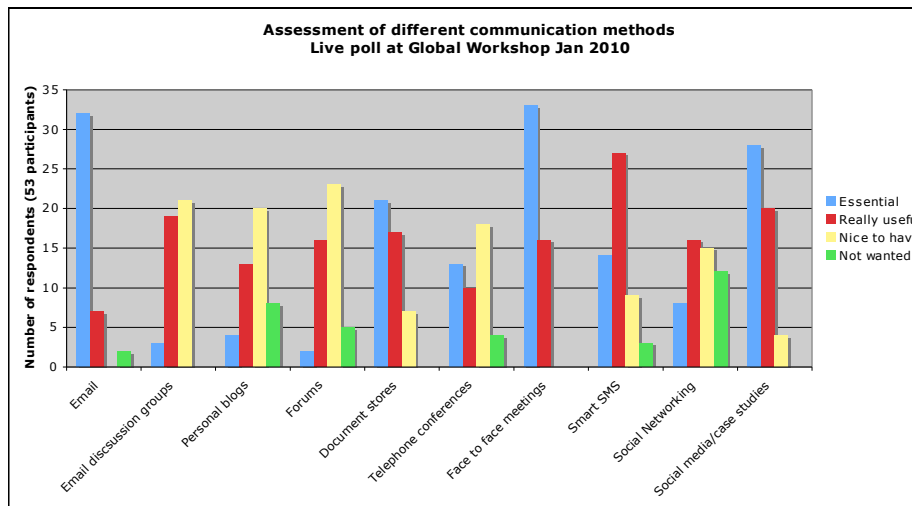


Diagram 2: Assessment of value of communications methods by network members

Social networking tools were not highly rated. However members also expressed a strong desire to develop network linkages and knowledge flows, particularly around 'social media/case studies' and 'document stores' sharing experience and expertise. It therefore appears that there will be a move towards a more 'cats cradle structure. They also gave strong endorsement to use of 'smart SMS' which increase the reach of the network in the consultation/surveying process.

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT – BOTH INTENDED AND UNINTENDED?

What impact did the project make? The question can be answered in two ways – firstly by comparing the impact with the original goals, and secondly by asking what *actual* impacts – intended and unintended – resulted. The second approach is based on the 'Most Significant Change' approach to monitoring and evaluation which is used widely as an alternative to traditional approaches (Davies, 1996). It has the benefit of asking those involved what actual changes they perceived, As a result it is truly participative, rather than making project participants subservient to a set of goals which are often set externally.

Intended outputs and impacts

The 'Views from the Frontline' data was drawn together in a report which had a striking impact at the conference due to both the volume of data (over 7000 responses were gathered and analysed, compared with under a hundred in ISDR's GAR report) and the fact that these were presented in reports which looked less like many civil society documents and more like a corporate report. The network secured space in the main plenary session to present the report and it featured in many discussions. This in turn engendered pride in network members – both those who attended the conference and those who logged on to the live GNDR blog.

The overall finding was of a contrast between national assessments of progress reported in UNISDR's Global Assessment Report (GAR), and the local level perceptions based on the VFL survey. Diagram 3 shows the relative assessments of key respondent groups in the VFL survey, compared with the GAR data

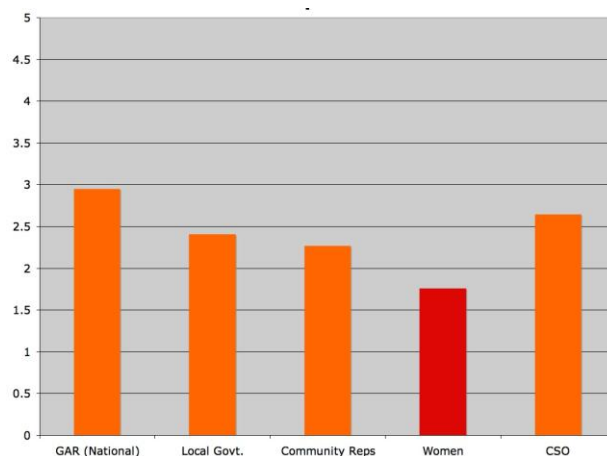


Diagram 3. Relative assessments of progress from different groups (Rating from no progress=0 to substantial progress=5)

This data reinforced the message that policy at international level was not leading to effective implementation at the 'frontline'. There is evidence that this messaging influenced the outcomes of the conference. The chair's closing statement highlighted the need for increased recognition of grassroots participatory processes (Point 11: GP-DRR 2009) and the need for partnerships between government and civil society actors (Point 12: GP-DRR 2009); echoing the VFL report recommendations and lobbying activities. Network members felt that their work had therefore created 'social demand' and the intended impact at the international level.

Unintended impacts

Alongside the intended goals, evidence was emerging before the report's completion of unintended, and interesting impacts.

"Views from the Frontline has let us meet with and get to know different actors in our area, even with people that it was difficult to get access to before"

Paz y Esperanza: GNDR participant; Peru, April 2009

Network members found the process created new opportunities for partnerships, through meeting stakeholders they previously had no access to. Some suggested that their association with GNDR and their involvement in the survey gave them a new status and influence.

IT'S NOT JUST THE DATA . . .

Results and impacts of VFL at the local level

Comments from network members about the unexpected opportunities for dialogue and partnerships led to this aspect of the project being assessed as part of a 'learning review' based on a detailed questionnaire to all participants. Specific responses included, for example:-

*"The most important objective for the VFL project is to **see an increase in dialogue understanding, and action** among government, civil society organisation, community leaders."*

Swaziland

*"Most importantly the VFL should help to enhance **civil society's ability to monitor progress**, share information, formulate policy positions, develop **advocacy coalitions** and **contribute towards multi-stakeholder efforts** to implement the HFA on the ground."*

Nigeria

"A well-informed citizenry can play a vital role in holding governments and other actors to account. Accountability works best where there is public or "social" demand on the government for the provision of appropriate goods and services."

Egypt

The Nigerian group gave a particular case study of local impact. The riverine Niger delta area where they are based experiences repeated storm damage to road communications. Communities suffer social and economic impacts as a consequence. One image was used in the report and presentations:-



Diagram 4. Collapsed bridge, Akwa Ibom district, Nigeria

The Nigerian group had formed an alliance with the local government representative - who had spent three years without success seeking funding at national level to replace this bridge. The alliance lobbied national government

based on their association with GNDR: presenting the VFL report. They report that the government have now, on the basis of this lobbying, released funding to rebuild the bridge. They were able to leverage their identity, status, and association with GNDR to create 'social demand'.

The intended mechanism for generating 'social demand' had been through communicating directly into the international system. Are these 'local level' outcomes sufficiently significant to be 'built in' to the project? To answer this question we need to draw together the unintended outcomes which have been noted.

Summarising unintended outcomes of the project

1. GNDR has functioned in a primarily 'hub and spoke' rather than the expected 'cats cradle' format.
2. Network members have become closely engaged with the network and its programme of action very quickly compared with the rate of development of many networks
3. Network members have invested significant time and resources in the project; despite limited funding from GNDR.
4. Network members have highlighted the benefits of dialogue and partnership as an unexpected outcome.
5. There appears to be a 'boomerang' effect whereby network members gain identity, status and even political influence at local level through their contributions to, and identification with GNDR

What do these observations add to our understanding of networks?

The 'hub and spoke' nature of the network reflects the fact that the majority of its work and information flows, have been concerned with VFL. Despite GNDR's name it has more of the character of an action orientated 'movement' (Tarrow, 2005). VFL is valued by its members – signified by their investment and participation- and has led to rapid engagement of the network's membership. Members benefit from the opportunity of creating 'horizontal' local dialogue and partnerships and from the 'boomerang effect' of association with a global movement; in addition to the value of generating 'vertical' social demand. The Nigerian case study exemplifies one concrete effect of this. Gaventa's 'power cube' model (Gaventa, 2006) and other case studies (Bawden, Guijt and Woodhill, 2007) reinforce and confirm these observations. In conclusion, these 'unintended' outcomes reveal an important role for VFL in promoting local partnerships which can create 'bottom up' social demand through creating new 'political space'.

CONCLUSIONS

GNDR members have valued the VFL project highly, and in their reflection on it have identified unanticipated outcomes which will reshape the next iteration significantly, and which may be informative for other comparable networks:-

- The initial VFL programme had the character of an action research project, and members participated in this as a movement rather than a network. Reflection and analysis suggests that this was in fact valuable in mobilising the network rapidly, creating engagement and participation.
- The outputs of the project created both visibility and 'social demand' for action on policy and implementation at the international level.
- The unintended outcomes of creating opportunities for dialogue and partnership, allied to the 'boomerang' effect on participants, have demonstrated a complementary form of 'bottom up' social demand. This is valued by network members, and comparison with other case studies suggests this is an effective way of creating 'political space'.
- The outcomes of this phase of VFL have in turn encouraged participants to undertake networking, knowledge sharing activities.

- The VFL participative survey process is therefore seen as valuable both in terms of generating 'social demand' through use of data in lobbying, and through the promotion of 'bottom up' social demand through local level partnerships creating 'political space'
- The network values strategic use of ICTs – for example social media to share case studies and SMS to increase reach at community level, rather than the expected use of web based social networking etc.

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