Five principles for network success in Solomon Islands

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Summary

In Solomon Islands, networks consisting of multiple partners are gaining momentum because of their potential to improve the capacity of communities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and government stakeholders to achieve their goals. Many organizations see the value of creating, leading and being a part of networks, and there are some examples of where these investments have led to bigger or more widespread outcomes than organizations could have achieved on their own. Nevertheless, strong networks can be difficult to establish and maintain, and they often come at a considerable cost of time and money to bring people together. Determining and sharing lessons from networks will help to overcome these and other challenges and avoid recurrence of failures while delivering optimal results into the future.

	Network	Established	Mission
National	**Development Services Exchange (DSE)**	1984	To strengthen effective NGO coordination. This will be achieved through advocacy, collecting and sharing information, capacity building and enhancing relationships with members and stakeholders. This will ensure that accredited, accountable and transparent NGOs and community organizations are working toward equal and sustainable development.
	Solomon Islands Locally Managed Marine Areas (SILMMA)	2003	To help communities manage/conserve marine resources to maximize benefits and ensure food security by sourcing funds, facilitating, coordinating and providing information, building capacity and empowering partners through traditional and scientific approaches.
	National Coordination Committee (NCC)	2009	Established as a mechanism to coordinate and promote country-level implementation of the national and regional Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI) on Coral Reefs, Fisheries, and Food Security (CTI-CFF) plans of action.
Provincial	**Gizo Environment Livelihood Conservation Association (GELCA)**	1998	To protect, conserve and manage the species and their habitats within the Gizo Conservation and Protected Areas to help ensure food security, cultural identity and income for future generations.
	National Resources Development Foundation (NRDF)	2004	To help people in Solomon Islands recognize the value of natural resources. This will be accomplished by actively supporting and engaging in sustainable natural resource management opportunities to improve and secure the social and economic future through sustainable forest management and livelihood programs.
	Malaita Province Partnership for Development (MPPD)	2012	To build a strong partnership and collaborative effort to oversee the implementation of programs and projects that are significant for meaningful development in Malaita Province.
Community	**Tetepare Descendants Association (TDA)**	2002	To protect and manage Tetepare Island and its resources.
	Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association (KIBCA)	2008	To protect Kolombangara Island's rich marine and forest biodiversity and to educate, promote and encourage sustainable management of natural resources through viable economic (livelihood) and social ventures for communities.

Table 1.   The eight networks that bring together information and promote collaborations between multiple organizations to maximize environment and development outcomes in Solomon Islands. The lessons from their more than 30 years of experiences are detailed in this document.

Introduction

Networks form when individuals, organizations or groups decide to work together in the belief that they can achieve more *collectively* than they could on their own. In tackling particular environmental and development challenges, it is common for people from different government, nongovernmental and community groups to come together in formal or informal networks. In Solomon Islands, and indeed around the world, networks are an important mechanism to (1) promote environmental and development successes, (2) draw together multiple skill sets, and (3) increase representation and accountability across different scales of decision-making, from national governments to local communities.

In November 2016, 24 experts, representing eight multi-actor networks and more than three decades of networking experience, met in Western Province of Solomon Islands. Each of the eight networks (see Table 1) was comprised of different agencies and had a slightly different goal, but all of them shared a similar belief that if they worked together they could achieve their goal more quickly or effectively. Over two days, the participants shared lessons learned and identified principles to guide improved practices for networks in Solomon Islands. This document is a summary of five principles that emerged from the workshop. These principles will help members of networks ensure that their investments (in terms of time, skills and resources) in networks have an impact that is dramatically greater than the sum of their individual efforts.

When taking a long-term view (i.e. looking across the years since a network formed), many networks in Solomon Islands have been achieving their goals. Participants at the workshop shared many success stories of several networks: the Solomon Islands Locally Managed Marine Area (SILMMA) network is the best platform to link government and NGOs working on marine resources; the National Coordinating committee (NCC) for the Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI) has developed a database of over 400 community-based projects; the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association (KIBCA) represents an important mechanisms to reduce logging pressure on Kolombangara island; the Tetepare Descendants Association (TDA) has achieved the establishment of the largest marine conservation area in the country; and the Malaita Provincial Partnership for

Development (MPPD) will never give up working toward its vision of meaningful development in Malaita Province. While some victories may appear small in the short-term, taken together they represent steady progress toward common goals.

Yet despite these successes, networks in Solomon Islands certainly face challenges. Inadequate access to information, insufficient capacity or time, variable or waning commitment from members and inadequate means of communication constrain many networks' ability to achieve their goals. For instance, many experts said that poor access to information can result in duplicate efforts (e.g. two networks working on the same challenge but not together). Alternatively, when members have different priorities or ways of working (with communities, for example), expectations are created that can pose challenges if the next network works in a different fashion. Donor funding comes and goes, and many networks struggle to maintain operations between grants or projects. Furthermore, following an initial surge in interest and support, maintaining the motivation of all network partners can also be a challenge.

After discussing achievements and obstacles, network representatives reflected on common factors that underpin their successes. Out of this discussion, we have developed a set of five principles for promoting network success in Solomon Islands (Figure 1).

Principle 1: Create clear shared objectives
• Develop common goals, terms of reference, work plans and clear member roles

Principle 2: Promote regular communication
• Update members via multiple methods (e.g. face-to-face meetings, e-mails, Facebook, etc.)

Principle 3: Share expertise and resources
• Source technical assistance through network members and share logistical costs/resources

Principle 4: Foster strong leadership
• Support, train and build the capacity of leaders at all levels of the network

Principle 5: Think long-term
• Create conditions that support the network beyond any single member (e.g. develop a funding plan)

Figure 1.   Principles for network success drawn from the experiences of eight conservation and development networks in Solomon Islands.

Principle 1: Create clear shared objectives

Networks are most effective when all members are working toward a clear, shared goal. By contrast a broad or poorly described goal means network members might struggle to work together with a clear purpose. By developing a shared set of clear objectives, as well as terms of reference, work plans can increase ownership among members. By making objectives explicit, networks can manage expectations. When expectations are not made clear, however, networks risk losing support when members or communities become frustrated or disillusioned if they feel their goals are not being met.

Developing a shared understanding of operational procedures, including roles and responsibilities, ensures that expectations for how partners are going to work together are clarified early in the network's development. Networks are most effective when members have shared goals that benefit all partners equally. Over time, this process creates trust, mutual respect and shared ways of working together within the network.

Photo credit: Delvene Boso/WorldFish

Women's awareness workshop, Malaita, Solomon islands.

Principle 2: Promote regular communication

Effective communication facilitates learning and shared understanding. By contrast, if there is ineffective communication within a network, then members may as well be working alone. Despite the importance of communication, inadequate access to information was the single biggest challenge identified by experts at the workshop. In many cases, people were unaware of who else was working in the same geographic area, on a similar challenge or who could provide extra support for the goals of their network. For example, several networks at the workshop were unaware of the Development Services Exchange (DSE), which is explicitly designed to support networks in Solomon Islands.

To promote regular communication, workshop experts suggested a few techniques. First, the effectiveness of different communication methods depends on the type of network. For community-based networks (such as TDA and KIBCA) that operate in remote places, two-way radios may be the most appropriate means of communication, whereas for national networks comprised of NGOs and government representatives, e-mail may be the best way to share information. All participants agreed that face-to-face communication was irreplaceable, though it can be expensive in a place like Solomon Islands, so these events need to be carefully planned around priority tasks. Several experts said that to communicate with members of the public, venues such as local newspapers are more effective than working documents or reports. Facebook is an increasingly available and affordable means of communication and can provide an effective platform for rapid, regular communication.

Second, workshops or meetings that bring actors together from multiple scales (e.g. representatives from community-based organizations and national ministries) promote cross-scale learning. This is an important activity to help networks understand the landscape (e.g. who is working where and on what), which can reduce duplication of efforts. For smaller-scale networks, face-to-face meetings help to ensure their work plans align with higher policies (e.g. provincial and national development strategies) and that national-scale networks are connected to actions taking place on the ground.

Third, sharing small victories, both internally and externally, is another important communication mechanism to maintain support and motivation within and between networks. Representatives from the MPPD, for example, shared their success of becoming formally recognized by the provincial government after four years of persistent effort; this formal recognition bolstered attendance at MPPD meetings and served as a great source of inspiration for an emerging provincial network in Western Province. Regular, effective communication can help networks build strong relationships, based on trust and complete information.

A community meeting to discuss marine resource management, Santupaele village, Western Province, Solomon Islands.

Photo credit: Filip Milovac/WorldFish

Principle 3: Share expertise and resources

By sharing expertise and resources, networks solve collective challenges faster and more effectively. This is particularly relevant in places where resources are limited. One tangible way to implement this principle in Solomon Islands is through sharing logistical costs (e.g. one partner can provide a boat while another can provide fuel for a trip to the same community). As one expert remarked, "For 30 years, we've been saying we don't have enough resources. But we can achieve our goals now by sharing what we already have."

Another way to implement this principle is by building on the strengths of network members. WorldFish, for example, found that several communities in northern Malaita needed support in the area of gender. Through the MPPD, they asked for assistance from the Women's Desk and therefore became more capable of delivering services to communities. Similarly, when KIBCA, which has a largely terrestrial focus, encountered a community that required assistance with its marine resources, the association invited WorldFish (a member of the KIBCA network) to provide expertise and help the community work toward a solution.

Training session underway, Solomon Islands.

Principle 4: Foster strong leadership

Strong leadership is essential for successful networks, because leaders drive and coordinate operational and communication activities. Strong leaders inspire other members through their behavior, commitment to the network's goals and by example. Leaders should be clearly appointed (e.g. via voting) and, ideally, the position would rotate every several years.

Workshop experts pointed out that honesty, transparency and consistency are critical attributes for strong leadership because people follow leaders they trust. Leaders can build this trust by communicating regularly. In addition, effective leaders ensure that all victories, no matter how small, are celebrated. Partners are motivated when they see that their efforts are leading to success. Experts also noted that it is important for network leaders to be supported and resourced. Yet rather than concentrating on one person as the leader of a network, experts reflected on the importance of building leadership capacity at all levels of the network in the belief that this helps leadership roles rotate.

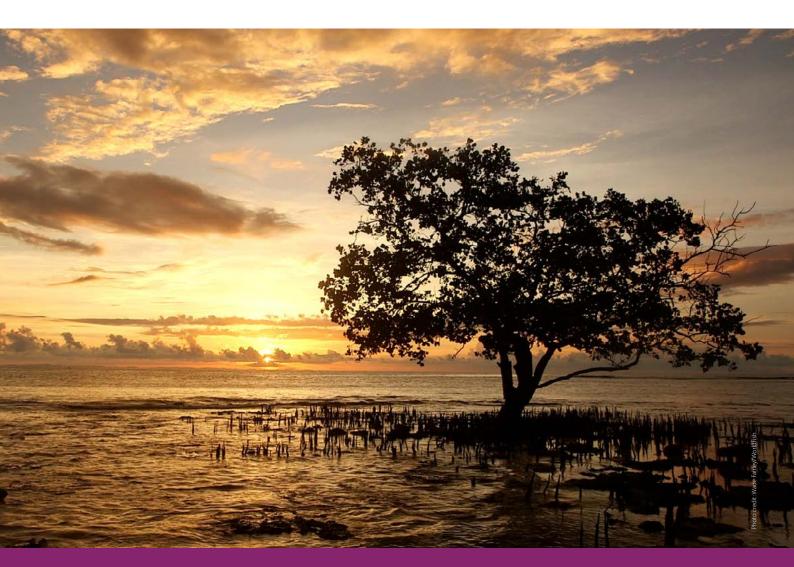Fostering strong leadership from all stakeholders, Solomon Islands.

Principle 5: Think long-term

One of the strengths of networks is their potential capacity to outlive any individual staff, project or elected government officer. When networks are strong, they provide a means of continuity over the long-term, and one of the key challenges that most networks face is long-term sustainability. Since many networks are supported through relatively short-term projects, they often struggle to maintain momentum or secure the financial resources needed to to stay afloat once projects are finished. This led many participants to ask: *How can we achieve organizational sustainability without depending on donor funding?*

Experts in the workshop discussed a couple mechanisms for ensuring network sustainability. First, such challenges can be addressed by developing a funding plan. Networks that have the capacity to generate income (e.g. a honey producers network) can reinvest a small portion of their revenue into maintaining the network. Training in fundraising (e.g. grant writing) was identified as an important mechanism for ensuring long-term sustainability. The representative for the DSE pointed out that it has the capacity to support such training and can respond to requests from networks on topics most relevant to them. Therefore, if networks are interested in training in fundraising, they can submit a proposal to the DSE in the future.

Second, several experts pointed to the necessity of capacity building across all members of the network and emphasized learning as an ongoing process. This is particularly important so that if members move onto other jobs or places, the knowledge they held within the network is not lost. Whenever there is a changeover in personnel, having a formal handover process in place ensures adequate information about the history and culture of the collaboration is passed on. It is important that networks build in a flexible approach to roles in order to accommodate changing circumstances and opportunities as they arise.

Photo credit: Wade Fairley/WorldFish

Mangroves, Solomon Islands.

Conclusion

Networks have formed throughout Solomon Islands to tackle the challenging tasks of environmental management and sustainable development. They have formed because individuals and groups recognize that the challenges and solutions are more complex than any one organization can deliver. However, working as a network has its own set of challenges. Slowly and steadily, networks across Solomon Islands are overcoming obstacles and achieving environmental and development goals. By creating clear shared objectives, promoting regular communication, sharing expertise and resources, fostering strong leadership and thinking long-term, networks will continue to contribute to a stronger, healthier and self-reliant Solomon Islands.

Contributions

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