

Capacity Building Networks - an effective way to scale up capacity building

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International network for capacity building in Integrated Water Resources Management (Cap-Net)

Abstract

Learning alliances take many forms and the Cap-Net global network for capacity building (CB) in water resources management is one of those.

As a new approach towards sustainable management of water resources was being promoted in the 1990's it was realised that there is a major capacity building need emerging also. Cap-Net was established to address this need. At the outset the strategy of networks was adopted to address the CB needs – was this the right one?

Learning alliances are created with the aim of bringing together a range of stakeholders interested in innovation and the creation of new knowledge in an area of common interest. Cap-Net and partner networks develop and organise training programmes and facilitate the delivery of capacity building to scale up application of IWRM concepts, thinking and application.

This paper will reflect on the Cap-Net experience over three years and what it tells us about learning alliances.

Starting an alliance

Networks, partnerships, alliances are terms very loosely applied and interpreted and have become a fashion. Unfortunately they do not always deliver on expectations – why is this? Perhaps in part it is because of the fashion and an assumption that they are the right thing to do.

Networks and alliances are only tools, they are not a goal in themselves but a means to an end. So often the activity takes control and the purpose is lost. Good linear planning tells us to identify the problem and the results first and then look at the appropriate strategies and tools to achieve the results. Therefore in our deliberations about learning alliances, networks, and partnerships etc we should always be sure to keep the expected results in mind. The lesson is to define the problem first and then choose the right strategy and tools.

Cap-Net defined the need for a network approach in the project document but probably without adequate demonstration that this is the correct tool. Fortunately there was a pilot being established (WaterNet) that gave many lessons as we moved along (Cap-Net, 2002a).

At the outset we documented clearly why the network approach was the appropriate strategy (Cap-Net, 2002b).

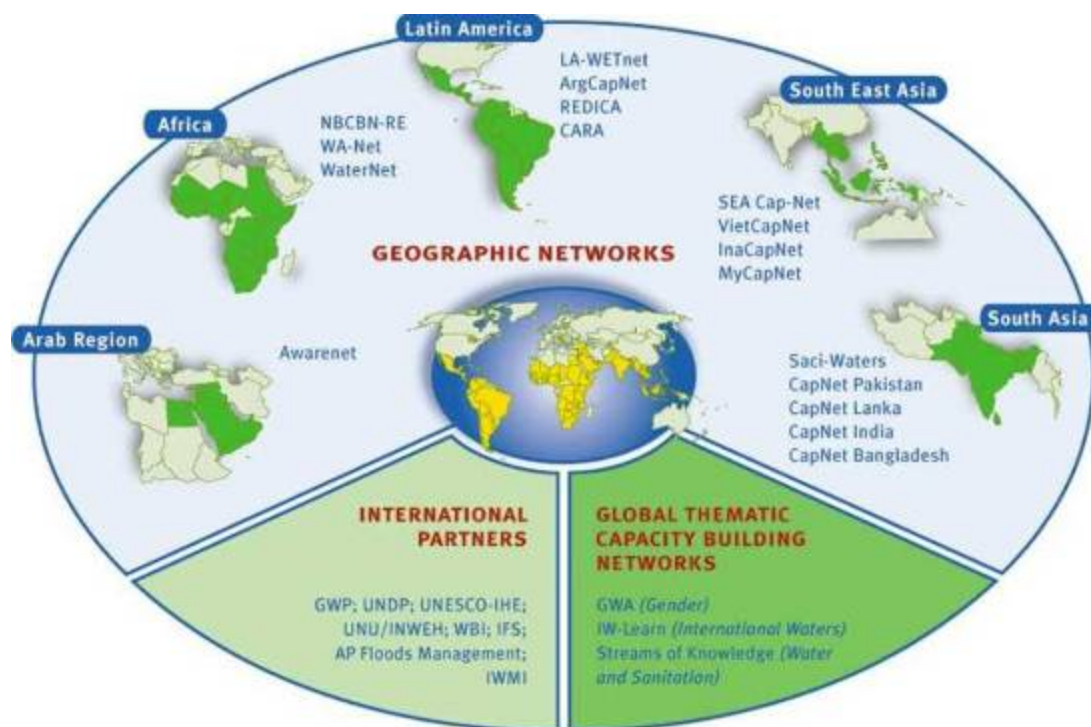
- Partnerships. Integrated water resources management emphasises the need to manage water in an integrated way. Capacity building must also demonstrate integration and bring together different disciplines and expertise. Even in developed countries this requires partnerships.
- Synergy. Developing country institutions are frequently identified as being weak or lacking in experience. This applies also to resource centres and knowledge centres. Networks allow various skills to be assembled and a critical mass to be developed such that capacity building services can be delivered locally using the maximum of local skills and knowledge.
- Local ownership. The recognition from decades of capacity development and network experience of UNDP (Lopes & Theisohn, 2003) and others (Crech & Willard, 2001) makes clear that local ownership of the process is essential for sustainability which also led us to the network approach as a strategy for ensuring that new knowledge could be made available and shared effectively and efficiently at the local level.

This analysis firmly established the network as the strategy to address the capacity building needs of a complex global issue – achieving sustainable integrated management of water resources – and provided the guidance (local ownership) on how the network should operate.

Building the alliance

Around 20 networks make up the Cap-Net global network and around a thousand institutions. Several networks were already existing and others arose from drivers at the local level not from Cap-Net. The majority of networks are based in developing countries next to global and some developed – developing country networks (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Cap-Net networks.



Each network has a different background and may have its own particular focus. For example REDICA in Central America, was established as a cooperative platform for engineering departments of one university in each of the Central American countries. The focus of the network was mainly environmental but has shifted to integrated water resources management. The network is also expanding to include Spanish speaking Caribbean countries. Other networks may have different origins and focus. What all the affiliated networks have in common is that they are composed of capacity building institutions and have adopted integrated water resources management as their focus.

There are two important aspects that affect the approach to networks:

- Firstly, there is a concern about the large number of networks. We should look for efficiency and not try to develop a new structure for each idea. Most networks were already there and address an aspect of water. Many existing networks addressing water are willing to allocate more time / effort and resources to new areas in IWRM without losing their original purpose. This brings synergy and efficiency.
- The second point is one of focus which should be down, not up. The goal is increased delivery of capacity building services through networks to serve their members. The networks should therefore be giving most of their attention downwards and not addressing ideas and activities driven by 'higher' levels as this will weaken not strengthen their effectiveness.

An examination of documented and our own experience gives several key guiding points for networks to develop (Cap-Net, 2002b):

- Networks are more sustainable when based on local initiatives;
- Capacity building programmes of networks need to be developed in consultation with the members;
- Water management institutions need to be engaged in network development for programmes to be relevant and effective;
- Network programmes are of more relevance if built on strengths of members rather than on imported expertise from outside;
- Network operational guidelines or a constitution clarify the basis and operations of the network and help to avoid confusion and uncertainties;
- Developing capacity building activities through networking has a high multiplier effect of investments;
- Linkages between the international community and capacity building institutions are facilitated through networks;
- Efficiency of capacity building is improved by sharing of experiences, skills, materials, tools and knowledge;
- Outreach of capacity building programmes is increased when making use of network structures;
- Local knowledge and experiences are easier accessed through networking.

Networking thus has many advantages and is a promising instrument to improve the delivery of capacity building. Networks gather the best of local knowledge and provide access for member institutions to the best of international knowledge. The challenges for networks are how to be effective in delivery and achieve the desired impact.

Becoming effective

For the basic thesis to be correct that networks are an effective tool for scaling up delivery of capacity for IWRM the following has to be true:

- The network has to function properly (network management) to be able to draw on members;
- Members have to have the competence (knowledge and skills) before they can deliver capacity building;
- Networks have to deliver capacity building addressing the immediate and long term needs of society.

Each of these points is dealt with below:

Network management

Networks can rise or fall on their network management. Applying the principle of local ownership can be challenging requiring outsiders to stand back while issues and problems are addressed (or not). There are many documents on what makes networks work (Creech & Willard, 2001) and Cap-Net has produced some management guidelines for networks in the context of capacity building which we believe distils some useful experience, lessons and guidelines (Cap-Net, 2004b).

Some of the key lessons are:

- Network functions need to be decentralised for members to feel connected and committed;
- The function of the secretariat is to facilitate and intermediate, not to deliver capacity building;
- The legal status of the network depends on the local situation; in some cases the networks is better off as integral part of another organisation to facilitate network operations, in others an independent legal entity will be more effective;
- Operational guidelines, code of conduct or constitutions are necessary for transparency;
- Networks have difficulties generating operational funds and need fund sourcing strategies to be able to deliver;
- Secretariat costs are difficult to recover as course fees generally cover the expenses of the course; member fees may be considered and overhead coverage on activities;

- All networks need champions to lead and coordinate the network and motivate members to be active;
- Skills in proposal development and course management are indispensable for a network to be effective.

Building network competence

IWRM is a new approach for most countries and is not well documented. In particular how to implement an IWRM approach to achieve sustainable management of water resources remains elusive. Some still question the concepts behind IWRM. As centres of learning, capacity building institutions need to be up to date with the debates, the philosophy and the practice. How does one address the knowledge gap when the information is not in the text books and scattered over many disciplines?

Various tools and strategies have been used. These include:

- Training of trainers in various aspects of IWRM;
- Improving access to information, materials and tools (Website, CDs, e-lists);
- Staff exchange between network member institutions and targeted international support.

In all cases attempts have been made to ensure that on the ground experience is captured through the networks in assembling training materials and that all materials are freely available and shared across the network and beyond. This again reinforces the benefit of the network approach in assembling various skills needed.

Developing capacity

Establishing the role of the network in the delivery of capacity building services is an important step that cannot be achieved unless the previous two (network management and network competence) are in place. To demonstrate the reality of the network, capacity building activities should be undertaken as soon as possible. To link the activities with needs, an opportunity assessment tool was developed (Cap-Net, 2004b) and this has been used by some networks to improve relevance of their programme.

One good example of the benefit of the network has been in response to the need for a training of trainers programme. Development of training materials and sharing of knowledge on aspects of IWRM implementation through the network has resulted in many training events implemented as downstream activities. The multiplier effect of the network approach is evident.

Training a trainer from a network has resulted in skills being tapped from the network. There are many examples of regional and national training events, seminars and briefings following on the trainees return from international training of trainers' courses. Not only this has multiplier effect in terms of numbers of people trained but also in resources committed. We have found an over 7-fold effect on financial resources and an unmeasured but substantial contribution of human resources. Capacity builders are in employment and so drawing them further into water activities is increasing resource allocation for IWRM.

Achieving Impact

Working in networks so far has had exponential impacts in effectiveness, competence and capacity building delivery of the network members (Cap-Net, 2004a). Over time we are seeing the transition from a focus on network development towards capacity building service delivery with the result that there is a scaling up of impact.

Improved management arrangements and management tools for network operations have resulted in networks becoming more effective. Networks operating in a transparent and accountable manner attract not only capacity building individuals and institutions bringing their background and knowledge to the network, but are also more likely to source funds for network operations. Management is improved by sharing lessons across similar networks and bringing in experiences from networks in other sectors. Constitutions and operational guidelines shared between networks have triggered other networks to become more transparent, build their memberships and linkages, and

identify effective demand for capacity building. Effective demand is capacity building priorities expressed by water management institutions that have allocated resources for these priorities to be addressed.

Other success factors include membership development. For networks to deliver against the expectations, the network membership needs to include the disciplines required for addressing water management in a holistic manner. Networks therefore have to be open and inclusive. On the other hand, capacity builders need to be convinced of the perceived advantage of being part of a network and the benefits for the members have to be made clear. The benefits of partnerships are generally recognised by members and they include:

- Extended outreach of capacity building programmes;
- Improved delivery of quality training;
- Training materials being shared and exchanged;
- Strengthening of local ownership of the capacity building process;
- Investments in capacity building being leveraged;
- Taking capacity building initiatives to the ground;
- Improved access to and use of international knowledge and resources; and,
- High commitment of network managers and members.

(Krijnen and Tucci, 2005)

Increased delivery of capacity building services is necessary to address a huge gap resulting from required capacities to manage water in an integrated manner. In assembling skills and knowledge in capacity building networks they are able to increase their capacities in providing support to governments and other water management implementers for improved water governance and sustainable management of the resources. Through research and training programmes, networks have extended their competences in relevant IWRM areas.

The impacts identified have materialised in increased training and education activities by members inside or outside the network. Building up competences of network members brings with it the potential to react more effectively to particular demands raised by water management implementers. Liaisons have to be established between water managers and capacity builders to benefit to the maximum of the improved capacities to deliver. Tools have been developed to assist networks to assess opportunities for developing demand responsive capacity building programmes in consultation with management implementers.

In achieving local impact, capacity building programmes have been adapted to local circumstances and address local issues relevant to water managers and decision makers. Educational programmes are more responsive to local issues for present or future water managers and anchoring knowledge in local capacity building institutions has led to increased sustainability.

The networks have engaged in actual delivering of capacity building on the ground through their respective memberships. Trainers are being trained in various aspects related to integrated water resources management at the regional level and these trainers take this forward at the local level by including the acquired knowledge in their educational curricula and/or by conducting direct training courses to water managers. Over 600 trainers have been trained, networks have an active programme; in 2005, 55 courses, meetings, and other activities have been programmed. The impacts of this “cascaded” strategy are yet to be evaluated but the responses by network members as well as water managers have been appreciative.

Obstacles and risks

Not all networks are success stories and the main obstacles for networks are financial and managerial.

Self-financing mechanisms so far have been very limited. Generally membership is free and network activities have not generated a high level of cost recovery. Network secretariats are often depending on project funding or on seed funds provided by Cap-Net to establish and run the network and secretariat. Cap-Net being a project itself with limited time span and budget, high dependency by networks on Cap-Net put them at risk for when the project comes to an end. Self-supporting mechanisms through membership fees and overheads on activities need to be explored in a constructive and structured way. Because the network is built upon institutions and individuals with a capacity building mandate there will be sustained benefit and impact from the network after it ceases to exist.

As argued above, network functioning is dependent on motivated network managers as drivers. In cases where such managers are absent it is observed that general network operations are very limited. There is no mechanism that deals with such situations and members may feel the network is obsolete, they will lose interest and miss potential benefits of networking.

These are possible obstacles that have to be addressed by the network. But there are also external risks that may hamper the network's function. Such risks include time constraints, donor drop-out, leadership change, etc. To ensure sustainability of the network, these risks have to be identified and dealt with in the organisational arrangements of the network.

On the other hand, networks have a purpose and when that has been achieved networks should change or disappear. This does not mean failure and there is merit in planning procedures for the eventual winding up of a network.

Measuring the results

There are many challenges in measuring the effectiveness of capacity building networks. For example:

- Identifying and measuring capacity and capacity needs is a poorly developed art;
- Measuring network performance has been started (Cap-Net, 2004b) but has yet to be fully implemented;
- Measuring impact of capacity building activities is expensive and difficult.

In measuring network performance some key network elements can serve as starting points for the development of indicators (Cap-Net, 2004b). These identified elements are:

- Network management arrangements are essential;
- Local ownership improves its establishment;
- Open, inclusive and multidisciplinary networks have more success;
- Decentralised operation enhances commitment of network members and improves relevance of actions;
- Communication among members is essential for network cohesion;
- a network is more relevant when it responds to effective demand and real needs; and,
- Networks goals should include addressing unequal capacities between the members.

Cap-Net has started establishment of performance indicators for networks and will begin to address indicators for the impact of capacity building activities in 2006. This is essential as it has been presumed at many occasions that capacity building is a key condition to achieve goals and objectives set by international conferences. Lessons learned and experiences showed that capacity building networks have a multiplier effect on investments and activities. However, this has not been objectively measured yet and a task is lying ahead. Measurement of the impact of the whole networking programme is being improved through better monitoring of network activities but a large challenge remains on how to measure capacity building demand and the translation thereof in capacity building actions.

Some final words

- Although being in place relatively recently, some important lessons can be learned from capacity building networks as learning alliances. For them to be effective they need to address local capacity building priorities and adapt their programmes to expressed demands.
- Network management arrangements have to be clear and adapted to suit the character of the network.
- Involving network members in work planning, programming, development and delivery of capacity building is essential.
- Obstacles and risks for networking have to be identified and addressed in a structured manner.
- Networks may not have eternal life and the functioning of networks against their initial goals need to be monitored continuously. Structure and management of the network are key elements for its success in delivering against the expectations.
- In a short time period, networks have proven to be very effective instruments to increase outreach of capacity building programmes, to improve the delivery of quality training, and to increase relevance of capacity building activities.

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