

# Collaboration Beyond Boundaries

Inter-American Networks



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## Introduction

With the growing realization that socio-economic development is multidimensional and requires an integral approach, more participatory collaborative arrangements have emerged in the international development field, across sectors and involving multiple actors.

Against this background, the Organization of American States (OAS) has supported the establishment and consolidation of Inter-American networks to enhance collaboration among member states as well as different stakeholders on development issues. These networks have become effective forums for sharing successful experiences, lessons learned, and knowledge on key topics such as disaster mitigation, energy, competitiveness, social protection, education, culture, labor, tourism, cooperation for development, and science and technology. They are mechanisms for fostering inter-sectoral collaboration, building communities of practice and knowledge, and building capacity of member states' development institutions and other stakeholders.

Within the OAS General Secretariat, the Executive Secretariat for Integral Development (SEDI) is responsible for supporting the member states in their efforts to reduce poverty and social inequity. To this end, SEDI serves as the technical secretariat for nine sectoral ministerial and high-level processes. The networks associated with these processes provide technical expertise as well as continuity to these political dialogues.<sup>1</sup> The fact that collaborative networks stem from political bodies and dialogue assures that they come into being with built-in political commitment and allows a continual feedback process between the political dialogue and the networks.

The inter-American networks, as collaboration and cooperation mechanisms, are based on the OAS partnership for integral development concept of an inclusive approach whereby every member state has something to offer and exchange. This concept, partnership for development, "embraces all member states, regardless of their level of development. It entails overcoming the traditional aid-oriented approach and developing instead forms of cooperation based on a partnership which, without

<sup>1</sup> - Competitiveness, cooperation, culture, education, labor, science and technology, social development, sustainable development and energy, and tourism.

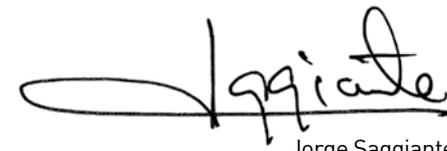
Energy  
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Labor  
Innovation

attempting to impose models, would support economic and social measures taken by countries in their development, particularly those to combat extreme poverty. It pays attention to horizontal and multilateral cooperation, and to the participation of communities, civil society, and the private sector in solving problems”2.

This document describes the main characteristics and functions of some of the inter-American collaborative networks supported by the OAS. It illustrates that they are flexible and demand-driven collaboration mechanisms by providing opportunities for bottom-up exchanges among key stakeholders. Moreover, the document highlights some of the main advantages for government agencies in the member states and international development stakeholders in collaborating within these networks.

We conclude by offering certain criteria to guide collaborative networks within the region, such as: flexibility and adaptability; cooperation and scaling-up potential; policy dialogue and bottom-up exchanges; value added and enhanced innovation; effectiveness; ownership and collective identity; technical consistency; inclusive development approach; and operational consistency.

Collaborative networks that follow these guidelines can advance development goals in a way that is inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the particular priorities and needs of countries and communities. Experience has shown that collaborative action through networks can further the efforts by the member states “[t]o “promote, by cooperative action their economic, social, and cultural development,” which is an essential purpose of the OAS under its Charter. In sum, networks serve to build consensus that is the foundation for democratic governance in our countries, and of peaceful and constructive coexistence among our peoples.



Jorge Saggiante  
Executive Secretary for Integral Development

## Summary

In recent years, collaborative networks have proliferated in the international development field, both in the Americas and around the world. This paper examines the relevance and functions of inter-American networks within the context of the OAS, in light of current literature on the topic. It touches on some of the main achievements, lessons learned, and challenges that remain for these cooperation mechanisms.

### Why Networks?

The field of international development has undergone a sea change. In a world that is more interconnected and interdependent than ever before, a growing number of governments and non-state actors are becoming partners in development, joining forces to find multifaceted solutions to complex, interrelated problems. The pace of change today demands development strategies that can respond more quickly and flexibly to emerging needs and priorities. And technology is opening up new possibilities for timely information exchange and broader-based cooperation. In addition, an ever-increasing range of instruments<sup>3</sup> are being implemented by this broader set of actors.

All these factors have contributed to the rise of collaborative networks. These systems often link a wide range of stakeholders—such as different government agencies, international organizations, nonprofit entities, and advocacy groups—in ways that enable them to exchange knowledge and experiences on the diverse social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of development. The value of these networks lies in their collaborative nature. They encourage the free flow of information, innovative ideas, good practices, and successful strategies.

Donors are increasingly turning to collaborative networks to implement development initiatives.<sup>4</sup> The sharing of information and know-how is gradually replacing the transfer of knowledge through the “expert counterpart” model.<sup>5</sup> Collaborative networks are considered collectively as a new cooperation model—one that can overcome some of the flaws of traditional event-driven,

**Collaborative networks  
are considered collectively as a  
new cooperation  
model.**

3 - Severino y Ray, 2009.  
4 - Hearn y Mendizábal, 2011.  
5 - Fukuda-Parr & Hill 2002.

supply-driven, or donor-driven forms of technical cooperation and displace the “faulty notion of the expert-counterpart model in which knowledge is transferred from a Northern expert to a Southern counterpart.”<sup>6</sup>

Current literature also suggests that “whereas the field of development used to be organized along a country-specific basis, the sector-specific entry has now become one of the main ways to address global issues.”<sup>7</sup>

International trends in development cooperation are leading to a division of labor among those involved, one that encourages “greater consideration of the comparative advantage of different flows, policies and players.”<sup>8</sup> Networks can provide an appropriate venue for enhancing these comparative advantages and for “exploiting niche opportunities,”<sup>9</sup> capitalizing on the specialized skills and expertise among members of a particular network.

## The OAS Context<sup>10</sup>

Collaborative networks serve as a bridge between political dialogue and technical expertise in different sectors. The OAS<sup>11</sup> takes an inclusive approach to partnership for development, believing that every member state has experience and knowledge that it can share and exchange.<sup>12</sup> This belief goes to the heart of the networks; thus, it makes sense to complement the traditional cooperation relationship between donor and recipient country with collaboration among equal partners with similar priorities and needs.

Inter-American networks enable the OAS to be present in every member state. They provide a mechanism for the OAS to promote connection and solidarity, strengthen communications and alliances among countries and institutions involved in development policy, and scale up the exchange and transfer of experience and knowledge to a multilateral setting.

6 - Fukuda-Parr y Hill, 2002, pág.194.

7 - Severino y Ray, 2009, pág.6.

8 - Chandy, 2011, pág.12.

9 - Fukuda-Parr y Hill, 2002, pág.189.

10 - Algunos de los principales conceptos incluidos en este documento provienen de los resultados del Programa Interamericano de Redes de Cooperación, financiado por la Agencia Canadiense de Desarrollo Internacional (ACDI). Durante el período 2008-2011 el programa financió—en distinta medida—once redes: la Red Interamericana de Educación Docente (RIED), la Red Interamericana de Mitigación de Desastres (RIMD), la Red Interamericano de Periodismo Científico, la Alianza de Energía y Clima de las Américas (ECPA), Capacitación en Red de Estrategias de Protección Social para el Caribe, la Red Interamericana para la Administración Laboral (RIAL), la Red de Pequeñas Empresas Turísticas, La Cultura en el Desarrollo: una Red Interamericana de Información, la Red Interamericana de Protección Social (RIPSO), la Red Interamericana de Cooperación (COOPERANET), la Red de Desarrollo Infantil Temprano, y la Red Interamericana de Competitividad (RIAC).

11 - La OEA tiene la responsabilidad de estimular el diálogo político a través de reuniones ministeriales sectoriales de alto nivel y reuniones de alto nivel sobre aspectos del desarrollo integral en la región, y proporcionar apoyo para la implementación de los mandatos.

12 - El Plan Estratégico de Cooperación Solidaria para el Desarrollo Integral establece la cooperación solidaria “abarca a todos los Estados Miembros, independientemente de su desarrollo. Esto implica superar el concepto tradicional de tipo asistencial, para desarrollar programas de cooperación solidaria que, sin pretender imponer modelos, apoyen las medidas económicas y sociales que tomen los países, en especial para combatir la pobreza”.

It is important to stress that collaborative networks are not simply websites. Although they often rely on virtual platforms to expand and enhance interaction, networks are defined by their members and the interaction itself rather than by the technology.

Building on already existing definitions in current literature, networks can be defined as collaborative mechanisms that promote interactions among diverse actors and stakeholders in key development fields of action.

The following network definitions and features can be considered:

- Networks “are made up of two main ingredients: ‘agents’ and interactions between agents that influence each others’ behavior.”<sup>13</sup>
- They are “a distinct form of organization that differs from hierarchical institutions or finite projects.”<sup>14</sup>
- There is a need to distinguish “between the network and its supporting entity.”<sup>15</sup>
- By fostering networks it is possible to “identify existing or potential relationships and enhance, add value to, expand, formalize or otherwise transform them.”<sup>16</sup>

Networks provide a way to share knowledge and experience and contribute to a better understanding of the role, capacity, needs, and abilities of participating members, institutions, and public policymakers. In general terms, networks lay the groundwork for collaboration by linking actors involved in particular topics and by fostering exchanges across member states, sectors, and institutions. Networks can facilitate such coordination both within the framework of political dialogue that has already been institutionalized and in cases where this has not yet occurred.

**For the OAS, collaborative networks serve as a bridge between political dialogue and technical expertise in different sectors.**

13 - Ramalingam 2011, p.8.  
 14 - Hearn & Mendizabal 2011, p.1.  
 15 - Hearn & Mendizabal 2011, p.2.  
 16 - Hearn & Mendizabal 2011, p.2.

## Inter-American Networks: Features and Achievements

As stated earlier, working within a network setting builds partnerships among OAS countries, institutions, and key stakeholders with similar challenges and priorities, in contrast to relying only on traditional, vertical cooperation exchanges. Inter-American collaborative networks have been structured around a series of common characteristics and have accrued considerable value. The following section details some of their achievements:

### 1. Strengthening institutions and improving capacity

Through a combination of activities, OAS networks have provided platforms that allow government agencies to more easily exchange lessons learned and gear training sessions specifically toward their own institutional needs.

Network activities at the regional and subregional level have benefited a wide range of member state institutions. These include – among others- social development ministries and agencies, ministries of labor, cooperation agencies, high-level authorities and agencies engaged in competitiveness issues, ministries of science and technology, scientific journalism associations, ministries of education, ministries of tourism, governmental tourism agencies, culture ministries and agencies, national energy authorities, and public agencies involved in natural disaster mitigation.

Here are some examples of networks that have helped strengthen institutions and develop skills:

- Network-Based Capacity Building on Social Protection Strategies in the Caribbean. This experience was primarily designed to transfer Chile's Puente Program for social protection to several Caribbean countries. It led to the creation of four local initiatives— Bridge (Jamaica), Koudemain Ste. Lucie (St. Lucia), RISE-UP (Trinidad and Tobago), and



I-See Bridge (Barbados)—which have adapted strategies to respond to each country's needs.

- The Inter-American Network for Labor Administration (RIAL) has given government ministries a range of tools and knowledge to better carry out their functions and identify cooperation needs and priorities. It has also improved communication and cooperation among peer ministries in the region.

## 2. Enhancing spill-over and multiplier effects

As platforms for amplifying key issues, expanding stakeholder engagement, mobilizing resources, and facilitating the capacity to be effective agents of change,<sup>17</sup> collaborative networks are ideal instruments for improving national strategies in targeted development areas. This multiplier effect is one of the paramount reasons the OAS technical secretariats foster and facilitate exchanges and cooperation among network members.

The nature of collaboration within a network allows for bilateral or multilateral exchanges among countries to encourage a broader range of exchanges and include more participants. In some cases, networks start off focusing on a particular subregion, sector, or specific development project, and in the process of implementation, they develop into larger regional networks and horizontal cooperation tools involving more countries and institutions.

Here are examples of cooperation exchanges that have been enriched through greater participation:

- The Network-Based Capacity Building on Social Protection Strategies in the Caribbean initiative promotes horizontal cooperation by providing sustained, targeted technical support to members. It was first established as a pilot project to transfer technical

The nature of **collaboration** within a network allows for **bilateral or multilateral exchanges** among countries to encourage a broader range of exchanges and include more participants.



17 - Heard & Mendizabal 2011: 4.

Networks foster a sense of ownership through a demand-driven approach.

support among four countries, and was later expanded to include other countries. The development of a replicable model of community of practice ultimately inspired the Inter-American Social Protection Network, established in 2009 by mandate of the Summit of the Americas and the Social Development Ministerial Forum.

- The Culture in Development Network facilitates bilateral technical cooperation missions to exchange experiences and knowledge between countries. Member states have highlighted the importance of promoting this sort of action to improve procedures for the design and implementation of new public policies.

### 3. Bringing together actors across agencies and sectors

While OAS-related networks consist mainly of policymakers from member states, they also include stakeholders from other international organizations, national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, and academia. The cross-sectoral nature of networks enhances vertical communication<sup>18</sup> and horizontal coordination, and allows participants outside of government to influence policies by contributing their expertise and perspectives.

In many networks, government entities are the main contacts, though in some cases where it is deemed appropriate, networks invite NGOs and other private entities not only to participate but also to operate as the focal point. The roles of nongovernmental entities vary among the collaborative networks. Some networks include a governing structure with private and NGO stakeholders—in some cases participating as full members of the governing council—whereas in other networks the stakeholders are active partners but have no vote on the governing council.

Participants include members of academia who provide research and educational tools for policy formulation, NGO members who use network resources to further their programs and exchange knowledge, and technical experts who provide policymaking support and help



18 - Perkin & Court 2005.



execute programs on the ground. Collaborative networks provide opportunities to directly connect supply and demand, gathering policymakers, investors, and technical experts in the same room—or in a virtual space—to come up with new initiatives.

Here are some examples of networks that have promoted broad collaboration:



- The Inter-American Teacher Education Network (ITEN), whose partners include the University of Pennsylvania’s Executive Leadership Program, the International Education and Resource Network, the World Bank, Teachers Without Borders, Fundación Telefónica, the Program for Revitalization of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (PREAL), and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).



- RIAC, whose membership includes government, private sector, and public-private representatives of countries in the Americas. Universities and NGOs specialized in one or more of the subject areas covered by the RIAC also became involved.



- The Early Childhood Education Network arranges for interaction among experts in academia, educational practitioners, and journalists to share good practices in early childhood development and to train communications specialists in a more scientifically based method of dissemination to a wider community through the radio and other media.

#### 4. Disseminating relevant knowledge for policymaking

Networks can have a strong influence on policymaking.<sup>19</sup> Toward this end, many have established virtual platforms to enhance the exchange of knowledge or provide online learning settings in different development fields among policymakers, think tanks, NGOs, and other stakeholders. Some of the products developed—or in some cases strengthened—include clearinghouse portals, online databases, good practices portfolios, observatories, virtual forums, webinars, and online training.

The following are examples of knowledge exchange through horizontal forms of collaboration:

- The Inter-American Scientific Journalism Network (IASJN) has hosted regional seminars whose attendees have subsequently established their own country-level workshops on scientific journalism in Peru, Chile, Bolivia, and Colombia.
- Countries in the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas (ECPA) share their relative strengths related to the network's seven thematic pillars. As a result of this exchange of expertise, Chile, Peru, and Costa Rica are establishing linked energy innovation centers, and Mexico will be starting a new Energy Efficiency Working Group.
- The Small Tourism Enterprise Network (STEN) includes popular tools on its website for Caribbean innkeepers, such as "Hospitality Doctor" and "Ask Your Peers." These provide a mechanism for knowledge exchange for over 105 small hotel owners in 13 different member countries.
- RIAC has facilitated knowledge exchange among regional partners via workshops, videoconferences, onsite visits, and publications such as "Key Elements for a 2020 Competitiveness Agenda in the Americas."

19 - Perkin & Court 2005

## 5. Fostering ownership among network members and stakeholders

Networks foster a sense of ownership through a demand-driven approach. They strengthen community-building by encouraging commitment and institutional involvement, full participation, and joint decision-making<sup>20</sup> at all stages, along with a strong steering structure and a clear definition of roles.<sup>21</sup>

A sense of ownership has led many member countries to contribute to network activities, whether by funding the travel of a bilateral technical mission or providing in-kind donations to host a workshop. Following are selected examples of collaborative action and decision-making that demonstrate ownership among network members:

- The Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation (INDM) developed the Early Flood Warning System's Regional Platform for the Central American Isthmus and the Dominican Republic. The portal was developed in collaboration with the national emergency systems and national hydrometeorological institutes of eight participating countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic.
- RIAL was established by mandate of the OAS member states. The governing bodies of the Labor Sectoral Ministerial Forum decide on its operations and priorities, establishing shared responsibilities and objectives and thus contributing to shared ownership. RIAL has also converted funding sources from a single donor to a Voluntary Contribution Fund, whereby the member states share the funding and enhance member buy-in.



20 - Bali Conference Notes 2011.

21 - Bali Conference Notes 2011.

- The Inter-American Cooperation Network (Cooperanet) held a series of videoconferences with regional cooperation authorities to compile a matrix of cooperation capabilities and needs in line with countries' interests and priorities.
- RIAC developed a set of 10 Competitiveness Principles for benchmarking medium- and long-term progress achieved by member countries. The text was approved by the representatives of 30 countries at the RIAC Annual Meeting.

## Main Challenges

While networks can be excellent platforms for organizing knowledge and sharing experience across sectors within the hemisphere, their diversity, complexity, ample scope, and outreach also present challenges.

Following are some of the biggest challenges, along with some of the strategies that have been developed to manage them:

### Reconciling multiple interests

Inter-American collaborative networks develop around specific issues that are often multifaceted, and members may have different perspectives or competing objectives. While many countries may be interested in exchanging knowledge or participating in initiatives on a particular topic, they may have different niche interests or want to guide network actions in a certain direction. Investing time during the network's initial stages to build political consensus and harmonize the multiple interests of stakeholders decreases long-term obstacles and contributes to more effective network communication.<sup>22</sup> Working together to resolve multiple interests allows for a clear definition of network priorities and actions.

#### 10 GENERAL COMPETITIVENESS PRINCIPLES OF THE AMERICAS



Competitiveness and Innovation Authorities, and Councils of the Americas today October 5, 2011 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, approved the **Commissio** of Santo Domingo. It sets the following **Principles** to ensure the economic development of the Americas. To advance toward a more competitive and prosperous region:

- 1 **Promote high-quality, pertinent and timely education** as a key element to enhance the competitiveness, good values and attitudes, and the development of our countries.
- 2 **Focus** the establishment of **effective institutions responsible for promoting competitiveness** with private sector involvement and other relevant actors, including existing entities, and **Public-Private Partnerships** to address short and long-term competitiveness issues.
- 3 **Promote a simple, more stable and efficient institutional and regulatory framework** for business and investment, by increasing transparency in government, the rule of law, promoting competition in our markets, and ethical conduct in the interactions between the public and private sector.
- 4 **Prioritize the development of human capital** and promote continuous **on-the-job training** and the **acquisition of new competences** to develop world-class skills for the human capital and productivity of our countries.
- 5 **Foster** the development of a **modern, efficient, well-maintained infrastructure -between and within countries-** and foster the rapid adoption of new technologies by economies, including **information technology and communications (ITC)**.
- 6 **Position innovation and high impact entrepreneurship** as a determining factor for competitiveness, through greater public and private investment in research and development (RD&D), the interaction with academia, and the adoption of innovation-enabling policies and strategies, including the protection of the rights of intellectual property holders in the framework of our development policies.
- 7 **Improve access to capital** for economic actors, especially MSMEs and entrepreneurs, and promote public-private mechanisms to increase **financial inclusion**.
- 8 **Foster equity, inclusion, social entrepreneurship, the adoption and application of corporate social responsibility principles, sustainability, shared value and gender equity** as fundamental elements to enhance the productivity and competitiveness of our region.
- 9 **Promote trade and integration, trade liberalization**, to diversify our economies with high value-added quality products and services, fostering the internationalization and participation in global value chains, and, improve **the competitiveness and productivity of industry, giving special priority to our MSMEs**.
- 10 **Promote energy efficiency and development** in the context of our efforts to foster environmental, social and economic sustainability, including the vision to become low carbon economies.

[www.RiacNet.org](http://www.RiacNet.org)

In one instance, a network addressed the issue of different interests by establishing various thematic pillars within its general framework. These pillars were determined based on a needs assessment of the particular development sector in member states. New pillars have been added to the network as necessary through bilateral discussions.

Fostering adequate feedback between political dialogue and network activities is another way to build consensus. Various networks have stressed that their objectives and priorities are discussed and determined in political venues for a particular sector, such as ministerial or high-level meetings; hence, network actions are based on mandates that emerge from OAS political bodies.

### Ensuring financial and operational sustainability

Some networks rely on a sole donor for funding their entire budget, while others have additional funding sources. Limited and time-restricted funds inhibit a network's ability to implement or continue proposed initiatives and projects. Operational stability is also important to ensure technical support for network activities beyond the stipulated timeframe.

Network funding needs to go beyond initial donor support, and mechanisms should be sought to sustain financial operability by fostering member ownership of the network. Some networks have developed strategies to address the challenge of sustaining network services in the face of limited funds—perhaps through a voluntary fund to which any member country can contribute, or by establishing a more cost-effective virtual forum that offers a permanent space for a community of practice to share information and experiences. This latter mechanism also serves to offset the impact of staff turnover in implementing countries, since virtual tools make knowledge more accessible to diverse stakeholders, and local initiatives do not depend exclusively on one small group or one department in a ministry. Several networks have also developed an operations manual to serve as a permanent guide on procedures, strategies, and



Energy  
Technology



methods used in the network.

One issue that clearly impinges on the survival of networks beyond their initial implementation relates to budgets. Network technical secretariats must ensure that the cost of coordination and administrative support is commensurate with the benefit of network initiatives and activities.

### **Overcoming technical and institutional limitations**

One persistent challenge for many network members is the lack of sufficient technical and institutional capacity. Network managers have to take care to avoid administrative overload when scheduling network activities; technical officers in ministries or counterpart institutions may be juggling several other commitments in addition to network membership; and in the case of virtual platforms, staff in network countries may lack the technical ability to maintain their country page on the network website. Similarly, technical staff at the OAS Secretariat may also be stretched for time and technical expertise. For example, one network found it difficult to keep up with the constant flow of information and potential collaboration opportunities in a timely manner, given that only one full-time consultant was available to provide network support. Another network manager has found that participation is low for certain countries because the points of contact and technical staff are too overburdened to fully contribute; even if the network can fund travel for technical staff, they simply do not have time to participate.

### **Increasing levels of participation**

Closely related to the previous challenge is the fact that some networks have lower than expected levels of member participation in network activities, despite the fact that the networks were formalized by political mandates or at the initiative of OAS member states. In some cases, a reassessment of network objectives and focus might be in order.

One method used to address the issue of participation is the establishment of joint coordinators for each thematic pillar, to distribute more responsibility among network members; this also corrects the perception that the network is shaped by one member state. In one instance, network coordinators determined that the support mechanism should plan webinars specifically geared towards boosting the participation of policymakers, who were the least active stakeholders.

## Lessons Learned

As is clear from the foregoing pages, inter-American networks have faced a number of obstacles but have made considerable progress in promoting collaboration for development. Based on the lessons learned, here are some important areas of focus for OAS collaborative networks:

### 1) Defining objectives and roles

Networks can become efficient collaborative mechanisms for meeting members' needs only when the objectives are clearly defined, roles and responsibilities are clearly assigned, the timetable for implementation is feasible and respected, and each specific task is precisely described.

### 2) Promoting policy dialogue from the bottom up

Given the nature of the OAS as the leading regional forum for political dialogue, many inter-American networks were established from the "top down" in response to organizational mandates and member states' priorities. However, looking to the future, it is important to promote a multidirectional approach with adequate opportunity for bottom-up exchange and



## Criteria to ensure effective networks



collaboration, and strong feedback and support at different levels.

The value added of collaborative networks that stem from political bodies and dialogue is that they come into being with built-in political commitment. Within the OAS context, a continual feedback process goes on between the political dialogue that occurs within the organization's scope of work and the networks that serve as practical tools for collaboration and exchange.

Current literature on networks describes them as “fluid and organic—they emerge, grow and adapt to achieve their purpose and to respond to members’ needs and to opportunities and challenges in their environment.”<sup>23</sup> They are unique forms of organization based on organic relationships and are substantially different from formal organizations and entities.

Many of the networks operating within the context of the OAS emerged in response to requests from already existing formal structures, and it is these networks that appear to be the most robust. The question of whether the flexible nature of networks is compatible with mandate-driven initiatives and fields of action has thus been answered in the affirmative as far as the OAS experience is concerned. What should be emphasized is that collaborative networks require a platform to receive input from the various stakeholders, and the interconnection among these actors must be fostered in order to effectively promote change. This in turn requires a high degree of horizontal equality and decentralization.<sup>24</sup>

### 3) Fostering ownership and a collective identity

Literature on this subject suggests that “cultivating a collective identity as a community of practice”<sup>25</sup> legitimizes a network’s activities. Enhancing member ownership and ensuring that participants identify with the network and that the network addresses members’ expectations<sup>26</sup> has always been a priority for the OAS. The source of ownership seems to have derived primarily from the interdependence and constant exchange between networks and the political dialogue

23 - Ramalingam 2011, p.6.

24 - Barder notes that “the network paradigm is decentralized”. Barder 2009, p.24

25 - Taschereau & Bolger, 2007, p.10.

26 - Taschereau & Bolger, 2007.

forums in each of the development fields of action.

The OAS can act as a supporting entity—a technical secretariat—and as a coordinator or facilitator, but networks are defined by the relationships and interaction among their members.

Some networks have found that having the predominant support of one member state ensures the short-term success of the network in terms of operational and financial stability. However, this runs counter to the concept of a network structure and reinforces the perception that the network is being used to further the interests of one or more member states—which of course impedes the growth of a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. In these cases, it is doubly important that network support mechanisms work hard to build a sense of ownership by creating more opportunities for joint action and responsibility through rotating steering committees and similar structures.

#### 4) Making cooperation flexible and multidirectional

Networks need to be able to adapt to the changing expectations of their members, and to be open and flexible while maintaining technical consistency.

One of the value-added features of networks is that they provide members with the opportunity to learn from one another as a South-South cooperation mechanism, instead of just being on the receiving end of bilateral relations with traditional donor or “expert” countries. Network members are considered partners, each with something to offer and something to learn.

A further advantage of networks is their permanence beyond one-time collaboration efforts or exchanges. The network environment enables such activities to be continued through time, built upon, and improved.



Energy  
Technology



By providing the potential for more than just a flow of information in one direction, networks can inspire a wealth of bilateral exchanges and multidirectional flows of information and experience. This mutual exchange through networks has enhanced learning and provided member states with insight as to how to adapt relevant lessons to their local context. Bilateral exchanges have also helped traditional donor countries by exposing them to other perspectives.

Networks can be useful vehicles for turning bilateral activities into multilateral gain. Among the pending issues to be addressed is how these experiences can be shared more effectively and incorporated into the network's community of practice. One network has successfully dealt with this by developing an operational manual that captures the OAS role in facilitating the transfer of knowledge among members and providing face-to-face and virtual discussion platforms.

### 5) Generating added value and innovation

One of the benefits of collaborative networks is that they add value to a certain community, initiative, or field of action. They “leverage the capabilities and resources that different actors bring to the network”<sup>27</sup> rather than merely directing the flow of information and experiences. Among other things, networks can build relationships, improve technical expertise, enhance the multiplier effect, and expand access to services, products, experience, and knowledge. The OAS provides technical secretariat services to many of the networks, facilitating and coordinating communication among members, promoting collaboration across sectors, and scaling up the exchange of knowledge to a multilateral level.

Innovation in networks stems from the wealth of sources of experiences,<sup>28</sup> knowledge, and ideas accumulated and shared with a wide array of participants. The effectiveness of networks'

27 - Taschereau & Bolger, 2007, p.11.

28 - Taschereau & Bolger, 2007, p.10.

ability to perform can be defined as the “capacity to contribute to positive change in their own institution/community and collectively at a higher level.”<sup>29</sup> Because of the way they deliver actions, functions, and services, networks have the potential to take collaboration to a new level.

### 6) Incorporating multiple actors and sectors

One of the most valuable aspects of the network format is that it allows multiple actors to interact outside formal channels through collaboration and horizontal cooperation. Activities carried out in conjunction with other agencies or stakeholders capitalize on the participation of different sectors and the interdependent nature of the development agenda. Given the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, some networks have established different segments within the network community to share strengths and have incorporated different mechanisms to engage members at every level.

In some circumstances, parallel initiatives could be conceived by the network as competition; however, they should be seen as opportunities to establish partnerships, further expand scope and membership, better direct scarce resources, encompass a wider range of experiences and knowledge, and build on already existing experiences. Allowing partner institutions to spearhead initiatives could also become a way to achieve financial and operational sustainability.



29 - Taschereau & Bolger, 2007, p.8.

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## 7) Strengthening operational aspects

### Overall management

The flexible nature of networks calls for a change in management style in some cases, and hence in the work of the OAS technical secretariats that provide support. Acting as a support structure for a collaborative network is very different from serving as the technical secretariat of a high-level political dialogue process or managing a project or an organization. Within the OAS, the task of facilitating the work of collaborative networks must balance their flexible, dynamic approach with the organization's more structured, mandate-driven strategies.

### Strategies to ensure financial and operational sustainability

Given the need to guarantee that collaborative networks become sustainable, some networks have established partnerships with other stakeholders in their respective fields (such as universities or other international organizations). Partners have proved to be key in terms of providing in-kind contributions, platforms, and material.

The need to expand and further invest in virtual tools has also been identified, given the high cost of in-person activities versus the opportunity to offer a wide array of online tools and components (such as webinars, discussion forums, and document exchange platforms).

As noted earlier, another pressing challenge for operational sustainability has been the issue of obtaining the necessary support from country institutions to implement network components



and activities. Unfortunately, changes of government can sometimes have a negative impact on a network's operations. The need for political will and commitment at the highest level is therefore of fundamental importance.

One of the most critical ways to ensure the sustainability of an inter-American collaborative network is to ensure that its activities are useful and relevant to its members and that its components and activities relate to the mandates and scope of work of the OAS.

### Communications strategy

A clear communications strategy is key to keeping all network stakeholders informed and engaged. Some networks have accomplished this by identifying points of contact in each member state to announce network activities, indicate which technical experts are best suited to participate in each activity, and communicate the country-level impact of network exchanges.

### Virtual platforms and tools

Collaborative networks are not mere websites or portals. Virtual platforms provide useful tools for network members to connect, share, and exchange experiences and know-how, but networks themselves are much broader in scope and functions.

Some networks set up their portals with open-source management so that countries can





## Conclusions

As the experience of recent years has shown, collaborative networks can advance inter-American development goals in a way that is inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the particular needs of countries and communities. Following are some of the criteria for effective networks:

- **Flexibility and adaptability.** Networks should be able to adapt to changes in the field and to members' needs, but should also provide stability and continuity beyond one-off exchanges.
- **Cooperation and scaling-up potential.** Networks have the potential to turn bilateral or trilateral cooperation outcomes into multilateral gains and provide the opportunity to learn from all countries, not just from traditional donor or "expert" countries. The OAS technical secretariat is in a position to help scale up exchanges to a multilateral setting.
- **Policy dialogue and bottom-up exchanges.** Actions and exchanges within networks should be demand-driven. Information should flow in multiple directions, and there should be adequate feedback between networks and political dialogue forums.
- **Value added and enhanced innovation.** Networks must create added value and a suitable environment for the free flow of novel solutions, ideas, and experiences.
- **Effectiveness.** Networks should function in such a manner as to capture the synergy of the network setting and introduce effective change within the community of practice.

- **Ownership and collective identity.** Networks gain legitimacy when they establish a common vision and reconcile multiple interests and approaches.
- **Technical consistency.** Although networks need to be able to adapt to new expectations and trends, they must maintain technical consistency.
- **Inclusive development approach.** Networks should be based on the concept of partnership for development, incorporating multiple actors and fostering collaboration across different sectors.
- **Operational consistency.** It is crucial to draw a clear distinction between networks and their functions on the one hand and the supporting entity (OAS technical secretariats) on the other. Operational and financial sustainability should be ensured. Coordination and administration costs should not exceed the value of network initiatives and activities.

Collaborative networks that meet these standards have the potential to harness the skills, ideas, and hard work of individuals and organizations working to promote development all around the Americas. This can only expand and enhance efforts by the member states to "promote, by cooperative action"—as the OAS Charter puts it—the region's "economic, social, and cultural development."



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## Collaboration Beyond Boundaries Inter-American Networks



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